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Wasteland: The Social and Environmental Impact of U.S. Militarism in Laos

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

by

Davorn Sisavath

Committee in charge:

Professor Y en L e Espiritu, Chair  
Professor Kirstie Dorr  
Professor Jin Kyung Lee  
Professor Curtis Marez  
Professor Kalindi Vora

2015

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2015

## DEDICATION

For my father

and

my mother

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This is a project I love very much but also that stems from so many various and violent sites. How do I write about the violence my father can only recollect with his eyes closed? How does one tackle a project with so little body of evidence? This dissertation grew out of my attempts to understand my family's presence in the United States, and has developed into an intellectual stake and task, once I arrived to UC San Diego.

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past six years, I have had the opportunity to learn from and work with extraordinary, kind, generous friends and colleagues who have contributed to the intellectual and political spaces at UC San Diego, and beyond: Ma Vang, Kit Myers, Long Bui, Thea Quiray Tagle, Angela Kong, Chien-ting Lin, Amanda Solomon-Amorao, Theodara Dryer, Kyung Hee Ha, Marilissa Navarro, Jose Fusté, Anthony Y. Kim, Mohamed A. Abumaye, Jennifer Mogannam, Lisa Ho, Rawan Arar, and Violeta Sanchez.

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Othello Elkins for his loving patience, endless support and kindness, and generous forgiveness during the dissertation process. Raymond has been the best intellectual companion of all – his curiosity, patience and wisdom have been extraordinary. Finally, I am indebted to the love and support of my family who have always been there when I needed them, encouraging and assisting my work in infinite ways. To them – Onechanh Sisavath, Chome Sisavath, Somboun Sisavath, Sombath Sisavath, Sanith Sisavath, Sandy Sisavath, Michele Tom-Sisavath, my niece Sienna Sisavath, and nephews, Ramsey Sisavath, Davian Souvannaphoungun, and Keo Sisavath – I am eternally grateful.

## VITA

- 2000 Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, San Jose State University
- 2006 Master of Arts in Asian American Studies, San Francisco State University
- 2015 Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnic Studies, University of California, San Diego

## FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Fields: Ethnic Studies, American Studies, Critical Refugee Studies, Environmental Studies, and Militarism and U.S. Empire

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Wasteland: The Social and Environmental Impact of U.S. Militarism in Laos

by

Davorn Sisavath

Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnic Studies

University of California, San Diego, 2015

Professor Y  n L   Espiritu, Chair

My dissertation addresses the absence of the Secret War and environmental racism in Cold War histories. I show how U.S. Cold War logics of “containment” were linked to the production of making “debris,” which was strategically contained in Laos. This research asks the following questions: 1) how was Laos designated and made to serve as a U.S. military wasteland?; and 2) how does the persistence of war bear on the material environment? Through archival materials, literary analysis, and analysis of cultural texts, my study highlights the racialized construction of Laos as “nonplace” in

order to naturalize violence and justify the U.S. aerial war. I argue Laos' battered landscape and military waste left behind reveals how forgetting the U.S. war and violence in the country is impossible because the debris encroaches, disrupts and inhabits the lives of Laotians and the land. This dissertation comprises two parts. Part 1 examines the symbolic violence of war to reveal the racial, gendered and spatialized process that enabled U.S. bombings in Laos with impunity. Part 2 examines the material violence of war to reveal how military waste have been domesticated or revitalized for tourist consumption. This dissertation brings together critical geography, war/humanitarian discourse, and postcolonial studies frameworks, but fundamentally I situate my work in critical refugee studies, environmental studies, Ethnic Studies and American Studies that conceptualizes the Secret War in Laos as a critical moment in U.S. imperial dominance during the Cold War.

## **Introduction Military Wasteland**

### **Introduction**

After the “Fall of Saigon” in 1975 and the withdrawal of U.S. troops in Vietnam, the U.S. sought to recast a humiliating defeat in the region as a moment of valor.<sup>1</sup> The same year, Washington quickly staged Operation Babylift, a mass evacuation of children from South Vietnam to the United States to gain sympathy from the public. In a widely circulated black and white photograph taken by photojournalist David H. Kennedy, President Gerald R. Ford carries a Vietnamese baby off a plane in San Francisco, thereby rescripting the United States role in Vietnam as meaningful and benevolent. In contrast to the massive public relations effort by Washington to rescript U.S. role in Vietnam, the U.S. quietly withdrew from its Secret War in Laos in 1973, leaving behind a military wasteland. The much-publicized U.S. commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Vietnam War in 2015 failed to mention the extensive Central Intelligence Agency (“CIA”) operations in Laos, even as Laos and its people have continued to suffer the deadly aftermath of the U.S. aerial war in Laos from 1964 to 1973. I suggest that exposing Lao’s violent hidden history—as the most bombed country of all times—would derail U.S. government’s attempt to sanitize and misremember the Vietnam War as a good war.

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<sup>1</sup> Yén Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

This dissertation conceptualizes the Secret War in Laos as a critical moment in U.S. imperial dominance in the Asia Pacific region during the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> I argue that Laos serves as a rich historical and contemporary space to examine the Cold War period as not only a moment that engendered a policy of “containment” but also a policy of “debris making.” In other words, at the height of the U.S. military industrial complex in the 1940s, the United States not only needed an “empty” landscape such as the deserts of the Southwest to hide its weapons, but also a landscape overseas to dump its military waste.<sup>3</sup> While the Vietnam War is remembered as a “war of images,” the U.S. bombing campaign in Laos has been largely absent from U.S. critical histories of race, war, and violence. Scholarship on the wars in Southeast Asia has marginalized the Secret War in Laos or constructed U.S. interventions as “saving” Lao civilians from communism. A number of scholars have even defended U.S. foreign policy in Laos and rationalized U.S. bombing campaign in the country as necessary to contain communism.<sup>4</sup> Yet because U.S. involvement in Laos was out of the public eye and continues to matter little in the

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<sup>2</sup> Many scholarship on the Cold War have specifically examine nations where the war was made public such as South Korea, Vietnam, and China in the Asia/Pacific region. For example, literary scholar Jodi Kim states in her work why she did not turned to Laos, “my relatively broad scope, however, does not include *every* Asian nation or region where the Cold War was directly or indirectly waged, such as the Philipines, Laos, Cambodia and Okinawa, because I have chosen nations where the Cold War was ‘publicly’ and directly waged in protracted ways as sites of immediate contention and competition between the United States and the Soviet Union.” By turning to Laos, I reveal the work is both necessary and generative. Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis, MN: Univ of Minnesotat Press, 2010), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Valerie Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert: Environmental Ruin in the American West* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Castle rationalizes the U.S. bombing of Laos in *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955–1975* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). See also Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). An important counterweight to these studies is Nick Turse’s *The Real Vietnam War* (New York: Metropolitan, 2013) and Bernd Greiner, *War Without Fronts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Alfred W. McCoy has also written extensively on “America’s Secret War in Laos, 1955-75” in *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, edited by Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

historiography of U.S. Cold War, I am interested in not simply asking what we know and do not know about the war in Laos but also about the racial ideologies that took shape and helped justify U.S. aerial war as “necessary” in the country.

In this dissertation, I focus on the social and environmental impact of military debris to show the hidden and unacknowledged costs of the U.S. military cold war logics in Laos. As Yael Navaro-Yashin has shown in her ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Cyprus, the presence of military waste has lasting effects upon persons – it transforms the livelihood of those who inhabit these postwar spaces; and evokes fear, distress and melancholy.<sup>5</sup> For a nation dubbed as the “most heavily bombed country per capita” and has too long been ignored, the long aftermath of war for those in Laos and their attempt to recover alludes to the danger of war repeating itself every day. By examining Laos as a site of excess and waste, this dissertation seeks to trace and examine how the U.S. cold war logics and interventions have produced Laos as a dumping ground for military purposes. I want to underscore the originality of this dissertation, the first work conducted about the ongoing violence of the Secret War. Through building new archival materials, literary analysis, and analysis of cultural texts, my dissertation highlights the racialized construction of Laos as “nonplace” in order to naturalize violence and justify the Secret War. I argue that the military waste, left behind to be decomposed, harvested and requisitioned as commodities for consumption, reveals that forgetting U.S. war and violence in the country is impossible because the debris encroaches, disrupts and inhabits the lives of those living in Laos and their land. In making this argument, I have taken

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<sup>5</sup> Yael Navaro-Yashin, “Affective spaces, melancholic objects: ruination and the production of anthropological knowledge,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, (2003), 1-18.



bold leaps when methodological limitations are set. In other words, how does one archive and go about sifting the Secret War – a war that is deliberately made to be a secret? How does one tackle a project with so little body of evidence? The intellectual stake and task, then, is to be creative and assemble an archive from the debris that remains and the effects that are never done. My dissertation's contributions to Ethnic Studies are: 1) I bring new archives to the field; 2) I read the archives through an Ethnic studies lens, for example, I critically analyzed Thomas Dooley and Fred Branfman as imperial projects; and 3) I carved a new field where "imperial debris" connects Ethnic Studies and militarism as sites of ongoing violence - pointing to the debris as ways to trace, uncover and interrogate US imperialism. Also revealing hidden and violent histories of U.S. dependence on racialized and gendered labor during the war and its afterlife. By imagining differently, my dissertation provides a space and offers alternatives to examine the unvalorized and overlooked activities and conditions in which imperialism leaves their mark. That is, how do Laotians who have been marked by the debris and excess of US militarism live *with* and how they had to live *in* them.<sup>6</sup> Taking these contributions, I situate my work within the fields that examine the ongoing nature of imperial effects, and where debris offers the analytic capacity to engage with history and memory, and environmental degradation. I add to the fields of Critical Refugee Studies, Ethnic Studies, and American Studies that have limited works on or about the Secret War in Laos, the experiences of Laotian refugees, and U.S. militarized and humanitarian violence in the country.

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<sup>6</sup> Ann Stoler, *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruinations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

## U.S. “Other War:” An Aerial War in Secret

Convinced of its destiny as a global empire, U.S. exceptionalism extended its reach with military interventions in Southeast Asia and Latin American regions during the Cold War. In Southeast Asia, the U.S. took interest in Laos, a country characterized as a “victim of its own geography,”<sup>7</sup> because its “loss” could possibly prompt a domino effect, and its mountainous terrain could harbor and fuel guerrilla activities. Because of its geography, Laos was a cold war pawn; China, Thailand, North and South Vietnam saw Laos as a buffer state to enhance their own security. Under President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s administration from 1953 to 1961, Laos was considered a “vital piece of real estate in the contest between communism and anticommunism.”<sup>8</sup> This priority and anxiety stemmed from the domino affect theory – the belief that if Laos, a landlocked country the size of Utah fell to communism, Vietnam and Cambodia would also follow. After Laos was granted full independence from France in 1953, the U.S. stepped in soon after to assume 100 percent military aid to fight “communism.” As part of a larger Cold War policy of containing communism, the Eisenhower administration formed a strategic alliance with the right wing government in Laos, a priority in promoting a pro-Western, anticommunist government.<sup>9</sup> American presence in Laos was allegedly to support the neutral Royal Lao Army (RLA) against a coalition government, which included the Pathet Lao, the left-wing insurgents supported by their North Vietnamese allies.

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<sup>7</sup> House Committee on the Judiciary, *Refugee and Civilian War Casualty Problems in Laos and Cambodia: Hearing before the Subcommittee to Investigate Problems connected with Refugees and Escapees*, 91st Cong, 1st sess., May 7, 1970.

<sup>8</sup> Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* This was exemplified in a special parliamentary election intended to bring all the factions into a Royal Lao government. When the Pathet Lao won thirteen out of twenty-one seats, the CIA deposed Souvana Phouma and helped sponsored General Phoumi Nosavan.

The first discussion of possible bombing missions in the country was in 1959 when the RLA feared losing the northern part of Laos to the Pathet Lao.<sup>10</sup> An important aspect of Eisenhower's policy was the use of the CIA, a relatively new government agency established in 1947, to covertly support U.S. engagement in a guerilla struggle to support the right-wing government. The CIA "conduct[ed] covert operations on the maximum feasible and productive scale"<sup>11</sup> by using paramilitary forces of Hmong and Lao tribesmen to fight the Pathet Lao. Moreover, the CIA-owned airline helped transport troops, supplies, agents and weapons. According to Peter Scott, Air America made the war in Laos possible because its primary function was logistic.<sup>12</sup> From 1960 to 1974, the U.S. fought the longest covert wars in Laos with the first airstrikes beginning in 1964, escalating in 1968 and ending in 1973.<sup>13</sup>

After failed attempts to militarily prop up Laos in the 1950s, and repeated confrontation with the Soviet Union over Laos in 1961-1962, President John Kennedy decided against continuing Eisenhower's Cold War doctrine. In 1962, Kennedy joined fourteen other countries to sign the Geneva Agreement: an international agreement on the neutrality, independence and sovereignty of Laos.<sup>14</sup> Under the terms of the Geneva

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<sup>10</sup> For a further historical background, see Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*; William J. Rust, *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954-1961* (Baltimore, MD: University Press of Kentucky, 2012); Martin E. Goldstein, *American Policy Toward Laos* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1973).

<sup>11</sup> Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Dale Scott, *The War Conspiracy: The Secret Road to the Second Indochina War* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972).

<sup>13</sup> On December 14, 1964, "Operation Barrel Roll" was a covert operation that carried out the first systematic airstrikes. The operation lasted until March 29, 1973. The mission also provided air support for the Royal Lao Armed Forces, CIA-backed tribal mercenaries, and Thai Volunteer Defense Corps.

<sup>14</sup> The Geneva Agreement signed on July 23, 1962 guaranteed the neutrality of Laos, which outlawed "foreign military personnel" in the country and prohibited the introduction of arms and war materials except for "conventional armaments...necessary for the national defense."

Agreement, the Kennedy administration agreed to withdraw from Laos.<sup>15</sup> Since the U.S. was treaty-bound to honor the neutrality of Laos and barred from engaging in conventional military operations, the U.S. found itself in an ambiguous position that led to the development of covert operations, and military aid to the right-wing Royal Lao Government. By 1963, the U.S. found itself fighting two wars in the country: 1) a secret Air Force bombing in South Vietnam and Cambodia over the Ho Chi Minh Trail that served as a corridor for the Communists; and 2) another war for the control of northern and central Laos between Laotian government forces backed by American and Thai allies against the Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies. The U.S. supported both wars with the continued use of paramilitary troops and recruitment of Hmong and Lao tribespeople who were trained and guided by the CIA.<sup>16</sup> Military aid came in the form of arms, food and equipment that were often channeled through the Agency for International Development (AID),<sup>17</sup> and heavy bombing campaigns to stop communist forces. As a result of the U.S. finding itself forced to “improvise” in Laos after signing the Geneva Agreement.

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<sup>15</sup> See Lawrence Freedmen, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (Oxford University Press, 2000). Scholarship on President Kennedy has noted his decision to support Laos' neutrality was a strategic miscalculation that would in effect led to North Vietnamese troops infiltrating Laos in order to penetrate into South Vietnam.

<sup>16</sup> John Hart Ely, “The American War in Indochina, Part II: The Unconstitutionality of War They Didn't Tell Us About,” *Stanford Law Review*, 42, no. 5 (1990), 1095. Ely notes that General Vang Pao's “Secret Army” (Armee Clandistine) comprised some 40,000 Hmong tribesman, and later augmented by as many as 21,000 American-paid Thai “volunteers,” most of whom “resigned from the Thai army to fight in Laos but were guaranteed reinstatement without loss of benefits upon their return.”

<sup>17</sup> Henry Kamm, “U.S. Involvement in Laos Virtually Over,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1975. Kamm writes, “The United States Agency for International Development was the disbursing agency for economic assistance. Because Laos had almost no other revenues, the aid agency was deeply involved in almost all Laotian economic and social activities, and the compound here became the seat of what many Laotians and foreigners considered a parallel government of Laos.”

Prior to the U.S. Air Force's first airstrikes in 1964, the Kennedy administration believed intervention and sustainability in Laos required "continued employment of U.S. forces."<sup>18</sup> As the U.S. was entering a war in Vietnam, dealing with the Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba, and heightened racial issues at home, the U.S. could not be embroiled in another war. President Kennedy was advised to "write Laos off,"<sup>19</sup> as state officials characterized the country as inferior, and the Lao people as "sluggish" and "feebleminded."<sup>20</sup> Unlike the Eisenhower administration, the Kennedy Administration believed Laos was an "expendable domino" in Southeast Asia, "one that required so much effort to prop up and yielded so little reward [during Eisenhower's administration]. It was more deadwood than ballast."<sup>21</sup> The secrecy of U.S. involvement was the only way that the U.S. could maintain its military presence in Laos without violating the neutrality of Laos. Gloria Emerson turns to *Air War in Indochina* to reveal how a war in Laos was kept a secret.<sup>22</sup> According to Emerson, the *Air War in Indochina* was a report prepared under the auspices of the Cornell University Program on Peace Studies, which revealed under President Kennedy's administration, the secrecy of the U.S. aerial war in Laos was possible because the U.S. Ambassador had direct control:

President Kennedy's 'Country Team' directive of May 1961 placed all US agencies operating within a foreign country under the direct supervision of the US Ambassador. In Laos, a nominally neutral country torn by a serious conflict which the US was involved, this had the effect of giving the ambassador direct control over all US military and paramilitary

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<sup>18</sup> Memorandum from the Secretary of Defense, The Joint Chiefs of Staff, Department of Defense, June 26, 1961. Subject: Berlin Contingency Planning (U). This was in response to Soviet influence in Laos.

<sup>19</sup> Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 237.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>22</sup> Gloria Emerson, "On No one Wants to Hear," *The New York Review of Books*, August 10, 1972. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1972/aug/10/voices-no-one-wants-to-hear/> accessed on May 1, 2015.

operations. These operations were subsequently escalated to a very high level, and the American ambassador in effect became the commander in a theatre of war, responsible directly to the President.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, American officials who were conducting the war did not need congressional authorization, and operations were conducted and organized by the CIA or by the decision of the Executive Branch. In terms of political measures “there would be no acceptable alternative to sustain action until military victory achievement [and] until the opposition agreed to negotiate a settlement on terms acceptable to the U.S.”<sup>24</sup> What then were considered “acceptable terms” to the United States? The United States found itself developing a new military doctrine – a “covert-warfare” that substituted infantry in the country with the use of airpower. Consequently, in order to avoid another public war in Indochina, American policymakers determined that an aerial war against Laos in secrecy was the alternative. In April 1971, when a glimpse of the war was made public during several Senate hearings from 1970 to 1972 on Laos, former Ambassador to Laos William H. Sullivan characterized U.S. activities in Laos as “the other war, which has nothing to do with operations in South Vietnam or Cambodia.”<sup>25</sup> The “other war” was illogical and illegitimate as opposed to U.S. military operations in South Vietnam and Cambodia that was logical, necessary and just. By naming the war in Laos as the “other war,” Ambassador Sullivan conveys a sanitized narrative of U.S. intervention in Laos: to defend Laos from North Vietnamese aggression. However, this “other war” has resulted in a “scorched earth” policy in Laos.

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Emerson, “No Want Wants to Hear.” See also Raphael Littauer and Norman Thomas Uphoff. *The Air War in Indochina*. Vol. 432 (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1972).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> 91st Cong, 1st sess., 51.

According to Nina S. Adams and Alfred H. McCoy, there were four main phases of the bombing campaigns.<sup>26</sup> The first phase of bombing was conducted from May 1964 until October 1966, which was sporadic and primarily carried out by propeller driver aircrafts targeting presumed troops in the forest. The first U.S bombing campaign began in 1964 when American fighter-bombers began bombing in northern Laos to support the Royal Laotian government forces and in the south to interdict the Communists who were infiltrating into South Vietnam. The strikes in 1964 were sporadic but over a nine-year period, American bombing campaign intensified and escalated “to destroy the social and economic infrastructure of Pathet Lao held areas.”<sup>27</sup> At this time, international rules of aerial warfare were nonexistent, which made Laos “the principal target of a ‘no holds barred’ air war.”<sup>28</sup>

The second phase of the bombing campaign was between October 1966 and the beginning of 1968, which began to focus on villages and towns. In certain areas, Lao civilians were evacuating their homes and the number of casualties began to increase. By the end of 1968, the third phase resulted in American planes outnumbering Laotian Air Force’s propeller-driven planes. After President Lyndon B. Johnson halted bombing operations over North Vietnam in 1968, a memorandum regarding potential actions considered a plan for “an actual or feigned airborne/airmobile expedition in force against

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<sup>26</sup> Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, *Laos: War and Revolution* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1970). Adams and McCoy’s periodization of the bombing campaigns in Laos was to provide an understanding of the human toll over a nine year period. See also Russell H. Fifield, “The Thirty Years War in Indochina: A Conceptual Framework,” *Asian Survey* 17, No. 9 (Sept 1977), p. 857-879. Fifield critically attends to the task of trying to “periodize” conflicts in terms of phases.

<sup>27</sup> House Committee on the Judiciary, *Problems of War Victims in Indochina Part II: Cambodia and Laos: Hearing before the Subcommittee to Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees and Escapees*, 92nd Cong., 2nd sess., May 9, 1972, 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

enemy lines of communications (LOCs) in Laos and Cambodia.”<sup>29</sup> This plan would set forth the largest air war in military history over Laos – anything and everything that stood became a target.

By 1969, the US Air Force was flying an “estimated 500 sorties a day over Laos, more than 300 in the north and the rest over the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the south.”<sup>30</sup> With neither military rules of engagement nor planning, the bombing campaign in Laos became one of confusion. In instances of bad weather, the U.S. Air Force were directed to unload military waste on Laos before returning to neutral military bases in Thailand.<sup>31</sup> In due course, the protocol for planes was “rather than bringing [military waste] back to the station, they just drop them off in Laos.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, in a State Department cable to U.S. ambassadors, U.S. military forces were instructed that airpower that was initially used “north of the 20<sup>th</sup> [parallel] can probably be used in Laos.”<sup>33</sup> During this period, aerial bombing missions were carried out on a regular basis and directed primarily against villages and towns. Many civilians moved to outlying areas of villages and towns where much of their time was spent in holes dug in the ground, caves or the bases of hills and mountains.

The last phase of the bombing campaign occurred mostly in 1969-1970 where everything and everyone became a target, Laotians’ social order was disrupted, and the

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<sup>29</sup> The White House, March 2, 1969, Memo to Kissinger from Al Haig. Subject: Memo from Secretary Laird Enclosing Preliminary Draft of Potential Military Actions re Vietnam” Declassified, 10/29/2010.

<sup>30</sup> Ely, “American War in Indochina,” 1098.

<sup>31</sup> Though the aim was to stop North Vietnamese soldiers from using northern Laos as a base for transporting military equipment to South Vietnam, what escalated after the 1968 bombing halt was dropping the bombs in Laos.

<sup>32</sup> House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Legacies of War: Unexploded Ordnance in Laos: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment*, 111th Cong., 2nd sess., 11.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*



bombing missions dramatically increased the flow of refugees and the toll in civilian casualties. During this period, planes flew over Laos daily, increasing the bombing missions to day and night, “ [where] everything was attacked – buffaloes, cows, rice fields, schools, temples, and tiny shelters erected outside the villages.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the U.S. military decision to unload their military waste on Laos illustrates not only the devaluing of the lives of the Lao people but also the devaluing of Laos’ land, which currently is surrounded by refuse of cluster bombs, old military tanks, shrapnel, craters, and trenches. Between 1968 and 1973, northern Laos served as a wasteland – a site to dispose U.S. military waste. Areas that were heavily devastated by the bombing campaigns have become no-growth zones. In all, the total number of bombs dropped in Laos was near 2.1 million tons, more than were dropped on Europe and in the Pacific during World War II.<sup>35</sup>

### **U.S. Aerial War as a Racial Project**

I suggest that U.S. military approach to Laos from 1964 to 1973 was a racialized project where race and racism played a significant role in the U.S. massive aerial war. The scale of the massive aerial bombing campaigns during the Vietnam War set it apart from World War I and II, and was an important component of counterinsurgency practices.<sup>36</sup> With increased sophistication and military technology, the concept of air superiority played a major role to win the war for the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Moreover, the U.S. military strategy of using paramilitary forces as

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<sup>34</sup> Adams and McCoy, *Laos*, 233.

<sup>35</sup> See [www.legaciesofwar.com](http://www.legaciesofwar.com).

<sup>36</sup> Adam Kocher, Thomas B. Pepinsky and Stathis N. Kalyvas, “Aerial Bombing and Counterinsurgency in the Vietnam War,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 55, no. 2 (April 2011) 201-218.

opposed to U.S. ground troops was a racialized project. With U.S. military presence only in the air, the intensity of the indiscriminate bombing campaign was not limited to populated “enemy-held” communist control villages; rather, it was a technique to manage and contain the potential threat of subjects falling prey to communism targeting “everything that stood.” According to Air Force Pamphlet 110-34, *Commander’s Handbook on the Law of Armed Conflict*, published in July 1980, “it is not unlawful to cause incidental injury or death to civilians or damage to civilian property during an attack on a legitimate military objective.”<sup>37</sup> The pamphlet uses the term “collateral damage” to refer to incidental civilian casualties and destruction of properties. Since then, the phrase has been widely used to describe the killing of civilians in attacks that were deemed legitimate military targets. During the 1991 Gulf War, “collateral damage” has become an inevitable reality of airpower in the “war on terror.” Recently, on the eve of the 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the September 11 attacks, President Barack Obama announced in a prime-time presidential address the authorization of U.S.-led airstrikes in Syria and expansion of attacks in Iraq against the Islamic State (ISIS). Obama vowed to “conduct a systematic campaign of airstrikes” that would “degrade and ultimately destroy” ISIS “through comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy.”<sup>38</sup> President Obama further stressed that any action or threat against America will result in the “enemy” finding no safe haven. Since August 2014, the U.S. has made the term “imminent

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<sup>37</sup> Air Force Pamphlet (AFP) 110-34, *Commander’s Handbook on the Law of Armed Conflict*, 25 July 1980, 5-3. See also *International Law-The Conduct of Armed Conflict and Air Operations and the Linebacker Bombing Campaigns of the Vietnam War*, November 1989 by George N. Walne *Center for Naval Analysis*.

<sup>38</sup> “Tune In: President Obama Addresses the Nation on the ISIL Threat,” *The White House Blog*, September 10, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/09/10/tune-president-obama-addresses-nation-isil-threat>.

threat”<sup>39</sup> pertinent to expand an open-ended deployment of airpower in the Middle East, launching 190 air strikes in Iraq and beginning air strikes in Syria.<sup>40</sup> In the most recent U.S. air strikes in the region, collateral damage is viewed as unavoidable and has violently displaced civilian population, created refugees and killed thousands of civilians. As historian Alfred McCoy has suggested, the U.S. military strategy and airpower in Laos has also been central to U.S. wars in the Middle East.

In a 1971 *New York Times* article, journalist Henry Kamm reports that an American official recounted the aerial war in Laos was “our kind of war [which] has destroyed all the accommodations that once existed. The scale and scope of our operations preclude any live-and-let-live. With our air power and our artillery, we have made it a massive war all the time.”<sup>41</sup> Kamm reveals the logic of U.S. imperial power required a “war all the time,” where violence and terror were put into practice to ultimately destroy non-American lives. In other words, the prolonged period of air war killed, wounded or demoralized many Laotian lives. Moreover, John Hart Ely has shown the U.S. war in Laos was unconstitutional whereby the U.S. military’s use of paramilitary forces was justified not only in terms of economics, but also of saving American lives. Under Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson believed that despite the way the war in Laos

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<sup>39</sup> Lawfulness of a Lethal Operation Directed Against a U.S. Citizen Who is a Senior Operational Leader of Al-Qa’ida or an Associated Force,” *Department of Justice White Paper*, accessed September 28, 2014, <https://www.scribd.com/doc/123929134/Justice-Department-Memo-on-Legal-Case-for-Drone-Strikes-on-Americans>, 7. The word “imminent” has been defined and redefined by the Justice Department as no longer near, at hand but what may come in the future.

<sup>40</sup> “US begins air strikes against Islamic State in Syria,” *BBC News*, accessed October 11, 2009, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29321236>.

<sup>41</sup> Henry Kamm, “Hopes Thin for the Millions Adrift Across Indochina,” *New York Times*, April 21, 1971.

was operated, the U.S. should be proud that American lives were not placed in danger and under direct aerial attacks. As Johnson testified,

I personally feel that although the ways that the operation has been run is orthodox, unprecedented, as I said, in many ways I think it is something of which we can be proud as Americans. It has involved virtually no American casualties. What we are getting for our money there, as the Ambassador said, is, I think, to use the old phrase, very cost effective.<sup>42</sup>

According to Major Curtis G. Cook's testimony, "there is no manual of aerial warfare, in part because there is no international agreement which would provide the basis for such a manual, as there is in the case of ground and naval warfare."<sup>43</sup> In other words, Cook's testimony regarding American credibility and concern with winning the "peace in Vietnam and Southeast Asia"<sup>44</sup> meant that Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians fell out of the realm as human lives worthy of saving.<sup>45</sup> In Laos, the U.S. found itself in the "other war" where the language of empire, as Nerissa Balce writes, is "a celebration not merely of whiteness and power but of the violence of power on bodies that were liminal subjects."<sup>46</sup>

Historians and scholars of U.S. empire have demonstrated that the making of racialized subjects and racial patterns of dominance was important to American imperial

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<sup>42</sup> Ely, "American War in Indochina," 1093.

<sup>43</sup> 92nd Cong., 2nd sess., 43.

<sup>44</sup> President Lyndon B. Johnson's Address to the Nation, "Announcing Steps to Limit the War in Vietnam and Reporting his Decision Not to Seek Reelection," March 31, 1968. <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/680331.asp>, accessed on May 27, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> 92nd Cong., 2nd sess., 7. Only when US acknowledge bombing missions as "accidental bombing" were value then placed on civilian lives. For example, in the village of Ban Long, 54 people were killed and US compensated the Laos Ministry \$55 for every person who had been killed. Thus, this small value put on a human life illustrate US direction of the war.

<sup>46</sup> Nerissa S. Balce, "Filipino bodies, lynching, and the language of empire," in *Positively No Filipinos Allowed: Building Communities and Discourses*. Antonio T. Tiongson, Jr., Edgardo V. Gutierrez and Ricardo V. Gutierrez, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 60.

expansion.<sup>47</sup> Characterizations of Laotians as “indolent,” “childish,” “primitive” were not unique but were common racial stereotypes applied to nonwhites for centuries. Racial stereotypes were applied by Europeans and Americans during the conquest of America, the seizure of territory and forced displacement of Native Americans, the slave trade, and the U.S. colonial conquest of the Philippines at the turn of the century. For example, in “Filipino Bodies, Lynching, and the Language of Empire,” Balce examines how Etienne Balibar’s “presence of the past” refers to “earlier representations of black and native subjects and how these stereotypes merged and coalesced in the figure of the Filipino savage.”<sup>48</sup> That is, cultural narratives anchored U.S. imperialist support of the Philippines. Expanding on Kristin L. Hogansen’s “Filipino degeneracy” Balce concludes “This notion [of savagery] was based on and reinforced by racialized and gendered stereotypes of the Filipino that were disseminated in the popular media shortly after the Americans moved into the country: Filipinos as dark “savages,” as “children,” and as “feminized” subjects.”<sup>49</sup> Hazel Carby has productively shown how “the narration of encounters” was instrumental in the construction of racialized subjects in the production of English or British cultural identity.<sup>50</sup> Turning to Stuart Hall’s “structured in dominance” and Michel Foucault’s “relations of subjugation manufacture subjects,” Carby historically situates racialized encounters and unequal power relations through

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<sup>47</sup> See Patricia N. Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 1998); Anne McClintock, *Imperial leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York, Routledge, 1995); Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005); Ann L. Stoler (Ed.), *Haunted by empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>48</sup> Balce, “Filipino Bodies,” 44.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>50</sup> Hazel V. Carby. “Becoming Modern Racialized Subjects,” *Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (2009) 624-657.

narratives. Moreover, Melani McAlister has suggested that the construction of race and gender about the Middle East was inseparable from U.S. foreign policy, cultural productions and how the U.S. understood itself.<sup>51</sup> Following these scholars' works on the making of racialized subjects, I suggest that U.S. cultural representation and foreign policy toward Laos were important in the making and unmaking of U.S. military interventions in the country. In other words, the cultural narratives that structured U.S. racial logics in Laos facilitated a racialized approach that constituted the people and land as expendable.

Although race and racism have been repeatedly applied in Asia during U.S. colonialism and imperial wars where contemptuous imagery and words routinely emphasized Asians as “subhumans,” “primitive,” and “childish,” the massive bombing campaign in Laos was a unique form of military engagement – a sustained war for nine years where “carpet bombing” was conducted with impunity. As a racial project, the U.S. aerial war was a viable military technology that established precisely whose lives fell out of the realm of humanity and whose lives were worthy of saving. In a 1971 Senate Hearing on the authorization of military procurement, Under Secretary Johnson testified “the only U.S. forces involved in Laos are [in] the air. We have no combat forces stationed here.”<sup>52</sup> Johnson's testimony reveals the absence of U.S. ground troops made the justification for aerial bombardment effortless in terms of Laotian lives were valuing and preserving. This logic was made clear as the Air Force introduced the use of thirty

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<sup>51</sup> Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>52</sup> *Fiscal Year 1972 Authorization for Military Procurement, Research and Development, Construction and Real Estate Acquisition for the Safeguard ABM, and Reserve Strength: Hearing Before the Senate Comm. on Armed Services, 92nd Cong., 1st Sess. 4289 (1971).*

different varieties of cluster bomb units (“CBU”) in the region.<sup>53</sup> The CBUs were designed to efficiently and effectively kill or wound human beings, indiscriminately. According to Jonathan Neale, the widely used CBU-24s in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia provided the greatest aerial coverage and inflicted maximum damage as they contained the most metallic fragments.<sup>54</sup> By the end of the Vietnam War, over 8 million tons of bombs were dropped on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, aerial warfare in the region illustrated power where the distinction between combatant and civilian resulted in a “delightful obscurity” and where the air scene was “power without aim, purpose, plausible enemy and in total impunity.”<sup>56</sup> According to *The New York Times* by the end of the war, approximately 350,000 people had been killed in Laos.<sup>57</sup>

The scale of the bombing campaigns marked U.S. power and war with impunity. McCoy has suggested the United States air war over Laos was a strategy for intervention without American casualties, and has “become central to U.S. foreign policy in Iraq, Bosnia, Kosova, and, most recently, Afghanistan.”<sup>58</sup> In *Precarious Life* Judith Butler asks: “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? and What makes for a grievable life?”<sup>59</sup> These questions come at an important moment when no ground troops have been sent to U.S. involvement in Syria, and military air strikes continue to intensify

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<sup>53</sup> James A. Tyner, *War, Violence, and Population: Making the Body Count* (New York: Guildford Press, 2009), 72.

<sup>54</sup> Jonathan Neale, *A People’s History of the Vietnam War* (New York: New Press, 2003), 78.

<sup>55</sup> Tyner, *War, Violence and Population*, 69.

<sup>56</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “War porn,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 1 (2006), 86-88. See also Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (Verso, 1989).

<sup>57</sup> Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology*, No. 1 (Montreal: Black Rose Books, Ltd., 1979), supra note 20, 260.

<sup>58</sup> Alfred McCoy, “The Costs of Covert Warfare: Airpower, Drugs, and Warlords in the Conduct of U.S. Foreign Policy,” *New England Journal of Public Policy*, 19, no. 1 (2003), 225.

<sup>59</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso Books, 2004), 20.

in the region. I turn our attention to Butler's call on the question of derealization – “a restrictive conception of the human that is based upon their exclusion. What is real? Whose lives are real?”<sup>60</sup> Butler's concept of “derealization” is useful in linking the wars in Laos and in the Middle East, particularly in how certain lives cannot be humanized and thus absorb the violence of omission. Butler writes, “there are no obituaries for the war casualties that the United States inflicts, and there cannot be. If there were to be an obituary, there would have had to have been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving, a life that qualifies for recognition.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, the aerial war as a racialized concept brings into being how certain life is unrecognizable and unworthy of preservation. Returning to the Department of Defense's commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Vietnam War, the American soldiers' lives becomes “publicly grievable and an icon for self-recognition.”<sup>62</sup> Through the memorial of their service, the U.S. can reframe its military violence in Laos and in the Middle East as humanitarian.

### **The Racialization of Space: Environmental Racism and Justice**

“Toxic colonialism,” “environmental genocide,” “environmental racism” are all conceptual terms that reveal the long history of colonialism, imperialism and militarization of how land and resources have been appropriated and dispossessed from indigenous and minority communities. Benjamin F. Chavis (former head of NAACP) first coined and defined the term “environmental racism” in 1982:

Environmental racism is racial discrimination in environmental policy making, the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 34.



of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and the history of excluding people of color from leadership of the ecology movements.<sup>63</sup>

In 1987, the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice released the first national-level study title *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*,<sup>64</sup> which came from environmental concerns of Blacks in Warren County, North Carolina. In 1982, civil rights activists organized and protest to prevent the state of North Carolina from dumping “120 million pounds of soil contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in the county with the highest proportion of African Americans.”<sup>65</sup> Since then, the literature on environmental racism and environmental justice has continued to document the unequal impacts and distribution of environmental pollutions on different social classes and racial/ethnic groups. Sociologist Robert D. Bullard’s study of environmental racism linked race, space and place, revealing that communities are not created equal, and that the locations of hazardous facilities are connected to historical patterns of spatial segregation in the southern United States. The “not in my backyard” mantra, espoused by largely affluent white communities, has led to the concentration of landfills, garbage dumps, prisons, and sewer treatment plants in communities of color.<sup>66</sup> In *Dumping in Dixie* Bullard found that the practice of deliberately dumping toxic waste in communities of color had their origins in both historic and contemporary forms of institutional

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<sup>63</sup> Paul Mohai, David Pellow, and J. Timmons Roberts, “Environmental Justice” in *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 34 (2009), 406-407.

<sup>64</sup> Chavis BF, Lee C., *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* (New York: United Church of Christ, 1987).

<sup>65</sup> Mohai, et al., “Environmental Justice,” 406.

<sup>66</sup> Bullard, R.D. “Residential Segregation and Urban Quality of Life in *Environmental Justice: Issues, Policies, and Solutions*, Bunyan Bryant, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1995): 76, 80. See also Lavelle, M. and Marcia Coyle, “Unequal Protection The Racial Divide in Environmental Law A Special Investigation” *The National Law Journal* 15, no. 3 (1992).

racism.<sup>67</sup> David Harvey suggests that the dumping of toxic waste is both a discriminatory and neoimperialist project where poor communities and countries have been the designated site to hold unwanted waste.<sup>68</sup> Martin V. Melosi reveals that, like race, the environment is a social and cultural construct where people of color experience environmental risks differently from whites.<sup>69</sup> Although U.S. centered, these studies reveal that race plays a role in how environmental burdens are distributed unequally and conclude that “race was the most important fact in predicting where these waste sites would be located.”<sup>70</sup>

The notion of how race and space is understood has its origins in colonial discourse by which European writers conceived of the land as empty. This *longue duree* of empire-building can be traced to the removal and displacement of Native Americans from their land. Today, Native Americans endure “garbage imperialism,”<sup>71</sup> where reservations are sites for waste disposal facilities. In *Tainted Deserts: Environmental and Social Ruin in the American West*, Valerie Kuletz reveals how Native American desert lands were referred to as “wastelands,” “badlands,” “barren” and “dry arid regions” that lack productive capacity. The desert land and its inhabitants were “perceived and

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<sup>67</sup> Bullard, R.D. *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990).

<sup>68</sup> David Harvey, “The Environment of Justice” in *Living with Nature: Environmental Politics as Cultural Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>69</sup> Melosi, M.V. “Equity, Eco-Racism, and the Environmental Justice Movement” in *The Face of the Earth: Environment and World History*. (J. Donald Hughes ed.). New York: M.E. Sharpe Inc.

<sup>70</sup> Mohai, et al., “Environmental Justice.” See also Lavelle, Marianne and Marcia Coyle. (1992). “Unequal Protection; The Racial Divide in Environmental Law” in the *National Law Journal* 15(3); Landfill Siting; The Commission for Racial Justice 1987; Mohai, P. and Bunyan Bryant. (1992). “Race, Poverty, and the Environment: The Disadvantaged Face Greater Risks” in *EPA Journal*. 18(J. 6).

<sup>71</sup> Bullard, R. D. “Environmental Justice for All” *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color* 3 (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1997), 17.

discursively interpreted as marginal within the dominant Euroamerican perspective.”<sup>72</sup> Drawing on philosophical and historical texts, Charles Mills’ “black trash” thesis connects the ideological framework of white racism to images of blacks with “barbarism, filth, dirt and pollution.” According to Mills, the dominant Euroamerican perspective (in the U.S. and globally) viewed Blacks as a form of “social contamination.” This ideological framework then legitimated the placement of industrial waste and pollution – consistently in indigenous and poor, segregated neighborhoods. These cultural markers devalued Native Americans and Blacks as expendable subjects and designated their living space as suitable for dumping toxic waste. Moreover, Robert Higgins shows how their living spaces are racially and culturally marked as always already “appropriately polluted.”<sup>73</sup> Both Mills and Higgins expose the cultural logic that undergirds environmental racism. Laura Pulido has revealed in the studies of Torrance and Los Angeles, California that Chicanos faced the highest level of environmental pollution compared to whites, as a result of racially biased urban planning. These studies conclude that racism is fundamental in determining how politics and urban planning are implemented in the U.S. and are generative to examine how policies also produce social and environmental inequalities outside of the United States.<sup>74</sup>

New patterns of toxic dumping, exposures to hazardous waste, and global environment inequalities and racism are also rampant in third world countries. Nations that have been impacted by global environment inequalities and racism are largely those

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<sup>72</sup> Kuletz, *Tainted Deserts*, 13.

<sup>73</sup> Robert R. Higgins, “Race, pollution and the mastery of nature,” *Environmental Ethics* 16, no. 3 (1994):251-63.

<sup>74</sup> Marbury, H. J., “Hazardous Waste Exportation: The Global Manifestation of Environmental Racism,” *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law*, Vol. 28 (1995): 257. See James Brooke, “Waste Dumpers Turning to West Africa” in *New York Times*, July 17, 1988, at A1.

that have endured legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and war. As an example, the United States-Mexico border continues to deal with issues associated with environmental racism and pollution. In 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) linked the economies of the United States, Mexico, and Canada, which promised jobs and economic prosperity for all three countries, and by designed created environmental pollution in Mexico. As Mohai et al. has shown, “since 1994, truck traffic from Tijuana, Mexico, to San Diego, California, has increased 60%, pumping carcinogenic diesel fumes into the air on both sides of the border.”<sup>75</sup> Moreover, a US-owned abandoned battery-recycling factory “left 23,000 tons of toxics on site” in Mexico’s Colonia Chipancingo. Environmental inequalities continue to persist between the U.S. and other industrialized nations, which have legally exported hazardous waste to developing countries.

According to Hugh J. Marbury, “as recently as 1976, the cost of legally disposing of hazardous waste in the United States was \$10 per ton” and in 1995, “the cost has risen to over \$2,500 per ton.”<sup>76</sup> The stringent regulation and rise in cost of hazardous waste disposal domestically has forced generators of hazardous waste to seek alternative sites to export the waste. Developing nations have been sited as the appropriate repositories for hazardous waste. For example, the West African nation of Guinea-Bissau have accepted hazardous waste and “signed a five-year, \$600 million contract with a group of European tanneries and pharmaceutical companies to dispose 15 million tons of toxic waste.”

Studies on environmental injustice have also begun to examine the impact of militarism globally, insisting upon a relationship between militarization and

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<sup>75</sup> Mohai, et. al., “Environmental Justice,” 419.

<sup>76</sup> Marbury, “Hazardous Waste Exportation,” 256.

environmental pollution. During the Cold War, part and parcel of U.S. imperialism and militarism in Asia Pacific was in the form of environmental damage and waste left behind which included the dumping of the chemical Agent Orange in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, the lingering hazardous wastes and the impact of radiation and cancer risks associated with nuclear weapons tests conducted on Bikini Atoll and the Marshall Islands.<sup>77</sup> Military bases have also brought pollution, noise to local communities, and have become highly toxic waste sites impacting the environment and land. Chalmers Johnson also makes the connection of America's military bases in other people's countries to environmental pollution liabilities. Similarly, Catherine Lutz illuminates the complex and dynamic relationships between U.S. military bases and host nations/communities that extend beyond the gates of the bases.<sup>78</sup> Joseph Gerson offers a global examination of the "abuses and usurpations" of U.S. military bases that

include more than rape, murder, sexual harassment, robbery, other common crimes, seizure of people's lands, destruction of property, and the cultural imperialism that have accompanied foreign armies since time immemorial. They now include terrorizing jet blasts of frequent low-altitude and night-landing exercises, helicopters and warplanes crashing into homes and schools and the poisoning of environments and communities with military toxins.<sup>79</sup>

The U.S. military policies—of projecting power, employing military forces, and supporting industrial modernity—harm local economies in the form of land and

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<sup>77</sup> See Setsu Shigematsu Keith L. Camacho, eds., *Militarized currents: Toward a decolonized future in Asia and the Pacific* (U of Minnesota Press, 2010). See also Simon SL., Bouville A., Land CE, and Beck HL, "Radiation Doses and Cancer Risks in the Marshall Islands Associated with Exposure to Radioactive Fallout from Bikini and Enewetak Nuclear Weapons Tests" in *Health Phys*, 99, no. 2 (2010), 105-123.

<sup>78</sup> Catherine Lutz, ed., *The Bases of Empire: The Global Struggle against U.S. Military Posts* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>79</sup> Gerson, J. "U.S. Foreign Military Bases and Military Colonialism: Personal and Analytical Perspectives" in *The Bases of Empire: The Global Struggle against U.S. Military Posts*. (ed. Lutz) (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 48.

environmental exploitation and extraction of resources. The literature examining patterns of global environmental injustice must be linked to empire, imperialism and war. This dissertation contributes to this literature and extends to the ways in which the “slow violence”<sup>80</sup> of military debris left behind manages people’s lives and emplaced in bodies, land and water. Through a critical engagement with environmental racism,<sup>81</sup> which documents the unequal distribution and disproportionate exposure of environmental pollution and hazardous wastes that people of color, ethnic minorities, and indigenous persons must confront from “industrialization, militarization, and consumer practices,” I suggest can help us understand *how* and *why* Laos became a vital landscape destined to hold U.S. military waste.

### **Humanitarian Militarism: Post-War Commitments**

Humanitarianism and its language of universality is a distinctly Western construct, a discourse of intervention more generally that codes “interactions” where humanitarianism can only be an encounter between Western and non-Western nations. Since the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva in 1949, which was tasked to be “an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance,”<sup>82</sup> claims of legitimate intervention thus separate the humanitarian from the political. That is, its

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<sup>80</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011): 2. Nixon defines “slow violence” as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence this is typically not viewed as violence at all.”

<sup>81</sup> See Mohai, et al, “Environmental Justice” and Laura Pulido, “A Critical Review of The Methodology of Environmental Racism Research” *Antipode* 28, no. 2 (1996), 142-159.

<sup>82</sup> <http://www.icrc.org/who-we-are/mandate/index.jsp> retrieved April 30, 2014

language of universality assumes that the process of humanitarianism is experienced by all humans in similar ways. During the postwar years, the ICRC and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) took on the role of providing “universal” and “political neutral” interventions that could not be met through the political, imposing Western values of democracy, human rights and rule of law in the process. Scholars have dated the idea and practices of humanitarianism to the 20th century but claims to humanitarian intervention appear to date back to colonial wars. According to Nil Gilman, although colonial wars sought to annihilate population, others function as a “means to subdue and reform a subject people, [and] has provided an important precedent for today’s dominant mode of partial warfare that aims not for the total capitulation of a political opponent but rather to win the sympathies of a contested population.”<sup>83</sup> Gilman’s dominant mode of presence must take into account how space, race and gender work together in the politics of rescue. As feminist scholar Neda Atanasoski asks: “How do certain parts of the world become legible as landscapes of atrocity, while others become spaces of humaneness and humanizations?”<sup>84</sup> This question captures the mode through which different languages and images of war, race, gender and rescue reflect “differential relations of human value and valueness”<sup>85</sup> in humanitarian projects. As Denise Ferreira da Silva posits:

*race difference* [is] a scientific category, a signifier, which connects certain bodily traits, place (continent) of ‘origin,’ and ‘mental functions.’ In this process, *whiteness* was produced to indicate the form of

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<sup>83</sup> Nils Gilman, “Preface: Militarism and Humanitarianism” in *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism and Development* 3, no. 2 (2012), 173.

<sup>84</sup> Neda Atanasoski, *Humanitarian Violence: The US Deployment of Diversity* (Univ of Minnesota Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>85</sup> Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing violence in the new racial capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 11.

consciousness able to conceive of universal principles that emerged in the European space – the only raced consciousness able to fulfill the material and *moral* projects of modernity.<sup>86</sup>

For example, during the U.S.-led NATO military humanitarianism in Kosovo, the call to action sought to rescue women and children who were sexually assaulted and targeted by Serb forces. However, certain regions of the world are racialized to be not worthy of intervention. As an example, during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the United States and other major powers avoided any reference to rescuing women and children who were subjected to sexual violence by Hutu militia groups. In an analysis of *The New York Times'* coverage of the genocide, Tendai Chari argues that the representation of Rwanda was “laden with historical colonial baggage where conflict is regarded as endemic in and emblematic of the continent.”<sup>87</sup> V.Y. Mudimbe has argued that this invention of Africa as inherently violent stems from the view of Africa as the “dark” continent, perpetrated by Western explorers, missionaries and anthropologists.<sup>88</sup> The West’s contrasting responses in Kosovo and in Rwanda attends to Atanasoski’s question posed in the beginning of this section. In explaining and justifying U.S. intervention in Kosovo, President Clinton relies on the narrative of modernity and *race difference*: “If we’re going to have a strong economic relationship that includes our ability to sell around the world, Europe has got to be a key. And if we want people to share our burdens of leadership with all the problems that will inevitably crop up, Europe needs to be our

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<sup>86</sup> Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Towards a Critique of the Socio-logos of Justice: The Analytics of Raciality and the Production of Universality,” *Social Identities*, 7, no. 3 (2001), 431.

<sup>87</sup> Tendai Chari, “Representation or misrepresentation? The New York Times’s framing of the 1994 Rwanda Genocide,” *African Identities*, 8, no. 4 (2010), 347.

<sup>88</sup> Mudimbe, V.Y. *The Invention of Africa, gnosis, philosophy and the order of knowledge* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).



partner. Now, that's what this Kosovo thing is all about... it's about our values."<sup>89</sup> The failure to intervene in Rwanda and aggressive U.S.-led NATO action in Kosovo reveals how race, space and gender work together in the politics of rescue and recognition.

The moral claim to intervene has received renewed attention and prominence since the humanitarian crises of the 1990s and the war on terror.<sup>90</sup> The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union marked the end of the Cold War, and the United States rise as the world's sole superpower. This period also gave way to a greater solidarity for the West who could now restore humanity, defend democracy, and strive to save civilians in perilous crossroads. In other words, the relationship between humanitarianism and militarism came to be normalized in saving projects such as "rescue and liberation" interventions, development projects in war zones and post-conflict countries, and the declaration that gender violence is a human rights issues. Didier Fassin refers to this intervention as a military and humanitarian government where the duty to intervene is essential to protect lives.<sup>91</sup> In his subsequent book *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, Fassin reframes humanitarian government as the "articulation between reason and emotion that defines moral sentiments."<sup>92</sup> That is, Fassin outlines how moral sentiments are deployed in contemporary politics, compelling the West to action and remedy the situation that gives rise to the misfortune of Third world

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<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Ellen Meiksins Wood, "Kosovo and The New Imperialism" in *Review of the Month* (June 1999), 2.

<sup>90</sup> See Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi, eds. *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions* (New York: Zone Books, 2010). "The President went to war over Kosovo and not Rwanda because important security interests were perceived to be at stake, including the credibility of the Alliance, and the use of air power promised a quick result with little risk of NATO air-crews." Quoted in Nicholas J. Wheeler, "Review article, Humanitarian intervention after Kosovo: emergent norm, moral duty or the coming anarchy" in *International Affairs* 77, no. 1 (2001), 126.

<sup>91</sup> Fassin and Pandolf, *Contemporary States of Emergency*.

<sup>92</sup> Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 2.

nations. This shift in humanitarian policy from “rights-based humanitarian” to the “new humanitarian” has framed military intervention as “the responsibility to protect”<sup>93</sup> since the atrocities in Kosovo and Rwanda.

In justifying its military interventions as humanitarian, the U.S. can then disavow and distance itself from older forms of global hegemony. In his observation of U.S. military interventions in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan, Canadian scholar Michael Ignatieff believes America’s empire in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be understood as “empire lite.” In other words, the new American empire achieves its global hegemony not through conquest or direct governance but through the implementation of free markets, human rights, and democracy. Guided by globalization and democratic values, the U.S. as a humanitarian empire is the new international order: “...the new face of an old figure: the democratic free world, the Christian West. It is held together by common elements of rhetoric and self-belief: the idea if not the practice of democracy; the idea if not the practice of human rights; the idea if not the practice of equality before the law.”<sup>94</sup> Ignatieff correctly reminds us that it is the United States military assistance and presence in post-conflict nations that makes humanitarian reconstruction possible; that is, U.S. efforts to alleviate human suffering are enforced by the “most awesome military power the world

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<sup>93</sup> David Chandler, “Unravelling the Paradox of ‘The Responsibility to Protect’” in *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 20, (2009), 27-39. For more information on *see also* International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty: the responsibility to protect* (Ottawa, 2001): vii. The “Responsibility to Protect” proposed by the independent International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS, 2001) was “about the so-called ‘right of humanitarian intervention’ – the question of when, if ever, it is appropriate for states to take coercive – and in particular military – action, against another state for the purpose of protecting people at risk in that other state.”

<sup>94</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation building in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 17.

has ever known.”<sup>95</sup> To use Madeleine Albright’s phrase, the U.S. is an “indispensable nation” whose military capabilities guarantee global security, provide humanitarian aid, and when necessary use force to intervene.<sup>96</sup> Today, the U.S. military is “indispensable” with 576 active military facilities globally. These military bases function as an updated version of U.S. colonies that work through contradictory logics of power and humanitarian care, which have long been a well-established pattern in U.S. foreign policy.<sup>97</sup> As an example, Andrew Bacevich argues that the spirit of the “white man’s burden” remains, and as in 1898, the U.S. continues to establish direct imperial rule over Iraq in 2003. Jeff Motter likewise defines humanitarian militarism “as the deployment of military personnel motivated by humanitarian justifications that points to ‘the emerging dominance of a partial, politicized, and policy-driven human rights agenda.’”<sup>98</sup> In other words, humanitarian militarism emerges from an American exceptionalist rhetoric of “compassionate generosity that purifies nationally, narrates transhistorically and asserts itself globally,”<sup>99</sup> particularly in allegedly obscure and distant places.

One of the persistent tropes of humanitarian intervention is saving women and children from the threat of barbaric brown men. This mantra of protecting women and children has been a theme of imperial enterprises and cited during U.S. wars in Vietnam,

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<sup>95</sup> Ignatieff, “THE AMERICAN EMPIRE; The Burden” in *The New York Times*, January 5, 2003.

<sup>96</sup> Micah Zenko, “The Myth of the Indispensable Nation” in *Foreign Policy*. November 6, 2014. accessed on March 15, 2015 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/the-myth-of-the-indispensable-nation/>

<sup>97</sup> Chalmers Johnson, *The sorrows of empire: Militarism, secrecy, and the end of the republic* (Macmillan, 2007), 8. Johnson has dismantled many of the arguments by defense officials, utilitarians, and scholars who promote the need to maintain military bases globally, showing that these global networks of US military installations have created more attacks and produced violence in the form of “blowback.” “Blowback,” a Central Intelligence Agency’s term for “unanticipated consequences of unacknowledged actions in other countries,” Johnson used this term to show that American interventions and violence abroad invited retaliatory attacks.

<sup>98</sup> Jeff Motter, “American Exceptionalism and the Rhetoric of Humanitarian Militarism: The Case of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami Relief Effort” in *Communication Studies* 61, 5 (2010), 509.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

Iraq, and Afghanistan. Feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe argues that “womenandchildren” serves as a patriarchal, nationalist narrative to frame wars as matters of national security—of protecting women and children from the “evil” enemy.<sup>100</sup> Charli R. Carpenter demonstrates the norms for protecting civilians are deeply gendered whereby women and children are seen as innocent victims of war while adult males and boys are discriminated against and left out of humanitarian law and protection.<sup>101</sup> According to Carpenter, the appeal to protecting “innocent women and children” has often been used by international actors to justify humanitarian intervention. For instance, in a 2001 radio address to the nation, First Lady Laura Bush unveiled women’s issue in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule, collapsing the Taliban and terrorists: “The brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists. Long before the current war began, the Taliban and its terrorist allies were making the lives of children and women in Afghanistan miserable.”<sup>102</sup> In her analysis of Laura Bush’s speech, Lila Abu-Lughod reveals the constant slippage that created “a kind of hyphenated monster identity: the Taliban-and-the-terrorists...the cultural monsters who wants to, as [Laura Bush] puts it, ‘impose their world on the rest of us.’”<sup>103</sup> The visual focus on the burka-clad women and the narrative of oppressed-passive-victims-who-are-in-need-of-saving called on Western feminists to

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<sup>100</sup> Cynthia Enloe, “Womenandchildren: making feminist sense of the Persian Gulf Crisis.” *The Village Voice* 25, no. 9 (1990). Enloe’s critical analysis show how women and children are collapsed into a category of vulnerable subjects. Wome and children are seen as sympathetic characters who must be protected and are deserving of assistance and charity, unlike men who are seen as an unattractive group undeserving of sympathies.

<sup>101</sup> R. Charli Carpenter, *Innocent Women and Children: Gender, Norms and the Protection of Civilians*. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>102</sup> George W. Bush: “Radio Address by Mrs. Bush,” November 17, 2001. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=24992> accessed on March 16, 2015

<sup>103</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002), 784.

fight for the universal rights and dignity of Third World women. Ultimately, Western feminists lauded military/humanitarian intervention in Afghanistan for allegedly liberating Afghani women from the Taliban's backwardness.<sup>104</sup> In fact, though the U.S. Iraq War in 2003 was determined by economic and geostrategic interest, President George Bush, Jr. and Prime Minister Tony Blair invoked the language of humanitarianism and human rights violation to explain the war in Iraq as an effort to "save" the Iraqi people from the premodern and "uncivilized" enemy. Ultimately, U.S. intervention would fulfill its promise as a nation of moral superiority whereby "[a]fter years of dictatorship, Iraq will soon be liberated."<sup>105</sup> In "Reflections on Violence, Law, and Humanitarianism," Talal Asad argues that the motivation for humanitarian action through military engagement is couched in the assumption that moral progress is advanced when human suffering is eliminated, particularly from barbarians and savages.<sup>106</sup> By declaring an end to the brutal oppression of women and children, the U.S. legitimized its "duty to intervene" and gave way to greater solidarity for the West to defend human rights through military humanitarianism.

The purported humanitarian uplift of Third World women produces them as subaltern subjects, a familiar trope that captures the relationship between colonizer and colonized. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explores how the

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> "Joint Statement by President Bush, Prime Minister Blair on Iraq's Future," April 8, 2003, available online at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/04/20030408-1.html> accessed on March 12, 2015.

<sup>106</sup> Talal Asad writes, "the horrific nature of the slaughter of 'innocent' human beings ('civilians,' 'women and children') is deeply implanted in the social imaginary of modern Euro-Americans as barbaric and savage – as morally intolerable to civilized sensibilities. It is this sensibility that also fuels the cause of military intervention ('We cannot watch and do nothing!')." [http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/reflections\\_on\\_violence\\_law\\_and\\_humanitarianism/](http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/reflections_on_violence_law_and_humanitarianism/) accessed on April 6, 2015.

issue of widow self-immolation became the justification for British colonialism and civilizing mission in South Asia. According to Spivak, the “white men saving brown women from brown men” mantra treats Indian women as having no voice and needing to be rescued by English men who represent the protector and savior. This argument has underpinned imperial missions and humanitarian interventions that reinforce an orientalist perspective. I extend Spivak’s phrase to Western feminism—the “white women are saving brown women from brown men” mantra—to illuminate the power exercised is similar to Western colonial and imperial discourse. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has critiqued the textual strategies used by (Western) feminist writers’ constructions of Third World women as “singular, monolithic subject” and victimized is predicated on the assumptions about Western women as “secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives.”<sup>107</sup> These resonances of the brown women as victims, oppressed and in need saving are central to contemporary interventions where the representation of subjects in need of being saved and liberated conceals the politics of empire, in this case, U.S. empire. Randall Williams argues this discourse has become a legitimizing instrument for contemporary imperialism whereby intervention such as humanitarian war and aid “relies heavily upon the production of subjects in need – in need of rights, in need of democracy, in need of rescued.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity* (Duke University Press, 2003), 19 and 42.

<sup>108</sup> Randall Williams, *Divided World: Human rights and its violence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010): 63-64. Williams’ writes, “The former (right of intervention) is a decidedly political question – subject to the potentially limiting conditions of sovereignty – while the latter (the duty to intervene) transposes the question of intervention onto a decontextualized, ahistorical moral terrain – no longer subject to any limiting conditions, reduced in form to the universal question of good versus evil, humanity versus inhumanity.”

The U.S. position as a super power allows it to serve as a humanitarian empire that legitimates its military interventions and presence in post-conflict nations by claiming that it has the “responsibility to rebuild.” As a humanitarian empire, the U.S. has its dominance in financial institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and Agency for International Development (USAID), enabling the U.S. to operate globally “in the service of unbridled free-market economic growth.”<sup>109</sup> For the most part, the scholarship on humanitarian interventions focuses on the macro level of foreign and economic policies. This dissertation contends that interventions must also attend to the lived experience impacted by the violent discourse and practice of “saving.”

### **Organization of Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized in two parts. Part 1 examines the symbolic violence of war to reveal the racial, gendered and spatialized process that enabled U.S. bombings in Laos with impunity. Part 2 examines the material violence of war to reveal how military waste has been domesticated or revitalized for tourist consumption. Chapter one’s title “What Kind of Place was Laos?,” is taken from Thomas Dooley’s nonfiction novel *The Edge of Tomorrow* published in 1958. The question and subsequent title of this chapter encapsulate the spatial nullity of Laos. Through a close reading of Thomas Dooley’s nonfiction novels of Laos, *The Edge of Tomorrow* (1958) and *The Night They Burned the Mountain* (1960), I suggest Dooley’s articulation of Laos as a “political Never-Never Land” and characterization of Laotians were steeped in racialized discourses and would be translated into U.S. foreign policies that framed Laos as a

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<sup>109</sup> Cchachhi, Amrita and Linda Herrera, “Empire, Geopolitics and Development” in *Development and Change*, 38, no. 6 (2007): 1026.

legible landscape to dump military waste. Dooley's published writings educated the American readers about Laos and Asia as an "otherworldly," fictional place containing "childlike" inhabitants. Instead of reading Dooley's nonfiction narratives as sentimental, I read them as the rhetoric of imperialism that created new knowledge about Laos and its people.

Whereas Chapter one centered the construction of Laos and its people as expendable, Chapter two, entitled "Retelling Refugee Testimonies," shifts the focus to the lived experiences of those whose lives have been rendered valueless and to the recuperation of Laos as a place. This chapter examines what it means to center refugee testimonies as primary texts in order to get at how the U.S. aerial war was experienced by Laotians displaced from their land. I examine close to thirty refugee testimonies and illustrations retrieved from Fred Branfman's<sup>110</sup> *Voices from the Plain of Jars* (1978, 2013), and the Appendix II of the congressional hearings on Laos held on April 21-22, 1971 and May 09, 1972, in order to foreground refugee and civilian collective remembering of life in Laos before the U.S. Secret War. The first and second edition of *Voices from the Plain of Jars* provides testimonies and illustrations by survivors in the Vientiane refugee camp. By repositioning refugee testimonies as primary texts, and constituting the memories and experiences of Laotian refugees as "legitimate knowledge," I show how these narratives and illustrations are rooted in cultural production. These narratives and illustrations reveal, unsettle, and challenge the official state narrative that "air operations are conducted in accord with a policy of avoiding

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<sup>110</sup> Fred Branfman spent nearly four years from March 1967 until February 1971 in Laos as an educational advisor with International Voluntary Services, Inc., a private voluntary group under contract with USAID in Laos. I acknowledge Branfman's work is a humanitarian project, creating a narrative space to include the experiences of Laotians. The second edition includes an introduction from Alfred McCoy.



civilian casualties and hardships as much as possible”<sup>111</sup> and that Laos was an “empty land” devoid of social relations. I suggest the retelling of war memories can elucidate the violence and terror of war that has been obscured and marginalized, disrupt U.S. state narratives that “care was taken” with civilian lives, and account for what the people of Laos are left with, and how they deal with the remainders of war.

The second half of the dissertation turns to the materiality of war and violence. Chapter three entitled “Humanitarian Government: ‘To Serve the Nation’” examines the ongoing legacies of U.S. imperialism through the logics of humanitarianism, which evoke benevolence, compassion and morality in order to mask the extraordinary violence inflicted on Laos. Although the U.S. has acknowledged the bombing campaigns in Laos, the dominant state narrative continues to prevail that liberation cannot be made possible in the country without U.S. humanitarian intervention: the hiring of Laotians to do demining work. This chapter asks what, then, is the relationship between humanitarianism, militarism, and the “liberation” of Laotians who are subject to hazardous conditions as deminers with wage-labor? I suggest the humanitarian project of recovery, reconstruction, and liberalization in Laos is a linear teleological understanding of events where the “rescue and liberation” narrative then functions under economic reform. In response to the crisis, I argue humanitarian values of economic progress such as providing demining work obscures the violence and threat of death or injury that Lao civilians encounter daily. That is, humanitarian and military discourse about “rescue and

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<sup>111</sup> 91st Cong., 2nd sess., Doolin, 48.

liberation”<sup>112</sup> requires the continued violence of demining labor available for Laotians, which have been created under the conditions of progress and capitalism that continue to exploit racialized and gendered bodies.

The last chapter, “Harvesting War: The Value of Military Waste” turns to the material remains of war left behind that continues to kill, maim, and hold people hostage to war. While chapter Three seeks to reveal how humanitarianism works to tame the past, this chapter shifts to focus on how the remnants cannot be ignored as “leftovers,” “scraps,” “waste” or “trash,” but are dangerous debris and part of the everyday for Laotians. Since Laos opened its borders to tourism in 1996, the people of Laos have found ways to survive by transforming U.S. military waste into souvenirs, traditional kitchen items such as spoons, forks, pot, and jewelries for tourist consumption. I turn to U.S. military waste left behind and its violent and productive capacities by examining the afterlife of waste, particularly as these violent objects have become domesticated, requisitioned as a newly refurbished commodity-life, or occupied by Laotians who are left with nowhere else to turn to (and some are turning to the lethal trade of collecting bomb scraps).<sup>113</sup> By attending to military waste as an active process that occupies “multiple historical tenses” – the violence carried out during the U.S. secret war, the ongoing and lingering effects and affects that permeate the present, and the uncertain

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<sup>112</sup> Yén Lê Espiritu, “The ‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’ Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the ‘Fall of Saigon’ in *American Quarterly*. 52, no. 2. (2006): 329-352. I follow Espiritu’s work to pay attention to how the “rescue and liberation” myth permits the *forgetting* of U.S. defeat by replacing them with narratives of U.S. humanitarianism.

<sup>113</sup> I borrow the term from the 2007 documentary film titled *Bomb Harvest*, directed by filmmaker Kim Mordaunt and produced by Sylvia Wilczynski. The film explores the consequences of the secret war in Laos and it follows an Australina bomb disposal specialist show train Laotians how to detonate UXO. “Bomb harvesting” has become an important sector in Laos because the excess U.S. military waste has allowed many to participate in the labor of excavating and abating UXO.

future for those who must go on – this chapter contributes to existing, yet limited scholarship on military waste produced by wars that has shifted towards a concern for the individuals who live in them, how they labor with the remains, and what forms these wastes take.

### **Conclusion**

In “Thirty Years AfterWARD: The Endings That Are Not Over,” Yén Lê Espiritu “demand[s] that we refashion the fields of American studies and Asian American studies...around the crucial issues of war, race, and violence, and of the history and memories that are forged from the thereafter.”<sup>114</sup> Taking this as a starting point, this dissertation discusses why forgetting U.S. war and violence in Laos is impossible because the remainders of U.S. imperialism function through the everyday. Today Laos remains one of the poorest nations in the world and most highly indebted according to the criteria set by the World Bank. Despite the U.S. embargo lift in 1995, the country continues to suffer from U.S. aerial bombardment where evidence of the material legacies is a normal, fixture of life naturalized in the landscape. Currently, the challenge for Laos is on a vast scale where an estimated 75 to 80 millions of submunitions failed to explode during the U.S. aerial war.<sup>115</sup> However, current statistics on contamination and clearance are not always reliable, and efforts to refine the data continue to reveal the seriousness of the problem. It is estimated that the waste inhabiting Laos’ infertile land will take at least 16 years to clear high priority land for agriculture, schools and irrigation, and at least 100

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<sup>114</sup> Yén Lê Espiritu, “Thirty Years AfterWARD: The Endings That Are Not Over,” *Ameriasia Journal* 31, no. 2 (2005), xviii.

<sup>115</sup> United Nations Development Program Report, 2008.

years to clear the land throughout scattered villages.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, if there is one thing we know from the aerial bombing campaigns in Laos, it is that controlling and dominating the air space was a direct precursor to future wars, and other death worlds in U.S. military spaces. Today, the revolution of technology has manifested itself in driven, low-risk wars, close-ups, live broadcasts and up-to-the-minute coverage of the war where the clearest expression is seen in the air.

Throughout, I show how U.S. imperialism is both historical and an ongoing project in that 40 years after the war had ended for the U.S., many Laotians have continued to struggle to survive daily and live with unexploded ordnance. Moreover, I interrogate the ways in which certain modes of analysis have been privileged over others and what kinds of narratives get written, particularly as “those histories, despite having been so concertedly effaced, yield new damages and renewed disparities.”<sup>117</sup> This dissertation turns to the remainders of war and examines how it exceed its original purpose, how people employ survival strategies in order to make life bearable, and how they find value in their labor. My work contributes to the fields of Ethnic Studies, American Studies and U.S. Cold War studies by articulating the complex racial and gendered histories of U.S. empire, violence, war. I wish to produce new archives and imaginings about war and memory that makes visible and addresses the experiences, memories, histories and cultures of those violently displaced.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 7.

## Chapter 1 “What kind of place was Laos?”

### Introduction

“What kind of place was Laos?”<sup>118</sup> Thomas Dooley’s (a young former Navy Irish Catholic doctor from St. Louis) team members asked as they awaited their journey from a layover in Vietnam to Laos in September 1956 to begin Operation Laos.<sup>119</sup> Both Dooley and his team knew very little about Laos, only that Oden Meeker, a former representative of Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) had informed him that the village Nam Tha in northern Laos where they would setup a hospital was “the most isolated part, and politically the most vulnerable.”<sup>120</sup> According to Dooley, Meeker expressed that “Those mountain people have rarely seen a white man. They have no allegiance to the central government. They’re just ripe for the Commie treatment.”<sup>121</sup> Prior to Dooley’s arrival, *New York Times*’ chief correspondent in Southeast Asia, Tillman Durdin provided a glimpse of Laos’ past, present and future. He wrote “Five hundred years ago, Laos was a great kingdom, incorporating not only her present territory but most of northern Thailand. In the latter half of the last century, France stepped in to save Laos from extinction and to create a buffer territory between Thailand and Vietnam. Today, Laos’ remains a buffer state with unnatural boundaries, undeveloped territory, and a scattered, largely illiterate population.”<sup>122</sup> Two years later in 1954, his wife, Peggy

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<sup>118</sup> Thomas Dooley, *The Edge of Tomorrow* (Signet, 1961), 24.

<sup>119</sup> While in Manila, Dooley met with President Magsaysay and Oscar Arellano, co-founder of Operation Brotherhood. This would inspire Operation Laos, CIA’s agent Edward Geary Landsdale was the brainchild for this team.

<sup>120</sup> Dooley, *The Edge*, 24.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Tillman Durdin. “Kingdom of Laos Having Hard Time: Little Indo-China Country has bring past, good future, poor present.” *New York Times*. Feb. 20, 1952.

Durbin described Laos as a “mass of steeped jungle-covered mountains wedged between China, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam ... [a country] easy to invade and tough to defend. Of little military value to either side in the Indo-China war (1946-1954), Laos is a battlefield by accident of international politics and geography.”<sup>123</sup> Based on his experience in Laos, Oden Meeker published *The Little World of Laos*, a depressing imaginative science fiction story that described the country as a “magical kingdom touched with gentle fantasy” whose inhabitants are lazy dreamy children and unconquerable by Earthmen.<sup>124</sup> These spatial and temporal descriptions evoke Laos as a primitive and atavistic place, frozen in time.

This chapter explores how American writers, journalists, and state and military officials conceived of the Lao landscape and its people as stagnant, backward and without progress, characteristics that allegedly would make them more susceptible to communism. As part of U.S. Cold War policies of containment and integration, the U.S. government sought nonaggressive strategies for winning the hearts and minds of Asians from communism. Under the terms of the 1954 Geneva settlement that ended French colonialism in Indochina and banned U.S. military intervention in Laos, the government endorsed independent, secular and individual humanitarianism through President Dwight D. Eisenhower ‘s People-to-People initiative, which sought to promote world peace through using culture to cultivate public support for political ends.<sup>125</sup> Emerging from this

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<sup>123</sup> Peggy Durbin. “Laos” Paradise on the Edge of War: This otherworldly member of the French Union in Indo-China is a battlefield by accident of international politics.” *New York Times*. April 4, 1954.

<sup>124</sup> Oden Meeker, *The Little World of Laos* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, 1959)

<sup>125</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower: "Remarks at the People-to-People Conference.," September 11, 1956. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=10599>, accessed on April 19, 2015. Christina Klein suggests this initiative emerged from the cultural Cold War. She writes, “The People-to-People program emerged out of

initiative were popular films and sentimental narratives that thematize American efforts to forge bonds across racial, cultural and national barriers.<sup>126</sup> As noted in the introduction, U.S. escalated commitment in Laos under the Eisenhower's administration was aimed to thwart communism and prop up a pro-Western government in the country.

I specifically examine commentary and narratives on Laos published between the Geneva conferences – 1954 and 1961-1962 because this period saw the most U.S. aid workers, missionaries, diplomats, journalists, and educators in Laos and provided Americans the most detailed and vision of the country.<sup>127</sup> According to William Prochnau, “The Westerners drawn there gave it still other names, invariably taken from the fairylands of their youth. Never-Never Land, they called it, and The Land of Oz.”<sup>128</sup> Attentive to imperialist ideology, I analyze the languages and tropes that enabled American writers to construct a coherent representation of Laos and its people during the early Cold War years, and how the languages and tropes intersected with foreign policy. Through a close reading of Thomas Dooley's nonfiction account of his journey in *The Edge of Tomorrow* and *The Night They Burned the Mountain*, I suggest Dooley's dramatized tales reduced Laos and its people into an empty space. I seek to connect how Laos' geographical location and spatial nullity facilitated the U.S. Cold War doctrine of containment, and made the country an acceptable area of its desire for a landscape to

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this cultural diplomacy framework: it was aimed at an international audience and designed to spread American culture, values, and ideas overseas. It sought to counter Soviet propaganda by promoting face-to-face contact between Americans and people in other countries and thereby display what America was 'really' like.” Christina Klein. *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Univ of California Press, 2003), p. 50.

<sup>126</sup> See Klein, *Cold War Orientalism* and Melanie McAlister, *Epic Encounters*.

<sup>127</sup> See Rust, *Before the Quagmire*.

<sup>128</sup> William Prochnau, *Once upon a distant war* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 1995), 103. See also James T. Fisher, *Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley* (Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1998): 122.

dispose of military waste. In *Epic Encounters*, Melanie McAlister has shown the role of cultural products in “forging a web of meanings” that made the Middle East matter to the U.S. in terms of setting the stage for the production of American identities and expansion of power.

Thomas Dooley, Jr. captured American imaginations with his good looks and charm. His service and humanitarian work in Southeast Asia were met with adulation and cynicism. At a time when many Americans living overseas demonstrated little interest in the customs and cultures of the host countries, Dooley’s humanitarian work was an example of President Eisenhower’s people-to-people initiative of international integration. For Americans, Dooley offered a “people-to-people” narrative bringing average Americans into contact with Asians. In contrast, military officials and their families who resided in “Little America” compounds in Laos saw Dooley as a self-centered fraud.<sup>129</sup> Dooley was a complex and controversial figure who played an important part in bringing Laos to the attention of Middle America during the early period of U.S. Cold War in Asia.

Not much has been written on Dooley’s private and public lives, as well as on his books describing his activities in Vietnam and Laos. Historian James T. Fisher, the leading scholar on Dooley, has written the most comprehensive biography on Dooley: *Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley, 1927-1961*, which focuses on Dooley’s life as a Catholic and gay man, his relationship with his mother, his place in cultural politics,

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<sup>129</sup> Thomas Dooley, *The Night They Burned the Mountain* (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1960): 109. Dooley was always distinguishing himself from the Americans in Laos. He writes, “I was an invited guest in this foreign land, and I was not going to make the kind of mistake that too often is the white man’s error in Asia. I was not about to storm around criticizing, complaining, and demanding.” See Jacobs’ *Unraveling* who devotes a chapter on “Little America” in Laos.



and his role in reshaping public discourse about U.S. military and political interventions in Southeast Asia.<sup>130</sup> In *The Universe Unraveling*, Seth Jacobs dedicates a chapter on two American icons who established a presence for Americans in Laos: Thomas Dooley and Edgar Monroe Buell. Jacobs distinguishes the two icons, illustrating Dooley's egotism and relentless self-promotion in Laos was opposite from Buell's reserved demeanor to save Laos from communism. Jacobs further dwells on Dooley's personal life and attributes, noting how Dooley's self-adulation "foreclosed the possibility of a genuine Washington-Vientiane partnership and made any notion of fighting communism in the 'Kingdom of Kids' [Laos] absurd."<sup>131</sup>

*Reader's Digest* played an influential role in publishing Thomas Dooley's sentimental writings of Laos. In her critical analyses of *Reader's Digest* and the *Saturday Review*, Christina Klein reveals how these two middlebrow cultural institutions helped shape popular representations of Asia. In *Cold War Orientalism* Klein brilliantly explores America's interest and fascination with Asia from the perspectives of middlebrow culture and policy-making. She contends that America's attention eastward immediately after World War II was important as the U.S. was expanding its power into Asia and the Pacific. In her reading of Dooley's sentimental narratives, Klein argues that Dooley's narratives became central to the self-definition of a national American identity: a humanitarian nation. Extending Edward Said's definition of Orientalism, Klein suggests that sentimental narratives were integral in U.S. expansion during the Cold War and

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<sup>130</sup> See Fisher, *Dr. America and The Catholic Counterculture in America, 1933-1962*. UNC Press Books, 2001.

<sup>131</sup> Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 193.

served to “work through a logic of affiliation as well as through one of difference.”<sup>132</sup> Building upon Klein’s articulation of Cold War Orientalism and sentimental narratives, Danielle Glassmeyer contends that a particularized notion of intervention emerged during the 1950s that instantiated America’s presence in Asia.<sup>133</sup> She coins the term “sentimental orientalism” to capture how popular films and novels produced between 1955 and 1962 cast American intervention as “maternal, pedagogical benevolence” and construct Asians as “children struggling toward democracy.”<sup>134</sup> In other words, maternal benevolence works to offer what native barbarism, colonialism and communism have been unable to supply – love and education for Asians. Instead of pursuing overtly foreign policy, maternal benevolence fueled by affective influence could support U.S. interests as benevolent, yet also undergirds U.S. expansion. For example, in her careful reading of Dooley’s memoirs in Vietnam and Laos, Glassmeyer argues that Dooley’s practice of love, kindness and gentleness towards Asian children was only possible because of his construction of the region as devoid of maternal benevolence.<sup>135</sup> Klein and Glassmeyer provide provocative and compelling arguments of the pervasive nature of sentimental narratives during the early Cold War period and their materialization alongside America’s military, economic and political policies. Rather than build upon Klein and Glassmeyer’s insightful reading of Dooley’s narratives on sentimentality, I offer a

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<sup>132</sup> Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 14, 16. Klein writes sentimental narratives have four defining features that make it “narratives of anti-conquest:” 1) “uphold human connection as the highest ideal and emphasize forging bonds and creation of solidarities; 2) explores how these bonds are forged across a divide of difference; 3) are characterized by reciprocity and exchange; and 4) holds up sympathy.”

<sup>133</sup> Danielle Glassmeyer, “A Beautiful Idea”: The King and I and the maternal promise of sentimental orientalism,” *The Journal of American Culture* 35, no. 2 (2012): 106-122.

<sup>134</sup> Glassmeyer, “A Beautiful Idea,” 106.

<sup>135</sup> Glassmeyer, “Tom Dooley and the Cold War Revision of ‘Indochina’” *Sinographies: Writing China*. Eric Hayot, Haun Saussy, and Steven G. Yao, eds. (Univ of Minnesota Press, 2008).

critical analysis of Dooley's production of race and space in Laos, which I argue can reveal another form of American racial knowledge of Asia(ns) that reinforced the necessity of U.S. intervention. In particular, I read Dooley's nonfiction novels as an imperial discourse that racializes Laos' landscape as "empty land," which I argue contributes to America's eventual treatment of Laos as a military wasteland.

### **Thomas Dooley's Books**

After publishing his first novel *Deliver Us From Evil: The Story of Vietnam's Flight to Freedom*, which showcased his "heroic work of treating [mostly Catholic North] Vietnamese refugees from communism following the fall of Dien Bien Phu,"<sup>136</sup> Dooley ascended to celebrity status and was voted as one of the "Ten Outstanding Men of 1956"<sup>137</sup> by the Junior Chamber of Commerce of the United States. According to *The Washington Post*, Dooley's mission of vanquishing communism in Southeast Asia by providing medical care "demonstrate[d] American goodwill in a practical manner, to show that this Nation is not ignoring the Asian's physical needs while, as Dr. Dooley puts it, 'we hand him pious platitudes.'"<sup>138</sup> Despite the U.S. Navy forcing Dooley to resign on March 28, 1956 because of his homosexual "tendencies and activities,"<sup>139</sup> Dooley's celebrity status continued to rise. The same year he resigned from the Navy, Leo Cherne, chairman of the International Rescue Committee (IRC)<sup>140</sup> approached Dooley to setup

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<sup>136</sup> Should note that in 1954, Dooley was stationed in Haiphong, North Viet-Nam when some 600,000 refugees were moved from the Communist North to the non-Communist South where setup Operation Cockroach, a refugee camp. (See Erica Anderson, March 29, 1959, *The Washington Post*, "A World-Wide Miracle!: How Albert Schweitzer, "greatest man alive" inspired the men of Medico."

<sup>137</sup> Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 177 and Dooley, *Edge*, 44.

<sup>138</sup> *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, July 16, 1956, "Diplomacy of the Heart"

<sup>139</sup> Fisher, *Dr. America*, 82.

<sup>140</sup> Fisher, *Dr. America*, 93. Fisher writes that the IRC "were also key operatives of the notorious Vietnam Lobby, a coalition of Americans with a deep investment in Ngo Dinh Diem's regime who now sought to widen their sphere of influence throughout Southeast Asia."

Operation Laos – a version of Operation Brotherhood, which had been CIA agent Edward G. Lansdale “psychological warfare” project from the start.<sup>141</sup> Operation Brotherhood was a CIA-trained project whereby Filipinos provided medical aide to the South Vietnamese.<sup>142</sup> According to Jonathan Nashel, its goal was simple: “having Asians from different countries working together (though under the covert auspices of the United States) would lend the new government of South Vietnam an air of legitimacy in the eyes of other governments in Asia.”<sup>143</sup> Similarly, Operation Laos’s goal was to use Dooley as an “agent of influence” to demonstrate U.S. good will in the fight against communism and as a spy and courier for the CIA.<sup>144</sup> Christina Klein and James Fisher, however, have suggested that Dooley went to Laos in quest of redemption from professional disgrace and of freedom from the constraints of heterosexual and normative family formations of the 1950s. The simple, compelling narrative of his selfless humanitarian work “binding humanity around the world”<sup>145</sup> through gentleness and understanding in Laos was the ideal model of U.S.-Asia integration policy, which sought access to Asia’s economy and

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<sup>141</sup> For a more detailed account of Leo Cherne’s tenure, role in foreign operations, relationship to the CIA, and Operation Brotherhood and its version in Laos, see Fisher’s *Dr. America*. Though Dooley consistently remarked that his work in Laos was purely humanitarian, scholarship on Dooley’s mission has shown his connection with the CIA. The implication that Dooley may have worked covertly during his tenure in Laos, suggests wider understanding of his role and practices employed to integrate Asians into the fold of democracy.

<sup>142</sup> Jonathan Nashel, *Edward Lansdale's Cold War* (Univ of Massachusetts Press, 2005); Roland G. Simbulan, "Covert Operations and the CIA's Hidden History in the Philippines." (2000); Shalom, Stephen. *The United States and the Philippines: A Study of Neo-colonialism* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1986) and Oscar J. Arellana, “How Operation Brotherhood got to Viet Nam” in *Philippine Studies* 14, No. 3 (1966): 396-409.

<sup>143</sup> Nashel, *Edward Lansdale*, 61.

<sup>144</sup> See Jacobs and Shaw.

<sup>145</sup> Dooley, *The Edge*, 141.

“securing the allegiance of decolonization nations and binding them to America,” while preserving U.S. military presence in the region.<sup>146</sup>

Dooley introduced Laos to the American readership as an “otherworldly,”<sup>147</sup> fictional, imagined place, in his widely-read books such as *The Edge of Tomorrow* and *The Night They Burned the Mountains*. *The Edge of Tomorrow* was a crucial and well-received text introducing Laos to Middle America. As Fisher notes, the book was “smartly packaged” appealing to secular and religious critics who were impressed with Dooley’s “lightheartedness in the midst of suffering and danger.”<sup>148</sup> The book sold more copies than *Deliver Us From Evil* and his portrayal of Laos and its people was never challenged by reviewers and Americans. Charles Poore of the *New York Times* lauded the book as “a breezy and remarkably compelling narrative of his adventures in the Kingdom of Laos.”<sup>149</sup> In order to situate Dooley’s adventure “to save lives in shadowy corners of the world,” Poore rhetorically asked “Where is Laos?” before informing readers that the Southeast Asian country is a “pestilential jungle country near the border of Red China.” Like Poore, *New York Times* reporter Peggy Durdin praised Dooley as a “humility-filled saint” who gave concrete form to U.S.-Lao relations. Durdin writes that Dooley’s “anecdote and an Irish gift for the felicitous phrase ... brings the reader an understanding of Laotian individuals, their ways of living, their attitudes, beliefs and superstitions – and their tragic needs.”<sup>150</sup> She also collapses Dooley’s inspiration to work in Laos, a “world

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<sup>146</sup> Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 24-28.

<sup>147</sup> See Durdin, “Laos Paradise on the Edge of War.”

<sup>148</sup> Fisher, *Dr. America*, 166.

<sup>149</sup> Charles Poore, “Books of the Times.” *New York Times*, May 27, 29, 1958.

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/114464169?accountid=14524>, accessed on April 19, 2015.

<sup>150</sup> Peggy Durdin, “Mission to Laos.” *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Sep 07, 1958  
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/114462690?accountid=14524>, accessed on April 19, 2015.

so tragic” also exist in Africa – places that are symbolically constructed as uncivilized and the site of misery and contamination. The success and appeal of *The Edge of Tomorrow* was a result in part of his editors at the *Reader’s Digest* and publisher Farrar, Straus and Cudahy who urged Dooley to reframe his experience from a conflict with foreign aid program to a “conflict with a savage jungle, a distant kingdom, loneliness, and the monotony of misery.”<sup>151</sup>

Dooley’s third and final personal account in *The Night They Burned the Mountains* described his last operation in Moung Sing, a village in northern Laos twenty miles across the mountains from Nam Tha, five miles from the Chinese border. His most successful book, *The Night They Burned the Mountains* spent twenty-one weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller’s list.<sup>152</sup> The book opens with a salute from a Lao soldier “*Thanh Mo America, mi tayah*”<sup>153</sup> who brings Dooley an urgent telegram from Pete Comanduras (Chief of MEDICO, the successor to Operation Laos) to immediately return to the U.S. Though readers learned in 1959 that “4,000 Red troops” were infiltrating two provinces in northern Laos: Sam Neua and Phong Saly, the book is an account of his jungle hospital in Moung Sing and its impending threat of communism, the triumph of MEDICO, the political turmoil in Laos, and the news of his cancer.<sup>154</sup> The book also introduces readers to two new team members: Earl Rhine and Dwight Davis who were “ordinary Americans” working to accomplish MEDICO’s goal of bonding through

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<sup>151</sup> Fisher, *Dr. America*, 153.

<sup>152</sup> Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 186.

<sup>153</sup> Dooley, *The Night*, 1.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. Dooley writes Medical International Co-Operation Organization’s (MEDICO) purpose is simple: “We wish to take care of people who are sick, in areas where they have little or no chance of receiving medical aid. [The belief] that we can win the friendship of people only by getting down on the ground and working beside them, one equal terms, humans-to-humans, towards goals that they understand and seek themselves. MEDICO is a person-to-person, heart-to-heart programme.”

simple acts of love and kindness. Dr. Howard A. Rusk for the *New York Times* commends Dooley's reluctance to leave his jungle hospital in Moung Sing as "The Splendid American" rather than the so-called "ugly American."<sup>155</sup> When Dooley passed away on January 18, 1961 his stature catapulted as he was awarded the Medal of Freedom by President John F. Kennedy and the Medal of Honor by Congress. *New York Times'* editorial remembered Dooley's "work and his spirit was like a flame in the dark jungle"<sup>156</sup> that gave existence to Laos.

### **The Production of Race and Space**

*"What Kind of Place Was Laos?"*

From *The Edge of Tomorrow* and *The Night They Burned the Mountain*, Middle America comes to know Laos as the wretchedness of Asia<sup>157</sup> – uncivilized, anachronistic, dirty, stinky, underdeveloped and barren – an empty space marked for military intervention. In the forward of *The Edge of Tomorrow*, readers are introduced to "the true story of six young Americans, [which] takes place in an exotic land of tinkling wind bells and clashing cymbals, half a world away – the Royal Kingdom of Laos."<sup>158</sup> Dooley along with his assistants – Normal Baker, Peter Kessey, Denny Shepard, Bob Waters and John deVitry – would embark on their first task of Operation Laos in Vang Vieng, located halfway between Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Unlike Dooley and his assistants, Chai, a local translator who would become an important member of Dooley's team, and other

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<sup>155</sup> Howard A. Rusk, M.D. "Dr. Dooley's New Fight" in *New York Times*, August 23, 1959. The phrase "ugly American" comes from a political novel *The Ugly American* (1958) by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer, which is about better ways for Americans living and working in Southeast Asia to integrate and build allegiance to secure a free world. Dooley was seen as antithetical to Burdick and Lederer's the "ugly american."

<sup>156</sup> *New York Times* "Thomas Dooley, M.D." January 20, 1961

<sup>157</sup> Dooley, *The Night*, 36.

<sup>158</sup> Dooley, *The Edge*, ix.

Laotians are introduced as primitive ignorant inhabitants who “clung to the world of spirits and phantoms.”<sup>159</sup> Under Chai’s guidance, the group endured Vang Vieng’s “primitive” conditions: “under blazing sun, we crept and crawled through dense jungle, plowed through monsoon mud, and hit long stretches of suffocating dust. But we also saw some of the most fantastically beautiful scenery on earth.”<sup>160</sup> In the following passage, Dooley evokes the familiar imperial discourse of having traveled halfway around the world across the Pacific Ocean to an unexplored territory in which he descends onto an empty land:

The setting for Vang Vieng must have been selected by a master artist. It is spectacular. The village rests at the foot of stupendous walls of rock, rising two thousand and three thousand feet into the sky. These mountains have no foothills. There’s no gradual rise or slope. Just an absolutely flat plain; then suddenly, abruptly, a staggering wall of rock. The tops of these mountains are covered with pine and on the side walls stubby tree grows out of the rock at painful angles and reach upwards for light... There are many stories of [Mekong River’s] perils, stories of deadly leeches, parasites, huge fish, rays and snakes, as well as Chai’s stories of spirits and dragons.<sup>161</sup>

When Dooley gazes out on the geography of Vang Vieng as a work of art, his presence transforms nothingness into a familiar terrain – as readers come to learn in *The Night They Burned the Mountain* that Laos is his valley, land and village.<sup>162</sup> Dooley’s mastery over the nature of the landscape provides knowledge of Laos. David Spurr suggests this writing convention is an important feature in the narratives of explorers of the nineteenth century.<sup>163</sup> The rhetorical mode of surveillance gives Western writers a privileged point

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<sup>159</sup> Dooley, *The Edge*, 32.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>162</sup> Dooley, *The Night*, 5.

<sup>163</sup> David Spurr, *The rhetoric of empire: Colonial discourse in journalism, travel writing, and imperial administration* (Duke University Press, 1993).



of view over what is surveyed. The commanding view offers the aesthetic pleasure, meaning, knowledge and authority over the Other: “it conveys a sense of mastery over the unknown and over what is often perceived by the Western writer as strange and bizarre.”<sup>164</sup> In *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt has shown how travel narratives that surveil distant land and nature stand in for the tropes of possession and control that form European subjectivities.<sup>165</sup> In other words, these narratives and strategies of “anti-conquest,” which are read as innocent knowledge production, in fact work to legitimate imperial expansion. This is only made possible in Dooley’s redefinition of Laos as an “empty land” – an emblematic trope of colonized landscape void of social life but “rich with potential for future progress.”<sup>166</sup> The provisional erasure of Laotians, the very people he would eventually miraculously save from suffering, would always reappear as “dirty” and “stinky.” Though readers are informed of stories of perils, spirits and dragons, Dooley’s descriptions of the region render Laos as an indeterminate space and a fantasy, one that beseeches “the new ways of the white medicine-men [away] from the magic of the traditional sorcerers.”<sup>167</sup> That is, Laos has to be narrated as an anachronistic space, an “empty land” where Dooley can only “travel backward in time to a disease-ridden world,”<sup>168</sup> in order to concretize his achievement of helping Laotians toward progress and civilization. As Doodley writes, “I did practice 19th-century medicine, and this was just

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>165</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial eyes: Travel writing and transculturation* (Routledge, 2007), 7. Pratt writes “the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony.”

<sup>166</sup> Dooley, *The Night*, 44.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., *The Edge*, 64.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 76.

fine. Upon my departure our indigenous personnel would practice 18th-century medicine. Good, this is progress, since most of the villagers live in the 15th century.”<sup>169</sup>

A recurrent theme that runs through Dooley’s narratives is the scenery of the “savage jungles” and mountains “on the edge of the world.”<sup>170</sup> This scene provides the natural backdrop for the jungle hospital and jungle doctor (*Thanh Mo American*) to dramatically open and deliver Laos from medieval time. The scenery of the jungle draws on a long history of colonial discourse about Asia – an environment of alterity. As an example, in *Burmese Days*, George Orwell declares that the unruly and sluggish landscape of Burma – its forest and jungle—can only be tamed and cleared with British colonial presence.<sup>171</sup> The jungle is narrated as overflowing, invasive, vast, grotesque and ultimately swallows the protagonist John Flory’s garden near the edge of the jungle. In his reading of Orwell’s novel, Douglas Kerr argues that the jungle for European imagination was symbolically and materially “the most foreign about the foreign parts which the European empires had penetrated.”<sup>172</sup> The jungle, Kerr suggests, is the environment and scenery that plays an important part in Orwell’s “eastern novels because much of the action is set in the environment.”<sup>173</sup> Similarly, the jungle plays a strategic part in Dooley’s novels to think about Laos’ landscape and acquaint his readers with unfamiliar geography. For example, the savage jungle where danger lurks is where Savong, a 14 year-old girl became infected and near death, and is then slowly transported to Dooley’s clean and modern clinic. Savong stood in for all of the children in Laos—

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<sup>169</sup> Dooley, *The Edge*, 50 and *The Night*, 111.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Edge*, 42.

<sup>171</sup> George Orwell, *Burmese days*. Vol. 2. (Random House, 1999).

<sup>172</sup> Douglas Kerr, “Colonial habitats: Orwell and Woolf in the Jungle,” *English Studies*, 78, no. 2 (1997), 149.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

racialized to be filthy, miserable and neglected – that Dooley was determined to save.<sup>174</sup>

The juxtaposition of the savage jungle and Dooley’s modern clinic works to produce a re-spatialization of the savage. That is, despite being in the same geographic space, the concept of the savage belongs in the jungle rather than in the space Dooley has created – his clean, sanitized, and painted clinic is where neglected children would emerge beautiful and strong. For Dooley, the jungle is “lovely and hideous,”<sup>175</sup> “wild and wonderful”<sup>176</sup> – but its lush and green scenery is dominated with disease (qualities assigned to savagery).

The jungle is also an unruly place of danger where communist rebellion forces are fomented. As Dooley and his men hacked and cleared the dark jungle through the northernmost part of Laos where “freedom [is] jammed into the underbelly of Communist China,”<sup>177</sup> they dreamed of introducing democracy – coded through love, gentleness and kindness. The jungle and mountain slopes that seem so chaotic and dangerous can be tamed by Dooley’s purposeful presence. Dooley tells his readers that one is “aware of conflicting forces and of every present dangers. Yet it was impossible to identify them clearly.”<sup>178</sup> That is, the jungle and mountain serve as a gateway to hidden communist threat lurking in villages. Through Dooley’s descriptive and dramatic writing, readers learn the danger and evil acts of communism as soldiers “had swooped down on the [Iu Mien] tribesman’s hut in a little village near the border. They had hacked at the occupants

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<sup>174</sup> Dooley, *The Edge*, 48. “She seemed symbolic of all the miserable, neglected kids in Laos – Southeast Asia is full of Savongs. So we were determined to save her. Of course, she was filthy after such long neglect. We literally had to scrub the nearly lifeless little body with soap.”

<sup>175</sup> Dooley, *The Night*, 145.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Dooley, *The Edge*, 58.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 106.

with long swords, literally quartering the grandmother and a small child.”<sup>179</sup> This detailed description of the Communist-inflicted violence would eventually supply Americans with a rationale that communism must be contained in the name of common humanity.

Within its magnificence, the jungle also holds misery. It is a place that freezes time where life is not governed by “watches strapped on wrists.”<sup>180</sup> Time stops in the jungle. In the compulsion to identify and contain communism, Dooley also identifies the evil that lurks in this space as the lack of progress: “These villages live in complete isolation from one another with no commerce and no trading.”<sup>181</sup> Dooley’s geographical journey across Laos is also one across time. In colonial discourse, Anne McClintock points to the trope of “anachronistic space” that is “prehistoric, atavistic and irrational, inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity.”<sup>182</sup> This trope has influenced the representation of Africa as the “Dark Continent” by travel writers and explorers who perpetually saw it as “out of time in modernity, marooned and historically abandoned.”<sup>183</sup> If Africa was a “fetish-land inhabited by witch doctors” then Dooley’s narratives of Laos as a “never-never land where witch-doctors put a ‘hex’ on their hospitals”<sup>184</sup> extends colonial trope of imperial progress across space as simultaneously a journey backward in time. The logic of progress and civilization in Laos functions similarly to that in Africa: both spatially and temporally different but both owe their progress to colonialism. As

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 64.

anthropologist Joel M. Halpern who traveled to Laos in 1956 writes: “Like these new African states, Laos owes her existence to the happenstances of colonial history.”<sup>185</sup>

“*The Place Was Filthy*”<sup>186</sup>

As illustrated above, the designation of Laos as an “anachronistic space” involved the designation of Laotians as “savage” or “primitive.” In other words, the discursive production of abjection through images of misery, filth, and wretchedness as the sign of the Other is constitutive of the production of race and space. According to Spurr, Western writing of indigenous peoples associated with disease, witchcraft, and barbarism serves to justify imperial intervention.<sup>187</sup> For example, in the production of race and space Dooley takes time and energy describing how his various homes and hospitals were set up. His attention to details included describing rooms for different purposes, bright desk lamp, movie projector, beds of teak wood, pasting pictures from old magazines to the walls, and a piano. His first home in Vang Vieng was a typical Lao hut “perched six feet above the ground on stout poles surrounded by a ‘porch’ and reached by a steep ladder”<sup>188</sup> given by the mayor of the village. Dooley shuddered that “the place was filthy” and quickly tore the home apart, breaking out “boxes of soap-power and bleach, and swabbed the deck Navy-style.”<sup>189</sup> His homes and hospitals eventually improved and became sophisticated over time, breaking off from a typical Lao home with bamboo walls, thatched roof and on stilts. Americans came to understand that the cultural and ideological spatialized and racialized construction of Laos can only be conceived through the narratives of

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<sup>185</sup> Halpern, Joel Martin Halpern. *The Lao elite: a study of tradition and innovation*. No. 2636. (Rand Corp., 1960), 1.

<sup>186</sup> Dooley, *The Edge*, 34.

<sup>187</sup> Spurr, *The Rhetoric*, 78.

<sup>188</sup> Dooley, *The Edge*, 34.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

civilization. In his narrative of civilization through cleanliness, Dooley must begin in the domestic where he estimated that his team has been in over “three thousand Asian homes.” This racialized place consisting of huts was “oppressively sultry and humid.”<sup>190</sup> By American standards, they were filthy and plagued with lice, fleas, gnats, and insects. Pete Kessey, one of Dooley’s assistant insist that “even the poorest white trash back in Texas wouldn’t live in such a place”<sup>191</sup> also reveals racial and social hierarchies that link Laotians and Laos as abject.

Dooley writes off Kessey’s statement, declaring that despite its filth, “No one could ever say that the men of Operation Laos lived apart from the natives in an air-conditioned ‘American compound.’”<sup>192</sup> Dooley took pride in extolling cultural tolerance, claiming that unlike the racial and social hierarchy practiced in the U.S., Laotians were an integral part to his team. “Coolie,” “houseboy,” and “servant” took on different meanings in Laos: “Having a coolie, a cook, a houseboy, interpreters and other servants in Laos is a different thing than is in America. They dined with us, bathed with us, swam with us, worked with us, and came out on nightcalls with us.”<sup>193</sup> In Klein’s analysis of Dooley’s home in Vang Vieng, she suggests that it must be read in a national and international context. His home in Vang Vieng is described as a hybrid space of East meets West: “The house resonates with two national landscapes and cultures: made out of bamboo and standing on stilts, the house proclaims its location in a Laotian village; at the

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 41.

same time, its wide front porch and flying American flag suggests a small-town American bungalow.”<sup>194</sup>

In contrast, Dooley’s homes in Nam Tha and Moung Sing broke off from the typical Lao home, since they were provided by the Lao government. Both homes were solidly constructed, built on the ground with rooms for different purposes: sleeping, dining, cooking and entertaining. The spatial configuration of the home diverges from his championing of cultural blending: his home was far superior to the typical Lao home. He described how race and space functions differently for Laotians and himself, distinguishing who resided in what space:

The wretched sick came from huts where they lived on miserable straw pallets in dark rooms. They came to our bright clinic with colourful pictures on the walls and put themselves in the tender hands of my crew. And they were better even before they received their antibiotics. Some of the old men were like little walnuts, browned and wrinkled and withered. Sometimes straggling primitive hordes of human beings known as refugees would come.<sup>195</sup>

Against this statement, I suggest that Dooley’s emphasis on making the home livable was part of his compulsive fear of contamination and disease. Laos, as part of the realm of the “darkest corners,”<sup>196</sup> was a place so filthy that “no matter how many times we scrubbed up during the day, washing our hands in alcohol until the skin became dry and brittle, we felt a mad desire toward evening to burn our clothes and literally bathe in alcohol.”<sup>197</sup> This place was also where “the pot-bellied children, the under-nourished, the

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<sup>194</sup> Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 94. See also Figure 6 on page 95 regarding “Tom’s Dooley’s ‘non-ugly American’ house in Vang Vieng, Laos.

<sup>195</sup> Dooley, *The Night*, 68.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Edge*, 43.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

malnourished, and the miserable”<sup>198</sup> reside. The reference of Laos as “the darkest corner” was part of what he learned about the disease known as Kwashiorakor, a disease first found in a tribe called the Akra in Africa and now is found in Laos.<sup>199</sup> The relationship of Africa and darkness has been part of a colonial discourse promulgated by Rudyard Kipling’s *In Darkest Africa* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. In the same way, Dooley narrates his journey through Laos as an effort to bring civilization to Laos’ “darkest corner.”

In Dooley’s desire to alleviate the suffering of Laotians, he calls on his readers to move to action through donating soap. Soap recurs throughout *The Edge of Tomorrow* as the commodity that could clean Laotians and save Laos from disease. Soap did the civilizing work, providing Laos and its people access to universal inclusion and progress. In “Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising,”<sup>200</sup> Anne McClintock argues that in the eighteenth century, soap was solely a mundane household object; by late nineteenth century, soap as a commodity had become “the fundamental form of a new industrial economy and cultural system for representing social value.”<sup>201</sup> Thus, soap not only filled a gap in the domestic market, but also because it was a “cheap and portable domestic commodity,” soap was potent in mediating the “Victorian poetics of racial hygiene and imperial progress.”<sup>202</sup> In tracing soap advertising in the realm of empire, McClintock reports that a “new imperialism was found in soap” – the imperial civilizing mission of washing and clothing the savage. Similarly, Dooley’s gesture of

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>199</sup> Dooley, *The Night*, 122.

<sup>200</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 209.



“saving” Laotians and Laos through a bar of soap was tied to imperial racism. The soap was important as it cured “each skin case that came to sick-call.”<sup>203</sup> Yaws, a skin disease, was cured with the “1-2-3 treatment – one shot of penicillin, two bars of soap, and three days!”<sup>204</sup> The introduction of soap inaugurated villagers into history proper as they learned to scrub their bodies. For example, Ion the young boy on the front cover of *The Edge of Tomorrow* would be healed with soap and water that “scrubbed away the filth” on his burned body. Soap also introduced the people to the ways of the “white medicine-man” that were more superior than the magic of traditional medicine performed by witch doctors. In Laos, soap and water became the symbols of imperial progress, exemplifying the civilizing work of U.S. imperial power in the region. The intimate and domestic space that Dooley worked so hard to distinguish from the typical Laotian homes became the site for the mission to civilize the people and land.

### **Thomas Dooley’s Legacy**

Before Eisenhower left office in 1961, he pleaded with incoming President Kennedy that military intervention might be necessary to prevent the takeover of Laos by the Pathet Lao. Eisenhower knew his plea for intervention was in effect the failure of his integration policy in Laos. The Eisenhower administration had propped up Laos, financially and militarily supporting the RLA, which ultimately backfired. Moreover, Eisenhower’s integration policy was a dumping ground for unqualified and inexperienced military and state officials. While much effort and attention was placed on Laos during the Eisenhower’s administration, the country became a testing ground for CIA covert

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<sup>203</sup> Dooley, *The Edge*, x.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

operations, the installing of a puppet government, and the dumping of officials who lacked national security experience. As James Fisher writes:

By 1958 USOM had a serious personnel crisis on its hands: the agency's files from the period are replete with case histories of individuals brought to Laos and placed in sensitive positions yet whose liabilities included previous convictions for forgery, confinements in mental institutions, and episodes of alcoholic psychosis, confirming the judgment of Lederer and Burdick that Southeast Asia had indeed become a **dumping ground** for troubled employees of the foreign service.<sup>205</sup>

In his examination of the many US civilians and military officials who helped formulate and execute the Eisenhower administration's policy in Laos from 1954 to 1961, William J. Rust has argued that this policy was a "key initial misstep on the road to war in Southeast Asia."<sup>206</sup>

Under Kennedy's administration, desperate to stop communism from spreading, the U.S. found itself discussing the political situation in Laos. Eisenhower's plea was glossed over as Kennedy moved cautiously and avoided sending military troops into the country—a country that many officials regarded as a "political Never-Never Land."<sup>207</sup> According to a memo to President Kennedy regarding actions in Southeast Asia, the action in Laos would be a costly one: "If we are to preserve the prospects for success in South Vietnam and keep our commitment to defend Thailand within manageable bounds, we must pursue our intention of preventing further expansion of Communist control in Laos."<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Fisher, *Dr. America*, 191.

<sup>206</sup> Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 3.

<sup>207</sup> Dooley, *The Edge*, 106.

<sup>208</sup> Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Countries. Laos: Security: Laos planning material, 18 June 1963, "Memorandum For the President," NCK-77-843 (Series 9)

Two days before President John F. Kennedy was inaugurated as the 35<sup>th</sup> U.S. President on January 20, 1961, Dooley passed away. Dooley's empire had evaporated less than a year after his death: his clinics were under the control of the Pathet Lao and MEDICO collapsed by 1962. Kennedy presented Dooley's mother, Agnes Dooley with the Congressional Gold Medal on June 7, 1962 commemorating Dooley for providing Americans a model of compassion as the tool to combat disease and Communism. Despite his celebrity status, after his death, Dooley's name was not mentioned for almost twenty years in any of the "major histories of the Vietnam War published from the late 1970s through the 1990s."<sup>209</sup> According to Jacobs, the interest in Dooley's publication was revitalized with Diana Shaw's article "The Temptation of Tom Dooley" (1991), Randy Shilt's monograph *Conduct Unbecoming* (1993), James Fisher's biography *Dr. America* (1997), and I would include Christian Klein's *Cold War Orientalism* (2003) and Seth Jacobs' *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam* (2005) and *The Universe Unraveling* (2012).

Shaw claims that Dooley's crusade in Southeast Asia was "integral to a covert CIA disinformation campaign. And the result of his propaganda, taken to its extreme interpretation, was no less than U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War."<sup>210</sup> Her revival of Dooley's life and involvement with the CIA as a "propaganda vehicle," and as a spy and courier, perhaps impel a newly interest in Dooley's work as more than "humanitarian," but staging the production of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. Shaw writes:

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<sup>209</sup> Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 140.

<sup>210</sup> Diana Shaw, "The Temptation Of Tom Dooley : He Was The Heroic Jungle Doctor Of Indochina In The 1950s. But He Had A Secret, And To Protect It, He Helped Launch The First Disinformation Campaign Of The Vietnam War." *Los Angeles Times*. December 15, 1991. [http://articles.latimes.com/print/1991-12-15/magazine/tm-868\\_1\\_tom-dooley](http://articles.latimes.com/print/1991-12-15/magazine/tm-868_1_tom-dooley), accessed on April 20, 2015.

The CIA asked [Dooley] for help of a different order: The agency wanted him to take weapons, along with his pharmaceutical supplies and surgical gear, so he could bury caches of arms that agents could use to mobilize local militia. His task would be to promote his clinics as outposts of peace, all the while covertly preparing for battle and giving induction exams to Laotian boys to clear them for service in the militia. Dooley's clinics were early mobilization efforts – in a part of Indochina that was meant to be neutral.<sup>211</sup>

In tracing American policy towards Laos, Seth Jacobs reveals that many Americans believed the Lao people were susceptible to “red coercion: cowardice, feebleness, ignorance, childishness, injudiciousness, depravity, [and] indolence.”<sup>212</sup> This language employed by Americans during the late 1950s represented U.S. anxiety over communism, and would come to inform knowledge about the racial and cultural Other. Americans came to learn and understand those parts of the world imagined as empty and absent of social life – places of savagery and wildness. Jacobs, however cautiously uses the term *racism*. Unlike chattel slavery, Jacobs claims that “midcentury Americans would never have asserted that the Lao were a separate biological group possessing genetically distinct talents.”<sup>213</sup> Jacobs further distinguishes between different types of racism: “The type of racism exhibited by Americans towards Laos was historically specific [and] rested in large part on the premise that indigenous peoples were capable of ascending the rungs of a developmental ladder, even if some of them, namely the Lao, needed to start at the bottom.”<sup>214</sup> Despite Jacobs's cautious attempt to use the term racism, I suggest Dooley's narratives of encounters in Laos influenced how Middle America and state officials conceived of Laos and how they eventually conducted its aerial war. That is,

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<sup>211</sup> Shaw, “The Temptation of Tom Dooley.”

<sup>212</sup> Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 6.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

Dooley's sentiments about villagers and description of Laos landscape provided the CIA with needed logistical and ideological information of the "difficult terrain."<sup>215</sup> The encoded notions of race, racial difference, and racialized domination in Dooley's books must be contextualized alongside a racial formation in the United States where blacks and people of color were inferior. The hierarchical rendering of Laos in Dooley's stereotypical resonances with colonial Africa point to racial hierarchy, racism and U.S. imperial expansion and occupation that give racial projects their coherence.<sup>216</sup>

In *Dr. America* Fisher concluded that "no American can played a larger role [than Dooley] in announcing the arrival of South Vietnam as a new ally whose fate was decisively bound to that of the United States."<sup>217</sup> Fisher's conclusion was constituent of Dooley's *Deliver Us From Evil* that put Vietnam on the map for Americans. Similarly, I suggest Dooley's *The Edge of Tomorrow* and *The Night They Burned the Mountain* literally located Laos on the map for Americans, and provided state officials and the CIA information about villagers in northern Laos that was controlled by the Pathet Laos. Melanie McAlister argues "through the intersecting deployment of cultural interests and political investments" distant regions and geographical spaces can be mapped for Americans.<sup>218</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated how Dooley's books influenced the ways in which Americans came to know the physical environment of Laos and Laotians. In 1952, in

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<sup>215</sup> Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Countries. Laos: Security: Laos planning material, 18 June 1963. NSF:CO:Laos, General, 6/18/63, Box 132.

<sup>216</sup> Michael Omi & Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, (New York City: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>217</sup> Fisher, *Dr. America*, 34.

<sup>218</sup> McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 303.

Dooley's books, Laos became this "otherworldly" place, a fictional, imagined place that belonged to somewhere else containing "backward," "child-like," "filthy" inhabitants that will never grow up in Middle America's imagination. I suggest the production of Laos' jungle as a savage space harboring communism and disease was crucial in the U.S. eventual treatment of Laos as a military wasteland. Many U.S. statesmen and journalists in Laos viewed Lao people as indolent and lacking. As an example, *Washington Post* John G. Norris questioned in 1959 whether the U.S. with its military power can do much in Laos, a "land-locked, mountain kingdom of a few freedom-loving intellectuals and largely unconcerned farmers, fishermen and opium-growing mountaineers."<sup>219</sup> Reporter Nicholas von Hoffman wrote an article for *Critic* in 1969 that blamed Dooley for helping to create "a climate of public misunderstanding that made the war in Vietnam possible [and] contributed to the malformation of our knowledge and moral judgments about Southeast Asia" – a region in simple terms between good and evil.<sup>220</sup> I suggest the racialization of Laotians as "primitive," "other," and Laos as "uninhabitable" and "expendable" was a fundamental component of U.S. foreign policy in the region. In this regard, the U.S. violently and decisively conducted an aerial war beginning in 1964 that enabled and fostered its own moral superiority and legitimacy, requiring Laos' space to be null and void of social relations where neither compassion nor gentleness existed.

Against the top-down racialization of Laos and its people, the next chapter centers refugee memories to reveal how Laotian refugees have experienced war. I attend to how

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<sup>219</sup> John G. Norris. "If U.N. Fails, What Then? Laos Poses Military Problem for West: Military Viewpoint a Land ..." *The Washington Post*. September 13, 1959.

<sup>220</sup> Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 140.

refugees remembered Laos through the retelling of war memories that can elucidate the violence and terror of war that has been obscured and marginalized.

## Chapter 2 Retelling Refugee Testimonies

### Introduction

Moving away from the production of racial knowledge about Laos and its people, as propagated by Thomas Dooley and others, this chapter focuses on Laotian refugee narratives in order to provide an alternative telling of the Secret War in Laos from the ground up. My engagement with history and memory discourse is not to seek truth, as memory cannot offer this, but to ask how to properly tell and explain the past in new ways that *produce an effect*.<sup>221</sup> Lisa Yoneyama urges a critical reading and analysis of remembering and forgetting: “We must also question why and how we remember – for what purpose, for whom, and from which position we remember – even when discussing sites of memory, where to many the significance of remembrance seems obvious.”<sup>222</sup> In acknowledging that memory is a politicized and constructed concept that is imbued with power, I insist that refugee memories and experiences constitute *knowledge* that can actively produce new ways of seeing the past that is linked to the present. Engaging with and retelling refugee narratives thus allows us to imagine and open new ways of knowing different histories and experiences inflicted by histories of war and empire. Following Espiritu’s call to “critically examine the relationship between history and memory, not as facts but as narratives,”<sup>223</sup> this chapter centers refugee narratives to offer multiple and different interpretations of Laos as a landscape that comprise of people, traditions and culture.

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<sup>221</sup> See Michele Foucault, *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

<sup>222</sup> Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima traces: Time, space, and the dialectics of memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>223</sup> Espiritu, *Body counts*, 4.



In the preceding chapter, I showed how the “empty land” trope was romanticized in Dooley’s books, allowing him to articulate his presence and justify his missionary work in Laos. In other words, Dooley’s presence is only possible when Laos is rendered “empty” and Laotians are racialized as “stagnant, backward, and without progress.” I suggest Dooley’s omnipresent fear of communism that lurks in the jungle, and the “impossibility to identify the [conflicting forces] clearly,”<sup>224</sup> facilitated the U.S. Cold War doctrine of containment and eventually contributed to the U.S. military’s desire for an “empty land” to dispose its military waste. This chapter turns to refugee narratives to refute these forms of racialization. I posit through refugee narratives – the act of writing, drawing, singing, and reciting can counter the ways that Dooley and others have produced different forms of racialization. They demonstrate how refugees as subjects articulate and narrate their relationship to land and community.

In what follows, I juxtapose the official Senate Hearings on refugee and civilian war casualty problems in Laos that took place in the early 1970s with the Laotian refugee narratives that appear in Fred Branfman’s *Voices From the Plain of Jars* (1972 and 2013), and in an appendix of one of the Senate Hearings. In general, an appendix (or addendum) is a supplemental addition to a main work, either explaining or updating the information, particularly if problems were detected too late to correct the main work. Though the appendix provides useful additional information, even without it, often times, the main work is deemed complete. The fact that the Laotian refugee stories appear in the Senate Hearings in an appendix – and thus as a supplemental to rather than part of an official narrative – highlights the state’s practice of forcing the war in Laos into a linear

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<sup>224</sup> Dooley, *The Edge*, 106.

narrative through a selective process of what counts as knowledge. I pay particular attention to Appendix II from a Senate hearing held on April 21 and 22 in 1971 because it features refugees' accounts of U.S. Air Force bombing operations in Laos, which remain a "secret" in official state narratives. In so doing, I mark refugee narratives as countervailing stories that constitute critical knowledge.

In my analysis of these texts, I attempt to "'explain the coincidence' that brings specific cultural products into conversation with specific political discourses."<sup>225</sup> I posit a reading practice that critically situates the contingency of texts as they come up against political discourses and undergo constant transformation, refusing a fixity or stability of meaning, which allows for an analysis that does not privilege the U.S. or its agents' perspectives. In other words, I suggest alternative perspectives bring to light other modes of knowing that differ from Western knowledge. I hope to reveal U.S. racial violence in Laos, destabilize its humanitarian narrative of "saving" Laotian refugees from communism, and attend to the lives that remain and continue to be human in a time of war.<sup>226</sup>

### **Senate Hearings on Refugee and Civilian War Casualty Problems**

When news reports of another war in Southeast Asia began to surface in 1969 in *The New York Times*<sup>227</sup> and *Washington Post*<sup>228</sup>, the Departments of Defense and State

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<sup>225</sup> McAlister, *Epic encounters*, 7.

<sup>226</sup> Some of the refugee narratives welcomed U.S. intervention in the region, while others shared memories of Laos before U.S. aerial bombardment, and many more viewed a return to home.

<sup>227</sup> Special to the *New York Times*, "The 'Forgotten' Conflict in Laos goes into a new offensive phase," *the New York Times*, Jan. 31, 1969, p. 3; T.D. Allman, Special to *The New York Times*, "Ruined town vignette of war in Laos" *New York Times*, Oct 17, 1969, p. 2.

<sup>228</sup> Chalmers M. Roberts, "War in Laos: Now it's President Nixon's turn to wrestle with the clandestine U.S. involvement," *The Washington Post*, Sep. 28, 1969, p. 39; Stanley Karnow, "Like Reds, U.S. Perpetuates Myth About its role in Laos," in *The Washington Post*, Sep. 29, 1969, p. A23;

had to explain to Congress and Americans the extent of U.S. involvement in Laos. That same year, Senator William J. Fulbright (D-AK) announced the establishment of a Senate ad hoc foreign relations subcommittee on U.S. security agreements and commitments abroad, chaired by Stuart Symington (D-MO) (Symington Subcommittee).<sup>229</sup> The Symington Subcommittee, spearheaded by Democratic senators, questioned controversial Republican President Richard Nixon's "executive secrecy" and clandestine activities regarding the wars in Southeast Asia that undermined constitutional government.<sup>230</sup> In late October, the subcommittee held a closed hearing for four days regarding the "secret war in Laos." The debates between the committee and the Nixon's administration on releasing parts of the testimony on Laos were met with tension between Symington and Henry Kissinger, the National Security Advisor to President Nixon.<sup>231</sup> Following the closed hearings, and in response to intense speculation and "grossly inaccurate statements about the situation,"<sup>232</sup> President Nixon addressed the nation on March 6, 1970 on the nature of U.S. foreign policies in Laos. Acknowledging the neutrality of Laos established in the Geneva agreement, Nixon told the nation "that the United States has no ground combat forces in Laos" and insisted that air power had only been used at the request of

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"Symington Unit calls Helms to explain CIA role in Laos: U.S. reported aiding in war, *The Washington Post*, Oct. 18, 1969, p. A2.

<sup>229</sup> See James C. Olson, *Stuart Symington: A Life* Vol. 1. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

<sup>230</sup> Olson, *Stuart Symington*, 393. The committee also included members from the Republican party such as George Aiken (VT), John Sherman Cooper (KT) and Jacob K. Javits (NY) who had been critical of American involvement in Vietnam.

<sup>231</sup> See Olson, *Stuart Symington*, 396. Olson writes Henry Kissinger was at the center of the controversy about releasing parts of the testimony on Laos. Kissinger cautions on the release of the testimony: "It is doubtful whether the release ... will placate the Senators. They know what is going on in Laos and why... Releasing the testimony would help North Vietnam document its case that we are violating the Geneva Accords, without admitting that it is violating them, and thus seriously undermine the real basis for our action... Furthermore, by giving in on Laos... we might be opening a real Pandora's box for ourselves, not only domestically, but in our relations with other countries."

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 396.

the Royal Lao Government (RLG) to interdict the flow of North Vietnamese troops along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which crossed the northern part of Laos.<sup>233</sup>

Two months after Nixon's public address on U.S. military involvement in Laos, and the release of the Symington Subcommittee hearings on April 19, 1970, which was heavily censored<sup>234</sup> on orders of the State Department and President Nixon, a total of three Senate hearings were held to investigate the refugee crisis in Laos and Cambodia. Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) opened the first Senate hearing on May 7, 1970 ("91<sup>st</sup> Congress") stating "the session is being held under the specter of escalating warfare in Southeast Asia – a senseless warfare which has seemingly become irresistible to our national leadership."<sup>235</sup> In other words, following the release of the Symington Subcommittee hearing transcripts, the Senate hearings sought to make plausible U.S. involvement in Laos. This Senate hearing was the first in regards to making the war-related and civilian war casualties in Laos a primary concern.

In his opening statement, Senator Kennedy summarized the Symington Subcommittee's conclusion that the U.S. had engaged in "intensive bombing of Laos":

Based on field reports available to the subcommittee, as well as press commentary and official report from our government, there is reason to believe that human suffering has vastly increased as a result of this escalation and the nature of American involvement. More than our national leadership cares to admit, the intensive bombing of Laos since 1968 has dramatically increased the flow of refugees, and, inevitably, the

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<sup>233</sup> Richard Nixon, "Statement About the Situation in Laos," March 6, 1970. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2902>. Accessed on May 9, 2015

<sup>234</sup> Olson, 397. According to Olson, the heavily censored transcript provided the information Symington wanted release, though partial, the transcript provided ample documentation for references to "the war in Laos." Murray Marder of the *Washington Post* wrote, "Those who express bafflement about why a younger generation loses faith in the words of its leaders will find some answers in the Laos transcript."

<sup>235</sup> Kennedy, 91st Con. Hrg., 2nd session, 1.

toll of civilian casualties...There are even suggestions that we have deliberately set about to remove population from Pathet Lao areas. Such a mindless use of power at this time ... only shows a continued insensitivity of our national leadership, which is distressing to this subcommittee and millions of Americans.<sup>236</sup>

Despite the Symington Subcommittee's findings and testimonies by private citizens<sup>237</sup> on the situation of civilians in Laos from the Senate hearing on May 7, 1970, military officials continued to characterize the war as a "relatively modest and low profile conflict."<sup>238</sup> By attributing refugees' flight from their homes as attempts to escape "communist terrorism," and characterization of the war as a modest conflict elided the complexity of U.S. airpower in the country. In other words, Ambassador Sullivan maintained and reinforced the view that the North Vietnamese were responsible for the refugee in crisis. For example, Ambassador Sullivan testified: "in this long, unhappy history of North Vietnamese aggression against Laos from 1962 until the present time, over 700,000 residents of Laos have been displaced...It is therefore very clear that the prime cause of these refugee movements to the west has been the constant military pressure of the North Vietnamese."<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> *Refugees and Civilian Casualty Problems in Laos and Cambodia: Hearing Before the Subcomm. to Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees and Escapees of the Senate Comm. on the Judiciary*, 91st Cong. 1 (1970) (opening statement of Senator Kennedy)

<sup>237</sup> The expert views from private citizens included Mr. James Norris, Assistant to Bishop Edward Swannstrom; Father Matt Menger, directed Catholic Relief Services projects in Laos since 1957; Miss Geraldine Hicken, Assistant to Father Matt Menger; Mr. Ronald Rickenbach, former Peace Corps volunteer; Mr. Walter Johnson served two years with International Voluntary Services.

<sup>238</sup> May 7, 1970 91<sup>st</sup> Congress, Kennedy, 2.

<sup>239</sup> House Committee on the Judiciary, *War-Related Civilian Problems in Indochina Part II: Laos and Cambodia: Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees and Escapees*, 92nd Cong., 1st sess., April 21 and 22, 1971, Sullivan, 47. See also Carl Strock, *The Long March*, *The New Republic*, May 9, 1970, at 13. "Laotian government reports 543,000 refugees with another 150,000 unregistered. Now because of the Plain of Jars bombing, another 100,000 refugees are trudging southward through the roadless mountains."

The Departments of Defense and State suggested the cause of refugees was not the impact of U.S. Air Force bombing operations, which were carefully directed.<sup>240</sup> It would be almost a year before the hearing on war-related civilian casualty continued on April 21 and 22, 1971 (“92<sup>nd</sup> Congress”) to address the living conditions of refugees caught in the long wars in Southeast Asia. Testifying before the subcommittee was Senator Paul McCloskey (D-CA) who returned from a visit to Laos in 1971, where he obtained accounts contrasting the Senate hearing on May 7, 1970; the reason for refugees was the “real possibility...[of] a State Department-controlled aerial bombardment of villages in Northern Laos.”<sup>241</sup> Senator McCloskey conducted his own surveys, along with four interpreters to assist him in interviewing refugees in the Vientiane refugee camps, finding that “their villages were destroyed by bombs.”<sup>242</sup> McCloskey requested submission of photographs of Laotian villages, documentation of American bombing of civilian targets in Laos, prepared by Fred Branfman (hereinafter Appendix II), and selected press reports and correspondence to support Senator McCloskey’s findings. These items were relegated to the Appendix, rather than featuring centrally as evidence in the hearing.

On April 21, 1971, Fred Branfman, a former educational advisor in Laos testified before the Senate that he has interviewed “several thousand refugees from every portion

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<sup>240</sup> There were multiple hearings on the civilian population that took place before this hearing. According to Senator Kennedy in his opening statement, “The subcommittee will come to order. Today’s hearings – after some 30 similar sessions in nearly 5 years – resumes the subcommittee’s public inquiry into the devastating impact on the civilian population of what has now become an Indochina war.” (1) I was unable to find all these hearings, except for this one where the hearing records, at least, the most complete.

<sup>241</sup> Apr 21, 1971 92nd Cong Hrg, McCloskey, 2.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 12.

of the area under Pathet Lao control in Laos”<sup>243</sup> There were other refugee surveys, such as the USIS report “Survey of Refugees from the Plain of Jars Summary,”<sup>244</sup> which was included in the main document of Senate hearing, and concluded that refugees fled because of the Pathet Lao. Senator Kennedy’s desire for a “substantially different report from the USIS” called upon Branfman to testify about his independent surveys. Kennedy used Branfman’s survey as evidence of the abuse of power by the Departments of Defense and State, and the result of such abuse: the thousands of refugees that Branfman had interviewed were caused “by American bombing while he was still inhabiting his village.”<sup>245</sup> The 60 pages of sample documentation of interviews were recorded and requested for submission by Fred Branfman.<sup>246</sup> Kennedy informed the committee that “those parts which are relevant will be made a part of the record,”<sup>247</sup> resulting in the inclusion of 25 of the 60 pages.<sup>248</sup> Despite Branfman’s public challenge during the

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<sup>243</sup> 92nd Cong., 1st sess., 37. I have not found any works that are critical or have suggested these numbers of interviewed are high. My critique is that I find the number high during a time of intensity and fear that many were willing to tell their experience. A further analysis is provided in the section *Voices of the Plain of Jars*.

<sup>244</sup> 92nd Cong., 1st sess., 14, This survey began in late June and early July of 1970 and was conducted by USIS, Vientiane, with American and local staffs under the guidance of the Embassy political section. According to Senator McCloskey, “They conducted interviews with about 213 refugees on the Plain of Jars on the conditions of life in wartime Pathet Lao zone and the reasons for leaving it. It states reasons for moving to the Royal Lao Government zone. It does not contain the reference that bombing was surely the most compelling reason.” This survey is part of the Senate hearing and not included in the appendix.

<sup>245</sup> Branfman, 37.

<sup>246</sup> Branfman, 37. Answers to Kennedy’s questions if the sample documentation were conversations he had. “Branfman: These are conversations, photos from the files of the Lao administration, an excerpt from a report by a U.N. expert, a list of articles written by reporters, people who have seen both the bombing and its aftereffects in person.”

<sup>247</sup> 92nd Cong., 1st sess., 37.

<sup>248</sup> The following documentations were included in Appendix II: 1) Summary of Branfman’s research on American bombing, 2) Excerpts from study by U.N. Advisor Georges Chapelier, 3) Article by *Le Monde* journalist Jacques DeCorney titled “Owls in the Grotto,” 4) Refugee statement titled “Life of a refugee in Bax N, by a Lao student,” 5) Letter from a former USAID official in Khammouane Province, 6) Newsletter from a former IVS volunteer in Moug Phalane, 7) Transcript of interview with refugees from Phone Savan and Khang Khay Region of Laos – May 22, 1970 as recorded by Fred Bransfman, and 8) excerpts from essays by the Lao refugees.

hearing and documentation of U.S. indiscriminate bombings in Laos, Ambassador Sullivan maintained that since the independent surveys were a “special case”<sup>249</sup> and an extrapolation of a small group of 20,000 out of 700,000 refugees, they did not constitute a credible indictment of the military policy and its conduct.<sup>250</sup>

The last hearing on the subcommittee’s public inquiry took place on May 9, 1972 (“92<sup>nd</sup> Congress 2<sup>nd</sup> Session”), which continued to investigate the situation in Laos and Cambodia. While the Departments of Defense and State’ narratives legitimated the U.S. military actions to defend Laos and the world from communism, thereby eliding U.S. “scorched-earth policy” that destroyed the civil society administered by the Pathet Lao and forced the population into government-controlled areas supported by the U.S., the testimonies of Laotian refugees in Appendix II contradict military actions. These Senate hearings were the first time military and state officials, with discretion, admitted to the existence of the aerial war in Laos and Cambodia, and the abuses of power that occurred during the U.S. bombings of both countries.<sup>251</sup> Despite the Senate Hearings’ conclusion that U.S. airpower in Laos was a “war crime,” bombing missions continued until 1973. When the U.S. quietly withdrew from Laos in 1974, its “scorched-earth” policy left Laos a wasteland.<sup>252</sup> This policy would be employed again a decade later in the Afghan-Pakistan border.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1st sess., 39.

<sup>250</sup> 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., May 7, 1970, 16. See also Noam Chomsky’s *At War with Asia: Essays on Indochina* (Vintage, 1970), 163. See press release of Tammy Arbuckle, reporter for the *Washington Star* whose article was included as part of the Appendix. Arbuckle reports: “Well-informed sources said the United States is pursuing a ‘scorched earth’ policy to force the people to move into government areas-and thus deprive the Reds of information, recruits and porters.”

<sup>251</sup> Hereinafter Senate Hearings and when referenced individually are known as 91<sup>st</sup> Hearing, 92<sup>nd</sup> Hearing or 92<sup>nd</sup> Hearing (2<sup>nd</sup> session). ”.

<sup>252</sup> See Nicole Barrett, *Holding Individual Leaders Responsible for Violations of Customary International Law: The U.S. Bombardment of Cambodia and Laos*, 32 Colum. Hum. Rts. L. Rev. 429



In 1997, President Bill Clinton finally admitted to the U.S. bombing campaigns in Laos. In return for U.S. admission of the bombings, the Lao government agreed to cooperate on the search for American prisoners of war/missing in action. In 2000, Clinton authorized the release of Air Force data that revealed the severity of the U.S. bombing campaigns in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. With the recent air strikes in Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, scholars have begun to critically link U.S. military aerial war in Laos to U.S. air strikes in the Middle East. Historian Mahmood Mamdani articulated this relationship revealing that the 1991 Gulf War was “the first time the U.S. applied the military doctrine it had forged in Laos during the long war from 1964 to 1974: ‘to compensate for the absence of ground forces by an aerial bombardment of unprecedented intensity, without regard for collateral damage.’” The first Gulf War would serve as a preview to the “shock and awe” campaign in which “1,800 aircraft flew 41,000 sorties over two days in an attempt to bomb Hussein’s government into submission.”<sup>254</sup> Today Iraq has earned the distinction of the most heavily bombed nation per capital in history, replacing Laos.<sup>255</sup>

### **Fred Branfman’s *Voices from the Plain of Jars***

Like Thomas Dooley, Fred Branfman played an important role in introducing Laotians to the American public. To avoid the draft for Vietnam, Branfman had gone to

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(2001), 436. “From 1965 to 1970, the United States dumped more than eleven million gallons of Agent Orange over approximately 4.5 million acres of South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. As a result, the inhabitants of East Laos today suffer from increased birth defects and related illnesses.”

<sup>253</sup> Hulme, Karen. "Armed Conflict, Wanton Ecological Devastation and Scorched Earth Policies: How the 1990-91 Gulf Conflict Revealed the Inadequacies of the Current Laws to Ensure Effective Protection and Preservation of the Natural Environment." *J. Armed Conflict L.* 2 (1997), 45.

<sup>254</sup> Mamdani, Mahmood. *Good Muslim, bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the roots of terror* (New York: Three Leaves, 2005).

<sup>255</sup> See John Donnelly and Jonathan Gorvett, “Air Campaign over Iraq Called Growing U.S. Risk,” *Boston Globe*, November 11, 1999, at A2.

Laos to serve as an educational advisor, representing International Services, Inc., a private voluntary agency supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). He spent nearly four years in Laos from March 1967 until February 18, 1971.<sup>256</sup> After learning about the U.S. bombing campaign in 1969, he stayed in the country, working as an independent journalist during his last two years. He began documenting peasant refugees from the Plain of Jars who camped outside Laos' capital Vientiane between September and December 1970. The majority of these refugees were from the Plain of Jars, Sam Tong and Long Cheng who were forced to leave their home due to the intense fighting in Laos since February 1970. These refugees were airlifted from northern Laos to the capital in Vientiane Plain and the Borikhane Province, and were processed by Lao Government personnel.<sup>257</sup> These internal refugees interviewed signal earlier instances of refugee displacement at the hands of U.S. intervention, distinct from the most documented Southeast Asian (primarily Vietnamese) refugees who left after 1975.

After his testimony on April 21, 1971, Branfman published the compiled anonymous memories and sketches of Laotian refugees a year later, which became *Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life Under Air War* (hereafter *Voices*). *Voices* was instrumental in exposing the bombing campaigns against civilians and bringing attention to U.S. involvement in Laos. Gloria Emerson for the *New York Review of Books* writes: "In this small, shattering book we hear – as we are so rarely able to do – the voices of

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<sup>256</sup> 92nd cong, 1st sess., 38.

<sup>257</sup> 91st cong., 2nd sess., 4, 8.

Asian peasants describing what we cannot begin to imagine.”<sup>258</sup> The late Pulitzer Prize winner and former *New York Times* reporter and columnist Anthony Lewis wrote in 1973:

The human results of being the most heavily bombed country in the history of the world were expectedly pitiful. They are described without rancor – almost unbearably so – in a small book that will go down as a class. It is *Voices from the Plain of Jars*, edited by Fred Branfman in which the villagers of Laos themselves describe what bombers did to their civilization. No American should be able to read that book without weeping at his country’s arrogance.<sup>259</sup>

*Voices* received attention from notable scholars such as Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Walter Haney and Alfred McCoy, commending the book’s unique account of Laotians living under U.S. airpower. The first edition was long out of print until its republication in 2013.

The second edition of *Voices* was republished by The University of Wisconsin Press as part of its New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies series.<sup>260</sup> The second edition includes historian Alfred McCoy’s foreword titled “Reflections on History’s Largest Air War,” thirteen additional illustrations by refugees, and an epilogue by Branfman reflecting on his return to Laos in 1993 and in 2010 for the First Meeting of

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<sup>258</sup> Gloria Emerson, “Voices No One Wants to Hear” book Review of *Voices*, August 10, 1972. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1972/aug/10/voices-no-one-wants-to-hear/> accessed on May 9, 2015.

<sup>259</sup> Quoted In Walt Haney’s paper presented at the 15th Annual Meeting Association of Third World Studies, Central Connecticut State University, October 9-11, 1997. “The Bombing of Laos and the Browning of One Volunteer,” Boston College. [http://rightslinklao.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2015/03/The\\_Bombing\\_of\\_Laos\\_150dpi.pdf](http://rightslinklao.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2015/03/The_Bombing_of_Laos_150dpi.pdf) accessed May 10, 2015 in Roger Warner, *BACK FIRE: The CIA’s Secret War in Laos and It’s Link to the War in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 337.

<sup>260</sup> Alfred McCoy has been a critical scholar of U.S. militarism. He is also the editor for the New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies series. McCoy has contributed to the Nation Institute’s TomDispatch.com, an online blog on U.S. war in Afghanistan, national security, surveillance state, U.S. empire, etc. As noted on its website, “Tomdispatch is intended to introduce readers to voices and perspectives from elsewhere (even when the elsewhere is here). Its mission is to connect some of the global dots regularly left unconnected by the mainstream media and to offer a clearer sense of how this imperial globe of ours actually works.”

States Parties to the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM) in Vientiane.<sup>261</sup> In his foreword, McCoy provides an abbreviated history of U.S. foreign policy that ultimately leads to the secret air war as part of a clandestine intervention in Laos. He praises Branfman's work as "both immediate and timeless,"<sup>262</sup> where some 40 years after the book's first publication, the significance of the message resonates in U.S. deployment of airpower today: "Branfman's slender volume stands as telling reminder for the devastating impact this realpolitik exercise of global power can have for the ordinary villagers worldwide who might suffer its collateral damage."<sup>263</sup> The late historian Howard Zinn wrote in *A People's History of the United States*:

[In Laos,] where a right-wing government installed by the CIA faced a rebellion, one of the most beautiful areas in the world, the Plain of Jars, was being destroyed by bombing. This was not reported by the government or the press, but an American who lived in Laos, Fred Branfman, told the story in his book *Voices from the Plain of Jars*.

The book consists of essays, songs, poems and short statements by Lao peasants from the Plain of Jars about life before, during and after the war. In addition to the writings by refugees, there are thirty-two drawings by refugees depicting what their life had been like under the air war. Under the section "Textual Note," although Branfman acknowledged his position as an American and the feelings of "distrust, fear or hate" that most refugees had that fled the U.S. bombing campaigns, I suggest his project provides a Western construction of knowledge about racialized populations. Unlike Dooley who exaggerated his narratives about Laos and the people, Branfman cautions his readers that "there is no reason to believe the people [who] wrote these essays and drew these pictures

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<sup>261</sup> In the second edition, two illustrations that were in the first edition were not included.

<sup>262</sup> Branfman, *Voices* 2013, xi.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

exaggerated in any way what happened to them.”<sup>264</sup> However, both Dooley and Branfman served as sympathetic authoritative observers, informants and/or experts in Laos because of their privileged positions to move through Laos freely during conflicts and their ability to bridge Americans and Laotians by conveying expressions of cultural tolerance and “saving” Laotians from warfare.

Branfman’s ability to survey several thousand refugees in four months begs for a critical reflection on how the data (the direct testimony of refugees themselves) extracted and collected remains untainted and registers as truth – as he “opted for factual, literal translation as close in meaning to the original as possible.”<sup>265</sup> Branfman begins the project of interviewing refugees by announcing a connection in his knowledge of the Lao language by writing, “Had we not known Laotian, the project would have been doomed from the start.”<sup>266</sup> In distinguishing himself from the “few Westerners” who care not to learn Lao and are consequently “completely cut off from the peasants,” Branfman, however, becomes the expert witness and objective reporter for refugees. In translating documents written in Lao into English, Branfman makes the refugees experience legible for Americans, simultaneously, speaking for the refugees as he “feels that these essays and drawings present as moving and accurate a picture of what the war was like for the peasants.” As an American, Branfman was aware of the obstacles of gaining refugees’ trust particularly when they were in an American-supported refugee camp. In order to gain their trust, Branfman encouraged the refugees to write about their experiences of living under U.S. aerial war in any form and to draw freely with pencils, pens, crayons

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid., xix.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., xvii.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

and markers that were provided for them. Many were asked not to state their party affiliation or preference for or against the Royal Lao Government or the Pathet Lao. Many refugees discussed topics such as the economy, education, and farming. In creating his authority about the refugees from the Plain of Jars, Branfman used “direct refugee testimony” to document and account for the U.S. bombing campaigns. Lastly, like many Westerners who have traveled to Laos, they saw the peasants as illiterate, dull and unimaginative – assuming they were unable to tell their stories and life under U.S. air war. Similarly, Branfman shared the racialization of Laotians as “illiterate,” and “backward,” but also reveals through compassion and cultural tolerance that Laotians can be rescued and liberated, The result of the refugees telling their experiences before, during and after the U.S. aerial war from 1964 through most of 1969 are rich, vivid and compelling.

As illustrated above, though Branfman’s work was important in revealing the devastating result of U.S. airpower and indiscriminate bombing in northern Laos to the American public, it also rehearses benevolence that sustains unequal power relations between the interviewer and refugees interviewed. When he passed away on September 2014, his obituary in *The Economist* referenced his connection to those who have been betrayed by America – not just blacks at home but also those abroad from war crimes. As a Jew, the airwar in Laos inevitably reminded Branfman of the Holocaust: “As if I had discovered Auschwitz when it was still going on.”<sup>267</sup> After drawing public attention of

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<sup>267</sup> Obituary: Fred Branfman, An Inconvenient Truth, *The Economics*, October 18, 2014. <http://www.economist.com/news/obituary/21625649-fred-branfman-exposer-americas-secret-war-laos-died-september-24th-aged-72> accessed on May 10, 2015 See also William Yardley, “Fred Branfman, Who Exposed Bombing of Laos, Dies at 72” in *The New York Times*, October 6, 2014.

the bombing campaigns, Branfman would go on to work as a research director for California governor Jerry Brown from 1979-1983. I acknowledge Branfman's work has been instrumental in exposing the secret air war and providing a narrative space to include experiences of refugees who were displaced from the Plain of Jars in Laos. I also suggest that we acknowledge that the act of collecting memoirs of over "2000 people" is thus an imposition of power and privilege.<sup>268</sup> My criticism calls attention to the consequences of that power and privilege allowing Branfman to freely move around camps to interview refugees, while others were unable to do the same. In other words, in what ways does Branfman's position rehearse "the white man's burden" to rescue and reveal the atrocities of U.S. airwar, and speak on behalf of the refugees as an expert witness.

### **Refugee Testimonies and Sketches**

As a field of knowledge production, personal narratives can offer challenges and limitations as a methodology. Memories of wars are contested, fragmented, and unpredictable. What stories are remembered, interpreted and represented are situational and shaped by the power relationship between narrator and researcher. As a way of remembering and bearing witness to violence, storytelling may be a way to restore a sense of continuity, and provide meaning and hope to alleviate suffering. They may evoke the need to explore and conceptualize different ways of being human in order to make sense of displacement. That is, the stories remembered and told, the organization, interpretation and representation of the experience, and the flow of events are never fully

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[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/07/us/fred-branfman-laos-activist-dies-at-72.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/07/us/fred-branfman-laos-activist-dies-at-72.html?_r=0) accessed May 10, 2015.

<sup>268</sup> See Marc Eberie, "The Most Secret Place on Earth" 2008.

“transparent renditions of reality, but partial and selective versions of it, arising out of social interaction.”<sup>269</sup> When placed in their wider social and political contexts, narratives can serve as ground for imagining and asking different kinds of questions about history and memory. As a researcher, I acknowledge the multiple dilemmas of representation, the complexities and tensions between empirical and interpretative demands, and the ways in which narratives are mobilized to cull over-generalized notions of “the refugee experience.”<sup>270</sup> However, the effort to understand and retell is central to how refugee narratives can reveal how Laotians made sense of forced displacement through different forms of expression. Social anthropologist Marita Eastmond writes, “As representation, rather than documentation of reality, narratives become methodologically more complex, but also open up theoretically more interesting possibilities: for one, they make room for a more dynamic view of the individual as subject, acting in the world and reflecting on that action.”<sup>271</sup>

I suggest attending to Laotian refugee narratives as “testimonies” can destabilize and make vulnerable Ambassador Sullivan’s testimony before the Senate Subcommittee that the U.S. aerial warfare in Laos did *not* create refugees and the refugee crisis emerged from *other* wars: “those whose lives have been disrupted by the other war in Laos,” which “represents the ambitions of the North Vietnamese to extend their control over their peaceful Lao neighbors.”<sup>272</sup> Thus, the inclusion of non-canonical texts, and writings from the subaltern and marginalized groups as “genre” has been an interest in

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<sup>269</sup> Marita Eastmond, “Stories as lived experience: Narratives in forced migration research,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20, no. 2 (2007), 260.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>272</sup> 92nd cong., 1st sess., see Sullivan statement.



postcolonial literature, subaltern studies and cultural studies. Laotian refugee narratives as “testimonies” can offer an alternative understanding of those whose lives have been disrupted, uprooted and displaced. George Yudice defines testimonial writing “as an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.) and is heterogeneous. It is an act, a tactic by means of which people engage in the process of self-constitution and survival.”<sup>273</sup> Lisa Lowe argues that the testimonial by Asian immigrant women constitutes a genre because they “extend the scope of what constitutes legitimate knowledge to include other forms and practices that have been excluded from both empirical and aesthetic modes of evaluation.”<sup>274</sup> In the telling of their “life stories, oral histories, and histories of community,”<sup>275</sup> Asian immigrant women used different narrative techniques to attend to affective spaces such as feeling and experience.

Within Latin American literature, testimonials produced by subaltern people have been instrumental in correcting Western discourse about the other and closely associated with revolutionary developments. Rosaura Sanchez argues that Californio *testimonios*, however mediated, are the voices of the subaltern because they “counter hegemonic historiography ... reposition and recenter themselves textually at a time when the physical and social spaces from which they could operate had become increasingly circumscribed.”<sup>276</sup> Similarly, Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo reads Rigoberta Menchú’s

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<sup>273</sup> George Yudice, “Testimonio and Postmodernism,” *Latin American Perspectives* 18 (3) 1991, 17-19.

<sup>274</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 156.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>276</sup> Rosaura Sánchez, *Telling Identities: The Californio Testimonios* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), x.

autobiography as emblematic of testimonial literature and within the “extraliterary” context borrowed from Alberto Moreira – as not only “‘the pain beyond any possibility of representation’ but also the theatre of Realpolitik, a theater in which Menchú actively participates, in part through her performance of testimonial acts.”<sup>277</sup> Together, these scholars call attention to mediated narratives and testimonials as genre – cultural forms of individual and collective narratives connected to records of histories of war, colonialism and empire. Although the different perspectives of life under U.S. wars are inherently contradictory and un-representable, I suggest that conceptualizing Laotian refugee narratives as testimonies treat them as a record of U.S. Cold War historiography, and address how refugees narrate their forced displacement and dispossession within their own terms and from their own perspective. George Gugelberger and Michael Kearney suggest testimonial writings offer the best sources because “the other speaks back and doing so unmask[s] not only Western versions of what is true, but even Western notions of truth.”<sup>278</sup>

Refugee testimonies and multiple disparate forms of expression, such as poems, illustrations, textbooks, and songs can offer a way to understand and retell how refugees renegotiate everyday life in relation to new contexts. In *Power/Knowledge* Michel Foucault writes, “subjugated knowledge is a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledge, located low down on the hierarchy beneath the required level of recognition or

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<sup>277</sup> Saldaña-Portillo, María Josefina. *The revolutionary imagination in the Americas and the age of development* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 153.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

scientificity.”<sup>279</sup> Taking Foucault’s definition of subjugated knowledge, I extend this to refugee knowledge. Refugee knowledge is then a compilation of texts, rich with possibility, similar but different, and disparate, when read against the grain, can draw attention to experiences that have been muted, disqualified, suppressed or forgotten. In my attempt to place refugee testimonies within the context of U.S. Cold War histories, I account for the missing pages of Appendix II submitted by Branfman, suggesting that the absence in the texts is a potential presence to dialogue with the official narrative. For example, in the Senate hearing what does it mean to omit illustrations in Appendix II that documents the war? In what ways do short stories, statements, sketches, songs and poems reveal the atrocities of war and offer new opportunities for remembering?

The refugee testimonies and sketches cited reveal dominant sentiments from Laotian peasants who were under attack from U.S. aerial war. In the act of retelling, I show how the testimonies and sketches are rich in details, complex and have the capacity to disrupt, challenge and complicate the state narrative that “no civilian casualties have ever resulted from U.S. air operations.”<sup>280</sup> They highlight the violent destructions of war that bear on the psychic and material spaces of communities. Some narrated their lives before the war, drawing landscapes with lush green vegetation and jungle, monks praying, temples, farmers harvesting their rice, mothers going to the market and children playing in the fields. Many refugees wrote about longing for what they could not enjoy and landscapes they could not replace in the confined spaces of their new place – the refugee camps. They expressed a deep sense of sadness, suffering, and hopelessness as

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<sup>279</sup> Foucault, *Power/knowledge*, 83.

<sup>280</sup> 92nd cong., 1st sess., 89.

they reflected on the past and imagined what the future held. The sketches are simple line drawings by peasants depicting family members, neighbors, villagers, and buffaloes being killed or maimed from the bombing. Many provide an image of life before and after the planes bombed their village. For others, drawing maimed bodies and limbs, smoke rising in the air from exploding bombs, airplanes directly aiming at villagers and homes, and the destruction of land. The overarching themes include: forced displacement and dispossession, destruction of homes, villages, and land, loss of human lives, and exposure to environmental toxins and degradation. The memory of war and what emerged from the conflict varied in the multiple forms of telling by the refugees. “Land and life” was a common trope by refugees to describe the devastation of U.S. bombings and the difficulties of spatial confinement in the refugee camp. Many survivors narrated a pressing account of the reality of war and point to the basic understanding of indiscriminate annihilation of land and people – “a life whose only value was death.”<sup>281</sup> In the next section, I provide a critical reading of selected testimonies and sketches from *Voices* because they reveal dominant experiences of life under war. I explore how refugee testimonies are not only sites for negotiating what happened in times of uncertainty and liminality, but also for addressing the complexity and ambiguity of their experiences at times and places of disruptions and war.

**“Land is Life”<sup>282</sup>**

Anne McClintock suggests the myth of the “empty land” is also the myth of the “virgin land,” which has long been part of colonial narratives. The empty land/virgin land

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<sup>281</sup> Branfman, *Voices*, 127.

<sup>282</sup> Patrick Wolfe, “Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native” in *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387-409.

involves “racial and gender dispossession” for access to territory through discovery. Since lands are “empty,” indigenous people are symbolically displaced onto an anachronistic space – outside of history proper. Scholarship on settler colonialism and genocide has revealed “empty land” as the site of wholesale expropriation of indigenous peoples and their lands, in order to implant a settler society.<sup>283</sup> In “Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native,” Patrick Wolfe writes “Land is life – or, at least, land is necessary for life. Thus contests for land can be – indeed, often are – contests for life.”<sup>284</sup> Using this sentence to open his essay to explore the relationship between genocide and the “settler-colonial logic of elimination,” Wolfe concludes the erasure of indigenous people is necessary. Though Wolfe provides insightful dimensions of “the logic of elimination,” I wish to reconsider how this logic can be extended to aerial warfare and occupation, particularly in Laos where the U.S. conducted an air war for nine years that enabled the dumping of over 2.1 million tons of bombs transforming the land as well as the socioeconomic system of the country.<sup>285</sup> Ideologically, however, there is a major difference between settler colonialism practiced by Europeans who employed different racial classification to eliminate in order replace. What I suggest is U.S. military aerial occupation and “carpet bombing” was by designed to annihilate land and people, where dangerous debris settled on land long after the war has ended. The U.S. aerial bombing campaigns forced Laotians from their land, but also drove off or killed their buffaloes and other livestock. In this light, we are in a position to ask whose life and whose land are

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<sup>283</sup> Wolfe, “Settler colonialism,” 388.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 387.

<sup>285</sup> I thank Curtis Marez for suggesting this unlikely connection during my prospectus meeting.

valued. The ideological justification for the dispossession and displacement of Laotians was that Laos was an “empty land.”

The “empty land” trope has enabled territorial appropriation for settler societies and military purposes. For example, the militarization of indigenous lands in the deserts of the Southwest as “zones of sacrifice,”<sup>286</sup> centers for military and scientific research that included testing ranges and nuclear dumpsites.<sup>287</sup> Keith L. Camacho and Laurel A. Monning (2010) argue the discursive militarization of the Pacific through the use of rhetoric, metaphors and images of the land and its women as “feminine” and “pleasure-oriented” have made the Pacific Islands a “staging ground” for invasion. Moreover, the Cold War geopolitics in Remote Oceania, which encompassed the Bikini and Enewetak atolls in the Marshall Islands, Christmas Island, and the Johnson Atoll have been the site of nuclear atomic bombing testing since the late 1940s. The remoteness and inaccessibility of the islands made them the best places for testing sites that could be kept a secret. Applying the “empty land” trope to Laos, I suggest that the U.S. long air war was made possible in part by the racialization of the country as an abstract space, empty of social relations. Rather than read the refugee narratives as histories of trauma that is impossible to fully represent, I demonstrate instead how the selected texts can invite alternative conceptualizations of space that disrupt and interrogate the “empty land” trope.

To highlight the reality of war and the sociality of what has been deemed “empty land,” I begin with the testimony of a twenty-one-year-old man to offer an alternative

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<sup>286</sup> Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, xviii.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

account of Laotian spatial memories of the U.S. aerial war. The testimony reveals life before the war and the value of land as necessary for prosperity and progress for Laotian rice farmers. Laos is a place understood and defined as a site of “good homes.” Home marks the quotidian – a place felt and experienced for the refugee. It is where life is sustained through everyday experience such as tending to the land and farming. “Land is life” for the author who remembers the wide land providing verdant rice fields – all signifying growth, harmony, beauty, fertility, and safety. However, the author’s life is violently disrupted as planes began to burn the rice fields, kill villagers and destroy homes.

Before, my village had prosperity and good homes for Laotian rice farmers. This led to much progress for our wide land. But then came the present time, as we and our rice fields were hit by the planes and burned; our homes were hit and burned, our belongings completely lost. I think back and within me tears want to fall. But there are not enough. For I have fled from the village of my birth.<sup>288</sup>

The author captures the temporal within the spatial, illustrated in the use of language through words like: “before,” “present” and “think back,” which entail forms of understanding the war. Time and space are marked by the author’s differentiation between a relatively peaceful past to a catastrophic present. He is keenly aware of the transformation of what was once “our wide land” has become the site of the U.S. “scorched-earth” policy where no organized life was possible. Arundhati Roy writes that “Indochina provided the lush, tropical backdrop [for] the U.S. to play out its

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<sup>288</sup> Branfman, *Voice*, 5.

fantasies...The Vietnamese, the Cambodians, and Laotians were only script props.

Nameless, faceless, slit-eyed humanoids. They were just the people who died. Gooks.”<sup>289</sup>



Figure 1, Artist: 27 years old<sup>290</sup>

In the sketch drawn by a 27-year-old, memory of the war is articulated through his artistic engagement of chaos, death, mutilation, air strikes, and destruction of land. Using very little color, the author details the violence of war. What the U.S. has called a “relatively modest and low profile conflict”<sup>291</sup> is depicted by two jets directly aiming at civilians, red clouds rising in the air, maimed bodies on the ground, livestock left to rot, destroyed homes, and razed countryside. The color of red, often associated with war, danger, strength and power dominates the illustration. The drawing, emotionally intense, summons the viewer to examine closely the details of the human and environmental costs of war. Noam Chomsky writes that during the Vietnam War, the task of American military technology was to bomb “the hell out” of Indochina: “The problem is that

<sup>289</sup> Arundhati Roy, *Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire* (Penguin India, 2006), 62.

<sup>290</sup> Retrieved from Legacies of War, <http://legaciesofwar.org/programs/national-traveling-exhibition/illustrations-narratives/> accessed on September 5, 2014.

<sup>291</sup> 91st cong., 2nd sess., 2.



American machines are not equal to the task of killing communist soldiers except as part of a scorched-earth policy that destroys everything else as well.”<sup>292</sup>

The illustration is accompanied with a narrative that remembers life for the people of Xieng Khouang. The artist narrates that war made it difficult for the population to work and harvest their rice because “there were people working in the rice field, in the garden, in the village, who were shot by the airplanes. The earth was struck and many, many cows, buffaloes, horses, and chickens also died.”<sup>293</sup> Challenging the racialization of Laos as an “empty land” void of meaning, the author depicts it as a place teeming with life where farming, community, home, animals and people existed alongside each other. The people of Laos farmed the land, tended to their buffaloes and animals, and worked together. Land was neither empty nor unproductive, but rich with natural resources and rice-growing countryside that provided for the people. The narrative and illustration depicts the deadly consequences of airpower and ultimately U.S. military policy in the country. The manner and scale of the U.S. air strikes in Laos illuminated America’s military power and “scorched-earth policy” that has continued to appear, most recently in the wars in the Middle East.

### **The Appendix II: “Farewell . . .”**

After two days walking across mountains and valleys we reached a place where helicopters brought us away from our home forever. While on board we had a last glance at our land.

No houses, no pagodas, no rice plants, nothing to tell us that there was some human life there. It was interesting to see some mountains with bare red tops, usually a little lake on it, far away there were columns of smoke

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<sup>292</sup> Noam Chomsky, *The Chomsky Reader* (Pantheon, 2010), 274.

<sup>293</sup> Branfman, *Voices*, 36.

looking like mushrooms. Such was the wonderful skyline as painted by the war in its newest art. Over there we left our home, over there we left our rice. Neither our goods nor our beast could be brought with us – what will we do without them.

*Farewell* – our buffalos, our pigs, our fowl . . . we hope they will be smart enough to hide themselves. If not, they will all get shot and eaten by the soldiers. How sorry we were not to take them with us.

*Farewell* – rice fields, orchards, bamboo gardens and lakes filled with fish! It is not our will to leave you, but the war obliges us. It is not our weakness to go away but it's because of the barbarity of some stronger people with their machines.

*Farewell* – everything that makes that place our home. *Farewell* . . .  
[from a young folk singer]<sup>294</sup>

The song begins with a collective journey away from Laos. The singer uses the catastrophic event of war to make sense of forced displacement from one's home to "reach a place." Place is temporary for the singer who knows that the possibility of violence may ensue at any moment. The transition from the fear of deafening jet noise is replaced with the choppy sound of helicopter blades that have taken *us* away as "we had a last glance at our land." This movement reveals how power and difference are understood where "helicopters brought us away from our home forever," marks somewhere else, a state of transition, a space in between. In the second verse, the singer introduces the sedimentation of U.S. imperialism that bears on the psychic and material spaces of refugee communities. The singer alludes to the fact that land that was once filled with life has been "painted by the war in its newest art." The land has become strange, the landscape of the valley's red tops, something that has become unknown, what was once there, usually a "little lake on it" has transformed into a "lake of blood and destruction." Again, red is used to describe war, power, danger and death. The skyline that is "painted

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<sup>294</sup> 92nd cong., 1st sess., 109.

by the war in its newest art” articulates the singer’s comprehension and subjection to the violence and terror by U.S. militarism. In elucidating the “we,” “our,” and “us,” this testimony forges both individual and collective subjectivities as “refugees” - a figure produced in order to be assigned all the misfortunes and suffering of communism; simultaneously, a subject who must be rescued in order to absolve U.S. military power and aggression.<sup>295</sup>

The singer returns to the theme of home where the repetition of “over there” signals home and Laos as “no where.” The singer notes the “over there” is their life before the war, and where land was fertile. Laos became a scene of power for the U.S. to exhibit its air power by occupying the air and turning skies into “columns of smoke looking like mushrooms.” Indeed, aerial warfare in the region illustrated power where the distinction between combatant and civilian resulted in a “delightful obscurity” and “power without aim, purpose, plausible enemy and in total impunity.”<sup>296</sup> In the last verse of the song, the singer turns to the form of repetition where *farewell* is repeated three times. The singer begins by telling of his/her concern of the livestock hoping that they [the livestock] are smart enough to hide themselves. The singer’s narrative of forced departure speaks to a story of a wound that cries out, an attempt to tell the listeners what it means to be separated from one’s home and land. The “everything that makes that place our home” but is now “over there” signals a once inhabited space now deemed a distant other that needs to be either deserted or rescued. In creating this image, the singer illustrates the nostalgic past of “home:” the recalling of “our buffalos, our pigs, our

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<sup>295</sup> See Espiritu, *Body Counts*.

<sup>296</sup> Baudrillard, “War porn,” 86.

fowl,” and “rice fields, orchards, bamboo gardens and lakes filled with fish” articulates the everyday and the familiar – a way to grasp the unknowable and make sense of what is incommensurable.

The word *farewell* repetitively appears in the song signifying an overwhelming experience of the war, the departure, and the forced separation of families and land. The word also reflects the unknown, “the barbarity of some stronger people” who with their machines forces the departure. By ending the song with “*farewell . . .*” the ellipsis further signifies what remains is unknown, an excess gesturing towards an interpretation. Here, the word *farewell* collapses the moment of leaving and looking back, reflecting the relations of power that makes the leaving not voluntary but forced. I suggest that the song’s telling of the everyday life elucidates the Laotian experiences of the war, simultaneously revealing the devastation of U.S. airpower on Laos. The word *farewell* implies that one’s relationship to land and place will be severed and that the possibility of a return is foreclosed. The singer’s “farewell . . .” reveals the temporal liminal status of the refugee, of simultaneously leaving and looking back, which disrupts the state’s linear narratives of humanitarian intervention.

## **Conclusion**

In addressing refugee narratives as primary text, I hope to show how individuals make life meaningful and continue to go on in time of war. Neferti Tadiar has proposed the notion of “life-times” to view the remainders of dehumanizing conditions and devaluation of marginalized communities. “Life-times” is useful to understand how refugees participate and practice in becoming human against the conditions of violence and war. In my reading of the refugee narratives and illustrations I show that even within

the chaos, the capacity to confront violence and to become human is to “make and remake social life in situations of life-threatening hardship, deprivation and precariousness.”<sup>297</sup> In their articulation through telling and drawing, we can understand the conditions of violence described by refugees under U.S. aerial war, forced displacement and dispossession, destruction of homes, villages, and land, loss of human lives, and exposure to environmental disasters. While some long for a return to the past, others attempt to accommodate their new surroundings in battered landscape and/or poor conditions in refugee camps. Together, the illustrations and narratives provide important evidence of the past and reveal the relations of power that produced and marked the spaces in which people lived as “empty land.” I conclude with the fourteen-year-old-boy’s testimony as an entry to reveal, fifty years after the first bombing mission, that there is no **aftermath** in Laos: “The place where I used to play had become so many bomb craters. And I couldn’t go into the woods anymore because some hadn’t yet exploded.”<sup>298</sup> There is nothing over about the war, as the debris remains lodged in maimed bodies, as well as in the land where new damage continues to emerge from unexploded ordnance, holding a population that relies on farming for ransom.

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<sup>297</sup> Neferti X.M. Tadiar, “Life-Times of Becoming Human.” *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 3 (2012), 1. <http://occasion.stanford.edu/node/75>.

<sup>298</sup> Branfman, *Voices* 1972.

### **Chapter 3**

## **Humanitarian Government: “To Serve the Nation”**

### **Introduction**

To this day, America does not support the bombing of civilian targets. And after every war, America has always helped countries rebuild. Even after Japan attacked the United States, U.S. assistance to Japan from 1946 to 1952 was about \$15.2 billion in 2005, of which 77 percent was in grants, 23 percent was in loans, according to the Congressional Research Service. Also, from 2003 to 2006, the USA appropriated \$35.7 billion for Iraq reconstruction. For Germany, “in constant 2005 dollars, the United States provided a total of \$29.3 billion in assistance from 1946 to 1942, with 60 percent in economic grants and nearly 30 percent in economic loans, and the remainder in military aid. What have we done for Laos as a government?”<sup>299</sup>

On April 22, 2010, the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment held a congressional hearing on the subject of the legacies of war concerning unexploded ordnance in Laos. Chairman of the subcommittee Hon. Eni F.H. Faleomavaega’s (D-American Samoa) opening statement marks a moral crisis in the United States’ humanitarian assistance to Laos – “What have we done for Laos as a government?” The hearing also corresponded with President Bill Clinton’s “Demining 2010 Initiative” first announced in 1997 that was dedicated to creating a mine safe world by 2010. The Demining 2010 Initiative led by the United States sought to devote \$1 billion in global humanitarian projects that aimed to “accelerate demining efforts, increase international coordination, and increase public and private resources dedicated to

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<sup>299</sup> 111th cong., 2nd sess., 3.

demining.”<sup>300</sup> While the U.S. remains the “largest”<sup>301</sup> donor in global humanitarian demining operations and assistance, other key financial contributors include Japan, the European Commission, Ireland, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Germany, United Kingdom, and Australia. By listing the United States charitable contributions toward general post-war relief in Japan, Germany and Iraq, Hon. Faleomavaega invokes humanitarianism as a moral obligation, or more precisely the core of America(n) “values” that has legitimized imperial expansion and “civilization” missions across the Pacific.<sup>302</sup> However, in framing the U.S. history of contributions, generosity, and the shared humanitarian sentiments that “America has always helped countries rebuild,” Hon. Faleomavaega obscures the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the role the U.S. has played in creating the destruction in the first place. This omission allows the U.S. to lead and recast military interventions onto a moral plane that makes it difficult to challenge. Simultaneously, this omission enables U.S. humanitarian interventions to be couched as a moral responsibility to defend against human rights abuses, ensure human security, and restore human dignity.<sup>303</sup> Along the lines of rallying moral sentiments and mobilizing shame to set right the wrongs, Hon. Faleomavaega’s call for the U.S. to do better through humanitarianism

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<sup>300</sup> See Rachel Good, “Yes we should: Why the U.S. should change its policy toward the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty,” *Northwestern Journal of International Human Rights* 9, no. 2 (2010) and Press Release Elizabeth Cramer, “U.S. Office of Global Humanitarian Demining Works Toward Demining 2010 Goals” in JMU 5.1 (April 2001) [http://www.jmu.edu/cisr/journal/5.1/Focus/E\\_Cramer/ecramer.htm](http://www.jmu.edu/cisr/journal/5.1/Focus/E_Cramer/ecramer.htm). accessed on May 7, 2015. The initiative aims to accelerate international demining efforts, increase funding for U.S. Global Humanitarian Demining available <http://www.jmu.edu/cisr/journal/2.1/statedept.htm>

<sup>301</sup> In Department of State, 12/08/14 Remarks at the To Walk the Earth in Safety Event; Secretary of State John Kerry; Washington, DC. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/12/234786.htm> accessed on March 15, 2015. In his remark, there is a differentiation between “largest” and “leading” contributor to the international demining efforts.

<sup>302</sup> See Craig Calhoun, “The Idea of Emergency: Humanitarian Action and Global (Dis)Order” in *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*, Fassina eds. (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 29- 58.

<sup>303</sup> See Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing displacement: Refugees and the politics of humanitarianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

relies on “a language that inextricably links values and affects, and serves both to define and justify discourse and practices of the government of human beings.”<sup>304</sup>

The United States’ renewed interest in Laos is part of a larger President Barack Obama’s administration to “pivot toward Asia” after 10 years of U.S. long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>305</sup> Since the end of the U.S. wars in Southeast Asia in 1975, the Lao government replaced Western aid with Soviet bloc countries until in the late 1980s. U.S.-Lao diplomatic relations were restored in 1992 after the collapse of the Soviet Union and remained minimal until 2010. In January 2011, USAID placed a staff person in Laos after a 35-year absence in the country. In July 2012, at the request of Legacies of War (a U.S.-based organization working to address unexploded ordnance in Laos), Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a four-hour visit to Laos before flying to Phnom Penh, Cambodia for the annual meeting of foreign ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Though brief, Clinton’s presence in Laos marked the first visit by a Secretary of State since John Foster Dulles in 1955 (when the U.S. established full diplomatic relations in the country). During her visit, Clinton “pledge[d] to help get rid of millions of unexploded bombs that still pockmark the impoverished country – and still kill.” The purpose of her visit was to gauge whether Laos could become a “new foothold of American influence in Asia” in the context of China’s expanding influence in Southeast Asia, and to discuss environmental concerns over a proposed dam on the Lower Mekong

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<sup>304</sup> Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 2. In an earlier essay, “Heart of Humanness: The Moral Economy of Humanitarian Intervention,” Fassin defines what we might call “humanitarian reason as the principle according to which humans share a condition that inspires solidarity with one another.” He further elaborates on “humanitarian emotion as the affect by virtue of which human beings feel personally concerned by the situation of others” (269).

<sup>305</sup> See “US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on historic Laos visit” in *BBC News Asia*, July 11, 2012. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18792282> accessed on March 16, 2015.



River.<sup>306</sup> After her visit, Clinton said U.S. relations with Laos would “trace the arch of our relationship from addressing the tragic legacies of the past to finding a way to being partners in the future.”

Today U.S. partnership with Laos comes in the form of donations to demining efforts — to help the Lao government to excavate and abate unexploded ordnance in the country so “our children [can] walk the earth in safety.”<sup>307</sup> In this chapter, I examine the United States engagement in Laos through a discourse of humanitarianism that seeks to sanitize and misremember its violent past by planting new narratives of compassion and liberalization.<sup>308</sup> However, this form of intervention based on humanitarian ethics of reconstruction and progress does more than relieve human suffering; it also reinscribes symbolic violence and actual violence of those employed in demining work. Sociologist Craig Calhoun refers to capitalist investments and suggests that the United States investments in humanitarianism is “embedded in more hierarchical understandings of humanity, it constitutes a relationship of dependency, not of equivalence.”<sup>309</sup> Legal scholar B.S. Chimni argues that “humanitarianism is the ideology of hegemonic states in the era of globalization marked by the end of the Cold War...[whereby] the ideology of humanitarianism mobilized a range of meanings and practices to establish and sustain global relations of domination.”<sup>310</sup> Though scholars of globalization focus more on

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<sup>306</sup> See Phuong Nguyen, “In Laos, a Strategic Opening the United States Cannot Miss” in *Center for Strategic & International Studies* 6, no. 7 (April 2, 2015). <http://csis.org/publication/laos-strategic-opening-united-states-cannot-miss> accessed on April 6, 2015.

<sup>307</sup> President William Jefferson Clinton, September 24, 1996 in 2000 Walk the Earth Safety Report.

<sup>308</sup> See B.S. Chimni, “Globalization, Humanitarianism and the Erosion of Refugee Protection” in *Journal of Refugee Studies* 13, no. 3 (2000), 243-263.

<sup>309</sup> Calhoun, “The Idea of Emergency,” 35.

<sup>310</sup> Chimni, “Globalization, Humanitarianism,” 244.

economic dependency theory and not to the legacies of militarism of places like Laos, I look to the meanings and practices of the United States humanitarian demining efforts in Laos to reveal how asymmetrical relations of power are sustained in post-war reconstruction. I suggest the “rescue and liberation” narrative functions through economic reform where assisting Laotians to be self-sufficient is to subject them to dangerous/hazardous work conditions as disposable laborers. I argue that the humanitarian-military projects of “saving” Laos from UXO depend on a racialized and gendered Laotian labor force willing to endure the threat of death or injury endemic to this kind of work. I suggest that a critical analysis of the U.S. humanitarian demining program initiated in 1993, with specific focus on its post-war commitment in Laos, and the United Kingdom’s Mines Advisory Group’s (an international organization that removes and destroys landmines, UXO and other post-war weapons) humanitarian work on the ground, can reveal the relationship between humanitarianism and the legacy of militarism that creates a Laotian subject who can become represented in an international frame. As the largest donor and the longest humanitarian organization in Laos respectively, both the United States and the United Kingdom have the authority to pronounce that everyone should “walk the earth in safety” – an argument for humanitarian presence that, I argue, reinforces imperial projects and resignifies race through “civilizing” and “humanizing” missions.

## “To Walk the Earth in Safety”

The United States is proud to be the world’s single largest financial supporter of humanitarian mine action...Our efforts have enabled many countries around the world to become free of the humanitarian impact of landmines (“impact free”) and have dramatically helped reduce the world’s annual mine casualty rate.<sup>311</sup>

The U.S would not be able to meet [its] national defense needs, nor [its] national...security commitment to [its] friends and allies if it joined the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty.<sup>312</sup>

In 1997, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (a coalition of non-governmental organizations)<sup>313</sup> for their efforts to bring about the Mine Ban Treaty (also known as the Ottawa Treaty). The Mine Ban Treaty (MBT), enacted on March 1, 1999, banned the use, production, trade and stockpile of anti-personnel landmines. As of March 16, 2015, there were 162 State Parties to the MBT.<sup>314</sup> The United States is not one of them. In the years since the passing of the MBT, the U.S. remains outside the treaty for military purposes. The U.S., however, has begun to adopt policies in line with the treaty’s goal and provisions. For example, the 1991 Gulf War was the last time U.S. military forces used landmines and in 1992, the U.S. enacted an export moratorium on landmines. Although President Obama has announced in

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<sup>311</sup> <http://www.state.gov/t/pm/rls/rpt/walkearth/> accessed on March 10, 2015.

<sup>312</sup> See Good and Second Review Conference of the Ottawa Convention Banning Anti-Personnel Landmines, U.S. Department of State, Daily Press Briefing, Ian Kelley, November 24, 2009.

<sup>313</sup> The coalition was formed in 1992 and includes the following nongovernmental organizations with similar interests: Human Rights Watch, Medico International, Handicap International, Physicians for Human Rights, Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation and Mines Advisory Group.

<sup>314</sup> International Campaign to Ban Landmines, <http://www.apminebanconvention.org/states-parties-to-the-convention/#c6809> accessed on March 16, 2015. The States not party of the Mine Ban Treaty include China, Egypt, India, Israel, Pakistan, Russia and the United States.

September 2014 that the U.S. will no longer use anti-personnel landmines outside of the Korean Peninsula, the United States continues to remain outside of the Treaty despite its humanitarian demining projects and support for landmine survivors.<sup>315</sup> I juxtapose the quotes above to underpin the essence of American exceptionalism. In this context U.S. imperial power (economic and military) simultaneously maintains its military dominance while functioning as a protective authority to rescue subjects and nations at risk. In its efforts to assist demining activities globally, the U.S. Government Humanitarian Mine Action Program assists countries “to relieve human suffering, to develop an indigenous demining capability, and to promote U.S. interests in peace, prosperity, and regional stability.”<sup>316</sup> In other words, the program seeks to establish a form of legitimate authority through its claim of benevolence that relies on humanitarian actions of governing and protecting populations.

In this section, I examine the U.S. Humanitarian Mine Action Program’s claim to protect and rebuild post-conflict nations, in particular to ensure that all can “walk the earth in safety.” This Mine Action Program dates back to late 1988 when the term “humanitarian demining”<sup>317</sup> was first coined in Afghanistan, which has the largest and

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<sup>315</sup> See Good, “Yes we should,” 223. She writes President Clinton’s reason for not signing the MBT was that the Treaty lack the timetable to phase out mines and that “landmines are necessary along the DMZ. He explained “in the event of an attack...our antipersonnel mines are a key part of our defense line in Korea.” President Obama has said that the U.S “will begin destroying stockpiles not required for the defense of South Korea. And we’re going to continue to work to find ways that would allow us to ultimately comply and accede to the Ottawa Convention.” <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/23/us-usa-defense-landmines-idUSKCN0HI1U920140923>. accessed on March 9, 2015.

<sup>316</sup> [http://www.state.gov/1997-2001-NOPDFS/global/arms/fs\\_980903\\_demine.html](http://www.state.gov/1997-2001-NOPDFS/global/arms/fs_980903_demine.html)

<sup>317</sup> According to the Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms on humanitarian demining. “Department of Defense and Department of State program to promote the foreign policy interests of the United States by assisting other nations in protecting their populations from landmines and clearing land of the threat posed by landmines remaining after conflict has ended. The humanitarian demining program includes training of host nation deminers, establishment of national demining organizations, provision of

oldest demining program globally. In 1993, the United States established the Humanitarian Demining Program to initiate international humanitarian mine action and ensure that all may be able “to walk the earth in safety.” The majority of funding for unexploded ordnance (UXO) demining comes from the State Department’s Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement (WRA), which is part of the Non-proliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs (NADR).<sup>318</sup> Since the Program’s first published report in 1999, women and children graced the cover page of eleven editions out of thirteen. For example, the 2000 report features “Rwandan children returning from a mine awareness class,” and the 2006 report a “mother smiling and holding her child.” As Laura Briggs has suggested, the visual figure of the Third World women and children positions the U.S. as rescuers and as such, “the United States could not even potentially be held accountable for the military, political and economic causes of poverty or hunger – its only role was to rescue the unfortunate victims of such events.”<sup>319</sup> I extend Briggs’ argument of the visual trope to the reports prepared by the United States Department of State entitled “To Walk the Earth in Safety,” which informs the reader about the U.S. commitment to rid the world of landmines and its role as the largest donor in humanitarian demining projects. I read these state reports to reveal the conditions of benevolence that are intertwined with violence. In other words, these reports tell the story of the U.S. as the hero - the world’s single largest financial supporter of humanitarian

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demining equipment, mine awareness training, and research development.”

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/humanitarian+demining> accessed on March 10, 2015.

<sup>318</sup> In collaboration with nongovernmental organizations to implement programs and address weapons of destruction and clearance, the following agencies work together in partnership and have supported over 90 countries – the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State, the Department of Defense (DOD), and the Agency for International Development (USAID).

<sup>319</sup> Laura Briggs, “Mother, child, race, nation: The visual iconography of rescue and the politics of transnational and transracial adoption,” *Gender & History* 15, no. 2 (2003), 198.

mine action: the morally superior, Judeo-Christian nation that reaches out with charity, solidarity and compassion to save the victims of non-Western countries. Rachel Good has pointed out the contradictions of the U.S. being the largest donor of humanitarian demining and its refusal to sign the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, arguing that the Mine Action Program has been ““in the best interest of the United States [because it] enhances the United States tarnished reputation.”<sup>320</sup>

Since 1993, the U.S. has provided more than \$2.3 billion in humanitarian demining action globally, which includes funds used for demining resources, risk education and survivor services. In Laos, although landmines were laid during the war, UXO such as cluster munitions remnants “represent a far greater threat to the population and account for the bulk of contamination. UXO, mostly of US origin, remain in the majority of the country’s 18 provinces.”<sup>321</sup> The U.S. began humanitarian demining funding in Laos in 1995 with \$80,000 and has gradually increased to a total of nine million in funding by the end of 2013.<sup>322</sup> Since the inception of funding for UXO clearance in 1996, Congress has specified that no less than \$5 million will be spent on demining efforts in Laos, which is the United States’ largest annual allocation. To date, the U.S. has invested more than \$71 million in Laos for clearance and safe disposal of UXO.<sup>323</sup> In addition, the U.S. Department of Agriculture also provides funding for school meals, UXO clearance, risk education and victims’ assistance. Under the direction of the Department of Defense, State Department, Department of Agriculture and USAID, the

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<sup>320</sup> Good, “Yes we should,” 225. “The 1999 Ottawa Convention prohibits the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of antipersonnel landmines. While backed by most countries, the treaty has not been endorsed by the United States, Russia, China and India.”

<sup>321</sup> United States Department of State, “To Walk the Earth in Safety” 2014.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

U.S. has managed to expel its histories of war and violence on Laos through the implementation of humanitarian demining projects, mine awareness and training programs, and victims' assistance.

I return to the questions posed by Hon. Faleomavaega, quoted in the epigraph: “what have we done for Laos?” and “what will we do?” because “justice demands that these wrongs be set right.” Hon. Faleomavaega’s interest in Laos stems from his service during the Vietnam War, and commitment “to do all [he] can to help the victims of Agent Orange as well as those who are and were affected b U.S. bombing operations in Laos.”<sup>324</sup> The April 22, 2010 Congressional hearing was held after Hon. Faleomavaega, along with Congressman Mike Honda (D-CA) and then Congressman Joseph Cao (R-LA) visited Laos in January of 2010 as part of a bipartisan congressional delegation to investigate the devastating effects of UXO. Hon. Faleomavaega’s questions and demand for action point to the U.S. long history and track record of humanitarian projects – an American ethos that Hon. Faleomavaega believes can end human suffering. Moreover, Hon. Faleomavaega’s call for assistance to Laos invokes the relationship between humanitarianism and religion, which has defined the narrative of colonialism, imperialism and contemporary globalization. As he asserts, “as a country founded on Judeo-Christian principles, we can and should do better.”<sup>325</sup> Although the “can and should do better” refers to the request for an increase in monetary funding for the UXO sector from \$5.1 million to \$10 million, it is also a proclamation of the U.S. as a benevolent savior who is able to provide monetary assistance for the “children in Laos [who] are

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<sup>324</sup> 111th cong., 2nd sess., 2.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

counting on us.”<sup>326</sup> The attempt to situate recovery and reconstruction for Laos and its people is a linear teleological understanding of events. For example, the ways in which the U.S. has portrayed its intervention in Laos begins with protecting Laotians from Communist threat, caring for them in refugee camps, supporting and assisting with the removal of UXO, and helping build a “vibrant civil society.” These forms of humanitarian interventions mask imperial exploitation, military violence and benevolent tutelage of non-Western countries.

Since its inception, the U.S. Humanitarian Demining Projects has produced a new labor force specialized in excavating and abating unexploded ordnance in Laos. The U.S. Special Operations Forces soldiers have trained Laotians to become experts and specialists in demining efforts.<sup>327</sup> To address UXO problem in Laos, the U.S. provides direct funding for UXO Lao, Mines Advisory Group (MAG), Norwegian People’s Aid, the Swiss Demining Foundation, and HALO Trust to conduct independent clearance operations, and provide technical and research assistance. These agencies have trained and educated Laotians about the danger of UXO, a danger Laotians have known too well since 1964. In the next section, I point to the contradictions of post-war commitments that depend on and recruit racialized and gendered subjects from the global South to provide “productive and reproductive labor” in post-war spaces.

### **Post-War Commitments**

I return to the epigraph in the beginning of this chapter to show how Hon. Faleomavaega’s call for a post-war commitment enables the U.S. to erase the violence in

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>327</sup> Jennifer Lange, “The U.S. Humanitarian Mine Action Program: Helping Countries ‘Get on their Feet’” *Journal of Mine Action* 7.1 (April 2003).  
<http://www.jmu.edu/cisr/journal/7.1/focus/lange/lange.htm> accessed on May 4, 2015.



Laos through its benevolent act of “saving.”<sup>328</sup> The U.S. is the largest donor and the provider of technological and research assistance to the demining program in Laos. The U.S. Department of Defense provides a “searchable database known as the Combat Air Activities Southeast Asia Database, which is the most comprehensive collection of strike information from the Vietnam War” to assist the Lao program in identifying contaminated areas to be cleared.<sup>329</sup> Additionally, post-war commitment is achieved by providing Laotians expert knowledge and skills to demine the estimated 80 million UXO littered throughout the country. As such, U.S. postwar commitment to promote “economic reform and good governance” in Laos takes the form of assisting Laotians to be self-sufficient in the dangerous work of demining.

In *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, Takashi Fujitani, Geoffrey White and Lisa Yoneyama argue that the imperial myth of the U.S. as a “liberator” created an “already accrued debt” for nations encountered by U.S. imperial power. This “already accrued debt” ensured that Asian and Latin American nations inflicted by war and violence eventually end up providing racialized and gendered labor for transnational corporations.<sup>330</sup> That is, the contradictions of capitalism demand and desire these “othered” bodies for labor, while simultaneously increasing military power to protect national borders from “undesirable” subjects. These forms of labor are often dangerous, devalued and dehumanized. In *Service Economies* Jin-Kyung Lee examines how

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<sup>328</sup> I suggest the various modes of military “operations” conducted to save, rescue and liberate Asian subjects as a public relations’ efforts.

<sup>329</sup> 111<sup>th</sup> cong., 2nd sess., 13.

<sup>330</sup> See Jin-Kyung Lee who states that “as a direct and indirect result of U.S. militarism, various locations in Asia, including South Korea and Vietnam in the short and long run, came to function as places of low-wage labor for U.S. capital since the 1970s” (2010, 1); See also Jodi Kim who also shows that the ‘effects of war are not “unintended” consequences of empire, but constitute the very conditions of possibility for empire’s continual expansion and reconstitution” (2010, 29).

“marginal transnational proletarian” labors (military labor, (industrial) sex work, military sex work, and migrant industrial labor) were premised on “commodifying the transformation of sexuality and race into labor power” in South Korea. Lee reconceptualizes these kinds of labor, bio-power, and “possibilities of death,” as necropolitical labor: “the most disposable labor – the ultimate labor commodity or worker, something or someone to be thrown out, replaced, and/or (both literally and figuratively) killed after or as the labor is performed.”<sup>331</sup> In this age of globalized capitalism where racialized and gendered subjects are recruited to fulfill capital’s demands as disposable workers, Grace Hong, Rhacel Pareñas and Kalindi Vora have demonstrated the global North’s dependence on the productive and reproductive labor performed by Third World women, the preferred workforce for transnational capitalism.

In her examination of new forms of affective and biological labor that are performed through call centers and gestational surrogacy, Kalindi Vora makes visible how these labors produce and transfer “human vital energy” to consumers in the global North, but are also tied to a long history of imperial labor. In other words, these forms of labor are “indices of new forms of exploitation and accumulation within neoliberal globalization, but they also rearticulate a historical colonial division of labor.”<sup>332</sup> Vora’s analysis of the “dual nature of reproductive labor” is generative to consider how demining work indexes a new form of racialized and gendered labor for the “poorest and most vulnerable” within global capitalism as well as a long history of U.S. militarism in Laos. I suggest that those who engage in demining work, often poor Laotian villagers

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<sup>331</sup> Lee, *Service Economies*, 6.

<sup>332</sup> Kalindi Vora, “Limits of ‘labor’: Accounting for affect and the biological in transnational surrogacy and service work,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111, no. 4 (2012), 683.

and farmers, provide two forms of labor as “services:” 1) the productive labor of demining the UXO that erases the U.S. aerial war in Laos; and 2) the affective labor of providing the care work that would enable future generations to “walk the earth in safety” in Laos. The first “service,” as paid work is supported by the West through funding and training Laotians to demine UXO. This paid-work serves and supports the West’s claim of humanitarian progress. In other words, it supports a “legitimate” labor workforce that did not exist prior to the West’s involvement, and thus provides tangible evidence of the West’s post-war commitments to rebuild war-ravaged countries. This productive labor also produces “safe” scrap metals that are then crafted into material goods for the benefits of global capitalism. The second “service” as affective labor is the energy that these workers expend in order to ensure that Laos is free from UXO for villagers to return to, and for the future generations to work, live, and play in a UXO-free Laos. These two services—the productive and affective labor provided by the demining workers—have been touted by the West as a successful project of economic restructuring and liberalization that is achieved through humanitarianism where militarism drops out of the equation.

Since the departure of U.S. military presence in Laos, other international non-governmental organizations such as HALO Trust, Norwegian People’s AID, and Swiss Aid have provided humanitarian demining assistance. MAG is an international humanitarian demining agency based in the United Kingdom that aims to clear landmines and remnants of war in post-conflict countries. MAG has been working in Laos since 1994 and MAG Lao currently works in Xieng Khouang and Khammouane Provinces. Since its time in Laos, the agency has cleared 1.68 million m<sup>2</sup> land, removed and

destroyed 5,422 cluster munitions and 1,585 unexploded ordnance, and spotted 1,374 explosive ordnance disposal.<sup>333</sup> MAG also works in other post-conflict nations such as Cambodia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Libya, Iraq, Lebanon, etc. In order for MAG to work globally with past work in 25 countries and current work in 16 countries, MAG's labor force is recruited from the "poorest and most vulnerable" group.

By hiring local staff from the communities we work in, MAG is maximizing the long-term development impact of our demining work by improving the skills and broadening the experience of the local workforce. MAG's recruitment policies ensure the poorest and most vulnerable people in communities are not only beneficiaries of clearance, but also have the opportunity to be gainfully employed by MAG in the process.<sup>334</sup>

In naming demining labor as "specialized," MAG obscures the ways in which race, class and gender are attached to the recruitment of its ideal labor force to perform this productive labor. Trained by U.S. soldiers and UK's MAG, Laotians learn the specialized skills needed to become experts in demining UXO. Demining experts also have the opportunity to transfer those skill sets to jobs available in other post-conflict nations. Post-conflict recovery recruitment agencies such as Global Project Recruitment provide services for the Ordnance Management and Mine Action by "match[ing] professionals with specialist skill sets with organizations operating in challenging, remote and hostile environments."<sup>335</sup> Other agencies include the United Nations Mine Action Service, Cleared Ground Demining, Olive Group Mine Action Group, The HALO Trust, Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining. These agencies seek individuals with the specific set skills that have been provided by MAG to perform dangerous work that

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<sup>333</sup> The data is for clearance up to 2013. For more information, see <http://www.magamerica.org/country/laos/overview>. The date was retrieved on March 9, 2015.

<sup>334</sup> <http://www.magamerica.org/investing-local-staff>.

<sup>335</sup> <http://www.globalprojectrecruitment.com/>.

governs the extension and reduction of life. As a result of the transnationalization of demining work, many Laotians are trained by demining specialists from other post-conflict nations such as Lebanon where MAG has trained “the most poorest and vulnerable people in the communities.”<sup>336</sup> In another example, many Cambodian demining specialists are working in Africa and the Middle East to demine UXO there.<sup>337</sup>

The demining work that is deemed “legitimate” and regulated by the West and the Laos government obscures the fact that the very same work is being performed by those who do not have access to or time to train with MAG experts. Laos’ ready access to scrap metals has made collecting scrap metals a viable means to secure an income. In many isolated and impoverished communities, villagers struggling to survive are pushed into the same labor force of demining, but without the necessary training and experience. When the value of scrap metals increases globally, many villagers undertake the dangerous work of demining because it is one of the few opportunities that they have to extricate themselves from poverty. This new labor force has become an important sector in the Laos’ economy where the excess of U.S. military waste allows/forces many to participate in excavating and abating, and also transforming these wastes into different forms of commodity to be used, sold and exchanged in both the local and global markets. In short, U.S. history of aerial war in Laos and neoliberal globalization have made demining work, where the risk of death or serious injury is high, the only choice for poor Laotians to secure an income. Moreover, many families have been forced to expose their

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<sup>336</sup> See Democracy Now!, “40 Years After Secret U.S. War in Laos Ended, Millions of Unexploded Bomblets Keep Killing Laotians,” April 4, 2013. [http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2013/4/4/40\\_years\\_after\\_secret\\_us\\_war\\_in\\_laos\\_ended\\_millions\\_of\\_unexploded\\_bomblets\\_keep\\_killing\\_laotians](http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2013/4/4/40_years_after_secret_us_war_in_laos_ended_millions_of_unexploded_bomblets_keep_killing_laotians) accessed on May 1, 2015.

<sup>337</sup> 111th cong., 2nd sess.

children to the dangerous work of excavating refuse. In the next section, I analyze the politics of racialized and gendered relations and foreign policies in post-war commitments under the logics of international humanitarian mine action. I examine the role of MAG's UCT6 team in Laos, particularly the structure of race, class and gender in the dependence and recruitment of demining work.

### **MAG's UCT6: "To Serve the Home and Nation"**

As shown in the previous section, MAG's publicized mission in Laos is to save lives, build futures and work with the local people, and "to train up the poorest members of a community as technicians." The "poorest members" are often Laotians from villages where sustaining an income is impossible and where the opportunity to earn a wage becomes alluring. To date, MAG humanitarian demining projects have enabled more than "half a million people in Laos to farm their land, grow food, build homes and walk to school in safety."<sup>338</sup> One of MAG's "successful and humanitarian achievements in Laos" is the UXO Clearance Team 6 (UCT6). The all-female UXO clearance team was formed in 2007 to "offer women a chance to work together" and to deal with the tragedies of unexploded ordnance.

In November of 2012, British photographer Tessa Bunney was commissioned by the British Embassy in Laos to document the progress of the UCT6 team and the UK's humanitarian achievements. At the same time, this was part of reinvigorating and enhancing the relationship between the UK and Laos. After a 27-year absence from Laos, the UK seeks to "champion [their] values, safeguard [their] security, and build

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<sup>338</sup> See [www.maginternational.org](http://www.maginternational.org).

[their] prosperity and support UK nationals in Laos.”<sup>339</sup> As Ambassador Philip Malone states, “We are happy to see MAG and Tessa lending their expertise to solve this important issue. While there is no quick end to the problems caused by UXO in Laos, MAG and UCT6 are bravely working to clear parts of the country and it’s great to see so many British contributions to end this legacy.”<sup>340</sup> Bunney’s photographs and short film about MAG’s UCT6 technicians have been featured in UK’s *Financial Times*. The short film, “To Serve a Nation” is a four-minute and thirty-eight-second compilation of still photographs and video taken by Bunney that explores the lives of UCT6 technicians in Ban Namoune and Xieng Khouang Province.<sup>341</sup> The digital story features the women’s lives together as a team, and is narrated by three of the six members: Bouakham Bounmavilay, Manixia Thor and Pheng.<sup>342</sup> “To Serve the Nation” functions as a “feel-good” narrative that works to produce an ideology of “rescue and liberation” by the West in post-conflict nations and reconstruction period in non-Western countries. As a trope, the women in the film are dramatized as victims of the legacy of U.S. bombing and stand in for the value of being liberated by MAG to become experts in demining unexploded ordnance. At the same time, the women are compensated with the illusion that the “work” perform is “serving the nation,” giving them purpose and autonomy when they are out in the fields working together, and as wage earners. The progression of the story traces the women’s development and transformation from learning the set skills to become

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<sup>339</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/priority/reinvigorating-the-uk-s-relationship-with-laos#issue> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/world/laos>.

<sup>340</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/british-photographer-supports-mags-work-in-laos>.

<sup>341</sup> Tessa Bunney, “The women clearing Laos of unexploded bombs” in *Financial Times Magazine*, April 5, 2013. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/9e343be6-9cb2-11e2-9a4b-00144feabdc0.html#slide0> accessed on April 13, 2015.

<sup>342</sup> During my research, I was unable to find Pheng’s full name.

specialists in demining unexploded ordnance to being role models for younger generations.

The UCT6 technicians are viewed as part of the humanitarian demining projects' success where resolution and redemption are told from their experiences to reveal the results of Western societies' moral mission and action in the country. The women's voices in Lao and the translated subtitles in English allow the audience to access the women's stories: how they became involved in this dangerous labor, their relationship with the land, nation and their job. Many of these women come from the countryside and are given the opportunity to earn a wage in detonating UXO. These women work three weeks out of the month on site, living apart from their husband and children, and leaving behind family duties. In order to alleviate loneliness, MAG provides a camp for each team to stay together during their three weeks on site.

Below is a sample of the narratives by three of the women:

Bouakham: my mum used to tell stories about planes flying over these areas...dropping bombs, killing animals and people...I was told the planes dropped many bombs...right over my village. I don't think my job is tough...because I see it as my duty...to save the lives of others. If we finish working without finding any bombs we're disappointed..."

Bouakham Bounmavilay, a widow with four children began work with MAG in 2012. As a deminer, she performs productive labor: to demine UXO. However, as narrated, Bounmavilay sees her work not only as a job but also as a *duty* "to save the lives of others." By characterizing her work as her "duty," Bounmavilay calls attention to the affective labor that she also performs—the gendered care work and self-sacrifice that is part and parcel of the work of protecting future generations from harm. In short, Bounmavilay's work involves both productive and reproductive labor – in this sense to



“serve the nation” functions as a duty and obligation in doing the dangerous labor of clearing the land not only for Laos but also for the West. Her duty becomes an obligation to support different communities and the next generation.

Pheng: I had to do some training and it took seven or eight days...we were taught how to distinguish different bombs...we learnt many different things...it was quite difficult but I was determined to study...Since I've been working as a technician, I've found unexploded bombs. If I find them I feel afraid...but I work in the way I've been trained. If I detect something, I carefully dig down...when I reach it I put a marker there...and then I report it to my supervisor.

Pheng, a widow with five children took up demining work to support her children after she lost her husband to unexploded ordnance while foraging for food. Prior to working for MAG as a technician, Pheng supported her children working in paddy rice fields and weaving at home. When she began working for MAG, Pheng viewed her work positively because she was finally earning a wage and serving her nation by clearing the land from UXO. Her desire to secure work with MAG and earn a living meant she had to take time away from her family duties to be trained. Pheng's determination to be a clearance technician resulted in studying hard to pass the training and examination. Because the work is dangerous, a technician must be able to know how to distinguish the different bombs that littered the land. Pheng's "determin[ation] to study" and to become a specialist involves "seven or eight days" of training in order to become a technician. The "time" to train and study and "work in the way I've been trained," I suggest reveals Pheng's transformation into a rational Western-trained subject who believes in the infallibility of training, procedures and protocol. Pheng's narrative suggests the reproductive labor is the investment in her determination to study, the careful attention to the conditions of her dangerous work, and the validation of being a good worker by

finding unexploded bombs and reporting to her supervisor. Her labor is translated into the ethos of “serving the nation” – the nation in terms of Laos, but also by extension the UK and the US. As Vora suggests they become “bearers of colonial legacies and neoliberal restructurings.”<sup>343</sup>

Manixia Thor: At the beginning I worked as a UXO technician...then 4 years later I became the leader. Now my responsibility is to monitor the team when detecting UXOs...assure the safety of the technicians and destroy bombs. Last week we found 500lb bomb and we were happy.<sup>344</sup>

At age 24, Manixia Thor, who is Hmong from Laos has worked her way up as the Deputy Team Leader and is responsible for monitoring the team on site. A team she believes “can show that women can do anything! I want to people to know that Lao women are as strong as women from other countries.”<sup>345</sup> Her hard work and the upward mobility from technician to Deputy Team Leader has made her a representable international subject. For example, as part of Legacies of War’s outreach program “Voices From Laos” and funded by the Department of State, Thor was given the opportunity to come to the U.S. to do a whirlwind tour to tell her story and bring awareness to the UXO in Laos. Thor’s husband also works for MAG as the Operations Support Officer. While she is away from her husband and son, Manixia’s family supports her by looking after her son. Her motivation to work for MAG stems from personal experience when a relative was maimed from UXO. Because of this tragedy, Thor views her work with MAG as her duty “to help ensure that such things do not happen to others in the future.”<sup>346</sup> The affective labor Thor provides is expressed in the feelings of happiness that she experienced when she

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<sup>343</sup> Vora, “Limits of ‘labor,’” 682.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> <http://legaciesofwar.org/voices/speakers/manixia-thor/>.

<sup>346</sup> <http://legaciesofwar.org/voices/speakers/manixia-thor/>.

discovered and detonated a bomb. This happiness is translated to enhancing opportunities for others and the future generation to live in a UXO-free land. At the same time, this happiness is the result of hard work and determination to locate UXO.

By the end of the film, the audience learns that the women have realized the moral imperative to “serve the nation,” which is to rid the land of unexploded ordnance for future generations. Three minutes and thirty-three seconds into the film, the audience can see the resolution of MAG’s humanitarian work where the women are together after their job, announcing: “After our duties on the clearance field, we joke and chat at the camp...telling each other stories, it’s a happy time...I want to serve the nation...and this UXO clearance project for a long time...I’ll only retire when I can’t use a detector anymore...and I’ll try my best to keep working until our land is free from UXOs.” The film ends with a song, “Xieng Khouang, the land of beauty,” sung by one of the members, Bouakham Bounmavilay. I suggest the humanitarian-military discourse of “rescue and liberation” requires the continued violence of the kinds of labor available for Laotians, which has been created under the conditions that rely upon racialized and gendered bodies. The film works to create a collective “feel good” narrative that valorizes progress in a country where women can earn a wage. They became agents and role models for younger generations of women who seek to “serve the nation.” The “feel good” narrative tells us that in a country where women traditionally stay home, they are now wage earners for the first time in their lives. Moreover, we are told that women in the West are linked to these women. According to Bunney, “as a group, these women often talk about the same issue that working mothers struggle with in the west: childcare

and work-life balance.”<sup>347</sup> However, Bunney’s validation of MAG’s program as a success and the shared issues of “child-care and work-life balance” between women from the global North and the UCT6 women are unequal. The precarious work performed by the UCT6 women, entering fields plagued with UXO are different from women’s work in the global North, particularly middle and upper class women who enter office buildings or work from home. These different spaces where work is performed invites different issues of childcare and work-life balance. Though many of the UCT6 women express gratitude for the opportunity to work and earn a wage, to tell their story, they all know too well the danger of their work. In viewing their work to serve the nation and the next generation, the UCT6 women help hide the dangerous aspect of their productive labor. As Fassin has shown, “the obligation on the receivers sometimes to tell their story, frequently to mend their ways, and always to show their gratitude. But it is clear that in these conditions the exchange remains profoundly unequal. And what is more, those at the receiving end of humanitarian attention know quite well that they are expected to show the humility of the beholden rather than express demands for rights.”<sup>348</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown how the West’s humanitarian work in Laos has created an endangered work force to demine UXO in the country. In other words, the demand and desire of economic progress under humanitarianism requires particular bodies to be regulated and disposable. At the same time, the exploitation of racialized and gendered bodies is obscured and framed in terms of mobility and autonomy where one

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<sup>347</sup> <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/9e343be6-9cb2-11e2-9a4b-00144feabdc0.html#slide13>.

<sup>348</sup> Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 3.

can move between geographical areas to perform dangerous and deadly work. I suggest that exploited Laotian labor provides the necessary *service* to erase U.S. war in Laos and other parts of the world, which enables the re-presentation of the U.S. as benevolent liberator. Simultaneously, this labor creates material goods whereby the excavated unexploded ordnance returns as commodity such as rebars for construction materials to build the infrastructures that support global capitalism, and or commodity for tourist consumption. By suturing the fragments of war and violence, I show how demining work is *only* made possible by U.S. militarism and humanitarianism. In the next chapter, I examine how the military waste collected through the dangerous labor of demining has resulted in the unequal distribution and relations between producers in Laos and consumers in the global North. And in this process, I examine how Laotians find ways to reconfigure and resist their subjugation by global capitalism and U.S. militarism.

## Chapter 4 Harvesting War: The Value of Military Waste

### Introduction

Here we have a man whose job it is to pick up the day's rubbish in the capital. He collects and catalogs everything that the great city has cast off, everything it has lost, and discarded, and broken. He goes through the archives of debauchery, and the jumbled array of refuse. He makes a selection, an intelligent choice; like a miser hoarding treasure, he collects the garbage that will become objects of utility or pleasure when refurbished by Industrial magic.<sup>349</sup>

When I found the canisters I thought, oh I can make so many things...cowbells, and also spoons, and a bucket to carry water; and I can make a basin to wash laundry.<sup>350</sup>

I open this chapter with the epigraph of French poet Charles Baudelaire's nineteenth century Parisian rag picker (discussed in Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*) to reveal how waste – the things that have been discarded, deemed insignificant, and/or useless have found an afterlife. The rag picker conceives the abundance of waste produced by capitalism as valuable and seeks to transform waste into “objects of utility and pleasure.” Like the rag picker who strategically collects, indexes, and transforms waste “that the great city has cast off” into something more, Pae, a “skinny, wrinkled man”<sup>351</sup> from Laos also sees the endless military waste cast off by the United States military as objects of value. Pae believes that he can make “the best” things from the steel of unexploded bombs, such as his “bombie ladder made from thin aluminum canisters

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<sup>349</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 243.

<sup>350</sup> Karen J. Coates and Jerry Redfern, *Eternal Harvest: The Legacy of American Bombs in Laos* (Hong Kong: ThingsPressAsia, 2013), 109.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*

that once held dozen of bombies.”<sup>352</sup> In one of the poorest countries in the world where subsistence agriculture provides eighty percent of employment,<sup>353</sup> Pae sees value in military waste, which was a common find during and after the war. He responds to everyday life and the capacity to subsist by turning military waste into objects that can be utilized in innumerable ways. For instance, Pae’s “bombie ladder” allows him to produce other objects of utility to sustain life such as the most basic, tangible and lasting things: cowbells, spoons, a bucket, and laundry basin.

This chapter is about military waste that exceeds its purpose, and brings material culture into the analysis of waste and value. The aim of this chapter is not to apply a simple logic of recuperating the low or an examination of the transformation of waste from something bad to good. If militarized excess points to what cultural anthropologist Ann Stoler has characterized “as the processes of becoming”<sup>354</sup> then an engagement with materiality can raise critical questions about the protracted nature and meaning of military waste. Such critical questions are: how do Laotians come to understand themselves through their appropriations of military waste? what is the significance of military waste on the symbolic, affective and historical contexts? and what are the relationships with military waste that give substance to the society Laotians live in? A materialist analysis can offer ways to think about the conditions that set in place how Laotians live with military waste, how they labor with the remainders of war, and what forms military waste takes after it has exceeded its original purpose. That is, I am interested in reading military waste as more than the object that allows Laotians to

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<sup>352</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>353</sup> See US State Department’s country profile.

<sup>354</sup> Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 8.

practice activities of perseverance and resilience, but also as an articulation of difference that engenders violence. What I mean by difference is how military waste marked as commodity for tourist consumption produces cultural, gendered and racial differences. I argue military waste and its transformation into “objects of utility and pleasure” can offer a rethinking of the capacities and uniqueness that waste serves – as an archive of imperialism and war that carried and conveys its excess back to the material world.

In order to provide a critical examination of military waste, this chapter analyzes two cultural “texts”: 1) Karen J. Coates and Jerry Redfern’s *Eternal Harvest: The Legacy of American Bombs in Laos*; and 2) peaceBOMB bracelets by ARTICLE22, Ethical Jewelry Peacebomb sold on the global market, the first jewelry made by Laotian “artisans” from bombs dropped during the Vietnam War. *Eternal Harvest* is a collection of black and white photographs, interviews, and stories that reveal how people in Laos live with the remnants of war. At over 350 pages, *Eternal Harvest* is divided into ten chapters and a page entitled, “A Note on Method,” highlighting their modest disclaimer that “nothing in this book is fabricated. No photo is altered, no quote embellished” but acknowledging that the process was an “imperfect system.” The photojournalistic book, which features poetry and first-person prose, seeks to serve as an archive of military debris by examining and documenting the condition and scope of damage on the ground, and how people have had to grapple with the materiality of war debris. Alongside *Eternal Harvest*, I analyze peaceBOMB bracelet produced by Lao “artisans” and circulated globally by ARTICLE22, a New York based company that “has been recognized by global consumers and press as pioneering the transformation of weapons to jewelry and,



more generally, the tangible value of transformation through fashion.”<sup>355</sup> I do not read these liberal narratives and photos as a cause for celebration or evidence of Laotian remarkable resilience; instead, I read them as a “feel-good” narrative that undergirds the fiction of the United States as a benevolent capitalist nation. In other words, what both liberal projects offer is a “humanizing mode of governance” and processes of domination that become “the white [wo]man’s burden, where civilized nations stand duty-bound to uplift so-called savage ones.”<sup>356</sup>

### **(Military) Waste Matters**

In the *Economics of Waste*, Richard C. Porter defines waste in its simplest form – “stuff we don’t want” which goes by many names such as trash, rubbish, garbage, and refuse.<sup>357</sup> In the *Oxford Dictionary*, waste is understood and marked differently. Waste is “to use or expend carelessly, extravagantly, or to no purpose” and “to devastate or ruin (a place).” Waste also refers to “a material, substance or byproduct that is eliminated or discarded as no longer useful or required after the completion of a process.” If we take the latter definition, waste, then has zero value after its use-value has been completed. However, Dominic Laporte reintroduces the potential use-value of waste, specifically bodily waste in *History of Shit*. Laporte writes “if that which is expelled inevitably returns, we must trace its circuitous path: Shit comes back and takes the place of that which is engendered by its return, but in a transfigured, incorruptible form. Once

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<sup>355</sup> <http://article22.com/world/about/>

<sup>356</sup> Renato Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989), 70.

<sup>357</sup> Richard C. Porter, *The Economics of Waste* (Washington, DC: Resources for the Future Press, 2002), 2.

eliminated, waste is reinscribed in the cycle of production as gold.”<sup>358</sup> Laporte’s work reveals that waste is entangled in the State and the making of the modern subject in the transformation of his habits. In other words, the mechanisms of control and obsession by the State suggest that waste has value and can be excised to be processed and purified. Similarly, in Volume 3 of *Capital*, Marx sees waste as matter that cannot escape the circular model of production and consumption. For Marx, waste can signify use-value in large amount where there is a potential to be reclaimed for new production:

The capitalist mode of production extends the utilisation of the excretions of production and consumption. The general requirements for the re-employment of these excretions are: large quantities of such waste, such as are available only in large-scale production; improved machinery whereby materials, formerly useless in their prevailing form, are put into a state fit for new production.<sup>359</sup>

Although Laporte and Marx’s interest in the value of waste (human excretions) lies within the State’s role to control waste and as a necessary condition for society, I suggest their claims can be extended to other forms of waste that reveals its potential to be renewed.

Scholars have extended the question of waste and value, and its usefulness to military waste to examine the lasting effects on people, land, and water. The conventional understanding of military waste includes but is not limited to “bombs, artillery and mortar shells, rockets, and grenades, sea mines, land mines, and booby traps, abandoned ammunition dumps and weapons caches, the dumping of unwanted munitions, and abandoned vehicles, sunken ships, or downed aircraft containing explosive devices.”<sup>360</sup> In

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<sup>358</sup> Laporte, *History of Shit*, 15-16.

<sup>359</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*. Volume III. Ed. Friedrich Engels, 70.

<sup>360</sup> Arthur H. Westing, “The Remnants of War,” *Ambio* 13, no. 1 (1984), 14.

exploring the scholarship on military waste, scholars have examined the exposure of explosives and health effects on civilians, the long-term effects of water pollution and soil degradation on or near former military sites and bases.<sup>361</sup> Military waste also consists of environmental contaminants such as depleted uranium (DU)<sup>362</sup> in energy and atomic bombs that have exposed civilians from Iraq to the lethal, health effects by the radiation. According to NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq, the ongoing conflict in Syria, Gaza, Lebanon and Iraq will have long-term effects on civilian health from the exposure of post-conflict pollutants and environment. Military waste in the region includes explosives such as “RDX and TNT, or the latter’s common carcinogenic contaminant DNT, as well as heavy metal particulates from firearms such as lead, mercury and tungsten may contaminate the rubble leftover from the use of heavy weapons in populated areas.”<sup>363</sup> This has been illustrated in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia where many civilians continue to suffer from the effects of Agent Orange, unexploded ordnance and landmines forty years later after the end of the Vietnam War. In the post-conflict environment, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Environmental Emergencies Section classifies military waste as also “disaster waste,” which is understood as any solid and liquid waste generated from a disaster. Some common

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<sup>361</sup> See Lutz, *Empire of Bases*.

<sup>362</sup> According to NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq’s June 2011 Brief on “Environmental Contaminants from War Remnants in Iraq,” depleted uranium is “one of the byproducts or wastes of the enrichment process of natural uranium. DU is mainly used to create the tip or core of many war munitions.” See <http://www.bandedpleteduranium.org/en/docs/163.pdf>

<sup>363</sup> Aneaka Kelley, “Who pays for toxic remnants of war?” in *The Toxic Remnants of War Project: exploring state responsibility for the toxic legacy of military activities*. June 23, 2014. Manchester, UK. <http://www.toxicremnantsofwar.info/who-pays-for-toxic-remnants-of-war/> accessed on December 15, 2014.

examples include “concrete, steel, wood, clay and tar elements from damaged buildings and infrastructures, unexploded ordnance, landmines, and pesticides and fertilizers.”<sup>364</sup>

In the United States, the concepts of “waste” and “wastefulness” have been taken up by economists as a way to reduce spending and seek political reforms in the military. According to the Commission on Wartime Contracting’s report to Congress, it is estimated as much as \$60 billion in U.S. war funds was lost to waste in Iraq and Afghanistan. The report reveals the use of too many contractors during the ten years of war in the region has led to “waste” and “wasteful” spending.<sup>365</sup> Since the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have come to an end, *New York Times*’ journalist Matt Apuzzo reveals how military surplus equipment, tools and armor trucks that were intended for U.S. wars in the region have been recycled to police departments throughout U.S. cities such as Springdale, Arkansas and Ferguson, Missouri.<sup>366</sup> The program, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)<sup>367</sup> enacted by the 101<sup>st</sup> Congress in 1990 allowed the transfer of military surplus equipments to America’s cities plagued with a drug crisis and violent crimes. For Congress, the measure of success correlated with the reduction and transfer of military surplus by ramping up police departments with military excess. The NDAA encouraged America’s law enforcement to employ military weapons and tactics, which many have noted in the image of Ferguson, Missouri that resembled a war zone.

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<sup>364</sup> “Disaster Waste Management Guidelines” in *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Environmental Emergencies Section*. January 2011, Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>365</sup> See also Richard Lardner, “Military Spending Waste: Up To \$60 Billion In Iraq, Afghanistan War Funds Lost To Poor Planning, Oversight, Fraud” in *Huffington Post*, August 30, 2011. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/30/military-spending-waste\\_n\\_942723.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/30/military-spending-waste_n_942723.html) accessed on December 4, 2015.

<sup>366</sup> Matt Apuzzo, “War gear flows to Police Departments” in *New York Times*, June 8, 2014.

<sup>367</sup> 101<sup>st</sup> Congress, 1989-1990), H.R. 2461. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 1990-1991. Under Title XII – Military Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities, Sec. 1208. Transfer of excess personal property by the Secretary of Defense to federal and state agencies personal property of the Department of Defense.

Similarly, Gilberto Rosas has shown how waste from one war is used to fight another war. In this case, the wars on the U.S.-Mexico border. Rosas writes, “surplus mobile military runways from the 1991 Gulf War were used to transform the chain link fence into a fourteen-foot-high, two-mile-long steel wall.”<sup>368</sup> Under these examples, military waste has shared histories of violence and functions as a disturbing reminder of state power and surveillance.

These shared histories of violence also reveal how post-conflict spaces are sites where people with little to nothing left have sought to make claims to material value. The concern has shifted towards how people and communities in different post-conflict spaces take up and conceptualized their engagement with military waste. In *Imperial Debris: Ruins and Ruination*, Stoler suggests that postcolonial scholarship shifts its gaze to examine and understand how new forms of debris “work on matter and mind to eat through people’s resources and resiliences as they embolden new political actors with indignant refusal, forging unanticipated, entangled, and empowered alliances.”<sup>369</sup> In her ethnographic study of Turkish-Cypriot refugees who were left with the ruins of the war during the 1974 invasion, anthropologist Yael Navaro Yashin has suggested the concept of ruination encompasses the “material remains or art[i]facts of destruction and violation, but also to the subjectivities and residual affects that linger in the aftermath of war or violence.”<sup>370</sup> David Hening’s ethnographic fieldwork on the Muslim village Brdo<sup>371</sup> and

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<sup>368</sup> Gilberto Rosas, “The Fragile Ends of War: Forging the United States – Mexico Border and Borderlands Consciousness” in *Social Text* 25, no. 2 91 (2007), 81.

<sup>369</sup> Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 29.

<sup>370</sup> Yael Navaro-Yashin, “Affective spaces, melancholic objects: ruination and the production of anthropological knowledge” in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15, 1-18 (2009).

<sup>371</sup> Brdo (pseudonym) is situated in a rural highland area, about 30 miles north of the capital, Sarajevo.

surrounding communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (one of the most heavily mined countries in the world) offers a useful way to conceptualize military waste.<sup>372</sup> As a mode of survival, many villagers learn how to extract wood in areas where landmines and the dangers of unexploded ordnance continue to persist after war's ends. Hening suggests an examination of how local knowledge embedded in the villagers' day-to-day practices with military waste and their engagement with the landscape can offer a different understanding of military waste as "a multifaceted entity that embraces materiality, technology, memory, politics, emotions and practical knowledge."<sup>373</sup> Moreover, Stoler has also called attention to "imperial ruination" as "more than a process that sloughs off debris as a by-product, [but] also a political project that lays waste to certain peoples, relations, and things that accumulate in specific places."<sup>374</sup> In Vietnam, she suggests "there is nothing 'over'" about the war in the country because it "remains in bodies, in the poisoned soil, in water on a massive and enduring scale."<sup>375</sup> These various post-conflict spaces serve as sites to consider the legacy of imperial violence on people and land, simultaneously, they reveal how military waste can be understood as an opportunity to investigate the potentialities of material culture that reside in these communities. This scholarship provides an entry point to examine how military waste in Laos can shed light, not just on the dangers it imposed, but also on the enduring qualities and multifarious ways waste has been taken up by individuals and communities within the domestic and global spheres. If Stoler's poignant question, "what do they do with what they are left

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<sup>372</sup> See portfolio of mine action projects. <http://www.mineaction.org/downloads/1/portfoliofinal.pdf>

<sup>373</sup> David Hening, "Iron in the Soil: Living with military waste in Bosnia-Herzegovina" in *Anthropology Today* 28(1), February 2012, p. 21-23.

<sup>374</sup> Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 11.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

with?” entails an account for the “contemporary force of imperial remains,” this chapter suggests the accumulation of war debris in Laos is the site of labor and livelihood where the redemption of military waste can neither be repressed nor buried, but returns and inhabits the material and physical spaces in Laos and the United States.

### **ARTICLE22: A New Market of Imperial Nostalgia**

Entrepreneur and New York native Elizabeth Suda, and Camille Hautefort, who is from Paris, first conceived of the peaceBOMB bracelet in 2009. After leaving the Merchandising Department at Coach, Inc., Suda found a home in Southeast Asia where she consulted for Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation.<sup>376</sup> Suda learned about Ban Naphia and villagers taking military waste and transforming into “objects of utility and pleasure.” I focus on the peaceBOMB bracelets from the first collection A22.1, which ranges from \$45 to \$50 and are inscribed with phrases such as “Dropped + Made in Laos,” or “Article 22 :: Peacebomb.” In 2010, the first peaceBOMB bracelet was produced through collaboration between the villagers of Ban Naphia (who had been creating spoons out of aluminum war scrap metal), the Rural Income through Sustainable Energy Project of Swiss NGO, Helvetas, and ARTICLE22. Since ARTICLE22 launched in 2010, the company has been successful, receiving positive reviews from the fashion industry where A22.2 collection was recently display on the sidelines of The Curve Boutique at the Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week 2015 in New York City. ARTICLE22’s has created two collections: A22.1 consists of “affordable” jewelry; and A22.2 is a more expensive

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<sup>376</sup> See [http://www.helvetas.org/projects\\_\\_\\_countries/what\\_we\\_do/](http://www.helvetas.org/projects___countries/what_we_do/) “HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation’s goal is a fairer world in which every person can determine how he or she wishes to live and in which all people’s basic needs are satisfied. HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation believes in helping people to help themselves and in working together as partners in development. As a learning organisation, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation critically assesses the impact of its endeavours and strives to make sustainable changes.

luxury collection, (with their most expensive piece sold online, from \$550 (brass) to \$700 (silver or rose gold) Bolts 22 Bangle),<sup>377</sup> and targets an affluent clientele.<sup>378</sup> According to Suda, ARTICLE 22's approach is to "cultivate sustainable economic development, protect culture by capacity-building upon existing skills and use local resources...[that] create [a] traceable link between producers in the East and consumers in the West...and to tell their stories."<sup>379</sup> In other words, this approach attempts to reproduce an ideology of progress, celebrate modernity, and human perseverance where military waste indexes the link to and dependence on third world labor (both to scavenge war debris and produce commodities). Moreover, in order for first world "socially conscious" consumers to tell "their" stories, Suda reinscribes difference between developed and underdeveloped through promoting the East-West binary. But what does it mean to tell "their" stories, to insist that those who purchase the jewelry can become storytellers or speak for Laotians who can neither be agents of change nor represent themselves, and therefore must wait to be liberated or represented?

To begin, the company ARTICLE22 derives its name from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 22. Under the UDHR, Article 22 states, "Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to

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<sup>377</sup> The description of the bangle, "Made by artisans in Laos and New York with Peacebomb finished with semi and precious metals. Bolts take inspiration from aircraft hardware that fastens the seams for flight. Includes donation to demine 34 m2 bomb littered land." See <http://article22.com/shop/22-bolts-bangle/>. According to Agence France-Presse, "their most expensive piece, a \$1,250 necklace, clears up to 840 square feet." See <http://www.afp.com/en/news/laos-love-vietnam-bombs-become-ny-jewelry>.

<sup>378</sup> On the company' website, the collections are described as: "A22.1 comprises classic shapes cast with Peacebomb metal that tell the story of how Laos became the most heavily bombed country in history and the artisans who transform bombs and war scrap to jewelry taking a constructive approach toward the destruction wrought by war. A22.2, abstract and refined, comprises Peacebomb metal finished with semi and precious metals. It tells the story of our special metal and represents the convergence of expertise of rural artisans and city artisans from Vientiane to New York." accessed on April 3, 2015.

<sup>379</sup> <http://article22.com/world/about/>.



realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.”<sup>380</sup> The UDHR emerged as a postwar international discourse to address human rights’ violations after World War II. Taking UDHR’s commitment to advancing a new universality, ARTICLE22 seeks to “promote everyone’s right to social, economic and cultural security through *fashion*.” As shown in the previous chapter, I suggest humanitarian interventions and nongovernmental organizations’ presence in Laos corresponds directly with U.S. imperialist aims and part of a neo-liberal international order.<sup>381</sup> According to ARTICLE22, it is through fashion that justice, peace and freedom can be achieved for Laotians who emerge as “deserving and civilized” victims of U.S. aerial war. “Deserving and civilized” constitute the language and grammar of race that is endemic of humanitarian discourse to justify ARTICLE22’s presence is necessary in Laos – an underdeveloped and economically dependent nation. Through a human rights based approach, ARTICLE22 is able to capitalize on the economy of military waste and third world labor that structures power relations between liberal feminists and the “oppressed Third World (wo)man.”<sup>382</sup> This structure and function of power relations are located in ARTICLE22’S branding that seeks to “embody a new luxury that intimately relates our objects and ideas... ARTICLE22 cultivates the untapped talents of artisans in forgotten or off-the-beaten-track places, promoting entrepreneurship and community

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<sup>380</sup> <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml#a22>.

<sup>381</sup> See also Randall Williams, *The Divided World: Human Rights and Its Violence*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

<sup>382</sup> See Caren Kaplan, “A world without boundaries’: The Body Shop’s Trans/National Geographies,” *Social Text*, no. 3 (1995).

development.” In other words, ARTICLE22 suggests that those who can embody this luxury (of the exoticizations of Laotian cultures) must fit into the category of a “global citizen” or economy. That is, despite Suda and Huatefort’s liberal discourses of self-empowerment and equality through benevolent capitalism, ARTICLE22 reinforces unequal and uneven links between the “global citizen” and “Third World wo(men).”

Indeed, the circulation of peaceBOMB bracelet reveals a new market of imperialist nostalgia. Renato Rosaldo (1989) has suggested that imperialist nostalgia functions as a “governing relations of dominance and subordination between the ‘race’” [that] makes racial dominance appear innocent and pure.”<sup>383</sup> I suggest the nature of the consumption poses an “innocent yearning” that demands consumers globally to eradicate injustice and be connected in the production and circulation of the peaceBOMB bracelets by buying back the bomb. Instead of demanding that first-world consumers “buy back the bomb,” as ARTICLE22 insists, I ask, what does it mean to “buy back the bomb?,” the very bombs that were meant to kill Laotians during the U.S. bombing campaigns. Centering on ARTICLE22’s peaceBOMB bracelet and its demand to “buy back the bombs,” this section examines the commodification of violence and the return migration of U.S. military waste to the imperial center through fashion. The demand to “buy back the bomb” has become an aesthetic charge that demands and appeals to “socially conscious” consumer that her purchase can imbue a Lao village with hope. The objects of violence are renamed “peaceBOMB” that is marketed as a product with value and meaning where consumers can tell unknown stories, give back, and learn that “each bracelet sold demines 3m2 of bomb littered land.”

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<sup>383</sup> Rosaldo, *Imperial Nostalgia*, 107.

Moreover, as noted on the company's website, the peaceBOMB bracelet is "A bracelet. A story about war and peace. Destruction and reconstruction. History. Instead of words, this story is composed of fragments of bombs, melted and shaped into a circle, a bracelet, a reminder." Today, the company has paid to demine 65,000 square meters of land in Laos.<sup>384</sup> For consumers who are "curious to discover and concerned by authenticity and quality," the peaceBOMB bracelets resemble traditional Laotian silver bracelets. Historically, silver has been both a symbol of beauty and legal tender for Laotians. In Lao lore, silver is seen as possessing power to keep away evil spirits and protect one from bad health and ill-fortune. At first look, the bracelets are simple, "sleek and timeless," and ultra lightweight. The capsule bracelet is simple, a limited offer in 2012 and features designed engraved arrow, and sold in sets of three for either \$40 or \$60. The afterlife of U.S. military waste in Laos, and the revitalization and requisition of bombs into fashionable objects is touted by the company as what Stoler suggests as "bind[ing] human potentials to degraded environments."<sup>385</sup> The bracelets are created from war scraps and are designed to tell a "story about war and peace." Instead of words, ARTICLE22 seeks to tell the history of destruction and reconstruction in Laos through the fragments of bombs that are melted and shaped into a bracelet. But what stories do they tell and do they not tell? How do they gloss over violence and war?

As background to ARTICLE22's project of rescue and liberation, we learn from the company's website that the Lao family's earned income is generated from micro-loans, which provide the family the means to send their daughters to school. The act of

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<sup>384</sup> Timothy A. Clary, "From Laos with love. Vietnam bombs become NY jewelry" in Agence France-Presse. February 14, 2015. <http://www.afp.com/en/news/laos-love-vietnam-bombs-become-ny-jewelry>.

<sup>385</sup> Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 7.

“buy[ing] back the bombs” is shown to reduce the estimated 800 years it will take to clear all Lao land of mines.<sup>386</sup> A viewer and/or consumer can be called upon, depending on which slide on the company’s website shows up to “be the peaceful warrior,” or an active participant in social media by utilizing hashtag such as “#buybackthebombs,”<sup>387</sup> and “#bombtbracelet.”<sup>388</sup> Moreover, the company’s website informs consumers that their purchase has contributed to the cost of clearing over 50,000 meters of land since 2009. As a result, consumers can learn that their “socially conscious consumption” gives Laotians the opportunity to be “agents of change where artisans are not just recipients of charity.”<sup>389</sup> In other words, ARTICLE22 does not function as a company that provides “aid” but as one where consumers are given the opportunity to “trade” their capital to acquire an object.<sup>390</sup> In other words, the mantra “Trade Not Aid” follows The Body Shop founder Anita Roddick’s corporate philosophy and practice that “emits bits of 1980s-style Thatcher/Reagan injunctions in the 1990s...where Third World needs ‘work rather than handouts’” and that the peaceBOMB ethical jewelries “are imbued with the moral and political values that ‘pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps’ activity accrues.”<sup>391</sup>

One can see how the “global citizen” is embodied on the company’s homepage, which opens with several slides moving continuously from left to right, with the option of

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<sup>386</sup> I visited the website page on December 13, 2014. As of February 11, 2015, the slides on the website have changed with a white female figure.

<sup>387</sup> As of February 10, 2015, a twitter search of #buybackthebombs to include everything resulted in a total of 14 tweets since November 15, 2011.

<sup>388</sup> As of February 10, 2015, a twitter search of #bombtbracelet to include everything resulted in a total of 12 tweets since July 14, 2014. Tweets include Williams College, Elizabeth Suda’s alma mater

<sup>389</sup> See [www.Article22.com](http://www.Article22.com).

<sup>390</sup> In an interview with The Daughters Rising (a nonprofit organization that works to prevent sex trafficking by empowering at-risk-girls through education, training programs and scholarships), See <http://riseupshop.com/causes/peace-bomb-bracelet/> Elizabeth Suda the bracelet and film is a “about trade not aid.”

<sup>391</sup> Kaplan, “A world without boundaries,” 56.

also moving from right to left. The slides show several images: a chic cosmopolitan Asian model with white warrior-like make-up under her eyes showcasing multiple bracelets on her forearm, a male model with dark features, and a chic white, Euro-American female with blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, wearing the A.22 collection, the Bolts Bangle Set on her arm which costs \$380 that suggests class difference. The “global citizen” is the woman who has the purchasing power to “buy back the bombs” in order to alleviate underdevelopment. By making the links between the global consumers and local producers, ARTICLE22 depends upon the stereotype of colonial and postcolonial discourse where the center and margin paradigm is recuperated, and in which middle-class and wealthy women and men are hailed as global consumers. This international cosmopolitanism has also been promoted on fashion company websites that seek out a particular clientele such as Refinery29, a fashion new-media brand based in New York City for “smart, creative, stylish women.” In its promotion of ARTICLE22’s peaceBOMB bracelet, Refinery29 advises that just like the little black dress, “jewelry that’s meaningful sticks around for life.”<sup>392</sup> Ecouterre has also informed its customers that while “we may not be able to reverse the 250 million bombs that the United States dropped on Laos, but perhaps we can buy back those same bombs, sliver by sliver, and in doing so, heal two countries.” These companies suggest that in “buying back the bombs,” first-world consumers can forge alliances with Third World producers while maintaining a comfortable distance. In her analysis of The Body Shop, Caren Kaplan argues that the

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<sup>392</sup> <http://www.refinery29.com/capsule-bracelets-peacebomb-by-article-22>.

company's marketing strategy offers a "feel-good capitalism and warm, fuzzy geopolitics,"<sup>393</sup> which resonates with ARTICLE22's branding.

### **"Bombie Ladder:" Domesticating Objects of Violence**

Over an eight-year period, Karen Coates and Jerry Redfern conducted research and talked to farmers, scrap-metal hunters, bomb disposal unit teams and Laotians who have made and used tools from unexploded ordnance. By "using old US Air Force maps to guide them to areas that were heavily bombed,"<sup>394</sup> Coates and Redfern conducted research in these villages to learn that the daily reality for many is the risk of death or serious injury. The project was made possible through The Fund for Investigative Journalism and The Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism. The Fund for Investigative Journalism was founded in 1969 by the late Philip M. Stern who devoted his life "to balanc[e] the scales of justice." The first grant enabled reporter Seymour Hersh to investigate the My Lai massacre by the U.S. Army, which subsequently changed how Americans viewed the war in Vietnam. For more than thirty years, the organization has provided funds for journalists whose investigation research yields results in the "fight against racism, poverty, corporate greed and governmental corruption."<sup>395</sup> Similarly, The Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism launched in 2004 and based at Brandeis University aims to "investigate significant social and political problems and human rights issues, and uncover corporate and government abuses of power."<sup>396</sup> Both funding sources' commitments to investigate injustice globally have helped Coates and Redfern's project make visible the ongoing legacy of U.S. secret war that has continued to kill and

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<sup>393</sup> In Kaplan's analysis, *The Body Shop* is a multinational corporation that started in the UK.

<sup>394</sup> Coates, *Eternal Harvest*.

<sup>395</sup> <http://fij.org/about/>.

<sup>396</sup> <https://www.brandeis.edu/investigate/about/index.html>.

maim indiscriminately. *Eternal Harvest* is richly textured, containing multiple stories, memories, and shifting points of view about localized knowledge and history in villages. Like ARTICLE22, *Eternal Harvest* can be marked as a narrative of “discovery” of the Secret War in Laos. According to the authors, the aim of the project is “to educate readers – especially Americans – about this little-known legacy of war, and encourage a renewed commitment to redressing historical injustices and building positive peace.”<sup>397</sup> That is, as a liberal project, the book offers an opportunity for the reader to learn about the war and become agents to tell “their” stories. Instead of reading *Eternal Harvest* as a project that seeks to unveil U.S. aerial war against Lao civilians, I suggest reading its representations against the grain to account for Laotians’ agency and subjectivity.

Coates writes, “The metal is formed into thin, smooth sheets; then cut and shaped into long, skinny ropes of rebar. That’s the only thing these foundries make: rebar, to be sold and moved all across Laos. That rebar supports shops, homes, and schools nationwide. Laos literally develops on the debris of its past.”<sup>398</sup> Rebar, also known as reinforcing bar or reinforcing steel is used as a tension device to reinforce concrete and buildings to strengthen and hold the concrete. I want to pause and consider the force of military violence and waste behind Coates’ passage and ethnographic observation that “Laos literally develops on the debris of its past.” The conditions that set forth Coates’ sentiment cannot be separated from the Cold War doctrine of containing communism and U.S. “covert-warfare doctrine.”<sup>399</sup> I begin with Coates’ observation in order to underscore

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<sup>397</sup> <http://eternalharvestthebook.com/about-the-book/>.

<sup>398</sup> Coates, *Eternal Harvest*, 107.

<sup>399</sup> See Alfred W. McCoy, “The Costs of Cover Warfare: Airpower, Drugs and Warlords in the Conduct of U.S. Foreign Policy,” in *New England Journal of Public Policy* 19(1), September 21, 2003,

the perverse fact that the present state of Laos' infrastructure is built on the violence of the United States covert-warfare doctrine. After the end of the United States war in Southeast Asia, Laos fell outside of historical and contemporary interests, leaving the conditions on the ground for Laotians to make-do with military waste that has left indelible marks on landscape, lives and memories. Today, it is not difficult to trace the violence of the U.S. bombing campaign that bears on the material environment, which is embedded in the everyday practices of Laotians who have found an afterlife in waste.

Coates' claim that "Laos literally develops on the debris of the past" must carefully gesture back to the place that generated the debris – the United States. If waste is the necessary byproduct of war, Coates' passage then articulates a "permanent" posture of war where U.S. presence in the form of waste material is installed as a normative reality in Laos. For example, in provinces heavily bombed such as Xieng Kouang, Phonsavanh, and Khammouane, the revitalization of military waste is forged and designed with a specific purpose. Military waste can be seen in the form of defused bombs kept as decorations for backyards as well as entrance to restaurants and guesthouses, and used as stilts for homes. The casings from cluster bomb are transformed as planters for herbs, and aluminum tail fins have been melted down and made into household items such as spoons, pots, mortars, and bowls. As discussed above, jewelry such as bracelets and necklaces have been made from repurposed war metals and served as commodities to be sold online to a global market. The high-grade steel from bombs –

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223-241. McCoy's work suggests "through four secret wars fought over the span of fifty years, the United States has developed a covert-warfare doctrine that combines special-operations forces with airpower.



the “best Detroit steel”<sup>400</sup> where cluster bomb casings were made – is used to make rebar and/or kept as savings by scrap metal collectors to sell to the market when scrap metal value increases. In Savannakhet, the damaged helicopters and army tanks serve as a war memorial. In other words, the history of U.S. foreign policies toward Laos can be told from the scarred landscapes, the familiar and strange ways homes have consolidated bombs and altered their purpose, and the three billion tons of debris that have shaped and continue to shape Laotians’ experience within intimate and public spaces. In Laos, people never have to worry about running out of things to make from military waste.



Figure 2, A Vietnamese trader’s family  
Photo courtesy of Jerry Redfern, *Eternal Harvest*

In the image above taken by photojournalist Jerry Redfern, the caption of the black and white photograph tells of “A Vietnamese trader’s family ha[ving] dinner over a pile of bomb shrapnel, cluster bombs, and an artillery shell in their hut in Etoum.

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<sup>400</sup> Ian MacKinnon, "Forty years on, Laos reaps bitter harvest of the secret war," *The Guardian* (2008). Detroit was the nexus of U.S. empire and crucial to U.S. foreign policy during WWII and the Cold War. The industrial factories shifted from the production of automobiles to manufacture and supplied a continual stream of warplanes, tanks, and steel for cluster bomb casings.

Vietnamese traders come to the area to buy scrap metal from locals who collect it in the surrounding fields and forest.”<sup>401</sup> Etoum village is located in the most southern edge of Laos in Attapeu province that nears the border of Vietnam and Cambodia. Along the Vietnamese-Lao border, many Vietnamese come to Laos to collect and trade scrap metal. The scrap metal is taken to Vietnam to resell to other scrap-metal dealers and smelters.<sup>402</sup> The photograph seeks to capture the details of everyday life of living with war remnants. Simultaneously it mobilizes a “sympathetic” narrative that enables and reproduces an ideology of rescue. That is, the photograph helps readers identify what it means to survive in the aftermath of war and encourages a commitment to do something. Nancy Armstrong argues photographs help viewers identify types:

Through the photograph’s uncanny ability to make its subject matter seem both unique and utterly predictable, the consumer of this visual information would nevertheless have recognized a given category of subject matter simply by recognizing the pose, a few background details, and a constellation of physical features. What first caught the viewer’s eye was not the unique object of each photograph. Instead, each example conjured up for the consumer a type or category, one of a system of such categories.<sup>403</sup>

Although Redfern’s photograph freezes the day-to-day moments of a family having dinner and cements an understanding of historical injustices, I suggest we reflect on the pile of debris – “a mess with a message”<sup>404</sup> that sits below the home of the family.

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<sup>401</sup> Coates, *Eternal Harvest*, 100.

<sup>402</sup> For more information on Vietnamese scrap metal collectors and middlemen, see Christina Schwenkel, “War Debris in Postwar Society: Managing Risk and uncertainty in the DMZ” in *Interactions with a violent past: reading post-conflict landscapes in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam*. Eds. Pholsena, V. and Oliver Tappe. National University of Singapore Press, 2013.

<sup>403</sup> Quoted in Briggs, “Mother, child, race, nation,” 181.

<sup>404</sup> Patricia Yaeger, “Trash as Archive, Trash as Enlightenment” in *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value*. Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, eds. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. (2003). I take this from Yaeger whose examination of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, and Fae Ng’s *Bone* to reveal how these writers center trash in their work as illuminous. Although these texts do not examine trash as the site of commodification, I take this

I reflect on this pile of debris alongside Coates' observation of war scraps that have been "formed into thin, smooth sheets; then cut and shaped into long skinny ropes of rebars."<sup>405</sup> Beneath Laos' infrastructure is the sedimentation of U.S. wars in Southeast Asia, a history of war detritus that gets piled up, and the hidden violence that bonds and reinforces the country. The juxtaposition of a "pile of debris" and the "order and form of rebar" then ask readers to consider the absence of military violence that is masked in neatly and uniformly piled rebar. What does it mean for rebar to offer a peculiar space of transformation in Laos? What are the signs of prior life that is hidden? What and who haunts the landscape?

In Laos, the domestic space becomes the vessel to hold violence and catalogue trauma. Along the old Ho Chi Minh Trail, many Lao villagers, predominantly women know that buyers in Vietnam will buy all kinds of scrap metal. They scavenged war scraps in nearby fields and forests to sell to the Vietnamese middlemen who resell to other scrap-metal dealers in Vietnam. Although many foundries in Laos do not buy any live ordnance because of the danger they pose, it does not mean someone else is not buying them.<sup>406</sup> Angela Robson of *Le Monde diplomatique* writes that when scrap metal value increases, villagers in the countryside scavenge military waste "from vehicles and bullet casings to large unexploded bombs."<sup>407</sup> Often, those who engage in the labor of

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quote to reveal that trash can illuminate a past that has been marginalized. "In a trajectory that becomes both nauseating and proliferating, history is no longer a trash heap we are trying to escape, but a trash heap that reeks: a mess with a message" (114).

<sup>405</sup> Coates, *Eternal Harvest*, 104.

<sup>406</sup> This is part and parcel of Laos as a member of the Convention on Cluster Munitions. The Convention has specifically adopted The Vientiane Action Plan (VAP) to destroy stockpile. For more information on The Convention, see <http://www.clusterconvention.org/>.

<sup>407</sup> Angela Robson, "'War Scrap is a Resource Like Wood or Bamboo' Laos reaps a deadly harvest" *Le Monde diplomatique* (English edition). Retrieved on December 29, 2014.

scavenging for scrap metal are poor, and predominantly women and children because men account for 85 percent of COPE's patients (Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise) since men do the plowing of the land and take more risk.<sup>408</sup> The image of the Vietnamese trader's family captures how ordinary lives are entangled with violence. Under their home, the pile of scrap metal and defused bomb dud marks the deadly force of U.S. bombing campaigns. The debris serves as archive of the U.S. aerial in Laos that is yet to transform as an object for global capitalism.

If Laotian labor and resistance to dispossession and violence constitutes the (re)building of Laos from its past, then, the act of transforming military waste material into "thin, smooth sheets" has long been part of Laos' history. That is, it is crucial if we are to realize the material relationships between Laotians and military waste. People in Laos have found innovative ways to manipulate, re-envision and reinvent military waste that saturate their land. Military waste becomes more than objects that reinforce a "discovery" narrative by liberal projects, it is the material that is imbued with multifunctional potentials and have long been part of the environment. For instance, in *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, social anthropologist Michael Thompson argues that "rubbish" was necessary to the system of value and social life. Thompson suggests that we can see and understand our relationship to objects in two different categories: transient and durable. In his value chain of objects, Thompson's diagram reveals the passage of objects from one value category to another as a necessary step to study rubbish and the social control of value. He writes, "transient object[s] gradually decline in value, slide into rubbish that has no value but has the chance of being

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<sup>408</sup> See <http://www.copelaos.org/>

discovered, and transferred to durability”<sup>409</sup> with enduring value. Consequently, according to Thompson, *rubbish* is socially defined and is the condition of possibility for worthless objects to be reevaluated, exchanged or reclaimed as useful resource whereby new meanings are attached to the object.

For example, the relationship to military waste requires a localized knowledge of how to locate the bombs, how to excavate for unexploded bombs, and how to transform war scrap metal into “objects of utility and pleasure.” Today, villagers in Xieng Khoung have found innovative ways to invert and offer the excessive and oftentimes cluttered piles of debris with purpose and value. For example, in Ban Naphia, a village near the Plain of Jars, villagers have made an industry out of war scrap, “using aluminum from flares, fuses, bomb fins, and fighter jet parts,” which are melted down and moulded into spoons and bracelets.<sup>410</sup> Each year, Ban Naphia produces about 150,000 spoons to be sold in the markets in Laos and in 2010, the jewelry and spoons are sold globally through ARTICLE22. Coates observes that “villagers fire [earthen] hot and strong, powerful enough to turn an aluminum section of flare canister – with U.S. label still attached – into a dribble of shimmering liquid. It is poured into spoon-shaped molds encased in wood. The liquid cools, and in just a few minutes, a spoon emerges.”<sup>411</sup> The routine sequence of transforming waste into familiar materials where its threatening qualities are melted reveals how Laotians have found ways to subsist amongst war debris. If the concept of ‘subsistence’ is often associated with ‘poverty and backwardness,’ Veronika Bennholdt-

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<sup>409</sup> Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford University Press, 1979), 9-10.

<sup>410</sup> In this remote village, also dubbed as “War spoon village,” 12 families *began transforming war scrap into spoons in the 1970s to supplement subsistence farming activities*. <http://in-pictures.photoshelter.com/image/I0000vXzYnN8qLIQ>.

<sup>411</sup> Coates, *Eternal Harvest*, 88.

Thomsen and Marie Mies suggest that “subsistence not only means hard labour and living at the margins of existence but also joy in life, happiness and abundance.”<sup>412</sup>

In the visually staged photograph below, the caption reads, Sou Lin Phan “poses [next] to a large dud bomb in the middle of his village in Xieng Khouang Province,”<sup>413</sup> one of the most heavily bombed areas in Laos during the United States covert air strikes. Phan is looking at the camera, posing for Redfern with his arms and legs crossed and leaning on the dud. Though his gaze runs into the distance beyond the frame, in some sense he is connecting and inviting the viewer outside the frame to closely examine the photograph. The framing of the photograph draws the viewer’s eye into the center where Phan is leaning on the dud. A closer examination, the viewer sees the direction of the dud is facing downward with the wing tip in the air, which provides a view of the position of a dud when it drops from the air. What is striking in the visual evidence is “U.S.A” spray-painted along the dud. The dud works to preserve, perhaps the spray-painted “USA” is deliberate to mark U.S. involvement in the country, and thus it becomes a site of archiving U.S air war. It is also a way to consider how the reorganization of the domestic spaces is entangled in relations of power whereas the photo evokes an understanding of postwar. There is a proper place for waste in the village, in this case the dud functions as part of a wired fence and decoration.

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<sup>412</sup> Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Maria Mies, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>413</sup> <http://eternalharvestthebook.com/april-10-on-lbjs-lao-legacy/>.

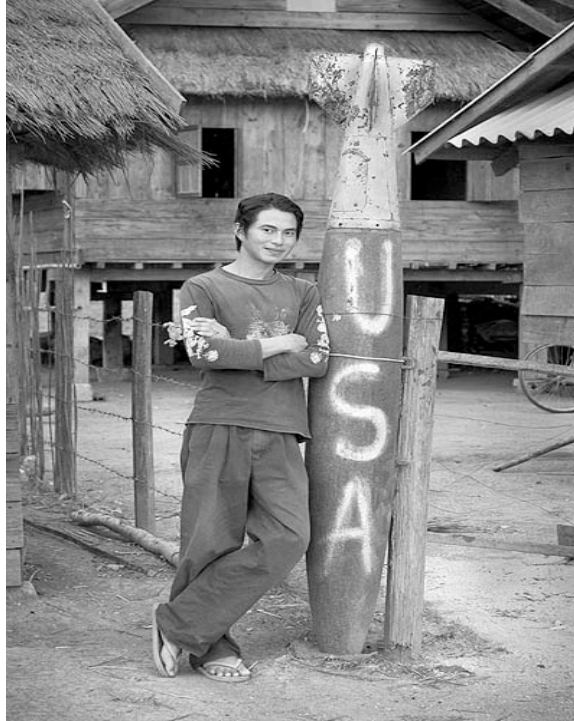


Figure 3, Sou Lin poses next to a dud  
Photo courtesy of Jerry Redfern, *Eternal Harvest*

The stark contrast between the thatched and wooden homes in the background and the dud in the foreground made from U.S. steel reinforces the disturbance and truth of U.S. airstrikes in the country. The dud in the foreground literally and symbolically points to the U.S. failed wars in Southeast Asia. Simultaneously, the marked dud reveals the political possibilities to hold the U.S. accountable for the violence and terror exacted on Laos and its people.

In the following passage, Coates' poetic form is suggestive of the basis of Lee Moua's subjectivity and materialism that lies in the production of his knives and hoes. Lee Moua, a Hmong blacksmith in Phonsavanh produces his 'mode of life' through the material conditions that determine his production – the continual repetition and rhythm of hammering, breaking, banging, and pounding war scrap metal into knives and hoes that he sends to his brother in Wisconsin. The everyday domestic objects provide a bridge

between Moua and his brother who recognizes that his continual repetition and rhythm led to an increased specialization of making the tools. In her observation of Moua's production, Coates describes the material form of life and the embodied relationship to military waste:

Lee Moua makes a garden hoe, using a hunk of metal purchased at a local scrap yard filled with piles of bomb shards from which to choose. He takes that piece of scrap to his backyard shop. He fires a bed of coals and a small inferno breathes. He shoves the jagged metal into the fire until it reddens with heat, then pries it out with tongs and pounds it with a hammer, breaking its form. He repeats this process several times. The banging of mallet on metal, the more he pounds, the more this piece of shrapnel resembles a hoe."<sup>414</sup> Lee Moua "makes his knives and hoes from scrap, then packs and ships many of them to friends and relatives who moved to the US after the war. One by one, Moua mails bombs – reshaped, retooled – back to their roots.

Moua's embodied techniques, used to work with bombs are characteristics of his interactions with localized knowledge and everyday interactions with military waste.

When military waste is stripped of its initial purpose, the kind of remembering embodied in these objects must be constructed out of the detritus of war. The material traces of war make available and recall the bodies and lives and find ways to articulate the past and the possibilities it contains. If domestic means the intimate, the literal reading of the intimate is that some "villagers even turn war scrap into prosthetic limb."<sup>415</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This chapter foregrounds and attends to the byproduct of U.S. militarism and violence in Laos – the fragments, leftovers, and waste that defined "racialized relations of allocations and appropriations" and the objects made out of refuse. In other words, an

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<sup>414</sup> Coates, *Eternal Harvest*, 96.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.



examination of waste reveals the compounded layers of military violence that impact people's lives where "movement is rough, disrupted and potentially perilous."<sup>416</sup> I suggest remnants cannot be ignored as *leftovers*, *scraps*, *waste* or *trash*, but are dangerous debris that are part of everyday life for Laotians. In suggesting an alternative reading of ARTICLE22 and *Eternal Harvest*, I attempt to show how both liberal projects are different versions of imperialist nostalgia that poses an "innocent yearning" for readers and consumers to do good by exposing the remnants of the U.S. secret war. In other words, imperialist nostalgia allows readers and consumers to establish their innocence and talk about what has been destroyed in Laos through their purchase of the book and peaceBOMB bracelet.

Lisa Lowe writes:

the material legacy of America's imperial past is borne out in the "return" of immigrants to the imperial center, and whereas the past is never available to us whole and transparent, it may often be read in the narratives, cultural practices, and locations of various immigrant formations, these fragmentary, displaced memories of America's imperialism, refigured as alternative modes in which immigrants are the survivors of empire, its witnesses, the inhabitants of its borders.<sup>417</sup>

Lowe's materialist critique and reading of immigration as the locus of racialization brings to light the contradictions that the U.S. nation-state attempts to resolve through political, economic and cultural membership. This chapter attempts to reveal that military waste is the site through which the material legacy of U.S. covert wars in Laos returns to the "imperial center." In this gesture of the return, I suggest military waste, often fragmented, refigured, and revitalized has come to inform an

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<sup>416</sup> Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2005), 95.

<sup>417</sup> Lisa Lowe, "The International within the National: American Studies and Asian American Critique," *Cultural Critique*, 40 (1998), 29.

imperial nostalgia and the commodification of violence that cautiously thread between life and death. In other words, a materialist analysis reveals that we cannot simply afford to forget U.S. aerial war in Laos that has returned in multiple and complex ways.

## Epilogue

Through a critical engagement with U.S. foreign and humanitarian policies, Laotian refugee narratives, and cultural texts, my aim has been to unsettle U.S. national narratives of “rescue and liberation” that helped to frame U.S. wars in Southeast Asia as benevolent, and even necessary. During U.S. wars in Southeast Asia, real or imagined “threats” to democracy were mapped for Americans through cultural texts, foreign policy, government actions, and television and news media. As Yén Lê Espiritu has argued, despite its loss in Vietnam, the U.S. has carefully reconstructed the Vietnam War into a “good war,” which absolved the U.S. military of any aggressive operations. Indeed, military operations once used to target and kill Southeast Asians were renamed and reframed to save Southeast Asian refugees such as Operation Babylift and Operation New Life. These post-war operations represented the U.S. as benevolent.

While the war in Vietnam was widely publicized, the “other war” in Laos was kept out of the public’s purview and continues to remain absent in Cold War histories.<sup>418</sup> Forty years after the U.S. withdrew from Southeast Asia, it is dismaying how few Americans have any knowledge of the “other war” – a brutal war whose aggressive military capability and airpower have set the precedent for the “shock and awe” and “decapitation strike” doctrines in Iraq.<sup>419</sup> Jodi Kim refers to the “war on terror” as a repetition of the Cold War – the *protracted afterlife*<sup>420</sup> whereby the logics and discourses

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<sup>418</sup> Throughout the Cold War, cultural products such as films, novels, television news, and texts constructed the distant “Other” as acceptable spaces for the exercise of American military power and played an important role in representing the “over there” as a stage for the production of American identities at home (Kim, 2010; Chow, 2006; McAlister, 2005; Klein, 2003).

<sup>419</sup> Patrick Deer, “The Ends of War and the Limits of War Culture” in *Social Text* 91 25(2)(Summer 2007).

<sup>420</sup> Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 4.

of benevolence, democracy, and containment have continued to be deployed to bolster American exceptionalism in the U.S. war in Iraq.

The U.S. imperialist project of promoting “progress” and “democracy” was not waged only through force and military confrontations, but also via the production of racial knowledge about the “potential threat” posed by the “Other.”<sup>421</sup> As the US expanded its power into the Asia/Pacific region, Christina Klein shows how American culture and politics became a site of coherence and tool to function as modes of 1) *containment* that relegated the aberrant outside of freedom and democracy, which justified military occupation, and as 2) *integration and response* to decolonization of Africa, Latin America and Asia that served to mobilize multiculturalism, which championed racial equality at home as a service for global expansion.<sup>422</sup> Rey Chow argues that the advent of area studies articulated knowledge production that sought to make “Other” cultures intelligible, and simultaneously to anticipate the “Other” and their representations as “potential targets” for American military and political power. This moment of military and political crises constructed and implicitly identified the unknowable subjects and unstable knowledge as an imminent threat to US global power. The “Other” was relegated as a problem that must be contained, particularly the revival of the “red menace” and “yellow peril” meant a renewed insistence on nationalism, loyalty, identity and patriotism. However, American anxieties about Asia and its subjects are not new. What was new was how Area Studies became a vital device of US political, economic and ideological hegemony. Melanie McAlister illustrates that representations

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<sup>421</sup> See Kim *Ends of Empire* and Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>422</sup> See Klein’s *Cold War Orientalism*.

about the “Other” mattered to U.S. ascendancy as a global superpower, particularly as cultural and political encounters shaped U.S. nationalism and constructed what it meant to be American. These encounters helped make Asia/Pacific an acceptable place to display U.S. military might and Americans understanding of themselves.

In this dissertation, I have posited that Laos was mapped for Americans through the intersecting deployment of military investments and humanitarian endeavors. In making this argument, I have looked to cultural texts, foreign policies, and humanitarian actions to offer a critical understanding of U.S. interventions in Laos as a Cold War project of “making debris.” Expanding on Rey Chow’s arguments about the production of knowledge about the “Other,” where the US occupies the “position of bomber [where] other cultures always viewed as the military and information target fields,”<sup>423</sup> I suggest that the U.S. as “bomber” also functions in the literal sense where airpower has assigned other people and spaces as military targets. First, I have argued that U.S. policy of containment cannot, in itself, explain U.S. foreign policy in Laos during the Cold War. We also need to understand how U.S. state and military officials helped to make the country a site of military fantasy that played out as a testing ground for covert guerilla warfare and “scorched-earth” policy, and a place to dispose of U.S. military waste from Agent Orange to unexploded ordnance. I posited that the policy of “debris-making” was important in the extension of US power where vulnerable and secret sites with unlimited land became testing ground for arsenal development. Such development also required that waste be left behind on indigenous land. In order to refute the “empty land” trope, I suggest addressing Laotian refugee narratives as primary text can offer alternative

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<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 41.

perspective and relationship to land. The second intervention of this dissertation has been to highlight the contradictions of humanitarianism, a state project that ensures U.S. presence in post-conflict nations, in this case, humanitarian demining operations in Laos. I posit that the dependence and recruitment of racialized and gendered subjects to provide productive and reproductive labor in Laos through demining work is “humanitarian violence.” Neda Atanasoski posits that “humanitarian violence” works to preserve the U.S. as a benevolent nation that offers an afterlife for those who can be saved through liberal law and the free-market, while masking the realities of American exceptionalism. The last intervention illuminates the connections between US militarism and the global economy where the question of labor and reproduction is articulated in the revitalization and circulation of military waste that possesses value.

I also place the specific history of Laos as a racialized nonplace in relations to other places that have been the targets of the U.S. military, in order to open the possibilities of making unlikely connections and transnational and comparative projects. For example, throughout the dissertation, I posit that U.S. airpower and technology in Laos have consequently been echoed in the U.S. airpower in Iraq. In other words, the U.S. aerial war in Laos was possible because the US did not want to send American ground troops into the region. Though this policy requires American pilots to man these jets, American casualties on the ground and in the air have been minimized through the use of advanced technology.<sup>424</sup> As an example, the use of unmanned aerial vehicle (commonly known as drones) has shifted the way the U.S. strategizes its war in the

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<sup>424</sup> David KilCullen and Andrew McDonald Exum, “Death from Above, Outrage Down Below. *The New York Times* (May 17, 2009).

Middle East. The U.S. had tested the use of drones during the first Gulf War and its success has made drones the weapon of choice in Pakistan and Iraq. Since President Obama took office, the use of drones has expanded considerably.<sup>425</sup> The only countries possessing capabilities of delivering drones are the US, UK, Israel, Pakistan and China. Another connection has been the environmental damage in countries where war has been waged. The bombing in Afghanistan and Iraq has damaged wetlands and polluted the water and soil with depleted uranium. In spaces where military arsenals were produced and tested, such as the deserts of the Southwest and Bikini Atoll, are often racialized as nonplaces. The consequences of war exceed the horrific toll on human life, but also the ecological effects that have devastated both land and bodies. Forty years after the war has ended for the U.S. in Southeast Asia, the cumulative impact of U.S. military actions continues to devastate land and bodies.

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<sup>425</sup> "Pakistan: Suspected U.S. Drone Strike Against Taliban Kills 18," *The Guardian* (December 27, 2010).

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