In March 2022, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict broke out, leading to a massive exodus of Ukrainian refugees being openly welcomed into neighboring western Europe and the United States.[1] Exactly one year after the conflict arose, a record-breaking more than 271,000 Ukrainian refugees were admitted into the US, far exceeding the 100,000 goal originally stipulated by President Joseph Biden’s “Uniting for Ukraine” sponsorship campaign and newly established Ukrainian Refugee Program.[2] Among them, Biden streamlined the reception of more than 10,000 unaccompanied Ukrainian minors.[3] The irony here is that while the United States was opening its doors to Ukrainian refugees, including unaccompanied minors, it was simultaneously and systematically denying asylum to Central American refugee youth and children barely surviving an ongoing refugee crisis at the southern border.[4] This contradictory response caused considerable confusion and frustration among migrant and refugee rights advocates, who claimed that all refugee children should be provided the same opportunity and right to asylum articulated by the 1980 Refugee Act, which formally institutionalized federal responsibility for unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs). This act, in theory, guarantees that all URMs, regardless of nationality, gender, religion, or race, have an age-based right to plead asylum. How, then, is it possible that the US can continue to justify such radically different treatment and reception of refugee youth and children from different parts of the world?

In her timely and ground-breaking new book, **Suffer the Little Children: Child Migration and the Geopolitics of Compassion in the United States**, which coincidentally also came out in March 2022, the same month that the Russo-Ukrainian conflict began, Anita Casavantes Bradford provides the first comprehensive history of refugee policies and programs in the United States explicitly pertaining to children. Equally important, she makes the claim that children were not simply participants in the making of refugee programs and policies, but rather were active drivers. While her book does not discuss Ukrainian refugees specific-
ally, her thoroughly researched study provides a deeper look at the reception of various other groups of refugee children, from the 1934 resettlement of Jewish German unaccompanied minors to the more recent 2014 surge of unaccompanied “alien” minors from Central America. What is particularly novel about Casavantes Bradford’s work and approach is that she does not focus on just one group, but instead provides a transnational historical analysis that looks at various groups—including, but not limited to, Jewish, British, Hungarian, Cuban, Vietnamese, and, finally, Central American children—at different points in time, all of whom face what she calls the United States’ “geopolitics of compassion.” Her main argument is that US refugee resettlement programs for unaccompanied children have historically been more often directly linked and concerned with the United States’ geopolitical agenda, including foreign and domestic politics, than with the overall well-being of children with an age-based right to protection and refuge. This includes taking into consideration the general American public’s perceptions and preconceived notions around race, ethnicity, gender, and religion, which often led to extremely selective and discriminatory policies and guidelines at different points in time.

To support her argument, Suffer the Little Children is broken down into seven chapters that each discuss a different era of the United States’ developing laws, policies, and programs regarding the reception and care of refugee minors. The initial chapter focuses on the first attempt to officially bring unaccompanied refugee children to the United States, which began in 1934 with an organization called the German-Jewish Children’s Aid (GJCA), composed of a group of private individuals who were concerned with German chancellor Adolf Hitler’s rise to power and the impact it would have on German Jews. Herein, Casavantes Bradford reveals the initially negative response from the US government, which, to stay neutral during the onset of World War II and feeding into growing anti-Semitism in the US, rejected the first proposal to bring unaccompanied Jewish children to the country. Pressured by the GJCA, however, the government eventually granted visas to 250 unaccompanied Jewish children, but only if they were privately funded and guaranteed not to become a public charge (p. 22). As Nazi German hostility toward Jews escalated drastically, Franklin Delano Roosevelt became the first US president to publicly condemn Nazi anti-Semitism in Germany and expanded US policy to accept refugees at a larger scale, including an additional 100 unaccompanied children. Unfortunately, this effort was far too small and came far too late as, still unknownst to the American public at the time, the Holocaust was already well underway, leading to the systematic mass murder of thousands of Jewish children. This is Casavantes Bradford’s first example of how US refugee policies toward children were directly shaped and defined by US foreign policies and interests.

In the second chapter, as World War II officially began and countries in eastern and western Europe came under attack by Nazi Germany, Casavantes Bradford reveals how, instead of expanding US refugee policies to further support unaccompanied Jewish children, the US Committee for the Care of European Children (USCOM) started the first refugee minors’ resettlement program for British children in areas directly under siege during WWII. Casavantes Bradford argues that, unlike Jewish refugee children, British unaccompanied minors were warmly welcomed into American homes, which Casavantes Bradford claims was because Americans saw British children as more assimilable into American culture than Jewish children, who came from a distinct ethnic, cultural, and religious background. Moreover, unclear on the difference between fostering unaccompanied children and adopting orphans, Americans began to see this as an opportunity to not only support the war efforts, but to also grow their families with youth of “desirable” backgrounds. Working directly with the GSJC, which was renamed the European Jewish Children’s Aid (EJCA),
USCOM also used this as an opportunity to expand its original project of rescuing more Jewish children. Thus, under the guise of the laws and policies protecting British children, which expanded protections to all European children directly affected by the war, USCOM and EJCA were able to admit an additional five thousand Jewish unaccompanied children from across Europe throughout WWII.

Herein, by historically contextualizing and comparatively analyzing the policies and programs for unaccompanied Jewish and British children, Casavantes Bradford clearly demonstrates how the first refugee resettlement programs for minors were largely shaped and influenced by the United States’ evolving foreign policy prior to and during WWII. In these first two chapters, Casavantes Bradford provides concrete evidence that the US government was initially more invested in safeguarding its own political interests than in sheltering children, whom the US did not yet recognize as individuals with an age-based right to protection and refuge. Moreover, she demonstrates how ethnic and religious discrimination also played a role in determining which children were openly welcomed into the United States as refugee minors and which ones were not. This is Casavantes Bradford’s first example of what she calls a “geopolitics of compassion,” or a politics of compassion expressed toward children whom the US government perceives as deserving and worthy of its protection.

This evolving concept of geopolitics of compassion is further developed in chapter 3, wherein Casavantes Bradford demonstrates how, in the aftermath of WWII, the United States began opening its doors to European war orphans, or children who had lost one or both parents during the war. American families, especially those who continued seeking to grow their families, opened their homes to these children, but not without conditions. According to Casavantes Bradford, many American families expressed interest in children with specific characteristics, including a special preference for little girls under six or infants under two. This requisite stifled the adoption and resettlement process significantly as most European war orphans in need of homes were teenage boys—an age group and gender that American families were much less likely to show sympathy for and/or adopt. Herein, Casavantes Bradford emphasizes how age and gender also played a significant role in determining which children were welcomed into the United States under its refugee minor resettlement programs and which were less likely to receive considerable accommodations. This becomes more evident in chapter 4 where Casavantes Bradford provides a thorough case study of Hungarian URM s fleeing communism, who became the first group of Cold War children to be considered for a “quasi-official” refugee resettlement program (p. 101).

The most interesting chapters, in my opinion, are chapters 5 and 6, which focus on the reception of Cuban and Vietnamese refugee unaccompanied minors into the United States during the Cold War. Casavantes Bradford argues that the United States’ fight against communism is what fueled the expansion of refugee programs for children from Cuba and Vietnam—namely those who were fleeing communism in their home countries. In the case of Cuba, Casavantes Bradford sheds light on the first fully funded government refugee program for unaccompanied minors: the Cuban Children’s Program, 1960-66, notoriously remembered by Cuban exiles as the “Peter Pan” Program. According to Casavantes Bradford, this voluntary program was originally meant to provide temporary relief and refuge to children whose parents were actively involved in the counterrevolutionary movement against Cuban leader Fidel Castro, which the United States initially thought would certainly also be temporary. This certainty faded after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, a US-CIA military operation designed to topple the Cuban revolutionary government with the support of counterrevolutionary forces. This epic fail-
ure led to an exodus of adult Cuban counterrevolutionary exiles who sought asylum in the United States. Unable to continue to justify the preferential treatment of Cuban unaccompanied children in the US foster system—who received significantly better funding per capita than US-born foster youth—the United States allowed Cuban refugee children to petition their parents for family reunification, which consequently provided asylum for the entire family unit. According to Casavantes Bradford, the United States justified this expedited legal incorporation of Cuban youth and their families to exemplify the superiority of capitalist ideals and society in the global fight against communism.

In chapter 6, Casavantes Bradford sheds light on a similar story with the expansion of unaccompanied minor resettlement programs for Southeast Asian youth, namely Vietnamese children fleeing the Vietnam War. Arguing that Southeast Asian youth should be granted the same treatment as Cuban youth, many Southeast Asian unaccompanied minors also sought and were granted asylum in the United States during the Cold War. The difference, however, is that American sentiment and sympathy toward communist-fleeing youth was waning, making it much more difficult for asylum-seeking Vietnamese youth to find suitable foster homes. Instead, anti-immigrant advocates began labeling Southeast Asian youth “anchor babies,” implying that these children were not seeking refuge and protection, but rather were being intentionally sent by their parents to begin the family reunification process in the United States. According to Casavantes Bradford, “these discourses implicitly sought to deny racially undesirable unaccompanied minors the right to be considered for admission to the United States” (p. 196). Ultimately, Casavantes Bradford argues, this reemergence of a “racialized logic of deterrence” is what led policymakers to amend policies for Southeast Asian URMsto make it more difficult for them to petition for their parents, thus complicating future possibilities of family reunification for all unaccompanied minors and refugees seeking asylum in the US (p. 196). Herein, Casavantes Bradford makes the claim that, once again, racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination also took part in shaping the reception and incorporation of Vietnamese unaccompanied minors, thus further complicating the United States’ evolving geopolitics of compassion.

Finally, in chapter 7, Casavantes Bradford brings the reader to the current moment and addresses the repercussions of the most recent refugee crisis in 2014 when an unprecedented influx of Haitian and Central American unaccompanied minors began turning themselves in at the US-Mexico border. She specifically talks about the plight of unaccompanied minors from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, whose migration history dates to the 1980s civil wars, which were backed and funded by US government. El Salvador alone, for example, received as much as $4.8 billion in US military aid during the 1980s, resulting in roughly $1-2 million dollars per day.

In this chapter, Casavantes Bradford recalls that, unlike previous asylum-seeking youth in the United States, Central Americans have one of the highest denial rates of any group seeking asylum in the US, amounting to a less than 1 percent acceptance rate. According to Casavantes Bradford, this is because the United States does not recognize Central Americans, in general, as asylum seekers, but rather categorizes them as economic migrants, including unaccompanied minors, thus depriving them of the same rights and privileges as other asylum-seeking children. Casavantes Bradford also points out that the recent administration of President Donald Trump, in a desperate attempt to deter further migration from Central America, exacerbated this situation by explicitly targeting Central American refugees with children and separating families at the border, thus intentionally violating the UN Refugee Convention, which guarantees the protection of parental and human rights of all asylum seekers.
To conclude, *Suffer the Little Children* is the first comprehensive book of its kind to provide such a thoughtful and thorough transnational analysis of the evolving history of unaccompanied refugee children in the United States—a necessary and outstanding contribution to critical refugee studies, especially in our day and age of escalating xenophobia. Overall, Casavantes Bradford does an excellent job providing the necessary historical evidence to support her main argument, which is that US refugee programs for unaccompanied minors have been largely shaped and determined by the United States' geopolitics of compassion, thus enforcing its foreign policies and protecting domestic interests above the needs of refugee children. Providing further nuance to an already complicated history and evolving politic, she also meticulously employs significant evidence to show how this geopolitics of compassion was additionally influenced by Americans' biases around race, ethnicity, religion, and gender, which often led to various forms of discrimination against youth who did not fulfill or meet Americans' desired characteristics or expectations for children worthy of refuge and protection in the United States. Moreover, Casavantes Bradford uses an unbelievably rich and wide variety of primary and secondary sources from a diverse array of archives, including collections from Washington, DC, Minnesota, New Jersey, Florida, California, and New York, which illustrates the lengths she went to in order to materialize this thoroughly researched book. Sources included meeting minutes, case notes, memorandums, statements, press releases, congressional records, policy manuals, correspondence, letters, organizational reports, documented telephone conversations, bulletins, advertisements, newspaper articles, telegrams, meeting agendas, testimonies, and more, all of which are outlined in detail in the endnotes.

In terms of its shortcomings, as a scholar of twentieth-century Central American history with a special focus on the evolution of communist parties and movements in Latin America, I found the book to lack a deeper critique of the role of US imperialism in the making of the refugee crisis, as well as its ensuing war on communism, particularly in the last chapter discussing Central American refugees. While I understood Casavantes Bradford's point at the beginning that the goal of the book was not to take a moral stance on the issue, it bears noting that the US fight against communism during the Cold War also deeply inhibited the progress of many revolutionary movements in Latin America that were, indeed, actively seeking and fighting for alternatives to the exploitative ideals and practices expanded under capitalism that actively disenfranchised and impoverished hundreds of thousands of children, especially working-class minors. This is true throughout the Global South, including Central America where armed revolutionary movements were, indeed, inspired by communist ideas and actively fought against several US-backed military dictatorships. Although Casavantes Bradford does acknowledge that the fight against communism during the Cold War is how the United States justified its brutal and violent intervention in the region, which led to massive displacement and human rights violations, she does not explicitly critique the capitalist system or imperialism, nor does she discuss US accountability or responsibility in creating the massive exodus of Central American refugees, including unaccompanied minors, seeking asylum in the United States. Perhaps it was beyond the scope of the project—or simply not the point. Nonetheless, given that the crux of Casavantes Bradford's argument is that the programs for URM in the latter part of the twentieth century were largely determined and shaped by the Cold War's anticommmunist geopolitics of compassion, a deeper critique and analysis of the historic role of US imperialism and its championing of the virtues of capitalism would have been fitting and welcome, especially taking into consideration its impact and expansiveness throughout Latin America.

Overall, *Suffer the Little Children* by Anita Casavantes Bradford is an excellent and important
contribution to critical refugee studies as it provides the first comprehensive investigation of the policies and laws regarding refugee minors in the United States. Moreover, using extensive historical evidence and analysis, this timely book helps us better deconstruct and understand the current moment, including the most recent incorporation of Ukrainian unaccompanied minors into the United States. For example, by contextualizing and analyzing the Russo-Ukrainian conflict through the lens of Casavantes Bradford’s geopolitics of compassion, we can begin to deduce how and why preferential treatment has been given to Ukrainian refugees over other groups, such as Central Americans. Of course, although a deeper historical analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and its ensuing exodus of Ukrainian refugees has yet to be written, the precedents laid out in Suffer the Little Children help us understand how Ukrainian URMs—like the Jewish, British, Hungarian, Cuban, Vietnamese, and Central American children that came before—might also play an important role in the United States’ current foreign policy agenda. Additionally, reflecting on the aftermath of the Trump administration’s wrath against Latinx migrants, especially Central American refugees, we can also infer that the United States’ current geopolitics of compassion continues to depend on the reemergence of a “racialized logic of deterrence,” as well as Americans’ biases around race, ethnicity, gender, and religion.

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