

visual essay / EMILY KIM

INTERSTICES 26

Beyond the view from above: Re-reading the Pacific airfield

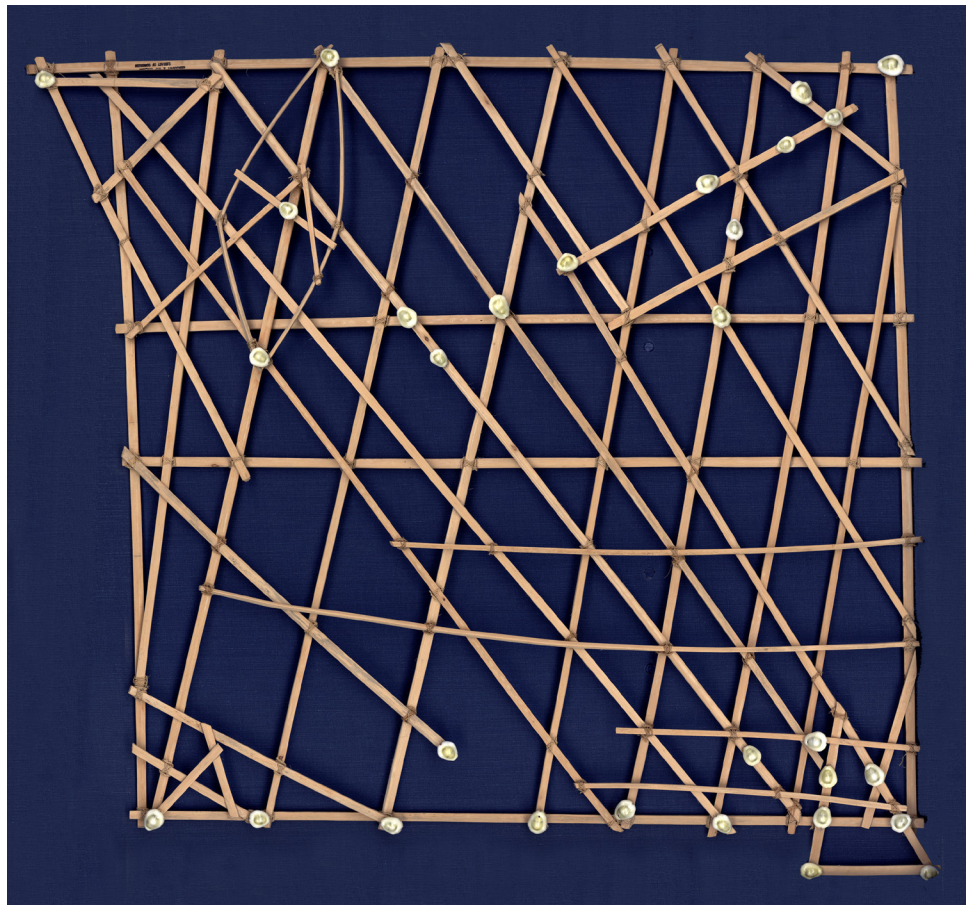


Fig. 1 Majuro (192-?). Marshall Islands stick chart, Rebbelib type
[Photograph: Library of Congress Geography and Map Division]

Pacific Islanders have navigated the ocean for thousands of years. The Marshallese stick chart, like the one found in the US Library of Congress, encodes this knowledge as a tactile mnemonic, studied on land as a personal tool of routes previously traversed, rather than held as a navigational map during travel.¹ Its most detailed register is the ocean itself: currents, winds, and swells, focusing on the connective tissue between islands.

This form of spatial navigation stands in contrast with much of Western cartography, whose oceanic representation enforces a water–land dichotomy. Abraham Ortelius’s *Maris Pacifici*, one of the first printed maps of the Pacific, rendered the



Fig. 2 Abraham Ortelius (1589). *Maris Pacifici* [Map: public domain via Wikimedia Commons]

ocean as a void: a blue expanse punctuated by routes and landmasses marking shifting imperial claims. Early twentieth-century aerial photography became the colonial map's successor.

During World War II, the Allied military tactic of 'island hopping' through the Pacific Theatre treated islands as strategic stepping-stones rather than places. Airfields demand specific, replicable dimensions, graded and cleared to accommodate flight. This militarised gaze flattened the ecological and cultural complexity of both individual islands and larger archipelagos, effectively erasing Indigenous understandings of a connective ocean and transforming distinct landscapes into placeless infrastructure. James Corner describes this synoptic vision as a scopic regime of authority and instrumental distance,² a gaze from everywhere and nowhere.³

This project questions this aerial logic through a multi-method investigation of two World War II airfields: Iejima Auxiliary Airfield (Okinawa Prefecture, Japan), and North Field (Tinian, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, US), militarised and infrastructural landscapes that are often dismissed. Findings are based on fieldwork and archival research conducted between 2023 and 2025. Here, the runway is treated as more than inert ruin, instead as material archive: an active participant in a living landscape.

The following drawings articulate tensions between imperial time and local ecological and cultural cycles. Chamorro/CHamoru (the Indigenous peoples of the Mariana Islands) temporalities are "fluid cycles in which the past, present, and

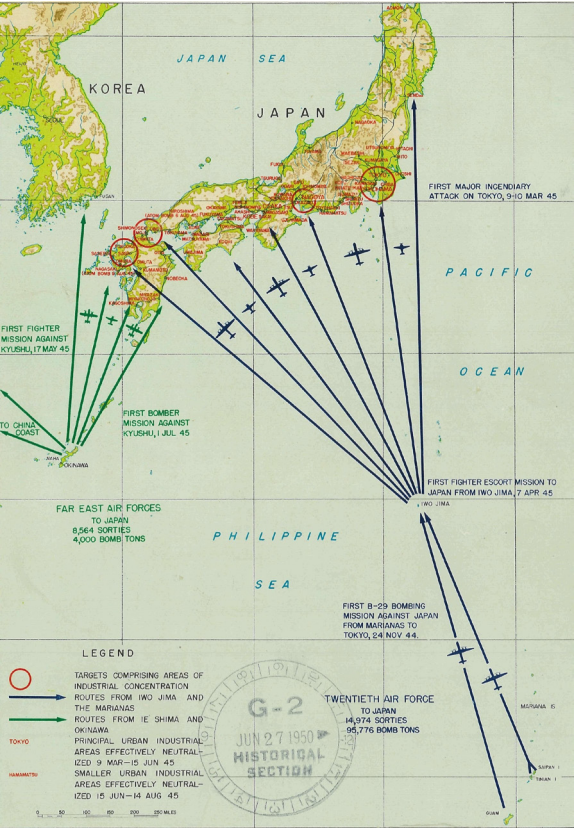
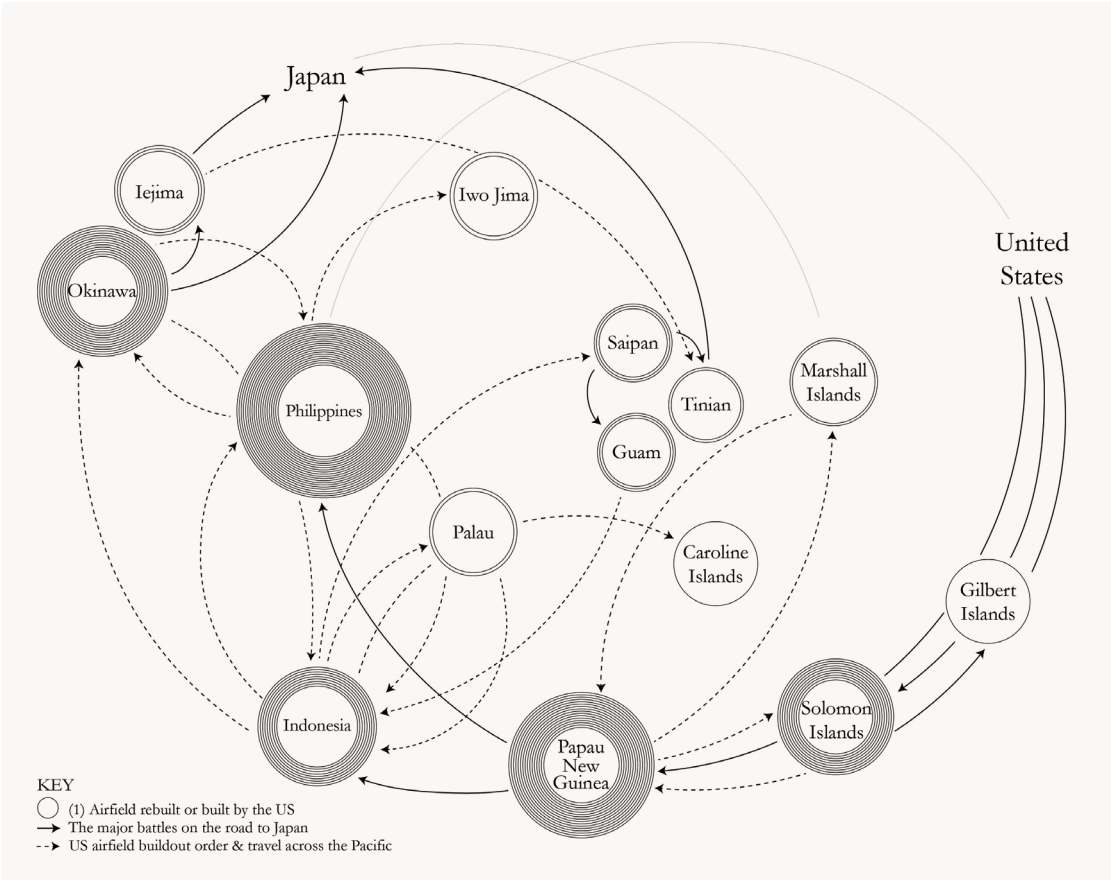


Fig. 3 Allied Force Headquarters (1944). Japan Bombing Operations Rough Draft (NAID: 50925956) [Map: US National Archives]

Fig. 4 Emily Kim (2024). World War II Airfields of the Pacific Theatre [Diagram drawn in Illustrator, using data on airfield locations, counts, and directional flows (based on battle dates) compiled from Pacific Wrecks, the US Army Center of Military History, the Australian War Memorial, Okinawa City government records, Batangas History, and Wikipedia].



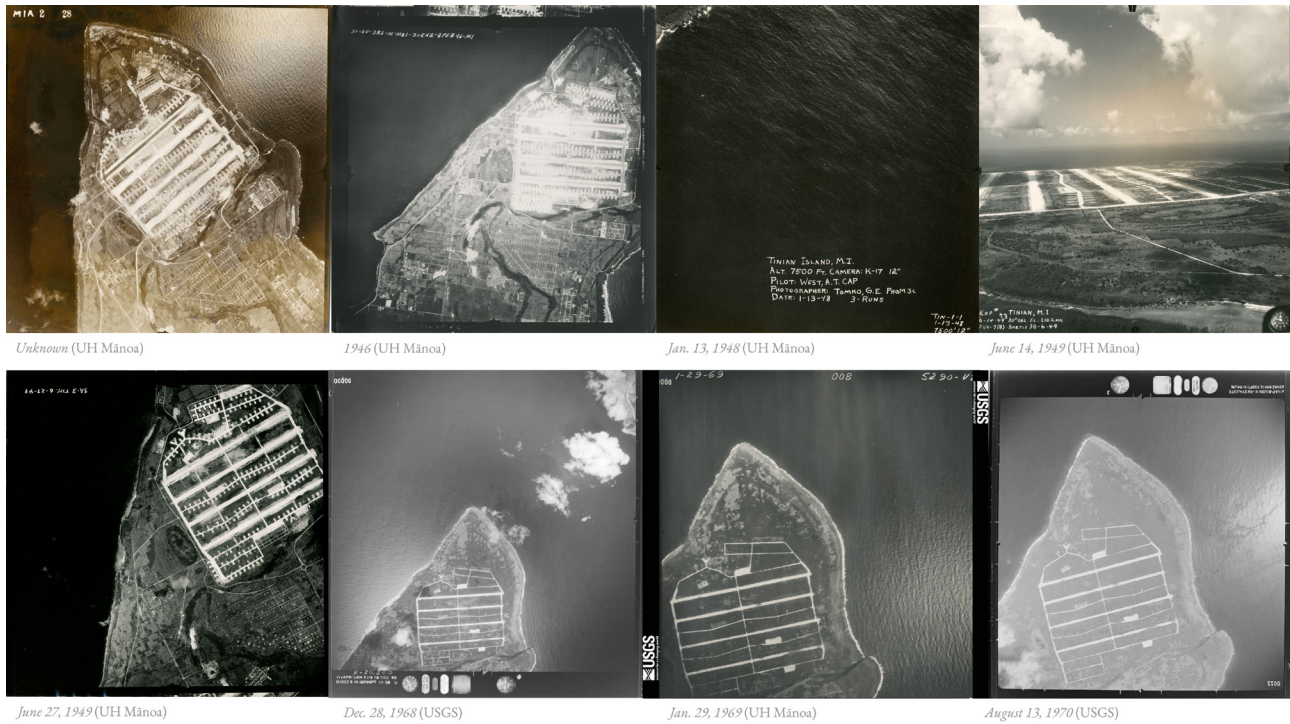


Fig. 5 Emily Kim (2025). Aerial photographs of North Field, Tinian, 1946–1970 [Composite aerial photographs: University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Digital Collection and USGS]

Fig. 6 Emily Kim (2024). Runway Baker, North Field, Tinian [Drone photograph]



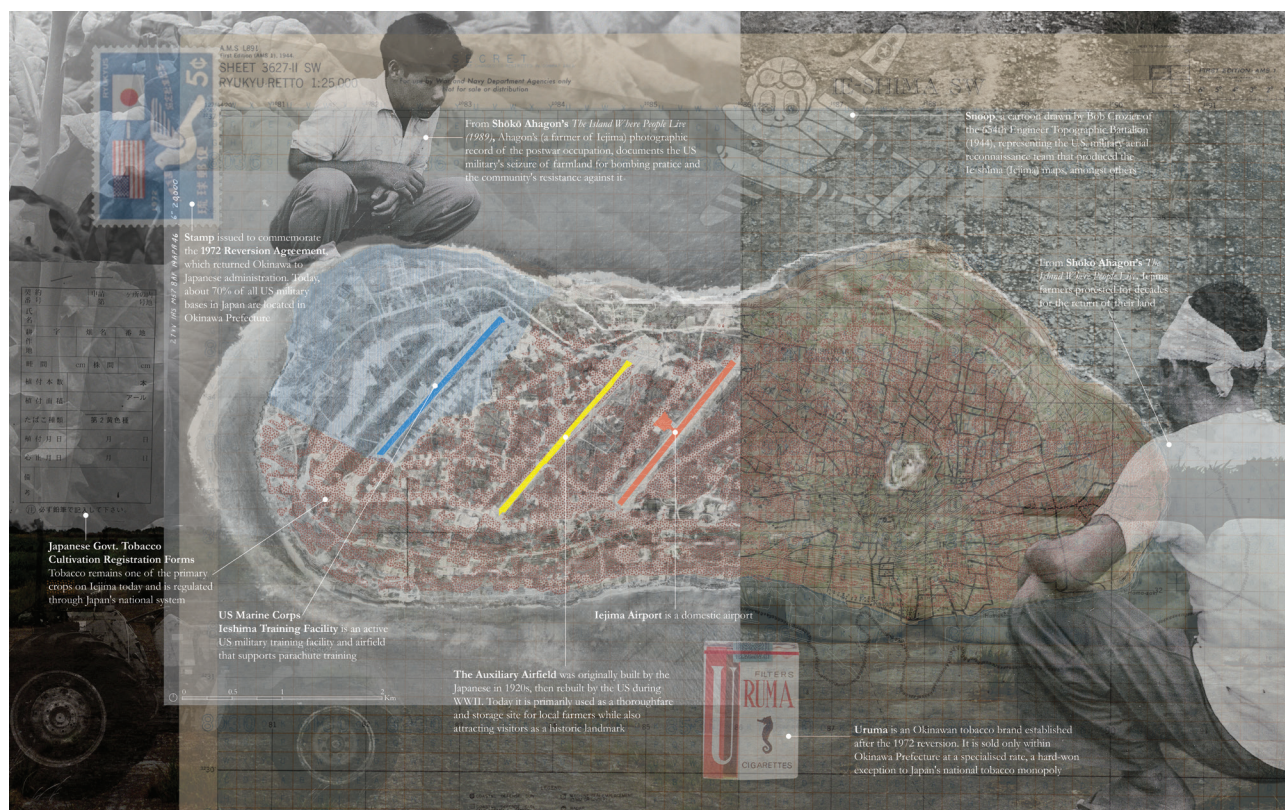
future are interdependent,²⁴ interwoven with Islander worldviews. The Cyclical Timeline renders this frame cartographically: events are anchored in islands and to each other, with the ocean drawn as the field of relation. Each collage, assembled from fragments, offers a situated, partial view.⁵

Standing on the Iejima Auxiliary Airfield runway is disorienting, flanked by low tobacco fields with the runway's geometry extending in both directions. There is a sensation of being anywhere and nowhere, neither a physical place nor a derelict ruin. Okinawan farmers, who have and continue to fight US military presence to reclaim their agricultural lands, actively maintain the surface for tractor movement and tobacco storage. The geometry of occupation on this sliver of Iejima is neither erased nor intact.

INTERSTICES 26



The stick chart is not a tool for locating position but for orienting oneself within relational fields. This is reflected in the collages: not singular views from above or below, but a new field of vision assembled from many. Their density invites close reading: zooming, tracing layers, following annotation, their partiality acting as an opening for further investigation. Through this ground-level re-reading, not from above, the Pacific runway is returned to the complex living and relational genealogy of the archipelago.



in Illustrator: Iejima Auxiliary Airfield (yellow, currently used by Okinawan farmers for tractor movement and tobacco curing), US Marine Corps Ieshima Training Facility (blue), Iejima Airport (orange). Additional elements: photographs of farmers surveying land cratered by US military ordnance, from Shōkō Ahagon's *The Island Where People Live*, a farmer's photographic account of the post-war occupation of Iejima:

an aerial reconnaissance cartoon by Bob Crozier, 654th Engineer Topographic Battalion, 1944; a 1972 postage stamp commemorating the Okinawan Reversion Agreement, which returned Okinawa to Japanese administration while the US military presence remained; and a package of Uruma cigarettes, an Okinawan brand established by local farmers after reversion, and a hard-fought exception to Japan's national tobacco monopoly]

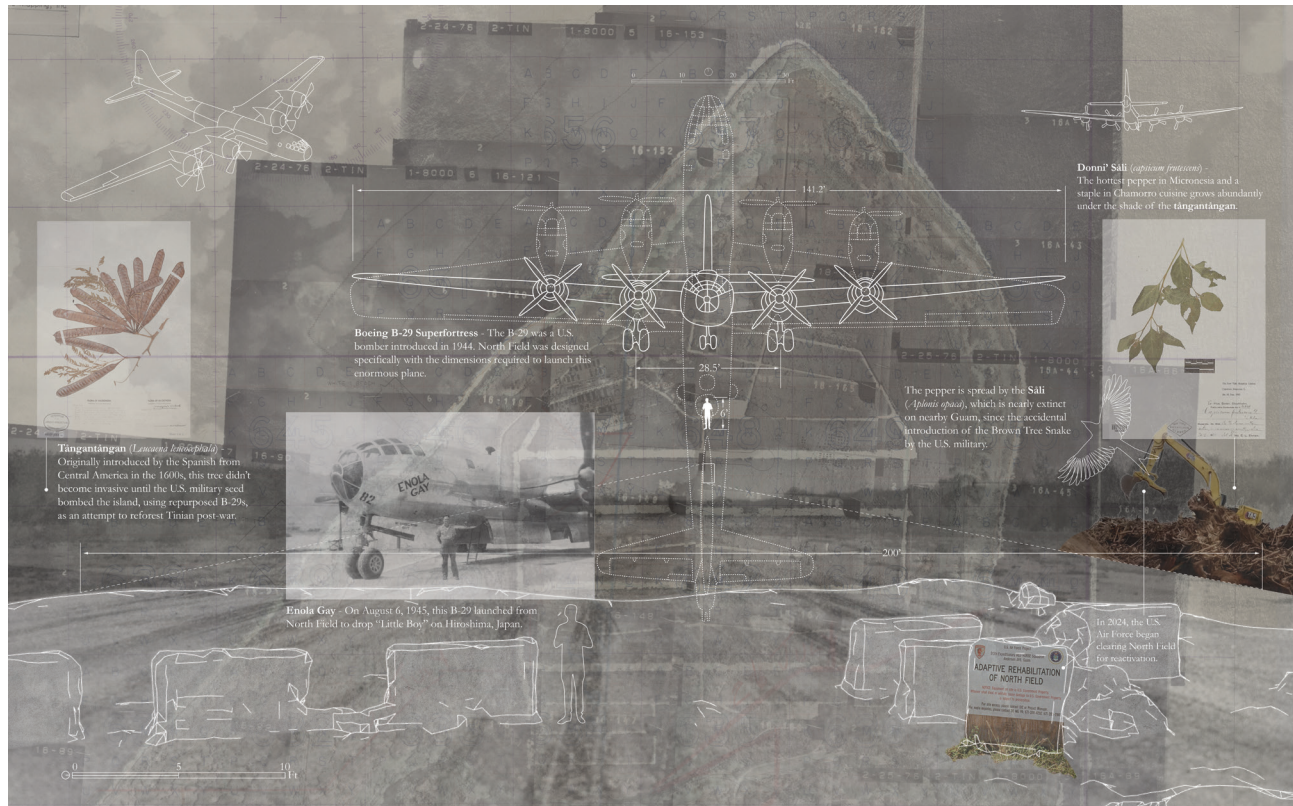


Fig. 9 Emily Kim (2024). Unfolding North Field [Digital collage assembled in Photoshop, Illustrator, and Rhino. Base: Special Air and Gunnery Target Map of Tinian, 64th Engineer Topographic Battalion, USAFICPA, April 1944, 1:20,000 (US National Archives), layered with a fieldwork photograph of Runway Baker (2024) showing skid marks from recent use, and a 1976 aerial photo index prepared by the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, Division of Lands and Surveys (University of Hawai'i at Mānoa MAGIS). Centre: Boeing B-29 Superfortress front elevation and plan, drawn in Rhino from technical drawings and scaled to the runway photograph; flanking B-29 drawings traced from photographs. The runway's dimensions were specified to accommodate this aircraft, which launched the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki from this site in August 1945. Foreground: 3D LIDAR scan of the runway's cross-section, captured in 2024 and processed into linework in Rhino. Right: US Air Force excavator (still from USAF Civil Engineers, "Tinian Island: WWII's Busiest Airfield Comes Back Into Focus," 2024) and fieldwork photograph of "Adaptive Rehabilitation of North Field" signage, marking current military reactivation. Ecological actors: *tangantangan*

(*Leucaena leucocephala*) herbarium specimen, Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University, originally University of Guam Herbarium; *donni' sali* (*Capsicum frutescens*) herbarium specimen, New York Botanical Garden; *sali* (bird) traced from photographs. Aerially seed-bombed onto Tinian post-war, the *tangantangan* has been classified as invasive, while the *sali* and *donni' sali*, in the years between heavy military use, have made of its canopy a site of mutual flourishing, re-authoring an occupied landscape and unsettling the category of 'invasive' itself]

NOTES

1. Thomas Gladwin, *East is a Big Bird: Navigation and Logic on Puluwat Atoll* (Harvard University Press, 1970); Joseph H. Genz, "Resolving Ambivalence in Marshallese Navigation: Relearning, Reinterpreting, and Reviving the 'Stick Chart' Wave Models," *Structure and Dynamics* 9, no. 1 (2016): 10, 15.

2. James Corner, "Eidetic Operations and New Landscapes," in *Composite Landscapes: Photomontage and Landscape Architecture*, ed. Charles Waldheim and Andrea Hansen (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2014), 135.

3. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 581.

4. "Section 4: Timeline," Guampedia, <https://www.guampedia.com/fanohge-chamoru-exhibit-section-4-timeline/>.

5. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 586.

6. Cynthia Ross, "Ecological Imperialism in the Occupied Landscape," *World History Connected* 18, no. 2 (2021): 26, <https://doi.org/10.13021/whc.v18i2.3609>. Though the focus of Ross's paper is on Guam, the analysis on the use of *tāngantāngan* by the US across the Pacific Islands is of particular note.

7. Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 15.