

## BOOK REVIEWS

---

Pholsena, Vatthana, and Oliver Tappe, eds. *Interactions with a Violent Past: Reading Post-Conflict Landscapes in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2013.

Reviewed by David Biggs, University of California at Riverside

Despite over six decades of scholarship on three Indochina Wars (1945-1986) and associated conflicts, relatively little has been published about the remote highland areas where much of the fighting occurred. Even fewer publications have concentrated on post-conflict social and environmental legacies of war on the diverse communities and landscapes in the region. Political anthropologist James Scott, in his recent work *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, deliberately ends his study of many different upland tribal communities in 1945 for the following reason: “Since 1945, and in some cases before then, the power of the state to deploy distance-demolishing technologies—railroads, all-weather roads, telephone, telegraph, airpower, helicopters, and now information technology — so changed the strategic balance of power between self-governing peoples and nation-states, so diminished the friction of terrain, that my analysis largely ceases to be useful.”

*Interactions with a Violent Past* effectively takes up this task, delivering nine unique chapters that each approach the legacies of violence and distance-demolishing technologies in different ways. The editors of the volume identify three approaches taken up in different ways by the contributors: landscape as a frame of analysis, Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*, and theories on processes of ruination and transformation. They use the term landscape as a signifier of material and semiotic meanings intertwined at particular sites. Other essays examine the different ways that historic sites, especially sites of war-related trauma, often trigger conflicting narrative-making on the parts of states and individuals. Still other essays in the volume critically address processes of destruction or ruination, examining how states, corporations, and individuals may use them to advance new creative agendas. The essays that follow from these approaches show in deep particulars how past conflicts have become embedded in landscapes and social processes of remembering (and forgetting).

The first three chapters of the volume consider rituals of commemorating war-dead and the many different tensions that have emerged between individuals and states over sites of commemoration and the nature of commemorative ceremonies. Sina Emde explores the tension between state and individual commemoration in her study of two of the most notorious sites associated with the Cambodian Genocide, the infamous high school-turned-prison, Tuol Sleng, and the “killing field” just outside Phnom Penh, Cheoung Ek. Emde explores the work of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal to identify names and dates of those killed at these sites. Throughout this chapter, Emde contrasts individual acts of memory-making such as ancestor worship rites as oppositional to state-led acts of mass commemoration. The result, she argues, is a polyphonic memoryscape; however just how local acts are opposed to the state is not clear. In

Chapter 2, Oliver Tappe brings Pierre Nora's notion of "lieux de mémoire" to bear on another iconic memorial site from the wars, the cave-city of Viengxay located in an upland border province of northern Laos not far from Hà Nội. This network of caves served as an administrative redoubt for the leaders of the Lao communist movement from 1964 to 1973. After the war, Viengxay was transformed from a provisional capital into a kind of prison camp where people from the losing side went for "re-education". In the 1990s, the Lao government closed the camps and then set to developing the site as a tourist center. Tappe considers this newly fashioned, national tourist site as an important *lieu de mémoire* for the Lao state, however he notes that it doesn't function along the lines of what Nora had described as multi-vocal sites key to a living "memory-nation" (p. 61). The third chapter by Markus Schlecker moves from important national sites of memory to a highly localized one, a recently discovered stone stelae turned up as a result of road construction in a northern Vietnamese village. Schlecker considers the resurgence of local ancestor cults and the fading interest in the more modern invention of war stelae dedicated to "war martyrs". In an era of village depopulation and declining state monetary support for war veterans, Schlecker suggests that village residents have returned to older practices of family-centered, ancestor veneration as a strategy to reclaim some autonomy from the state.

The next two chapters in the volume by Elaine Russell and Christina Schwenkel move from sites of commemoration to the practices of removing thousands of unexploded bombs left behind after the war. Russell's study of sites in Laos includes an eloquent, concise history of the overall effects of American bombing campaigns here from 1964 to 1973. She weaves in biographies of individuals involved in the removal of unexploded ordnance (UXO), showing how individual experiences, often traumatic, intersect with ongoing national and international dialogues. In the chapter's conclusion, she suggests the provocative notion that UXO might be considered as another type of *lieu de mémoire*, but the idea is not really developed in the essay.

Christina Schwenkel addresses more specifically the evolving *practices* of mine and UXO clearance in the former demilitarized zone of Vietnam in present-day Quang Tri Province. Schwenkel first provides a detailed synopsis of professional, state-managed demining programs, and then she draws on field work and other anthropological research to examine the parallel, often derided work of "hobby" deminers. In parallel with the earlier chapters, Schwenkel delves into the conflicting practices of hobby versus professional ordnance clearers. Rather than accept commonly accepted views on the hobbyists as untrained volunteers or social outcasts, Schwenkel considers more carefully why these individuals take such high risks and how they mitigate them. This chapter is especially useful for its deep theoretical reflections on the often-competing "moral economies of risk" (p. 153) that define UXO clearance and scrap metal collecting.

The final four chapters in the volume address various acts of post-conflict renovation. Vathana Pholsena describes one of the most iconic roads of the war, Highway 9 that ran east-west connecting Savannakhet Province (Laos) and Quang Tri Province (Vietnam) just below the former DMZ at the 17th parallel. In the first half of the chapter, Pholsena articulates a vivid historical geography of this road from its inception as a commercial route to its role in the war as a side-branch for North Vietnamese troops and supplies moving north-south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Focusing on the Lao town of Sepon in the uplands not far from the border, Pholsena notes the different, conflicting memories associated with the road through such sites as state-sanctioned war memorials and the erased ruins of now-closed, post-war prison camps. Pholsena's interviews with residents of Sepon are fascinating, especially as she contrasts the experiences of villagers with former prison camp detainees who have since settled in the area.

Susan Hammond provides a chapter on Agent Orange based on her visits to one heavily sprayed site, A Luóí, and studies of archival and other records on the American deployment of tactical herbicides. The chapter lacks a theoretical focus comparable to other contributors – i.e., no discussion of *lieux de mémoire* – but it is nevertheless a compelling survey of issues attributed to Agent Orange/dioxin exposure in post-conflict landscapes.

In Chapter 8, Krisna Uk examines highlander villages in northeastern Cambodia, in particular studying how iconic images from the war such as planes, bombs, and guns have been worked into motifs of funerary art and in traditional weaving. Studying the motifs painted on the thatch roofs of funerary structures in these villages, Uk shows how the use of war-related icons suggests how wartime experiences or deadly legacies of the war such as UXO are visually woven into personal and collective narratives of individual lives. The second art-form in the chapter, woven handicrafts, conveys similar images from the war but for very different purposes. Here women weaving textiles have included icons from the war *not* because they relate to personal experiences but instead because the women believe tourists are more attracted to these references to war.

The final chapter by Ian Baird details a twenty-year saga of conflicts between one upland minority group, the Heuny, and Lao state officials anxious to use their homeland for hydropower projects and the associated mining of bauxite. Baird follows the struggles of this group of almost 7,000 persons who were forcibly resettled in the 1990s when a hydropower project was built. Many individuals left the resettlement zone and returned to ancestral homelands, citing a lack of agricultural land in the new area or a wish to recognize spiritual ties to old sacred sites. In this chapter, the relationship between the Heuny's conflicts and legacies of war is not clearly defined. Baird suggests that the community's involvement with American special forces units may have played into the Lao government's lack of concern with the destruction of their homes and home territory.

Scott ended his study of upland Southeast Asia in 1945, because he believed that the model for his argument ceased to exist; this collection of essays features the fine work of nine scholars who have ventured past the "distance-demolishing" technologies of the mid-twentieth century to find new "frictions of terrain" in select sites. Each essay draws on a slightly different mix of theoretical approach and subject, but all more or less show how new forms of social or political friction persist despite the trauma of war or post-war social upheaval. In some cases, new frictions reveal the persistence of older tensions, especially between upland minority groups and lowland elites and their allies. *Interactions with a Violent Past* is both a scholar's and a teacher's book. It offers students of upland Southeast Asia a variety of models and theoretical tools that open up new possibilities, new archives even, for more research. It's especially useful for teachers in two ways. One, each chapter stands alone very well as a case study. Two, most chapters feature concise, well-annotated summaries of key historical events such

as the Lao resistance at Viengxay or the extent of American bombing in across Indochina. Few edited volumes manage to seamlessly stitch contributor chapters into a coherent super-narrative, and this is no exception; however, these contributors bridge multiple languages, archives and fragmented geographies to shed light on a little-studied, deeply traumatized part of the world. Engaging absences in the literature and the diversity of perspectives and experiences on the ground certainly takes precedence, and *Interactions with a Violent Past* is exemplary in this respect.