

University at Albany, State University of New York

Scholars Archive

History Faculty Scholarship

History

Winter 2015

Interactions with a Violent Past: Reading Post Conflict Landscapes in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam

Michitake Aso

University at Albany, State University of New York, maso@albany.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/history_fac_scholar



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Aso, Michitake, "Interactions with a Violent Past: Reading Post Conflict Landscapes in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam" (2015). *History Faculty Scholarship*. 27.

https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/history_fac_scholar/27

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.

VATTHANA PHOLSENA AND OLIVER TAPPE

Interactions with a Violent Past: Reading Post Conflict Landscapes
in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam

Singapore: NUS Press in association with IRASEC, 2013. Xii + 300 Pp.
\$32.00 (Paper)

Interactions with a Violent Past, edited by Vatthana Pholsena and Oliver Tappe, is an impressive collection of essays that contributes much needed social histories of the legacies of the “Vietnam War,” called the “American War” in Vietnam. While there is an extensive literature on the politics, diplomatic relations, and military battles of this war, “less is known...about the impacts of warfare violence upon local societies and populations... which are being felt to this very day.” (1) Following earlier literature on the Pacific Wars (1931-1945), *Interactions* suggests that the Vietnam War is best understood as a collection of separate, yet linked, conflicts involving diverse actors including lowland farmers, highlanders, and “Agent Orange victims.” In order to better understand the experience of these actors, *Interactions* examines disparate objects, from the more familiar, such as dioxin and unexploded ordnance (UXO), to the lesser known, such as fabrics and caves. As such, *Interactions* will prove useful for undergraduate courses, especially those dealing with the Vietnam War and memory, and graduate courses on modern Southeast Asia and its landscapes.

At the moral and intellectual heart of the book lie two questions articulated by Christina Schwenkel: “How does a landscape ‘heal’? Can wounded landscapes fully recover from the destructive forces of a violent war?” (153). Together, the essays in *Interactions* present a nuanced, ambiguous response, both cautious and hopeful, showing how landscapes, and the people

inhabiting them, can heal in certain situations, while remain wounded and ruined in others. As such, this book highlights the agency involved in resolving memories and creating histories of place. Readers of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* will appreciate the coverage of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, and this book's broad disciplinary base, including geography, anthropology, and history. *Interactions* also opens up a conversation between academics and activists, which highlights the productive tensions existing between these overlapping but distinct communities.

In the first two chapters, Sina Emde and Tappe offer novel readings of familiar landscapes and show how personal memories intertwine with state-sanctioned memorial practices, simultaneously undercutting and reinforcing each other. In Cambodia, Emde views "the security prison S-21, and the related killing fields of Choeung Ek as polyphonic memoryscapes, that is, chronotopic spaces that form and are formed by different practices and forms of remembering and making meaning of the past by different, sometimes very divergent actors" (20). In Laos, Tappe argues that "Viengxay is now a spatial historical document and a potential economic resource where the interests of the Lao government and the international development community intersect" (48). In this way, Emde and Tappe's chapters suggest that the fashioning of ever-denser networks of association materializes memories in particular places. Both of the sites that Emde and Tappe study are intimately connected with violence, death, and socialist experiments. In Cambodia, socialism stands discredited, drowned in the blood and buried by the bones of those killed by the Khmer Rouge, while in Laos, socialism still strikes a heroic pose, at least among those in power.

In chapter 3, Markus Schlecker examines how a Democratic Republic of Vietnam state project, that of commemorating the war dead, has been co-opted by some in the Thanh Hà commune. In his analysis, Schlecker translates between notions of perdurability and Vietnamese concepts connecting the living to each other and to the dead (82-83). Schlecker thinks through materiality by juxtaposing a recently unearthed mysterious stone, which some residents view as haunted, with newly produced *bia*, or commemorative stelae, dedicated to war-martyrs and used to reinforce *dòng họ*, or ancestral kin groups. As war-martyrs pass away, however, fewer state resources flow to Thanh Hà, part of "a more general reorientation of the Party

State away from a rewarding, ideological, state to a post-ideological welfare provider” (87).

Chapters 4 and 5 tackle the issues surrounding unexploded ordnance directly. As these chapters show, UXO have multiple ramifications across moral, legal, and political domains. In her chapter, Elaine Russell takes an activist stance and presents a strong moral case for more vigorous UXO removal in Laos. She points out that despite spending an average of \$2.7 million *per day* on bombing efforts between 1964 and 1973, the US government (through the USAID Leahy War Victims Fund and Weapons Removal and Abatement Program) has contributed only about \$3.2 million *annually* to demining efforts between 1996 and 2012 (124-125, my emphasis). In addition to the number of people killed (already fifty thousand since 1964), UXO create a psychological burden and contaminate the landscape (97, 129). In chapter 5, Schwenkel develops a theoretically sophisticated analysis of the political economy of risk created by UXO in Quảng Trị, Vietnam. Her examination of risk cultures differentiates between professional deminers, who aim for zero risk, and the “hobby” (i.e. not foreign-trained) scrap metal collectors who live with substantially higher risk. Schwenkel shows that despite stigma arising from the pollution of risk, hobby collectors have contributed to shaping postwar landscapes.

Chapter 6 by Pholsena turns to a road, specifically Route 9 in southern Laos, as an organizing device for memories. Rather than *lieu de mémoire*, or “sites of memory,” Pholsena views roads as *milieux de mémoire*, or “environments of memory,” pointing to their more diffuse quality. She analyzes silence and speech, memory and forgetting associated with Route 9 by juxtaposing official memory housed in (long-delayed) museums with non-state ways of remembering. Through her fieldwork, she realizes that the silence she noted surrounding reeducation camps came about less due to taboo than because of the familiar, and non-threatening, character of the topic (180). Susan Hammond’s chapter on Agent Orange provides an excellent overview of the legacies of the herbicide sprayings that happened during the American War. She traces the evolving understandings of how dioxin, a chemical generated during the manufacture of herbicides, continues to affect landscapes and bodies. For those exposed to dioxin during the war,

their and their descendants' bodies serve, Hammond suggests, as the *lieu de mémoire* of past violence and injustice (210).

The last two chapters examine highlander communities in Cambodia and Laos, respectively. Krisna Uk's fascinating chapter on postwar social and cultural transformations in Jorai and Tampuon villages examines "trench art," or items related to war, as "alternative vessels of memory" (216-17). Uk shows how the ways in which craftsmen incorporate war motifs into their work are influenced by a combination of their own aesthetic dispositions, individual and collective memories of warfare, and the rewards promised by catering to a tourist market. For Uk, sculptures, funeral huts, and woven fabrics all serve as *lieu de mémoire*. Finally, Ian Baird's chapter explores the adaptive strategies of the Heuny (or Nya Heun) after their displacement by the Houay Ho Dam in Champasak Province, Laos. Baird introduces the concepts of attempted "domicide" and "partial displacement" in order to examine forced migration due to the violence of economic projects infused with wartime legacies. Baird argues that a sense of displacement cannot be reduced to material conditions, but always involves the sacredness of home associate with a particular landscape. As Pholsena shows for Route 9, the Heuny's "home" landscapes, which remain "relatively close," can perhaps be viewed as a *milieux de mémoire* (241-245).

As with any pioneering study, *Interactions* raises more questions than it answers. In particular, a reader might want a more extensive treatment of the non-human and ecological legacies of the war. In a related way, the rich findings of this book could be further highlighted by a longer discussion of the literature on disasters. Finally, *Interactions* leaves a range of landscapes calling for further attention.

Mitch Aso, State University of Albany-SUNY