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Theresa de Langis
American University of Phnom Penh

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Book Review: *Landscape, Memory and Post-Violence in Cambodia*

Theresa de Langis

American University of Phnom Penh

Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Landscape, Memory and Post-Violence in Cambodia

James A. Tyner

London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017

223 Pages; Price: GBP 80 Hardback

Reviewed by Theresa de Langis,
American University of Phnom Penh

Is violent conflict ever fully “post”? *Landscape, Memory, and Post-Violence in Cambodia* probes the memorialization of mass atrocity, revealing the limits of official remembrance of the Khmer Rouge atrocity in contradistinction to how this tragic past remains unreconciled within the everyday lives and routine landscapes of the present. Putting forward a provocative theory of “post-violence” to signify the residual trauma of violation, “violence” cannot simply be said to be part of the past but rather remains ever present in its material remains. As such, Cambodia’s conflict history has left behind a landscape of ruination, hidden in plain sight in the remnants of Khmer Rouge infrastructure programs (dams, reservoirs), its genocidal security apparatus (prisons housed in pagodas, schools, hospitals), and in the consequences of both (hundreds of mass graves and killing fields), whose material afterlife serves as a constant reminder to survivors. These “living sites”, unmarked and unremarked, are threatened, the book contends, by the selective and politicized official memorialization of Cambodia’s violent heritage, which serves to “negate the lived experiences of millions of Cambodians” and, as such, works against ongoing efforts to bring about social justice and reconciliation.

Chapter 1 clearly presents the objectives of the book as part of a broader engagement with war, violence and critical heritage studies, and establishes a theoretical framework influenced by Marianne Hirsch’s¹ work on post-memory and, even more so, by cultural anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler’s² concept of ruination as imperial debris and aftershock. The chapter sets the backdrop for understanding the cases to follow within a context of the politically fraught project of official remembrance. Memory of the atrocity in Cambodia is delineated by Prime Minister Hun Sen’s infamous 1998 declaration to “dig a hole and bury the past,” a political calculation intended to entice Khmer Rouge insurgents to put down their guns and end the civil war. The ploy worked, but the scars remain.

Thoroughly grounded in historical detail, the book as a whole is notable for its diversity of sources, including Cambodia’s ruins, survivor testimonies and materials from the proceedings of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (the Khmer Rouge tribunal/ECCC). Such an approach adds fresh insight and nuance to otherwise familiar materials. Chapters 2 and 3, for example, provide new detail to the torture center converted into Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and the killing field memorialized as Choeng Ek Genocide Center. Judy Ledgerwood’s³ thesis on the political production of memory at both locations to rationalize the Vietnamese invasion and occupation is extended with legal, expert and witness testimony memorialized as part of the ECCC’s trial, conviction and life sentence for Kaing Guek Eav (alias Duch), the notorious Khmer Rouge director of both sites. While Tuol Sleng and Choeng EK have been officially commemorated, the chapters argue, it is not so much to remember and honor those who died there, but more so to lay blame at the feet of a handful of high-ranking cadres who would later be brought to trial.

¹ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

² Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

³ Judy Ledgerwood, “The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative,” *Museum Anthropology* 21, (1997), 82-98.

Chapter 4 moves away from these, perhaps, more typical examples of memorialization and into the rural countryside and the site of the remnants of Khmer Rouge infrastructure development—myriad dams and dikes, canals and reservoirs. Often neglected by memory and memorialization scholars, these sites are read in the chapter as standing both as material objects of a despotic regime and atrocity in the past, as well as landscapes of living heritage in the present. Here, sites like Kraing Ta Chan detention center have been adopted by local non-governmental organizations in an effort to promote awareness, public education and reconciliation. Yet, these collective and local memory sites too often emphasize the day-to-day violence of the average Cambodian, Tyner argues, and offer little explanation for understanding the larger context and root causes of the violence. Hundreds, if not thousands, of such material structures remain visible throughout Cambodia, often built literally on top of the bodies that succumbed to Khmer Rouge ruthlessness, and yet remain unremarked and unpreserved. Bereft of textual information, no understanding of the site is possible beyond that of personal survivor memories, faded and transitory.

A haunting example is that of the Trapeang Thma dam and reservoir, one of the Khmer Rouge's most ambitious infrastructure projects, constructed over the bodies of forced laborers who died from exhaustion and hunger. Today, this site of past brutality is a vital water supply for communities and a protection area for endangered species. Such sites vex the tendency to suppress seeing "anything remotely positive or beneficial resulting from 'Pol Pot' times." They also mark the possible oblivion of the atrocity's trace. As the chapter points out, foreign tourists from the urban centers, who flock to the area to rent boats for a day of natural respite, may see the site as an oasis, untouched by the painful suffering commemorated at Tuol Sleng and Cheoung Ek, unaware they are floating upon a watery mass grave. An unmarked atrocity ruin, hidden in plain sight, perhaps should be marked; perhaps not. The chapter does not come down on either side, but exhorts, at the very least, as scholars and travelers, it is our responsibility to somehow know the existence of this haunting double reality.

The book ends by examining the larger geopolitical context of the Cambodian genocide. Chapter 5 studies the geographic wounds of the U.S. bombings in Cambodia during the Vietnam-American War in the early 1970s. This attention to the wider framework of the atrocity is welcomed, as transitional justice discourse is dominated by the temporal jurisdiction of the ECCC (that is, crimes committed between April 15, 1975 and January 7, 1979). Cambodia is a terrain cluttered with landmines, cluster bombs, and other remnants of war that continue "to inflict belated maimings" and to pose a deadly risk that is very much part of the past-present violence of Cambodia. Chapter 6 investigates the absence in contemporary memorial landscapes of Cold War geopolitical complicity. Using new primary sources, the chapter argues that the case of if and how Cambodia's post-violence was to be remembered was deeply embedded in domestic politics, far removed from the control of the Cambodian population or concerns for local-level reconciliation.

The volume ends somewhat abruptly after Chapter 6 and could have benefited from a final chapter tying the different cases together and providing a final assessment of ways forward for efforts around social justice and reconciliation in Cambodia, especially in terms of how atrocity is memorialized. Perhaps the thesis may be too constrictive, positioning official memorials and what Tyner calls living heritage ruins as mutually exclusive, when they might be better described as in conversation. If the former is static and the latter fluid, the quandary the book surfaces is that such fluidity can transform quite easily into the oblivious beauty of the Cambodian countryside, accelerated as survivors with personal recollections pass away. Yet, in a predominantly Buddhist country such as Cambodia, where the transitory is the very nature of existence, such oblivion may not be problematic but rather pre-requisite to letting go of past lives to be reborn into the new.

A professor of geography at Kent State University and author of dozens of books, Tyner is no stranger to Cambodia's genocide, from his *The Killing of Cambodia: Geography, Genocide and the Unmaking of Space*⁴ to his recent work discussed in this review. This volume will be of interest to students and scholars in heritage studies, critical geography, memory studies, and dark tourism, and its innovative theorization of post-violence has the potential to inform genocide scholarship

⁴ James A. Tyner, *The Killing of Cambodia: Geography, Genocide and the Unmaking of Space* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008).

in other scenarios. It explores how a legacy of genocide can become part of the cultural heritage of a national identity marked with a violent past and, simultaneously, how this heritage is produced and constructed, not in official reckonings, but 'from below,' in the mundane landscape daily traversed. As such, *Landscape, Memory, and Post-Violence in Cambodia* makes an important contribution to contemporary efforts to establish a "truthful" historiography of past events as a basis for promoting a more peaceful future for Cambodia.