

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Introduction to Y-Dang's Refugee Lifeworlds: The Afterlife of the Cold War in Cambodia

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5vw8x7d0>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 14(2)

Authors

Troeung, Y-Dang

Patterson, Christopher B.

Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.5070/T814262474

Copyright Information

Copyright 2023 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

# Introduction to Y-Dang's *Refugee Lifeworlds: The Afterlife of the Cold War in Cambodia* Excerpt

---

CHRISTOPHER B. PATTERSON  
(husband)

I write this within the first month after Dr. Y-Dang Troeung's passing, when the story of her life has remained at the center of our thoughts and memories. Her book, *Refugee Lifeworlds: The Afterlife of the Cold War in Cambodia*, contains these stories, and allows them to unfold upon her readings of texts, and the histories of Cambodia. Stories of herself and her family's journey, from the Cambodian genocide, to living in a refugee camp, to arrival in Canada, and to refugee personhood, weave with arguments that place Cambodian history within the center of Cold War history. This brief Introduction to her book's second chapter will continue this work of enfolding, weaving, and mourning.

Born in Khao-I-Dang refugee camp, which became her namesake, Y-Dang arrived with her family in Goderich, Canada, in December 1980, when they were accepted as the putative "last refugees" of Canada's private refugee sponsorship program. Y-Dang was not yet a year old, but she could still be used by the Canadian State to hold a Canadian flag and pose for photo-ops with the then prime minister, Pierre Trudeau. Y-Dang remained in Canada until receiving her PhD from McMaster University in 2011, and though she was awarded a postdoctoral research position at USC (working under Viet Thanh Nguyen), she never actually moved to California, but instead left her postdoc early to accept a tenure-track job in Hong Kong, a city she had dreamed of living in since she was a teenager and first saw the films of Wong Kar Wai and listened to the music of Faye Wong.

During her six years in Hong Kong, Y-Dang remained a constant presence in Cambodia, especially Phnom Penh. The first time we went to Cambodia together, in 2014, we sat in the courtroom of The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) tribunal, where we heard the historic verdicts of Nuon Chea, second-in-command to Pol Pot, and Khieu Samphan, Cambodia's head of state during the Khmer Rouge. Over the years, we made numerous research trips to the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-

Cam), Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, and Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center, where Y-Dang helped host events and organize an exhibit. Y-Dang eventually rented an apartment in the historic BKK1 neighborhood. During her time, she visited her cousins and extended family, brought students to Seim Reap, and connected with artists such as Kosal Khiev, Anida Yoeu Ali, and Rithy Panh.

*Refugee Lifeworlds* was written within Y-Dang's deep moments of discovery in Phnom Penh, when she experienced the passion and joy of being accepted as a researcher, writer, and diasporic daughter. The texts she considers in the book are transnational in the definitive sense, focusing on Global South filmmakers, on Canadian authors writing about Cambodia, and on Cambodian American deportees who can never return to the United States. Her sense of devotion to the transnational, it must be said, was never in any mere comparative mode, where the genocide of Cambodia would be juxtaposed to the Holocaust or other major world tragedies. For Y-Dang, studies of Cambodian history never needed to be justified by comparing it to the West, nor did Cambodia's case of war and massacre need to be used as an example of what others should not do. Cambodia and its peoples would not be simplified to a warning sign or a failed experiment.

The afterlife of Cambodian histories had enough content to fill a library, and Y-Dang was resistant to the idea that transnational critique rested on a colonial politics of comparison, of always bringing the argument back to give value to the West. For Y-Dang, transnational critique rested in the deep and complex relations of Cambodia's Cold War history: the unfathomable amount of American bombs secretly dropped on Cambodia despite its neutrality during the Vietnam War; the rise of the Khmer Rouge in response to the bombings but influenced by French intellectuals as well as Maoist agricultural policies; the Cold War fraternities that continue to cast Cambodians as cursed and self-inflicting victims, while justifying millions of dollars in Cold War-era debts.

Y-Dang's refusal to cast Cambodia as a lens for the West to see (and perhaps better) itself was not taken well by publishers. After being rejected from just about every major press, *Refugee Lifeworlds* was encouraged by an editor, and went successfully through two rounds of tough reviews, before it was halted at the Editorial Board level. Y-Dang briefly described the Board's response to me:

In their rationale, the Board believed my work was not academic enough, that its subjects of Cambodia's civil war, US bombings, Khmer Rouge takeover, work camps, genocide, and their aftermaths, were too minor for a scholarly book, unless these issues were ported to speak to histories and places closer to the West. But their most devastating comment was that I, as an author, could not claim to be an expert on the subject matter—that is, my own history.

In their anonymous letters justifying their decision not to publish Y-Dang's book, the Editorial Board claimed that the book had an "intellectual myopia," that it was currently inhabiting a "silo," and that the book "seemed to care more about art than life." Written

anonymously, the Board's responses starkly reveal two prevailing presumptions of what it means to do transnational American studies, which I have faced in my own work. The first, that "transnationalism" rests on a colonial if not deeply problematic method of comparison that, in the end, reserves its deepest insights for American audiences. Second, that transnational critique is something done by the West unto others, not something that comes from the Global South, its diasporas, or its refugees.

The Board's rejection of Y-Dang's book occurred in 2015. The psychological toll of this rejection, the processing of this defeat, delayed the book's publication by seven years. In the end, Y-Dang did not yield. *Refugee Lifeworlds* only became more "siloeed" in its focus on Cambodia, more committed to its arguments that life and art can emerge from death, more devoted to its communities in the Global South. In the end, *Refugee Lifeworlds* was written not for us, the academics of the Global North, but for the world.

*Refugee Lifeworlds* was published in August of 2022. Y-Dang died in November. Her words, her stories, her dedication, and her determination, live on.

# REFUGEE LIFEWORLDS

The Afterlife of the Cold War in Cambodia

Y-DANG TROEUNG



Copyright © 2022, Temple University Press. All rights reserved.

# REFUGEE LIFEWORLDS

---

*The Afterlife of the Cold War in Cambodia*

---



Y-DANG TROEUNG



TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
*Philadelphia • Rome • Tokyo*

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19122  
*tupress.temple.edu*

Copyright © 2022 by Temple University—Of The Commonwealth System  
of Higher Education  
All rights reserved  
Published 2022

The research and publication of this book was supported by the following: the UBC  
Scholarly Publication Fund, the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Research Wall Scholar  
Grant, the Hong Kong RGC Early Career Scheme Grant, and the Social Sciences and  
Humanities Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Troeung, Y-Dang, 1980– author.

Title: Refugee lifeworlds : the afterlife of the Cold War in Cambodia /  
Y-Dang Troeung.

Other titles: Asian American history and culture.

Description: Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 2022. | Series: Asian  
american history and culture | Includes bibliographical references and  
index. | Summary: “Utilizing the concept of aphasia, this book  
demonstrates how Cambodian refugee narratives resist state violence and  
take head-on hegemonic discourses across popular and scholarly spaces  
that prop up colonial, imperial, capitalist, heteropatriarchal, and  
ableist formations of the Cold War in Cambodia”— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022006677 (print) | LCCN 2022006678 (ebook) | ISBN  
9781439921760 (cloth) | ISBN 9781439921777 (paperback) | ISBN  
9781439921784 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Refugees—Cambodia—Social conditions. |  
Refugees—Cambodia—Psychology. | People with  
disabilities—Cambodia—Social conditions. | People with  
disabilities—Cambodia—Psychology. | Genocide—Cambodia—Psychological  
aspects. | Political atrocities—Cambodia—Psychological aspects. |  
Cambodia—History—Civil War, 1970–1975. | Cambodia—History—1975–1979.

Classification: LCC HV640.5.C35 T76 2022 (print) | LCC HV640.5.C35  
(ebook) | DDC 362.8709596—dc23/eng/20220608

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022006677>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022006678>

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the  
American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence  
of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992

Printed in the United States of America

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Contents

Preface: A Genealogy of the Cold War in Cambodia	ix
Acknowledgments	xxix
Introduction: On War, Disability, and Refugee Life	1
1 Cambodia's Cold War Episteme	46
2 Debility and the U.S. Bombing of Cambodia	71
3 Crippling the Kapok Tree and the Cambodian Genocide	107
4 Aphasia and the Nervous Condition of Refugee Asylum	135
Coda: Boneyards of the Cold War	165
Notes	173
Index	211



---

## Debility and the U.S. Bombing of Cambodia

In 1971, the Cambodian Civil War began to permeate every aspect of my mother and father's life in their hometown of Kampong Thom. They remember how the skies above the city were regularly filled with U.S. military drones and fighter jets. Every day, the drone planes circled above, scanning the terrain and quietly snapping aerial photographs. Meanwhile, the jets swooped down from the skies and made deafening sounds, leaving the city's residents in constant fear of impending bombs. Everyone knew these were U.S.-made planes, as it was common knowledge that the two armies at war—the Khmer Rouge guerillas and the Lon Nol army—did not have access to this kind of technology. One night, when the bombings got too close to the city, my mother and father packed up their two young children (my brothers) and took shelter overnight in a Buddhist pagoda, a site rumored to be safe from the U.S. bombs. When they returned to the city the next day, they found that their home had been taken over by the Lon Nol soldiers, who wanted to use the rooftop to launch rockets at the Khmer Rouge. The incoming shelling happened every morning, and, out on the streets, people would go from buying coffee and noodles in one instant to throwing their bodies down on the streets in the next. One morning, outside a café, a rocket hit a man standing just meters away from my father, who was also wounded by a piece of shrapnel from the blast. With the sound of the explosion ringing in his ears, my father stared in horror at the lifeless body of this man, his neighbor, on the street.

For years, the war continued to rage on, bringing daily scenes such as this one to the lives of Cambodian people, particularly those in the rural coun-

tryside. In 1973, my mother and brothers were evacuated by helicopter from Kampong Thom to Phnom Penh, a capital city beginning to expand with waves of refugees arriving from the countryside. At the last minute, my father was prevented from boarding the helicopter and had to watch in disbelief as his family lifted off without him. It took seven months until he, too, was able to evacuate on a cargo boat filled with hundreds of Cambodian people. The journey by boat along the Tonle Sap River was dangerous. To try to stop the refugees from fleeing to Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge hid in coconut trees along the river. When refugee cargo boats slowed down at a bend in the river, the guerrilla fighters took this opportunity to fire at the boats from the tree-tops. To this day, my father finds it difficult to talk about this period of time, often lapsing into a repetitive monologue about how many close encounters he had with death in those years of Lon Nol time, and then afterward, when the Khmer Rouge took over. It was only when I was in my twenties, when I began asking many questions about the past, that I learned that my family had lived through a brutal civil war and a U.S. bombing campaign that made them into refugees before the horror of the Cambodian Genocide had even begun.

I begin with this fragment to frame this chapter's discussion of debility in the afterlife of the U.S. bombing of Cambodia. Despite its vivid centrality within the collective psyche of Cambodian people, the U.S. bombing of Cambodia remains only faintly legible in the episteme of the Cold War knowledge formation that, as Lisa Yoneyama argues, continues to obscure the regional manifestations of the Cold War as they played out in places such as Cambodia.<sup>1</sup> Here, starting in 1970, the Cold War unfolded as a violent hot war, as the scenes from my mother and father's memories make viscerally clear. In the words of Australian journalist John Pilger, in 1979, "The official aim of the bombing was to wipe out a Viet Cong base in Cambodia—a base that existed only in the imagination of American generals. President Nixon's aim was to show the Vietnamese Communists just how tough he could be—a policy he once described as a madman's theory of war. The Cambodians who died were called 'collateral damage' and their burning villages, 'friendly fire.'"<sup>2</sup> Linked to the military calculation of "acceptable" levels of killing during wartime, the term "collateral damage" was first popularized during the Vietnam War era to describe the U.S. military's "unintentional" killing of Southeast Asian civilians.<sup>3</sup> Today, Jasbir Puar explains, the language of collateral damage continues to disarticulate "the effects of warfare from the perpetration of violence" through terms such as "unintended" or "accidental" killings while never calling into question the *justness* of the war in the first

place.<sup>4</sup> Also obscured is the collateral damage that continues to unfold for long after the initial violence—damage that manifests as what Puar describes as “deeply entrenched forms of belated disability caused by U.S. imperial occupations.”<sup>5</sup> To read the U.S. bombing of Cambodia as a structure of endemic debilitation is to move away from a trauma-based framework that individualizes the nature of wartime injury.

This shift from trauma to debility seeks to acknowledge, in Puar’s words, that “the production of most of the world’s disability happens through colonial violence, developmentalism, war, occupation, and the disparity of resources.”<sup>6</sup> For Cambodian people who have lived through war, genocide, and refugee displacement, many of whom continue to live in perpetual fear of being maimed and killed by unexploded ordnances, the “elsewhere” zone of endemic debilitation is already *here*: There is no clear before or after becoming disabled. Debility complicates the notion of the violent “accident” by emphasizing “the statistical likelihood by which certain populations are expected to yield themselves to bodily debilitation, deterioration, and outright harm.”<sup>7</sup> Puar focuses on the tactical debilitation of Palestinian inhabitants of Gaza and the West Bank, insisting on the carceral-ableist and settler-colonial structures of power that make and remake the disability of Palestinian people. Unsettling the disabled/nondisabled binary, debility is about “the slow wearing down of populations instead of the event of becoming disabled” and is witnessed, for example, in the Israeli state’s “shoot to maim but not to kill” policy in Palestine.<sup>8</sup> Debility also destabilizes assumptions about the disabled subject’s capacity to “voice” or “speak” their pain within a framework legible to a listening public.<sup>9</sup>

In this chapter, I examine Rithy Panh’s 2011 film *Shiiku, the Catch*, Viet Thanh Nguyen’s 2010 short story “The Americans,” and Masahiro Sugano and Kosal Khiev’s film *Cambodian Son* as works that explore the U.S. collateralization of Cambodian refugee life during the Cold War. In Panh’s film and Nguyen’s story, debility implicates not only the lifeworlds of refugees injured and maimed by war but also that of the Black U.S. soldier enlisted in the transpacific currents of militarized labor.<sup>10</sup> As Nikhil Pal Singh argues, undeclared wars such as the U.S. bombing of Cambodia have always been inextricably linked to the domestic “inner wars” on American soil.<sup>11</sup> In his 1970 foreword to the 1951 petition *We Charge Genocide*, American civil rights activist William Patterson wrote, “The wantonly murderous and predatory racist attacks on Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia . . . are inseparably related to the equally criminal murders of rebellious black youth in Chicago, Illinois, New Haven, Connecticut, Augusta, Georgia, and Jackson, Mississippi.”<sup>12</sup> For many of these young Black men caught in the impossible binary of “the

choice to kill or be killed,” military enlistment in the outer wars in Asia proved to be their only option to escape the racial violence of the inner war at home.<sup>13</sup> While Panh’s *Shiiku, the Catch* and Nguyen’s “The Americans” explore the channeling of surplus Black bodies into the military and to the “off the map” zones of undeclared wars in places such as Cambodia, the film *Cambodian Son* demonstrates how surplus refugee bodies are channeled into prison or deportation exile. Focusing on the story of Cambodian American spoken word poet Kosal Khiev, *Cambodian Son* explores the carceral disciplining of the refugee body, resettled and recaptured in the U.S. hyperghetto, prison system, and deportation land of exile. These works that constitute the Cambodian refugee archive limn a landscape of refugee physical and mental impairment that arises as a product of the carceral-ableist military-industrial complex. What emerges through a reading of these works are a reckoning with the enduring remains of war and an understanding of how those remains have been salvaged and remade among refugees and racialized subjects in war’s afterlife.

### Rithy Panh’s *Shiiku, the Catch*: Debility “Off the Map”

Rithy Panh’s film *Shiiku, the Catch* centers on a community of villagers living in the rural, Cambodian countryside as it is being ravaged by U.S. bombings in 1972.<sup>14</sup> The film’s story is adapted from Japanese author Kenzaburo Oe’s classic novella, *Shiiku (Prize Stock)*.<sup>15</sup> Oe’s novella is a fictional account of an unnamed Black American pilot whose fighter plane crashes into a small secluded Japanese village near the end of World War II. Oe’s story narrates the pilot’s capture by the village people, focusing on his interactions with a group of Japanese boys left in charge of guarding him. In intense, often uncomfortably graphic detail, Oe recounts the exoticization and violence the Black pilot is subjected to as well as the semblance of a growing kinship between the pilot and the Japanese boys. In the novella’s climax, the Black soldier captures one of the Japanese boys as a hostage, prompting the Japanese villagers to exact a brutal revenge. In her book *A Violent Peace*, Christine Hong argues that Oe’s *Shiiku*, published five years after the formal end of the U.S. occupation of Japan, serves as an “ironic meditation on the U.S. occupation and postwar democratization of Japan.”<sup>16</sup> Reading the novella in relation to discussions of “the black Pacific,” Hong asserts that the text illustrates “dramas in comparative subhumanity in which the operators of machineries of death and the inhabitants of the target have been unevenly placed into inexorable kill-or-be-killed motion against each other.”<sup>17</sup> Panh explains his reasoning for choosing to adapt Oe’s story as the following: “I thought there were some good paral-

lels with the original 1957 Kenzaburo Oe story and I thought we could set the story in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge rather than WWII Japan.”<sup>18</sup> Stressing the parallels between the history of U.S. imperialism in Japan and Cambodia, Panh aligns himself with an artistic genealogy of Asian authors and auteurs known for their antiwar, anti-imperial writing and filmmaking.

In Panh’s *Shiiku, the Catch*, the B-52 plane of a Black American bomber pilot, named Lieutenant Simon Jefferson Louis, crashes behind Khmer Rouge enemy lines in 1972. Captured by Cambodian villagers, Louis’s imprisonment becomes a part of the military training of a group of young Cambodian boys as they live amid the relentless U.S. aerial bombardments and the intensifying civil war between the Khmer Rouge regime and the Lon Nol army. A coming-of-age narrative about Cambodian childhoods silenced and curtailed by war and military recruitment, Panh’s *Shiiku, the Catch* rests specifically on the perspective of a tough orphan Cambodian boy named Pang, who must navigate the U.S. bombings and the military hierarchies of the Khmer Rouge. As the narrative unfolds, we see how Pang’s debilitation is linked to the regime’s gradual reformation of Pang’s personhood into a hardened militarized cadre. Disciplined into the language and codes of Communist military manhood, Pang is no longer allowed to be a carefree, wayward child.<sup>19</sup> Seated at the edge of a crater made by a U.S. bomb, Pang and his friends are instructed on how to sit and stand in formation, how to obey military hierarchy, and how to speak or not speak. As Achille Mbembe writes, necropower works by disaggregating local populations into “rebels, child soldiers, victims, or refugees, or civilians who are incapacitated through mutilation or simply massacred on the model of ancient sacrifices.”<sup>20</sup> In Cambodia, what we saw was a deep blurring of these categories, with children such as Pang inhabiting multiple categories all at once. Pang is a refugee and a victim of the U.S. bombs as well as a child soldier and a rebel. Incapacitated by multiple overlapping systems of necropower (both the U.S. empire and the Khmer Rouge), Pang’s deepening silence is conveyed through his increasing externalization of violence. The symbol of debility in the film is thus the rifle that comes into Pang’s possession. His new toy, the rifle, figures as Pang’s predicament in the film: He is given repeated opportunities to exercise violence while still being a child himself. He represents the generation of abandoned young children, uneducated and often orphaned, who were taken in and trained to see Angkar as their only family.<sup>21</sup> As Khatharya Um points out, “Whether on the side of the government or of the [Khmer Rouge], it was more often that individuals *found* themselves there rather than they *chose* to be there . . . the Khmer Rouge did build their organizational force from a small community of ‘true believers.’ Most Cambodians, however, simply ‘asked to stay alive.’”<sup>22</sup> In an

environment saturated with ideological indoctrination and an economic context of rural disenfranchisement, young Khmer Rouge recruits were often caught in a situation of survival by necessity.<sup>23</sup>

In the “vertical sovereignty” of necropolitical war, Achille Mbembe writes, “underground and airspace are transformed into conflict zones” and “occupation of the skies” is of critical importance.<sup>24</sup> We see this U.S. occupation of the skies in Panh’s film as the camera cuts back and forth between the imperial “view from above” and the sight lines of Cambodian refugee lives on the ground.<sup>25</sup> The film’s opening sequence strategically combines historical archival footage with dramatic voice reenactments to situate the viewer directly in the aerial perspective of the bomber pilot, who drops cluster bombs while commenting boastfully in English about the success of the mission.<sup>26</sup> From this vantage point, the U.S. pilot, in radio communication with his fleet, exclaims as the bombs explode, “That was an outstanding target! Alright, we bomb first of all and we can see the people running everywhere. Fantastic! We know we got them.”<sup>27</sup> The pilot’s casual commentary, as if he were leading a mission in a video game, combined with the scene’s upbeat musical score, conveys the indiscriminateness of the bombings and the imperial state’s presumed right to extraterritorial killing. Sighted as objects of the U.S. military’s “kill-chain” that names “the grim relation between pilots and the masses below,”<sup>28</sup> the Cambodian lives on the ground become meaningless and formless targets to be eliminated for sport. In the film, we see that the U.S. bombings have not targeted specific Vietnamese military sanctuaries as purported by the U.S. government but have turned Cambodian landscapes, dwellings, and communities into unspecific sites of collateral damage.

If *Shiiku, the Catch*’s opening bombing sequence introduces the imperial cartographies and rationalities that transformed Cambodia’s ground into expendable terrain, the rest of the film moves the viewer into the perspective of the lifeworlds on the receiving end of the U.S. bombs.<sup>29</sup> The routinization of necropolitical war is expressed in the film’s exploration of the deafening sonic impact of air war. As the bombings intensify, the idyllic sounds of the Cambodian countryside (cicadas and children’s laughter) are interrupted by the fragmenting sounds of war and chaos. In one scene, a village elder named Uncle Vorn sits polishing a rifle when he suddenly hears a shift in the distant airwaves. He cries out “it seems bombing us day by day is not enough now!”<sup>30</sup> Where previously the bombs arrived predictably by day, villagers now have to adjust to the anticipation of death or maiming at any moment. The scene gives sensory density to what James A. Tyner, writing about the U.S. bombing of Cambodia, has termed “everyday death,” where “the palpable fear of being maimed or killed becomes ‘routine’; and where the simple, seemingly trivial

task of washing a shirt or cooking dinner becomes infused with the prospect of being shot.”<sup>31</sup> In this environment, the villagers’ eyes and ears have become attuned to the threat of bombs, their senses telling them when to take shelter underground and when to brace themselves for impact. For instance, a young Cambodian boy named A’Siet warns the villagers that the sounds of the planes are getting “louder and louder” and that they need to run.<sup>32</sup> Soon all communication between the villagers is drowned out by the sound of war. As the sounds of distant explosions and rattling objects reverberate, we observe how the villagers have become habituated to what Ian Hill terms “sonic torture.”<sup>33</sup> As Hill writes, “All noise can produce headaches, nausea, impotence, hypertension, slowed digestion, reduced bodily functions, altered diction and intellectual capacities, as well as disorientation, anxiety, fear, and terror.”<sup>34</sup> Prolonged exposure to loud noise can produce hearing loss, interrupt rest and sleep patterns, and break down social communication. Sonic torture thus produces debilitation at the corporeal, psychological, and sensory levels. Sonic torture also produces a debilitating form of aphasia, termed as the “altered diction” of sensory disordering and psychological distress.

Near the end of this bombing sequence, the camera lingers on Pang as he wields a long bamboo stick (his only weapon) and glances up at the sky. Unlike the other villagers who have taken shelter underground, Pang stands alone on the ground and gazes up at an invisible enemy in the lit-up sky. Confronted by the utter intensity of the war, Pang is rendered speechless. Pang’s world—the Cambodia of the 1970s—is referred to in a later scene by the captured U.S. pilot as a location “off the map” of the world’s media radar and global consciousness.<sup>35</sup> Cambodia is also “off the map” of the U.S.’s officially declared territory of war, what Jasbir Puar calls an “elsewhere” zone of disavowed debilitation in the U.S. circuits of empire. As Puar writes, “Via this circuitry, disability—or, rather, debility and debilitation—is an exported product of imperial aggression. This exportation not only is disavowed but is done so through the belated arrival of such disability.”<sup>36</sup> In Cambodia, this belated debility continues to arrive in the form of unexploded ordnances leftover from the U.S. bombs. In *Shiiku, the Catch*, the escalating war and increasingly militarized landscape of the countryside inspire in the children a sense of both terror and wonder. Without any school to attend and few adults around to care for them, the boys are easily seduced by the lure of militarism. In one scene, a group of boys are shown cleaning up the wreckage of a B-52 bomber plane. They have been assigned this dangerous work by the adult Khmer Rouge cadres, heedless of a villager’s earlier observation that the plane is “full of bombs. It’ll go off!”<sup>37</sup> In an overhead shot, the camera pans across the ruins of the U.S. military aircraft that has begun to blend in with the



foliage. We look down at a row of nine Cambodian boys pretending to fly the bomber plane, simulating the sound of the aircraft while extending their arms as wings. The ruined aircraft has become their new favorite toy, and the cratered landscape, filled with the toxic detritus of U.S. militarism, has become their new playground.

This image of Cambodian children surviving among the toxic ruins of war, during the 1970s, highlights how in many “elsewhere” zones of the Global South, such as Cambodia then and now, the aftereffects of war such as unexploded ordnances and chemical exposure guarantee ongoing forms of belated and disavowed debility and toxicity. As Mel Y. Chen argues, narratives of toxicity in the Global South, including the toxic legacies of U.S. wars and interventions abroad, minimally register for Western publics located in the “seat of U.S. empire.”<sup>38</sup> It is important, Chen writes, to retain within our analyses “a fine sensitivity to the vastly different sites in which toxicity involves itself in very different lived experiences (or deaths).”<sup>39</sup> As Panh’s film demonstrates, the work of salvaging empire’s waste material becomes the primary form of labor available in a local economy that has had its agrarian base destroyed by B-52 bombings and civil war. For instance, we watch a scene where three of the Cambodian boys sit in a circle surrounded by an assortment of military waste material they have salvaged from the wreckage (see Fig. 2.1). As the boys scrutinize the various pieces of equipment from the plane, they wonder about each item’s specific function in waging war against them. Looking at a digital piece of equipment, one boy attempts to explain it to his friends, “It shows the number of bombs. When they drop a bomb, it burns down all our houses, and now there’s no more bombs. The circle is for zero.”<sup>40</sup> Orphaned from their parents who have been killed or conscripted into war, the Cambodian boys entertain themselves with the literal debris of empire in their hands. With their homes and schools transformed into ground zeros of bombing raids, these children have only each other to try to make sense of the violence of war and its never-ending nature. They are inhabitants of the “elsewhere” target points, always somewhat hazy and undefinable, in the U.S. imperial cartography.

In this emerging militia economy, the salvaged war material—what Angela Naimou calls “the physical debris of collapsed economies”<sup>41</sup>—performs multiple functions: to preoccupy and amuse the boys who have nothing else to play with, and to serve as tools of recruitment used by the senior Khmer Rouge cadres to “educate” the children about the terror being wrought on their land by foreign Western powers. One of the most important interventions Panh’s film makes in the narration of the Cold War in Cambodia is the depiction of how the Khmer Rouge regime (before becoming the genocidal



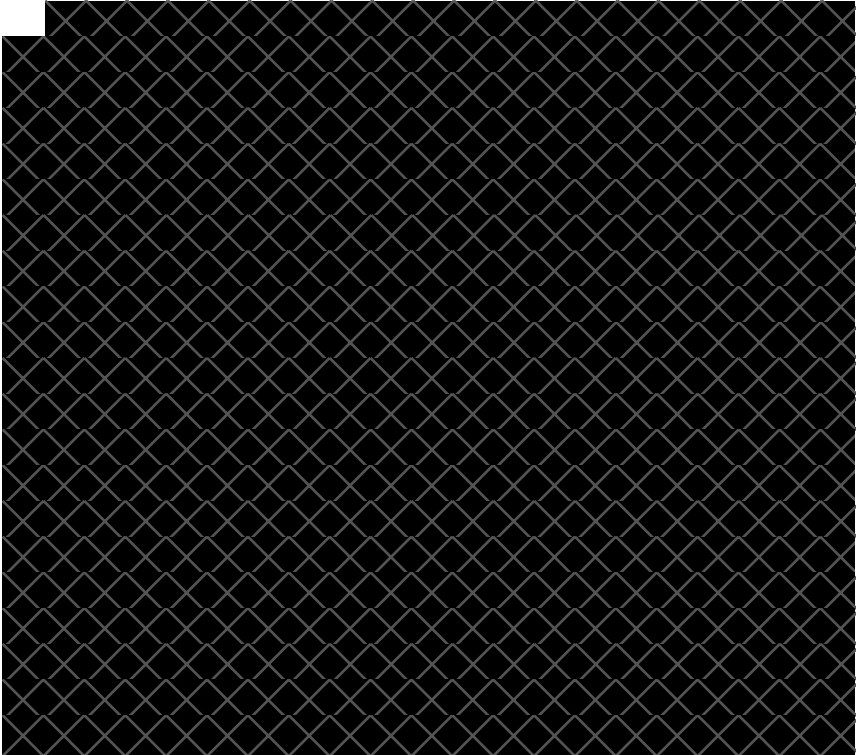


**Figure 2.1** Village boys play with salvaged war material while discussing the U.S. bombs that drop at night. (From *Shiiku, the Catch*, directed by Rithy Panh, 2011.)

regime that they would become during Democratic Kampuchea) preyed on the ruination caused by the U.S. war machine to fuel the expansion of its militia insurgency. As Taylor Owen and Ben Kiernan explain in their essay “Bombs over Cambodia,” “Civilian casualties in Cambodia drove an enraged populace into the arms of an insurgency that had enjoyed relatively little support until the bombing began, setting in motion the expansion of the Vietnam War deeper into Cambodia, a coup d’état in 1970, the rapid rise of the Khmer Rouge, and ultimately the Cambodian Genocide.”<sup>42</sup> The rise of such insurgencies is not unique to the history of Cambodia. As Achille Mbembe writes, in necropolitical zones, “war is no longer waged between the armies of two sovereign states but between armed groups that act behind the mask of the state against armed groups that have no state but control very distinct territories, with both sides having as their main targets civilian populations that are unarmed or organized into militias.”<sup>43</sup> We see this played out in *Shiiku, the Catch* as Cambodian children become pawns of recruitment. Immersed in an atmosphere of militarism and traumatized by years of U.S. airstrikes, the Cambodian boys in the film become particularly vulnerable to recruitment by the Khmer Rouge regime that promises them both safety from and retribution against the Western imperialists.

Panh’s film explores the relationship between debility and salvage work—the labor of repurposing waste material—perhaps most poignantly in a scene where Cambodian children and the Black soldier are depicted literally speaking through an object of military salvage—the tin can radio. Developed in 1962

by U.S. designer Victor Papanek, the tin can radio emerged out of the U.S. Army's need for help with "designing a device that could deliver a radio signal to people living in remote parts of the world: villages which were primarily illiterate, unaware of the fact that they lived in a nation-state, and had no electricity, money for batteries, or access to broadcast news."<sup>44</sup> The solution came when Papanek discovered that "the tin can was able to act as a one-transistor radio, and it was non-directional, which meant it could only pick up one radio signal."<sup>45</sup> Like in the Vietcong-controlled villages along what was known as the "Ho Chi Minh Trail," villagers on the Cambodian side of the trail made homemade weapons out of salvaged material: "Materials ranged from scavenged tin can[s] to discarded wire, but the most important ingredients were provided by the enemy. In a year, dud American bombs could leave more than 20,000 tons of explosives scattered around the Vietnamese countryside. After air-raids, volunteers retrieved the duds and the dangerous business of creating new weapons began."<sup>46</sup> In *Shiiku, the Catch*, the salvaged tin radio represents not only the Cambodian redeployment of U.S. imperial design and debris as a tactic of local survival and resistance but also a means of cutting across the Cold War and racial divides between the Cambodian refugees and the Black American soldier.



76. Robert McRuer, *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 22.
77. Liat Ben-Moshe, *Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 23–24.

## CHAPTER 2

1. Lisa Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), viii.
2. See *Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia*, directed by David Munro and written by John Pilger (London: Associated Television, 1979), accessed May 31, 2018, available at <http://johnpilger.com/videos/year-zero-the-silent-death-of-cambodia>.
3. For more on collateral damage, see Eric Tang, “Collateral Damage: Southeast Asian Poverty in the United States,” *Social Text* 62, vol. 18, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 59–79.
4. Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 128.
5. Puar, *Right to Maim*, 90.
6. *Ibid.*, xix.
7. *Ibid.*, 73.
8. *Ibid.*, xiii–xiv.
9. *Ibid.*, 27.
10. For more on the work of soldiering in U.S. wars in the transpacific, see Simeon Man, *Soldiering through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).
11. Nikhil Pal Singh, *Race and America’s Long War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 8–9.
12. William Patterson, *We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief from a Crime of the United States Government against the Negro People* (New York: Civil Rights Congress, 1951), 8.
13. Man, *Soldiering through Empire*, 2.
14. *Shiiku, the Catch*, directed by Rithy Panh (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Arte, 2011), DVD, was shot entirely with a Cambodian team, with the exception of Cyril Guei (the U.S. pilot in the film), who is a French actor of Ivorian descent. Most of the dialogue is spoken in Khmer and translated on the screen with English subtitles. When it was released in 2011, the film screened at major international film festivals such as the Toronto International Film Festival, the Hong Kong International Film Festival, and the Twenty-Fourth Tokyo International Film Festival, where it was nominated for Best Asian–Middle Eastern Film Award.
15. Kenzaburo Oe’s *Shiiku* is also the source text of a 1961 film titled *The Catch*, directed by Japanese auteur Nagisa Ōshima, who, like Oe, is known for the antiwar themes that mark his work.
16. Christine Hong, *A Violent Peace: Race, U.S. Militarism, and Cultures of Democratization in Cold War Asia and the Pacific* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 59.
17. Christine Hong, *Violent Peace*, 59.
18. Rithy Panh, quoted in James Dingle, “A Completely Cambodian Production—Interview with Rithy Panh,” *The Advisor*, no. 4, December 26, 2011, accessed March

27, 2022, available at [http://www.expat-advisory.com/articles/southeast-asia/cambodia/completely-cambodian-production-interview-rithy-panh?quicktabs\\_1=2](http://www.expat-advisory.com/articles/southeast-asia/cambodia/completely-cambodian-production-interview-rithy-panh?quicktabs_1=2).

19. For a history of female Khmer Rouge cadres, see Brent Crane, “Female Cadres of the Khmer Rouge,” *Phnom Penh Post*, August 1, 2015, accessed March 27, 2022, available at <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-weekend/female-cadres-khmer-rouge?>

20. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 86.

21. For more on the Khmer Rouge’s recruitment of children as child soldiers, see Chhay Sophal, *Mom and Angkar’s Kid* (self-pub., 2012).

22. Khatharya Um, *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodia Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 113.

23. In this way, Panh’s *Shiiku, the Catch* can be read in the context of contemporary discussions of reconciliation in Cambodia that have revisited the previously held rigid distinction between victims and perpetrators. As James A. Tyner has said, in recent decades, there has been a growing “awareness of the brutal means by which children, especially, were recruited to serve the Khmer Rouge” (*Landscape, Memory, and Post-violence in Cambodia* [Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017], 185); for more on this topic, see also Meng-Try Ea and Sorya Sim, *Victims and Perpetrators? Testimony of Young Khmer Rouge Comrades* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2001); Burcu Munyas, “Genocide in the Minds of Cambodian Youth: Transmitting (Hi)stories of Genocide to the Second and Third Generation in Cambodia,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 10, no. 3 (2008): 417; Khamboly Dy, “Genocide Education in Cambodia: Local Initiatives, Global Connections” (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 2015), 208; Cathy J. Schlund-Vials and Samuel Martinez, “Interrogating the Perpetrator: Violation, Culpability and Human Rights,” in *Interrogating the Perpetrator: Violation, Culpability, and Human Rights*, ed. Cathy Schlund-Vials and Samuel Martinez (London: Routledge, 2017): 1–6.

24. Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 81–82.

25. For more on the U.S. military’s “view from above,” see Caran Kaplan, *Aerial Aftermaths: Wartime from Above* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

26. The archival footage of the U.S. bombing of Cambodia was shot by U.S. Air Force servicemen and sourced from the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

27. *Shiiku, the Catch*, directed by Rithy Panh (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Arte, 2011).

28. Christine Hong, *Violent Peace*, 59.

29. For an insightful analysis of this aspect of the film, see Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, “Aerial Aftermaths and reckonings from Below: Reseeing Rithy Panh’s *Shiiku, the Catch*,” in *The Cinema of Rithy Panh: Everything Has a Soul* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 86–98.

30. Panh, *Shiiku, the Catch*.

31. Tyner, *Landscape, Memory, and Post-violence*, 162.

32. Panh, *Shiiku, the Catch*.

33. See Ian Hill, “Not Quite Bleeding from the Ears: Amplifying Sonic Torture,” *Western Journal of Communication* 76, no. 3 (2012): 218, who defines “sonic torture” as the use of “sound reproduction technologies to blast prisoners with a continuous noise at peak loudness in order to coerce cooperation.” While, according to this definition, sonic torture is not the same as the incidental sounds of explosions and reverberations

during an airstrike, Hill's arguments about the military's use of sonic torture in prisons can be extrapolated to the psychological damage caused by sound exposure in a bomb zone.

34. Hill, "Not Quite Bleeding," 218.

35. Panh, *Shiiku, the Catch*.

36. Puar, *Right to Maim*, 89.

37. Panh, *Shiiku, the Catch*.

38. Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 188.

39. M. Chen, *Animacies*, 192.

40. Panh, *Shiiku, the Catch*.

41. Angela Naimou, *Salvage Work: U.S. and Caribbean Literatures amid the Debris of Legal Personhood* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 8.

42. Taylor Owen and Ben Kiernan, "Bombs over Cambodia," *The Walrus*, October 12, 2006, accessed March 27, 2022, <https://thewalrus.ca/2006-10-history/>.

43. Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 87.

44. Alex Catanese, "Painting the Tin Can," *Medium*, January 18, 2016, accessed March 27, 2022, available at <https://medium.com/design-and/painting-the-tin-can-485964ddb44>.

45. Catanese, "Painting the Tin Can."

46. "Guerrilla Tactics: An Overview," *PBS*, accessed April 19, 2021, available at <https://www.pbs.org/battlefieldvietnam/guerrilla/>.

