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Zani, Leah. 2019. *Bomb Children: Life in the Former Battlefields of Laos*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 184 pp. Pb.: $24.95. ISBN: 9781478004226.

Book review by

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As described in *Bomb Children*, Laos is the most heavily bombed country in history relative to the size of its population. During the Secret War (1962–1975), the United States air-dropped more than two million tons of ordnance, of which approximately one-third did not explode. This military waste represents the central part of the Zanis' monograph that is not only an important contribution to the anthropology of violence but also insight into conducting fieldwork in hazardous circumstances. It offers some aspects on how to write about sensitive information in a way that the researcher still follows the anthropological tradition of interweaving ethnographic data with theory.

Hazardous fieldwork persuaded the author to use the thin description to respect interlocutors' choices of anonymity. In a sense, the thinness becomes "a form of ethnographic evidence" (p. 31) of the circumstances in the field. While reading the monograph, it is noticeable that the author builds the text by thoroughly describing the landscape and important happenings. The reader learns very little about individuals' lives and their stories but, maybe as a counterweight, a lot about Zanis' experiences. In contrast, when Zani writes about small events related to her interlocutors, she pays a great deal of attention to describing their gestures and body language. Overall, the focus of the book is to outline the military landscape and its impact on embodied experiences.

The author faced different difficulties to which the researcher can be exposed while studying violence. To address them in the book, she uses parallelism as a special methodological concept. She describes the parallels between the experiences of the fieldworker and of those who are studied. In fact, the whole book is based on an overview of parallel processes related to remains (massive military waste left over the Secret War) and revivals (renewal processes in post-war Laos), toward the analysis of the sociocultural aftereffects of war (what is the everyday life of people in the former war zones and how do they deal with the explosive remnants of war). Those picturesque parallels are constantly describing the two worlds that are coexisting side by side.

Every section of the book, including the *Introduction*, opens with the author's fieldpoem. In the first chapter Zani explains, why she uses parallels to represent different phenomena. Her concept of parallelism is rooted in the Laotian poetry with a specific literary style—poems are usually 'written as a set of two to four distinct columns' (p. 42) that can be read vertically or horizontally. Parallels are also present in the Laotian spoken language. They are a reflection of a repressive regime of the state, directed against the Laotians; the author describes how her interlocutors started to narrate in a different manner when they suspected that someone was watching them.

As an American researcher, she was often perceived as a spy; her movement through the country was always controlled and limited. She developed a sense of paranoia as the result of intense experience and ubiquitous control. Her fieldpoems become a kind of ethnographic data through which she expresses complexity, contradictions and sensitive information that cannot be addressed directly. They are her method in dealing with hazards in the field.

In what follows, the author deals with the concept of the "hauntology" of military waste in Laos. She examines the haunting of an industrial centre Sepon and presents a parallel: Sepon as a gold mine associated with revival, development, and economic opportunity, and Sepon as one of the most war-contaminated zones in the country—a ghost mine, "a place where one unearths ghosts or becomes a ghost oneself" (p. 34). Even though war is long over and the revival of the city is at the forefront, the material remnants of war persist. As the author describes, they can be found in the architecture and landscape —"dismantled bombs used as supports for stilt house" (p. 56) or bomb "craters used as trash pits" (p. 74). Recycled, reused bombs are reflecting a materialised haunting from wartime, and that is how remains and revivals are coexisting together.

The chapter *Blast Radius* begins with a vivid description of the author's confrontation with controlled bomb detonation. As she was standing at the margins of the blast radius,

her experience was parallel to an accidental or uncontrolled blast. She introduces the concept of apprehension relating to fear, anxiety and the way of perceiving through fright. Though sound is one of the central perceptions in apprehension, it is not an isolated phenomenon. It is accompanied by the realm of the unconscious, the unsounds, where "ambient affective states, tactile vibrations, organ resonances, or physical trauma" (p. 102) are taking place.

Zani thoroughly examines the boundaries of herself as an ethnographer. She can never reach the centre of the blast—if she did, she would be hurt or even die. The closest she can get is the margins of the blast radius, where she is not only the participant observer but also the "participant listener" (p. 128). She can witness the explosion from a safe distance. However, she is not entirely part of the "local ontologies" (p. 109), embodied affects and learnt apprehensions of explosions, acquired through the process of socialisation. In this local perception, the uncontrolled explosion is not an accident—when it happens, it is associated with war. In this way, the bomb becomes an indirect military act.

The monograph is a journey through the Zanis' four years of hazardous fieldwork—primarily among the bomb technicians of an explosives clearance operator—in the "culture of terror" (p. 136), where the political disappearances, authors' experiences with harassment by the police and everyday encounters with military waste are common and part of a bigger phenomenon of post-war remnants and revivals. Zani points to the problem of conducting the fieldwork in such circumstances and how to approach it with adjusted methods. In this sense, the fieldpoems and photographs she uses are eloquent ethnographic data, subtly placed in a text that is interlacement of theoretical considerations and personal sentience for military landscape and violence persistence in Laos.