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Darcie Deangelo

Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia,
Volume 3, Number 2, October 2019, pp. 45-64 (Article)

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2019.0024>



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Negative Space:

Imaginaries of Violence in Cambodia

DARCIE DEANGELO

Abstract

This paper discusses negative space as a methodology as pertaining to imaginaries of violence in Cambodia. Negative space references the use of images in the recounting of stories of this violence; however, due to the scarcity of photographic records from the era before the fall of the Khmer Rouge, these archives exist on the skins of former soldiers. This paper traces how a set of yantra tattoos provokes expressions of violence from the past and, potentially, in the future. The paper contextualizes these tattoos with histories of violence, an analytic philosophy of images and Buddhist memorialization of death. The tattoos render the human body as 'negative space', allowing for what seems to be secretive to be revealed as representations that capture uncertainties in imaginaries of violence.

Non-Existent Photographs, Finding Cambodia

"This is a photo that didn't exist," my Cambodian-American friend Chavi said as she thrust her phone at me, showing me a picture of a couple in a doorway. It was her father and her mother. Her mother was pale and sported a shiny black beehive haircut and a sleeveless brocade dress. "Look at her," my roommate said, "already pissed." Her father, beside his unsmiling new wife, stared out and over as if at a crowd, grinning through his chiselled cheekbones.

[Southeast of Now
Vol. 3 No. 2 (October 2019), pp.45–64]

This photograph “didn’t exist” because Chavi’s mother had told her that she had no photographs from her life in Cambodia. Rather than telling her stories or showing her photographs from her past, Chavi’s mother used the absence of images to portray her life in the village and under the Khmer Rouge. When Chavi asked her mother questions about these experiences, she received silences or stories that seemed to have nothing to do with the questions. Frustrated with this indirect communication, Chavi travelled to figure out things first-hand in Cambodia. Her journey paralleled mine, as I had also left North America to conduct 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork. Instead of looking for my roots, I conducted anthropological fieldwork among veterans, soldiers and deminers. Although it was not my original research subject, over time people shared with me stories of violence that seemed secretive at first glance. Later, I came to understand this was their way of portraying stories of violence through images and silences.

I want to think with Chavi’s frustration and her mother’s absentmindedness (or deliberate evasion) about images. The photograph Chavi showed me reminds me of the photographs collected on the website Found Cambodia, a site dedicated to archived images from Cambodia and curated by the photo-journalist Charles Fox, whose aim was to “trace some of the sociocultural changes Cambodia has witnessed since 1979”. The year 1979 saw the end of the violent Khmer Rouge rule when the Khmer Rouge army was officially ousted from Phnom Penh by the Vietnamese. Until recently, the website divided Cambodian history into two parts: pre-1979 photographs are categorized as “Before”, and post-1979 photographs are categorized into roughly five-year intervals up till 2010.¹

While I contend that the distinction between before and after 1979 was not clearly demarcated for most Cambodians, as armies in villages continued to fight until the 1990s, Found Cambodia’s division is not just an arbitrary choice. When the violent communist nationalist party, the Khmer Rouge, took over the capital in 1975, families destroyed or hid photographs to keep them safe from destruction (Stock 2017). This means that photographs from before the Khmer Rouge regime are much rarer, despite the fact that photography would have been a commonly available technology for Cambodians, at least among the urban population. Thus the photographic archives from the “Before” period is sparse, as is photographic documentation of the Khmer Rouge itself.

Chavi’s photograph of her parents in the 1960s, like the archives in Found Cambodia, demonstrates a loss beyond its material rarity. The philosopher Cora Diamond describes a photograph as holding contradictory horrors,

because it confronts the viewer with the impermanence of life. Inspired by Ted Hughes' poem about a photograph of dead young miners, she explains: "[The photograph evokes] the experience of the mind's not being able to encompass something which it encounters [...] The impossibility of anyone's being more alive than these smiling men, nothing's being more dead" (Diamond 2006: 2). The photograph proclaims the death of the men through its capture of a fleeting moment, a moment that no longer exists. Photographs, in this reading, always show a paradoxical temporality: they are proof that nothing ever lasts and yet they are a permanence of representation.

"I specifically asked her if she had any photos from Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge. We were living in California at the time and I wanted to know about my homeland because I was moving there. I asked my father too. It's so annoying that they didn't tell me about this photo." Chavi thought that her mother kept this photograph from her because her parents were divorced and her mother did not want to discuss anything of their life together, but perhaps it also revealed a deeper loss from a time before the war. When Chavi found the photo in storage in their home in the United States and showed it to her mother, she just shrugged, "Oh, yeah, that one." But she continued, "Why do you ask so many questions? It is not good to ask so many questions." "It's like Cambodian people only tell you things when you don't ask them," Chavi said. "They always speak on the side."

Questions in Cambodia, Chavi generalized, are unanswerable. Indeed, "unanswerable" and similar adjectives as "unspeakable" (Meut 2012; Caswell 2004; Lim 2016), "inexpressible" (Thompson 2013) and "unsayable" (Ivarsson and Isager 2010) often show up in scholarship about Southeast Asia, especially when stories from interlocutors include violence. Questions can also be unaskable because it is "not good to ask". But this does not mean that people did not communicate about unspeakable things or violence, be it marital abuse or the horror of wars; they do so in an indirect way. Even Chavi admitted that her mother would sometimes tell her stories, but randomly and never when she asked.

Chavi used a photograph to communicate her mother's past and its status as a photo that both is and isn't. This dual existence-nonexistence captivated Chavi and me when we looked at the photograph, because it was simultaneously a representation of wealth and modernity—evident in her mother's French hairstyle and brocade dress—as well as grave personal and historical loss. The photo depicted her mother's past but also its absence. Within its borders was its portrayal of inherent loss (Diamond 2006) the absence of what was in the present. It was only after in-depth ethnographic research and attention to these absences that I became sensitized to them.

For Chavi, this photograph was the story of her parents, their wedding and village life before the Khmer Rouge. Her use of the photo mediated her feelings about her loss and frustration without her telling me directly how angry she was. As an image, Chavi's photo forced the viewer, me, to relate to it through her memories, feelings and sense of loss. A photo always shows something lost because it is a copy of a moment that can never repeat itself and yet is forever frozen (Berger 2011), but Chavi's photo, in particular, is all about a loss of normality.

While photographs of the pre-Khmer Rouge period are rare, I encountered other kinds of images from this time: tattoos. I will discuss how I came to understand the tattoos as a means to portray absences in a fashion similar to Chavi's photograph. I conceptualize this absence or the "horrific contradiction" (Diamond 2006: 2) inherent in images as a method of negative space. The tattoos rendered skin negative space. Skin became a space to portray imagined violence on bodies through tattoos, all of which were inked during this time.

Negative Space as Method

It is not unusual for farmers and deminers to find in fields bodies from the Vietnam War and the Khmer Rouge genocide and the aftermath of civil battles in the 1990s (Uk 2016). These bodies litter the land with spirits who had met with 'bad deaths'. Khmer Rouge soldiers haunt people in their dreams (Guillou 2012), and people consider forested lands dangerous because of the ghosts of Vietnam War soldiers (Uk 2016; Arensen 2012). The question of what to do with these unclaimed bodies has met with differing ideas about how to commemorate the genocide. Should the bodies be archived for evidence or should they be allowed a rebirth for their souls? To allow souls to be reborn, the bodies would need to be cremated or left alone to be buried by termites (Thompson 2013: 89–93), but that would also mean that the bodies could no longer serve as evidence of murders. To outsiders, cremation and neglect appear as an attempt to get rid of evidence, which seems akin to forgetting that the genocide ever happened, but Thompson (2013: 89) calls this 'forgetting' a typical Cambodian commemoration of the violence through absence.

Between 1975 and 1979, thousands of people were tortured at one particular prison, S-21, also known as Tuol Sleng. S-21 was a former high school in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh and was modified to procure and archive confessions of those who were suspected of espionage against the Khmer Rouge organization. Historians have described these confessions as

false and coerced (Chandler 1983 and 1991; Kiernan 2014). The S-21 prisoners were buried in unmarked graves 15 km away, at Choeung Ek. In the early 1990s, the question of what to do with the bodies arose.

During the 1980s, the S-21 bodies were commemorated through a Cambodian tradition: purposeful neglect. Purposeful neglect was a common spiritual practice, by which people ignored burial sites such that termite hills eventually emerged on top of the mass graves. To foreigners who came to witness the atrocities of genocide, the termite hills rendered the bodies invisible. For Cambodians, however, the termite hills are quite obvious objects of veneration (Thompson 2013: 89; Guillou 2017). In general, termite hills in Cambodia are thought of as sacred. Temples are allowed to fall into disrepair so that termites can build stacked mounds of dirt over them. At mass gravesites from the Khmer Rouge era, termites built on top of and with the remains of the dead. In so doing, they allowed the dead to have a new life as a sacred landmark equivalent to that of a Buddha statue.

At the S-21 killing fields, people gave these termite hills offerings as if they were giving to the newly dead. Others collected the bodies in the area to allow the termites to build even more hills over the dead. The hill portrayed a *lack*, a negative space. The mounds buried the bodies and revealed them through no other markers—an absence of bodies belying their very presence. Monks and other worshipers tended to these hills. Without reburial by termites, cremation or some other way to pass on, the bodies would tie their souls to earth, and they would be stuck as ghosts who have had bad deaths (Thompson 2013: 89).

This case study inspired my methodology of negative space and within it, what Thompson calls the need to understand silences and so-called ‘forgotten’ stories in Cambodia. This contrasts with how scholarship is normally done, as Veena Das points out in her essay about the victims of sexual violence in India: “The absence of any standing language of pain is perhaps symptomatic of the fact that I cannot separate my pain from my expression of it...” (Das 2007: 39)

The “absence of any standing language” occurs when pain is inextricable from its expression, such that the listener is trapped and unable to formulate an opinion of the speaker or story, or to mediate reality. To close down and define pain (and violence) by language separates pain from how it is experienced. It also makes it far easier to gloss over since it essentializes. Das describes a family situation where a woman was abducted during the Partition of India and Pakistan. The violence she underwent is never described explicitly, but it forms a cloud over her marriage. Das shows how the woman’s “community seemed to have offered protection by silence” (82),

as making known that the woman was a rape victim could lead to devastating consequences, such as being “spoiled” (81–3). If her experience had been described directly, not only would she relieve her past pain, but it would also result in more suffering. In her work, Das often mimics this silence by not explicitly describing narratives of violence and suffering.

In this case, Thompson (2013: 88) says that what non-Cambodian “tourists” considered invisible did not mean absence to Cambodians. She contrasts Khmer understandings about the Khmer Rouge genocide with Euro-American understandings of the Holocaust. For Thompson (2013: 100), indirect communication about the genocide, rather than direct memorialization of it, allows for an ethical consideration that both perpetrator and victim are human. It also allows for the unspeakability of such violence. Similarly, I found that ambiguity was key to communicating or representing the uncertain violence in Cambodia; consequently, I adopted such methods to explore what images, especially tattoos, conveyed for the deminers.

Rather than labelling this kind of communication as merely ‘indirect’, I offer the term ‘negative space’. In art, negative space is defined as the background that outlines the subject or positive space, which is the focal point. In other forms of art, negative space is a compositional tool that co-constructs an image. By using this term, I do not mean to reference a binary distinction between negative and positive space but rather, to blur the distinctions between that which is expressed directly and that which is portrayed through absence via media or via silence. For this I draw on Thompson’s deconstructionist approach to memorials of the Khmer Rouge genocide, but also on Diamond’s understanding of the photograph of the dead miners.

When you are used to looking for negative space, it transforms the ways you see positive space images. Similarly, the Cambodians I knew were attuned to this way of communicating, so that the negative space images were more obvious to them than they were to me. Moreover, negative space allows me to evoke nonlinear temporalities. With a film strip, the negative space of an image is what the image was before it is captured. The concealed and uncertain violence was often, like the landmines, remnants of a war still active in the present.

A Secret Image

On each of the former soldiers’ thighs appear two drawings of naked women positioned with legs splayed open and arms spread wide (see Figures 1 and 2). The bodies of the women are marked with pinpoints—a black dot for the

vaginal opening, navel, the mouth, and two dots for the eyes. Below the splayed legs are two types of weapons: landmines on the right thigh and bullets on the left thigh. The weapons have magic words written above them and seem to be entering or exiting the bodies.

These tattoos are normally hidden. They are secret spells, shown only to people in the know. They are not meant to be shared, perhaps because they might incite laughter in a beholder who views the bearer as foolish to believe in them, or because they only work when kept hidden. If you ask people whether they have such tattoos, they will often say “no” initially. Anthropologists in Southeast Asia have had trouble eliciting stories about spells or spirits, often finding that stories have been altered, ghosts replaced with thieves or magic spells omitted from testimonies of how to stay safe in minefields (Uk 2016: 30; Arensen 2017; Zani 2019).

The negative space of the images forming the soldier's tattoo is a battle wound, a shrapnel of a landmine embedded outside its lines. The negative space of these images is also the soldier's skin.

Human skin can be read as an archive. Tattoos tell stories, portraying histories, memorials and even spells that are passed on from generation to generation and revealed only through images. Survivors of war have scars that record injuries. Sometimes these records exhibit material remnants of war, such as shrapnel studding the skin. In Cambodia, I found that skin archived violence through both scars and ink. These injuries and tattoos



FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2

were reproduced in photographs and shared through social media. It was through my confrontation with these dermatic and photographic archives in the field that I found a methodological framework to better engage with the imagistic archive of violence, that is, the framework of negative space.

I found that images, for example soldiers' tattoos, provided literal negative space for people to portray violence. Vanna, a soldier I met during fieldwork, did not speak of his injuries but pointed to the shrapnel wound around his tattoo. The tattoo became a way for him to tell me about his suffering without talking directly about it. He told me about his actual wounds by showing me his tattoo, which was supposed to help him avoid potential wounds. These tattoos presented an imagistic record of wounds through negative space.

When I circulated the photographs among other deminers and soldiers, they became images that inspired people to share their fears and uncertainties. It was not only Vanna's wound that became negative space but his entire skin, covering a vulnerable and porous soldier. Vanna's tattoo, wound and skin began the archive for this paper, and his image accompanies me through photographic layers of negative space.

Yantra spells are a type of Brahmanic magic. They are sacred scripts and shapes or magical charms drawn by *kru khmer* (animist shamans) or Buddhist monks that grant powers or protection to the bespelled, be it a person, house or car (Cummings 2012: 48). These yantra spells can take the form of a drawing or a filigreed marker shape on a car ceiling or a painted single flag on the roof beams of a home. The drawings work as doors for the

spirits to enter either the tattooed person or the flag or ceiling. Politicians are said to have many yantra spells that bring them power. Politics and spirits are connected in Southeast Asia—political power can derive from protective spirits, and even spirits are subjected to a hierarchy of power, which starts from deminers at the bottom, to supervisors, the government, spirits, and, at the top, Buddha, who is what one deminer calls the “manager of all the spirits”.

The word yantra comes from the Sanskrit word *yan*, which means ‘to control’ or ‘to restrain’, and the suffix *-tra*, which means ‘to make use of’. These spells portray and harness unspeakable powers that can control people and spirits (Drouyer 2013: 29; Malamoud 2012: 145–6).

The negative space of the yantra is profoundly important. The cosmology of the tattoo depends on an understanding of the skin as porous and interconnected with its exterior through a series of lines or paths called *sorsai* (Eisenbruch 1992; Au 2011: 242). The ink keeps injury and weapons out of the body but also allows spirits in. The tattoo leaves some of the skin untattooed so that good things can enter (Cummings 2012: 24). This is why a soldier cannot tattoo his entire body. Thompson also points this out when she quotes the Documentation Centre for Cambodia’s description of its spiritual practice for archiving Khmer Rouge victims’ skulls. She underlines the institution’s comment that air can reach the skulls, “thus allowing the spirits to come and go as they wish” (2013: 96).

This porousness leaves Vanna open to harmful things such as malicious spirits and also war violence, as evident in his injuries. Any deminer could be victim to an explosive. As a veteran of the Khmer Rouge Army said, “People died all around me—there was never any escape because of all the ways in which they could shoot us.”

When my Norwegian friend Sondre and I visited Vanna at his home, he brought us upstairs to show us his shrine. It was decorated with blinking twinkle lights and a sparkly garland that framed a portrait of a man who looked like but was not Buddha. “This is Brahman, not Buddhist,” he told us. Vanna meant that the painting was not a portrait of the Buddha, but of a guru who practised spells that invoked animist spirits. “Brahman” referred to a more Hindu or traditional Khmer animist belief, while “Buddhist” referred to the reformed Theravada Buddhist movement that emphasized doctrinal texts rather than village traditions (Choulean 2006; Hansen 2007). Practised even among monks, these beliefs and traditions overlapped. Vanna’s hand spread out towards the fake lilies that led up to the portrait on built steps and we did not look towards the beds on the other side of the room. One

square of light fell from a glassless window onto the wooden floor beams. The only other light came from the twinkle lights on the altar.

“I told Darcie about your tattoos,” said Sondre. Sondre had been living in Battambang on and off for three years. Vanna had already shown Sondre his tattoos, but he showed them to me then, lifting his shorts to reveal crude outlines of a naked woman on each thigh. On the left, the tattoo protected him from landmines, but it was there that a mine once exploded. Pointing to the shrapnel scar, his only comment was that his leg was saved. The other was to protect him from bullets. Each naked woman had pinpoints to mark their nipples in circles on their chest and a single pinpoint on their vagina between spread legs. Going into or out of the vaginas were the respective weapons (Figure 2). We asked him who the women were and what they were doing, but he did not know how they worked. He did not seem to know how to answer our questions about what their cosmologies were. Instead, he responded with stories about the war. For example, he recounted how he had a fever for three days after the *kru khmer* had drawn the tattoos, in the midst of battles during the Khmer Rouge.

The disorienting effects of violence in Cambodia became visible to me when I attended to the negative space of images like Vanna’s tattoos, the photographs I took of his tattoos, and the photographs of other yantra tattoos. The Vietnamese writer and filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha often alludes to Southeast Asian political violence as requiring indirect communication (2016: 1; 2009: 16; 2005: 54; 1992: 182; 1999: 211), in a way that is similar to what I found in Cambodia. Trinh says that language need not always be “wholesome, clear, and direct” (1989: 16), but can communicate indirectly. In the same way that some words take less space as authoritarian persuasions, images shape what I like to think of as negative space. Trinh points out that direct language—language so clear that it allows for no ambiguity in its message—does not allow for truths that are more complicated than can be captured using straightforward definitions. Direct language is often found in distinctions between binary categories, such as victim and perpetrator. For the deminers, binary categories do not allow for the ambiguity of violence where lines between victims and perpetrators are blurred. To discuss violence as uncertain means deliberately making its actions and agents ambiguous but also containing its temporality in something that exists and does not exist. Because the violence that haunted the minefield could not be spoken about directly, it emerged in the negative spaces of the images provided. The tattoo professed a simultaneous vulnerability and impermeability of Vanna’s skin, allowing for two potential outcomes to exist at the same time and space. This portrayed the truth of uncertainty coexisting with violence.

A Frozen Image

When Vanna showed me his tattoos, I asked for his permission to shoot some videos, then made screenshots from the videos. In the videos, I captured not only the images of the tattoos, but also Vanna's expressions and gestures accompanying his descriptions of the tattoos. The video reframed the tattoo images. He stood before a window that only dimly lit the upper floor of his house on stilts. He did not describe all of his tattoos—in fact, he did not go into details about any of them, only gestured at them. The silences reveal a new layer of negative space in these images.

When I reviewed the video of this interview (see Figure 3), I perceived more clearly a negative space in Vanna's speech surrounding his tattoo. In the video, Vanna was silent about his shrapnel scar. All he did was point to it and then gestured to the rest of the tattoo. The shrapnel hit him there, but he did not lose his leg because he had this tattoo. The tattoo made him get sick, but it protected him from the war's violence. At the same time, when we spoke to him, the tattoo allowed him to portray what he went through while allowing him to avoid speaking directly of hardship and murder.

Even though he showed us his other tattoos, two magic words on each shoulder, he remained silent about the necklace of stars on his chest. Later on, a friend, looking at my photographs, informed me that stars on people's chests represented how many people they had killed during the Khmer Rouge War. I tried to imagine soft-spoken and skinny Vanna killing dozens of people, then tattooing symbols of each one onto his chest. I still cannot conjure that image.



FIGURE 3

I saw these tattoos everywhere on men over a certain age when they walked shirtless in the hot streets. My video of Vanna shows all of his tattoos and many of his silences.

In general, when speaking to me about their tattoo spells, my interlocutors indirectly communicated the risks of being a deminer or soldier. The risks were contained in war material such as leftover bomb waste, but also the potential violence of spirits. This is why it was good to have powerful tattoos that called on spirits that could offer protection against the angry and sometimes vengeful spirits of the mine-filled countryside. Many spirits are themselves leftovers from the war, just like landmines. The ways these dead are commemorated parallel the negative spaces of the yantra tattoos: tattoos call attention to the skin as negative space just like how the dead are commemorated through absence (Thompson 2013).

Nebulous violence hid deep within images that circulated, revealed only through negative space. I was able to confirm these violences in flickering images, from revealed secrets or by collating conversations and media. For example, I found out that the village where Vanna's *kru khmer*, the man who did his tattoos, lived was known for "having a lot of ghosts". Later, I was told that it was a village where bandits had congregated during the Khmer Rouge era. The *kru khmer* put it this way: "During the Khmer Rouge, there were three groups: the Cambodian army, the Khmer Rouge, and the bandit army [he called this the "pirate army" in khmer], and Vanna and I were part of this army. I saved many brothers and sisters with my magic."

My friend elaborated on what the *kru khmer* meant by "pirates" as we drove his motorcycle back to the city. "You know," he said in English, "people who steal houses and attack people only to steal from them? Pirates?" At the time when I visited this village, it was still known as a village full of criminals. These "pirates" were not on anyone's side during the Khmer Rouge period; rather, they exploited the fighting and hunkered down with stolen land and goods. The silence surrounding the "bandit party" communicated in the same way as Vanna's silence about certain of his tattoos—they indirectly communicated potential violence. The *kru khmer* told us stories about how his magic had offered protection during the war by making over 100 of his people invisible to enemy soldiers. Some people, he said, did not obey his yantra rules, which came with obligations to abstain from sex as well as adorn the protective ink. These men and women were, consequently, not invisible to the soldiers.

The negative space in this spoken story is that of the disobedient men and women and that of the unspoken actions of this self-proclaimed "bandit

party". Why did the *kru khmer* call himself a bandit? The violence behind such a label was left implicit. His leadership was unquestionable among the bandits due to his spiritual powers, but they could still be victim to violence despite his yantra. "You have to follow the rules and really believe that the yantra spell will work. Otherwise, they will not work," he explained as he gave me a yantra spell of protection.

Vanna allowed me to take photos of his tattoos, including the stars on his chest, and he used the stories of how he got them to tell us about his suffering. He did not tell us the stars on his chest meant that he murdered that many people. This was left unsaid, in the negative space of the conversation. Perhaps this inability to imagine violence best portrays what I mean about negative space—an inability to form a clear and positive image of certain actions or actors. These violent images remain hidden in plain sight, in unspeakable things or inexpressible images. In light of this, if the magic of Vanna's yantra spell had protected him against harm from the state in the form of military violence, then the negative space of his vulnerable skin can subtly portray such state violence, both in the past and anticipation of it in the future. Injuries on this vulnerable skin expose the state's military violence all the more sharply. The shrapnel scar on Vanna speaks to state violence in its most material form: war explosives embedded in an enemy soldier's leg.

A Shared Image

I froze frames of the video of Vanna's tattoos that showed his careful gestures, the outlines of the women and his shoulder tattoos. These were part of a selection of other scenes I kept on my tablet and videophone, which I brought to my office in the demining headquarters. They became part of a digital collection of yantra tattoos and magic spells: here, a bird on a deminer's arm that drew women to him; there, a tattoo on a deminer's wrist that had been burned off with acid because his mother had not approved of him having such a tattoo; yet another soldier who got a tattoo of a tiger to make him strong. I would pick images at random to show to a person and hopefully inspire him to tell me about his own secret magic tattoos.

But these digital images inspired people to do even more. They forwarded me videos and photographs on Facebook of men in villages receiving yantra spells. On one screen, I saw a back with rivulets of blood trickling between the shoulder blades. Through the blood I saw some black ink, and beneath that ink, sliced wounds. In another image, a man, surrounded by other villagers with axes, was dripping all over with red blood. This was part of a ceremony

to test the tattoos in order to prove that they worked. When I saw these photos, it seemed clear to me that the yantra spells were not working; these men were covered in blood. But, like the shrapnel embedded in Vanna's skin, the wounds lay outside the spell, in the spell's negative space. So these images of wounded villagers actually proved that the spells worked.

It was then that I wondered how the negative space of these tattoos figured in contemporary times. These villagers were no longer at war, yet they still tattooed themselves to protect their skin. What violence lay in this contemporary negative space?

I showed my friends the photos of yantra tattoos of birds, lions, women and other protection symbols with my phone and computer, copying how other Cambodians used media to invite stories that usually remained unspoken. This allowed my friends to speak of their own magic and shamanic practices, but—of most relevance for our understanding of negative space as a method—allowed them to communicate indirectly about unspeakable things in Cambodia. If I asked people about their tattoos or shamanic practices, they would not answer, but when I showed them images of yantra tattoos, they showed me more photos of tattoos or some other form of shamanic magic.

A deminer, Sara, pointed out to me ordinary-looking black squares on pillars in a restaurant. He knew I was interested in these magic spells because I had shown him photographs of Vanna's tattoos. "There are magic words beneath them, but they are secret," Sara told me. "Only the *kru* can know them. See? It is magic from a *kru khmer*. Like the tattoos that keep you safe from landmines." He pointed out that these spells kept the pillars standing but did not prevent holes from forming in the roof. The magic was there but hidden in black squares, obvious only to those in the know.

Sara himself did not have these tattoos (at least that was what he said), but he showed me other people's tattoos in photographs from Facebook or told me stories about people who had them. "They do not work," Sara said, "on places where the tattoo isn't found." In other words, the spells only protected the inked skin. One day he showed me the front page of his Facebook news feed on his phone. On the tiny screen was a gory photo of a man dripping with blood from open wounds all over his skin. "They are testing his tattoos," Sara said. "It doesn't work where there is no tattoo, so why get them?" The villager was next to his neighbour who held a machete. He looked exhausted from the cuts and his eyes were swollen shut from punches. It was hard to see anything besides the blood, except for the tattoos that appeared as shadows through the blood.

These tattoo-testing photos stood out, because it was initially difficult for me to understand what people like Sara were trying to say. At first, I thought Sara was joking about how these tattoos did not work, but when I asked him more questions and when other people spoke about Sara, it became clear to me that he did think the magic worked. He just meant that it was not worth getting the tattoos, because you would not be safe anywhere besides the black lines on the skin. Even the process of yantra tattoo magic references this testing, as the final step of the spell is for a monk or *kru khmer* to ritually strike the person's skin with an axe, ensuring or proving its effectiveness (Drouyer 2013: 43).

These new tattoos were drawn on men² who lived in villages where there were many minefields. They protected people who were dealing with the remnants of war in a time of peace and in so doing, referenced an existential crisis that undermined the definition of a postwar setting. There are approximately four to six million landmines in Cambodia left over from wars that ended decades ago (Landmine Monitor 2016). Cambodian minefields hide potential violence beneath bucolic beauty. Reflective pools of water shine like opals amidst a lush landscape. Rainbows appear over these pools and clouds form in the skies above the landmines buried beneath crop soils, rice fields and trees and near ponds. Indeed, the soldiers who buried landmines often chose a relaxing spot to hide the explosive. They knew that their enemies would need a shady spot to rest or fresh water to drink. As such, landmines are found in places that inspire peacefulness, just as tattoos are found on men to protect them from the weapons of war in an era of peace.

Talal Asad suggests that this disruption lends violence a particular kind of horror because it upends a person's sense of "ordinariness in which human identity resides" (2007: 70). Landmines only encompass one part of this disruption; they also reference the disruption of the soldiers who planted them. Asad describes how war renders humans inhuman when he describes a Vietnam War veteran who suffers because he enjoyed committing violence. The soldier, Asad says, "is at once perpetrator and victim" (72). Landmines exist as a standing reminder to those who live in the minefields that human identity is also on unsteady ground. Landmines make apparent that humans are always monsters as well as men.

For Sara, the tattoos evoked a contemporary negative space, a potential injury on un-inked skin that could occur even in times of peace. They spoke more to what was dangerous—not only for soldiers and deminers—but also for humans who were not part of the Cambodian military. More so than a kind of magic of safety and protection, they embodied indirect communication about the horrors of an existential crisis, as well as the violence of war and

disrupted regimes. Most landmines in Cambodia have been planted by the armed forces of past governments and reference a destabilization of governments violently overthrown.

The vulnerable, un-inked skin indirectly referenced the violence of the state, particularly apparent in the case of Vanna's tattoo. With regard to the Facebook photos, un-inked skin was also just a matter of the selective power of spiritual tattoos. Sara indicated the bloody skin of the man in the photos and reiterated, "It doesn't work where there is no tattoo." In this case, the skin as negative space represents a depiction of fragility. The ever-present vulnerability of what it means to be human is not actually between good or evil but mortality. Life itself is not certain. This has been shown over and over again in the setting that is Cambodia, a place recovering from multiple regime changes.

Negative space communicates indirectly with the silences that surround stories. It also works outside the borders of an image, like the shrapnel scar between Vanna's tattoos. While landmines may or may not react with violence, they cause an anticipation of violence, one that can only be imagined. This imagined violence destabilized conversations, relationships between people, and the ground on which the deminers worked. Violence thus demanded indirectness, because it was destabilizing and uncertain—you never knew when the world around you would explode.

Much was communicated in this way. Vanna gestured at the shrapnel as if proving that the tattoo had worked. Sara showed me photographs of bloody men to prove that tattoos were indirect representations of potentially bloody skin. The tattoos spoke indirectly of the inherent danger of being a deminer or soldier, two overlapping occupations in Cambodia that dealt with war. But this is not limited to soldiers or deminers. In the tattoo-testing photos exchanged on social media, imagined violence is rendered ubiquitous for humanity. These tattoos proclaim the human being as a perpetual potential victim of violence.

Imaginariness of Violence

The creation and circulation of photos and the ensuing conversations communicated violence and fear more clearly for me when I shifted my perspective towards understanding the image's negative space. In these depictions, photographs became a medium that allowed people to tell stories where what happened and who did what to whom remained unclear. The photographs imply an imagined loss beyond their borders and what lies unseen outside their lines. While images provide centrepieces for each section, I do not mean to tie indirect communication to only this medium.

Rather, I posit that silences as well as images form a potential negative space for modes of indirect communication. For example, when people discussed their experiences of the Khmer Rouge, they would be silent about violent details. But they would tell stories surrounding the violence, such as how they swam away from soldiers, without describing why they were escaping. Many of these silences were provoked by images. In a way, my description of these images is also a description of the silences.

I suggest that such ‘unspeakable things’ are best understood through negative space because they resist certainty. Thus images and silences, because they represent a place beyond words, align with the unspeakable and, in an indefinable sense, with dangerous spirits and government spies. Certain things like suffering and violence work before (or beyond) words. You can only use indirect communication when trying to depict violence because it is a subject that is always unclear. Such uncertainties cannot be communicated properly otherwise. Uncertainties about violence demand an anticipation of violence; images of violence can only be understood in a way that mimics the pattern of an unseen landmine. An explosive destabilizes even if it is not really there, because it might just be under the next footfall. Images themselves depend on their transmission of uncertainty.

“This is a photo that didn’t exist,” said Chavi. I return to this phrase because it is poetic and also because it depicts the paradoxical temporality Diamond mentions in her photographic analyses (2006). The photo exists now, because Chavi found it even though her mother had told her she had no photographs of life in Cambodia. Its appearance allowed Chavi to know her past, but it also realized her past in the present. The word ‘to exist’ in Khmer is interchangeable with the word ‘to have’, and I wonder now if Chavi’s mother was telling her something through negative space: “I do not have these photos” and “These photos do not exist,”³ are the same in Khmer. She did not have them, but she may have implied they had the potential to exist. All these realities outline the negative spaces of other realities—the wounds where the ink does not stain.

BIOGRAPHY

Darcie DeAngelo is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the College of Holy Cross in Worcester, MA. Her research of human-nonhuman relations in Cambodia integrates filming and ethnography. Her current book project, part of UC Press’s *Atelier* series 2019 workshop, is entitled *Beloved Technologies: On bombs and rats in a Cambodian minefield*. Some of her filmic work can be seen here: <https://adjusting-latitudes-deangelo.squarespace.com/>, Email: ddeangelo@holycross.edu

NOTES

- ¹ As of June 2019, Found Cambodia has changed its website design, limiting the number of photographs on display. In summer, Charles Fox published a book entitled *Buried* with Catfish Books, see <https://www.catfish.asia/books/buried>.
- ² Women getting tattoos is even more of a taboo. In most of these cases, women will undergo the ceremony of tattoos but in invisible ink, so it does not mar the beauty of their skin.
- ³ ព្រឹត្តិ (initverb) indicates the accomplishment of an action, to happen to, to have occasion to (v), to have, possess, own, to exist, there is, there are IPA: /mien/ (see <https://kheng.info/search/?query=to+have>).

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