"To the Intellectuals of the West"
Rithy Panh's The Elimination and Genealogies of the Cambodian Genocide
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In bearing witness to the Cambodian genocide of 1975-1979, Rithy Panh’s 2013 book *The Elimination* (written with Christopher Bataille and translated by John Cullen) is one of the first Cambodian memoirs to engage directly with the question of how the West, ideologically, militarily and juridically, has been complicit in this collective trauma and its aftermath. Considered a leading filmmaker in contemporary Cambodian cinema, Panh arrived in Grenoble, France as a refugee in 1979, returning to Cambodia as an adult to make documentary films. Panh explains in *The Elimination* that, despite thinking that he was finished making films about the Khmer Rouge era after completing his films *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy* (1996) and *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2002), he was brought back to the subject matter with the beginning of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal. Since 2003, this U.N.-backed tribunal has been tasked with prosecuting top Khmer Rouge leaders, and in 2010, Kaing Guek Eav (a.k.a Duch) became the first Khmer Rouge official to be convicted for crimes against humanity, torture and murder. *The Elimination* chronicles Panh’s face-to-face conversations with Duch, who commanded S-21, a torture and execution centre that imprisoned more than 12,000 Cambodians. With special permission from the ECCC, Panh visits Duch in prison and records hundreds of hours of interviews. As the conversations accrue, Panh also relays his own story of losing his parents and siblings, and of the vicious cycle of survival, rupture, devastation, breakdown, numbness and guilt that continues to haunt his present. *The Elimination* thus represents a compelling text through which to consider the place of the intellectual—embodied in the figure of Panh—in redressing the traumatic legacies of genocide that encompass not only the crimes of the Khmer Rouge, but also the Western intellectual genealogies that shaped Cambodia’s Cold War history.
A work of memoir, essay and reportage, *The Elimination* is composed of two voices: Duch, the torturer now brought to trial, and Panh, the refugee and the intellectual, returning once again to the difficult work of excavating the past. The power and fragility of Panh’s book arises from languages (Khmer, French and English) stretched across two simultaneities: the careful language used by Duch to put distance between himself and the act of killing, and the intimate language used by Panh, which seeks to grapple with the enduring loss and grief he feels as survivor of genocide. The former encompasses Duch’s reiteration of Khmer Rouge doctrine—a doctrine conceptualized in the elite communist enclaves of 1950s Paris cafes and study groups, forged in the violence of Cambodia’s civil war (1970-75) under 2.8 million tons of American bombs, and implemented in the Khmer Rouge’s labor communes and execution centers. Over thirty years after the genocide, Duch’s tribunal testimony and interviews generate a new archive that Panh seeks to examine. In *The Elimination*, therefore, the state discourses of communism, slaughter, lies and legality contrast with Panh’s personal language of poetry, filmmaking, family and historical research.

Influenced by Edward Said’s (1994) discussion of the work of the intellectual as “what Foucault called a ‘relentless erudition,’ scouring alternative sources, exhuming buried documents, reviving forgotten (or abandoned) histories” (xvii), we examine *The Elimination* as a critical expression of Rithy Panh—a refugee-intellectual who has returned to Cambodia to engage with its unreconciled and embodied histories of violence. How has the juridical context of the ECCC provoked and influenced Panh’s intellectual and artistic work? How was the ideology of the Khmer Rouge shaped through Western Marxist intellectual influence? To what extent did some Western intellectuals politicize the Cambodian genocide as a function of Cold War Realpolitik? Finally, how do Panh’s own intellectual genealogies index both Khmer and French philosophical and aesthetic influences? We trace these questions through analysis of *The Elimination*’s sustained meditation on the idea of the intellectual and its complicated place in Cambodia’s modern history. Panh’s text works against the tendency among commentators to interpret Pol Pot and his regime as a geographical and cultural anomaly outside of history. Rejecting orientalist discourses that link Cambodia’s historical encounters with war and genocide to essentialized cultural traits of Cambodian people, *The Elimination* uncovers the intellectual genealogy of the Khmer Rouge as thoroughly imbricated with 20th century Cold War history. Panh’s text also speaks back directly to “the intellectuals of West” who romanticized (2013: 105), and in some cases continue to romanticize, an idealized form of communism divorced from the lived realities of those who have suffered under this ideology.
The Elimination as a Counternarrative to the Khmer Rouge Tribunal

Described as the “apex of Cambodia’s tormented accountability process,” the ECCC has the mandate to “try ‘senior leaders’ of the Pol Pot regime and others deemed ‘responsible’ for crimes committed under the CPK rule” (Ciorciari and Heindel 2014: 4, 8). During this period of Khmer Rouge rule from 1975-1979, Cambodia endured a massive loss of human life as Pol Pot’s communist regime killed an estimated 1.7 million people through execution, torture, enforced disappearance, starvation and hard labor. A feature of the regime was its ruthless targeting of the country’s educated, bourgeois and foreign-influenced former government. Those affiliated with these social categories had to lie about their identities in order to survive as the Khmer Rouge sought to purge the nation of all named enemies of the revolution. Cambodia’s ethnic minorities (Cham Muslims, ethnic Vietnamese, ethnic Chinese and Khmer Krom indigenous people) were also viewed as threats to the state, as were elements of pre-revolutionary social life, such as the family unit, Buddhist religion and non-revolutionary cultural forms of photography, filmmaking, music, literature and dance. The Cambodian genocide, combined with the preceding years of civil war between the Khmer Rouge and the U.S.-backed Lon Nol regime (1970-1975), and the following decades of civil war between the Khmer Rouge and the occupying Vietnamese army (1979-1998), devastated the social, cultural and political fabric of Cambodia, resulting in a legacy that haunts Cambodians to this day as families continue to search for answers and, in some cases, missing loved ones.

Writing more than three decades after the Cambodian genocide, John Ciorciari and Anne Heindel (2014), authors of the book Hybrid Justice: The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, explain that the “ECCC will likely be the last officially sanctioned opportunity to seek a measure of justice and pronouncement of legal truth on the inner workings of the Pol Pot regime” (4). Despite years of trial proceedings and a vast expenditure of resources, however, the ECCC has been continually mired in allegations of corruption, administrative mismanagement and debilitating disagreements between branches of the court. Furthermore, the successful prosecution of only three senior Khmer Rouge leaders (Duch in Case 001 and Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan in Case 002) has led many critics to regard the tribunal as a failure. As Cathy Schlund-Vials (2012) has argued, the ECCC’s temporal belatedness (three decades after the genocide) and its limited temporal scope of prosecution (1975-1979) have significantly hindered the institution’s capacity to deliver “historical truth” and justice to Cambodians in a meaningful way (16). Khatharya Um (2015) similarly notes that “though tribunals...are often seen as the necessary mechanisms for truth finding, the process of bearing witness itself may in fact contribute to the silencing of memories that are contested” (256). The tribunal proceedings of Case 001, Duch’s trial, were especially difficult for Cambodians to observe as Duch took the stand every day for six months, giving extensive testimony and repeatedly asking for forgiveness but never accepting responsibility.
As Thierry Cruvellier (2014) explains, “no other perpetrator has been given such ample opportunity to be heard—not in Austria, Freetown, or The Hague” (9). Duch, whom Cruvellier calls the “master of confession,” seemed to be playing what many saw as a carefully constructed rhetorical game to protect his own interests, resulting in further alienation and aggravation of the civil parties from whom Duch was supposedly asking forgiveness (2014: 306). In The Elimination, Panh writes: “I read the transcripts of the first hearing in Duch’s trial, and they tormented me. I realized I couldn’t maintain my distance” (2013: 13). Confronted by the language of denial expressed by Duch and the failures and omissions of the tribunal, Panh feels an obligation to return to the past.

In order to establish an alternative space where truth can be pursued, Panh writes The Elimination as a memoir that appropriates and revises the narrative conventions of the courtroom drama as it has been played out by the ECCC. Before the trial began, Panh believed in the potential of the tribunal to show “images” that would “tell the world what the guilty parties did” (2013:13), but when he hears and sees Duch’s testimony, Panh realizes that the tribunal will not be able to deliver the truth that he is seeking. Panh sets out to make a documentary on Duch in which Duch will be questioned in his cell, in front of the camera, rather than in the courtroom. Here, Panh believes, Duch will leave behind the falsehoods and adornments of the courtroom and “be forthright and frank with [him]” (2013: 13). This documentary would later become Panh’s 2011 film, Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell, which, along with The Elimination and his 2013 Oscar-nominated documentary The Missing Picture, would comprise Panh’s tripartite artistic response to the tribunal, many aspects of which Panh repeatedly says in his memoir that he found “unacceptable” and “incomprehensible” (2013: 248, 249). Panh is specific in detailing what he regards as the missed opportunities and failures of the tribunal to “establish a historical documentation” (94). He mentions the prosecutor’s refusal to “call Nuon Chea as a witness” in Duch’s trial (249), the prosecutor’s use in the courtroom of an irresponsibly-made “fictional documentary” in which actors enacted scenes at S-21 (248), and the “allegedly ‘neutral’ images shot by the ECCC’s technicians” to film the trial (249). Panh questions the neutrality of such a film, arguing that “the result was a trial without images for a genocide without images” (249). Panh draws an analogy between the historical erasure of the past under the Khmer Rouge and the perpetuation of this erasure in the courtroom space of the ECCC. In this space of erasure, dominated by Duch’s rhetorical arsenal of lies, “partial truth[s]” and “partial falsehood[s]” (241), Panh watches and comes to the realization that “there was no longer any possibility that the truth would make an appearance” (160). For Panh, the courtroom has also become a space of humiliation for survivors as various key actors have turned this painful history into a performance of egos. Describing one such scene, in which the Duch’s defense lawyer Jacques Verges mocks the court by turning his back as one of the judges speaks, Panh narrates: “Yes, the great lawyer is putting on his show. A mockery. Television images. Provocation, tension. Let the
humiliation never cease. Let death, followed by the obliterating of death—let all that be a game too” (2013: 120).

In his response to the tribunal, Panh undertakes a sustained “investigation” of the “great crime” of the Cambodian genocide and performs the role of the prosecutor-interrogator who “question[s] Duch tirelessly” (2013: 110, 33). To step out of Duch’s rhetorical entrapments, Panh must think about their relationship in other terms. He observes that each individual has their own trajectory and although, in hindsight, the trajectory may appear fated, it was chosen, step by step, by the individual. Speaking of Duch, Panh writes, “I want him to answer me, and in so doing to take a step on the road to humanity” (5). Humanity finds itself in this act of call and response (or conversation) that is a movement away from self; the destruction and construction of self and knowledge is part of the act of questioning and answering. Language between the two men is a game of cat and mouse but we do not know who is the cat and who is the mouse. Their conversations are fraught with intention and even hope. Duch desires absolution from Panh: he wants Panh to come to the conclusion that Duch and Panh have been equally victimized by the Khmer Rouge leaders, or, perhaps, by fate itself. These are the roles they are given: one will be the torturer who destroys tens of thousands of lives, the other the victim who will lose everyone whom he loves.

Panh initially believed he was trying to understand a human enigma in the form of Duch, but there is no enigma, only the human. “No, he’s no monster,” Panh writes, “and he’s even less of a demon” (2013: 34). Therefore, as a human, Duch is responsible for his actions. To those who would argue that we are all potential torturers, Panh’s intellect and experience have led him to a different conclusion: “No, we’re not all a fraction of an inch, the depth of a sheet of paper, from committing a great crime” (57). In time, Duch’s words accumulate and contradict one another. Over weeks and months, Duch’s testimony in front of Panh’s camera slowly allows for a stronger understanding of the structure and genealogy of Khmer Rouge doctrine, planning, codes and orders, the sum of which reveals truths Duch has been consciously hiding. Panh’s interrogation of Duch, alongside Panh’s meticulous research and personal memories, unfolds layers of history about the Khmer Rouge regime and its ideology that went unexamined by the tribunal.

The Intellectual Genealogy of the Khmer Rouge

Panh’s memoir examines the ideology of the Khmer Rouge and traces its intellectual genealogy in Western Marxist thought. The language used by the Khmer Rouge during the Cambodian genocide had its own specialized terminology, words that came into being through Cambodia’s specific position as a crossroads of French and Khmer culture during a time of overwhelming Chinese, Soviet, Vietnamese and American political and military intervention. In The Elimination, Panh notes that in the 1950s, Khmer Rouge leaders (Pol Pot, Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary and Ieng
Thirith) enjoyed lives as cosmopolitan intellectuals: they “all lived many years in Paris, where they studied Rousseau and Montesquieu, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, some Marx, and certain writings by Stalin and Mao Zedong” (2013: 68). At the same time in Cambodia, Duch was reading “Marx’s Capital and especially Mao’s On New Democracy, in Khmer and French” (2013: 68). The Khmer Rouge’s vision of utopia was not Cambodia-specific but was inseparable from the utopias imagined by 20th-century humanity. As Panh writes,

The crimes committed by Democratic Kampuchea, and the intention behind those crimes, were incontrovertibly human; they involved man in his universality, man in his entirety, man in his history and in his politics. No one can consider those crimes as a geographical peculiarity or a historical oddity; on the contrary the twentieth century reached its fulfillment in that place; the crimes in Cambodia can even be taken to represent the whole twentieth century. (2013: 111)

Panh’s text rejects orientalist discourses that posit a culture of violence inherent to Cambodian people. Such discourses, Panh asserts, elide the long history of social agonism, dispossession and suffering wrought by colonialism and the Cold War.

During this period, languages including French, Khmer, English and Chinese—all of which expressed specific aspirations, selfhood, colonizations, nationhoods and ideologies—met and intermingled in Cambodia’s geography and in the minds of its citizens. In her book Camboje: the Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945, Penny Edwards (2007) traces the emergence of Cambodian nationalism through traffic in bodies, ideas and images between France and Camboje in the colonial era, explaining that

since 1951, the Cambodian community in France had been split into right, left and moderate factions. The left organized a Marxist-Leninist club (cercle), with the support of the Parti communiste français. This clandestine, closed group [composed of future Khmer Rouge leaders] was dedicated to reading the works of Marx, Lenin, Engels, and Stalin. (2007: 251)

Seemingly untroubled by the contradictions inherent in the intellectual genealogy of their anti-colonial modernity, these key actors translated and transported this ideology back to Cambodia in the 1960s. James A. Tyner (2008) explains that “it is generally agreed, for example, that Saloth Sar’s ideas—despite claims to the contrary—were shaped to a large extent by foreign influences. His French-influenced education was paramount” (89). Under French colonization and later American interference and Chinese and Soviet military aid to the Khmer Rouge, slogans, languages and systems of thinking, with their attendant hypocrisies, confronted and compounded one another.

In The Elimination, Duch’s ideology is shown to be a product of these Cold War collisions and contradictions. Fond of launching into long expositions in French
on subjects as diverse as the poetry of Honoré de Balzac or Stephane Hessel, or on “Marx’s writings, historical materialism and dialectical materialism” (Panh 2013: 16), Duch’s discourse reflects the ideological crosscurrents between Europe, China and Cambodia that produced the brutality of “Khmer Rouge Marxism,” wherein, as Panh writes, “everything passes through language. Everything converges on the slogan” (121). Rejecting the idea that Duch was nothing more than a functionary, “a cog among other cogs in the killing machine,” Panh seeks instead to situate Duch’s actions within the context of personal and collective history: “[But] no one can occupy Duch’s place in the human community. No one can duplicate his biographical, intellectual and psychological trajectory” (57). Panh refuses to accept Duch’s defense of ignorance, that he was simply a mimic of European and Chinese Marxist ideas and therefore not responsible for his actions. To refute Duch’s adamant denials of culpability, Panh persistently returns to Duch’s words themselves:

The Khmer Rouge devise the word *kamtech*, which I ask Duch to define—he’s written it thousands of times and uses it to this day. Duch is clear: *kamtech* means to destroy and then to erase all trace: to reduce to dust. The tribunal translates it as “to crush,” which is obviously quite different. The language of slaughter is in that word. Let nothing remain, no trace of life, no trace of death. Let the death itself be erased. That’s the secret that explains why the terror could go on for so long and never face a revolt. (2013: 103)

Panh’s reflection here suggests the limits of Western legalistic and human rights discourse in translating the Khmer Rouge’s “language of killing” (2013: 202), a language that Duch continues to revere and use to the present day. Duch’s command of Khmer Rouge doctrine enables Panh to expose how the regime seized not only the biopolitical power of life and death but also uncompromising control of the language. As Panh says, “The Khmer Rouge spoke a rather odd language, using words I knew little or not at all” (34). They sought to invent a new, revolutionary language borrowed from Marxism and mixed with local idiom. A cultural translation and intensification of Marxist and Maoist precepts, the language of Khmer Rouge Marxism—one of slaughter—sought to purge the linguistic remnants of the past perceived as threatening: terms of family, love, desire, ownership, learning, tradition and hospitality.

The doctrine of the Khmer Rouge, with its genealogy in Western Enlightenment intellectualism and revolutionary anti-colonialism, paradoxically manifested one of the most extreme forms of anti-intellectualism in the 20th century. Panh’s memoir encapsulates this painful contradiction in one brief passage: “In some images taken in the jungle (no doubt before 1975), all the Angkar leaders have two or three pens in their shirt pockets—a surprising emblem for a regime proud of breaking eyeglasses and closing schools” (2013: 220). The Khmer Rouge demanded that Cambodians remake their language and with it their identities. These new selves could contain only one language, a language whose sole purpose was to solidify the
central power of the Khmer Rouge. Near the end of The Elimination, Panh comes to see that Duch’s words will always conceal more than they express: “Duch reinvents his truth in order to survive. Every act, however horrible, is put in perspective, subsumed, rethought until it becomes acceptable, or almost so” (186). After decades of denial, Duch has now reinvented himself through the language of confession; Panh remarks that Duch is “in control of his life from start to finish, all the way to his late conversion to Christianity—he’s presently an evangelical Christian. If it’s not one ideology, it’s another” (19). Duch believes that the act of confession is more important than the actuality of what occurred; as it is constructed through language, Duch uses confession to perpetuate his preferred version of history. From mathematician to torture technician to self-professed scholar of Marxism and French literature and art, Duch now “reads the Bible every day. He appears to meditate. He regularly receives visits from evangelical pastors” (264). Duch’s final turn to religious doctrine, to the “spiritual lineage of the guilty but glorious” (264), represents his substitution of one means of force for another. Panh’s intimate portrait of Duch allows the reader to slowly apprehend the banality and hypocrisy that resides beneath the surface of Duch’s performed intellectualism.

Intellectual Complicity, Realpolitik and the Cold War

The Elimination’s dialogic narrative structure enables Panh to interrogate not only the Khmer Rouge’s language of killing but also the discourse of genocide denial expressed by some Western intellectuals in the Cold War era. Donald Beachler (2009) explains that commentators began debating the actions and intentions of Khmer Rouge regime from the day Phnom Penh fell in April 1975: the “arguments over the proper way to interpret the Khmer Rouge regime and its attempted transformation of Cambodian society were to continue for another thirty years, albeit in various permutations” (214). Beachler argues that much of the debate seemed motivated by political purposes “and it often appeared as though the Cambodian people were little more than props in the rhetorical, ideological and policy strategies of academics, journalists and governments” (214).

On the left in the United States, many politicians and intellectuals saw the Khmer Rouge regime’s economic transformation of Cambodia as the realization of Third World self-determination and liberation from the global capitalist economy. Praising the regime as a “an ‘Enlightened’ Polity” (Beachler 2009: 217), leftist intellectuals saw the Khmer Rouge’s victory over the U.S.-backed Lon Nol government as a justified rebellion against U.S. imperialism in Cambodia. In their book Cambodia: Starvation and Revolution, scholars Gareth Porter and George C. Hildebrand (1976) argue that the Khmer Rouge’s “evacuation” of Phnom Penh in April 1975—the removal by force of 2.5 million residents in seventy-two hours—was a justified act. Despite the fact that the US military had already withdrawn, Hildebrand and Porter insist that the Khmer Rouge had good reason to fear a post-war attack from
the United States military, citing the U.S. bombing of the Cambodia countryside (1965-1968) that killed and displaced hundreds of thousands of civilian lives and gave rise to the Khmer Rouge (8). Porter and Hildebrand are skeptical of Cambodian refugee testimonial accounts of Khmer Rouge atrocities, which they regard as complicit with anti-communist propaganda. They portray the Khmer Rouge regime as a functioning state and include, as evidence, photographs of cheering peasants and satisfied workers, photographs that scholars have since discredited as Khmer Rouge propaganda. In a similar vein, Malcolm Caldwell (1976) believed that “others ought to…emulate the policies that emanated from Democratic Kampuchea” (103), while Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman (1979) contended that

The deaths in Cambodia were not the result of systematic slaughter and starvation organized by the state, but rather attributable…to peasant revenge, undisciplined military units out of government control, starvation and disease that are direct consequences of the U.S. war, or other such factors. (139)

In general, these scholars celebrated the economic model of the Khmer Rouge as a new way for the future, or they minimized or outright dismissed the mass violence in Cambodia.

In The Elimination, references to these Western debates about the nature of the Khmer Rouge regime are juxtaposed with Panh’s own personal memories of late 1970s Cambodia, where, as a child of thirteen, he witnessed all of his family members slowly die of starvation and illness. Panh recalls how the Khmer Rouge used the pretext of imminent American bombing in Phnom Penh to deport Cambodians to the countryside and how “certain Western intellectuals had echoed the speculation” of possible bombing (2013: 32). Panh also paints a portrait of the extreme paranoia and repression that guided the regime’s totalitarian communism. As Panh writes, “It wasn’t possible to move, express yourself or act without being listened to, questioned, monitored. There you are, there’s your revolutionary: a man who has rice on his plate; and who looks for an enemy in other people’s eyes” (139). Panh’s use of the second person address here speaks back directly to those Western intellectuals who celebrated and romanticized the Khmer Rouge fighter as an exemplar of Third World revolution. Moreover, he directly refutes all claims that the Khmer Rouge regime represented an enlightened polity that provided social welfare such as education, medical care, suffrage and so forth:

Contrary to what a number of intellectuals (particular French intellectuals…) believed or wished to believe, and contrary to propaganda images, I want to state clearly that we were almost never given any classes. Between the ages of thirteen and seventeen I attended a total of five. (172)

Panh’s “education” during this period consisted rather in the punishing labor of the work camps and the relentless inculcation of Khmer Rouge slogans.
To provide contrast between Panh’s lived experience and the leftist intellectual tradition that initially supported the Khmer Rouge, Panh includes in *The Elimination* passages of direct quotations from the writing of scholars. For example, there is a passage from Alain Badiou’s January 1979 opinion piece in *Le Monde* titled “Kampuchea will overcome!” In this essay, Badiou asserts that the “simple desire to rely on their own resources and not to be anyone’s subjects clarifies a great many aspects of the Cambodian revolution, including the incorporation of terror” (quoted in Panh 2013: 233). Similarly, Panh references Chomsky and Herman’s 1979 book *After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology* (also cited above), in which they proclaim that “it became virtually a matter of dogma in the West that the regime was the very incarnation of evil with no redeeming qualities” (quoted in Panh 2013: 234). As a survivor, Panh expresses the incomprehensibility of this discourse to him: “I reread those sentences. The words slip aside and get away. I don’t understand” (234).

Panh’s indictment of Western intellectual influence in Cambodia is not solely reserved for those on the left, for *The Elimination* also exposes the complicity of right-wing politicians during the Cold War era. Although conservative politicians in the United States did indeed point to Khmer Rouge atrocities as a justification for military intervention in Southeast Asia, they soon revealed their hypocrisy. In 1979, when invading Vietnamese forces toppled the Khmer Rouge regime, horrifying reports of human rights abuses by the deposed regime emerged—yet the United States was not prepared to endorse Vietnam, an ally of the Soviet Union. On the contrary, until 1991, the United States continued to recognize the Khmer Rouge regime—encamped at the Thai-Cambodia border—as the legitimate representative of the Cambodian people. Even as the population starved, the United States went so far as to enact sanctions on foreign aid to Cambodia. Panh writes in *The Elimination*,

I believe I’ve failed to mention that Democratic Kampuchea [the Khmer Rouge regime] kept its seat at the United Nations until 1991, and that Pol Pot died in the jungle in 1998. In the jungle, and in his bed. And it seems so hard to try five of the regime’s top leaders, currently incarcerated in Phnom, with any sort of vigor. (2013: 265)

Panh suggests the ECCC’s ineffectuality in bringing a small number of aging Khmer Rouge leaders to justice exposes something deeper: its fundamentally limited capacity or will to redress the Cold War complicities of foreign actors such as the United States, France and China. Panh asserts:

France has yet to establish what happened inside the very walls of its embassy in April 1975 or to explain why it handed over to the Khmer Rouge various leading Cambodian officials clearly destined to be put to death. As for the United States and China, will they ever reveal the ties they maintained with that criminal regime for so long, and why? (264-265)
In *The Elimination*, therefore, Panh recovers the Khmer Rouge’s intellectual genealogy in Marxist, Maoist and Soviet influences, refusing to accept the oft-repeated argument that the Cambodian genocide represented a historical aberration of Marxism and a departure from its true potentiality. Panh writes,

> Of course it’s impossible to compare the Soviet, Chinese and Cambodian regimes. But I see in all of them the camps and the prisons, the violence, the paranoia. I see everywhere the hatred of men and ideas. To the intellectuals of the West who have composed odes and poems, created *dazibao* (big character posters), written tracts and enthusiastic articles and books; who still today, after so much progress toward democracy, aspire to a new, purified communism; and who hold forth in chic salons, smoothing the velvet of their radicalism, I say: there is only one man. (2013: 105)

Panh implores the reader to acknowledge that ideology does not exist outside of its actual manifestation in history. Those who denied the violence of this history should be held accountable. In reckoning with this history of Western intellectual complicity, *The Elimination* represents an attempt to bring symbolic accountability to those who championed, and continue to champion, a pure form of radicalism from their position of safety and privilege in the West. As Zhang Longxi (2014) argues

> the killing fields, the repression of freedom, the persecution of intellectuals, the control of the mind…ought to give us pause in cheering the success of the material forces generated when the theory of Marxism seized the masses, or more generally, when action to change the world took precedence over philosophical thinking to interpret the world. (290-291)

In light of intensified efforts on the part of academics and activists to pursue alternatives to capitalism—efforts that are necessary and urgent in an era of global neoliberalism and reinvigorated empire—Panh’s work reminds us of the importance of attending to the lived experiences of Marxist-inspired revolutions that have occurred in places such as Cambodia and China, where a clearer picture of the scale and brutality of suffering that took place has only recently begun to emerge.

**Refugee Genealogies and the Work of the Intellectual**

Against the problematic genealogies that extend back to the Khmer Rouge era and its aftermath—genealogies that Panh suggests are being replayed in the present-day ECCC courtroom—*The Elimination* charts an alternative genealogy rooted in Panh’s lived experience as a refugee and his commitment to the work of the intellectual-artist. This work began upon Panh’s return to Cambodia in 1990, when he started making documentary films about the Khmer Rouge era, with the hope of reviving Cambodia’s devastated film industry. Although over 300 Cambodian films were produced in the ‘golden era’ of the Cambodian film industry, most of these films were lost due to the damage wrought by decades of war. In 2006, Panh
founded the Bophana Audio Visual Resource Centre in Phnom Penh to recover and preserve the Cambodia’s lost and decaying film archives. Although Panh has been criticized by some for repeatedly returning to the subject matter of the Khmer Rouge in his films (rather than making films about more contemporary issues facing Cambodians), Panh has responded by stressing the unfinished nature of this work:

Sometimes one film is like many films put together, and sometimes a collection of films is like one series of memories around a single subject. I cannot answer all of the questions that genocide asks of us. But I try to provide some response. If you watch S-21: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine and then you see Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell and later, The Missing Picture—hopefully, gradually, you can begin to understand a little bit better. I would actually like to produce a fully fictional film. But if it’s necessary to come back again to the subject of the Khmer Rouge genocide, I will be back again. If it’s not necessary, I will not come. It’s an open question to me. (quoted in Brzeski 2013)

For Panh, the wounds of the past remain unresolved: it is the necessary work of returning to this past that offers the possibility of personal and collective transformation.

In his influential book *Representations of the Intellectual*, Edward Said (1994) argues that that one distinguishing feature of the intellectual is their enduring condition of exile and marginality, the condition of being “neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvements and half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another” (49). In *The Elimination*, Panh describes his existence in this state of exile as a refugee in France, a space where he oscillates between the conflicting affects of gratitude and resentment:“In recent years France has become something of a refuge for me, a kind of womb. It’s where I’m at the right distance. At the same time it’s the place where I have the most absurd, most violent dreams” (2013: 259). Panh’s feminized personification of France as a space of care and rebirth—one that allows him critical distance from the past—is qualified by the psychological torment he feels living with survivor’s guilt, subject to the traumatic replay of a past that often paralyzes him. The figuration of France as a “mother country” also invokes the nation’s complicated colonial legacies that render France an alienating place for Panh: these include the “cruel and unjust” subjugation of the Khmer peasantry by the French during the nearly ninety years of colonial rule (67), “the Khmer Rouge leaders’ sojourns in France” (260), “the treatment of the Khmer Rouge revolution in the French press, particularly during the years 1975 and 1976” (260), and France’s abandonment and handover of Cambodians during the French Embassy siege during the fall of Phnom Penh.
In his relationship to France, Panh therefore struggles to negotiate a balance between what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls “refuse and refuge” (2011: 43)—the simultaneous refusal of incorporation into the state and its nationalist myths, and gratitude for the nation’s provision of life-saving refuge and hospitality. As Trinh explains, “Although feelings of gratitude in the process of successful readjustment are never missing among Those Who Leave, the ‘midway to nowhere’ malaise of the transit camp period has not in any way ended with resettlement” (48). Haunted and emboldened by the memory of his father, a man who maintained a tireless commitment to education in Cambodia, who died in an act of final defiance against the Khmer Rouge, Panh channels his own malaise into self-reinvention as a writer and filmmaker. He is influenced by the work of French artists-intellectuals such as Jacques Prévert, Charlotte Delbo and Claude Lanzmann: the poetry of Jacques Prévert returns Panh to memories of his childhood, when his father used to recite to him Prévert’s poetry “in impeccable French,” instilling in Panh a love of the sound and cadences of the language (2013: 59). In the work of Charlotte Delbo, known for her trilogy of memoirs *Auschwitz and After* (1970), Panh finds both an exemplar of courageous survival and literary style that manages to approach, through testimonial language, the experience of “grief and grief abounding” (2013: 147). Finally, Claude Lanzmann’s work represents an intellectual genealogy of rigorous engagement with histories of violence on European soil as well as an ethical mode of representation. Panh “infinitely admire[s]” the way in which Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985) “lets the viewer see through words” (2013: 72), attesting to Panh and Lanzmann’s shared belief in the power of witness testimony to stand alone without the need for accompanying images of extreme violence. Panh’s enduring admiration for figures such as Prévert, Delbo and Lanzmann thus stands in stark contrast to the resentment he feels towards Western commentators who politicized the crime in Cambodia for their own ideological ends. Against the difficult legacies of Marx that informed the Khmer Rouge—and that continue, in the present, to inform Duch—Panh invokes an alternative genealogy that embraces various forms of Western artistic-intellectual influences. Like his father who “admired Jules Ferry and the French public school system” (2013: 59), Panh remains committed to an emancipatory ideal of cultural translation and artistic-intellectual border crossing, advocating that “some university theses be produced simultaneously in French and Khmer by French and Cambodian historians” (260). This “double point of view,” Panh asserts, would work to “establish, little by little, a real school of Cambodian history” (260).

Panh’s own method and body of work has laid the groundwork for this school of history to emerge, for to understand the historical “crime in Cambodia,” Panh has “striven to go into the tiniest details; to verify once, twice, a hundred times; never to give up on the chance of meeting a torturer or a survivor” (2013: 248). Panh’s indefatigable work of historical research reflects Said’s view of the intellectual as “exile and marginal, as amateur, and as the author of a language that tries to speak the
truth to power” (1994: xvi). As opposed to the professional who is easily “compelled into some slogan, orthodox party line, or fixed dogma,” Said believes the intellectual’s principal duty “is the search for relative independence from such pressures” (xvi). Removed from the desire and pressures to produce conformist knowledge, the intellectual, in Said’s view, can eventually ascertain whether in fact a massacre was committed or an official cover-up produced. The first imperative is to find out what occurred and then why, not as isolated events but as unfolding history whose broad contours include one’s own nation as an actor. (1994: 99)

Panh indeed seeks a discourse that is faithful to the Cambodia that he knows exists, a place that cannot be separated from its geographical, political, historical and cultural positions. Through his writings and his films, Panh resists the idea that language cannot lead him closer to the truth: to disavow language would be to accept incomprehension about history, and incomprehension can only result in silence. The work of returning to the past—“of research, of understanding, of explication,” Panh asserts—“isn’t some sad passion; it’s a struggle against elimination…it gives us back our humanity, our intelligence, our history. Sometime it even ennobles us. It makes us alive” (2013: 162). Panh offers here a definition of intellectual work that asserts the refuge of art as a counterforce to the erasure of both the collective and the self. In so doing, Panh also offers a productive update of Said’s original assertions by linking intellectual work to the work of survival through art. Panh’s memoir prompts us to consider the problems that arise when intellectuals are so devoted to their political project and their definitions of power that they end up disbelieving and marginalizing survivors of violence, as so many Western intellectuals did in the aftermath of the Cambodian genocide. Repeating earlier histories of movement, travel and engagement with French intellectual and artistic traditions, but with differences informed by Panh’s own trajectory of exile and return, The Elimination reminds us of the importance of keeping our intellectual work and calls to action responsible to the historical record of the 20th century and especially to those whom this work purports to emancipate.

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Notes

1. See for example, Joel Brinkley’s *Cambodia’s Curse: The Troubled History of a Modern Land* (2011), and Senaglim Bit’s *The Warrior Heritage: A Psychological Perspective of Cambodian Trauma* (1991). Both Brinkley and Bit generally employ culturally essentialist logics in their tracing of histories of violence in Cambodia back to ancient Khmer culture.

2. Similar views were expressed by some intellectuals and journalists in France. Writing the reception of Cambodian French writer Soth Polin’s landmark 1980 novel *l’anarchiste*, Penny Edwards (2015) argues that “the novel’s failure to gain stronger traction with French literary circuits on its first publication might have resulted from its stark critique of French journalists who had taken a strong pro-Khmer Rouge position in their reporting during the 1970s, and its caricature of a French ethnographer” (“The Anarchist”). See Soth Polin’s *L’anarchiste* (1980) and also Simon Leys (2009), who comments “upon the return to fashion of a certain form of trendy Maoism” in the French literary and intellectual scene.

3. Since the 1980s, Chomsky has generally distanced himself from his earlier writings that could be seen as supporting the Khmer Rouge but has maintained his argument about the U.S. mainstream media’s uneven reporting on “worthy” versus “unworthy” victims in Southeast Asia during this period. Chomsky’s writings on the Khmer Rouge have recently received attention again in a relatively high profile online debate between Chomsky and Slavoj Žižek. See “Noam Chomsky replies to Zizek’s ‘fantasies’” in *ROAR Magazine* (July 2013).


5. Panh’s new documentary film is entitled *La France est Notre Patrie (France is our Mother Country)*, 2015.

References


