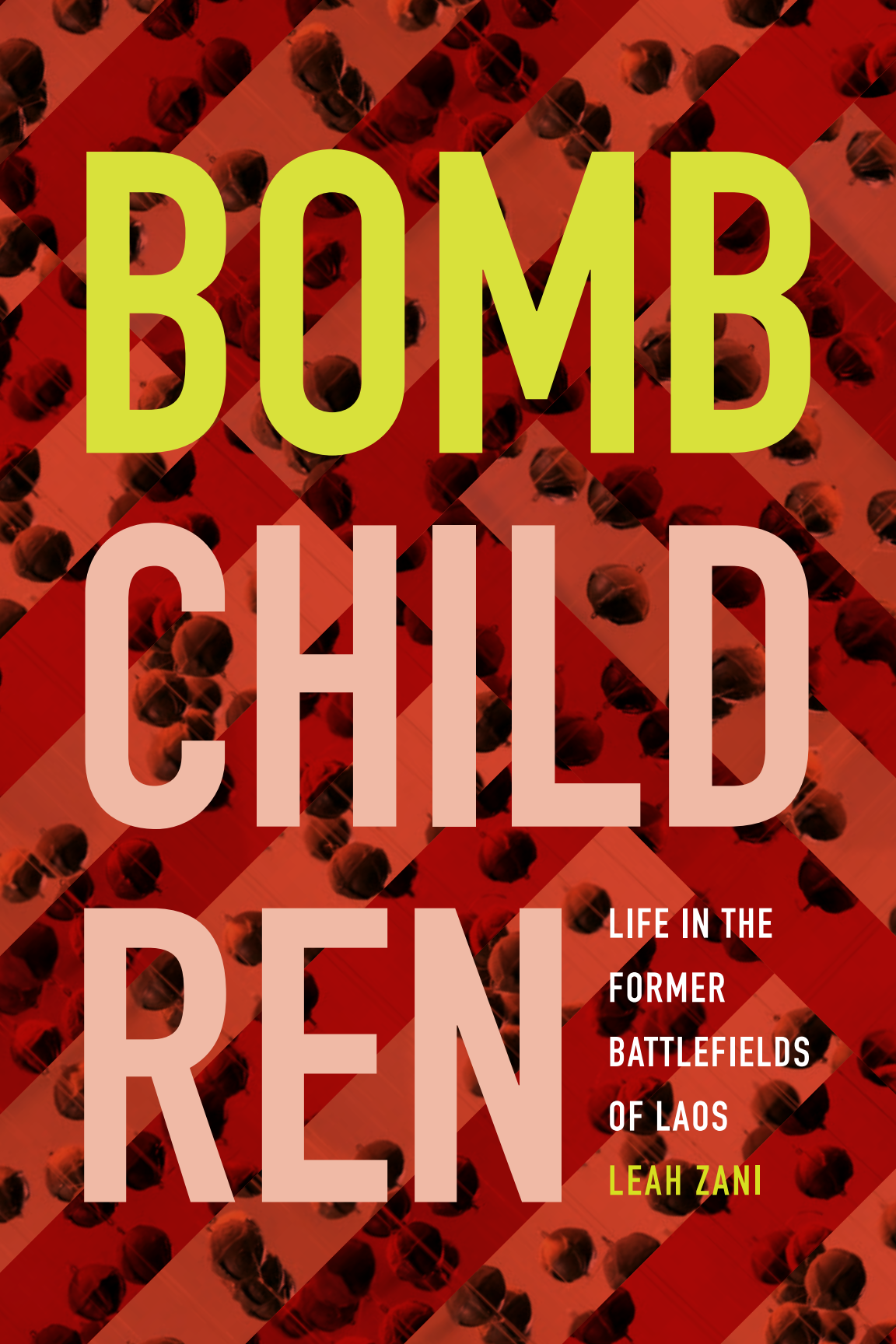
BOMB
CHILD
REN
LIFE IN THE
FORMER
BATTLEFIELDS
OF LAOS
LEAH ZANI

BOMB CHILDREN

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Life in the Former Battlefields of Laos

LEAH ZANI

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Note on the Lao Language

There are no standard transliterations between Lao and English words. I have used colloquial translations and transliterations when available (for example, the word "karma" instead of *kamma*) to aid the reader in recognizing more familiar terms. Unless a colloquial transliteration in English already exists, I have tried to preserve consonant distinctions and vowel lengths in my transliterations (for example, transliterating "development" as the conventional *phattana* rather than the more accurate *phatthanaa*).

Lao naming practices do not follow the Western norm of personal first name then formal last name. In Lao, it is common to refer to a person more formally by a first name, particularly in honorifics. I have respected this by citing Lao authors by their first names in in-text citations and in the reference list—unless the author has published significantly in English under their last name. All other authors are cited by their last names.

FIELDPOEM 30

Postwar

My sight has changed forever:
I see the hulk of an army-green
helicopter
in a farm field in rural California
amongst rusting tractors, threshers
harvesters

Every one is a wreck of something

Introduction

THE FRUIT EATERS

Opening Invocation

Before becoming a bomb technician, an interlocutor of mine served as a monk for seven years at a Theravada Buddhist temple in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. After his workday at the office of an explosives clearance operator that is hosting my research, he invites me to ride with him on his motorbike to visit his former temple, Wat Sokpaluang, on the outskirts of town. Wat Sokpaluang is a forest temple, originally situated in the jungle outside the city walls—though in recent decades it has been fully encompassed by urban sprawl. The temple maintains expansive forested grounds, circumnavigated by a white, gilded wall. Leaving our motorbike beyond the wall, we enter by foot under a large, lavishly painted archway of entwined dragons. As we cross into the forested interior, the sound of the nearby thoroughfare is smothered by the vestigial forest preserved within the temple grounds: an underbrush of flowering ginger and medicinal herbs, plus large trees whose trunks host pale lichens, wax-leaved bromeliads, ferns, and trailing gray lianas. When we arrive at the central plaza next to the *sim* (the most sacred central building), a cremation is under way (see figure I.1). The relatives and guests have left—only two silent novices remain to tend the giant kiln. They kindle the

FIGURE 1.1 A cremation under way at Wat Sokpaluang. Photo by the author.

fire with long sticks, producing snapping crackles that seem only to deepen the silence in the plaza. The air is suffused with blue smoke and the thick smell of incense. The coffin has already collapsed upon itself, and the body is no longer visible within the flames. Wreaths and other flower decorations smoke, their green moisture resisting the cremation. We stay at the border of the plaza and watch the flames slowly diminish the corpse and the flowers.

In this quiet zone of mortal reflection, my companion tells me a strange, brief war story he heard while he was a monk at this temple. He told this story in the present tense, as he first heard it and as I tell it here: Two American soldiers are flying a helicopter low over the jungles of Laos, scouting for villages during the Vietnam-American War. They are looking for possible communist hideouts, sites where rebels built camps or were hosted by existing villages. Skimming the treetops, one soldier very clearly sees a village below: grass huts on stilts, dirt-worn paths through the green fields, people walking with baskets of fruit strapped to their backs. He signals a landing nearby, but once they are on the ground, there is no village to be found. After giving up the search and reboarding their helicopter, the two soldiers keep watch out of the vehicle's windows. Neither one sees a village. The village and its inhabitants have disappeared.

In response to my perplexed expression, my interlocutor explains, "There are worlds around us that we can't see, full of people who are right and honest and only eat fruit. They never kill anything." These worlds exist parallel to the present realm: other realms, other heavens and hells. My interlocutor spreads his arms wide and sweeps them around while wriggling his fingers as if to touch the stuff of these many worlds all around us, invisible. The world that the soldiers glimpsed in the war story is known as the realm of the fruit eaters. It is a special paradise inhabited by merit-filled beings who never kill anything to sustain themselves; they only eat fruit that has fallen freely from wild trees. This kind of food is free from the negative karma of slaughtering animals or destroying plants. It is a realm without butchers, meat eaters, murderers, executioners, or soldiers. As a result of the virtuous habits of the residents, the realm of the fruit eaters is peaceful, and all the beings who reside there are healthy and happy. Only especially morally correct beings are reincarnated as fruit eaters. By comparison, the immoral actions of the inhabitants of our world are creating a state of near-perpetual war, violence, and suffering. My interlocutor explains that the Vietnam-American War made the boundaries between these parallel worlds porous; and so, in the midst of war, one American soldier glimpses a Lao paradise free of violence.

I call it a strange war story since it isn't really a war story at all—it is a story about a world of peace, present but out of reach to all but the exceedingly virtuous. The realm of the fruit eaters was closed to the soldiers due to their immoral actions during war, but the war had also, paradoxically, brought such worlds closer to ours. Lao political cosmology exhibits a form of "this-worldly and otherworldly parallelism" in which political systems are "doubled" in our world and in other, parallel worlds (Holt 2009, 44). These other, parallel realms legitimize this-worldly political systems—for example, by ritually confirming the parity between the spirit world and our own. In this logic of parallels, the perception of other realms of peace may be interpreted as evidence of the immorality of our political systems—while also indicating that alternate forms of politics are possible. The fruit eaters' realm of ultimate peace was visible, but not equally visible to everyone. Only one soldier could see it. And my interlocutor, gesturing around us with his arms outstretched, was indicating that the two of us couldn't see it. I invoke this war story now, at the beginning of this book, as an invitation to look past war to other possible worlds—to learn to perceive peace just out of reach.

The Sociality of War

To examine the long-term social and cultural impact of war is to confront the fundamental sociality of war. This requires dismantling binaries between war and peace and instead examining war and its aftermath as constitutive parts of larger, ongoing processes of social change. Processes of "slow violence" and "long dying" (Nixon 2006–7, 14), in which violence prolongs itself via subtle and pervasive effects, may far exceed the historical boundaries of war. At the same time, the effects of war are not limited to violence and destruction: conflict zones are key sites for economic intervention, human rights advocacy, and humanitarian assistance (Fassin 2012; Redfield 2005; Rosenblatt 2015), as well as spaces of alternative or underground social, political, and economic forms (Nordstrom 2004). Following this tradition, I assert that war is not an aberration from the social, but is constitutive of modern forms of political control, economic transformation, and social action. Countering assumptions that war destroys society, in this book I examine the former battlefields of Laos as social fields powerfully shaped by violence and intervention. In the transition from battlefield to marketplace, or minefield to schoolyard, the reconstruction and rehabilitation practices that attend war constitute crucial acts of political and social intervention.

Contemporary Laos is one of the most rapidly developing countries in the world; it is also the world's most bombed country, per capita, and remains massively contaminated with explosive military wastes from the Vietnam-American War. This book examines the present period of rapid development and revival amid these exploding remnants of war. In the 1960s and 1970s, Laos was subject to a massive air war and counterinsurgency program as part of an American paramilitary operation run by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in secret and without the knowledge of Congress. Generally known as the Secret War, the conflict in Laos was the longest and most intense air war in history (i.e., a war fought primarily with air power and minimal ground troops; see Branfman 2013). Cluster munitions, land mines, mortar shells, and other military waste continued to explode after the war ended, and will continue to explode for centuries. These remnants of war embed themselves in people's everyday lives far beyond the cessation of conflict. What are the long-term social and cultural impacts of military waste, particularly in the context of covert warfare? How do people build lives in former battlefields and interact with explosive remnants of war? How is ongoing war violence incorporated into peacetime development?

In response to these concerns, I develop a conceptual framework for parallelism, or the treatment of war's violent remains and postwar revival as parallel, layering, but also often distinct, phenomena. I use the paired concepts of remains and revivals to analyze the sedimentation of war and peace as a feature of contemporary geopolitics. By "remains," I refer to massive military wastes left over from the Secret War. In the explosives clearance sector, explosive remnants of war is a technical term describing ordnance that remains after a conflict has ended. My use of the term "remains" refers not only to these physical remains of war but also to sociocultural phenomena produced by war and its aftermath. By "revivals," I refer to several interweaving processes in postwar Laos: socioeconomic liberalization, authoritarian renovation, and religious awakening. I use the term "revivals" to reference the layering of old and new that characterizes contemporary Lao nation building; for example, the revival of a romanticized prewar Lao state within the Party state's socialist reforms. "Revivals" also references the ongoing transformation of military waste after war, such as the scavenging of bombs for sale in the illegal war scrap trade. The present Lao period of rapid socioeconomic transformation foregrounds desires to transcend these half-century-old battlefields. This book is an examination of the parallel process of remains/revivals in Laos, toward the analysis of the sociocultural aftereffects of war more generally.

My analysis is rooted in the current Lao period of Renovation reforms, a period beginning in the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, and marked by ongoing socioeconomic liberalization. Contemporary Laos is a single-party socialist state; but increasingly, socialist reforms are loosening, civil groups are forming, and nonstate media are available. The Renovation era in Laos is part of a larger, global post-Soviet transformation that includes the opening of many former Cold War battlefields to Western intervention. The concomitant fall of the Bamboo Curtain (strict border controls around Asia's communist countries, including Laos) also opened Laos to the possibility of hosting international explosive clearance operators, enabling Laos's first explosives clearance programs. Thus, Laos received almost no official postwar aid or clearance assistance until the 1990s, three decades after the war began. The present period of Renovation reforms is also distinguished by a tightening of authoritarian controls, including heightened surveillance, political violence, and forced disappearance. The period of my fieldwork was marked by government harassment targeted against civil society and development workers—just prior to my arrival in the field, Sombath Somphone,

a prominent Lao civil society leader, was very publicly disappeared by the police. When I arrived in Laos for primary fieldwork, I found that research agreements I had made prior to Sombath's disappearance required renegotiation; and, fearing the risks of associating themselves with a foreign researcher, one of my host organizations rescinded its patronage altogether. In the final chapter of this book, I analyze my interlocutors' experiences of being "haunted" by Sombath's ghost toward an ethnography of the darker valence of revival—the revival of authoritarianism. This form of state terror functions by making absence visible, a quality that I examine in my elaboration of the haunting of postwar Laos. As these accounts of political violence indicate, the current sociopolitical revival is not limited to strictly liberal practices and includes a revival of authoritarian power and violence. This book is not a linear account of the transition from isolated, war-torn, socialist state to globalizing, peaceful, liberal state; rather, this is an account of the complex and discordant experience of rapid socioeconomic transformation in former battlefields.

Military Waste as Cultural and Area Studies

This book also develops methods, concepts, and theories suited to the complexities and hazards of former battlefields. How might postwar zones constitute their own area studies? Throughout the research and analysis for this book, I found myself drawing on scholarship from diverse war zones: Argentina (Robben 2000), Bosnia (Henig 2012), Cyprus (Navaro-Yashin 2012), Iraq (Daughtry 2015), Korea (Kim 2016), Mozambique (Nordstrom 1997), Sri Lanka (Daniel 1996), Vietnam (Kwon 2008), and Cambodia (Uk 2016), to name just a few. My academic claim, in aligning these studies within this analysis of Laos, is that war zones demand their own cultural and area studies—not as a collection of individual cases, but as a global phenomenon of war and humanitarian intervention that produces its own geographic and cultural formations. I develop a paired approach that treats the study of military waste topically (as one studies courtrooms or schools) and also geographically to the extent that military waste contaminates soils and transforms ecologies, producing an area of shared geographic concern.

This is, essentially, a claim for "metageography" that understands maps as sets of "spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world" (Lewis and Wigen 1997, ix). Military waste produces its own cultural and ecological patterns that only partially hew to geopolitical borders, while

simultaneously manifesting a durability in the soil that frustrates geopolitical resolution. Military waste has no single front line or battleground, but instead manifests the layering and sedimentation of multiple conflicts over time within the same space. What methods and analytics are best suited to studying this process of layering contamination? The material sedimentation of military waste provokes comparative analysis between conflicts, or across multiple conflicts taken as parts of a single, larger phenomenon. What might be included in a hazardous research methods tool kit for ethnographers studying these zones? In this book, I contribute my own theories and methods to this shared tool kit: a theory of parallelism, whereby war, state violence, and peacetime development are examined in parallel; suggestions for increased subject and researcher protections; and, in particular, a method of poetic attention and field notation (what I call "fieldpoems" and introduce in chapter 1).

This metageographic perspective is partially influenced by Southeast Asian studies. Entanglements of war and scholarship propelled the discipline of Southeast Asian studies into being. This is not to say that Southeast Asia does not exist as an autonomous geographic zone and topic of study (see Benda 1962; Smail 1961); yet in charting this particular conjunction of military and academic processes, I situate this book within a larger geopolitical process that includes the Secret War in Laos. The regional name "Southeast Asia" was itself a political expedient used to refer to the South-East Asia Command during World War II (Anderson 1998; Reid 1993). Later, under the pressures of Soviet and American world building during the Cold War, the idea of Southeast Asia solidified into its present geopolitical and disciplinary shape. The Vietnam-American War intensified the process of forming Southeast Asia as a region and as a discipline: "American anticommunist hegemony created the initial basis for the new field of Southeast Asian studies" present mostly in American universities (Anderson 1998, 8). And yet, Anthony J. S. Reid (1999) asserts that the region did not fully cohere until as recently as the 1990s in partial response to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen's (1997, 173) view, the coalescing of Southeast Asia during the Cold War was not only a "geopolitical resolution" for purposes of military command, but, importantly, also a "postimperial crisis of spatial conceptualization" resolved, in part, through drawing the bounds of scholarly disciplines. The region and the academic discipline came into being together as a result of ongoing geopolitical intervention. Engaging the ongoing imbrication of war and scholarship, I aim to reverse

the logic that cuts up geographic regions as bounded zones of intervention and instead examine the process of intervention itself as a geopolitical, conceptual, and theoretical phenomenon. The nascent disciplinary space that I chart is somewhat prefigured by the international clearance sector, whose practitioners treat military waste as a global problem, addressed via international certification programs, shared methods manuals, standardized data collection practices, and specialized equipment. Evocatively, one clearance operator that I worked with was producing a global map of explosives clearance in which the entire world was mapped onto a massive grid so that every clearance site could be noted in relation to every other clearance site. The whole world prefigured as an explosives clearance zone.

"Military waste" describes the material of war that remains after war has ended. Explosive ordnance in Laos is waste in the sense that these items were abandoned by combatants or failed to detonate during the Vietnam-American War. In Laos, "military waste" broadly applies to military materials such as downed American airplanes and abandoned Russian tanks, the remains of military camps such as helmets and canteens, abandoned and unexploded ordnance such as land mine fields, and the residue of biological weapons such as Agent Orange. These war materials may become waste after a war has ended—and also may become resources as they are repurposed or recycled (airplanes into rebar, bomb cases into cookpots, etc.). How might we theorize this unexpected spoliation of war's remains? International clearance operators treat war remains as ecological contaminants: the use of technical terms such as "contamination," "hazardous area," and "residual risk" give a sense of this ecological approach. This terminology invites analysis of "post-conflict landscapes" (Pholsena and Tappe 2013) as distinct ecological zones, what I present in my work elsewhere as "bomb ecologies" (Zani 2015). In other ways, treating ordnance as waste elides geopolitical conflict to the extent that it naturalizes war and obscures the politics that cuts up battlefields, brackets conflicts, and counts corpses.

While war has inspired significant anthropological theory, the anthropological study of military waste is nascent (Henig 2012; Kim 2016; Uk 2016). Military waste has, to date, generally been taken up as a kind of provocation—something that one encounters in the course of carrying out research on unrelated topics in areas that are contaminated. David Henig (2012), an anthropologist working in Bosnia, developed the term "military waste" to describe the land mines and other ordnance that contaminated his field sites. He did not plan to study military waste, but found that his

intended research topic was increasingly terrorized and contaminated by it in a way that compelled his attention. For Henig and other anthropologists studying military waste, the contamination of one's field sites becomes an injunction to study the lived social and cultural impact of explosive ordnance. Eleana Kim (2016), in her pioneering article on military waste in the Korean DMZ, proposes the need for an anthropology of land mines that addresses military waste as a topic of study in and of itself. She theorizes land mine fields in the Korean DMZ as "rogue infrastructure" that provoke unexpected agencies and material possibilities (Kim 2016, 163). Mine fields are rogue in the sense that they embed themselves in an area, offering unexpected alliances and affordances, thereby exceeding imperial geopolitics, ecological expectations, and technological expertise. Mines may be designed as area-denial weapons that limit movement through and use of an area, but people nonetheless interact with them and adapt them for their own purposes. My proposition for treating military waste as area studies resists the conventional logic of clearance, that is, the logic that interprets land mines as contaminants or wastes that are distinct from the context in which they are encountered (as if one could remove them entirely to reveal a prewar culture or environment). Such a discipline would engage the process of wasting itself and examine land mines and other remnants of war as constitutive of contemporary ecological and cultural contexts. Wasting describes an ongoing process of degradation; at the same time, the term gestures toward an afterward beyond violence. Waste exceeds the conditions of its original deployment, provoking new ecological and cultural formations. A scholarship that engages with what war wastes may transcend war and the political claims that bracket conflicts.

The following two sections attend, respectively, to the paired concepts of remains and revivals. The first section presents a brief history of the Vietnam-American War in Laos and the formation of an explosives clearance sector. The second section presents an overlapping history of liberalization, development, and Lao state building. I am, in essence, telling the same story twice in order to introduce my field site. I present these two sections in lieu of a linear history of the war in Laos (see, for example, Coates and Redfern 2013; Jacobs 2012; Kurlantzick 2017). There is value in crafting these historical accounts of war, but there are also other topics worth analyzing in contemporary Laos: ongoing development, peace, and revival may go unaddressed in the course of telling a good war story. My purpose in framing the introduction in this way is to steer clear of overdetermining accounts of

the Vietnam-American War and its impact on contemporary Laos. By presenting two overlapping accounts, rather than a single linear account, I foreground my analytic claim for parallelism.

Remains

Remains and revivals together form a paired conceptual frame that I draw upon throughout the book (I discuss revivals in the next section). Both remains and revivals emerged as analytic concepts from my ethnographic research with development organizations and explosives clearance operators in Laos. In the explosives clearance sector, explosive remnants of war is a technical term describing unexploded ordnance (UXO) and abandoned ordnance that remains after a conflict has ended. My use of "remains" references these physical remnants of war as a way of inviting analysis of forms of social life and death that are produced by war and its aftermath. This conceptualization draws on social theories of necropolitics and haunting in which death is analyzed as constitutive of political, social, and economic systems—not destructive or ancillary to such systems (see, for example, Klima 2002; Mbembe 2003). "Remains" carries morbid connotations—the corpse as remains—that I consciously invoke in my use of this term.

The remains/revivals parallel challenges the assumed binarism of life and death that is present, in particular, in new materialism and related social theories of non/human agency. Tempering this trend toward vitalism (see, for example, Bennet 2010; Ingold 2011; Stengers 2012), I ask: How might we theorize agency beyond the abilities of living human (or humanlike) agents? What might a theory of mortalism look like in anthropology? I use the conceptual frame of remains to continually mark the violence of these material and social relations. I analyze how military waste manifests a different kind of agency—one of deathliness—that is a constitutive part of social relations in postwar zones. Explosive ordnance exhibits a form of nonhuman agency that subsists in its own destruction and neglect, whose power increases as human agency recedes: the soldiers die or leave, the planes fly away, and the war ends. Military waste seems, rather, to challenge human agency via its latent power to explode at any time, anywhere. Researching these remains of war, I attend to ethnographic accounts of haunting and ghosts in order to develop a hauntology, or an ontology of military waste as haunting (Derrida 2006; Gordon 2008). I expound this theory at greater detail in chapter 2. In Laos, explosions are commonly described in terms of haunting, where the

ghosts of war are said to have triggered explosions, or evil spirits are said to have animated bombs in order to control their detonation. The bombs are "alive," but not in the way that Jane Bennet (2010) uses that term to vivify inanimate objects. Rather, the deadly agency of bombs (to kill, to haunt, to explode) is foregrounded in these ethnographic accounts. My analysis, throughout this book, focuses on this deadly, haunting quality of military waste.

Death may be a means of power, even as it destroys those that are subject to it. Mbembe, in his theorization of necropolitics (after Foucault's theory of biopower as the power to foster or neglect life), refutes the notion that the power to kill only exists in contemporary zones of exception or emergency, such as war zones. Rather, he argues, power may sometimes consist in "*the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*" (Mbembe 2003, 14, emphasis in original). I extend this insight to the study of explosives, looking beyond the analysis of military waste as exceptional and instead analyzing how explosive ordnance is, instead, constitutive of a kind of deathly power. I theorize military waste as its own form of power distinct from the intentions of military strategists or the soldiers that emplace minefields or drop bombs—military waste, by definition, persists beyond the conflict of its emplacement. Ordnance is agential via its own destruction. This is not to say that it is purely destructive; rather, and in line with Mbembe's analysis of necropolitics, I am mindfully breaking down the binary that equates life with power and death with passivity and failure, in which the primacy is given to humanlike life. The mortalism of ordnance is distinguished by absence and latency instead of presence and activity. This mortal agency is marked by its own destruction as well as the destruction of its human targets: when a bomb explodes and kills someone, it also destroys itself.

Throughout this book, I carefully use the words "explosive" or "explosion" to describe live ordnance and its detonation. I do this as a political act of linguistic precision, in distinction from the regular practice in explosives clearance and victim assistance of referring to explosions as "accidents" and ordnance as "unexploded ordnance." Where appropriate to a quote, I use the words "accident" or "unexploded ordnance" carefully in context as ethnographic evidence of how explosions are discussed by my interlocutors. The language of explosives clearance leads to peculiar linguistic convolutions, such as a person being the "victim of an unexploded ordnance explosion" whereby a bomb is described as both unexploded and exploded at the same

time. These linguistic convolutions are revealing of the necropolitics of military action and victim assistance. As I elaborate in later chapters, talk of accident and unexploded ordnance assumes a misleading divide between war and peace, whereby the end of conflict is assumed to also mark the end of meaningful war violence. Calling an ordnance explosion an accident obscures the intentional violence of war, and of cluster strikes in particular, as part of a long-term process of military wasting. "Accident" implies that each explosion is a singular event, an exceptional misfortune, rather than evidence of how an entire population may be subject to the endemic risks of military waste.

Widespread experiences of risk disrupt the binarism between survivor and victim, abled and disabled, and instead compel analysis of the cultural and political salience of statistically likely injury. Is being in danger a disability?* Drawing on Jasbir K. Puar's (2017) analysis of the necropolitics of debility, the language of the accident disconnects violence from war, obfuscating the political value of debility as an imperial process that extends war. Discussing the general use of the word "accident" to refer to disabling events, Puar writes that "the accident functions as an alibi for the constitutive relations of force [that target specific populations. . . .] Mutilation and amputation are thus no accident but are part of the biopolitical scripting of populations available for injury" (2017, 64). The risks of military waste are not an accidental byproduct of war, but a necessary practice of imperial control; a tactic in and of itself that systematically debilitates target populations far beyond the cessation of conflict. Seen at the level of populations, the end of war may be ancillary to the risks and dangers experienced by target populations over the long term. From this perspective, an accident is not a category of disablement, and certainly not a synonym for civilian casualty or

* This project began as a study of victim assistance in Laos, deeply informed by disability studies. As the project and book developed, the focus of my analysis shifted from victim assistance to postwar revival. I think that there is real value in studying these forms of violence while leaving disability somewhat open ended. In instances such as this ("Is being in danger a disability?"), I engage disability in order to disrupt norms of physical impairment and personal misfortune. Engaging disability in this open-ended manner, I have the twofold goal of (1) disrupting the slippage between explosion, survivor, and disabled, whereby the only meaningful impact of an explosion is assumed to be death or disability; and (2) to examine larger ecological and geopolitical processes whose debilitating effects are often glossed as accidental or do not register as direct impairment.

collateral damage; the term, in its very obfuscation, outlines in reverse an important process of widespread endangerment and geopolitical erasure. An explosion is not an accident, and the risks of military waste are not randomly distributed.

The United States covertly bombed Laos in violation of the 1962 Geneva Accords declaring Laos neutral territory during the Vietnam-American War (also known as the Second Indochina War). During this period, from roughly 1964 to 1973, Laos was subject to intense ground battles between communist and royalist factions, especially along the hotly contested Ho Chi Minh Trail that wound through Laos's long, mountainous border with Vietnam and China. This Secret War was simultaneously a revolution, the last major conflict in the protracted Lao wars of independence. This bombing was itself part of a larger Lao civil war between the communist Pathet Lao and royalist factions, lasting from 1959 to 1975, which was itself an extension of the First Indochina War (sometimes known as the Dirty War) against French imperialism beginning in 1946. Additionally, during World War II, Laos had been briefly and violently occupied by the Japanese. To this list, I could also add Thailand's even older occupation of Laos and ongoing skirmishes on the Lao-Thai border. Thus, the 1975 revolution was seen by the Party elites as the final resolution to more than three decades of nearly continuous armed resistance against a succession of foreign imperialists. The Lao nation-state has thus always been contaminated with military waste.

The scale of this Secret War in Laos was unprecedented: it is estimated that the United States covertly dropped more than two million tons of ordnance on Laos.* This amounts to roughly one ton of ordnance for every inhabitant, resulting in at least 30,000 direct casualties (deaths and injuries) during the immediate war years. In total, roughly 200,000 Lao died during the Secret War, representing about one out of every ten persons then living in Laos (Kurlantzick 2017; Stuart-Fox 1997). Additionally, more than a quarter of Laos's population fled as refugees. In the forty years since the war ended, an estimated 20,000 additional casualties have involved the same

* This figure does not include ordnance from other combatants, or from ground battles, or ordnance not recorded, or in records that remain classified. I note that the United States is the only combatant in the region to have released records of its involvement in the Secret War. During my fieldwork with explosives clearance teams, I was presented with military waste from a variety of countries, including ordnance from Russia and China.

FIGURE I.2 Cluster submunitions gathered at the base of a tree by bomb technicians during the clearance of this rice field. Photo by the author.

ordnance (Boddington and Bountao 2008). Every province of the country remains contaminated with dangerous live explosives. A half century after war, Laos remains one of the most massively war-contaminated countries in the world. "Massive" is a technical term in the international clearance sector describing contamination over more than 1,000 square kilometers; the category of massive cluster munition contamination was created specifically to describe the unprecedented levels of military waste in contemporary Laos and Vietnam (NPA 2014).

Most of the contamination in contemporary Laos is cluster munitions (see figure I.2). The ordnance in figure I.2 was gathered by a bomb technician during the survey phase of the clearance of a rice field. The technician carefully carried each item of ordnance by hand to the base of this stump in preparation for a controlled demolition. Each item had rusted with time and was now a rough, mottled brown, the ball shrapnel in the casing clearly

visible. In Lao, cluster munitions are often called *mee laberd* (bomb mothers) and the cluster submunitions inside called *luk laberd* (bomb children). I first heard these phrases while conducting fieldwork with the explosives clearance team surveying the rice field depicted in figure I.2. An older Lao bomb technician was carefully digging up cluster submunitions with his hands and a small trowel. He called me over and pulled aside a flowering bush to show me the small, rusty sphere of bomb half submerged in the gray soil. "Ni meen luk laberd." Here is a bomb child.

Cluster munitions are usually dropped from aircraft, breaking open in midair to disperse hundreds or thousands of submunitions densely over very large areas. For example, a cluster bomb unit seven (CBU-7) weapons system typically disperses 1,200 ballistic units type eighteen (BLU-18) over roughly 12,000 square meters. An unknown percentage of these units will fail to detonate, as determined by wind and weather conditions, the height from which the munitions were dropped, the quality of the ground (mud), and the accuracy of weapons manufacturing. The Lao government estimates that roughly one-third of the cluster munitions dropped on Laos failed to explode during the bombing (NRA 2010). In the international clearance sector, "cluster munition remnants" refers to unexploded submunitions, failed munitions, and abandoned munitions (NPA 2014, 5). Usually, cluster submunitions, or *bombies* as they are commonly called in Lao, are about twenty kilograms in weight, spherical, and fist sized. They may be painted in a military palate (yellow, brown, green), though, over time, the paint fades and peels to rust. Submunitions that fail to detonate are quite durable and generally do not explode if they are later disturbed or stepped on—but the impact of a hoe or shovel, or the heat of a fire, may detonate them nonetheless.

Walking through a cow pasture that used to be a military camp, and before that a village, a man knelt to collect a handful of dirt. He opened his palm to me, showing the small capsules of pressed black gunpowder leavened into the soil. "Bombs are part of life," he said as he scattered the capsules back into the field, like seeds. He was part of a group of residents that sieved this gunpowder out of the soil in order to resell it on the black market. The bombs, too, were gathered for resale, and were plentiful in the pasture behind us: blue spheres half submerged in the mud; long spike of a rocket visible above the fringe of the grasses; army-green hemispheres difficult to distinguish from rocks underfoot. Thick mist suffused the valley, condensing the colors to a deeper green. A tree grew out of a bomb crater, both perhaps forty years old (figure I.3). The valley was very quiet—there were no cars or

FIGURE 1.3 A former Thai military camp converted into a cow pasture near Phonsavan, Xieng Khouang Province. The tree in the foreground is growing out of a large bomb crater. Photo by the author.

electrical appliances in this highland village—and peaceful, strewn with yellow wildflowers. When explosive ordnance becomes endemic, particularly during periods of official peace, ordinary life may manifest a kind of covert violence. Bombs may become "part of life," which is not the same as saying that war becomes ordinary. War and peace, death and life, are not salient binary poles for locating these phenomena; there is a much larger, more complex social field of possible action and experience. The ordnance that remains after the Secret War ended will continue to be explosive for between fifty and 350 years, depending on type and location of emplacement.

Unlike minefields, which are generally too dangerous to farm, cluster-bombed areas are commonly farmed and inhabited. Due to the particular features of this kind of ordnance (small size, durability, and geographic spread), people may live in even very contaminated areas. This capacity to contaminate daily life was designed into the practice of cluster bombing. Analyzing American government reports from the war period, Fred Branfman (2013, 25) demonstrates that a primary goal of the bombing was to destroy

the foundations of a viable socialist state if America lost the war. The bombing was intended as a social and cultural intervention at the level of basic, daily life. The ground people walk on; the fields people farm—as my interlocutor said to me in the ethnographic vignette above, "bombs are part of life." The war was never intended to be a conventional military event—it was the first American war to be managed as a covert CIA paramilitary operation, not as a uniformed military operation. In fact, though America technically lost the war in Laos (the state went communist), the operation was considered a success by its American planners. In this view, the war had succeeded in significantly hindering the incoming communist state's capacity to build basic infrastructure and support economic and social systems. Moreover, the Secret War demonstrated that the United States could sustain a long-term conflict with minimal American ground troops and without public or congressional support. Achille Mbembe notes in his theorization of necropolitics that colonial warfare "is not subject to legal or institutional rules. It is not a legally codified activity. . . . Peace is not necessarily the natural outcome of a colonial war. In fact, the distinction between war and peace does not avail" (2003, 25). This logic of intervention does not distinguish between military action and other forms of intervention (including humanitarian assistance). Imperial warfare, rather, perpetuates forms of power via extended, latent violence that permeates daily life.

The success of the Secret War disrupts any simple distinction between war and postwar and, rather, imposes an imperial logic of intervention that exceeds the end of conflict. The war in Laos was a testing ground for a new means of war, including some of the first instances of computer-directed bombing, digital archiving, antipersonnel bombs, aerial gunships, and drone warfare (High, Curran, and Robinson 2013; McCoy 2013). The Secret War became a "template for a new type of large, secret war" that inaugurated the increased global paramilitary involvement of the CIA (Kurlantzick 2017, 16). Alfred W. McCoy goes so far as to argue that the air war in Laos was the "progenitor for warfare in the twenty-first century" (2013, xiv). The Vietnam-American War theater was also an especially potent site, a "critical laboratory" (Redfield 2013, 76) of modern techniques for humanitarian intervention, including the creation of standardized explosives clearance practices. In the half century since the Vietnam-American War, the "Laos model" of warfare (marked by massive aerial bombardment, minimal ground troops, increased collateral damage, and counterinsurgency support via humanitarian assistance) has served as a model for many other conflicts

(Branfman 2013, 30). These sociopolitical forms, including the creation of a paramilitary CIA and of an international humanitarian sector, constitute another part of the Laos model of warfare.*

The Mines Advisory Group (MAG), one of the first major international humanitarian clearance operators, entered Laos in 1994 to begin clearance. In 1989, MAG was founded to help clear the remains of Soviet-era conflicts in Afghanistan. The formation of international humanitarian clearance operators and of an international clearance sector indexes global sociopolitical shifts in the 1990s: as the Soviet Union collapsed, many former Cold War battlefields began opening up to Western humanitarian and developmental intervention. The suffix "humanitarianism," in this period, came to refer to victim-centered forms of care and intervention (Rosenblatt 2015). In the 1990s, the apparatus of war was shifting; the world's first humanitarian clearance operators (MAG, HALO Trust, etc.) were founded in the post-Soviet period by former soldiers choosing to use their skills to clear battlefields rather than fight in them. Humanitarian operators, as opposed to corporate or private operators, work to clear local communities regardless of economic status (though land use does factor into how land is prioritized for clearance) and are not hired privately or paid per area cleared. Today, the international clearance sector is composed of both corporate and humanitarian clearance operators; international organizations that create standards for the sector, notably the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, founded in 1998; publications and research in mine action; and international advocacy groups supporting policies for the deployment, stockpiling, and destruction of ordnance. As the most cluster-bombed country in the world, and one of the earliest sites of humanitarian clearance, Laos has become an important testing ground for cluster munition clearance methods.

Bomb technicians that worked in Laos at the start of official clearance described a "ground harvest" of bombs lying so thick on the surface that they could be gathered carefully by hand. A Lao interlocutor in the bomb clearance sector told me that when his family returned to his home village after the war (this was before he worked as a bomb technician), his family discovered a "harvest of bombs" and began gathering them in baskets like fallen fruit. His family collected these bombs at a central point and, when

* Laos was not the only testing ground for these new types of counterinsurgency warfare. See Pedersen (2012) on the parallel El Salvador model used in Iraq.

the pile got large enough, lit it on fire from afar—bombs as numerous as fruit, needing to be harvested before they explode. Adding poignant depth to this analogy (bombs as fruit), many kinds of cluster submunitions look like fruits. In Lao, bombs are often called by the names of the fruits they most resemble: a BLU-3 cluster submunition, which is yellow and sits upright upon a flat base, with a large spray of metal fins, is known as a pineapple bomb (*laberd mak nad*). A rocket-propelled grenade, which is long and thin, with a bulbous nose, is known as a cucumber bomb (*laberd mak dtaeng*). And on through the inventory of local fruits and found ordnance (see figure I.2). Another Lao bomb technician once asked me, with all seriousness, whether the American military had studied Lao native fruits in order to design their bombs to "look like fruit, so we will pick them up."

War remains provoke an ongoing, irregular process of social and material ruination: the contamination of the everyday. This process of contamination counters common distinctions between war and postwar—I extend this insight to the broader critique of postcolonial, postconflict, and postsocialist processes, which I return to throughout the book. In analyzing what remains and persists, I draw on recent scholarship of ruins and ruination. Yael Navaro-Yashin, researching postwar Cyprus, uses "ruination" to refer to the "material remains or artifacts of destruction and violation," such as land mines, as well as "to the subjectivities and residual affects that linger . . . in the aftermath of war or violence" (2012, 162). Ruination is an ongoing desolation that matures over time. Ann Laura Stoler (2013, 7), another scholar who attends to the material remains of imperialism, theorizes ruination as "an active, ongoing process that allocates imperial debris differentially," often through the effacement of ruination itself via its erasure from official representation. Military waste contamination creates active ruins that arrest possible futures, especially with regard to postwar reconstruction and development. The ruinous materials in former battlefields are not relics; they are active, corrosive elements of the present and future. The challenge of this kind of scholarship is to understand how violent imperial processes persist in peace, present just beneath the surface of people's lives. My use of mortalism is an elaboration of this scholarly attention toward ruination—my own effort to understand how bombs become part of life. In these former battlefields, deathly agency may work as a counterpolitics to imperialist claims to life and power. As a kind of strategic scholarship, for myself and other scholars, "we look to the lives of those living *in* [ruins]" (Stoler 2013, 15, emphasis in original).

Revivals

Revival is a conceptual frame for analyzing the parallelism of socioeconomic reform, religious awakening, and authoritarian renovation. I use the notion of revivals to invite an analysis of time characterized by resurrections and returns that is inclusive of temporal complexities and pluralities. I am examining a temporal dynamic in which intersecting or layering legacies may produce events that exceed linear cause and effect. Benedict Anderson famously analyzed related experiences of layering temporalities in Southeast Asia as a kind of haunting: linkages to remote events may become so thick as to be disorienting, resulting in a sense of being haunted by the "spectre of comparisons" (1998, 2). Anderson's analysis focuses on the layering process of nation building through colonialism and independence. In the Lao context, the Party state's call for revival is provoked by parallel processes of decolonialization, postwar reconstruction, and liberalization. Additionally, the present revival activates regional cosmologies of state power predicated on moral and temporal cycles in which past, present, and future events coincide.

In 1986, the Lao Communist Party announced a new economic mechanism that opened Laos to nonsocialist sources of aid and investment in a shift toward a market-oriented economy. These ongoing socioeconomic and political reforms are referred to collectively as the Renovation. The Renovation process is extremely fraught, a product of what Grant Evans (1998, 10) identifies as the "serious existential crisis" of the Lao state after the fall of the Soviet Union and weakening of the Communist Brotherhood in Asia in the late 1980s and 1990s. Socialist sources of development aid had begun to dissolve. Shaken by the slow collapse of the Soviet Union, the Lao government's project of socialist construction effectively ended by 1985. By the middle of the 1990s, socialist sources of aid had dwindled to nearly nothing, and by then, Laos had already shifted its base toward liberal funders and models of development (including both private funders and the World Bank). I use "development" to refer to the continuation of particular practices, discourses, and relations between former colonial/imperial powers and former colonies/territories beyond the World War era (Elyachar 2012b). In this book, I use the language of development to examine the particular conjuncture of conflict and reconstruction, or the continuation of relations postconflict. Imbricated in these geopolitical shifts, globally, development in the 1980s more often focused on neoliberal reforms in newly independent

states, such as privatizing basic infrastructure (Elyachar 2012b). The forms of aid that predominated in this region after the fall of the Soviet Union often came with social and economic entailments—particular forms of expertise and accountability designed to facilitate the liberalization and decentralization of the Lao Party state.

Throughout these ongoing socioeconomic transformations, the Party sought widespread reform without compromising its single-party leadership. Economic practices previously classified by the Party as neocolonialist, such as the privatization of utilities, were carefully enacted under the guidance of the World Bank and other Western financial and development assistance organizations (Phraxayavong 2009, 135). The post-1985 period of liberalization is the latest in an ongoing effort to create a viable Lao state, characterized by adaptability, rather than by a necessary rupture with socialism. This way of understanding Lao nation building shares traits with classic galactic polity or mandala states (Tambiah 1976; Wolters 1999), as well as being informed by Theravada Buddhist concepts of cyclical time (Hansen 2007). The process of creating a viable Lao state has both temporal and spatial dimensions, manifest through cycles of crisis, destruction, and revival. The total bombing of most major cities and towns during the Secret War unexpectedly accommodates this larger pattern of pulsating urban centers, by turns shrinking and growing. The communist liberation was also a project of urban planning and reform: the creation of cave cities safe from constant bombardment and, after the war, the relocation or reconstruction of bombed-out villages, towns, and cities based upon new, socialist plans. The town of Sepon, a key site of analysis in chapter 2, is one example of a city that was recentered after the war. In its early plans, the new regime was characterized by adaptation rather than rigid dogmatism: in response to the widespread failure of farming cooperatives, collectivization was largely abandoned by 1979, just a few years after the revolution (Askew, Logan, and Long 2006; Evans 1990). Socioeconomic revival and reconstruction were not restricted to the post-Soviet years, but have characterized the Party's ongoing adaptation to the needs of a newly independent but war-ravaged state.

Forty years after the Vietnam-American War ended, development has overtaken any overt process of postwar reconstruction. Laos today receives more foreign aid and financial investment than it has at any other time in its history, surpassing even military assistance and aid to the Royal Lao Government during the Secret War (Phraxayavong 2009, 209). Contemporary

Laos is ranked by the United Nations as one of the least developed countries (LDC) in the world; Laos is also the only such country that has active plans to graduate from that status by 2020 (Cooper 2014). This plan includes a Lao-specific Millennium Development Goal to "Reduce the Impact of UXO" (MDG9). As part of this plan, clearance is currently managed as an aspect of rural poverty alleviation and development—not as an aspect of postwar reconstruction. The clearance sector in Laos is formally managed by the National Authority for UXO/Mine Action. This agency has oversight over explosives clearance, victim assistance, risk education, and national data management and reporting. The clearance sector has been centralized under the purview of the Party state—somewhat notoriously (for my clearance interlocutors) without proper procedures such as audits, anticorruption programs, and financial transparency. Party management of clearance, and the presentation of the Lao state as the victim of bombings, obscures the state's ongoing corruption problems and human rights abuses. There is an essential conundrum at the heart of the clearance sector in Laos: even as the state supports international conventions to ban cluster munitions and land mines, capitalizing on its status as the most bombed country in the world, it is stockpiling antipersonnel mines and has yet to sign the Mine Ban Treaty (LCMM 2017).

In Laos, the language of development also carries additional social and spiritual connotations: development is alternately translated in Lao as either *phattana* or *jaleun*. Both words describe spiritual and material development; in the Lao context, there is no strict division between attaining material prosperity, political influence, and spiritual power. Jaleun, in particular, describes an entity's ability to attain its fullest positive expression, often rendered in terms of attaining enlightenment. The term is tightly linked with spiritual ability (for Buddhists, this means merit-making practices in this life as well as karma from past lives). In recent years, jaleun has become significant due to its association with promises of prosperity and spiritual attainment and its contrast with prior socialist calls for austerity and secularity (Singh 2014). Buddhist rituals that invoke jaleun, such as *basi* ceremonies formerly practiced by the nobility, are now used to bless development projects and otherwise incorporated into the Lao state's exercise of power (Ladwig 2015; Singh 2014). My use of the concept of revival, with its religious connotations in English, is intended to remind the reader of these additional processes of spiritual renewal encoded in development in the Lao context.

In Laos, the development sector consists of international and nongovernmental organizations, local and foreign consultants, local nonprofit associations, mass organizations within the Lao Front for Socialist Construction, government ministries, and village committees. "Nonprofit association" is an official term describing what, in a liberal context, would be called a civil society organization—however, in Lao socialist practice, there is no official distinction between state and civil society. Over this same period, legally recognized religious practices have been broadened and reoriented toward development and economic reform under the control of the Lao Front. Buddhist groups are managed by the government as mass organizations within the Lao Front—Buddhism's official role within the Party state is as an apparatus for socialist, moral education. Elaborating on the religious connotations of phattana and jaleun, I analyze the Lao Sangha (monastic community) and associated groups as part of the Lao development sector. This broader analysis of development derives from my ethnographic data on the overlap between religious and material development and my fieldwork with faith-based development organizations negotiating projects within the Lao Front.

My interlocutors in the development sector told me repeatedly, often accompanied by a shrug of the shoulders or a deep sigh, that "Laos does not have jaleun." Noting a similar refrain among forestry developers, Sarinda Singh writes that while the Lao state is not recognized as having jaleun (an internal capacity for prosperity), "the Lao state is locally perceived as having potential—a power that is yet to be fully realized" (2012, 14). The Lao state's potential for positive transformation is a powerful legitimizer of its political authority, even in the absence of evident successes. The Lao state possesses a latent power: "For the state to have potential, it does not need to be consistently strong, but it does need people to believe that the state has the capacity to provide them with benefits" (Singh 2012, 15). As other scholars of Laos have noted, local political engagement is characterized by extreme ambivalence: colloquial accounts of state corruption and violence are in tension with desires for access, infrastructure, and support (Evans 1990; High 2014; Singh 2014). In Holly High's ethnography of rural development in southern Laos, the state is experienced by locals as "both a potential source of benefit and as a potential source of destruction" (2014, 103). New poverty reduction plans and development programs are often welcomed as evidence of the state's revival, while simultaneously provoking distrust and suspicion among the participants in these programs. High elaborates: "Even

when demands for state largess [remain] often unfulfilled, and themselves become the source of disgruntlement, the fantasy remains, and is indeed intensified. The state haunts even those who reject it most forcibly—and this capacity for resurrection and return is one of the key characteristics of desire itself" (2014, 124). Desire for development, desire for progress, occurs in parallel with a haunting sense of corruption and violence. This desire for the state's power to be actualized, rather than latent, has contributed to what High identifies as the "desiring resurrection of the state" (2014, 150). As I describe in chapter 2, these discourses of resurrection often reference a mythical prewar past in which Laos was politically independent, spiritually resolute, and economically prosperous.

Liberalization intensified the new regime's promises of national prosperity: in 1991, at the height of these global and Lao-specific reforms, the Lao state slogan ("Peace, Independence, Unity and Socialism") was amended to include the word "prosperity" (which replaced the word "socialism"). In the same period, the hammer and sickle on the national seal was replaced with the profile of That Luang stupa, commonly recognized as the sacred center of the Lao state (see figure I.4). In these shifts in national symbology, older religious models (coupled with economic reform) replace socialism as the motor of progress. Faith, rather than socialism, appears to sanction the morality of increasing economic prosperity. This practice is in line with a long tradition of Buddhist governance in mainland Southeast Asia (Hansen 2007; Reid 1993; Schober 2010; Tambiah 1984). Speaking generally, scholars have identified Buddhism as the cosmology of the state in mainland Southeast Asia, to the degree that political or economic shifts may be enacted through Buddhist reforms or vice versa (Hansen 2007; Schober 2010). As Reid (1993, 169) reminds us in his now-classic history of Southeast Asia, "all power was spiritual" in this region. Anne R. Hansen (2007), studying Buddhist modernism in colonial and postcolonial Cambodia, understands modern state reforms as part of a long tradition of Buddhist purification or renewal. Sociopolitical shifts may present as the erosion of religious systems, requiring moral revival and reform. In Buddhist cosmology, moral progress necessarily manifests different kinds of worlds through time. More specifically, "the corporeality of the world, its inhabitants, and its temporal cycles are tied to the moral behavior of human beings" (Hansen 2007, 22). Reforms are a natural and inevitable part of how people respond to change, and manifest change, in a world that is always in process. Contra reform, continuity in this cosmology is something that has to be worked for "through

FIGURE 1.4 That Luang stupa receiving offerings during the yearly festival in its honor. Photo by the author.

the replication and renewal of earlier forms" (Tambiah 1984, 240). Things do not endure; continuity is achievable only through replication or renewal.

These religious concepts of sovereignty and revival were never completely effaced: significantly, the 1975 liberation was officially celebrated via a Party march to That Luang; and the yearly That Luang festival (to ritually support the prosperity of the state) was permitted by the Party even in the early years of intense socialist reform (Askew, Logan, and Long 2007; Ladwig 2015). Analyzed within this larger cosmology of spiritual renewal, the present revival appears as just the latest in a long cycle of spiritual and material development. In this kind of cyclical time, the old and the new may sometimes switch places: socialist regulations governing comportment and dress are loosening, and Buddhist rituals (associated with the monarchy) are now often practiced by government officials and even Party members (Evans 1998). People are now often wearing older styles of clothing associated with the monarchy, especially the *sihn*, or ethnic Lao skirt. Yet the choice to revive older practices has come to point to a "future imagined modernity, not to the past" (Evans 1998, 87). In spite of these renewed promises of wealth via social and spiritual renewal, and partly due to its new economic entanglement

with Thailand, Laos was extremely hard hit by the 1997 Asian financial crisis and 2008 global mortgage crisis. The present Renovation era carries this additional charge, a potentiality after crisis or between past and future crises.

Methodological Frame

This four-year field research project began in 2012 and ended in 2015, involving a total of seventeen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Laos. My primary research site was Vientiane, the capital of Laos, where I was hosted primarily by an explosives clearance operator (2012–13) and a faith-based development organization (2014–15). Beyond the capital, I spent significant time conducting fieldwork with development organizations and explosive clearance teams from four different operators in four provinces of the country: in the far north, Xieng Khouang Province, original stronghold of the communist Pathet Lao revolutionaries and site of the secret city of Long Tieng, an airbase from which the CIA managed its covert bombings; Khammouane Province, mostly forested and mountainous; Savannakhet Province, whose name means City of Paradise, a former royal capital and colonial capital; and, to the far south, Salavan Province, stretched across the agriculturally fertile Bolaven Plateau. These provinces are the most contaminated parts of Laos. I also conducted trips to Champasak Province, Luang Namtha Province, and Luang Prabang Province.

My fieldwork was characterized by learning how to perceive what is only unevenly perceivable, or layered beneath what is overtly perceivable. This was largely a challenge inherent to studying military waste a half century after war—ethnographic evidence almost necessarily consists of traces, ghosts, remains. "Remains," here, is also a methodological concept. The constitutive parts of my fieldwork praxis acquired surreal, often sinister, qualities. "Evidence," for example, is a technical term in the explosives clearance sector for data used to determine if clearance is necessary in a particular area. A bomb is evidence. A crater is evidence. Evidence often explodes, destroying itself and the person who found it. A death is evidence. This adjustment of fieldwork praxis has been remarked upon by other ethnographers in their own studies of violence. E. V. Daniel, in his work on political violence in Sri Lanka, writes, "The very words 'project,' 'informants,' 'information,' 'interview,' 'evidence,' 'description' took on new and terrifying meanings" (1996, 3). The methodological and theoretical praxis for his research were in "a state of utter discordance that [was] sustained by the relentless presence—now

exploding, now simmering—of violence" (3). But whereas Daniel experienced a terrorizing of seemingly normal parts of his research (an interview, a project), I experienced the normalization of terror in my field site. Daily life and war violence merge such that the violence is no longer exceptional. In this shaping of the everyday by military waste, it becomes difficult to hold on to the terror of violence—cluster bombs contaminate people's everyday lives, becoming just one among many risks and resources for people inhabiting these often rural and impoverished parts of Laos. This experience of having my research methods terrorized by war is part of my development of hazardous research methods as outlined in chapter 1.

Military waste is perceivable only from certain vantage points, a quality that bomb technicians calculate in order to occupy positions of safety on the margins of controlled demolitions. I examine this phenomenon, as it relates to the sound of explosions, in chapter 3, where I explore the process of learning to listen from the margins of explosions. In the course of this research, I actively engaged my interlocutors in learning to perceive remains of war. One of these interlocutors, a bomb technician, and I would play a guessing game: "Is it a crater or a hole?" One of us would point out a hole in the ground and the other would guess whether it was a bomb crater—and had to justify the answer with evidence. Holes that drew our attention might variously include watering holes, buffalo ponds, fish farms, trash pits, fire pits, and drainage caches. My interlocutor, for example, might point out that there was a small lip of debris around the rim of a fish pond, indicating that the hole was probably produced by an explosion. The ability to correctly identify craters and holes was an important part of clearance survey practices; during the survey stage, craters were evidence used to determine if an area was contaminated. Additionally, correctly identifying craters was an important way to manage one's own safety in an area that might or might not be contaminated.

This unsettling sensibility—learning to recognize the traces of war—contaminated my fieldwork even when I was not working directly in a clearance zone. A visit to an interlocutor's home village in rural Savannakhet stands out as formative of this experience. While staying with my interlocutor's family, I regularly accompanied her when she escorted the family's buffalo from morning pasture to evening pasture. The pastures were situated around many circular ponds in which the buffalo sat with supreme contentment. My memories of this village were similarly suffused with feelings of comfort and ease. Later, when I was taking a plane back to Vientiane, the

plane happened to take a route that flew over this same village. We were flying low enough to the ground that I could distinguish the features of the recognizable houses, pastures, and footpaths of my interlocutor's home. It occurred to me: this is what villages look like to bomber pilots. And from that height, I could recognize that the large ponds in the pastures were actually arranged in a bomb strike pattern. They were bomb craters, not only ponds. Conducting this research well required that I learn how to switch between points of view, learning to see from the ground as easily as from the air. Those bomb ponds, like many ghostly traces of war, were difficult to perceive directly from any single position. This perceptual switching was tempered by a sense of elision, or misdirection, akin to looking for an optical illusion in a holographic image.

Ethnographic reorientations such as these invite a discussion of the politics of perception in fieldwork. Accounts of ethnographic methods for studying war and violence have focused on questions of representation (Daniel 1996; Nordstrom 2004). I was much more vexed by questions of perception. There seemed to be a major disjuncture between the mode of empiricism I had been taught as an ethnographer (one premised on lived, everyday experience) and the surreal experiences of myself and my interlocutors inhabiting these zones of military waste. I use the word "surreal" to indicate the experience of layering realities, by which the everyday is punctuated by latent danger lying beneath and lingering into the future. The very material of everyday life seemed to be contaminated in a way that resisted my awareness. I had to learn to perceive military waste, even though it was right there beneath my feet. How do I perceive and study this subtle subterranean violence, with all its complex and unintended effects, and also study those presently living just above it?

Learning to carry out this fieldwork and interpret my field data meant increasing my capacity to dwell in "nonknowing," which I experienced in Laos primarily as a sense of perpetual secrecy and paranoia (after Agamben; see Jackson 2013, 153). In my ethnographic practice, I cultivated "knowledge about absence," where "loss of knowledge [was treated] as part of the data, not as loss of the data" (Strathern 2004, 97–98). I found that this research frustrated my every effort at "thick description," which I understood as a mode of theory and representation rooted in the disclosure of cultural context, meaning, and depth (Geertz 1973). The very act of cultural disclosure became untenable, particularly as I sought to deflect frequent accusations that I was a spy or that my research was unsafe because I was being spied on.

The injunction to keep things secret and private constituted a crucial quality of my ethnographic data, compelling methods and modes of representation attentive to silence and uncertainty. These methodological and ethical struggles had the unexpected consequence of troubling my assumptions about the act of ethnography, particularly as a practice of empirical research and writing. Critically engaging with conventions in ethnographic writing toward the "fetishization of thickness" (Jackson 2013, 152), I examine modes of writing premised on thin description and related ethical and representational responses (Jackson 2013; Love 2013; Simpson 2014). Thinness and thickness are parallel representational practices in that they exist in generative tension, without necessarily converging or contradicting each other. My use of thin description is not a rejection of the Geertzian model of thick description, but is a related representational practice rooted in the particularities of my field site (such as my interlocutors' paranoia and reticence to speak). I strive to accurately describe the thinness of my data and respect my interlocutors' choices for nondisclosure (where thinness is, itself, a form of ethnographic evidence).

Clifford Geertz asserts that "ethnography is thick description and ethnographers are those who are doing the describing" (1973, 16). Yet even as he propounds an interpretive method of thickness, Geertz is careful to warn that "cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete" (29). He writes that "coherence cannot be the major test of validity for a cultural description. . . . The force of our interpretations cannot rest, as they are now so often made to do, on the tightness with which they hold together, or the assurance with which they are argued" (17). One of Geertz's examples of comparable interpretive rigor is the act of interpreting a poem, in which the reading of the poem includes an explication of the interpretive logic of the poet and the poem's readers: who wrote the poem, who reads the poem, and what meanings the poem evokes for readers (rather than simply counting its lines and syllables). The goal is not analytic totality, the presumption of seeing or understanding everything; an interpretation has succeeded when it evokes the imaginative universe that imbues poems with meaning for poets and readers alike. In chapter 1, I examine my own use of poetry as a field method for recording and analyzing complexity and contradiction.

This approach to ethnographic fieldwork follows a tradition in feminist anthropology of cultivating "partial knowledge" as a tonic against modes of knowledge production that assume privileged total access to phenomena (Strathern 2004). I adapt parallelism as a methodological concept in this

book in the manner of feminist theories that root methods in lived, embodied experiences of struggle. Turning to Sara Ahmed's use of sweaty concepts: "Sweat is bodily; we might sweat more during more strenuous and muscular activity. A sweaty concept might come out of a bodily experience that is trying. The task is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty" (2017, 13). My methods are inspired by the very real challenges of carrying out fieldwork in a repressive, authoritarian country with a record of human rights abuse, where I and my interlocutors were subject to ongoing government surveillance and threat. With this kind of knowledge, as for many kinds of qualitative data, certainty and completeness cannot be the rubric for success. Instead, there is an impulse to wrangle with the qualities of knowledge itself (and of knowledge production) as an ethnographic process that involves interactions with one's informants. An interlocutor's or researcher's choices to not disclose details of a story are an important aspect of research ethics: these moments of "ethnographic refusal" (Simpson 2014) are poignant encounters with the personal stakes of research and representation—and opportunities to carefully assess research practices. Carrying out this fieldwork provoked me to reassess the methods/ethics framework in ethnography; my use of parallelism as a framing concept emerged from this careful reassessment. Parallelism is not a concept that facilitates resolution—it is a concept of ongoing struggle, irresolution, and incompleteness. As I describe in chapter 1, parallelism became a crucial method of attention to the unsaid, silenced, or contradictory. My response to these methodological and ethical challenges was to preserve the incompleteness of my data, in some cases by examining gaps in data or, in other cases, by purposefully obscuring details of my interlocutors' lives. There is thus a parity between my experiences of carrying out this research and my analytic framing of the book: I preserve the sense of struggle and absence within my writing.

As a consequence of my careful attention to these methodological and ethical concerns, I have chosen to eschew standard anonymization practices that replace subject identifiers with composite characters or fake identifiers. None of my interlocutors are identified by name, and only the most minimal details of their lives are presented to the reader. I carefully present uncertainties in my ethnographic data and maintain disrupted narratives as constitutive of my ethnographic analysis. Where appropriate to my argument, I may mark that an interlocutor is recurring from a previous chapter, but, in general, I also eschew creating narrative arcs for specific, recurring

interlocutors. This partially replicates my field notation practices, in which I assigned interlocutors code names in the field (that could be decoded later using a cipher that I memorized) and thus never included actual names in my field notes. "Thin description is soaked in purposeful cover-ups, nonrevelations, and calculated glosses. . . . So, there are secrets you keep. That you treat very preciously. Names of research subjects you share but many more you do not. There is information veiled for the sake of story. For the sake of much more" (Jackson 2013, 153). The reader's sense of incompleteness is intentional; I am replicating, in my writing choices, the qualia of paranoia and secrecy that characterized my ethnographic data. A representational practice of thinness and partiality is not a license to write anything, any which way I choose without regard to validity. For kinds of data that are silenced or ghostly, direct disclosure or overly zealous fact checking may counter the aim of research; there are many kinds of ethnographic data for which existential questions of truth or objectivity are simply beside the point. I am not rejecting conventional modes of ethnographic writing, but rather pursuing shared goals of humility, respect, and care toward the interlocutors and the communities I study.

In format, my book performs its own response to these concerns: the chapters of this book are arranged to provoke parallel readings, for example, through the repetition of topics across chapters; and within each chapter, I juxtapose individual sections and employ / marks to bring parallels to the reader's attention (such as the remains/revivals parallel). The reader will find poems as interleaves between each chapter of the book (the first is just prior to this introduction). This is designed to create a sense of parallel reading: one may read the poems as standalone pieces, in the interleaves, without theorization or critique; or one may read, in the chapters themselves or in the appendix, the poems as analytic entities subject to explanation. My use of poetry plays with the idea of ethnographic data in a text—a playful nod to Geertz's (1983, 70) famous assertion that learning the "natives' inner lives" is very like learning to properly "read a poem," where cultures are approached analytically as texts. The reader's process of interpreting these poems is expressive of my fieldwork experience; an experience of interpretive uncertainty that was very present in my ethnographic data. This builds toward my larger claim that narrative language does not have a monopoly on truth, or more pointedly, on representing field data. Some field data are best recorded as narrative notes; other data as poems (Faulkner 2009); others as drawings (Taussig 2011); others as audio recordings (Feld 2012), and so on.

I assert that, as anthropologists, the heterogeneity of our field data compels us to acquire more flexibility (and playfulness) in our data collection and representation practices. This book is one, among many, interventions in the field that presents nonnarrative forms of scholarship alongside more conventional narrative scholarship.

Chapter Overview

The book begins with a chapter on parallelism and proceeds through three ethnographic chapters that each explores a different aspect of remains/revivals in contemporary Laos. In chapter 1, "The Dragon and the River," I present an argument for parallelism as a method of ethnographic attention and as ethnographic evidence for contemporary Lao politics. This chapter introduces my primary field sites and fieldwork relations with development organizations and clearance operators, and, via an examination of authoritarianism and the culture of paranoia in Laos, also foregrounds contemporary dangers of the lingering remains of a half-century-old war. The title of the chapter refers to a simple parallel: the government has outlawed swimming in the river because the water dragon is dangerous and the river current is dangerous. The two statements express a tension in Lao politics wherein the current secular socialist regime cannot officially recognize the dragon's traditional, religious claims to sovereignty and violence. Spurred by the challenges of carrying out fieldwork in an authoritarian socialist country, I examine Laos's culture of paranoia as ethnographic evidence of authoritarian revival and as incitement to methodological innovation. I draw on ethnographic examples of Lao poetic parallelism to develop a method of poetic inquiry, what I term "fieldpoems," for hazardous fieldwork.

In chapter 2, "Ghost Mine," I examine the haunting of Sepon, an industrial center in the mountains of Savannakhet. Sepon is both the home of Laos's first gold mine (the centerpiece of the state's economic liberalization plan) and one of the most war-contaminated zones in the country. Based on fieldwork with explosives clearance teams in Sepon and interviews with workers at the gold mine, I examine the fraught resurrection of the state at the Sepon Gold Mine (High 2014). Workers at the mine are unearthing gold, copper, explosive bombs, archaeological artifacts, and ghosts that possess mine workers. The gold mine is also a ghost mine: a place where one unearths ghosts or becomes a ghost oneself. I analyze parallel accounts of the gold mine and ghost mine to develop a hauntology of military waste in Laos.

In chapter 3, "Blast Radius," I use the sound of an explosion as my entrance into an analysis of endangerment and embodiment in contaminated zones. I analyze this sound within a Lao cosmology of resonant power. A bomb that explodes within this field of force has a sociopolitical and spiritual blast radius. People inhabit this blast radius as a zone of disabling possibility—whether or not they are directly injured by the blast. Turning to the resonant power of other sounds within this cosmology, I contrast the sound of a bomb going off with the sound of chanted poetry used by Buddhist monks during mine risk education trainings.

In the conclusion, "Phaseout," I reflect on the ending of my fieldwork and the concomitant phaseout of a major development organization that hosted part of my research. This organization's exit from Laos was compelled, in part, by the forced disappearance of Sombath Somphone, a high-profile Lao aid worker. To explain the haunting of Laos's present revival, I analyze the forced disappearance of Sombath and his ghost's subsequent haunting of the Lao development sector. I compare this phaseout with my own ambivalent entrance/exit to fieldwork in Laos. I use this account of the haunting of Lao development to summarize the process of remains/revivals in contemporary Laos. I use these accounts of disappearance and phaseout to examine the stakes in developing a hazardous research methods tool kit and to extend an invitation to future work on the anthropology of military waste. My reflection on exits, phaseouts, and disappearances appropriately concludes the book.

FIELDPOEM 11

The Fruit Eaters

The exceedingly virtuous eat only fruit that freely falls
without knowledge of death

She forages from the forest:
cucumber bombs
guava bombs
bael bombs
pineapple bombs
melon bombs

"Sometimes I wonder if they
are supposed to look like fruit
so that we will pick them up."

She holds a yellow bomb the size of her fist
with fins like the blades of pineapples

Appendix. Notes on Fieldpoems

FIELDPOEM 30: *Postwar*

After completing fieldwork, I returned to my native California. I wrote this poem on the Amtrak train from Oakland to a family gathering in Fresno—the train passed by military training grounds, farm fields abandoned due to the extreme drought, protest signs claiming local water rights, laborers bent double picking fruit, shantytowns, strip malls, and new housing complexes on the expanding edge of suburbia. This was the last fieldpoem I wrote during research.

FIELDPOEM 11: *The Fruit Eaters*

Cluster submunitions, the most common type of military waste in Laos, are called by the names of the fruits they most resemble. People often encounter bombs while foraging for wild foods in the forests surrounding their villages. The title of the poem is a reference to fruit eaters, a Theravada Buddhist name for beings who exit the cycles of violence that characterize our world by practicing virtuous eating habits. In a special paradise realm, these merit-filled people eat only fruit that falls from wild trees. Such food is free from karmic entailments (e.g., the bad karma of slaughtering animals). I heard this analogy frequently enough from villagers and clearance technicians that it stuck in my mind, long before I had made the connection to the Buddhist realm of the fruit eaters. Adding poignant depth to the analogy, many kinds of cluster submunitions look like wild fruits. The clearance technician quoted in the poem wonders if American weapons experts had studied Lao native fruits in order to make their bombs especially insidious. This poem won an Ethnographic Poetry Prize from the Society for Humanistic Anthropology.