



## The Dragon and the River: Poetic Parallelism in Hazardous Research

LEAH ZANI

*Department of Anthropology, School of Social and Behavioral Sciences  
University of California, Irvine  
3151 Social Sciences Plaza, Irvine, CA, 92697*

**SUMMARY** *I offer poetic parallelism as evidence for an ethnography of authoritarian power in Laos and as a conceptual frame for understanding hazards in ethnography and anthropological knowledge production. Parallel poems take the form of juxtaposed statements, often characterized by multiplicity and contradiction. In an authoritarian context marked by state violence, the very form of the parallels is data on Lao society. I examine poetic parallels as a provocation to write field poems rather than field notes. [ethnographic method, hazards, Laos, parallelism, poetry]*

After the monsoon rains, regular as clockwork every afternoon, I stopped by a friend's shop for tea and conversation.<sup>1</sup> Her shop was a few blocks from the Mekong river in downtown Vientiane, the capital of Laos. Along this part of the river bank preparations were under way for the Boat Racing Festival to honor and entertain the *naga*, or water dragons, that live in the river. Historically, *naga* have been keepers of civil order in Mekong cities (Askew et al. 2007). *Naga* sanction laws, adjudicate conflicts, appoint rulers, and devour wrongdoers. A *naga* is content when the government is prosperous, lawful, and devout. If the government is weak or immoral, *naga* may show their displeasure by rampaging through riverside communities. Over tea, my friend wistfully commented that when she was a child people were respectful and made offerings to the Vientiane *naga*. Swimming fatalities were rare. Recently, however, there have been several prominent fatalities. The local government has banned swimming—even during the festival in the *naga*'s honor.

"So is the *naga* killing people and that is why swimming is illegal?"

She slowly shook her head to one side and then the other, equivocating, then looked me squarely in the eyes: "Leah, you must learn that the Lao think in two ways: the *naga* in the river *and* we don't know how deep it is."

I sat in the silence after her statement, waiting for further clarification which she did not provide. We were alone; there was no one else present to critique her remark, yet she spoke as if she was afraid. Vientiane was presently under curfew, and it was common to see soldiers on patrol or at checkpoints at major intersections, though there were none visible from our seats on the porch of her shop. I sipped my bael-fruit tea and thought. She made no effort to reconcile the dangerous *naga* and the dangerous river or to explain whether the government was afraid of the righteous anger of a Vientiane *naga*. My feeling was that the tension between her parallel

statements, the ability to “think in two ways,” was the meat of her remark: the government wants to protect its people from the currents of a monsoon-swollen river; *and* the government wants to prevent the local naga from devouring people, implying the regime’s weakness. Simultaneously, the government, nominally socialist and secular, will not publicly admit the naga’s existence. It was not merely that my question was simplistic. Rather, my assumption that there would only be one answer prevented me from appreciating crucial complexities of Lao politics and culture in a period of social reform, economic liberalization, and religious revival. My friend tried to teach me this lesson very early on in my fieldwork, but it was not until I became more familiar with Lao politics and the Lao language that I learned to follow her advice and “think in two ways.”

This article is inspired by this first encounter with ethnographic data in the form of parallels, though my argument is not limited to a discussion of the dragon and the river. As my Lao language skills improved, I came to recognize my friend’s statement as an example of a Lao way of expressing information in “two ways” simultaneously: poetic parallelism. Parallelism is a poetic form in which statements are juxtaposed, often through the repetition of similar sounds, grammars, structures, or themes. Parallels develop their richness from the latent equivalencies between everyday concepts; speakers draw on a shared pool of poetic references and current events to create subtle, textured parallels. The form has attracted scholarly attention for its potential to “provide insight into what the poets and their audiences themselves intuitively consider to be the most interesting equivalents” (Keane 1997:107).<sup>2</sup> Parallelism is a common poetic and cultural practice throughout Southeast Asia. The practice has its roots in spoken Lao and is not limited to strict poetic forms, though poetry is central to its cultural enactment in Laos. Simple parallels were commonly used in conversations among my friends and colleagues to craft nuanced jokes, express complex opinions, and share hazardous information.

I engage parallelism in the field as provocation to methodological reflection and innovation. In this sense, this article is “about” parallelism as a quality of hazardous research and not “about” Laos or Lao poetic parallelism, though it is inspired by the specific Lao hazards of surveillance, police harassment, self-censorship, and lingering war violence. I employ the term “hazard” as a broad conceptual frame that includes “hazards” encountered in the field, such as war violence, and “hazardous research methods” that engage these hazards as a means of anthropological knowledge production. The People’s Democratic Republic of Laos is an authoritarian, repressive regime, born of revolution and warfare. The surveillance paranoia that I analyze in this article is one component of a larger Lao “culture of terror,” which includes secret prison camps, forced resettlement, and political disappearance (Taussig 1997; see Zani, forthcoming for an extended discussion). “Cultures of terror” refers to sociopolitical systems in which “order [...] is maintained by the permanent, massive, and systematic use or threat of violence and intimidation by the state” against its own population, for whom “fear becomes a way of life” (Sluka 2000:22–23). For example, my interlocutor’s comment that “the government owns all the phone lines” is efficacious,

as a kind of paranoia rooted in state terror, regardless of the state's actual capacity to wiretap phones. While specific instances of surveillance may be implausible, this paranoia is supported by an authoritarian sociopolitical context characterized by the pervasive use of violence and threat. The surveillance paranoia that I analyze in this article constitutes only one possible type of research hazard; and poetic parallelism constitutes only one possible methodological response.

My fieldwork experiences imply a parallelism as method: my friend's skill at delicately describing the stakes in swimming in the river prompted me to consider my own ability to research hazardous topics. How might we ethically engage our interlocutors' paranoia? How might we learn to "hear" what is not speakable? Parallelism became a crucial mode of engaging these methodological and ethical concerns, while also being an important component of my data on postwar Laos. My fieldwork experiences of paranoia compel me to align my analysis of parallelism with the analysis of the sociocultural context that makes information hazardous. While the ethnographic accounts that I present are from both urban and rural contexts across three provinces of Laos, they each occurred in spaces of interaction between Lao and foreigners: local headquarters of foreign organizations, program sites for development projects, shops and cafes popular with both locals and foreigners. These are spaces of interaction but also spaces of surveillance and control. The capital Vientiane, with its special openness to foreigners, was particularly marked by surveillance, curfew, police checkpoints, and the like.

This article moves through a parallelism of its own in that it lies at the nexus of anthropological debates regarding the ethnography of violence (see, for example, Nordstrom 1997; Daniel 1996) and the hazards latent in ethnographic intimacy (see High 2011). My analysis engages these discipline-level discussions while being rooted in my ethnography of contemporary Laos. In an authoritarian context marked by state surveillance and the threat of violence, the very *form* of the parallels enacts relations and is itself data on Lao society. It is these linkages among poetry, paranoia, and hazardous research that I analyze in this article.

In the next section, I introduce Lao poetic parallelism as a method for presenting multiple statements simultaneously, inviting or foreclosing multiple readings. Understanding the features of parallels enables my analysis, in the later sections, of my own and my interlocutors' surveillance paranoia and the sociopolitical context that supported our paranoia. I engage surveillance paranoia as fieldwork dilemmas requiring an ethical response and as data for an ethnography of the Lao state. In the final section, I turn again to poetic parallelism to analyze my use of field poetry as a methodological and ethical response to experiences of hazard in fieldwork.

### **Lao Parallelism in Poetry and Practice**

The poetic form that I examine in this article was codified in the twentieth century as part of nationalist efforts to identify specifically "Lao" literature. The standardization of poems into two hemistiches, or distiches (split lines across parallel columns of the poem) occurred as recently as the

1990s—a process culminating in what Koret describes as the “reinvention of Lao literature” (1999:238). New poetic styles, authorized by the Ministry of Education, were taught in schools as a traditional “Lao” literary style. My interlocutors identified poetic parallelism as a “traditional” and “Buddhist” form, without recognizing its very recent standardization. The “Lao” form of parallelism is also commonly found in northeast Thailand and more broadly among non-Lao ethnicities within mainland Southeast Asia (Koret 1999).

Parallelism is a form of creativity with roots in the spoken Lao language. It is, after Jakobson’s pioneering theorization of the form, a kind of “pervasive parallelism” that activates interrelated domains of oral language, written language, and culture (1966:403). Written distiches replicate spoken parallels: repeating themes, words, and tones, as well as the use of assonance, alliteration, consonance, and silence. Most written Lao poems are likely to have originally existed as multiple, simultaneously circulating, oral versions (Koret 2000). When transcribed, poems are often written on perishable leaves or paper, requiring regular recopying for preservation and circulation. When a poem is recopied, it is frequently changed by the copier (generally a young monk). Poems rarely carry the name of an author, and under these circumstances of frequent and expected amendments, identifying a single author would miss the point. The poems do not have single authors. The content of poems follows a similar logic: topics, characters, themes, even lines or phrases are not considered the invention of a singular poet. Poets draw on a shared collection of poetic resources to craft poems; the skill is in the clever juxtaposition of known content rather than in the creation of new content. Koret elaborates:

To understand Lao literature and the nature of its composition, it is necessary to reconcile two conflicting statements, that individual Lao stories have multiple authorship and that they have no author at all. According to traditional Lao belief, the stories that comprise Lao literature are taken from Buddhist religious sources rather than being the creation of the Lao themselves. The literature’s perceived religious origin [...] makes the concept of literary authorship appear sacrilegious if not irrelevant (2000:210).

Poetry recapitulates the “this-worldly/otherworldly parallelism” that scholars have identified in Lao-Theravada Buddhist cosmology more generally (Holt 2009:39). This-worldly forms, whether poetical or political, are understood to exist in dynamic relation with the otherworlds of deities and spirits. The person who writes the poem does not consider her/himself to be the poem’s original creator but sits at some distance from the poem understood as an inspired, semi-autonomous entity.

This “doubling” effect is most clearly visible in the form of the poems themselves: a typical Lao poem is written as a set of two to four distinct columns. One reads across the distich, letting the gaps between columns enhance the resonance of the parallels. The centermost two columns contain the core content, with the outermost columns providing peripheral information on setting, time period, or speaker. Below, I have included the first two stanzas of a poem written by a group of “development monks” with whom

I conducted a mine-risk education project (see Fig. 1). The poem is part of a Buddhist sermon to be memorized and recited at religious events. The full poem includes sections on the danger of tampering with bombs, how to offer spiritual support to victims, and the importance of honoring disabled family members. I have kept the distich in my English version, though the norm is to remove them in translation, in order to preserve the crucial sense of distance. I transcribed the poem in phonetic Lao so that the sonic register of the parallels is more obvious:

Thaan thii maa jaak gkaam	daen daan din dai gaw dii
Thook thua thang logka	phaen phuum phai pheuun
Yoo ahsii leuu ahfrika nan	europ odsadaalii
Hed haa tii soi gkuu	phai haai manud khon
Honorable people from far-	away lands
All together the world	underneath the plains, mountains
Within Asia or Africa	Europe or Australia
Make us worthy to clear	dangerous bombs

In the original Lao, each part of the poem is itself made up of smaller parallels. The phrase “faraway lands” is split across the distich, such that the gap creates a sense of far-ness. The first line is split between the first half, marked by the repetition of the *th* consonant, and the last half, marked by the repetition of the long *aa* vowel. Within each half of the line, the sound repetitions create additional internal parallels between words (*thaaan thii*, for



**Figure 1.**  
Buddhist monks and novices developing Buddhist sermons about risk education at a training in Phonesavanh, Xieng Khouang Province. Source: Author. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

example). These paired sounds, in turn, resonate with the repetition of similar sounds or tones elsewhere in the poem. These examples of internal parallels elucidate three features of Lao poetry: first, that parallelism is a creative practice present at every scale of the poem and not merely a poetic form; second, that paired entities are equivalent but not identical. This is repetition with difference, each time. There is no assumption of allegiance or fidelity to an original. Third, pairs are not singular but are often multiply paired to other parts of the poem. Like Jakobson, in his analysis of parallels, I find that when the poems are subjected to analysis, they do not yield to simplicity but rather reveal “a network of multifarious compelling affinities” in which each line “is indissolubly interlaced with the near and distant verbal environment” (1966:429). Recall, there is no single author; the poems are written by no one and everyone at the same time. It is important to me, as a scholar, that my ethnography maintain this sense of incompleteness and frustrated origins. The power of parallels is in the friction, or juxtaposition, of things that seem like they should be the same, or should sound the same, but somehow do not.

When I initially translated this poem with one of my Lao tutors, I asked him if it was intentional that Asia and Africa were in one column, and Europe and Australia were in the other. I read an intimation of socioeconomic classes, where the bombs were associated with richer, Western countries (“Europe or Australia/dangerous bombs”). America, the source of most of the bombs, is pointedly not listed among the “honorable people.” He quickly cautioned me: “You could do that, but we must not read like that! If you read like that, it might make someone unhappy, so it is important that we just read across the columns.” Quite literally, the distiches in a poem may be read across or down. Some poems are intentionally written so that alternate meanings emerge horizontally or vertically. My tutor’s words reflected his concern with teaching me a proper reading, but his tone of voice implied that an improper reading was certainly possible, perhaps more so for me than for him (“*you* could do that, but *we* must not”). His caution implied the hazards in reading poems one way over another. Parallels have the power to invoke dangerous equivalents that may remain unvoiced, latent within the poem.

Often, Lao poems are written in what Koret calls a “pattern of three” or “AAB pattern” (2000:219), in which a final monostich summarizes the preceding parallels. Alternately, the final phrase may be purposely unvoiced, creating a monostich, as in the opening example about the naga and the river—my friend intended me to come to my own final conclusion. Her persistent silence triggered me more closely to examine her words. I was learning to “hear” the parallels and to “hear” the silence that exists between parallels. Below is a simple AAB poem improvised by a monk during the risk-education training. Recognizing that this monk was speaking a poem, I created a poetic transcription of his spoken words in my field notes, inductively splitting his words into hemistiches based on my familiarity with this poet and this form (Leavy 2009). I have added marks for the AAB pattern and included my own translation maintaining the AAB form:

Baw dtaaii (A1)    Baw dtai (A2)  
 Dtaaii dtai (B)

Don't die                    Don't do it  
 We all die

While the poem sounds dour in translation, it provoked laughter at the training due to its gallows humor and clever repetition of only two sounds (with tonal and vowel-length variation). As he said it, the orating monk gestured to a poster of a farmer reaching down to pick up a cluster bomblet in his field—don't pick up the bomb! This short poem demonstrates another feature of parallelism: successful parallels often feed off of a central tension or contradiction within the poem. The final line summarizes the tension: regardless of the risk reduction practices one learns, everyone is going to die in the end. The poem does not resolve this tension, only presents it as a fact of (Buddhist) existence.

### **Fieldwork in Socialist Asia**

I engaged parallels as a quality of hazardous ethnography. While my broader claim is that this method of attention is applicable to diverse hazards, the present analysis is rooted in my experiences carrying out fieldwork in Laos. My narrower claim is that parallelism may inform fieldwork methods for Laos and other socialist Asian countries. By making this narrower claim, I recognize the difference between socialist Asia and post-socialist Russia and Eastern Europe. Like Turner (2013), in her pioneering account of fieldwork in upland socialist Asia, I read post-Soviet scholarship as its own field not necessarily relevant to the study of modern Asian socialist states. The USSR and its communist satellites fell during the late 1980s. Liberalization and market integration occurred rapidly in communist regions, including Laos and its neighbors China and Vietnam. While communism “collapsed” in some areas, Laos, China, and Vietnam instituted gradual economic reforms while remaining centralized and single-party states. Urban Vientiane, in particular, is at the forefront of Laos’ fraught “opening” to Western developers and investors. Vientiane’s resulting mix of party cadres, social elites, and Western developers is equal parts economic frontier and authoritarian capital city with police checkpoints at every major intersection and entire city blocks under redevelopment. This regional context presents fieldwork challenges, particularly to Westerners and ethnographers, that are distinct from those experienced in other areas of the world. “Relationships in the field are a result of specific power structures,” and the analysis of fieldwork dilemmas is a critical, but often underrepresented, way to study power (Turner 2013:9). For example, ongoing policies of control over the movement of foreigners within Laos have a direct and immediate effect on my ability to access rural field sites. While recognizing the heterogeneity of my interlocutors’ descriptions of Laos’ socioeconomic system (“socialist,” “post-socialist,” “late socialist,” “directed capitalist,” “centralized market

economy," etc.), I choose to refer to Laos as socialist to reflect my experience conducting fieldwork in this region.

Almost no scholarship on fieldwork in Laos exists. Petit (2013) interprets this lack of information on fieldwork in Laos as a form of self-protection under authoritarianism—the discussion of state–researcher interactions may endanger access already hard won. Interactions with gatekeepers, normally sidelined as the pre-fieldwork negotiation, constitute valuable ethnographic data on the state itself. Considering these state–researcher interactions as a form of ethnography “sheds light on the very basic mechanisms of the state as experienced from within. Problematic situations such as refusals, bureaucratic harassment, no-reply strategies, denunciations and (self-)censorship paradoxically help to draw [. . . a] portrait of the state” (Petit 2013:144). High noted that her interlocutors’ stories of the Lao state “carried the emotional charge of speaking that which must not be said but which, nonetheless, is said compulsively and repetitiously” (2014:89). Such stories, often intentionally, lack links to actual persons or events and cannot be factually verified. There is no public, open discussion of the state in Laos. Instead, accounts that describe the “real” workings of the state are “a public secret [. . .] communicated to visitors in a way that shows this knowledge is supposed to be unknown, but that it is necessary to know nevertheless if one is to have any operational efficacy” (High 2014:90). Ambiguous procedures and public secrets frustrate efforts to explain standard fieldwork practices, and also indicate the enculturation of paranoia in interactions with officials (and fieldworkers).

Conducting fieldwork in China, Hansen (2006) argues for the impossibility of carrying out conventional ethnographic research in socialist Asia due to the power of party gatekeepers. Hansen refers to this as “walking in the footsteps of the Communist Party” (2006:82). I know this feeling. Due to travel restrictions on foreign researchers, it was far easier for me to study my NGO-worker colleagues in Vientiane, the capital city, than to conduct fieldwork in rural communities. On one of the few occasions when I managed to officially travel with my colleagues to a rural site in Luang Namtha Province, I was dismayed to discover that our van was being covertly escorted by two trucks of soldiers “for our protection.” “If anything happened, the District would be responsible,” a Lao colleague told me. My colleague politely deflected my queries for details on “anything happening,” which made her caution seem more sinister. The soldiers were instructed to arrive in the village before us, alert the villagers to our visit, and leave before we arrived. It was evident that I was not supposed to know that we were being supervised. We were traveling to a remote area dominated by non-Lao, non-Buddhist communities, a region my colleagues characterized as barely governable and extremely poor. In Lao ecopolitical cosmology, forested rural peripheries (and their inhabitants) are often thought to be uncivilized, lacking the internal capacity for social order (Singh 2012). The escort was silent and discrete—I never saw them or their guns—but their presence haunted my fieldwork. I found myself cultivating a “what if” ethics: What if “anything happened?” How do I fully comprehend the risks to my subjects

and myself when an open discussion of hazards was, itself, a hazard? On future trips, I pursued less official transportation.

These kinds of uncomfortable situations may be analyzed toward the study of fieldwork methods in socialist Asia, and, doubly, toward the ethnography of authoritarian power in contemporary Laos. An expat interlocutor who similarly discovered his own secret escort was deeply shaken; though a pacifist, he was unable to refuse his armed escort. Was the aid program for which he was scouting worth the risks implied by the soldiers? He refused the logic that linked the provision of services to armed surveillance but found himself implicated in it nonetheless. In our interactions with the armed guards assigned to us, I and my colleagues enacted a kind of distance. In the village, I was hyperconscious not to say or do anything that might cause the guards behind me to threaten the villagers. When given the opportunity to interview local shamans about spirit cult practices, I declined, knowing that such practices are sometimes suppressed by the state. I couldn't know how my interest would be interpreted by those invisible watchers. In adopting this attitude of cultivated distance, my scholarship became entangled in the everyday experience of authoritarianism.

### **"I Swear I'm Not a Spy"**

I extend these concerns with the entanglement of authoritarianism and scholarship to the development of fieldwork methods in the region. Fieldwork in Laos is impacted by ongoing, insidious, and violent geopolitical processes: most relevant to my analysis of hazardous research, my fieldwork was riddled with paranoia about surveillance. Nearly every one of my interlocutors voiced concerns about spies, either that they were being spied on or that I was a spy. While I had expected to encounter surveillance and had included increased subject protections in my preliminary research plan, it became apparent to me during the first months that I needed to address critically the pervasive paranoia of my interlocutors. I took up this challenge in two ways: first, to examine paranoia as ethnographic evidence; and second, as an incitement to methodological innovation. Parallelism, as a quality of evidence and method of attention, is crucial for addressing these challenges.

Fieldwork in Southeast Asia is part of a covert history of anthropologists working as spies. The first American Anthropological Association Statement on Ethics was written in response to anthropologists working for the U.S. government during the Vietnam–American War. During the war, some U.S. missionaries, researchers, and aid workers were enrolled as covert culture experts—part of the reason that the current Lao regime is nervous about ethnographic research. I could trace this history further back, to Franz Boas' (1919) famous tirade against the U.S. government's hiring of anthropologists as spies during the first World War. He wrote that these anthropological spies "have done the greatest possible disservice to scientific inquiry. In consequence of their acts every nation will look with distrust upon the visiting foreign investigator who wants to do honest

work, suspecting sinister designs" (1919). At the time, Boas was censured from the American Anthropological Association for his critiques. The council that censured Boas, it was later discovered, had already been infiltrated by spies.

References to spies punctuated my interviews. If we met in a public spot, interlocutors would often point out who in the area they thought was tailing them. Such comments could be presented in a playful way, or could carry a real charge of danger. In a memorable interview at a cafe, I met with a religious leader who had previously told me about his colleagues being threatened by soldiers, shot point blank in front of him, or simply disappeared. When a wealthy, large Lao man with a military demeanor, but dressed in plain clothes, entered the empty cafe and sat at an adjacent table, my interlocutor locked eyes with me fiercely. Without breaking eye contact, he pitched his voice louder and said "I don't hide from [the] government." After that, every word he said was voiced to carry to that other listener—the state. Our interview acquired the quality of being parallel; another version of that interview existed for the acknowledged, but silent, listener at the table next to us. Being told that an interlocutor's colleague was recently shot by the police for "collaborating" with foreign groups, and being spied on during interviews with this same interlocutor, pushes me to re-assess my subject protections. Our parallel interview (with me and with the spy) heightened my attention to what could be said and what could only be said by not speaking directly ("I don't hide from the government"). In this and other instances, my familiarity with parallelism was an important tool for recognizing and communicating hazards in research, especially in situations where the discussion of risk was itself hazardous. Listening for the unsaid requires a kind of paranoia, an attentive ear that is tuned to the fears of those being interviewed.<sup>3</sup>

My interlocutors' fears of espionage had unexpected consequences. After a week conducting fieldwork with a bomb clearance operator in Savannakhet Province, the team leader confided in me that she had agreed to my fieldwork request assuming that I was an American spy sent to check up on her team's use of funds and proper handling of explosives. Working under this assumption, she felt that she could not refuse my research request without "giving up the game." I told her, forcefully, "I swear I'm not a spy." Ethnographic encounters such as this one highlight that research ethics are contingent on knowledge acquired in the field. I could not have known that this culture of paranoia would facilitate my access to this field site prior to entering the site. The team leader's later confession of paranoia, ironically, indexed her increasing comfort with my research presence. These fears of espionage have a fantastical quality, while also betraying an element of parody—what Aretxaga describes as "bar terrorism" in which "state terror [reveals] the state more as a parody" of its own claims to total power (2000:60). In this highly charged context, the reality of espionage is almost beside the point. The feeling exists quite apart from the actual capacity of the Lao state to carry out complex surveillance, which is generally held to be very low.

Ethnographic encounters such as these highlight the contingency of subject and researcher protections. Scholarship on fieldwork methods tends to compartmentalize methods from ethics, and researcher from subject protections. The risks of fieldwork to the researcher are, surprisingly, rarely explored in methods manuals, though the topic of subject protections is briefly treated in some of them (Bernard 2011; Maxwell 1996). Even my manual for research on the violation of human rights does not include guidance on how to protect subjects or researchers inhabiting contexts of human-rights abuse (Reed and Padsokocimaite 2012). Against this trend, recent scholarship has examined the role of risks in fieldwork (Davies and Spencer 2010; Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000). These contemporary scholars are “making danger visible and explaining its relationship to data collection and the understanding of social phenomena” (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000:1).

Intense experiences, notably surveillance, fundamentally altered my experience of being a fieldworker and the conditions of possibility for my research. My fieldwork ethics required careful listening. At the end of an interview, as I was asking if there was anything an interlocutor wanted me to redact from my notes, she laughed and remarked: “No, the government of Laos already knows everything!” Her very phrase implied that she thinks she is subject to surveillance. I made the decision to anonymize and change some details of her story. I took these extra protections above those requested in part to protect her, and in part to protect myself. I find it fruitful to think of anonymity as a social phenomenon that must relate to the wider contexts that make certain kinds of knowledge hazardous. Listening for speech by omission, my subject protections should link to the real and silently implied hazards my informants risk by speaking with me.

### **Poems and Field Poems**

I did not intend to write poems as part of my fieldwork practice. I found myself compelled to do so once I was in the field, and as my Lao skills increased, slowly became aware of the unexpected parallel between my turn to poetry and my interlocutors’ own practices. My compulsion is not universal, but it does convey information about my fieldwork experience and the complexities of this field site. “Our slow integration into the field [...] by either loosening existing ties or forcing new adaptations, commonly generates new states and ways of being significant to the work we undertake” (Davies 2010:47). Elsewhere (Zani, forthcoming), I examine the implications of poetry for ethnographic research—what I term “field poems”—and how field poetry might contribute to creative forms of ethnographic research and argumentation. In the present article, I chart my conceptual attunement to poetic parallelism (learning to “think in two ways”) and its implications for conducting hazardous research.

Let me describe the first instance of my poetic compulsion: during preliminary research in early 2012, I traveled with a bomb clearance operator to the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang Province. This was my first trip outside the insular capital of Vientiane. When I arrived in Phonesavanh,

the provincial capital, I was immediately struck with a puzzling vertigo. It took me several days to figure out that this feeling was caused by my perception of the eerie flatness of the area, its lingering war contamination, plus the present construction boom: a sense of things missing, coupled with a premonition of future construction and destruction. The Plain of Jars, and all its towns and villages, were completely destroyed by a decade of continuous bombings during the Vietnam–American War. The province was literally flattened and then its towns rebuilt in bits and pieces, often using war scrap as building material (see Fig. 2). The epitome of Phonesavanh urban development is the dual-model bomb clearance and construction company, and several businesses of this type can be found in the town center. The ground beneath Phonesavanh was not systematically cleared prior to its founding, meaning that clearance is ongoing and haphazard. Hulks of old artillery guns and other war paraphernalia strangely littered the new capital and its surrounds, slowly picked over by scavengers, or preserved by local officials as half-dismantled relics to the war (see Fig. 3). Bombs were prominently featured in local architecture—often without first having been defused, as a colleague of mine discovered when he investigated the bombs that decorated his office. I could not convey this feeling accurately in my field notes or photographs, nor can I now in this passage.



**Figure 2.**  
Dismantled general purpose bombs used as supports for a stilt house near Phonesavanh, Xieng Khouang Province. Source: Author. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]



**Figure 3.**  
**Live explosive ordnance gathered at a government office in Phonesavanh, Xieng Khouang Province. Source: Author. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]**

I found myself writing my first poems in the field in order to record this experience:

Field Poems 1 & 2

The Plain is the ash  
 sifted to everywhere  
 an expanse of itself

Flatness becomes  
 the houses, the craters  
 filled in by debris

In this poem, I am thinking through the ghostly flatness of Phonesavanh after a decade of intense bombings. A bomb technician had described the bombing as “inefficient,” meaning that many of the bombs deployed exploded upwards, producing vast clouds of debris relative to the destruction. There was a literal sifting of soil. This flatness, in turn, enabled development built on craters, built with debris. Locals described filling in craters with the debris of houses in order to build good foundations for their own houses. Dismantled bombs sometimes served as the supports for stilt houses. “Because the metal doesn’t rot in the mud,” my guide explained (see Fig. 2). As a research exercise, I later rewrote my first field poem in a Lao style:

The Plain	The ash
sifted to everywhere	an expanse of itself

Flatness becomes	the craters
the houses	filled in by debris

Written in this style, the parallels that I was intuitively constructing become clearer. The columns may be read across, or down, for different resonances. The alternating flatness of the destroyed houses and the filled-in craters comes through with more strength. The visual parallel between the flat plain and the sifted, settling ash of the bombing is also much stronger. This poem was a crucial part of my recognizing this cycle of destruction/construction in postwar Laos.

Parallelism plays around with different kinds of knowledge. Data on the war are often contradictory or unavailable—and poetry is a generous kind of knowledge, open to multiple interpretations. Rather than wrangle with multiple, suspect information on the war, the poem gives up the search for single answers and embraces ambiguity. My field poems are accurate without being intelligible in a conventional, narrative way. As ethnographic data, these poems work precisely because poetry resists the quick equivalence of experience and knowledge. Faulkner advocates for the use of poetry in research as a means of preserving wonder in data: “[Poetry] resists itself; the fact that poetry resists itself means we can experience wonder, rediscover pleasure in our inability to make the word intelligible” (2009:16). Poetry’s capacity to resist knowledge preserves crucial qualities of ambiguity and uncertainty present in my data.

#### Field Poem 17

A bomb is under this café  
500 pounds, too big to remove  
I sip my mulberry tea

This poem developed out of my interaction with a Phonesavanh cafe owner over breakfast. During one of our morning conversations, the owner exclaimed to me: “There is a five hundred-pound bomb under this cafe, too big to remove, so we built the cafe on top of it. [...] If there is an earthquake, the whole block is going to go boom!” I immediately felt that a narrative description was inadequate to recording this encounter. In only three lines, this field poem conveys my sense of surreality, a normalcy punctured by latent danger. I accomplished this, in part, by eschewing lengthy description and juxtaposing two carefully chosen details: mulberry tea and a five hundred-pound bomb. I winnowed my experience of hazard down to its bare nub.

The field poem is also a place marker for the cafe owner’s illegal expertise in bomb clearance, euphemistically known in the clearance sector as “village clearance volunteering.” The owner cleared bombs found in the routine construction of Phonesavanh. The five-hundred pound bomb she found during the construction of her own cafe, however, was too big for her to remove. The irony (that the large bomb was underneath her own cafe) did not escape her. Her clearance activities were doubly illegal: it is illegal to conduct unofficial clearance, and it is illegal for a civilian to possess bombs. Like blank space on the page, the poem is structured by unspoken possibilities: being charged with possessing a bomb buried beneath one’s cafe; being killed by a bomb while sipping tea during peacetime. With this

kind of oblique data, I strive for faithful descriptions where factual ones are risky or impossible. I am increasingly convinced that an accurate ethnography of Laos will also be oblique, riven by silences.

### Conclusion

Parallelism is an immensely rich and creative practice. In the domain of ethnographic method, parallelism implies an ethics of attention to contradictions, multiplicities, and silences. Parallelism is both a quality of ethnographic data and a method of ethnographic attention in hazardous field sites. As I have made clear, parallelism does not necessarily take the form of poetry, nor do field poems necessarily take the form of parallel hemistiches. More accurately, the hazards of this fieldsite inspired me to develop a new ethnographic sensibility, one crafted via poems and parallels. Expanding my initial claim to develop methods for fieldwork in socialist Asia, it is my hope that this method may have more general significance wherever ethnographers encounter hazards in fieldwork.

Like the researcher-poet Faulkner, I ask of a field poem: "Why is there a reason for speech rather than silence?" (2009:92). Repeatedly presented with this question in the course of studying postwar Laos, I found myself reading war poetry. There is a long and full tradition of poets writing about war. Mahmoud Darwish's poem on the 1982 bombing of Beirut foregrounds being bombed with descriptions of mundane acts, like fetching the newspaper:

What am I searching for? I open the door several times, but find no newspaper.  
Why am I looking for the paper when buildings are falling in all directions? Is that not writing enough? (1995:23)

The bombs themselves are words, and the words are bombs that explode on the page. This powerfully imaginative move aligns the reader's experience of reading with the poet's experience of being bombed. Darwish collapses the distance between being and knowing, thereby, almost magically, working against the difficulty of describing his destroyed neighborhood. Taking this insight back to ethnography, I understand field poems as a process of "poetic inquiry [...] to synthesize experience in a direct and affective way" (Prendergast 2009:xxii), thereby tightening the connections between knowledge and experience and making that knowledge more accessible to audiences with diverse experiences. The poet's focus on the details of the everyday at war, by presenting them in parallel, disrupts assumptions about "everyday" and "war." When aligned with ethnography, such poems root new theories in the intimacy, affectivity, and experience of hazards as a component of everyday life. Poetry helps me to think through a monk saying "we all die" even while educating people on safer methods for farming in former battlefields. There is an existential particularity in postwar zones that is deeply responsive to ethnographic and poetic attention.

The persistent danger of military waste is the always present background to my theorizing of hazards. There is a poetic parallel between hazardous data and dangerous military waste. I use the word "hazard" in

contradistinction to the over-determining vocabulary of “danger” and “risk” common in the explosives clearance sector. “Hazard” is a broader conceptual frame that enables me to trace parallels between, for example, the terror of state violence and the risk of a bomb exploding. My analysis of hazardous data overlaps but does not fully eclipse, the analysis of danger in military waste zones. Yet, in my thinking and writing, I continually circle back to the dangers of explosive military waste. Subterranean explosives, lying latent in the earth fifty years after the Vietnam–American War began, are a counterpoint to my experience of surveillance and government violence. In some of my poems, unexploded bombs are metonyms for the threat of political violence. These were threats that I could not fully remove from fieldwork. The monk’s risk education poem embraces the always incomplete task of removing risks and reducing suffering: proper risk education does not prevent a cluster bomblet from exploding when triggered. Societies and cultures are complex; hazards, rather than being fieldwork obstacles that must necessarily be removed, are a form of cultural complexity important in ethnographic research.

Rilke opined that each poem is the outcome of “having-been-in-danger” (quoted in Hirshfield 2015:42). My field poems were often responses to my own or my interlocutors’ experiences at extremity. Yet, it can be difficult to identify when one has entered an extreme in a field site marked by paranoia, where a placid field may hide landmines beneath. My paranoia demonstrated aspects of contemporary Lao culture while also raising methodological and ethical issues about hazardous fieldwork. This recursive relation between writing and fieldwork is not restricted to poetry, though my experience was that hazardous fieldwork compelled a poetic sensibility. In the following and final poem, I list obvious sources of hazard (artillery guns, military bunkers). Yet, the guns were rusting, long unused, and the bunkers were greening and locked. They failed to explain my growing sense of unease and were more like evidence of my own misdirection. Military wastes, despite their abject danger, were not the hazards that required my attention; police harassment and government surveillance were much greater hazards in fieldwork. In the final line of the poem, the parallel form conveys my ambivalent feelings about entering this field site. I am landing, an American, on an airstrip built during the Vietnam–American War to accommodate bombing raids in the region. The poem takes the classic account of the anthropologist entering the field and makes it sinister. Written with the benefit of hindsight, the poem captures my premonition of the hazards of research:

Field Poem 31: Entrances and Exits

I step through the door of the plane  
*I am rushing towards something, something unpleasant*  
 past artillery guns rusting by the runway  
 and the many green slopes of earthwork bunkers  
 every hill has a door

abandoned

entrances and exits

## Notes

1. Throughout this article, I omitted or changed subject identifying details to protect my interlocutors' identities. Rather than substitute fake names and backgrounds for omitted details, or create composite characters, I have chosen in this article to leave the absences apparent. The reader's sense of "thin description" is intentional and meant to extend my discussion of hazardous research and silence/absences in field data (Jackson 2013).

2. The form has attracted more theoretical attention than it has ethnographic attention (see, for example, Jakobson 1966). In this article, I draw on Koret's (1999, 2000) pioneering work on Lao parallelism as a literary tradition (he does not treat it as ethnographic evidence). For another ethnographic account of parallelism in Southeast Asia, see Fox's ethnography of Roti ritual language in Eastern Indonesia (1971, 1974).

3. I note the connections to Sedgwick's paranoid inquiry (2002). Suspicion and paranoia prompt the researcher to "uncover" systems of oppression as a means of knowledge production in academia.

## References Cited

- Aretxaga, Begona  
 2000 "A Fictional Reality: Paramilitary Death Squads and the Construction of State Terror in Spain." In *Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror*, edited by Jeffrey A. Sluka, pp. 46–69. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Askew, Marc, Colin Long, and William Logan  
 2007 *Vientiane: Lao Urbanism, Memory and Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Bernard, Harvey Russell  
 2011 *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. 5th ed. Lanham, MD: AltaMira.
- Boas, Franz  
 1919 "Scientists as Spies." *The Nation*, December 20, p. 2842.
- Daniel, E. Valentine  
 1996 *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropology of Violence*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Darwish, Mahmoud  
 1995 *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982*. Translated by Ibrahim Muhawi. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Davies, James  
 2010 "Disorientation, Dissonance, and Altered Perception in the Field." In *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience*, edited by James Davies and Dmitrina Spencer, pp. 47–66. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Davies, James, and Dmitrina Spencer, eds.  
 2010 *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Faulkner, Sandra L.  
 2009 *Poetry as Method: Reporting Research through Verse*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Fox, James J.  
 1971 "Semantic Parallelism in Rotinese Ritual Language." *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 127(2):215–55.  
 1974 "'Our Ancestors Spoke in Pairs': Rotinese Views of Language, Dialect, and Code." In *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking* edited by Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer, pp. 65–85. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Hansen, Mette H.  
 2006 "In the Footsteps of the Communist Party: Dilemmas and Strategies." In *Doing Fieldwork in China*, edited by Maria Heimer and Stig Thøgersen, pp. 81–95. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press.

- High, Holly  
 2011 "Melancholia and Anthropology." *American Ethnologist* 38(2):217–33.  
 2014 *Fields of Desire: Poverty and Policy in Laos*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Hirshfield, Jane  
 2015 *Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World*. New York: Knopf.
- Holt, John Clifford  
 2009 *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Jackson, John  
 2013 *Thin Description: Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jakobson, Roman  
 1966 "Grammatical Parallelism and Its Russian Facet." *Language* 42(2):399–429.
- Keane, Webb  
 1997 *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Koret, Peter  
 1999 "Books of Search: The Invention of Traditional Lao Literature as a Subject of Study." In *Laos: Culture and Society*, edited by Grant Evans, pp. 226–57. Chiang Mai: Silkwork Books.  
 2000 "Books of Search: Convention and Creativity in Traditional Lao Literature." In *The Canon in Southeast Asian Literatures*, edited by David Smyth, pp. 210–33. London: Routledge.
- Leavy, Patricia  
 2009 *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Lee-Treweek, Geraldine, and Stephanie Linkogle  
 2000 *Danger in the Field: Risk and Ethics in Social Research*. London: Routledge.
- Maxwell, Joseph A.  
 1996 *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Nordstrom, Carolyn  
 1997 *A Different Kind of War Story*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Petit, Pierre  
 2013 "The Backstage of Ethnography as Ethnography of the State: Coping with Officials in the Lao People's Democratic Republic." In *Red Stamps and Gold Stars*, edited by Sarah Turner, pp. 143–64. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Prendergast, Monica  
 2009 "Introduction: The Phenomena of Poetry in Research." In *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences*, edited by Monica Prendergast, Carl Leggo, and Pauline Sameshima, pp. xix–xlii. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Reed, Kristin, and Ausra Padskocimaite  
 2012 *The Right Toolkit: Applying Research Methods in the Service of Human Rights*. Berkeley, CA: Human Rights Center.
- Sedgwick, Eve  
 2002 "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You." In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, edited by Eve Sedgwick, pp. 123–52. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Singh, Sarinda  
 2012 *Natural Potency and Political Power: Forests and State Authority in Contemporary Laos*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Sluka, Jeffrey A.  
 2000 "Introduction: State Terror and Anthropology." In *Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror*, edited by Jeffrey A. Sluka, pp. 1–45. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Taussig, Michael T.

1997 *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Turner, Sarah

2013 "Dilemmas and Detours: Fieldwork with Ethnic Minorities in Upland Southwest China, Vietnam, and Laos." In *Red Stamps and Gold Stars*, edited by Sarah Turner, pp. 1–21. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Zani, Leah Forthcoming *Revival: Remains of War in Laos*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.