

Book Review

Zani, Leah. *Strike Patterns: Notes from Postwar Laos*. Stanford: Redwood Press, 2022, 187 pages.

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Based on Zani's fieldwork in Laos from 2012 to 2015, *Strike Patterns* is a work of ethnographic fiction that is part ethnography, part novel, and part personal memoir. Its goal is to paint a portrait of Lao people coping with the after-effects of the Vietnam-American War, or more specifically, the CIA's "secret" air war over Laos that made it the most bombed nation per capita in the history of the world. Zani, an anthropologist and author of the 2019 ethnography, *Bomb Children*, chooses a fictionalized account for this book. It reads similar to a movie that is "based on a true story"—one suspects that the people and events are roughly real but rewritten into a work of fiction both to disguise their identities for reasons of confidentiality and personal safety, and to provide a non-academic format in which to convey the story of post-war, ordnance-contaminated Laos to a broader audience. In Zani's own words, the novel aims to employ the powerful "empathetic registers of literature" to convey her ethnographic research through creative methods that "compel ethical action" (vii). Zani notes that in her 2019 ethnography, she was unable to tell personal stories due to the risks of writing about real people living within the authoritarian Lao state; *Strike Patterns* is therefore her solution to writing a more emotionally powerful, personalized account—fictional yet grounded in ethnographic research.

Cluster munitions, and the unexploded (or ready-to-explode) ordnance they leave behind, are deadly for decades after their initial use in war. In Laos, cluster bomblets litter the countryside almost 50 years after the end of the war; in other nations, they continue to initiate this journey of decades-long contamination today. From 1964 until 1973, the United States dropped more than two million tons of ordnance over Laos, bombing especially the communist side's Ho Chi Minh Trail, which brought supplies from North Vietnam through Laos to the

fighting in the South. Cluster bombs containing hundreds of mini-bomblets fell upon the countryside, up to a third of which failed to detonate, leaving behind tens of thousands of bomblets that continue to maim and kill civilians today, including children, who are attracted to the shiny metal objects. The efforts to clear these munitions and render the countryside safe remain ongoing, now five decades after the last bombs were dropped.

In *Strike Patterns*, Zani writes in the first person to combine the story of these clearing efforts with portrayals of everyday life in Laos from her perspective as a participant-observer, interspersed with occasional linkages to her own family history of American military veterans and anti-war protesters. The phrase “strike pattern” has a dual meaning in her writing: it refers to the technical term for the pattern of physical impacts on a landscape left behind by an aerial war, patterns that are used by clearance technicians to assess the scope of their clearance task; it also refers to the pattern of sociocultural impacts of war, including “loss, safety, fear, stigma, and hope” (5). Zani’s story leads us back and forth through scenes that show us pieces of both of these “strike patterns.” While surveying the landscape with Channarong, an explosives clearance technician, she theorizes that the American bombing of Laos was not just a military strategy of war itself, but a way of destroying civilian life so as to cripple the Lao state if (and ultimately, when) it fell to communism. She goes on to describe the consequences: a desperately poor nation, impacted by decades of war, destruction, and subsequent Western trade embargoes, unaided by postwar aid, ordnance clearance efforts, or refugee assistance, and without humanitarian ordnance clearance teams for the first three decades following the war. It is a country divided between a somewhat more prosperous lowland, less affected by war, and the heavily-bombed highlands, which remain particularly poor and under-resourced.

To humanize our understanding of postwar Laos, she tells us stories of accompanying surveillance and clearance teams into the Lao countryside, learning that the safety gear they wear is designed for defusing landmines rather than for cluster munitions clearance, and is, therefore, more symbolic than protective—while increasing the risk of heat stroke. We learn from Channarong that even after a clearance project is completed, they cannot guarantee safety—that clearing is always incomplete. We hear Silavong’s wartime story of her home burning down from a bomb strike, and how her family then lived in a hole in the ground with a thatched roof—a makeshift bomb shelter—as her mother moved the still-unexploded bomblets from the

vegetable garden into the woods. We learn from Dao—a bomb technician who lost her leg to ordnance that exploded below her while she was repairing her house—how her family used to make cookpots, spoons and candles from the metal remains of bombs. She got her job as a demolition technician because of her status as an explosion survivor; she has a special plastic prosthetic for work so that her everyday one will not set off the metal detectors. We meet Bounmi, a war scrap trader who dreams of clearing the land of ordnance to make life safe for his imagined future son, and who keeps a log of every local child killed in an explosion. Other parts of Zani’s narrative simply tell us about everyday life in rural Laos—the rituals that accompany the Fireboat Festival, the concerns about ghosts, and the day-to-day practices associated with Theravada Buddhism.

In *Strike Patterns*, Zani gives us a novel that provides a window into postwar Laos. It is the humanized complement to her earlier ethnography, *Bomb Children*. As a novel, it succeeds as a well-written story. As a piece of ethnography, it is partial, but this partiality comes with the promise of educating a broader audience without losing their attention with theoretical framing and scholarly arguments. In addition to those interested in the impacts of war in Southeast Asia, writers who are interested in thinking about how to approach creative, autoethnographic, and fictionalized ethnography as genres will also find this book worth a read.