

LEAH ZANI. STRIKE PATTERNS: NOTES FROM POSTWAR LAOS. STANFORD: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 2022, 208 P. ISBN: 9781503611733

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In *Strike patterns* (2022), Leah Zani takes the reader on her journey through Laos, exploring the remnants of the Secret War waged against communism. Between 1964 and 1973, the United States dropped more than 2 million bombs in the small Southeast Asian state, making it the most heavily bombed country in the world per capita. Through her ethnographic fiction, Zani skilfully captures its impact and implications on present day lives. In the first chapters, we meet Chanta, an employee at a clearance operator in Laos where Zani begins her journey to study post-war reconstruction. As Chanta invites the researcher to her home town to join her family for the *Fireboat Festival*, the reader catches a glimpse of an evolving friendship that sets the poetic tone for a thoughtful story about violence and war in everyday life. Quickly, however, Zani brings attention to the reality of cleaning up after a war that has been over for almost half a decade. Craters from cluster bombs, still holding unexploded missiles, are no longer easy to spot. With the help of Channarong, a field manager surveying former battlefields, the protagonist learns to recognise their patterns, but also learns about their histories entangled with her own. Growing up in California, her experience of war was remote, yet was carried by an air of familiarity for a family of soldiers. In Laos, the war is brought into the everyday through stories such as that of Dao: losing her leg to a bomb explosion while repairing her house. Rather than dwelling on the tragedy of such a loss, Dao takes the reader on her journey of finding her new leg. From uncomfortable prosthetics made out of bamboo to a high-tech one given to her by a foreign doctor before being taken away for fear of her breaking it, to her current leg suitable for clearing the explosives to which she has devoted herself since then. It is these stories of explosions, clearance operations and historical narratives woven into a cultural context of rituals, ghosts and ceremonies that allow the reader to gain a holistic insight into the remnants of a war that seems to be 'secret' to this day.

Throughout the book, Zani neatly inserts herself into the story in a way that opens up valuable questions about anthropological knowledge, subjectivity and the ethnographic fiction itself. She paints a story of the realities of anthropology in the field: misunderstandings, language barriers, and unfamiliarities that all feed into what one could call the 'product' of anthropological fieldwork, but are rarely spelled out so clearly. The medium of ethnographic fiction makes particular space for these kinds of questions. The researcher, for instance, has been offered the chance to learn about *blood blowing*, a local medicine of breathing only accessible through a spiritual doctor. Yet, the doctor, Silavong, warns her: if she doesn't believe in it, if she is not a good Buddhist, 'it is worse than dangerous' (p. 47). Zani

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contemplates this decision: should she follow her yearning, take this unique chance of a research opportunity? Or does she respect Silavong's warning and turn her down? Such reflections illustrate the double nature of ethnographic fiction of which Zani's book is an excellent example. On the one hand, it provides an opportunity to illustrate relationships and stories that illuminate a subject from different angles. On the other hand, ethnographic fiction reveals the ramifications that anthropological research in the field entails. Previous experiences, histories and prior knowledge of the researcher influence fieldwork as much as the relationships the anthropologist is capable of forming and the obstacles standing in the way of that formation, whether through language, belief or other assumptions. The anthropologist, whether recounted through fiction or classic ethnographic works, is inevitably situated in the midst of this tension between essence and subjectivity. Zani's *Strike patterns* illustrates this tension beautifully: the story is as much about the remnants and relations that war and violence leave behind as it is about an American anthropologist exploring these relations.

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