PLAYING IN TRAFFIC: A TIMELY METAPHOR FOR POSTMODERN ETHNOGRAPHY AND COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

CROSSING THE STREET

I went to Vietnam for the first time in 2002. It was my third trip to Asia but my first to the so-called Third World. I prepared for danger. I brought Cipro to ward off food- and water-induced illnesses. In the months prior to my departure I took the entire recommended series of inoculations—hepatitis A, hepatitis B, typhoid, and tetanus. But as my physician informed me while she had the typhoid needle buried in my left deltoid, the number one cause of injury and death to travelers in Vietnam by far is traffic accidents. For travelers from the U.S., this is partly because traffic moves on the left in Vietnam—it is hard to break the habit of looking left-right-left when stepping into the street. But the danger I experienced in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi on this first trip and on my subsequent 2005 trip was due less to different traffic rules than the absence of traffic rules. There are some lights, a few crosswalks, some street signs. But these carry the force of suggestion more than the force of law. The movement of traffic is constant. Traffic does not stop to let pedestrians cross, then begin again. Traffic at intersections does not alternate via any consistent external regulation. Motorbikes, lorries, bicycles, pedestrians, oxcarts, cyclos, taxis, minivans, and the occasional private car all share the road. Right-of-way is not automatically granted via predetermined factors. It is earned moment-to-moment via a rough computation of one’s velocity, size, and trajectory in relation to those approaching.

I traveled with my colleague and close friend, Vietnamese-American artist Thuan Vu, on both trips. On July 6, 2002, our first morning together in Ho Chi Minh City, we stepped out of The Grand Hotel on Dhong Khoi at five
a.m. after our jetlagged bodies snapped awake at four. Once on the streets, we were surprised to see that they were already filled with boys playing soccer, girls playing badminton, women doing tai chi, and even men jogging (sometimes wearing singlets, always barefoot). As we moved toward Ben Thanh market, planning to participate in the morning rush of commerce by buying coffee to take home, the sidewalks began to fill with families creating cafés with portable stoves, plastic stools, and dishes, and individuals creating newsstands by hanging the day’s newspapers on trees or creating barbershops by setting up a mirror and a chair.

I saw it was a mistake for me to read Ho Chi Minh City’s asphalt spaces as sidewalks and streets. To name them such invested their function with a permanence that didn’t accurately capture their fluidity. In July’s predawn and thus not-quite-yet stifling temperatures and humidity, the streets were not-quite-yet streets—they were playgrounds, soccer fields, and badminton courts. The sidewalks had their own evolving set of uses I witnessed over the course of each day: mobile café, newspaper stand, barber shop, bicycle and motorbike parking lot, daycare space, sleeping space, and—nearly always—retail space. Sidewalk was a misnomer when these functions left no space for pedestrians but the street. No space had a consistent function: the time of day and the climate defined what these spaces were.

Emerging from the seamless crush of commerce in Ben Thanh market a few hours later on that first day, we found the soccer fields and badminton courts were now streets occupied by an equally seamless crush of vehicles. We immediately saw that it was a mistake to wait for them to stop for us. Traffic is slow in the center of Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi because it is so thick; it is difficult to ever move much faster than 20 m.p.h. Local residents picked their spot and walked into traffic. As pedestrians in the street, we needed to resist our urge to yield to the assortment of vehicles moving toward us. In fact, these outsiders’ instincts put us in the most danger. We needed to adopt and maintain the locals’ steady pace, going no slower and no faster, in order to keep ourselves and the people and vehicles moving around us safe. Crossing the streets in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi were initially extraordinary experiences that, with practice, came to feel utterly ordinary in those spaces. Collectively, these experiences of crossing the street became a teaching moment. As an outsider, I had to adopt Vietnamese road rules and set aside my own if I was going to get anywhere. I had to learn to move on the terms the physical space of Vietnam offered me.

I did not go to Vietnam to learn how to cross the street, of course—I went to investigate the role foreign-language literacy practices play in Vietnamese women’s lives as they navigate the shift to a market economy. As the joke about the chicken goes, I was just trying to get to the other side. But
the repeated challenge of something so ordinary eventually caught my attention. Crossing the street became an interesting object lesson in learning how to see the future. I eventually learned that I could not treat the traffic as just a spatial reasoning problem; it was a diachronic problem as well. As I practiced, I grew more accomplished at predicting where a cyclo, a taxi, a bicycle, and I would not quite meet in time and space; a chain of these almost-encounters created my paths across the streets. These paths closed behind me immediately and appeared in front of me only if—and because—I kept moving at a slow, steady pace. Running, darting, or dodging was at best counterproductive and at worst dangerous. My paths across the street appeared only when they had to—those around me had no extra space to give me, and it was common for motorbikes and bicycles to brush against pedestrians as they passed. I was not in control of my paths; they were produced in relation to those I encountered. We determined each other’s movements. Moving in traffic taught me that I was not just looking at the physical space of Vietnam from a new local perspective. Perspective became too static a concept, too vision-centric, to capture what I was doing. My perspective was fluid in this space; I found my path was created not inspite of others’ movements, but because of them. My experience, my perspective, my identity in that space, was shaped by our interaction. I found that moving in traffic in Vietnam offered me a metaphor for understanding the importance of practicing timely work, a metaphor I have been using not only to understand my 2002 and 2005 ethnography work in Vietnam, but also my teaching in a U.S. university.

**TIMELY WORK**

I created this metaphor in Vietnam out of pure necessity. I needed it to understand that my workspaces were constantly being produced by a set of global and local circumstances for specific and finite moments in time. I needed it to understand that my work had to be timely. In other words, I had to recognize and take advantage of these time-bound work spaces when my movements in relation to others produced them. I also needed the metaphor to understand that my capacity to predict and control these moments was limited. And finally, I needed it to reassure me that while I had a limited capacity to predict and control these moments, the work I produced within them was real—it counted as knowledge. The metaphor helped me dislodge myself from a comfortably reticent, reflective, and static stance and forced me to work in a much more fluid and less controlling way.

It was work that prompted me to shift my focus from my initial concerns about the ethics of representing Vietnam to the material conditions of doing ethnographic work there. In Bruce Horner’s terms, I began to think about my ethnographic work as a “cultural material practice” that demanded
I develop “a multiplicity of strategies, each appropriate for different circumstances” (Horner 581). Learning to do timely work on the terms that a space offers is difficult. There is nothing sure-footed about it. As I read and used my journals and fieldnotes from both trips, I was struck by how often I expressed doubt and uncertainty. I found that navigating Vietnam as an imagined place was comfortable for me; learning to navigate Vietnam as a material space put me out of my physical, intellectual, and emotional comfort zones.

The classical rhetorical concept of kairos clearly influenced the sense of timely perspective that I developed in Vietnam. Kairos is commonly translated as the “right time for action,” but the term is more than a label for a rhetor’s opportune moment to make his or her case most effectively (Liddell and Scott 841). As Kelly Pender notes in her recent essay, kairos was a “generative principle” for the sophists, who believed the world was produced by rhetors choosing to exploit opportunities produced by the confluence of conflicting forces (97). Each day in Vietnam presented me with timely choices to seize, most forcing me to step away from the spaces I expected to work in—museums, cultural sites, and historical sites—because these preplanned paths were guaranteed to put me in contact with women who used English. But I found these women were not interested in talking with me about their literacy histories in the context of Vietnam’s emerging market economy.

Focusing on such official spaces also tended to blind me to other spaces that appeared. For example, on the third day of our 2002 trip, Thuan and I visited Ho Chi Minh City’s Museum of Fine Art, which turned out to be a rather woebegone facility with minimal curation. Walking back to our hotel, we decided to browse in a street of antique dealers. In the first dealer’s stall, I asked for a stack of old picture postcards from a large glass display case and settled onto one of Vietnam’s ubiquitous tiny, plastic stools to flip through faded shots of the Riviera, Rome, and Paris. When I looked into the glass case to see if there were more, I saw that the shelf above the postcards held rows and rows of silver cigarette lighters, Zippo lighters, the kind carried by American soldiers during the Vietnam War. Each lighter had the city, the year, sometimes the name—David Owens, Da Nang, 67-68—stamped on it. I looked across and then down the narrow street. Each shop had a similar glass case; I could see the glint cast inside each one by the rows of Zippos. A peculiar feeling came over me as I realized what I was looking at. I thought about how the sheer number of lighters, the equally large number of young men’s lives they represented, and why they were in these cases. When I gathered up the postcards to return them, I noticed I had been setting aside the photographs mixed in with them, photographs of the same vintage as the Zippos—Vietnamese families’ baby pictures, confirmation pictures, school pictures, and wedding pictures. In California a few weeks before, Thuan’s mother had shown us similar photographs she had carried out.
of Saigon when the family fled. These photographs, like the lighters, were left behind, separated from their owners by the war. Both objects visibly represented lives lost and broken.

But the lighters left a much greater impression on me than the photographs. While the lighters gave me chills, it was really only after this first trip that I thought much about the photographs again; I began noticing how encounters with U.S. soldiers’ artifacts have become rather *de rigueur* for Americans writing about their travels in Vietnam, writing that typically emphasizes the war’s effects on individual Americans while sidestepping larger questions about U.S. policy and overlooking the effects the war had on Vietnam and individual Vietnamese (Bourdain, Tomlin).

In a conversation with Thuan back in the U.S., he suggested that our movement from the art museum—a space that represented the official version of Vietnamese culture—to the antique stalls—a space that was not marked as academic—affected my ability to see the pictures as well as I saw the lighters. What he called my “academic light bulb” was “on” at the museum. It was not at the antique stall. I was working from an internalized sense of what kinds of spaces and experiences yield learning moments, a sense highly overdetermined at that point by the features of academic spaces. I recognized the space of the art museum as an academic space and responded to its cues by looking at what I saw there in an academic manner—expecting to learn and to see things that would teach me about Vietnamese culture. I did. For example, I was interested in how and why Vietnamese women were used to compose a national narrative of strength and perseverance. As a result, I became engrossed in the art with war themes and the prominence women had in this art, shown fighting, supplying troops, and practicing medicine. When I exited the museum, my academic light bulb went off; I realized that when we arrived at the antique stall, I did not have the same expectation that I could learn something about Vietnamese women. So I didn’t.

In other moments I had more success moving in traffic. It is not possible to catalogue all of the working spaces my movements created for me, but, collectively, moments like the following allowed me to compose local vantage points from which I could begin to see how complex cultural, historic, and economic forces shape Vietnam and move Vietnamese people transnationally.

During the trip, I spent an enormous amount of time just moving from one space to another—on foot, in taxis, in minivans, on a motorbike, in airplanes. All of this movement produced my best opportunities for contact and conversation, opportunities I had to learn to recognize and seize. Airports and airplanes yielded some of the most dramatic evidence of the uneven ways globalization affects Vietnam. I met immigrants returning home to visit family they left behind to pursue economic opportunity. I saw factory workers on
their first plane ride visibly annoying the worldly, genteel flight attendants by putting their bare feet on the armrests and talking loudly to everyone around them, offering us fruit and other homemade snacks they had packed. I saw frightened women who had never left rural northern Vietnam on their way to be maids in Taiwan so they could earn money for their families.

To see and use these timely moments as workspaces, I had to set aside my habit of waiting for ideal space, time, and circumstances. One night Hoang Thi Kieu Trang, Thuy Nga, and I drank ice coffees in a café, and I interviewed them over the noise of a live band. When I asked if there was a quieter place to go and continue the interview, they laughed and said, “There is no quiet place in Vietnam!” All of my taped interviews record the constant noise and interruption: dogs bark, cars honk, people talk, and music plays. Trang is Thuan’s cousin; she was earning her Master’s degree in physics when I first met her and is now a doctoral student at Florida State University. Trang and her parents welcomed me, Thuan, his brother Khanh, and Khanh’s three daughters into their home late one hot, mid-July night. In the middle of this family reunion, Trang allowed me to interview her. She became a friend and ally, helping me to explore Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta and working tirelessly during my second trip to find additional interview subjects. Trang’s experiences and analysis regarding access to education, women’s rights, political freedoms, and the shift to a market economy in Vietnam have been invaluable. She also introduced me to her childhood friend Thuy Nga, whose frustrations over settling for a job that required her to focus on English rather than the Japanese she preferred showed how globalization can compel people to acquire and use literacies on the terms it dictates. More recently Nga was denied an opportunity to work and study abroad, which she thinks is related to the government’s persecution of her elderly father. Her experiences are teaching me more about the kinds of political constraints Vietnamese people face.

Also, in Ben Thanh market, in the shops on Dhong Khoi, and in hotels in Ho Chi Minh City, I made a practice of introducing myself to women I met—vendors, artists, shop girls, and hotel clerks in between customers—and Thuan helped me to talk with them. In an Adidas store, Thuan and I were waited on by Co Thi Hai. Weeks away from marrying an American she had recently met and moving to San Diego with him, she came to a second interview with three friends, who invited me to attend their English conversation class. I ended up teaching the class, which gave me access to thirty more young, working-class students’ stories. A shop owner on Dhong Khoi from whom Thuan, his brother Trieu, and I bought several things telephoned her daughter, a children’s English teacher, and had her come on the spot to be interviewed. I took notes on napkins and the menu of the café. These women and others, all met on the street so to
speak, have continued to stay in contact via email as their circumstances allow, sharing stories of negotiating complex socioeconomic contexts.

**A Metaphor for Teaching**

I said earlier that I created the metaphor of moving in traffic out of necessity while I was in Vietnam. I could not treat the material conditions of Vietnam as obstacles to work. I had to treat them as opportunities. In the space between my first and second trips, I began to reflect on what my experiences and this metaphor could offer my work as a writing teacher. Obviously, it can help my students learn to work as writers, but I have found that it helps me even more as I continue to learn to teach writing. I have shown how my path in Vietnam was created in conjunction with others. When I compare my past and present composition courses, I can see that my pedagogy now operates more and more from these principles of timely work.

This shift has meant letting go of several pedagogical practices I have been deeply invested in. I have always loved defining a course’s themes, carefully juxtaposing readings to create certain insights for students and then nurturing the evolution of those insights via a carefully designed assignment sequence. But more recently I have questioned some of the assumptions underlying this pedagogy. While I would like to think of myself as a very liberal, even radical, teacher because I ask students to historicize and critically engage with concepts of race, class, gender, and sexuality, the pedagogy itself has actually been relatively safe and nontransgressive. Essentially, I have laid out a preplanned path through the semester with readings I have chosen and writing assignments I have designed. I have a sense of where I want them to be as readers, thinkers, and writers, and I have created the conditions to move them to a particular place during the time and space our class allows.

My own work as a writer in and out of Vietnam has dampened my need to control my students’ thinking, reading, and writing paths to this degree. As a result, I have tried to replace this pedagogy of the preplanned path with the pedagogy of moving in traffic. I have begun with that remembered experience of crossing the street in Vietnam and invoking the idea of “the street” in two ways.

To invoke the idea of the street in the first way, I stopped assuming that technology in the classroom hindered the real work of a writing class, and I experimented with teaching in networked classrooms equipped with wireless laptops. I was jaded by an experience with computers in the classroom in the late 1990s; I had neither the height to be seen nor the voice to be heard over noisy, desktop computers in a long, narrow classroom. But a compact seminar-style classroom with mobile, slender laptops is a different material circumstance, as is access to the “street” known as the information superhighway, the Internet.
This environment has, in turn, changed the nature of my writing assignments. I assign collectively-written blogs, ethnography-based projects, interviews, dialogues, and documentary projects—assignments that rely on independent work online, fieldwork outside of the classroom, and primary sources that students create and share. These kinds of writing assignments are out of my control in many ways. My students’ own efforts to move in traffic, to negotiate their material circumstances—including the people, sociocultural sites, material artifacts, and resources they can gain access to as well as the degree to which they can gain access to and navigate the internet—shape the work that is possible for them. I can help them negotiate these circumstances, but I cannot put clear boundaries on the scope or direction of their work as I could when I offered students a finite set of readings as the defined terrain of our inquiry.

I have come to believe that students learn more this way even when it is nerve-wracking for me. Rather than always assigning readings I have screened and, consequently, “know,” I ask my students to subscribe to the *New York Times* and other online publications and produce a collective blog that documents and shares their paths across the internet as readers and thinkers. I blog with them, sharing my online path while observing and responding to theirs. Sometimes I respond by asking them to find a particular kind of reading, other times by giving them a particular reading that suits the path they are creating for themselves. I am still teaching critical reading, writing, and thinking, but I am doing it differently—I am looking for the teaching moments that students’ actions as readers, writers, and thinkers create for me to seize.

Practicing a pedagogy of moving in traffic has not meant abandoning content, theme, or focus. It has meant recognizing and launching timely inquiries with students rather than scripting the start and end points of their inquiry. I have learned to look for timely prompts for student work. With my fall 2005 basic writing course, for example, I chose to launch the class with *Vanity Fair*’s 2005 writing contest prompt:

What’s on the minds of America’s youth today? More than 30 years ago, people across the country staged sit-ins for civil rights, got up and protested against a misguided, undeclared war, and actually gave a damn if a president lied to them. Although a lot has changed since then, there are still racial divides, and America is once again mired in a largely controversial war. Back in the 1960s and 70s, a similar climate motivated great numbers of young people to act, organize, and take to the streets in defiance. Today it seems as if younger Americans are content to watch their MTV, fiddle with their game players, follow the love lives of Brad, Jen, Jessica, and Paris, and assume the hard work is being done for them by others. What has changed? Is
it simply that we do not have motivating factors such as a draft or Kent State to bring us together, to anger us? What is going on inside the minds of America’s youth today? (24)

The prompt is striking in the ways it constructs these two generations. If the text does not make its investments clear enough, the page has two illustrations. The first is a black and white photo captioned “War Protest, Des Moines, Iowa, 1968,” featuring peace-sign waving students carrying placards reading “We Support the Black Liberation Struggle,” “Get Out of Vietnam Now,” and “Law and Order=Racism.” The second is a color photo captioned “Spring Break, South Padre Island, Texas, 2004,” featuring gym-muscled young men assisting bikini-clad coeds with their beer bongs.

I recognized my encounter with this prompt as a timely moment not because it offered an opportunity to think about Vietnam alongside students, but because I also understand the metaphor of the street in a second sense, a journalistic one. The street is journalism’s updated version of the man-on-the-street figure. This updated version (often referring to popular opinion in the Middle East, as in “the Arab street”) nods to the possibility of multiple perspectives and suggests that the specific space of the street—where it is, why it is there, and what is on it—shapes who is on it and how they feel. My basic writing classroom was the street of American youth. On the first day of the semester, I had students write in response to this prompt and then to my question, “What would you have to do to discover the answer to this question?” Their responses helped me direct them toward readings to address in their blog and shaped the semester’s sequence and type of writing assignments.

On the second day, the students spent time in small groups listing what they thought they knew about each of these generations. I need to credit my graduate research fellow Rebekka Van Horn for editing my version of the question—she decided we should ask them to list what they thought they knew about the events, values, attitudes, beliefs, and popular culture of each generation—because this allowed us to then discuss the sources of our so-called knowledge and consider, as my student Andy Caron-Bacon put it, how sources can show an “interested” point of view. As they shared their lists on the board about their own “spring break” generation—which, largely in agreement with the prompt, characterized them as party animals with weak morals and no political consciousness—they acknowledged that they were not the source of this knowledge, and that there was another side to their story. In fact, some, like Martin Waters and John DeBiase, had already “talked back” to the prompt in their journals, arguing that protests against the war in Iraq existed but perhaps not as visibly to this “war generation” because they hadn’t taken the same in-the-streets form that Vietnam War protests had. Others, like Jake Hurwitz,
noted that the protest generation could just as easily have been represented with a picture of Woodstock.

They concluded, then, that to answer the question posed by *Vanity Fair* would require them to interview people in both generations, find statistics about the “war protest” and “spring break” generation, collect examples of popular culture that claimed to reflect the beliefs and values of each generation, read already published opinions and analysis, and review their history lessons. This work laid out our scope and direction for the semester. Their answer to the question, “What’s on the minds of America’s youth?” will be determined by the kind of inquiry their material circumstances make possible. The course is in progress as I write, and I am not sure what their answer will be, but I know they will produce it collectively. I know I will teach them to plan and produce their fieldwork together, to share their sources and ideas on their blog, to share their interviews and to use them to develop their arguments, and to reflect on how and why they are able to work.

Practicing a pedagogy of moving in traffic involves putting students into the field to create primary sources, asking students to create their own paths of inquiry, helping students question paths that seem preplanned and overmanaged, and allowing students opportunities for uncontrolled paths—even those that lead to dead ends. It also requires helping students reflect on how their material constraints shape their work, see the consequences of different responses to these constraints, manage their anxieties about not knowing what they will find and about doing work the “right” way, and acknowledge their own blind spots.

**TELLING MY STUDENTS TO PLAY IN TRAFFIC**

I seek to practice this pedagogy without judgment because anxiety significantly shapes my students’ writing lives, whether they are graduate or first-year students. Quite honestly, fear still powerfully shapes my own work as a writer and teacher. But lately I’ve practiced walking into that fear rather than dismissing it, denying it, or hiding from it. I’m not supposed to be afraid. But I am because I don’t know the exact value of what I found as a researcher after two trips to Vietnam: a few dozen interviews and several suitcases full of texts and artifacts. Getting it was uncomfortable, and writing about it is uncomfortable. There is the fear of violating academic boundaries—I am not trained as an anthropologist or a sociologist, nor do I have degrees in international relations or proficiency in Vietnamese. There is the fear of violating ethical boundaries by working with real people in ways that misrepresent them, that inconvenience them, or are dangerous for them. There is the fear of not knowing what will take shape as I add more interviews, or how it will take shape, the fear that it will not be interesting or useful or worthy of anything. There is the fear of
missing timely opportunities to learn more. There is the fear of not being able to explain what I am doing and the fear of not really knowing what I am doing. If working in the street and moving in traffic makes me afraid, I must practice empathy for my students when I put them in the same situation.

So why put them in that situation? Why put myself in that situation? Fear is a performance that marks when and where we enter uncharted territory, when and where we go off our familiar physical and conceptual maps. Fear is also a signal, then, that we are in spaces and places of discovery. My students and I need to work in ways that make us afraid because that is how we are pushed to take the risks necessary to make new discoveries. We need to keep moving forward or we endanger our chances of discovering and creating new knowledge, new ways of seeing and being for ourselves and those we write to/for/about/with. My work in Vietnam began as traditional, research-based scholarship, resulting in traditional, argument-driven essays and articles like the one you are reading now. But the writing is shifting and evolving; the next piece taking shape is working more at the intersection of the critical and creative and taking visual as well as written form. I’ve resisted this shift for a long time, afraid that it will not be academic enough. But I am increasingly seeing the interviews themselves and the growing context of print and non-print artifacts I have compiled about doi moi Vietnam take a different shape, more suited to arguing by using the conventions of documentary, creative non-fiction, and memoir while drawing on the methodology of ethnography, anthropology, and sociology.

Because I feel hope as well as fear when I write, I’ve titled this “Playing in Traffic” even though “moving in traffic” is the metaphor I initially created and explored throughout this piece. These days, when I write something that I can’t really describe, it still feels good even though I know that it isn’t “academic,” and I feel hopeful that I’m discovering another way to write to/for/about/with women in Vietnam. “Playing in traffic” does a better job of capturing the fear and the hope I need to practice in my work as a writer and teacher.

“Go play in traffic” was a childhood insult, a way we told each other to get lost. What it suggests to me now is a way of working that is kairotic, that foregrounds the real danger of this work—misrepresentation, self-aggrandizement, reinscription of oppressive discourses and power relations—while also foregrounding play, in the sense that it gives up the need to control, to predetermine, to know before we can write or teach. Instead, it is a way of working that finds pleasure in discovering how to move with the traffic in the street—as the boys passing scuffed plastic balls, the girls batting shuttlecocks, and the men running barefoot discover ways to play in the predawn streets of Ho Chi Minh City in the summertime.

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Critical anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson argue for a distinction between space and place. Spaces are physical, material locations. Places are remembered and/or imagined locations. When people collectively remember and imagine a space, making it meaningful to them, it becomes a place. To illustrate the process, Gupta and Ferguson note how displaced peoples create diasporas in the image of “remembered or imagined homelands.” Thus “India and Pakistan seem to reappear in postcolonial simulation in London, [and] prerevolution Tehran rises from the ashes in Los Angeles.” Similarly, a section of Orange County, California has become “Little Saigon,” which the New York Times describes in terms of a collectively reimagined ending to the Vietnam War—“this is what Saigon might have looked like if America had won the war in 1975” (Mydans).

In one recent example, writer Jimmy Tomlin profiles 34-year-old California firefighter Stacey Hansen for the October 2003 issue of Delta’s in-flight magazine Sky. Hansen initially traveled to Vietnam on vacation, but her discovery of U.S. soldiers’ dog tags being sold in a museum shop inspired her to begin finding and buying dog tags in order to return them either to the soldiers or their surviving families. Tomlin writes, “It dawned on Hansen that her unplanned purchase—in a dingy, desolate museum that displayed US military artifacts—might have been more than an impulse buy. Each tag represented a life—no, a family and countless friends—affected by the Vietnam War” (59). While several former soldiers who received their old dog tags from Hansen are profiled, Vietnamese people appear in Tomlin’s piece only as unnamed assistants helping Hansen find and buy dog tags.

Works Cited


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