

When the Zones of War, Racism, Natural Disaster and the Zone of Proximal Development in Youth Coincide: A Depiction of Demoralization

(Spatio-Temporal Context for Catamaran)

1971. It is six years since the Marines landed in Da Nang. * It is three years since the 1968 Tet Offensive and the battle for Huê a city up a little on the coastal highway QL1. The regions around Huê and its fabled Citadel are once more under the sway of the US military and The Army of the Republic of Việt Nam. Some of the soldiers of the 101st Airborne at Camp Eagle are mocking anxious new arrivals. The 'newbies' are reassuring one another their units will stand down sooner than expected. An alternative wish for their extrication takes the form: as the war continues to become 'Vietnamized' and their military occupational specialty (MOS) codes are no longer needed, they will 'drop' time from their tours. Among those present are 'short timers' in earnest who indulge neither credulity nor mockery but count every day until their tours are over.

Their predecessors in the Army and the Air Force had endured tours of 365 days on individualized rotations; they deferred their countdowns until they had reached a hundred days to go. The subsequent 99 days were occasion for 'the double-digit fidgets.' In contrast, Marines came and went as a unit, perhaps mitigating re-entry culture shock and isolation; however, on the other hand, their tours were one month more. *

Continuing the war effort, new enlistment along with conscription contributes to supply replacements for the short timers.

'Beauses' for enlistment or submitting to the draft are varied in kind and range of potency. Only with difficult self-examination are they susceptible of assortment in value matrices according to best reasons and base motives and again according to relative strength. Some want 'to do their bit' construed according to their own lights or in accordance with received constructions of their efforts: preventing the fall of dominoes, for instance, or securing Vietnamese hearts and minds. Some seek a career. Some see the GI Bill as a means to an education otherwise beyond their reach. Some are curious about this war that is more and more defining their generation. Some want to prove themselves in the alembic. Some who have not the proper affiliations or credentials or desire to claim conscientious objector status seek three-year enlistment in the Army (or, if they

have graduated from high school, a four-year enlistment in the Airforce or Navy*) instead of submitting to only two years conscription. This affords them some choice in MOS thereby allowing a modicum of control over how-- but not where-- they will serve. Some are contending with homophobic societal rejection because of their sexual orientation. They have found that official prohibitions against their serving have of late been applied less stringently (so long as they are extremely careful to whom they declare themselves). Some have narcissistic, sociopathic and/or sadistic tendencies that may find fulfilment in a setting where dominance and submission can be clear-cut, albeit not necessarily according to rank. Some who are demoralized believe they have found a sanctioned form of suicidality.

Up until December 1969, deferments from the draft tended to ensure college attendance for those who were otherwise ambivalent about higher education, and also tended to 'channel' scholars away from the humanities, deemed less essential to the gross national product. Those scholars who had reached the age limit of deferment, had completed their education or had dropped out were vulnerable to the draft. However, at this time, while deferments are not altogether abolished, conscription is determined by lottery and those who 'win' by having higher numbers are able to exercise more choices about entering the work force or furthering their education.

There are other more insidious forms of channeling: away from impoverished conditions and unemployment for example and, on occasion, away from correctional facilities, when the offer can be made to an offender to 'volunteer for the draft' and serve in the military in lieu of serving time.

The resultant mix provides an immersion experience, unprecedented for almost everyone here.

Many 'back in the world' have chosen instead to risk serving time and resist, burning their draft cards. Some who have already perished in the war were not even 'in-country'. Occupying many still embodied minds, though they be transported now to Indochina, is the continuum of casualty in 'the world' including college students at Kent State and the democratic process in Chicago.

Sides are taken—or not. Even here, maybe especially here, it can be easy to discern in conversation who has taken which of them. Among those serving in

Vietnam, sympathies and antipathies for the casualties back home vary considerably.

Many hope the black and white racial conflict among those serving in Vietnam in the years following the assassination of Reverend Martin Luther King has finally crested.

The coverup of the 1968 massacre of unarmed children, women and men at Mỹ Lai was made known a little less than two years ago. The original recommendation was made by an Army Board that twenty-eight officers be charged with crimes related to the massacre. Eventually fourteen were. Just last March there was a conviction and a life sentence, but only for one. The others were acquitted. It will be another thirty years before those soldiers who resisted orders and protected the vulnerable, who, at present, are often subjected to vilification, will in some ways be vindicated.

The racist orientation towards the Vietnamese (and among some privileged Vietnamese towards out-groups within their borders) remains prevalent with no sign of subsiding.

Many who will spend most of their tour (save for Rest and Relaxation) entirely within one compound or between one compound and another make do with the acquisition of slang and pidgin, often heavily laced with obscenities, profanities that leave few unsullied. Once home their first order of business will be to expunge the slurs from their idiolects. They will hope 'all that' emerged in the peculiar context of their tours in Vietnam. Among them will be some who strike a deeper aporia. They will find the work of addressing their complicity and concupiscence privately or with others a profoundly challenging, albeit self-assigned, hardship tour. In some cases-- for those who have a mind to-- it will take years to debride and dress the moral wounds of the sexism and racism enveloping them now. They will do so in order to gain an enlarged capacity for--and expanded ambit of-- moral consciousness. Others, who are not of the same mind, under the pressure of what is termed with resentment 'political correctness' will learn to leave unspoken their abusive epithets and conceal their underlying attitudes. They will still retain a nidus around which they will consolidate more prejudices. For a while, they will become 'hidden people' who, however, will find

gratification in other-affirmed self-disclosure in enclaves with those who can be trusted to sustain their biases.

Here and now, there are some in the shared environment who make efforts to master a few words and contrive somehow to use them for the sake of transactional purposes during predatory excursions to the ville. Others make the same efforts respectfully, recognizing when there is tolerance (and even, perhaps, at times, welcoming) of their foreign presence, it is ambivalent, tenuous. A few, however, take a keener interest in the richness of language and culture waiting just beyond the concertina wire of their compounds. They ply their interlocutors with questions and practice pronunciations of key words and phrases. There is shared amusement at unintended meanings conveyed by mistaken pitch and suspect tonality. Hand gestures to ensure joint attention coupled with ostensive definitions and repetitions help. Pauses have become very important.

Human communication and its mysteries hold fascination for only a very few; but Noam Chomsky's insights into language have by this time filtered down into undergraduate linguistic correspondence courses available to interested soldiers.

All in all, it is hard to tell when opportunities might arise for achieving more than a semblance of understanding.

Among their predecessors had been airmen assigned to forward observation locations in army base camps. They had been issued televisions and could watch "Combat" starring Vic Morrow at 3PM on AFVN. Just now, however, in the compound of interest, televisions are vanishingly rare. *

DJ Adrian Cronauer's signature greeting later immortalized by Robin Williams in Good Morning, Vietnam is now but a faint echo from the sixties mostly residing in the memories of those career soldiers (aka 'Lifers') who have had multiple tours. The Armed Forces Radio Service has a station now in Quảng Trị since the one in Huế was overrun during the Tet Offensive. The necessary media and equipment for personalized music are cassettes and cassette players available along with all manner of electronics at PX concessions. The Concert for Bangladesh held in August has generated great anticipation of the album that will come along in December.

Offering frameworks for apprehending and making meaning out of what appear to be meaningless endeavors are films like M*A*S*H and an adaptation of Heller's Catch -22 (with the iconic flight of Yossarian on his raft) that could be seen by enlistees and inductees before departing from 'the world'.

Older films like The Bridge over the River Kwai supplement entertainment from the newer ones like Walkabout and the 1970 version of Edith Nesbit's The Railway Children (with Jenny Agutter as Bobbie) circulating currently among the bases. Peter Davis must be assembling materials for his documentary Heart and Minds which will be released at the Cannes film Festival in 1974 but because of a restraining order not until 1975 in the US. That year, it will receive the Academy Award for Best Documentary. Reckoned from 1971, it will be seven years more and eight years more, respectively before Deerhunter debuts and Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness is reworked in the film Apocalypse Now. Platoon will debut in 1986. Miss Saigon's reworking of Puccini's Madame Butterfly will open on Broadway in twenty-years' time. It will include an anguished song about Bui Doi, the dust of war, children of American and Vietnamese unions. Many can be found right now at the orphanage in Huê. It is hinted by the workers there that the likelihood of abandonment is directly proportional to the darkness of skin.

The prostitution of Vietnamese women to servicemen that will be shown in Hearts and Minds and in Miss Saigon is just one more aspect of human beings emphatically commodified. Exploitation of women of almost any culture generates an endless stream of pornography. Porn is often made available for those in search of it via the same projectors used for the sanctioned feature films. There is often time to visit the Enlisted Club for a raunchy floorshow before the porn is projected.

Fictions and non-fictions on dog-eared pages left behind in footlockers by warriors returning to the world are a find: Hesse's Journey to the East, Vonnegut's Slaughter House Five, Gary Wills' Nixon Agonistes, Mike Royko's Boss as well as bulletins and collected essays from the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars. Halberstam's The Best and the Brightest won't be out until next year. The gradual disintegration of printed matter left behind is inevitable—not so the ordnance and land mines.

About half a year from now, those Americans still stationed in support units near Huế will receive a recent issue of a weekly news magazine from 'the world'. They will read with a mix of consternation and a sense of abandonment how they have already stood down, departed and are no longer in harm's way.

1971. Just last May two congressmen came over to Vietnam for an official visit. They returned to 'the world' with some extremely disturbing news: 15 percent of U.S. servicemen in Vietnam, they said, were actively addicted to heroin. At this time, there are strongly held convictions among professionals and para professionals that heroin addiction is, among all the addictions, the least likely to be overcome.

It will be two years more before Lee Robins' studies are conducted and published revealing that narcotic use including heroin is a good deal— she'll estimate three times— more widespread in 1971 than the congressmen reported but also, to everyone's surprise, that the vast majority of users would be able to put aside use of heroin at the end of their tours.

A tropical depression will form near Palau Island on October 18, 1971, will gather strength as it moves westward towards the Philippines, and will be promoted from Tropical Storm Hester to Typhoon Hester while over the South China Sea. It will boast peak winds at 105 miles per hour. It will make landfall near Huế on October 23rd.

The next most northern province, Quảng Trị, which abuts the Demilitarized Zone, will fall to the North Vietnamese the following year, after their Easter Offensive. The fall of Saigon will be four years later.

Two to three years after the fall of Saigon, all manner of ready-at-hand and makeshift craft, many of which are unseaworthy, will be employed in a new diaspora by refugees fleeing the aftermath of the war, the regime change figuring in some cases, economic and political hardships in others and conflicts that have arisen involving China, Cambodia and Vietnam. They will be called the Boat People and those who survive their immigration to 'the world' will enrich the cultural plurality in other countries, including America.

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* Revised with incorporation of additional details courtesy of Ted Engelmann. For a rich and full photojournalistic account of Ted's spatio-temporal context of service in Viet Nam please visit: www.onesoldiersheart.com

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