D

Damage[i]

Donna Houston[ii]

A tiny pocket of wasteland lies at the end of my street. It sits on unceded Gadigal Country and comprises a small hill wedged between two golf courses, a creek, a car park and a playing field. The hill owes its existence to layers of materials accumulated over time: shifting sand and unknown debris dumped there. Presently, the hill is an overgrown tangle of Sydney native plants and weeds (camphor laurel, banksia, casuarinas, melaleucas and gum trees). The tangled understory provides a habitat for small critters and the small clearing in the middle for teenage kids. At the bottom of the hill, there is a small grove of paperbarks, which once grew extensively along coastal and riparian planes in the region. The paperbarks sit in front of a council work shed and storage area used for collecting and composting green waste and mulch.

A channelized creek runs behind the shed. It forms a barrier to the public golf course, which is a marshy landscape prone to flooding. On most days, a shallow trickle of run-off transports a mixture of urban detritus directly into Sydney Harbour. The creek is cleaned a few times a year but the weeds, rubbish and sludge build up quickly. Australian White Ibis, colloquially known as 'rubbish chooks,' wade along the weedy sediments picking insects and fish with their curved black beaks. When the harbour tide comes in, ducks swim up the channel, foraging in the weeds for food. Sometimes the ducks have ducklings, but this creek is a tough intertidal neighbourhood with predators and scavengers such as eels, foxes, kookaburras, ravens, rats and feral and domestic cats looking to make a quick meal.

Figure 1. The Creek

The concrete bank of the creek inclines sharply towards the parking lot. Three charity bins overflow with clothes and household items, much of it torn or broken, the boundaries between recycling and discard blurred beyond distinction. At the other end of the car park, at the bottom of the hill, a stretch of land has been flattened, filled in with recycled crates and fenced. The local community has built an organic garden there. Orderly garden beds made out of recycled timber raise up from a carefully mulched floor, and passion fruit vines proliferate along the garden fence, along with rosemary, pumpkin vines and raspberry bushes. The fence itself represents a nature-culture boundary – the passionfruit and raspberries are invasive weeds on the hillside but they are cultivated food within the garden. The garden hosts bees (Australian native and European), worms, and chickens. The garden members make their own soil out of composted food and waste from the local area.

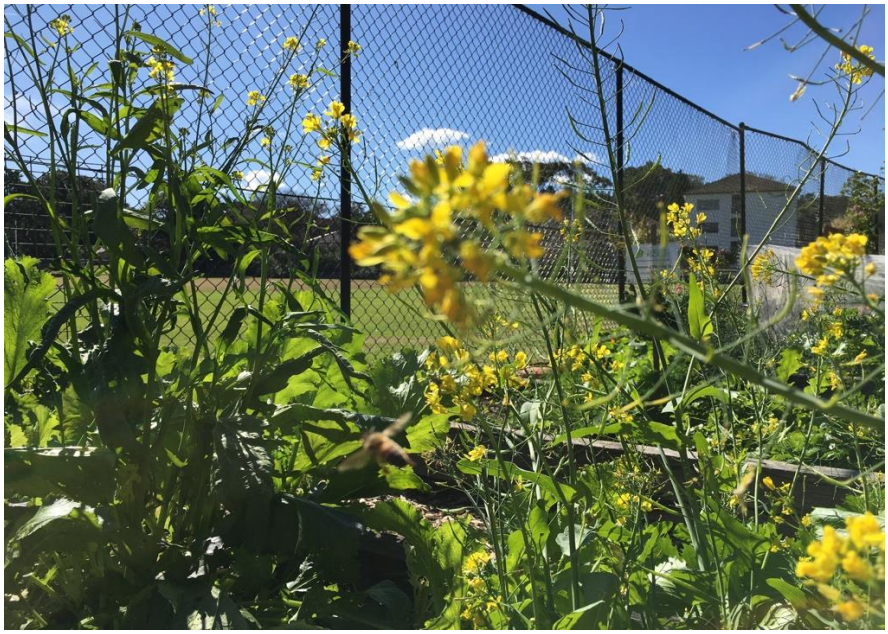

Figure 2. The Community Garden

Val Plumwood advocated for a fuller sense of inhabiting damaged places by becoming more attuned with and responsible to them.[1] "Wastelands" are often defined as quintessentially damaged places, other terms used to describe them include: barren, overgrown, neglected, unused, under-utilised, derelict, degraded, mundane and ugly. Damaged places are the by-products, excesses and conditions of colonialism and capitalism. For Plumwood, they become *shadowed*, in the sense that they routinely escape notice, their toxic interconnections and histories of displacement hidden often in plain sight. Wastelands can be large tracts of blasted, irrevocably contaminated, scarred or sacrificed land or, as in the case of the little wasteland at the end of my street, pockets of under-developed, polluted, weedy land in cities and towns.

[1] Plumwood, "Shadow Places."

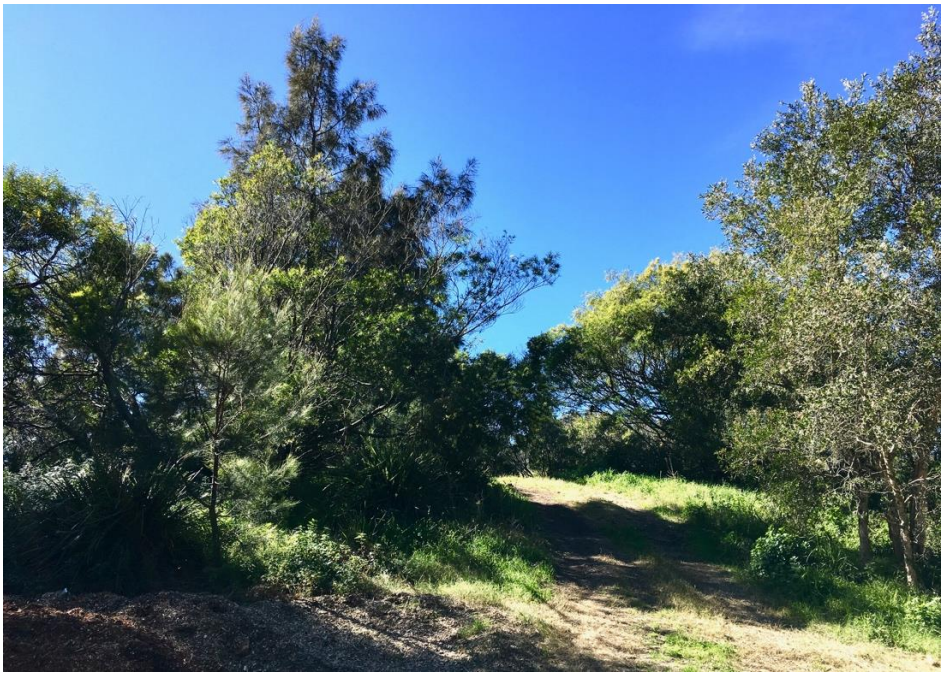

Figure 3. The Hill

For an unsightly, underutilized area, the tiny wasteland at the end of my street does a great deal of bio-cultural and political work: it is a good place to think about and with damage. It provides habitat for a surprising diversity of urban creatures, it is a floodplain, it is a place where dogs can be walked off-leash, it is a place for growing local food, regenerating bushland, hanging out, riding bikes, informal camping, and playing sport. Due to this hybrid mix of agencies and uses, this tiny wasteland troubles nature-culture boundaries and cultural logics of ecological disruption, damage and social disregard. For these reasons, Matthew Gandy (2016) refers to such landscapes as "unintentional."[2] Unintentional landscapes in cities and towns are the left behind and in-between places that proliferate as a result of uneven development and the historical specificity of landscape change in particular places. "The unintentional landscape," Gandy writes, "is not a primal landscape in the sense of 'wild nature' serving as an object of aesthetic contemplation, it is not an idealized landscape that conforms to some-pre-existing conception between nature and culture, and it is not a designed landscape allied to particular social or political goals."[3]

Gandy's work highlights the allure of damaged landscapes absent from the expert gaze of design and capital. The very imperfection of such places: the co-existence of old and new infrastructures, the multiple and contested uses, the remnant ecological patches, the lack of formal design and regulation and the ugly and mundane stuff accumulated there is what strips away the layers of inauthenticity found in places that are sanitised and staged for public consumption.[4] Yet, situated at the interstices of sacrifice, abandonment and possible regeneration, the very lack of value attached to urban wastelands renders them as fallow, ripe for economic redevelopment.

[2] Gandy, "Unintentional Landscapes."
[3] Ibid, 434.
[4] Gandy, "Interstitial Landscapes."

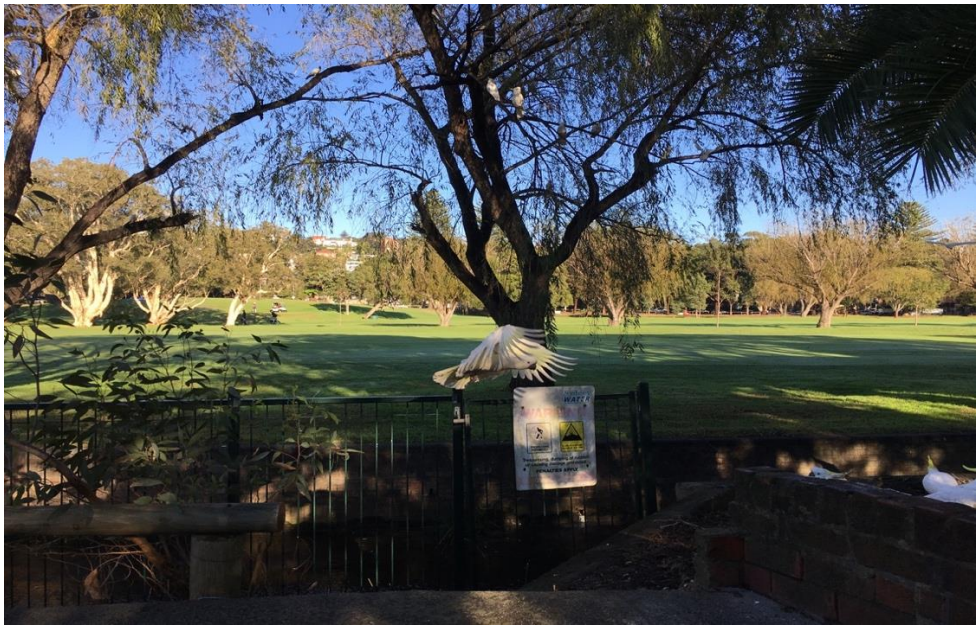

Figure 4. Sulphur Crested Cockatoos

What gets lost in the capitalist and colonialist logic of ruin or redemption? Elaine Gan and her co-authors observe that damage is inhabited by ghosts of the living and the dead.[5] They write: "Anthropocene: a time when survival teeters on a question stirring in the marrow of the Earth's bones. What kinds of human disturbances can life on Earth bare?"[6] The politics of wastelands from the microbial to the planetary require greater attunement to the iridescent edges of disturbance, the lived interdependencies and multispecies injustices. Here, there is no redemption, only the potential for the ethical and political navigation of 'impure' states of more-than-human flourishing.[7]

In the little pocket of wasteland at the end of my street it is evening and I am walking amidst the ghosts and ruins. Rainbow lorikeets are cacophonous as they return to the hollows in the strand of melaleucas running along a forgotten sand dune. Sulphur-crested cockatoos are equally raucous as they settle in their night-time roosts in the tall trees. Even the rubbishy creek is bathed in glorious iridescent twilight. My dog zig-zags here and there, sniffing the expanse of chemical-green grass. In the distance, a solitary golfer lobs balls into the oncoming gloom. I am happy enough here in this interstitial patch of urban nature. It could be worse. It might not exist at all or be infilled with luxury townhouses. But the ghosts lurking in this shadow place gather. This place which always was and always will be Gadigal land, which spills over with discarded ecologies and things, where fertilisers, insecticides and herbicides silently leach into the Harbour, where the birds and critters described here are only a dim reflection of past abundance and what might be nurtured again. In this moment, I am reminded of what Val Plumwood wanted to tell us about shadow places and the politics of dwelling: that they/we co-exist in fucked-up relations and inhabiting them is a call to ethical action.

[5] Gan *et al.*, "Introduction."
[6] Ibid, G12.
[7] See Shotwell, *Against Purity*, 9.

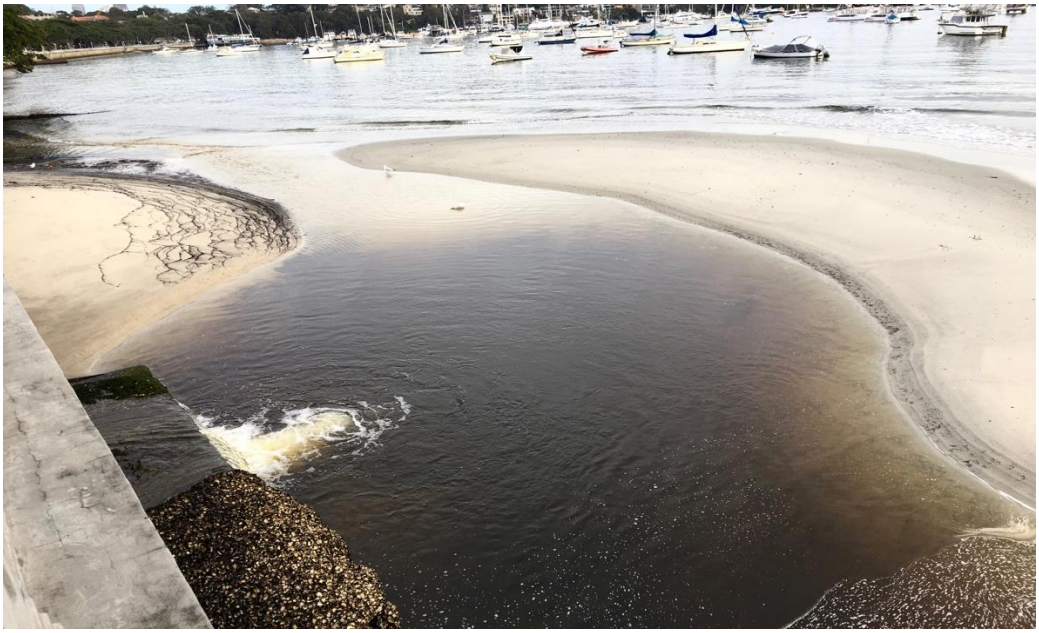

Figure 5. Outfall into Sydney Harbour

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[i] Houston, Donna. "Damage." *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020). https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts

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