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Hauntingⁱ

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Haunting as Method: From a Vietnamese Australian perspective, writing and living on stolen land

This piece was mostly written at a home in the land of both the Bidjigal people of the Eora Nation and the Cabrogal people of the Darug Nation. We live, practice and pay respects to the elders, past, present and emerging. Sovereignty was never ceded and the land always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Haunting is a lingering which resides in everything around us; the smell of algae, the sand between our toes, the sounds of river waves, the rustling of bird's wings. Haunting refers to the aftermaths of a repressed past, a lingering of a presence unresolved. Many cultures and individuals will refer to these as spirits. It is a reminder of responsibilities; we live with the consequences. Haunting forces us to contemplate the infinite character of responsibility, beyond the tangible and visible.

This piece attempts to give essences of how I – as a Vietnamese Australian – utilise the haunting of a contaminated landscape as a method towards an ethics of care and responsibility. The landscape is the land of the Wangal people of the Eora Nation, now called Rhodes and Sydney Olympic Park, NSW, with the Parramatta River running through. Val Plumwood wrote of shadow places as places that take our pollution and dangerous waste and that there is a need to apply an ethics of care to these places alongside other places. Caring is respecting the spiritual relationship that the Wangal people have with that land.

“An important part of the environmental project can then be reformulated as a place principle of environmental justice, an injunction to cherish and care for your places, but without in the process destroying or degrading any other places, where ‘other places’ include other human places but also other species’ places”¹

Haunting has been a way for me to attempt to de-colonise my understanding and relationship with land, although the system of colonisation largely in place has completely spoilt me at the expense of the sufferings of Aboriginal Australians. Guilt-ridden, haunting as method is my attempt to grasp a sense of responsibility, living on stolen land.

This is my small story of how I was haunted. How I tried to understand haunting. And through haunting I found some direction of a way of living with stolen land. Haunting as (un)belonging. Haunting as Responsibility. Haunting as Entangled. Haunting as Activism. Haunting as Intimacy.

¹ Plumwood, “Shadow Places,” 147.

“Recovering a storied sense of land and place is a crucial part of the restoration of meaning”²

Haunting as (Un)Belonging

Vietnamese Australians have a close relationship with rivers and rivers become landscapes of leisure, places for family picnics – BBQs, fishing and lying under the sultry sun. This relationship is an extension of feeling at home and of belonging as Vietnam is itself, a waterborne landscape. Beaches and oceans can be landscapes of trauma for many in the community since many were boatpeople. Rivers become places of belonging, a site of performing home.

“In Vietnamese culture we think of water as life, it’s calming ... The river is a big part of Vietnamese culture because in rural areas, people use the water from the river for the rice fields ... To some people, when they look at the rivers it makes them feel a bit at home... it reminds them of their memories in Vietnam”³

My family used to live in the land of the Wangal people. We would have picnics at Sydney Olympic Park and do bike rides and walks along the Parramatta River. We told each other stories of the past in this land.

Whilst digging through archives and books on Agent Orange contamination in Vietnam, I found out that there was a Union Carbide factory located in Rhodes and producing Agent Orange during the Vietnam War.⁴ Due to the dumping of toxic waste down the river in the production process, the landscape which my family spent picnics and leisurely activities in, is a contaminated landscape, with the very same contamination which has affected our family, community and societies in Vietnam. This contamination haunts us, a migrant family from Vietnam to Australia. The chemical aftermaths of the war not only settle in Vietnam, where my family escaped from, but in Australia, where my family settled.

Haunting as Responsibility

“I can’t wait till we leave this place” the person said with a sense of repulsion. We were on the ferry along the Parramatta River, going towards Sydney Olympic Park. We were having a conversation about the nature of contamination in the area. I was surprised with the repulsion. I used to live near here. Many still live here now. And many is encompassing both humans and non-humans alike. Fish with dioxin contamination in their tissues.⁵ The birds in the wetlands. People. I began to think it is coming from a privileged place to reject landscapes in such a manner.

² Plumwood, “Shadow Places,” 139.

³ Huy Pham interviewed in Cadzow, Byrne and Goodall, “Waterborne,” 126-127.

⁴ Agent Orange is a 50/50 mixture of two commercial herbicides; 2,4,5-T and 2,4-D, created by Army Researcher in Fort Detrick and used as a military strategy during the Vietnam War between 1962-1971 under Operation Ranch Hand to defoliate the forest and rural areas of Vietnam to deprive the Viet Cong of cover and food crops. This has created high levels of dioxin in the land, water and food sources in Vietnam and linked to sickness, disabilities and diseases which are intergenerational. Union Carbide was one of the many chemical manufacturers making Agent Orange during the Vietnam War.

⁵ Fishing is prohibited at the Parramatta River due to the dioxin contamination in the sediment and the fishes

We think of our bodily health when we are repulsed by contaminated landscape. The dangers of the contaminated landscape to us. But this is part of the separation of land and body, a dichotomy that is part of a colonial rhetoric. Part of decolonising our relationship with land is to live with it and to acknowledge that even if its contaminated, it is a part of us, reflecting bodies and lands in need of healing. In the multiple facets of encountering land, to embrace haunting is to understand the need for the responsibility of healing. To not abandon landscapes, to not reject them.

“We would have to accept all these shadow places too as ‘our’ place, not just the privileged, special, recognised place, the castle-of-the-self-place called home”⁶

Haunting as Entangled

“Someone decided to unload a cargo of unsellable Agent Orange on remote indigenous Australia where its use didn’t matter, where precarious employed young men need jobs”⁷

Entanglement of landscapes and bodies goes beyond boundaries. The nature of contamination is the messy path and the trouble with the aftereffects. It is a haunting that seeps into facets of disadvantage. Even after it was known – after the Vietnam War – of the dangerous aftereffects of the dioxin in Agent Orange, men were employed by the Western Australian Agricultural Protection Board, through the 1970s and the 1980s, to use the chemical components of Agent Orange, 2,4,5-T and 2,4-D, as a herbicide in the West Kimberley region. Most of the men were Aboriginal Australians. The Indigenous communities of the Kimberley, like the communities in Vietnam, are still reeling from the aftermaths; land contamination, cancer, disabilities, early deaths. Fear and anxiety pervade through these aftermaths.

Haunting reveals the colonial nature of contamination distribution, where devaluation of lives and environments are shown through the path of contamination, how it appears and disappears. Haunting is a tapestry of entangling all places and people that Agent Orange has affected – Vietnamese and Aboriginal Australians among many others. We all are seemingly separate and far, but together in entangled, messy but communal haunting and need for communal healing of bodies and landscape.

“Haunting was the language and the experiential modality by which I tried to reach an understanding of the meeting of force and meaning, because haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security). Haunting is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced by them. What’s distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely”⁸

Haunting as Activism

I got feedback about a piece I have written about social and cultural effects of Agent Orange. The feedback was that rather than express people as victims of Agent Orange, I need to write

⁶ Plumwood, “Shadow Places,” 147.

⁷ Muecke, “Day 12.”

⁸ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.

that “they believed to be victims of Agent Orange.” The feedback was based on an approach of science - although the effects of Agent Orange on communities is unquestioned, many individuals find it hard to present tangible facts that they have been heavily effected, or that their or future generation’s disabilities, cancers etc. were because of Agent Orange. Chemical contamination operates differently on different bodies and different landscapes. It does not have predictable patterns. According to this particular feedback, people’s stories and experiences alone does not legitimise the effects of Agent Orange. This feedback ultimately silence voices.

The biomedical diagnosis framework of science and medicine should not be the only means of diagnosis of contamination. Diagnosis should be through stories alongside science. The utilisation of clinical and family histories, genetics counselling, storytelling etc. as part of diagnosis is already incorporated widespread in many medical practices. However, diagnosis for chemical contamination is politically charged, where an acknowledgement of the effects of Agent Orange may mean a costly compensation. This may have driven the conclusion drawn in the Royal Commission on the Use and Effects of Chemical Agents in Australian Personnel in Vietnam (1985), which attribute many of the symptoms which indicate the effects of Agent Orange to smoking, PTSD, among other possible causes. This is not accounting for any story of chemical exposure of our soldiers.

Stories can fully encompass and acknowledge how Agent Orange has affected people and landscape. A storied sense of understanding uncertainty, haunting and the intergenerational effects of chemical contamination in landscapes and generations is a way which we can have diagnosis, accept responsibility and heal. Stories conveying haunting refuses rejection and ignorance. Stories as diagnosis is a form of activism and respect for the lands and people who are affected and will be continuously haunted, for generations by Agent Orange. Haunting as an ethical model of care and activism, serve as a reminder - It is their story, their bodies and their environment.

Haunting as Intimacy

We sat and watch the sky become over-cast. Rain started to trickle, creating constellation like patterns on the river water’s surface. My uncle folded his fishing rod and started folding his camping chair. My mum and aunties began to put food back into Tupperware and rolled up the picnic mat. It was the end of a humid day of telling each other stories, of drinking wine, of the children playing. The smell of basil and chilli alongside the residue of oil on the BBQ lingers. We care for this place that contains our stories, our family time. We care, as generations have cared before us. We take responsibility, through integrating haunting in our everyday practice – in research, in writing and ultimately, in our intimacy with the places we have left and places we have come to. Places that haunt. The sky darkened as we left Sydney Olympic Park. Saltwater mosquitos from the nearby wetlands rises.

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ⁱ Ngo, Boi Huyen. "Haunting." *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020). <https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

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