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Reflections

- ¹ Most ethnographic research and writing focuses on the intensive interaction ethnographers have with their human collaborators (*anthropos*), who commonly form the focus of anthropological research. The most celebrated method of ethnography is “participant observation,” an all-encompassing immersive experience supplemented by detailed field-notes, “thick description,” interviews, open-ended conversations, shared experiences, surveys, library research, and more. Prioritizing such methods, ethnography tends to focus, often for very good reasons, on forms of phatic communication (things spoken), which are then translated in logocentric ways into writing, the “graphos” of ethnography. In this essay, I show how reflecting on visual images adds important perspectives to the anthropological toolkit. When anthropologists focus on images, new objects of study come into focus¹. This method is not intended to replace the phatic aspects of ethnographic research but facilitates a fruitful dialogue between ethnography and visual thinking. On the surface, these new perspectives might appear to prompt a turn away from “the social” in order to focus on material things. But the material is not the opposite of the social. Instead, it turns out that material elements are as much a part of human stories as the actual stories humans tell– the trees and pathways are social, and more-than-social, too.
- ² Reflecting on images entails reflecting on the interaction between humans and the material world, which is itself a complex production of human and non-human entanglements.² To show this, this essay dips into a collection of photographs I took while conducting ethnographic research into the eviction of 14,600 household from a place called Thủ Thiêm, and which I now maintain as a digital archive. I have written a more conventional ethnography of this same development project in book form

(Harms, 2016). There are many merits to the conventional genre, for the focus it allows on life histories, political struggles, and engaging at length in academic debates. But revisiting the site virtually through this photographic archive opens up the story again, leading the investigation down new paths, in this case, as we shall see, actual paths.

- 3 The very act of choosing a small selection of photographs from a digital archive of thousands of digital images captured over the course of several years of research is itself a kind of analytic process. The process is informed by my own ethnographic research, and what I learned from years talking to people. But looking at the photos also transforms how I interpret that research. As I reflect on the images, they reflect back on me, creating an interpretive dialogue. While most of my research and writing has focused on the stories people told me, focusing on images allows other important stories to emerge. Those stories emerge not only because they have been captured by the camera, but because they are made meaningful by ethnographic knowledge that informs the context within which they were photographed. That is not to say that the meaning of the images simply rests upon what ethnography already knows – like a simple explanatory caption. The process is more recursive than that, because the images also transform the ethnographic lens – telling new stories, in different ways, giving new angles. In this essay, the stories that emerge from reflecting on the images take on a dreamlike quality, but they are not fantasies. Instead, they suggest that the real fantasy is the idea of an ethnography ever being finished. There is always another angle, another view. In this case, beyond what they do to the ethnographer, the images also call out a dialogue between humans and the non-human world within which humans are themselves enmeshed and co-constituted. The trees and pathways depicted in these photographs are not human beings; but, as we see, they played an important role in how people went about being human.

Cây Bàng

- 4 Long before the coming of the Great Plan, before architects and urban planners arrived with schemes for building the city according to fanciful dreams of urban development, there were pathways. In the Thủ Thiêm peninsula, one such pathway followed the bend of the Saigon River. Over time, the pathway became a road. It is difficult to know when the path first appeared, or when it became a road, but it is visible, albeit unnamed, on a famous 1815 map of Saigon by Trần Văn Học. Eventually, it gained a name: Cây Bàng Road.
- 5 The road was named for the trees planted in the narrow margin along the bank of the river separating the path of movement from water's edge. These trees do not appear on maps, but their arrangement is not unplanned. They spread their horizontal branches and their broad, flat leaves over hot earth, casting shadows that combine with breezes from the river to cool life down and make it bearable. Photographs from when the trees still lined the road reveal that they were planted at regular intervals, spaced so their leafy crowns might overlap just enough to extend into an almost unbroken canopy. The outermost leaves of one tree share shadows with the outermost leaves of the next. One wonders if this species of trees, common throughout tropical Asia, evolved in tandem with the human beings who plant them, for the canopy always leaves enough clearance for the unimpeded passage of traffic and the gathering of people in the shade that concentrates in the space between the trunks of the trees. It is common to discover a

hammock strung between a pair of cây bàng trees, or a collection of plastic stools gathered to form a simple café within its cool shadows. Symbiosis of this sort signals the fruitful coming together of human beings and non-human things in the incrementally built worlds that characterized Thủ Thiêm. Or so it was, in this now transformed corner of the great motorbike metropolis.³ So it was. Until the end of the first decade of the twenty first century.

Illustration 1 - Cây bàng trees along Cây bàng road (district 2, Ho Chi Minh City)

Author: Erik Harms. September 20, 2010.

- 6 The trees, like the road, are called cây bàng, *Terminalia catappa*. Provincial streets in small towns across Vietnam – all the way from north to south – are commonly lined by cây bàng trees. In cities and vacation destinations, rural themed restaurants and leisurely cafes often take the name as well. The tree evokes the simple satisfaction that comes from escaping the heat underneath the shadows of a tree in a hot climate. The sentimental appeal of the tree is even captured in a four-stanza poem recited by nursery school children. The poem, *Cây Bàng*, was written in the 1980s by a sentimental poet named Xuân Quỳnh, famous not only for her poems but for dying alongside her loving husband and young son in a tragic automobile accident. Children across Vietnam often memorize the poem at a young age. Sometimes parents post videos of their children on the internet, earnestly reciting the lines, proudly (or dutifully) demonstrating their emerging talents with formal language⁴. Here are two of the four stanzas from the famous poem:

<i>Khi vào mùa nóng</i>	When summer comes
<i>Tán lá xòe ra</i>	Broad leaves unfurl
<i>Như cái ô to</i>	Like parasols
<i>Đang làm bóng mát</i>	Making cool shade

<i>Bóng bàng tròn lấm</i>	Bàng shade is round
<i>Tròn như cái nong</i>	like a basket
<i>Em ngồi vào trong</i>	I sit inside
<i>Mát ơi là mát!</i> ⁵	Cool, oh how cool!

Illustration 2 - Đường Cây Bàng denuded of the trees that gave the street its name (District 2, Ho Chi Minh City)

Author: Erik Harms, September 20, 2010.

- 7 In 2010, when the pace of mass demolition began to pick up in order to clear the land for the development of the Thủ Thiêm New Urban Zone, some of the first things to go were the cây bàng trees. Two photographs taken along of Đường cây Bàng on the same day in September of 2010, capture this process in motion (illustrations 1 and 2). One photo shows the aftermath and the other shows a row of trees that will soon be sawed down to a stump. The shade they cast will vanish with the trees, and with the shade a space for gathering will vanish too. We now know as historical fact, almost a decade after the photographs were taken, what we could then only assume: the chainsaws and the felling of the trees were preparing the way for the bulldozers. Not just the trees, but also the buildings, then entire neighborhoods.

Paths

- 8 Before demolitions, evictions, and terraforming transformed Thủ Thiêm, Cây Bàng Road was one of only two paved roads visible from above ground. The other road was called Lương Định Của, a mostly straight road with one bend leading from the ferry station that delivered motorbike traffic into Thủ Thiêm from downtown. Lương Định Của Road first cut through Thủ Thiêm before intersecting with Cây Bàng Road, which looped around the river like an inverted question mark, before rejoining its partner at

an “X” in the middle of the peninsula. After the intersection where the two roads converge, Cây Bàng road straightens out, widens to two lanes in each direction, changes name, becomes a commercial trunk road lined with shops, and continues onward to another junction where it joins the national highway near the base of the Saigon Bridge.

- 9 If you have only seen Thủ Thiêm from tourist maps, formal planning maps, war era US military maps, or satellite images, you might be forgiven for assuming that there were no other passageways in the whole peninsula. From above it looks like there are just two roads – one straight, and the other curving back to meet the first. However, when viewed from the ground – on foot, bicycle, motorbike, or three wheeled cart – the reality is different. Until the coming of the bulldozers, Thủ Thiêm was crisscrossed with a network of paths branching off from those two roads. It recalls the nascent form of Saigon’s famous alleyway morphology⁶. The paths, however, retained their own qualities. These paths were even less conspicuous than alleyways, easy to miss. They are not only too small for even cars to pass, but demand the dexterity of motorbikes or pedestrians. They formed a system of pathways, weaving a fabric of lived space, a world which could always be quickly connected to the city but which also turned inward into itself, not in a socially isolating manner but more in the manner of the curving passageways of a carnival maze.
- 10 The pathways twist and turn just enough to alter the sense of direction and carve out a world within a world, a place outside of city space but right in the middle of it. They are pleasantly disorienting in a way that recalls the meandering pathways of Olmstead’s Central Park, but they are not designed for strolls. These pathways gave Thủ Thiêm its own unique character, meandering pathways leading to entire neighborhoods, or to family compounds hidden in lush foliage but from which one could still gaze upon the ever-growing towers of the growing metropolis across the river. They enable a vernacular version of green urbanism built through habitation rather than formal architectural training.⁷ These spaces are never fully outside of the urban, but engage in a dialogue with the urban, borrowing certain cues from rural life, spatiality and temporality, but also rejecting rural modes of production.⁸ The pathways do not just lead to but form the heart of green living – not the green living of advertisements or professional urban design, but of lived spaces that have emerged through a long history of following and pushing back against the world of plants and soils and water, while also engaging with the pull of the city and money and infrastructure⁹. The paths both lead to and reproduce a world forged from a human desire to conquer nature while also capturing the simple gifts it gives, like wind and shade, the rustling of grass, the dappled shadows of leaves under shifting sun.

Illustration 3 - A pathway leading from Cây bàng road into a residential area (district 2, Ho Chi Minh City)

Author: Erik Harms, September 20, 2010.

- 11 The pathways in Thủ Thiêm emerged over time, through a series of negotiations between people and plants, social organization and the properties of soil. The paths that emerged inscribe a history of interaction – people battling back nature and also following natural cues in search of paths of least resistance. The story of habitation in places like Thủ Thiêm is often told as the history of “clearing the land” (*khai phá*), of whacking away weeds and jungle, chasing away tigers, and delivering the markers of civilization by building Vietnamese style houses, erecting community halls (*đình*) to mark the establishment of a village, establishing markets, building a Catholic church and a convent for the Lovers of the Holy Cross, and of course Buddhist temples and pagodas, and a Cao Đài temple¹⁰. Families built ancestral tombs on their land, a Catholic cemetery was built behind the church. But the fight to clear away and civilize nature enlisted nature in its own project along these pathways, which both follow and reorient plants and soil.
- 12 All of these signs of human life (and death) are connected not only by roads but by pathways, eroded into the soil by the footsteps and tire tracks of an endless stream of moving bodies. The pathways are built to resist the ravages of nature through human intervention – built up like the berms dividing rice fields, packed muddy piles of earth, sometimes shored up with broken bricks, poured concrete, rocks. In the process, human agents gather up elements of nature to counteract its own natural processes of erosion. They do these things by asserting their will, their human agency, but in doing so they mobilize elements of nature to do this human work and are thus transformed in the process as well: the edges of the paths are planted with trees and grasses are allowed to grow, holding the soil in place. Sections prone to erosion are sometimes shored up with concrete and sometimes by the strategic placement of a coconut tree. Pathways crossing streams require simple bridges, or water diverted through tubes, and sharp turns to accommodate meandering flows. Drivers on these pathways do their

best not to fall into gulleys, and time their excursions with the rising and falling of the tides.

- 13 The path is a curious kind of social space. It cuts through space as it binds, connects, and opens up spaces of interaction. Like the side of the road, at certain places along the way the space on the edge of the path creates little eddies of sociality, spaces of repose alongside the space of movement conditioned by the direction of the path. The path is not an artifact of pure nature but is also always more than human. It only comes into being through a long and incrementally negotiated relationship between humans and the non-human world. The path tells the human where to go, but in going there the human transforms the path, adds to it, plants trees, sets up pit stops, lays gravel, cuts a groove.

Illustration 4 - Eddies of sociality and spaces of repose along a pathway (district 2, Ho Chi Minh City)

Author: Erik Harms, November 2, 2010.

- 14 If the path itself is a product of negotiation, so too is passage along the path from one point to another. The skinniness of the path slows passage to a human pace. Chance encounters along the path demand accommodation, subtle forms of communications. One learns through experience where it is possible to bring one's motorbike to a stop without falling over, or how to avoid setting one's foot into soft soil eroding towards a ditch. Such subtle contours of the path must be known in order to accommodate others coming from the other direction along the path. Puddles must be navigated, mud avoided, curves anticipated, and blind spots can only be entered after the toot of a horn. The path is a product of those who move along it, but it also tells the mover how to move. The word for path, *đường mòn*, implies a road worn out (*mòn*) of the soil. Riders also become worn out by the concentration required to navigate the path their own history of movement has worn into existence.
- 15 The story of the pathway is in many ways the opposite of the tragedy of the commons (Hardin 1968). Instead of the selfish depletion of a finite common resource, the path is

the cumulative product of collective contribution to an unanticipated project, which is not so much made from the spirit of collectivism but an accumulation of selfish desires of individuals trying to get where each one wants to go. *Picture a landscape open to all. It is to be expected that human beings will forge pathways through it. The first walker may be followed by the next, who treads upon the same soil trod by the first. Therein lies the story of the path. Each human passerby is drawn into the passage of the previous, wearing into the ground a pathway by virtue of treading upon it, surrendering nothing but the movement across space and gaining in the process a pathway easing that movement.*¹¹

- 16 Such were the paths of Thủ Thiêm, such as they were, before the bulldozers came.

Illustration 5 - A pathway shored up with patches of concrete, packed earth, grass, and trees (district 2, Ho Chi Minh City)

Author: Erik Harms, September 25, 2010.

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NOTES

1. The field of visual anthropology is vast and sophisticated, and rather than devalue it with a single citation, I invite the reader to anticipate the work of Tram Luong, PhD candidate in anthropology at Yale University, whose investigations into the way "optics" become entangled with social processes inspire this essay.
2. Readers will recognize some affinity in this approach to anthropological work building from Actor Network Theory (Hull, 2012), or some of the exciting new work on materiality and infrastructure (Anand, 2017; Björkman, 2015; Eli Elinoff, 2017; Schwenkel, 2013). I also find inspiration in work focusing on "ecologies of urbanism," which combines careful anthropological

attention to ethnography with attention to political-ecology and the interaction of people with non-human nature and other things, both anthropogenic and otherwise (Rademache, 2015; Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan, 2013; Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan, 2017).

3. The evocative description of Saigon as the “motorbike metropolis” comes from the title of a dissertation by Jessica Lockrem (2016).

4. For examples of young children reciting the poem, and of teachers using it in lessons, see:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Z_Eed4VDko; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwpWWtRP85g>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwpWWtRP85g>

5. The poem appeared in a 1981 collection (Xuân Quỳnh, 1981). It is also available online here: <https://www.thivien.net/Xu%C3%A2n-Qu%E1%BB%B3nh/C%C3%A2y-b%C3%A0ng/poem-cRUhkBdqnrX9VeymBdXu7w>

6. On the alleyways of Ho Chi Minh City, see Gibert-Futre, 2019.

7. On the more formal variety of green urbanism, as practiced by architects in India, see Rademacher, 2017.

8. The rural aesthetic, as Gillen (2016) so usefully notes, is often an essential (and often “essentialized”) part of how urban actors construct vital aspects of their lives in the city.

9. In this way green living along such pathways is a working-class alternative to the “bourgeois environmentalism” so provocatively criticized by Baviskar (2011).

10. For a critical history of “clearing the wastelands” in Ho Chi Minh City see Harms (2014, 2016).

11. These sentences are italicized to indicate that they are a reworking of Hardin’s famous description of the tragedy of the commons. This is the original: “The tragedy of the commons develops in this way. Picture a pasture open to all. It is to be expected that each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the commons. [...] the rational herdsman concludes that the only sensible course for him to pursue is to add another animal to his herd. And another; and another... But this is the conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons. Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit—in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all” (Hardin 1968).

ABSTRACTS

Photographic images from Ho Chi Minh City’s Thủ Thiêm Peninsula draw attention to now-vanished trees and pathways from a place that has been demolished for the sake of urban expansion. The trees and pathways in these photographs evoke an aspect of sociality often overlooked in the logocentric anthropological and geographical literature on development-induced evictions. Attention to images draws attention to the history of non-human nature and to lost pathways of urban development, which in turn emphasizes their uses and the practices which maintained them, revealing the interconnection between human sociality and the non-human world. Unlike the “tragedy of the commons,” which describes common resources extinguished or depleted by unregulated use, these elements appear as a collective resource, produced and cared for by their users. Reflecting on photographic images taken before and during a period of mass eviction inspires a rethinking of the idea of the commons, crafted

through a cultural approach that attends to the material landscape, the role of the non-human in social relationships, and the social production of landscapes.

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Keywords: Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City, Thu Thiem, pathway, tree, eviction

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