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Cameron Muir

Fifty Shades of Shadow Places:¹ A Photographic Essay

Every time there's a big wet, say every four or so years, the creek at Chidna Station runs blue. A lurid, cobalt blue. At the Pilliga, tailings turn the ground white and the forest black. Further south, the Murray River blooms green. At Roxby Downs, in South Australia, where we mine the world's largest known deposit of uranium, the water takes on a yellow hue. Here is a rainbow of toxicity. Agriculture, mining, and industry have transformed many of Australia's waterways, often in faraway localities, where the consequences of our consumption and exploitation of people and places remain out of sight and out of mind. These are shadow places.



Figures 1 & 2:
A creek on Chidna Station near the abandoned Mount Oxide mine, Queensland. Photos courtesy of Vernon Spreadborough.

Vernon Spreadborough fears for the health of his cattle here. He sees birds drop dead at the old Mt Oxide mine pit at the edge of his property. The mining company left decades ago and the government won't spend the money to clean up the site. He carries on with his blue water and dead animals up in Queensland, towards the Northern Territory border, one of the most sparsely populated places in the world.

1 Val Plumwood, "Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling," *Australian Humanities Review* 44 (2008), <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-March-2008/plumwood.html>.

Figures 3 & 4:
Bibblewindi spill site,
Pilliga Forest, New
South Wales. Photos
by the author.

Wastewater from coal seam gas extraction spilled into the forest in 2011 and killed the vegetation. The site has been rehabilitated but the ground still leeches salts. New gas and coal mining developments have divided the rural communities in northwest New South Wales.



Figure 5:
Tailings dam from
the uranium mine at
Roxby Downs, South
Australia. Photo cour-
tesy Jessie Boylan.

The Olympic Dam mine near Roxby Downs in South Australia holds the world's largest known deposit of uranium. It has been the site of anti-nuclear protests since 1983. Australia doesn't produce nuclear energy but it supplies uranium to most of the world's nuclear energy producers.





Figures 6 & 7: Blue-green algae in the Murray-Darling River system, Australia. Photos courtesy of Murray-Darling Basin Authority.

Australia has transformed many of its inland rivers. In the summer of 1991–92, the Darling River became the site of the world’s largest toxic blue-green algae outbreak. The bloom stretched for over 1,000 kilometres, locals along the river reported. The New South Wales government trucked in drinking water and called on the military for support.

I think I am drawn to Val Plumwood’s “shadow places” more than any other concept in the environmental humanities. Plumwood was a founding ecofeminist philosopher and her words influenced scholars and activists around the world. In Australia, she was a key member of the ecological humanities group that included Freya Matthews, Kate Rigby, Libby Robin, and Deborah Bird Rose. *Shadow Places* was only a short essay, written towards the end of Plumwood’s life and published after her death in 2008. Others, however, are quietly expanding the ideas in that essay.

Shadow places are sites of extraction and production that provide for our material comfort, yet they are places “we don’t know about, don’t want to know about, and in a commodity regime don’t ever need to know about.” The enjoyment of our homes and national parks and other privileged places is made possible by outsourcing risk and disorder to other people and places—often to the most vulnerable—and to future generations. Plumwood argued we should expand our idea of “home” to include all the places that nourish us, the places that provide our material needs and comforts. This expands our responsibilities beyond the local. Many of us continue to grapple with what that means in practice. Maybe the act of acknowledgement is enough at first.

Figure 8:

Thermal water pollution from the Vales Point Power Station, Lake Macquarie, New South Wales. Photo courtesy Mark Merton, sydneyimages.com.au

This small power plant burns coal mined in the nearby Hunter Valley. It emits nearly 10 million tonnes of greenhouse gases each year.

**Figure 9:**

Contaminated water samples from Teshima Island, Japan. Photo by the author.

In the 1980s and 90s, hundreds of thousands of tonnes of toxic waste from the car industry were illegally dumped on the island. Locals lived with the dioxins, PCBs, and lead material for years before the Japanese government began remedial works. Australia imports many of its cars from Japan. Where does responsibility for the "local" lie in the Anthropocene?





Figure 10:
Facility for processing and transferring toxic waste from Teshima Island, Japan.

The cost of the facility alone was around US \$250 million. Running the disposal facility will cost hundreds of millions more before the cleanup is complete.



Figure 11:
Traditional leather tannery in Fes, Morocco. Photo by Andrew E. Larsen.



Figures 12 & 13:
Thilafushi has become known as “Rubbish Island” in the Maldives. Photos by Hani Amir.

From the leather goods we import to the places we travel, our actions come with costs. Leather tanneries pollute waterways with toxic materials such as chromium salts, especially in China, India, and Bangladesh, the main countries where leather is processed. Tourism has placed such pressure on waste management in the resource-poor Maldives that Thilafushi Island has become a dumping ground.





Figure 14:
Contaminated Rio
Doce water flows into
the Atlantic. Photo by
NASA.

In November 2015, an iron ore tailings dam in Bento Rodrigues collapsed, sending 60 million cubic meters of toxic brown mud into the Doce River and eventually into the Atlantic Ocean. Seventeen people died and many more were injured. The mine was part-owned by BHP Billiton, the world's largest mining company, and one of Australia's largest companies.

The concept of shadow places is more than the old accounting-based notions of “ghost acres” and “ecological footprint.” It is those and more. It pulls us to concrete localities. It includes the experiences of people in those places. It brings a strong moral dimension. It demands a humanities approach.

Some of us are pushing the earth into a new epoch, the Anthropocene, and it is harder to think about Australia in isolation. Trade ties other individuals, groups, and nations to our shadow places, just as it ties us to theirs. Australia's private rooftop solar installations may reduce our greenhouse gas emissions but we give little thought to the pollution released by the factories that manufacture the panels. Fishers and villagers in China have complained that contamination from solar plants has killed wildlife and domestic animals and poses a risk to human health. Demonstrators have clashed with police. Australian companies mine around the world. We buy cars from Japan where the industry dumped waste illegally on surrounding islands. Europe, China, the US, and the UK buy our uranium.

The question of shadow places goes to the heart of justice in the Anthropocene.