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“Only You Can Prevent a Forest”: Agent Orange, Ecocide, and Environmental Justice [1]

The real story of the environmental crisis is one of power and profit and the institutional and bureaucratic arrangements and the cultural conventions that *create* conditions of environmental destruction. Toxic wastes and oil spills and dying forests, presented in the daily news as the entire environmental story, are symptoms of social arrangements, and especially of social *derangements*. The environmental crisis, more than the sum of ozone depletion, global warming, and overconsumption, is a crisis of the dominant ideology. ~Joni Seager

Nevertheless, by 1971 internal and external political pressures on the US government were so intense that it became necessary to cancel the entire Ranch Hand program. Thus ended a combat organization dedicated solely to the purpose of conducting war upon the environment. [2] ~Paul Frederick Cecil

In “Creating a Culture of Destruction: Gender, Militarism, and the Environment,” geographer

Joni Seager explores the pathways between the destruction of the environment and the

ostentatiously masculine, industrial, and militaristic culture that has long dominated much of the

world. In her conclusion, she implores her readers to think about agency: “As progressive

environmentalists, we must learn to be more curious about causality and about agency. Grass-

roots environmental groups have been the most effective at naming names but perhaps the least

effective at exposing the larger linkages, the structures, and the *culture* behind the agents of

environmental destruction. Those structures and cultures are not gender or race neutral” (65). In

the fifteen years following Seager’s call for better understanding the cultural foundations of

environmental destruction, the ecocriticism and environmental justice movements have made

great efforts to expose the cultural foundations of western attitudes toward the environment, as

well as the enculturated sexism and racism inherent in public environmental policy. And yet, despite the interconnectedness of those two endeavors, it seems that a division between them remains. On the one side we have ecocritics who pull apart representations of nature in literature and popular culture to see how they work, and on the other we have environmental justice critics who examine public environmental policy to understand the uneven distribution of social and health impacts at all levels from local to global based on gender and race. Rarely do we have the opportunity to see these two come together: how cultural representations of nature influence discriminatory public environmental policy, or conversely how discriminatory public environmental policy influences how writers represent the environment. Even more rarely do we see such attitudes toward the environment and public policy shaping an American identity in the world, expressing as Seager puts it, America’s dominant ideology.

Finding such an unusual intersection requires looking in extreme places; in this case, in a kind of nature writing so different from the usual fare as to be in fact “anti-nature” writing. To that end, this essay examines a seminal text in American war literature: the only published book-length history of the defoliation program in Vietnam written by someone who actually participated in the program. Paul Cecil’s *Herbicidal Warfare: The Ranch Hand Project in Vietnam* is part military history and part group autobiography, a synthesis which has produced a monograph that, unlike other histories of Operation Ranch Hand, goes beyond simply reporting what the official government documents reveal about the program’s decision-making chronologies and successes and failures; it also paints a vivid portrait of the program’s personality and cultural norms. As a former Ranch Hand pilot and as the postwar Ranch Hand Vietnam Association’s official historian, Cecil has the special authority to speak for the men with whom he served, to tell their stories and to represent them the way they want to see themselves, “to preserve the true story of [their] time for future generations,” and to help his readers

“understand why this was a special outfit of special people.”[3] This essay examines that “special” collective identity and posits that *Herbicidal Warfare* demonstrates the “culture behind [these] agents of environmental destruction,” enabling us to see clearly how this group of privileged, primarily white men regarded the environment, women, race, technology, appearances, military adventurism, and exclusivity. In short, it not only shows us how these attitudes came together in one of the greatest environmental injustices of the twentieth century, but also demonstrates how Americans’ actions abroad, in the most extreme of situations, so clearly crystallizes a particular American identity to the rest of the world.

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The environmental justice movement in the United States formed in response to the widespread recognition that pervasive institutionalized racism forces communities of color to shoulder a disproportionate share of the world’s environmental toxic burden. For example, Winona LaDuke, director of the White Earth Land Recovery Project and co-chair of the Indigenous Women’s Network, champions the plight of indigenous people and the lands that sustain both their everyday needs as well as their spiritual lives. She points out that every single nuclear weapon test in the United States has been conducted on land held by indigenous people, with over six hundred on lands belonging to the Shoshone nation alone, and that the groups who have been displaced or poisoned by large hydroelectric projects have been similarly and disproportionately indigenous (99). Sociologist Robert D. Bullard, one of the first academics in the US to recognize, study, and promote the environmental justice movement, has untiringly chronicled the siting of toxic waste dumps and incinerators in African- and Hispanic- American communities across the country, noting that this pervasive environmental racism affects all aspects of our lives: “Institutional racism influences local land use, enforcement of

environmental regulations, industrial facility siting, economic vulnerability, and where people of color live, work, and play. Environmental racism is just as real as the racism that exists in housing, employment, and education....Discrimination is a manifestation of institutional racism. Even today, racism permeates nearly every social institution” (“Anatomy of ER and the EJM” 25). Bullard also recognizes the need to see these problems at the cultural and ideological level: “It is unlikely that this nation will ever achieve lasting solutions to its environmental problems unless it also addresses the system of racial injustice that helps sustain the existence of powerless communities forced to bear disproportionate environmental costs” (“Anatomy of ER” 22). Building on this foundation, scholars such as Joni Seager and activists such as Dana Alston and Nicole Brown have helped the environmental justice movement begin to search out the ways in which militaries around the world have also been guilty of institutional and environmental racism, culminating in acts of environmental injustice.

Several aspects of America’s problem with racism relating to the war it waged in Vietnam are already well known and well documented, both in academic discourse as well as in popular culture. The US drafted a disproportionate number of African- and Hispanic- Americans into the war in the first place, and once there, especially in the waning years of the sixties, many of those draftees began to view their coerced service as just another form of the racism they had been struggling against at home. The civil rights battles erupting in the streets of New York, Detroit, Los Angeles, and just about everywhere else in the U.S. could scarcely not affect relations between the American soldiers serving in Vietnam. As Herman Graham suggests in *The Brother’s Vietnam War*, the fact that the rate of African-American casualties was disproportionately higher than their draft eligibility was not lost on them, and after Muhammed Ali refused his draft notice, fewer and fewer African-American men saw service in the army as an acceptable means toward achieving equality and social justice at home (135).

Just as pervasive during the war was the variety and vehemence of the racism directed toward the Vietnamese by American soldiers and decision makers. The most common modes of racism towards the Vietnamese followed typical patterns of racist thought and behavior in the US. Americans in Vietnam had a plethora of racial epithets for the Vietnamese, many of which had been passed down over seven decades of the Army's fighting in Asia, beginning with the war it waged against Philippine independence from 1899 to 1913. These words allowed for the kind of commonplace dehumanization that led even the top leaders of the Army, such as General Westmoreland, to think of the Vietnamese as less than human, and to regularly imagine Americans as "plac[ing] higher value on human life than [the Vietnamese]" (Berman 76).

Just as repugnant, but perhaps more pertinent, given the environmental justice movement's roots in social justice for indigenous people, was the ubiquitous equation of the war effort with playing cowboys and Indians. Michael Yellow Bird asserts, "During the Vietnam War the United States often thought of Vietnam in images of the American West and cast the Vietnamese in the role of Indians. It was common for American soldiers to refer to enemy territory (free-fire zones) as 'Indian Country' and for American soldiers to brutally massacre Vietnamese while fantasizing they were killing Indians" (43). Any cursory glance at either the history or the literature of the American war in Vietnam bears this out, though Philip Caputo expresses the unexamined, uncritical, and thus deeply submerged racist fantasy element of this equation best when he explains his eagerness for combat as growing out of his boyhood daydreams: "Once in a while, I found flint arrowheads in the muddy creek bank [in Illinois]. Looking at them, I would dream of that savage, heroic time and wish I had lived then, before America became a land of salesmen and shopping centers" (5). Note that he doesn't wish he'd been an Indian, just to have lived during those times to have tried his mettle in fighting them. Even as someone who grew to be critical of the war, and of America's predilection for war,

Caputo could not escape from the inherently racist culture in which he'd been raised. James Webb's *Fields of Fire* goes one step further, suggesting through his character Robert E. Lee Hodges, Jr. that many of the soldiers fighting in the war in Vietnam didn't just grow up fantasizing about killing Indians, but were the actual descendants of those who did and continued to feel an intergenerational bond with them at the thought of it: "He was a Hodges same as you...we always been out here, since the first days when we took the wilderness, all the low blue mountains from Cherokee and Saponi and Tutelo. Those were some fights...when it was just a man and his family against them Indians" (31).

Yellow Bird connects these racist Vietnamese-Indian associations to the March 16, 1968 massacre at My Lai through the testimony of Robert Johnson at the Congressional War Crimes Hearings in April of 1971. When Congresswoman Patsy Mink asked, "You made a statement that in your opinion the My Lai massacre was the inevitable consequence of certain policies. Would you specify what policy you make reference to with regard to the killing of POWs?" Johnson replied, "First, the underlying rational policy, that is, that the only good gook is a dead gook. Very similar to the only good Indian is a dead Indian and the only good nigger is a dead nigger" (Citizens Commission 50-51).

The issue of the My Lai massacre also unites this underlying racism with the dominant ideology informing American culture during the war. The only American convicted for the massacre (and quickly pardoned by President Nixon), William Calley, asserted in his memoir, *Body Count*, that: "We weren't in My Lai to kill human beings, really. We were there to kill ideology that is carried by--I don't know. Pawns. Blobs. Pieces of flesh. And I wasn't in My Lai to destroy intelligent men. I was there to destroy an intangible idea. To destroy communism...I looked at communism as a southerner looks at a Negro, supposedly. It's evil. It's bad" (104-105). Capitalists are to communists as southerners are to blacks as good is to evil. Calley stumbles into

saying what the environmental justice movement has maintained all along, that the system of industrial capitalism in the United States has co-evolved with several forms of institutionalized racism, so that the two are at their historic cores inseparable.

When we map this capitalistic, hyper-product-oriented mentality--with all its emphasis on technological innovation and the accumulation of things--on to the institutionalized, enculturated racism of the US military in Vietnam, what results is the Ranch Hand program that sprayed over nineteen million gallons of toxic, dioxin-laden herbicides on the people and land of Vietnam. Paul Cecil's account of the program captures everything that's wrong with America's relationship with the environment--everything that makes up our "culture of destruction"--as if in a cloth-bound sieve. Much of it is explicit: a perpetuation of the cowboy mythology in the place of recognizing centuries of genocidal policies toward indigenous peoples, an uncritical acceptance and admiration for technology, a preference for appearances over reality, and an insatiable appetite for sex, violence and adventure. But the implicit is also here: how privileged, white men have made decisions and cling to reasoning that has forced people of color to shoulder an unfair distribution of negative environmental effects. And it is no coincidence that these interrelated and mutually reinforcing cultural biases are so clearly present, or that they so clearly articulate America's problematic relationship with nature, race, and gender: the American war in Vietnam, after all, was not only the first declared war on the environment, but also the world's first planned ecocide, in which entire ecosystems were targeted and destroyed. As a partisan, frequently personal, account of the Ranch Hand program, *Herbicide Warfare* demonstrates the often subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) ways the dominant, capitalist military ideology expresses itself through individual acts and personalities, as well as through larger policies and procedures. Like all intimate accounts of horrific acts, the underlying logic--in Seager's terms, the

"social derangement" or "dominant ideology"--when brought to the surface, clearly indicates the powerful cultural forces leading toward tragedy. [4]

Cecil begins his history of Operation Ranch Hand with an attempt to reinforce the idea that it is acceptable to destroy the environment, just as it is acceptable to destroy Indians or others deemed expendable, by arguing that such an endeavor was not terribly unlike any other Western military strategy over the last three thousand years. In the first chapter of *Herbicide Warfare*, he sketches an argument of historical consistency, demonstrating first that the ancient Greeks used chemical warfare, as did the Romans, the British, the Germans, the French and others. The chapter culminates in this pronouncement: "In the Indian Wars that followed the [American Civil War], the Army successfully employed environmental warfare to counter the 'hit-and-run' tactics of the plains Indians. Civilian destruction of the buffalo herds upon which the tribes were almost totally dependent was applauded by the Army, and aided materially in forcing the tribes onto reservations, where they were more easily controlled" (3). No mention is made of the spread of disease, alcoholism, or substandard foodstuffs, but that's not all that's overlooked. In fact, Cecil's short history of germ, chemical, and environmental warfare is often astonishing not necessarily for what it reveals--this sort of information is nothing new to most American cultural critics, and certainly not to the indigenous people of the Americas--but, as the passage demonstrates, for its complete lack of self-reflection or contrition. Cecil's subtext is that the herbicide program in Vietnam was morally acceptable because it was just like the genocide of North America's indigenous people, which he expects his readers--imagining them to be part of the dominant ideology from which he writes--to agree was justifiably necessary. If any doubt remains about how Cecil himself reads this history, perhaps it becomes clearer knowing that a substantial part of the Ranch Hand ethos came from cowboy mythology. Not only was the radio call sign he and the other pilots used for one another during the war, "Cowboy," but the

appellation has been maintained by the postwar Ranch Hand society even to this day. [5] Obviously, the name Ranch Hand itself conjures up the old West, as did its partner operation, Trail Dust, which employed jeep mounted and smaller, backpack sized spray apparatuses for defoliation missions on the ground. Thinking of themselves as cowboys helped them establish a rationale for the mission: not only were they cleaning up "the ranch" by removing unwanted vegetation, they were taming the wild, assisting in the eradication of the "Indian" and the "Indian country" all at once.

Another of the most striking, explicit features of the text is its doggedly tight focus on rational, scientific, or technical problem solving without regard for any larger social or ethical concerns. In countless examples, small problem A leads to solution B, end of story. Herbicide scientist E.J. Kraus needed to prove the safety of his herbicide to humans, so he ingested half a gram of 2,4-D daily for three weeks; World War II troops suffered from malaria, so they sprayed DDT everywhere they went, including the landing sites at Iwo Jima and Okinawa; middle class American consumers wanted an easy way to control weeds, so the chemical companies transferred the military herbicide technology to domestic use; using herbicides seemed to some like gas warfare, but recent radical increases in domestic use demonstrated that it really wasn't; one type of defoliant didn't work at 1 gallon per acre, so a stronger pump was installed to deliver 3 gallons per acre; a plane was damaged, so the spray operator had to dump the whole load manually. The phrasing occurs over and over again in the text, and each time, Cecil dramatically emphasizes the ingenuity of the men providing the solution, praising their typically American, can-do attitudes and technical prowess, their ability to apply "modern science and industry to the solution of social and political problems" (177).

But Cecil never mentions any consequence other than the initial problem being solved. For example, we never learn how Kraus died, how DDT nearly drove a variety of species to

extinction, or what a highly concentrated dump of defoliant could do to a small patch of the earth and the life it supports. And so, in the same way, Cecils' focus on these small details means we never see him reflect on the larger consequences of the program: the destruction of nearly an eighth of the Vietnamese environment, the creation and abandonment of half a dozen dioxin hotspots scattered across the southern half of Vietnam, or the cursing of multiple generations of human beings with a host of cancers, birth defects, and neurological, endocrinal, and psychological disorders. [6]

The only big picture Cecil does seem to care about is the lasting image of the Ranch Hand program participants. If he has to admit that the modified transport planes were ungainly, he follows with a stroke to the egos of the men who flew them: "Their missions required a close match of man and machine; performance had to be sensed, not judged by reference to complex instruments. Herbicide sorties, especially, were a throwback to the 1920s--to the days of barnstorming and 'seat-of-the-pants' flying" (49). He devotes several pages to describing the planes' paint jobs and the program's dashing uniform, complete with purple scarves given to them by Air Vice-Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky (who later became the Prime Minister of South Vietnam) and Vietnamese style black berets, all worn with cavalier disregard for strict military protocol or stepping on the toes of the Green Berets. As the "'seat-of-the-pants'-barnstorming-flying circus atmosphere of the early spray operation became a tradition," the program participants' reputation for living it up also became legendary. Motorcycle racing in "various states of undress" in "'Hundred-P Alley,' an infamous area named after the price of its prostitutes...to the...cheers of the street's habitués," living in former French villas with cooks and servants, "going to war in the morning and returning to 'civilization' in the afternoon," and new members of the program buying out the officers' club's stock of champagne at "cherry parties" are all described with relish, as Cecil nostalgically constructs a bad-boy-living-the-high-life image

for himself and other Ranch Hand participants that Senior Research Historians back home in the States rarely have. The spray squadron was so cool, writes Cecil, that "the sometimes childish activities of the purple-scarved crewmen were usually regarded with a tolerant and forgiving eye, particularly since this wild behavior seemed a part of the special mystique that surrounded the unique organization" (65-89). Clearly, according to Cecil, chemical warfare was fun, the best days of his life. [7]

And why not? According to Cecil, each mission simply gave the cowboy pilots and crews another chance to compete for the statistical measure of worth the armed forces, if not America's capitalist culture of consumerism in general, had imposed on their psyches. He and the other pilots "badgered the scheduling officers to assign them to the position each thought most likely to take the most hits. The squadron hit board, which indicated each man's total, was consulted as avidly as any stockbroker ever checked the progress of market quotations" (142). His incessant attention to the ever-increasing, "record-setting" numbers of hits taken, sorties flown, acres defoliated, and gallons of herbicide used demonstrate that for him the most personal consequence to the mission was the status it bestowed upon the crews. Cecil valued this statistical measure of worth so highly that he had requested to be transferred into the defoliation program from the cargo flights he had been flying, where at least two Seventh Air Force News interviews with him demonstrate that his interest lay in setting records for tons hauled in a day, shots taken, and whatever other numbers he could accumulate. ("Provider" 6).

Related to this image-mongering is the way Cecil persistently characterizes the program's relationship with the media and public sentiment. On the one hand, he dismisses all reports from Hanoi decrying the use of toxic chemicals as "propaganda," and on the other, he seems to find solace in the fact that American decision-makers seemed less concerned with what the program was than how it appeared. For example, despite opposition to the program from

Roger Hilsman, head of the State Department's internal Bureau of Intelligence and Research and later the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, who argued that "defoliation was just too reminiscent of gas warfare," (34) the program survived a dozen or so proposed cancellations that had been motivated by the assumption that Americans who found out about it would be morally outraged. The program survived in part because the moral outrage took much longer than expected to come, thanks to measures taken to disguise or keep secret what was being done and by whom. For instance, at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport, they parked the defoliation planes on a special, heavily guarded ramp, otherwise reserved for the South Vietnamese president's personal fighter squadron. "Since news media personnel were prohibited in this area, it was hoped that this would prevent any publicity concerning American participation in the chemical mission" (31). Other tactics included using removable insignia on the planes themselves, so the crop destruction missions would appear to be flown by Viet Nam Air Force planes (a fact Cecil carefully elides) (Buckingham 137). Either the initial concerns over how the mission was perceived were adequately defused by these measures, or they were altogether unnecessary, since even the Americans who first knew about the missions did not seem particularly concerned. The House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee hearing that discussed the testing and combat use of these chemicals in 1962 "caused little comment and were overshadowed by testimony concerning Soviet advances in bacteriological and radiological warfare techniques" (Cecil 34). In other words, the discussion turned rapidly from what the program really was to how it looked and could be justified in terms of Soviet actions.

Cecil himself seems unconcerned by these red flags. One might expect that if Ranch Hand was a chemical warfare program that the US government wanted to keep secret from the press because they themselves had to admit the existence of reservations over its morality and safety, then a historical narrative of the program might express some of that doubt. But, as the

discussions of cowboy heroics, technical problem-solving and party-adventure identity suggest, each of the opportunities for a doubt-inspired discussion of the morality or safety of the mission is missed. Instead, Cecil gives the overall impression after each near cancellation that only good fortune and the program's high demand from other military commands had helped a good program manage to carry on. Or in other words, that the daring young cowboys and their flying machines had just barely survived yet another close call.

The most severe form of Cecil's preference for creating the appearance of a good program over actual circumstances is evidenced by his failure to recognize the implicit race and class distinctions that insulated him from the worst of the toxic exposure to the herbicides. Cecil and the other pilots and program officers clearly benefited from the institutional racism of the US military since the heavy manual labor required to transfer each of the thousands of 640-pound drums of herbicides from ship to barge to truck to base, and to load each drum into the refueling unit, were tasks typically assigned to Vietnamese soldiers. This handling constituted one of the most health-threatening parts of the operation because it was during these times that spills and direct, accidental exposures of undiluted herbicides occurred. The Commander in Chief, Pacific, Admiral Harry D. Felt, knew this when he ordered: "Vietnamese personnel will be utilized to the maximum extent possible in the handling of chemicals for the defoliant operation to include delivery of defoliants to the spray aircraft under control of Commander 2nd ADVON" (Felt 1). Cecil presents the issue as a simple matter of rational logistics, but what simple, local logistical problem gets its orders from the very top of the command? Cecil has entirely ignored the racist logic expressed by the US military in Vietnam that the cheapest, to their minds most expendable, labor should perform the most dangerous and most life-threatening tasks because to do otherwise would force him to acknowledge his privilege and disrupt the cowboy hero image he wishes to project. In fact, Cecil further separated himself from the truth while researching the

book by sending surveys only to former program officers, so he didn't even have to hear from the enlisted men or South Vietnamese servicemen who performed the tasks closest to the toxins. [8]

All together then, the culture of the Ranch Hand project, as Cecil describes it, is one characterized by 1) an obsession with America's cowboy mythology, 2) foolish social and sexual bravado, including the frequent exploitation of female sex workers and harassment of female military personnel, 3) overconfidence and pride in technological problem-solving--despite that sort of thinking's tendency to bog down in patchwork solutions to small problems rather than analyzing the larger system that created the problems in the first place, 4) a fixation on appearances and status, 5) a steadfast refusal of the precautionary principle, 6) a denial of human and environmental suffering, and 7) racism on multiple, institutional levels that includes: a) genocidal attitudes towards the indigenous people of North America; b) dehumanizing the Vietnamese through a variety of commonplace ways of thinking and speaking of them, as well as by giving them the worst, most dangerous jobs for the least pay; and c) sending a disproportionate share of American ethnic and economic minorities to fight in Vietnam, only to also give them disproportionate shares of combat duty, the most dangerous logistical work, injuries, and deaths.

Thus, there is much in Cecil's monograph to support Joni Seager's assessment that our culture of destruction is predominantly a construct of white males. The passages in which Cecil describes the Ranch Hand personnel off duty--i.e. frequenting brothels, calling new project members "cherries," playing and fighting with puerile bravado, etc. --particularly suggest parallels with the gentlemen's agreements, bonding rites and privileges, fraternal exclusivity, and arrogance that Seager blames for much of the military's disregard for the environmental consequences of their actions (Seager 37-43). But while there can be no doubt that the Ranch Hand personnel, their commanding officers, the scientists and corporate executives who made

agent orange, and even the leadership of the United States were all men, to label the fundamental culture that sustained their decisions primarily as "masculine," as Seager does, diminishes masculinity itself, relegating it permanently to an inferior, problematic status.

Instead I would argue that the individual men responsible for the decisions behind Operation Ranch Hand were particularly solipsistic, and overly commonplace specimens who used the privilege of their wealth and power to first and foremost ensure the solidification and survival of that wealth and power by institutionalizing aggression, greed, exclusivity, and contempt, rather than by establishing a "hegemonic masculinity" (Seager 9). Following that logic, our culture of destruction can be seen as a construct of arrogance and privilege that has evolved from our personal and industrial conquest of the American frontier--a conquest perpetuated incidentally by both men and women--and that has always fundamentally lacked a land ethic that treats all living things as part of the same universal community. Richard Hofrichter suggests these qualities have produced a "toxic culture" that is not only a response to our use of "harmful materials and processes," but also "the way language, concepts, rituals, valuation processes, and politics frame the debates over major issues, ignoring the political conflict and relations of power that influence human and community health" (1). William Kittredge has put it another way, calling it our "racist, sexist, imperialist mythology of conquest; a rationale for violence--against other people and against nature," (63) and in using that word "sexist," gets at what I believe Seager also wants to pin down, but without necessitating that being masculine equals being sexist, aggressive, or puerile.

For his own part, Cecil remains willfully blind to any of the larger social or cultural implications of the program, claiming that he won't write about "politics" since that's not what combat personnel worry about (Cecil x). But as the Nuremberg trials demonstrated, no one frees themselves from the responsibility of ethical behavior simply by putting on a uniform. To give

him some benefit of the doubt, at the time of the spraying, maybe he was convinced, as many others were, that the defoliants were safe (even though they were being sprayed at 13 times the application rate suggested by the manufacturers of the commercial version of the defoliants (VAVA 15, 17)). But as a historian, writing after the toxic effects of the defoliants and their high dioxin levels became widely known, he had a responsibility to open his eyes, to consider more objectively the stories of suffering from the Vietnamese and our own enlisted servicemen that he too readily dismissed as propaganda simply because they did not jive with his own, privileged experience. [9]

As a pilot and an officer, Cecil was totally divorced from the worst of the toxic effects of the herbicides. He didn't have to load it, spray it, breathe it, or eat it. He wasn't on the ground to feel it on his skin, taste it in his mouth, or inhale it into his lungs. He didn't have to move his family because his rice crop had been destroyed, or starve in the mountains because all the game and traditional foods and medicines had been scared off or poisoned. There's no doubt that Cecil and his elite comrades in ecocide believed what the Air Force told them--that the herbicides were safe, that everyone used them in America and no one had been harmed--and continue to believe those lies, simply because he and they had created enough barriers of nationality, race, class, and rank, or in other words, had sufficiently wrapped themselves in the cloak of mythology, to insulate themselves from the truth.

But there were plenty of moments, both during the program itself and in the writing of the book, where doubts were raised not only about the efficacy of the program but, more importantly, about the devastating effects to human health that should have burst this protective bubble. At their root, these latter doubts were signaling that the Ranch Hand mission was not just a "campaign to save lives at the cost of vegetation,"(152) but ecocidal and genocidal chemical warfare on a scale witnessed never before or since. Unlike the perpetrators of the holocaust,

however, these pilot/gassers could continue to believe in the adventuresome hero identity they had created for themselves because they had the luxury of never being forced to face the consequences of their own actions.

And in this way, by never allowing themselves to be confronted by their victims, by rejecting out-of-hand even the idea that their actions have created victims, Cecil and the Ranch Hands who still believe what they'd done was right make themselves the perfect analogues to how cultural theorist Viet Thanh Nguyen suggests we should read memoirs of tragedy: "We have never lacked the valuable stories and the recorded experiences of witnesses to conflicts and atrocities, but we should not read them naively, taking them as unproblematically authoritative or transparently truthful. We need to read these stories...beyond their own self-positioning and their repositioning by others" (Nguyen 124). We have to read beyond Cecil and the Ranch Hands' positioning themselves as "special people in a special outfit," as courageous heroes, or even just as men in uniform following orders. We need also to be able to read beyond thinking of them simply as the "pilot/gassers" I referred to them as above. We must see them for what they truly are: manifestations of perhaps the ugliest aspects of America's "toxic culture"--that part of who we are when we delude ourselves into believing in easy technical or chemical solutions to complicated problems because we have the power to force others into paying the true environmental and health-related costs. Or, more simply, who we are when we use our power to dominate any one, in any situation.

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In the epilogue, Cecil summarizes what was at stake in writing the book: "As a group, Ranch Hand veterans questioned the conclusions drawn by some scientific investigative bodies, speculating that at least part of their concern for environmental protection was actually based on

antiwar dissent or political disagreement. As military professionals, most former spray crewmen believed that herbicide use significantly improved battlefield conditions in favor of the Allies and reduced friendly casualties. When the defoliation program was cancelled by the Department of Defense, Ranch Hand veterans wondered whether American and Vietnamese lives were being sacrificed in Vietnam because of excessive and unwarranted concern over possible damage to the ecology" (176). This is a restatement of his belief (expressed in an earlier chapter) that "the concern for environmental protection" came in part from the international anti-chemical warfare movement, in part from scholarly attention toxins began to receive thanks to Rachel Carson, "but in large measure as the result of propaganda aimed against any and all American intervention in Southeast Asia" (153). He adds to this interpretation his dismay for what he calls a lack of similar opprobrium for Soviet use of "toxic weapons" in Laos, Cambodia, and Afghanistan. In other words, Cecil argues that the criticism of herbicidal warfare was strictly ideological, having nothing to do with environmental or human health *really*, or even with simply defining who we are as Americans by assessing what our decision-makers do in the world.

On a certain level, he is right. Criticism of the defoliation campaign is ideological, but not strictly in the sense of the antiwar or communist propaganda he thinks it is. What Cecil is up against is a way of thinking about life on earth that refuses to believe that human beings and the accumulation of things are, as Laurence Coupe puts it, the "central fact of the planet" (Coupe 302). Because he is embedded in a culture of destruction, because of his ideology and inherent acceptance of a racist American frontier mythology, Cecil cannot see the real irony in a sentence such as this one: "Ironically, a military weapon specifically intended not to cause direct injury to *living beings* became the center of a controversy" (Cecil 153, my emphasis) As if the trees, which had lived in those jungles for hundreds of years, as if the tigers, monkeys, and birds, mammals, reptiles, and insects, or the dozens of species found nowhere else in the world but in those

jungles, were not alive. And even to accept his anthropocentrism, as if the death, or even the temporary poisoning, of those watersheds and ecosystems would not have a devastating impact on the hundreds of thousands of human beings they sustained.

Furthermore, the ideology confronting Cecil is one that suggests war is not always the answer, and that people should be cautious about their use and proximity to chemicals since the companies that make them are not. It is an ideology that is gathering momentum, uniting communities that have previously seen themselves as having to face their struggles alone, especially in places that have already been forced to bear more than their fair share of our global toxic burden.

Environmental justice activists around the world, and especially the agent orange victims in Vietnam, are just this sort of community. In the past, families with agent orange related disabilities most commonly saw their illnesses as bad luck, or simply the life they had to live, which is a common theme in Vietnamese attitudes toward fate. The fiction writer, Y Ban, has explored this mindset in her story, "The Younger Brother," and how it, along with cruel poverty, can lead to the kind of equally crippling self-doubt and recriminations that can tear families apart. But the author insists that the story, even though it is about how the family of a war veteran survives when the youngest child is severely mentally and physically challenged, is not about how families have responded to agent orange. [10]

Perhaps this is because the Vietnamese are only now beginning to recognize the agency Joni Seager has implored us to give thought to. Just as one character in Suong Nguyet Minh's story, "Thirteen Harbors," tells another who has suffered from several agent orange-related miscarriages, "We did not sow the breeze that wreaked this whirlwind on your body," (Suong 226) these families have begun to understand that whatever fate they have drawn, it was the US government that made the decision to spray their country with toxic herbicides, and it was the

chemical companies that created and sold these products fully knowing that they contained abnormally high, and extremely dangerous levels of dioxin, and finally, it was a culture of casual chemical use and expendable others that made it all seem okay. [11] These are the families who have joined the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA) and filed a lawsuit against the American producers of agent orange. Despite having their initial case dismissed by Judge Jack Weinstein (the presiding judge in the US veterans' case against the same chemical companies in the 1980s), they have appealed, and more importantly, through the publicity generated by the case, they have and will continue to appeal to international public opinion. They have begun, as Jim Tarter suggests is necessary, to move "to an alliance politics, one that sees new possibilities for intercultural alliances formed on an environmental basis" (Tarter 142). And because they recognize that they must also, as Chris Kiefer and Medea Benjamin have pointed out, "learn not only how to use the available local, national, and international machinery for environmental protection [but] also actively shape public opinion...create new laws and treaties where the existing ones are inadequate...[and build] solidarity among themselves and with potential allies in the North," (Kiefer 227) VAVA has made substantial efforts to connect with groups such as the Vietnam Veterans of America, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, the Ford Foundation and others.

This sort of alliance building comes at a crucial time. As Vietnam continues to develop economic ties to the United States, and as Vietnamese academics heed their government's call to understand their former enemy better by establishing American studies programs, the presence and actions of American groups like these, interested in helping those still suffering from the consequences of the war, demonstrates the multiplicity of American personalities, ideologies, and cultures. They say, despite our culture of destruction that caused this mess, and despite our legal and political systems that continue to rationalize the problem instead of helping to solve it, there

are also Americans fostering a culture of responsibility, self-awareness and caring, working toward a more just world.

Perhaps this essay too will "amplify the voices" (Kiefer 227) of the victims of agent orange spraying in Vietnam, help us to better understand the American culture of destruction, and begin to set right the "social derangement" that has poisoned not only so much land and so many people, but also at a fundamental level, what it means to be an American.

notes

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1. The title, "Only you can prevent a forest," was a Ranch Hand slogan, taken from a Smokey the Bear poster in which the last word, "fire," was replaced. See James G. Lewis, "On Smokey Bear in Vietnam," *Environmental History* 11 (July 2006): 598-603.
 2. Epigraphs are from Joni Seager, "Creating a Culture of Destruction: Gender, Militarism, and the Environment," *Toxic Struggles: The Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice*, ed. Richard Hofrichter (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1993) 59; and Paul Frederick Cecil, *Herbicide Warfare: The Ranch Hand Project in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1986) 1-2.
 3. Paul Cecil, letter to Fellow Ranch Hand Veterans, Summer 1981, Paul Cecil Collection, The Virtual Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, <<http://www.virtual.vietnam.ttu.edu/cgi-bin/starfetch.exe?ExpWQ319EOXbr6EyQbh@miiVh0u5FlfXTr67Lb4hosxR7aCo.SBIYOe@pjhpVT7C2FCKknU.OBKzD2PNwMqS9xOV5UTBg9OP@5I4d4wrTrk/2520512001.pdf>>
 4. See for example, Michel Foucault's *I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother-- : a case of parricide in the 19th century*, Emmanuel Carrère's *The Adversary*, or Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*.
 5. Cecil 79. In fact, former Ranch Hands continue to refer to one another as "Cowboys" in official Ranch Hand Vietnam Association correspondence. See the association log book at <http://www.ranchhandvietnam.org/logbook/book1.htm>, where entries commonly end "Go Cowboys!" or "To the Ranch!"
 6. "The number of diseases that VA has recognized as associated with (but not necessarily caused by) Agent Orange exposure has expanded considerably during the 1990's. The following conditions are recognized for service-connection for these veterans: chloracne (a skin disorder), porphyria cutanea tarda, acute or subacute peripheral neuropathy (a nerve disorder), type 2 diabetes, and numerous cancers [non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, soft tissue sarcoma, Hodgkin's disease, multiple myeloma, prostate cancer, and respiratory cancers (including cancers of the lung, larynx, trachea, and bronchus)]. VA is in the process of adding chronic lymphocytic leukemia to this list." Environmental Agents Service, Dept of Veteran Affairs, Agent Orange: Information for Veterans Who Served in Vietnam, General Information <<http://www1.va.gov/agentorange/docs/AOIB10-49JUL03.pdf>> page 3. Though no American study has been done on Vietnamese Agent Orange victims, we can safely assume that the

Vietnamese who were sprayed at the very least suffer from the same illnesses recognized by the US Veterans Administration, if not others. See also note 36. On the agent orange hotspots still in Vietnam, see Wayne Dwernychuk "Dioxin hot spots in Vietnam" *Chemosphere* 60.7 (Aug2005): 998-999; and Wayne Dwernychuk, Hoang Dinh Cau, Christopher T Hatfield, Thomas G. Boivin, Tran Manh Hung Phung Tri Dung, and Nguyen Dinh Thai "Dioxin reservoirs in southern Viet Nam--A legacy of Agent Orange" *Chemosphere* 47.2 (Apr2002):117-138.

7. Cecil 65,68, 80, 88, 89. Ranch Hand's party atmosphere continues to the present, in the form of their yearly reunions at the Ramada Beach Resort on Okaloosa Island in Fort Walton, Florida, where the hospitality room opens at noon. Ranch Hand Vietnam Association newsletters, 1993-1999.

8. Cecil 98, 236-242.. This logic is similar to that of former World Bank chief economist Lawrence Summers, who argued: "The measurement of the costs of health-impairing pollution depends on the foregone earnings from increased morbidity and mortality. From this point of view a given amount of health-impairing pollution should be done in the country with the lowest cost, which will be the country with the lowest wages. I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that." Quoted in R. Scott Frey, ed., *The Environment and Society Reader* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001) 198.

9. The twenty-year USAF study of Ranch Hand participants' health has shown higher than average instances of diabetes, and a range of other physical and mental health problems. Dr. Arnold Schector, professor of environmental medicine at the University of Texas School of Public Health, and others have excoriated the Air Force study for its limited findings based on a rigid and outdated methodology, and have demonstrated that the threat of cancer and other serious psychological, neurological and endocrinal disorders to Ranch Hand and other US veterans is much higher than average. Personal correspondence with Arnold Schector; Arnold Schector and Jean Stellman. Interview with Ted Koppel. Nightline. ABC. KTVX. Salt Lake City. 17 Nov. 2005; Pavuk, Marian MD, PhD; Michalek, Joel E. PhD; Schector, Arnold MD, MPH; Ketchum, Norma S. MS; Akhtar, Fatema Z. MS; Fox, Karen A. MD "Did TCDD Exposure or Service in Southeast Asia Increase the Risk of Cancer in Air Force Vietnam Veterans Who Did Not Spray Agent Orange?" *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 47.4 (April 2005):335-342.

10. Y Ban "The Younger Brother" Wayne Karlin trans. *Love After War* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone, 2004) 254-264. Y Ban. Interview with the author. Hanoi, Vietnam, 3 May 2004.

11. Final Appellate Brief 05-1953-cv, filed on behalf of the Vietnamese Victims of Agent Orange in the Second Circuit of the United States Court of Appeals, June 18, 2007. 15, 17. Not only were the defoliants sprayed undiluted, at 13 times the recommended application rate for US domestic use, they contained anywhere from 6 to 25 times the amount of dioxin.

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