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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Contested Representations of Agent Orange's Destruction in Vu Le My's *Where War Has Passed* and Masako Sakata's *Agent Orange: A Personal Requiem*

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**Abstract:** This study examines two documentaries on the impact of Agent Orange in post-war Vietnam: *Where War Has Passed* (1997), by the Vietnamese director Vu Le My and *Agent Orange: A Personal Requiem* (2007), by Japanese director Masako Sakata. In order to depict the destructiveness of Agent Orange, these directors focus exclusively neither on the footprints of war in Vietnam's physical landscape nor the sufferings of Vietnamese victims. By highlighting the existence of Agent Orange victims in the landscape that was once the target of a series of American spraying missions, both documentaries urge the audience to remove the boundaries between humans and the natural environment. While Vu explored local people's perceptions, Sakata provided a constructive representation grounded in historical and scientific references. In this way, Vu focused on exploring the "sense of place" by revealing how both local people and the landscape have suffered from the impacts of Agent Orange. By contrast, Sakata utilized a framework of the "sense of planet" by tracing the long historical process beyond the American spraying missions.

**Keywords:** Agent Orange, Vietnam War, Human-Nature Boundaries, Destruction, Documentary

Though the Vietnam War has passed, its consequences and traces exist in people's lives in the present. One of the most terrible consequences has been the presence of Agent Orange victims, who are not only veterans or people who were exposed to Agent Orange during the conflict but also the second and third generations born with physical and intellectual disabilities. As the symbol of the residual effects of

the war in its aftermath, their bodies demonstrate that Agent Orange reversed the natural laws and contributed to abnormalities in the ecosystem that is envisioned to be in equilibrium.

Agent Orange was one of five herbicides that were used by the U.S. Army as a chemical weapon in the Vietnam War from 1962-1971. The U.S. Army deployed Agent Orange to destroy forests, in which

guerrillas and Vietnamese army soldiers would hide. During that decade, more than 21 million gallons of toxic chemicals were sprayed over South Vietnam. According to Schuck (1986) in *Agent Orange on Trial: Mass Toxic Disasters in the Courts*, more than 10% of the Southern Vietnamese land was contaminated with Agent Orange (p. 17). Although the U.S. government has asserted that Agent Orange had no lasting effect on humans and nature, many terrible statistics on the consequences of this chemical war have been mentioned. According to Stellman et al. (2003), 69% of villages in southern Vietnam were sprayed, and approximately four million Vietnamese people were exposed to Agent Orange (p. 685). Among them, 150,000 victims were children who suffered terrible deformities, such as paralysis, epilepsy, deafness, blindness, and cleft palate. Agent Orange is, therefore, considered to be “one significant ghost,” a “haunted memory” for the Vietnamese people, and even “Vietnam’s Deadly Fog.”

The negative impact of Ranch Hand on the Vietnamese land during the post-war decades has become the subject of multiple studies from many different approaches. In *The History, Use, Disposition and Environmental Fate of Agent Orange*, Young (2009) demonstrated the concern from both the American and Vietnamese sides about Agent Orange through three periods: the period from 1971 to 1974 when U.S. reports concerning the harmful effects of Agent Orange were proliferating; the post-war period with research from the U.S. and Vietnamese side; and, especially, the period since 1995, when the U.S. embargo on Vietnam was eventually lifted, and Agent Orange workshops were jointly organized by the U.S. and Vietnam to have a common voice on this issue. Young (2002) claimed that “time will tell whether the Vietnam War and the issues surrounding the use of Agent Orange will become a topic that will muster only a passive interest by scholars” (p. 161). Also, the narratives about Agent Orange have conveyed the presence of Agent Orange in post-war life, depicted people’s feelings when faced with the aftermath of war, and highlighted the way indigenous people coped with the catastrophes of war.

The topic of Agent Orange has appeared in short stories (such as *Thirteen Harbors* by Suong Nguyet Minh or *The Younger Brother* by Y Ban), novels (such as *Meditations in Green* by Stephen Wright), and documentary films. Documentary films have a strong

point in conveying the feelings of indigenous peoples and describing the specific images of the ecosystem affected by Agent Orange. This is because these films provide the real situation and allow the witness to speak directly so that people over the world can see the image of a postwar Vietnam affected by Agent Orange.

Ever since the formal normalization of diplomatic relations between the United States of America and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, more and more films on Agent Orange have been produced. The National Documentary and Scientific Film Studio (DSF) was the starting point for the Agent Orange documentary series with the films by Vu Le My (*Where War Has Passed* 1997) and Tran Van Thuy (*Story from the Corner of a Park* 1996, *Kind story / How to Behave* 1987). The effects of Agent Orange and the efforts of Agent Orange victims to live optimistically and become useful in society also attracted the attention of foreign directors such as Janet P. Gardner (*The Last Ghost of War*, 2008), Courtney Marsh (*Chau, Beyond the lines*, 2015), and Philipp Abresch (*Long Thanh will Lachen*, 2016). When domestic and foreign documentaries present images of destruction and disability as the consequences of Agent Orange, the terrible numbers relating to Agent Orange that scientific works mentioned become more specific. This article focuses on two films by two women who are Vietnamese and Japanese, talking about Agent Orange and its effects on Vietnamese veterans’ children.

*Where War Has Passed* by Vu Le My (1997) is about 21 minutes long, and it focuses on Agent Orange victims, who are veterans, as well as their children. This film was released in 1997 and won many high awards in major film festivals, such as first prize at the International Film Festival on Environment in Freiburg in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1997, the Special Prize in the 14th International Film Festival in Montréal Canada in 1998, and the special prize of the 9th Tokyo-Japan Global Environment Film Festival organized by Earth Vision in 2001. Sakata’s (2007) *Agent Orange: A Personal Requiem* won some awards such as the Special Prize of the Jury, 2008 Paris International Film Festival, 2007 Tokyo International Women’s Film Festival, and 2007 International Festival of New Latin American Cinema. It lasts 1 hour and 11 minutes, with intertwined stories. The film takes the story about Sakata’s husband, a former U.S. veteran, who battles infection by Agent Orange, ultimately succumbing to it at the age of 54, and the stories about

children born in the Vietnamese countryside affected by Agent Orange.

When it comes to these two films, Reagan (2011) regarded them as “representations on reproductive hazards of Agent Orange” and argued that they offer “a respectful treatment of Vietnamese views by listening to Vietnamese experts and victims” (p. 56). In my article, I interpret these hazards from ecological criticism combined with a cultural approach to point out the “culture behind [these] agents of environmental destruction” (Waugh, 2010, p. 115). How do the two directors—a Vietnamese woman and a Japanese woman—explain the phenomenon of Agent Orange from the perception of indigenous peoples? How do these directors understand the interaction between ecosystems and human beings as they are both influenced by Agent Orange? Through a close reading of the two documentaries, I argue that the Agent Orange victims were considered the highest manifestation of the reversal of the natural law in the ecosystem because the boundary between man and nature had been erased. Agent Orange became a disaster that people had to find ways to deal with. If Vu Le My showed the accepting attitudes and the ways to live with such disasters, Sakata demonstrated how to deal with that disaster from an eco-cosmopolitan perspective.

### **The Removal of the Boundary Between Human and Nature: From Ecoambiguity to Ecophobia**

Ecologists consider a boundary as a concept indicating “different things on different occasions.” Boundaries “may arise because of discontinuities between patches (a consequential boundary, such as a forest – field boundary), or they may cause discontinuities between patches (a causal boundary, such as a fence that encloses a herd of cattle)” (Strayer et al., 2003, p. 724). According to this definition, human beings and nature certainly have distinct boundaries. However, in some cases, they may overlap or be eliminated when both humans and nature are grouped into the same physical spatial structure and are attributed to the same dominant regular property in a particular context.

Carson (1987) in *Silent Spring* mentioned the fusion of the boundary between human beings and nature when she demonstrated the belief that

human health is a projection of the health of the surroundings. In chapter 14, titled “One in Four,” she used human cancers as a manifestation of an ecosystem that has been badly affected by human-made toxins. Cancer and ecological decline here are hardly separate.

When it comes to Agent Orange in postwar human life, the documentary films directed by Vu Le My and Sakata also tend to erase the boundaries between man and nature. They focused on pictures of children with disabilities and traits that are unusual to emphasize a common phenomenon within a physical space, in which the U.S. sprayed Agent Orange. That is the change of natural laws in the ecosystem where anomalies in the human body are the highest manifestation of the “distortion” of nature. In tandem with the witnesses’ narration and the haunting images of the Agent Orange victims, in *Where Was Has Passed* and especially in *Agent Orange: A Personal Requiem*, the images of the American planes, trailed by two streams of white toxic gas, and the immense forests in central and southern Vietnam appeared repeatedly. Besides, Sakata inserted into the witnesses’ narration process some scenes of bare trees, which were destroyed after Agent Orange was sprayed. The Japanese female director emphasizes the equality of the destructive effects of such poison on nature and man. In other words, when constructing two mixed narrative lines of human beings and nature, as well as historical past and present life, the two documentaries showed that, in the same physical space, under the destructive effects of the chemical agent, the boundary between man and nature could not be delineated. When that boundary is removed, the image of the ecosystem and its destruction by Agent Orange emerge. The terrifying destruction is the reversal of the natural laws in the ecosystem. That leads to ecoambiguity and ecophobia. Therefore, the process of trying to cope with the ecological disaster of the indigenous people has become difficult and challenging.

When reflecting on the breakdown of the boundary between nature and human beings, both Vu Le My and Sakata conveyed a sense of ecoambiguity and ecophobia that exists in indigenous people’s thought, people who hourly face the consequences of Agent Orange. Thornber (2012) in *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures* defined that ecoambiguity is expressed through the combination of consciousness and action:

Environmental ambiguity manifests itself in multiple, intertwined ways, including ambivalent attitudes toward nature; confusion about the actual condition of the nonhuman, often a consequence of ambiguous information; contradictory human behaviors toward ecosystems; and discrepancies among attitudes, conditions, and behaviors that lead to actively downplaying and acquiescing to nonhuman degradation, as well as to inadvertently harming the very environments one is attempting to protect. (p. 6)

Thus, the ecological ambiguity relates to the states such as “ambivalent,” “confusion,” “contradictory,” or “discrepancies” between the two poles. She explained in more detail that

An individual or group can simultaneously feel positively (e.g., reverent), negatively (e.g., antagonistic), uncertain, and apathetic toward different species; an individual or group can also have mixed emotions toward a single species, or about the nonhuman more generally. Just as frequently, a single plant, animal, or ecosystem will evoke positive sentiments in some people, negative sentiments in some people, uncertainty in others, and no discernable emotions in still others. Likewise, perceptions of (in)appropriate lifestyles and of what constitutes (ir)responsible behavior vis-à-vis environments change regularly and often are contradictory. Beliefs also are inconsistent on what makes changes to ecosystems necessary or at least acceptable. Perceptions vary on which changes should be prevented, encouraged, and overlooked; which are mitigated by other changes; and which should be altered, and how and by whom. (Thornber, 2012, p. 10)

In *Chinese Literature and Environmental Crises*, Thornber (2014) argued that “Ecoambiguity refers to the inconsistent, frequently contradictory interactions between people and the natural world” (p. 2). She emphasized the negotiations of two important modes of ecoambiguity: (a) the rapid fluctuation of attitudes between awe and (b) indifference and the situation of a strong love for nature (“loving nature to death”) that we extract too much from it or crush it with our own

presence (p. 2). Ecoambiguity, therefore, emerges from the contradictions between desire and reality, faith and action, and the relationship between people and the environment.

In these two films, eco-ambiguity exists in the consciousness of indigenous people. The two films open with music and scenes of nature and Vietnamese villages with the rice fields, rivers, and the peaceful storks in the field. Green covering the mountains and forests, the tranquility of rivers, rice fields make audiences think of a quiet postwar Vietnam, a Vietnam with no traces of ecological devastation caused by war. Sakata focused on how the lotus flowers, a symbol of Vietnam, reveal what is pure and peaceful. Witnesses of the war years—the years the U.S. sprayed Agent Orange over central and southern Vietnam—and even the people living in the Agent Orange sprayed lands after the end of the conflict talked about what happened and about the scenes they witnessed. However, they did not mention the impact of Agent Orange on their environment, even though some of them may have thought it something strange and inexplicable by their knowledge.

In the film by Vu Le My, a veteran said that Orange Agent was like a mist, and after spraying, the trees died. Then America dropped gas bombs, and the forest caught fire. The witness in Sakata’s film described two American planes spraying something pink and white that smelled like ripe guava. When their children were born with a deformity, they were still skeptical and speculated that it was due to genetic and congenital factors. Some people have doubts about the timing and mechanism of Agent Orange contamination. In Vu Le My’s film, intermingled with the witnesses and veterans’ words, are black and white documentary footage and photographs about the U.S. spraying Agent Orange. Their black-and-white color serves as a defining mark of things that have been in the past. In both films, all of the witnesses neither mention nor perceive the presence of Agent Orange in the environment in the present time. This could be taken as a kind of eco-ambiguity because they know that it is a strange thing; they do not emphasize its long-lasting impact on the post-war environment. What they are seeing is the green forests and rice fields, which are as normal as ever.

However, it is just a “pseudo” ecoambiguity because all the visualizations of ecological decline and destruction from past to present, and even to the



future, focus on the human body and the reversal of the natural law from both the physical and intellectual perspectives. Two-thirds of the documentary film by Vu Le My focused on two subjects infected with Agent Orange. The first subjects are the children of veterans, who got out of the war and hardly think that they have been exposed to Agent Orange. The second subjects are the children born in Cam Lo - Quang Tri, where the U.S. sprayed toxic chemicals with high intensity.

Vu Le My proved the “reversal” of the natural law for humans by presenting Agent Orange victims with deformities of the body: Duyen, a girl with traces of brown spots gradually spreading throughout the body; another girl, who lost her mind, and her body appeared many big skin tags; Dang Thi Ngo and Dang Thi Hue (20 years old) were blind, had no teeth, could not speak or smile, their faces were deformed; The son of a veteran in Bac Ninh suffers muscular dystrophy, the child of a veteran living in Thai Binh has no eyes. The scenes of playing rural children separate the scenes depicting children with intellectual disabilities and terrible deformities. This montage implies a comparison of the difference between the natural and anti-natural development and an emphasis on how the bodies of deformed children are the highest manifestation of ecological destruction, destroying the nature that this world needs to preserve and protect. The indigenous people here do not think broadly about the ecosystem; they only talk about their children and relatives, who have been infected with Agent Orange. Almost all of the victims could barely speak; their pain was shown through the deformity of the body, and then “explained” by relatives. The film crew comments closely following each image, adding context so the viewer can imagine the feelings of victims and their family members: pain on their body and abnormality of natural growth. These comments also imply the inability to fully express the abnormalities and reversals to natural laws presenting in the Agent Orange victims’ bodies. When the images of Agent Orange victims appear on screen, the commentator, despite trying to keep up with the fate of Agent Orange victims, had to say “inexpressible.”

Sakata is not different from Vu Le My in her feelings about the consequences of reversing the natural law when displaying images of the deformed Agent Orange victims, who cannot express their own thought in language, are unable to interact with relatives, and who just lie on the bed (especially the image

of Mr. Vo Van Trac). Following that image, Sakata created a contrast between the inversion of nature and the natural, emphasizing the destructiveness of Agent Orange through a street scene in Vietnam, in which the girls are wearing *áo dài* and walk on the road—a symbol of a peaceful Vietnam, a Vietnam in the pulse of daily life. Along with a matching effect, the Japanese female director in some scenes combines images of green and lush trees with those of people born in the late 1980s, whose physical and intellectual growth was stunted, lying and crying on the floor. The images of green mountains and forests seem to indicate that nature has been recovering and no longer has the mark of the consequences of Agent Orange. In contrast, the images of victims assert that the destructiveness of that poison is terrible. Also, it would be difficult to imagine the end of its chain of consequences.

From feeling the presence of children who belong to the second and the third generation who are contaminated by Agent Orange as the highest manifestation of reversing the laws of natural ecosystems, ecophobia began to form in local people’s minds. Sobel (2008) and Estok (2010, 2018) have defined ecophobia as an ideological fear of the natural world. In *Beyond Ecophobia*, Sobel (2008) argued that ecophobia, or withdrawal from the natural world, is derived from our obsession with computers and the digital age. For Estok (2010), ecophobia is “an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world” (p. 144). Ecophobia contains the idea that “nature as an opponent, can be expressed toward natural physical geographies (mountains, windswept plains), animals (snakes, spiders, bears), extreme meteorological events (Shakespearean tempests, hurricanes in New Orleans, typhoons), bodily processes and products (microbes, bodily odors, menstruation, defecation), and biotic land-, air-, and seascapes” (Estok, 2018, p. 1). Estok (2018) argued that “ecophobia is a condition that allows humanity to do bad things to the natural world” due to the feeling of “fear” (p. 11). For example, a fear of whale hunting is the result of ecophobia. In *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, Clark (2015) suggested that ecophobia might be defined in less “tragic terms as: an antipathy, dismissive stance

or sheer indifference toward the natural toward the natural environment” (p. 111). Thus, ecophobia emerges when one considers nature as an object that needs to be controlled or mastered. In other words, ecophobia is a consequence of an ideological desire to control, dominate, sanitize, or domesticate the natural world. Cutting the grass, applying pesticides, eating fish, silencing bird noise, and being afraid of seeing coyotes are all everyday ecophobic experiences that are “rooted in and dependent upon anthropocentric arrogance and speciesism” (Estok, 2009, p. 210). Ecophobia, therefore, is considered not only as the fear of wilderness “out there,” but fear of human animality.

The two documentaries provided images of Agent Orange victims to convey the atmosphere of ecophobia and ecophobic condition. However, in these films, the boundary between nature and man is removed; the children who are the victims of Agent Orange become the symbol of ecosystem destruction. Therefore, the contrast between human beings and the environment is not present in the images of these victims. Fearing that nature would support the Communist regime, the U.S. Army sprayed Agent Orange to destroy the forests. Ecophobia was formed from here, and its atmosphere spread to the present time. Ecophobia, in this case, is synonymous with the fear of facing the reversal of natural laws. That is proven through the practices of sharing indigenous people in two films. When living with Agent Orange victims, indigenous people are not afraid of those bizarre bodies. By creating specific images, Vu Le My and Sakata showed that indigenous parents still comfort and remain close to their deformed children. What haunts them is the emergence and prolongation of unnatural factors caused by Agent Orange. In *Where War Has Passed*, that fear is referenced through a woman’s words about her 10 miscarriages or the obsession of the mothers and fathers when they witnessed the birth defects of children become more and more visible over time. The grandmother also worried when thinking about the future, a time when no one would be able to care for those disabled children. It was a dreadful feeling when the woman in Quang Tri thought of walking under the “mist” of Agent Orange and then vomiting blood, her skin is rough, not burned, but abnormal in any case.

That fear, mixed with the words of witnesses and local people, does not seem to have become a highlight in the film by Vu Le My.

However, 10 years later, Sakata depicted ecophobia more clearly, obsessively, and in more detail. All the words of the witnesses or of those people related to the Agent Orange victims in this film reflect fear and despair deep in their minds. Doctor Nguyen Thi Ngoc Phuong, who regularly treats the child victims of Agent Orange, when interviewed by Sakata, said that she felt sad and sometimes cried because the disabled children are innocent and carefree; “they do not know about their future.” This reflects ecophobia and an obsession with the anomalies that Agent Orange leaves on the human body. In Sakata’s film, the locals also share their own fears of Agent Orange. The woman who represents the Women’s Union in Cam Nghia Village, Cam Lo district, Quang Tri province—where the U.S. sprayed toxic chemicals at the highest rate according to the map Sakata used—said that many children born after 1980 were deformed. At first, people did not know the reason, and they thought that it was due to genetics. But after determining that it was a consequence of Agent Orange, there was a fear in the local mindset. Therefore, young people were afraid of getting married and having children. It is the fear of a prolonged and irreversible ecological complication.

One woman shared that when her child was born, it was disabled, so the whole family hid the truth from her. When the mother saw her baby, she passed out and could not eat or sleep at all. She explained that the birth of a child with a deformity resulted from the family’s fate. Meanwhile, the husband said that the doctor advised that they should not have children because he was afraid that more deformed babies would be born. Sakata reconstructed the process of forming an ecophobia from cause to effect by creating a sequence of images and narratives through documentary films: the U.S. president’s statement in opposition to communist expansion in South Vietnam, the production and transport of the Agent Orange containing dioxin, the image of two American planes flying parallel in the sky with two lines of white vapors on either side, the vast forests below, and the images of the victims belonging to the first, second, and third generations. The image of the American planes spraying Agent Orange is consistent with the story of a woman in Quang Tri at the beginning of the film, which depicted the white and pink poison that causes the trees to die.

Sakata's visualization touches on the cause, effect, and existence of ecophobia in Vietnam: from a fear that nature will serve as a sanctuary for the enemies of the U.S. army to a destructive practice to eliminate that fear. As a result, this action led to the reversal of the natural laws and the perpetual obsession with indigenous peoples' thinking. That process embodies two states: firstly, that human beings are opposed to nature, and secondly, that the boundary between human beings and nature is removed when both are victims.

Thus, it is clear in both Vu Le My and Sakata's films that when locals are confronted with Agent Orange, even though a sense of eco-ambiguity and ecophobia mixed in their thought, it is still a disaster. Such representation of disaster creates a character that covers all objects whether human or nature: the reversal of laws and natural growth of the ecosystem and long-lasting sequelae. However, each film presents a way of visualizing how to cope with disasters. Vu Le My primarily showed the way locals "live" with the effects of Agent Orange, whereas Sakata aimed to diversify solutions and expand "frontier" access to the Agent Orange victim problem.

### ***Ecological Disaster and the Way the Indigenous People Cope With it***

According to the conclusions of some historians, the two biggest disasters that Vietnamese people often have to face are wars and floods. In terms of war, the Vietnamese cope by using the traditional power of national cohesion to fight the enemy. There is some historical evidence for Vietnamese traditional experiences of fighting foreign invaders. In the 13th century, King Tran Anh Tong asked Tran Quoc Tuan, who was a general of the Tran dynasty, and who defeated Yuan-Mongol three times, "In case, the Northern enemy will invade again, what are our plans?" Tran Quoc Tuan answered, "the people's strength is their deepest root. That is the policy of keeping freedom for our country forever." Nguyen Trai, who together with Le Loi defeated the Ming invader, also thought that "People are the ones pushing and overturning boats." Regarding floods, the Vietnamese built a dike system as historian Phung (2017) has pointed out: "In general, these cauldron-handle dikes and those sea dikes illustrate two different aims of the Vietnamese state; while the purpose of the former was flood control, the latter was intended to facilitate land reclamation" (p. 118).

However, the use of poison has never appeared in previous wars, so it is still a new disaster that Vietnamese have to find ways to cope with, step by step, through their own experiences and traditions as well as via "new ways and methods." It is no coincidence that both Vu Le My and Sakata presented the narratives of the people who witnessed the U.S. spraying of Agent Orange at the beginning of the two films. In the 1990s and 2000s, when looking back on that event, these people all said that it was a weird substance, from color to taste, sprayed down on plants and the human body that led to deformities. Often, in the words of veterans or relatives of the victims, Agent Orange is always a phenomenon they cannot explain, so it is difficult for them to find a solution to deal with it. Vu Le My has shown the possible options that the local people have available to them when facing and living with the consequences of Agent Orange.

The indigenous people would want to find a solution to ameliorate the unnatural with the natural. This is evoked in the story of a woman from Quang Tri, whose husband is a veteran infected with Agent Orange. She was pregnant 10 times, and on the 10th time, the doctor comforted her. He advised her that, "I am sorry. Because it is war." The woman, in tears, shared that, since hearing that doctor's advice, she had not thought about giving birth anymore. That experience can be partly explained by the psychology, tradition, and perceptions of the Vietnamese. Vu (1968) explained the Vietnamese perception of childbearing, stating that "We have the saying *Having children means wealth*. If any family or ancestry includes a large number of people, they are considered to be blessed, despite poverty or lack of material goods. Couples are never opposed to having children because of their career interests [...]. Everyone considers having children to be important" (p. 21). The desire to have children, even many children, has long since been deeply rooted in the mind of the Vietnamese people. They want to have children because "if there is no heir for ourselves, then we are unfilial to our ancestors" (Phan, 2005, p.73). That desire and purpose could be one of the most crucial psychological reasons that motivated a woman to get pregnant 10 times and stop only when the doctor gave his advice concerning



the consequences of war. It is also possible to explain this woman's story, hopes, and despair from another perspective. Knowing that the husband was exposed to Agent Orange, the couple may have been aware of the reversal of the natural laws or at least recognized them through some broken pregnancies. Determined to get pregnant 10 times means that they are trying to use the natural to counteract the anti-natural, expecting that the natural chain will be able to eventually conform to the laws of nature. It is due to that fact that, when getting married, the Vietnamese view pregnancy as a very natural result.

In addition, Vietnamese people always associate childbirth with the concept of happiness and virtue. Giving birth to healthy, intelligent children, they believe, is due to ancestral and family blessings. The Vietnamese people used to have folklore reflecting their thoughts on the relationship between ancestral grace and a family of full, filial, and intelligent descendants as follows: 祖功宗德千年盛. 子孝孙贤万代昌 (The merits of the ancestors and the virtues of the family line will flourish for thousand years; Filial children and gentle offspring will prosper forever). Thus, in the desire to create products in accordance with the laws of nature, Vietnamese people often attribute the concept of blessings of ancestors to their destiny and families. When explaining the decision to stop having more children, besides accepting the doctor's explanation, the wife said that "maybe our fate is like that." That explanation allows them to silently accept the undesirable outcome and reflects their sense of life. They would wish to have good graces to maintain the natural, but their fate does not allow them to enjoy it. And their destiny is referred to and overlaps with the category of war consequences.

Another "solution" mentioned by the people in Quang Tri, perhaps also the solution as well as the choice of most of the other Vietnamese when facing Agent Orange, is to accept it as a normal thing, a consequence of war. These people hardly thought of any plan to change the lives of the children infected with Agent Orange. They only worry about who will take care of their children once the grandmother and grandfather die. In their acceptance, there is also despair. The despair makes them think that a reversal of that natural law is present in their lives. Vu Le My focused on details that highlight the hard life, such as the extreme poverty of the families of Agent Orange victims: shabby cottages, meals with only two bowls

of rice, and a plate of vegetables. Indigenous people also talked about planning to support their life, such as "neighborhood" and the aids from some child sponsor funds. The concept of "neighborhood" here evokes the Vietnamese tradition of community solidarity, "the good leaves protect the tattered ones." When faced with difficulties or disasters, the Vietnamese often promote such a tradition. History has proven its effectiveness and efficiency. However, the locals themselves said that "we want to support the families of the soldiers infected with Agent Orange, but only a small part." The scene of foreign organizations giving gifts to veterans' families also took place right after sharing about "neighborhood." But, in the background of those scenes, there remains a shabby cottage.

Following those scenes is the close-up of tears rolling down the cheeks of a woman whose husband was infected with Agent Orange, the words of a blind, two-eyed soldier who makes due by weaving a net that reads, "My wife and I were about to commit suicide," and an image of two rice bowls. The sequence ends with the image of the veteran's daughter with bewildered eyes and a body covered with brown spots. The "freeze scene" here implied that the place of war is also the land in which the sequelae caused by Agent Orange have persisted. The reversal of the natural laws is a great disaster, a great shock, and unprecedented in the indigenous people's experiences. For a long time, they struggled to find ways to cope with it, but the feeling of despair, helplessness, and, finally, acceptance almost invaded their entire thinking. Vu Le My's film thus raises questions to viewers, such as: what solutions are possible to deal with the war's sequelae and the reversal of the natural law in the post-war period? Is it possible to accept only the victim's solution, which accepts the destructiveness of Agent Orange simply "because it is war"?

### ***Ecological Disaster and the Way to Cope With it From Eco-Cosmopolitan Thinking***

When it comes to ecological issues, Heise (2008) has made a logical connection between the local and the global because, in her opinion, a sense of place needs a "sense of planet" and vice versa. Thus, the term "eco-cosmopolitanism" aims to create "an increased emphasis on a sense of planet" in connecting the local and the global. She defined "eco-cosmopolitanism" as an "attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary 'imagined communities' of both

human and nonhuman kinds” (Heise, 2008, p. 61). From eco-cosmopolitanism thinking, when referring, for example, to the nuclear explosion at Chernobyl, Heise pointed out the mutually constitutive relationship between local and global senses of place vis-a-vis “risk.” Risks like Chernobyl, in her view, require new forms of expression and analysis and new ways of inhabiting the world. In *Agent Orange: A Personal Requiem*, the construction of eco-cosmopolitanism thought is evident when Sakata sought solutions to the Agent Orange phenomenon in the post-war period. It is not only confined to the local scope but is a risk at the global level. Risk needs to be explained to find a broader solution within the planetary “imagined community.”

One of the obvious indications of Sakata’s eco-cosmopolitan thinking is the tendency to break down a single tone in the local voice, aiming to create a “diversity of voices.” The film begins with the indigenous’ sharing about Agent Orange sprayed on Quang Tri, which has become a strange phenomenon in their memories. In Sakata’s narrative sequence, the voices of the local people, those who directly took care of Agent Orange victims, resounded many times. They talked about children of the second and third generation infected with Agent Orange in both states of acceptance and hope. They talked about their perceptions of the destructiveness of Agent Orange on forests, its residues in soil, water, and plants, which lead to the most explicit consequence: children being born with disabilities. They also revealed that they could not explain the causes of these phenomena. They accept fate while nourishing and taking care of their children day by day because “She/he is my child.” A mother with a child infected by Agent Orange said she “did not know who caused this.” However, each story told by locals is associated with historical documents and pictures depicting the Agent Orange spraying journey of the U.S. army in Vietnam. It could be the voice of objective history and truth to answer the people’s “ambiguity” about Agent Orange and its terrible consequences. In other words, the voice of indigenous peoples paralleled the voice of history and truth. The voice of the indigenous people is no longer a single voice. It touches on the risk that needs to be recognized by the international community.

In the indigenous voice, Sakata also produced many different states. Most relatives of the disabled children spoke up, even though Agent Orange

victims themselves could not speak their voices. They struggled (with pain) on rugs and beds, but their own bodies, when shot up close, prevented them from expressing their own pain. In addition, Sakata created a different tone with the long sharing of Nguyen Thi Ngoc Phuong, a physician at Tu Du Hospital. She talked about second and third-generation Agent Orange children in terms of toxicity numbers, scientific explanations, and ideas to limit the birth rates of disabled children. As she talked about her grief over children’s sadness and their bleak future, laughter and an innocent image of a child without arms happily going to school appeared. While Do Duc Duyen and his wife talked about a two-headed child, their sadness, and acceptance of their fate, their first two daughters played with the younger brother because, as they often said, “he laughs a lot.” The opposing emotions coexist to evoke the desire to find a different life for Agent Orange victims so that theirs are not only voices and images of despair and deadlock.

Along with the voice of the indigenous people, the voices of American veterans and scientists are presented in this film. The “outside” voice combines with the “inside” voice to make Agent Orange no longer a problem in only small groups or one community. Outside voices gave warnings about human destruction of the natural state of man with chemical poisons in general. In other words, the presence of the “outside” voice in connection with the “inside” voice produces a sense of “translocality” (Slovic, 2009). The outside voice comes from the narrative of Greg, Sakata’s husband. Greg talked about his youth when he fought in Vietnam and returned to America to join the anti-war movement. Greg and Sakata know that they cannot have children because Greg has been infected with Agent Orange. That story and those of other veterans like David Cline, President Veterans for Peace, make the voices of American veterans fully compatible with the voices of the natives because they emphasize the tragedy and the unnaturalness of Agent Orange and its effects on the ecosystem. They further provide the real, historical experiences of the U.S. spraying Agent Orange in South Vietnam. Therefore, the voice of indigenous peoples is no longer a confined, local voice. The unspoken cry of the Agent Orange

victims now becomes a global calling. Every picture of Greg's journey and the book by Philip Jones Griffiths is an indication Sakata gives to find the victims for interviewing to reconstruct their story on the screen. The present and historical are co-present continuously in the narrative of Sakata. The destruction of ecosystems caused by Agent Orange is evidenced by photographs, historical documents, and witnesses. Also, it is confirmed by scientific studies through the analysis of Dr. Arnold Schecter and Dr. Jeanne Mager Stellman. In other words, Sakata's film has combined the voices of witnesses, history, and science about Agent Orange. Thus, from the "diversity of voices," she directed a "more multi-ethnic movement" (Glottfelty, 1996, p. xxv) and stressed that they are all sharing mutual concerns and issues beyond national boundaries. At this time, the Vietnamese and the Americans are not on opposite sides anymore but work together to extend their voices against the war and Agent Orange. They share the same ethical foundation required for dealing with its consequences. This means that Sakata is making a transition from an "ethics of proximity to a cosmopolitan ethic" (Heise, 2008, p.157) and creating the idea of "deterritorialization," eroding the tension between localism and globalism in the process of finding a solution for the Agent Orange problem.

The solution mentioned in this film is, therefore, perhaps not just a single solution of the indigenous people, of a small community, but an open and connective one. In addition to the efforts of relatives to take care of Agent Orange victims, treatment facilities to care for them have appeared through the efforts of international organizations. At Tu Du Hospital, Dr. Dang Thi Ngoc Phuong talked about pregnancy and prenatal testing to limit the birth of children infected with Agent Orange. Also, she mentioned a solution concerning how to nurture and educate deformed children so that they can participate in classes, apprenticeships, and work. The image of those children learning Japanese happily and singing Japanese songs is one highlight in a series of efforts to bring the reversal of nature back to the natural balance. The support of the U.S. veterans in nurturing and training Agent Orange victims also creates a sense of connectivity between the natives and the world in coping with persistent ecological disasters. In her film, Sakata provided a series of images and documents about herbicide production for both agriculture and

wars as desired by the President of the United States, as well as the progression of Americans and veterans fighting to end herbicide production in the hope that people will not witness more ecological disasters. The result of that series of struggles was stated in the slogan "Goodbye Herbicide." Following that slogan is a series of pictures of Agent Orange victims writhing with deformed bodies, speechless, and the image of peasants planting rice in the fields. These peasants produce rice in a way that integrates themselves into the natural ecosystem. That is to say, even though the production of herbicide has stopped, its consequences and the reversal of natural law persist. Humans need to respect the natural state of the ecosystem and coexist with it. Sakata's film creates an atmosphere of a global, trans-local connection as it emphasizes efforts to open up new horizons for Agent Orange victims by connecting the local and global through interactions, shared understanding, and practical action.

## Conclusion

In spite of a 10-year gap, the documentary films by Vu Le My and Sakata both focused on the images of disabled children to express Agent Orange's reversal of the natural growth of the ecosystem. The body of these children demonstrates the hazards of Agent Orange, representing catastrophe with persistent consequences. When confronted with it, the Vietnamese have to turn to both traditional experiences and broad community voices in recognizing Agent Orange's dangers and coming to solutions.

In the journey to depict ways of coping with disaster, Vu Le My showed a "sense of place," whereas Sakata aimed to a "sense of planet." Either way, the images about Agent Orange show that people have created the tools both to accomplish their goals while also causing their own eco-ambiguity and ecophobia.

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## Declaration of ownership

This report is my original work.

## Conflict of interest

None.

## Ethical clearance:

This study was approved by my institution.

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