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Hacking the Anthropocene:
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Learning to Find a Place

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The purpose of this personal narrative is to question how what is considered environmental knowledge has been influenced by colonisation and the impact this has on power structures in creating environmental disciplines. I question the impact colonisation has on how I have interpreted my upbringing and what it means to have environmentally-minded values. So began a YouTube rabbit hole watching videos that came up from searching "decolonisation." I write from the perspective of imagining if I could unravel my experiences with class, colonisation, and race with people of colour as my educators. I have summarised highlights of their talks throughout my narrative as comments like a student would receive for their assignments.

What would it feel like if I could learn about class, colonisation, and race with people of colour as my educators? It remains a rare experience. The purpose of this personal narrative stems from a startling encounter with my therapist that led me to feel my environmental knowledge is considered less legitimate. I could not help but wonder if it was related to my background as an Asian-Australian. To be specific, my preference for communal living was questioned given this idea was based in Vietnamese culture. According to my therapist, it was worth questioning the impact communal approaches might have on individual development. I felt my opinions had to be substantiated through research in university institutions. As someone navigating decolonisation, I found this ironic. The way environmental courses are divided into specialisations where one can become an 'expert' is counter intuitive to First Nations Peoples' knowledges in Australia, which is to see everything as connected (Milroy and Milroy 2008). It seems to me that how universities structure knowledge in environmental courses is reproducing the colonial practices it recognises it needs to address.

I wanted to choose a popular and accessible medium because media contributes to hierarchies of knowledge production that also limit how we believe we can participate. Subject reading lists could direct us to podcasts, online lectures, or videos but for the most part we are directed to struggle over academic texts instead. This has the impact of narrowing where and how we think we can learn. It also gives the impression that prominent academics do not engage outside of university institutions or share their knowledge in a modern-day style of oral history. So began my descent down a YouTube rabbit hole, which was one of the most authentic experiences of democratised knowledge I have experienced. I have summarised highlights of some of the talks I watched on YouTube throughout my narrative as comments like a student would receive for their assignments.

A few weeks ago, I woke up to see a dear friend had texted me at 2:15AM. He was grappling with repressed childhood trauma clawing its way to consciousness following controversial news coverage about a First Nations' Australian Football League (AFL) player. This led to something of an emergency call. Together, we attempted to break down the memories and understand how the AFL can be a trigger. You don't have to have played it to experience the institutional racism within the sport. My friend's discomfort was in recognising

that AFL was not made with people like him in mind and this latest news story was a reminder of how hurtful racialized systems are.

Neither my friend nor I grew up aware that Asian Studies is academic, or that you can have a university-level education about racism. Instead, we grew up with a narrative shared among the Vietnamese migrant community: you should never forget you are Asian but seek success as if you could be white. This problematic goal associates whiteness with wealth and happiness. In the United States there are similar expectations in the Vietnamese community that the aspirational "model minority Asian American" has the highest income and is the best educated (Lee 2014, 146).

I still don't know all the different frameworks, theories, or histories that can help situate my experiences. I fumble with an acute awareness that there is a better way to package my thoughts so that I might be better understood by others. Right now, there is only one framework that I do know very well: speaking from feelings and experiences.

My friend and I are people of colour who have not "done the work" in the academic sense, but we do the emotional labour of carrying experiences and encounters that can be transformed as data. For now, untangling our past is a path to learning to love our origin stories. This involves attempting to understand why we sometimes have visceral reactions that feel painfully uncontrollable in situations which might not seem like they need much analysing. Then, out of synchronicity, we find the work of artists, activists, and academics who articulate ideas in a way that resonates with the minutiae of our experience, frames it in a way that validates why it matters so much to us. I aspire to be able to eventually express myself like this too. I too want to learn to walk this tightrope of how to understand the world through theory while being aware of its limitations: that it represents but can also unwittingly exclude.

> *Nikki Sanchez: I can see that navigating race is complicated in terms of understanding your identity, history and how-to-be in the world. "This history is not your fault. But it is your responsibility." There is a collective responsibility for all of us to pave a way to heal together. Although it will be painful and difficult at times, know that unravelling these early memories are an important step to re-writing what you understand to be your purpose (Sanchez 2019).*

I tell this story in questioning what it means to hack the Anthropocene because I see a similar pattern in how to engage in environmentalism. There will be example after example of minorities like my friend and me who do not have the words (scientific, theoretical, academic) to grapple with Western constructs, yet, we *can* understand them. Eventually, we understand them so well we only know the words in English rather than our native language.

Unravelling these stories is important to better understand how my upbringing was a series of structures: family, formal education, workplaces; that, in their silence, gave me the impression I never need to acknowledge the consequences of colonialism. People around me live like this is normal, but I have found it insidious and damaging. Even in my YouTube travels watching Indigenous activists like Maxima Acuna (Acuna 2016) and Berta Caceres (Caceres 2015), I can't help but see their struggle against corporate greed as it is tied to colonial history. We are still living under colonialism and this dominant narrative cannot be trusted to have an honest conversation about environmentalism.

> *Linda Tuhiwai Smith: You are on the cusp of understanding what it means to try decolonising methodologies, and begin to learn what you think you know all over again in a way that makes sense to you. This is not an easy process because it involves undoing a*

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lot of what people have told you is knowledge and instead go in search for the relational rather than a global truth. Colonisation has been a powerful and confident force that entrenches ideologies and frames the Other as though they should blame themselves for their own shortcomings. You are correct that university is an apparatus upholding certain power structures. But given they are spaces for knowledge creation and knowledge production, it is important to write ourselves into institutions (Tuhiwai Smith 2020).

The power relationship between who is observing and who is being observed changes how we perceive actions. Depending on perspective, childhood memories can be brimming with opportunity, or representative of coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Assumptions about inequality can be used to wrongly reinforce that poor young people are growing up through a lens of poverty and deficit when this is not always the case (Thomas 2010). Thomas' critique is primarily focused on how crisis narratives are mobilised in the US education system to create a monolithic narrative about poverty in education. However, there are parallels to this reductive view of disadvantage that has also affected environmental narratives.

For example, there was no single-use waste plastic in my childhood. Every plastic cup, plate and piece of cutlery was washed and reused for the next family party. It was only when our parents learned that affluent (white) families throw party plates out every time that they understood disposable is aspirational. Still, my dad cannot resist a good fossick on hard rubbish day. Not quite the repair cafes that are in vogue these days, but in his garage, trash is transformed into furniture.

In general, my parents prefer not to only see things as single purpose. We have never bought a tumble dryer; a heater multi-tasks and will dry clothes while it keeps us warm. A bucket lives next to the kitchen sink because water washing vegetables should water the garden too. My parents did not know the words (low carbon lifestyle), but I reflect on my childhood with an appreciation that they taught me everything is valuable. Nothing needs to be wasted.

My parents also turned our house into a safe space. A family of six as it was, they were always sharing our house with family and friends arriving to this new country as though home were a game of Tetris. While their actions were motivated by thriftiness, I think it is also true we do not control the influence or inspiration we have on others. My parents could not know these actions would be formative memories for me, but this is the lens through which I see the impact they have had on my life.

Analysed under the watchful eye of class and race however, my parents' lives become examples of what poor migrants do to get by. There might be a glint of pity at the lack of money available in our network, and so our behaviours become undesirable. This is not the only story. How different the narrative might have been if my parents were encouraged to feel confident sharing these stories as quick and efficient ways to prevent waste. Perhaps it could have been migrants from decades past who spearheaded a zero-waste movement. Instead, it is 2020, we are drowning in trash and our eco-warriors make waves on social media showing us how to say no to a plastic straw.

Amitav Ghosh: This glimpse of your childhood is realistic and an accurate reflection on how seemingly banal actions can be reframed as part of a richer tapestry of life... but you are also right to note that such fillers in a story are connected to class. The evolution of realism is to learn the new pleasures of the bourgeoisie. As readers (and people) we are not taught to wonder how or what we might learn from the poor. We have been too wrapped up in grand narratives that do not serve our environment. The long awaited coming-of-age road trip, travelling to supposedly deserted islands, recreating Austen's

> *gardens. There is a crisis of the imagination and of our culture in addressing climate in our stories that are interrelated with issues of race and class (Ghosh 2015).*

I am now about the same age that my parents were when they arrived in Australia. Owning a home in inner-city Melbourne is material wealth beyond what my parents could have hoped for their children, and I feel like one of the luckiest people in the world. I also believe it is important to share this good fortune by keeping our home open like my parents did (redistribute privilege). For this reason, my partner and I have a revolving door of housemates. Sometimes they were friends already, sometimes we become best friends. Occasionally, we do not see them again. Equally important, it happens to be one of the easiest ways to incorporate sustainability values into our lifestyle (communal living).

> *Jules Orcullo: Yes! This is what I refer to in the Joy Offensive when I say we need to create spaces where we do not position ourselves as Other. I can imagine you expected radical living to look something like out of a movie, a group of activists huddled in the lounge room with their lives consumed with changing the world. Needing money or food is conveniently absent. This stems from a desire for a kind of privilege that you did not grow up with. But that does not mean you and your family do not participate in the kind of action you refer to. It is important to recognise that radical work can happen in under-represented spaces. Take pride in this, learn to create opportunities and possibilities in spaces that might not be considered radical (Orcullo 2017).*

As more friends become parents, I remain in the minority, even among those who shared similar immigrant childhoods to mine. That is okay, we can reach different conclusions (diversity). However, the most aggressive response came from my therapist when she suggested that perhaps having housemates is stagnating development in my relationship with my partner. When I tried to explain my position, her response was perhaps this is why there are still development issues in Vietnam too (microaggression). It is difficult navigating what to do when the person you consult to grow as a person might not understand the racial tension in their advice. Then, a memory pops up of how often I tried to convince my 18-year-old cousin that it is not normal to sleep in the same bed as her mother. In Australia, there is much research on the dangers of separation anxiety if you continue to sleep with your parents. In Vietnam, many girls sleep next to their mothers until they marry. It is a quandary what of one's culture we are meant to hold onto as 'normal' and what we are meant to consider as a sign of our poverty or lack of 'development.'

> *Amitav Ghosh: Your difficulty explaining to the therapist that your actions are a desire to be embodied with the environment is part of what I consider to be humanity's Great Derangement. We think we are living in an era of heightened self-awareness yet even in a therapy session there is an ignorant silence of how understanding ourselves is to understand we exist as part of the environment. When later generations look to our artefacts to better understand how we grappled with climate change, they will see this silence extended across so many disciplines (Ghosh 2015).*

It feels frustrating that to respond to my therapist, I need to find research about modes of resilience found in poorer countries. Unsure what to even type into the search engine, my therapy session has become a university assignment. I know the answers in myself, but I do not know how to prove there is a way of understanding my upbringing as reflecting sustainable values. Again, all I have are feelings.

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Why must everything be backed up with evidence-based research? At what point will there be some acknowledgement that the privileging of rationality and logic starts with faith in this chosen paradigm? There is no inherent objectivity in this ontology. I feel like the tree that has only proved its worth *after* research substantiated its multi-million-dollar benefits to the economy.

> *Jacinta Koolmatrie: Indeed, this is a frustrating consequence of colonisation where certain knowledge systems are belittled. First Nations' myths are fact, not fiction. We use stories to explain the land on which we live. The "Yamatie" is part of my family's storytelling that has been passed down generations. That this giant creature exists in our stories proves we lived alongside megafauna but is not considered evidence. It takes a group of archaeologists to make this 'discovery' before it is accepted (Koolmatrie 2018).*

In navigating my decolonisation journey, I echo Meher's sentiment which sees a "need for political and historical distinctions between migrant settlers to be engaged in order for meaningful solidarity to happen" (2019, 456). Although my parents' arrival via boat was undoubtedly traumatic, they were afforded many opportunities that I have been able to convert into privilege not so dissimilar to the original settlers. I must appreciate the danger of unwittingly positioning myself as championing against reductive binaries while simultaneously simplifying the world as white and other (Meher 2019, Trask 1996). We are so much more nuanced and interesting than that.

> *Linda Tuhiwai Smith: I am glad you have differentiated this difference. You might have felt a strong connection to my broken egg analogy, but we are cobbling together different eggshells, so to speak.*
>
> *To propose that a university authentically engages with decolonising is always met with white fragility, aggression, and defensiveness because it requires a redistribution of privilege and making space for other voices that compromise those in power. Simultaneously in this post-colonial world academic institutions acknowledge that we have a problem with inequality that we must talk about. Generally, what you get as a compromise is a reproduction of hierarchies where "small pockets of radical work may form, but they spend almost their entire careers to prove their work is good" (Tuhiwai Smith 2020). This is going to be a constant tension because you will rely on the status and opportunity provided by attending academic institutions to be able to explore these issues while also being aware of the colonial power relations they reproduce (Tuhiwai Smith 2020).*

I have yet to find the right words so that it does not sound so heavy handed but what I seek is to be part of the right story, one that unravels the assertion Western knowledge should dominate or consider itself superior over all other forms of 'knowing' (Milroy and Milroy 2008). I do this in my attempt to contribute to alternative narratives of Asian-Australian migration. At the same time, this is not just about my identity or my family's origin story. It is also about connecting to older stories. In this space I act according to the roles assigned to me as someone who recognises I live here as an "uninvited guest…learn[ing] their place" (Trask 1994, 914).

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ROSIE PHAM completed her Masters of Environment at Melbourne University in 2020. She enrolled with a firm plan to apply for her previous "dream job" in local government but as the months went on her priorities soon changed and it was time to close that chapter. She is going to attempt doing more writing and connecting with environmental projects in her local neighbourhood instead. **On social media**: @rosie_got_social