



LIVING LEXICON FOR
THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

Bomb Ecologies

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During breaks in clearing explosive ordnance from the former battlefields of Laos, bomb technicians commonly forage for wild foods. A half-century after the Vietnam-American War, these battlefields are rarely “wastelands,” but more frequently rice fields and orchards, markets, and schoolyards. These contaminated grounds are fertile; numerous wild and cultivated foods grow here, including bitter herbs, ginger, limes, and chilies. The older craters, especially, shelter young plants and saplings. As this account of foraging suggests, contaminated sites are not experienced by those that inhabit them as wastelands apart from everyday life. Military waste may be better understood as a kind of surreal substrate to everyday life. Beneath this rice field, the war.

In Lao, the linguistic classifier for bombs is *nuoy*, the same as the classifier for fruit. Bombs are often called by the names of the fruits they most resemble: a BLU-3 cluster submunition, which is yellow and sits upright on a flat base, with a large spray of metal fins, is known as a “pineapple bomb” (*laberd mak nad*) (see fig. 1). A rocket-propelled grenade, which is long and thin, is known as a “cucumber bomb” (*laberd mak dtaeng*). And on through the inventory of local fruits and found ordnance. Technicians may spend all day collecting pineapple bombs for demolition and break to forage for pineapples during their lunch. A bomb technician once asked me, in all seriousness, whether the American military had studied Lao native fruits in order to design their bombs to “look like fruit, so we will pick them up.”

A half-century after war, these former battlefields may be understood as “bomb ecologies,” zones in which war profoundly shapes the ecological relations, political systems, and material conditions of living and dying.¹ Villages in the most contaminated

1. Zani, “Bomb Ecologies?”



Figure 1. Yellow BLU-3 cluster submunitions gathered at a local government office in Phonesavanh, Laos. Photograph courtesy of the author

parts of Laos are colloquially called “bomb villages” (*ban laberd*), a phrase referencing both wartime airstrikes and postwar reconstruction using war debris as building material: stilt houses built on top of emptied ordnance, fences made of hammered-halves of cluster munitions, each over a meter high. How might we theorize this unexpected spoliation of war’s remains? I develop the phrase bomb ecologies out of my fieldwork with clearance operators and development organizations that select these massively contaminated villages for intervention. Researching a similar mix of ecological and geopolitical intervention, Masco analyzed how military waste produced “mutant ecologies” in post-Cold War New Mexico.² Nuclear radiation has ongoing ecological and geopolitical effects; the mutant plant species that Masco identified in New Mexican nuclear zones are emblematic of broader transformations in American culture and military practice. Looking beyond studies of militarism, theories of ecology have productively been used to think through contamination and danger.³ Explosive ordnance are part of Lao ecologies, becoming another possible “wild fruit” found and foraged by those who know how

2. Masco, *Nuclear Borderlands*, 298.

3. E.g., Choy, *Ecologies of Comparison*; Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies*.

to handle them safely. The bombs-as-fruit analogy is both specific to Laos and indicative of patterns of bomb ecologies in postwar zones. Some Lao bomb technicians described a “ground harvest” of bombs lying so thick on the surface that they could be gathered carefully by hand and put in baskets like fruit. Bombs that have to be harvested before they explode.

Military waste provokes an analysis of the simultaneity of ecological contamination and geopolitical conflict. In explosives clearance practice, “military waste” describes the material of war that remains after war has ended. Pieces of ordnance in Laos are waste in the sense that they failed to detonate during the Vietnam-American War. Operators treat ordnance as waste in an additional ecological sense, as toxic waste: terminology such as *military waste*, *contamination*, *hazardous area*, and *residual risk* give a sense of this approach. This terminology invites analysis of “post-conflict landscapes”⁴ as distinct ecological zones. In other ways, treating ordnance as waste elides geopolitical conflict to the extent that it naturalizes war and obscures the politics that cut up battlefields, bracket conflicts, and count corpses. Critically expanding this ecological approach, I engage the process of military wasting itself as constitutive of ecological and cultural contexts. This work contributes to research on the sociocultural significance of “ruination,” “active debris,” “rogue infrastructure,” and related forms of “slow violence.”⁵ Bomb ecologies are a product of slow, ongoing military wasting. The long-term ecological impact of war constitutes a further, implied or often hidden, part of contemporary warfare. At the same time, the term *waste* gestures toward an afterward beyond violence. A scholarship that engages with what war leaves behind may transcend war and the political claims that bracket conflicts.

As Laos continues to develop, the logic of war appears increasingly distant from daily life. Engaging with ordnance as ecological waste opens the possibility of treating bombs as something other than weapons. This move—away from war, toward the possibilities of everyday life—is central to my conceptualization of military wasting in bomb ecologies. In my fieldwork, I used poetry to capture these elusive moments of everyday possibility. I refer to this form of ethnographic notation as *field poems* rather than *field notes*. Let me share a field poem: Early on in my fieldwork, a friend told me a war story that contrasted Laos during the Vietnam-American War with a Theravada Buddhist utopia called the Land of the Fruit Eaters. Fruit eaters are beings who only eat fruit that falls from wild trees, thereby nurturing their bodies without slaughtering animals or killing plants. Fruit eaters inhabit a utopia that is free of violence, war, and murder. There is a poem in these accounts of bombs-as-fruit and fruits-as-peace, one that highlights the productivity of bombs and the positive merit accrued by carrying out explosives clearance:

4. Pholsena and Tappe, “The ‘American War.’”

5. “Ruination,” Stoler, “Introduction”; and Navaro-Yashin *Make-Believe Space*; “active debris,” Stoler, *Duress*; “rogue infrastructure,” Kim, “Toward an Anthropology of Landmines”; and “slow violence,” Nixon, *Slow Violence*.

Fieldpoem 11: The Fruit Eaters

The exceedingly virtuous eat only fruit that freely falls
 without knowledge of death
 She forages from the forest:
 cucumber bombs
 guava bombs
 bael bombs
 pineapple bombs
 melon bombs
 "Sometimes I wonder if they
 are supposed to look like fruit
 so that we will pick them up."
 She holds a yellow bomb the size of her fist
 with fins like the blades of pineapples

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