Dead zone: pollution, contamination and the neglected dead in post-war Saigon

Christophe Robert

Thresholds and water margins: Binh Hung Hoa cemeteries

The entrance gates of the Binh Hung Hoa cemeteries are falling apart. The faded, mouldy yellow paint peels off. Some of the gates date back from the time of the American War. One of them displays a date, 1964, the year President Johnson decided to escalate the war in Vietnam. These are the largest cemeteries in Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City, located in one of the poorest areas in the city. The cemeteries are full and overflowing; Buddhist graves and Christian graves; graves of Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese; graves of poor people; graves of soldiers of the old regime, who died in vain for the defunct Republic of Vietnam, which disappeared when Saigon was liberated in April 1975 (or fell, according to American terminology).

Many dead rest here, but their spirits are restless and disturbed these days. People say that the Binh Hung Hoa cemeteries are the oldest in the city. On late nineteenth-century French colonial maps these graveyard sites were recorded on the far northwestern margins of the new colonial city of Saigon then under construction. At the end of colonial rule in Vietnam in the mid-1950s, the city had moved closer to the cemeteries that now lay on the other side of the airport. These days the graveyards are full and in complete disarray. No one is quite sure of the actual number, but they are said to hold several thousand graves. Many more graves have been swallowed up by encroaching slums and new streets and neighbourhoods, a

Figure 4.1 Refuse on the side of the road through Binh Hung Hoa cemeteries.

process that has accelerated since the American War. On the northern side, near the crematorium, fields of bright green vines blanket the cemeteries. The presence of tombs can only be divined by large ripples in the folds of green. Names and photographs of the dead on the tombstones peer from under the vines.

Abandoned tombs haven fallen over. Some graves have been removed and are filled with weeds. Others have been renovated, and refurbished with enamelled green or blue tiles. The area is insalubrious. The streams that cross these marshy lands erode gravesites. Local inhabitants complain of the run-off from the cemeteries. Dead bodies are leaching bodily fluids in the waterways. There is no running water in these poor neighbourhoods, and people draw water from wells they dug themselves. They complain of government inaction, of the lack of social services and help to deal with unsanitary conditions and an emerging health crisis. Newspaper articles report high rates of cancer in the area. Here, in addition to economic hardship and the lack of educational and job opportunities, living in a poor area is marked by high incidence of disease and widespread anxiety about health hazards from adjoining cemeteries and factories.

In 2008, the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City decided to remove these cemeteries, and turn the area into an urban park. And since then? The removal of the cemeteries stalled, and turned into a

story of official incompetence and callousness that became big news in Saigon in 2009 and 2010 until the government reined in the press on this specific issue. Rumours continue to circulate about the future of the area. In summer 2011 construction began for a luxury gated community and golf course on a large, adjacent marshy plot that belongs to the Airport Authority.

The cemeteries are located in swamp lands next to Tan Son Nhat airport, which became the largest American air base during the Vietnam War. The marsh is bright green. The almost unnatural hues of tall grasses seem oddly out of place. The swamp is surrounded by tight rows of narrow houses, carpentry workshops and street-seller stalls. The marshy landscape looks tentative, in movement. The land is flat, but the eye cannot see very far; the horizon is short. It is one area of the city where you find huge trees, dark untrimmed wild canopies. Scrawny ponies graze along the canals and cattle waddle in graveyard ponds. The narrow streets are packed with dirty traffic and dust. The air stings with exhaust fumes from motorbikes and trucks carrying construction materials. Houses are being demolished on the edges of the marsh. Landfill has been brought in to create stone, gravel and concrete platforms sunk into the mud on which roads and new houses will be built. The whole thing feels tentative, crowded, unstable.

The cemeteries are large, uneven rectangles covering several square kilometres, filled with tight rows of graves in barren sandy soil. But the resting places of the dead have been encircled. Adjoining streets have filled up with new houses and apartment buildings. Along the marshy eastern edge of the cemeteries the golf course and luxury resort under construction next to the airport fuel renewed pressure to remove and relocate derelict graveyards, and the inhabitants of this poor neighbourhood. Beyond the cemeteries a few isolated graves are still found among warehouses. There is a sense of violation here: locals say that many abandoned graves were moved surreptitiously, dug up or simply covered over.

I first heard of this place inadvertently from a Vietnamese woman I will call Lam, during a conversation about her mother's death. Lam is a busy, forty-year-old banking manager. Her face tenses up and she nervously scratches at her left cheek with a fingernail as she describes an anxious episode that occurred in these cemeteries. 'I went out there to meet a supplier. At the time I was in charge of marketing. We needed to have quality advertising signage made. I made an appointment with this factory manager, to meet him at the factory site. I took a taxi one rainy evening to go meet him and

check on the quality of the work.' She gets agitated as she recalls the story: 'The taxi stopped. It was completely dark. I was scared. I asked the young taxi driver, "Where are we?" We were lost. He said, "This is the address, sister. It's here." I could not see anything in the rain and the darkness.' She calls the factory manager, and waits in the taxi. He finally comes out to meet her. 'I get out of the car, and I almost fainted. We're surrounded by graves. I could see the tombstones everywhere in the darkness.' She asks the factory manager, 'What is this place?' The factory manager tells her that his company rented this space cheaply, 'Because it was right next to the cemeteries.' Lam's face is distorted by the memory of this terrifying moment. Her mother had recently passed away. She was grieving.

Lam's unexpected encounter with graves and the dead momentarily terrify her. A year later, she still recalled this episode with great anxiety and sadness. 'I'll never forget that moment. I was so scared. It was so sad. I kept thinking about the fate of the people who were buried there, and about my mother.' Lam was working, her mind focused on projects and checklists. And then something scary and seemingly impossible unexpectedly came into view, and jolted her.

Grieving and mourning are painful, patient attempts to let go of the departed. When Lam stepped out of the taxi into the rain and the darkness the departed returned with unexpected violence. What is it exactly that returned then? In Vietnamese notions of death, the dead are not kept at bay.¹ Spirits of the dead are present in funerary altars found in all Vietnamese households, however modest. The spirit world is nearby, not remote, and ordered by means of funerary rituals and daily offerings to the spirits of deceased ancestors on the family altar at home.² Spirits live among people, or rather the living inhabit a realm made up largely of the tactile and soothing presence of deceased ancestors, and occasionally the less benevolent presence of errant ghost souls.

But at that terrifying moment, Lam's brutal encounter with abandoned graves and disorder raised the spectre of chaos, of violation of the ordered relationship between the world of the living and that of the dead. Georges Bataille long ago reflected on the fear of violation and contamination resulting from encounters with corpses, and humans' efforts to institute rituals to domesticate the pollution from encounters with dead bodies (Bataille 1962: 46–7; 1991: 79–81). In Lam's case, something brutally came into view. But it was more than a difficult or unexpected encounter with death. It was an utter jumbling of categories and mix-up of expectations concerning death.

I reflect here on one specific instance of this jumbling of ritual, social and political categories. On the surface this looks like a case of reclaiming fallow, marshy land for urban redevelopment and road building. The removal of cemeteries from city centres or urban areas is not a new or unexpected phenomenon. In nineteenth-century Paris or London, for instance, dozens of *intra-muros* cemeteries were removed and converted to parks (Thorsheim 2011). Similarly, in the last few decades governments in Hong Kong, China and Singapore have been promoting cremation and the removal of cemeteries from city centres (Teather 2001). But in this case, as evidenced by Lam's unexpected encounter with abject death, in addition to simply neutral 'urban development' we are dealing with lingering anxieties stemming from ethical violations surrounding the treatment of corpses and the deceased.

The southern threshold of this area is a marsh crossed by a stinking, polluted stream called Black Water Creek. Its dark, slow waters meander through the flat landscape. The terrain is being prepared for development. Some of it has been developed and built up already. But it is still a puzzle of land plots under construction. It is being bulldozed, drained, filled out with sand and landfill, flattened and tamped down. In spite of the large red billboards from the district's People's Committee asking people not to litter, wild and illegal dumping is rampant. The marsh is uninhabited, but not abandoned. You detect human presence by the trash that is dumped everywhere and that sinks slowly into the black mud. It is land in transition. Most of it has not been claimed by anyone yet. Hence, as is often the case in Vietnam, it is used for dumping.

This zone is about death, pollution, refuse and purification. The impulses to purify come from below, from locals' calls for better social and health services, for an end to the contaminated run-off through the graveyards. Impulses to purify, clean up and evacuate also come from above, more brutally and visibly, through demolition and construction in attempts to civilise, pacify and reorder these complex, irregular social and natural environments. On the north bank of Black Water Creek a squat, white building hosts a newly built government memorial to the war dead. These dead are safe, properly named, recognised and honoured during state commemorative ceremonies. In autumn 2011 a newly built middle school opened, not far from the war memorial. Development proceeds piecemeal, plot by plot, with large areas of marshland, wild grasses and reeds in between.

Dead zones: anxieties over matter out of place

Water animates this landscape. In Vietnam as elsewhere, marshes are drained to build houses and channel water flows for agriculture. But run-off and pollution, and deep movements of water below the surface, evoke other forces. The swampy ground is alive and forces people to take notice. It brings about erosion and erasure, forces that push things to the surface. The dead resurface as well – both symbolically and in real terms, when erosion shifts the soil around tombs and collapses graves, when water gnaws at the sandy loam and digs gullies through the cemeteries. In these gullies, people say they imagine the veins of the dead, and the fluid movement of the corpses now liquefied, now alive in new abject and polluting forms.³

The land is alive with forces through the movement of water. There is no real way of knowing where water comes from and where it flows to. It erodes and seeps through sand and sediments. Here, in the marshy, sandy soils on the margins of the Mekong Delta, the annual seasonal cycle of the rainy and dry seasons drives time – water or its absence is the key element. Abundant, regular rains and drained lands turned into rice fields and orchards have created the wealth of the Mekong Delta. But in these threshold lands and water margins where the city expands on the outskirts of dense urban cores, run-off and interactions of land and water in marshlands create unstable and shifting landscapes. These are domains of real estate speculation, wild zones of power⁴ where people dump garbage and build without permits, where state officials clear the land and residents for massive profits – indeterminate zones where, in earlier times, cemeteries were built on the far margins of the city.

These cemetery spaces are disorderly. Death spills over into the realm of the living. 'I'll never forget that moment', says a terrified and sorrowful Lam. The dead suddenly peered out from their graves, unannounced, when she stepped out of the taxi. The boundaries of the cemeteries are soft; their margins creep outward. Entrance gates have no fences and no locks. They mark a threshold, not the edge of a border. These thresholds are open and welcoming, since the world of the dead is not remote from that of the living. In rural areas, in less populated zones, graves are built according to geomantic principles in propitious locations, next to houses, in rice fields, in hills, both inside and in the margins of inhabited territory, so that benevolent ancestors can feel they rest peacefully near and among their descendants.⁵

Here in the city, according to local officials and their attempts to rezone neighbourhoods, there is no longer enough room to bury the dead. The dead are crowded in their decrepit spaces: graveyards are full. People reclaim every small space on the cemeteries' margins. Street sellers set up portable awnings and flat tables along the dusty roadsides and paths that cross the graveyards. They push abandoned tombstones out of the way to display their wares: plastic wallets, helmets or sunglasses.

Middle-class urbanites object to the presence of street sellers and 'uncivilised' (*khong van minh*) selling among places of repose of the dead. The poverty in neighbourhoods around the cemeteries displays itself in recognisable ways, as with itinerant hawkers waiting for the occasional client. This is a familiar scene, replicated day and night everywhere in Vietnam. But the ways in which these street vendors operate near cemeteries cause disquiet and repulsion among the *nouveau-riche* bourgeoisie. Graveyards are not supposed to be places where people ply their trades. And yet a bit of careful observation of daily life in these neighbourhoods reveals a different picture: the graveyards are zones of intense social activity, and most of it has little to do with death or burial. The Binh Hung Hoa cemeteries are zones of passage. They form large 'open' plots in an otherwise incredibly dense urban fabric. Their lesser density, the massive tree canopies, the streams that crisscross them, their location next to large marshlands and industrial zones surrounding the airport render them anomalous. Locals use muddy trails as shortcuts: motorbike and foot traffic is incessant in the cemeteries. People visit relatives' graves by motorbike, and ask street sellers and passersby for directions into the maze of tombs.

The educated middle classes deplore the lack of civilised behaviour – the lack of civility – of the poor. Why do discourses about poverty collide with those about death, moralised and displaced into the realm of culture and civilised behaviour? In marginal areas where occupancy is less dense, where land rights are not clearly established, and in transitional zones between city and countryside, neat binary demarcations and roles waver. This has to do in part with difficulties in local administration and management of city services. These are ambiguous zones, where the unclear attribution of tasks and the lack of accountability of the city government give rise to the types of environments we encountered around the cemeteries. Discourses on the 'uncivilised' behaviours of the poor should perhaps be reconceptualised as symptoms of dispossession and mismanagement. In public areas where ownership is not private, there are few efforts at

maintenance. It is in part because no money can be made directly or visibly in these processes, where tasks and responsibilities cannot easily be parcelled out for immediate or significant profit.

These cemeteries fall into zones of unclear sovereignty ruled by customary arrangements. They are run by local crews of graveyard workers who pay off local officials for a free run of the facilities and services. Decay is visible: the graveyards are patches of sandy soil with dried-up clumps of weeds, strewn with litter, garbage bags, construction materials, piles of ashes and half-burned trash. I ask Lam, who lives nearby, why the area is littered with refuse. She replies matter-of-factly, 'Because it's a poor area.' The idea is that the poor live in their garbage. But the reality is more complex, more subtle: the poor live among garbage because the city and government services that handle waste removal do not operate there. Why not? Because this is a poor neighbourhood, says Lam. The logic is neatly circular, yet inescapable as far as most Vietnamese are concerned.

Because of the disquiet caused by cemeteries, these zones are further left to abandonment. They are on the other side of the threshold. The neat boundaries between civilised and uncivilised behaviour that are hallmarks of middle-class speech and attitudes toward the poor crumble. Cemeteries are places where the presence of garbage adds another layer of discomfort and disquiet to facts of death. Death here is linked directly with garbage, refuse, pollution and contamination.⁶

'Dead zone' (*khu vuc chet*), says Lam. 'The area is really "complicated" [*phuc tap*]. A lot of poor people live there. They have no jobs, no income, no place to live. So they do small jobs: they dig graves, they build tombstones, they help clean and restore the graves. It's very expensive: they charge high prices for these services. But if the relatives of the deceased don't agree with the price, these people – you know, many are from "black society" [criminal groups] – they will destroy the grave.'

She adds that she reads about this in newspapers, in addition to her daily conversations in the neighbourhood. She continues on the same themes, prodded on by growing anxiety: 'This area at night is very "complicated" [*phuc tap*] because it's not lit. It's very dark at night. People enter the cemeteries to play cards and gamble, to smoke [heroin], and when they're high they simply lie on the graves and fall asleep there. Prostitutes go into the area as well. Very "complicated" area!' She pauses briefly, and rounds up her description by focusing on the forlorn lives of youths in the area: 'The ponds gather rain water. People fish there. The children in the area have no

community centres or parks. They have nowhere to meet and play. It's a very poor area. So in the evenings children and youth go to the cemeteries to play. They play in the tombs.'

Here, the combination of poverty, destitution, death and criminality gives rise to an imaginary landscape superimposed on the actual topography. The sense of violation, the presence of the dead and ghosts that roam the poorly lit cemeteries at night is relayed by popular, imaginative constructs of outcasts and a criminal *Lumpenproletariat*. The living who occupy and inhabit these cemeteries violate the peaceful rest of the dead. Their callous handling of the deceased – of people unrelated to them – when combined with the real pressures of destitution creates powerfully negative images of violation. Yet violation of taboos surrounding death is displaced into the realm of criminality and lack of accountability, more than simply violation *per se*. Vietnamese are used to the presence of the dead, but as a properly domesticated presence, channelled by respect for the deceased inscribed in daily ritual practices of ancestor worship. Here the callousness of the poor and destitute who live among the tombs shocks middle-class sensibilities. What is perhaps most shocking, as in the cases Lam describes, is the spectre of abandonment of the dead and the abject callousness of the living toward the anonymous dead.

Identifying the dead: names and images of the deceased

In the far northern reaches of the cemeteries, along dusty roadsides, vines blanket graves in layers of bright green. Vines are reminders of oblivion, slowly advancing waves of forgetting and abandonment. The graves are not all subjected to this in the same way: in some plots, graves are better kept and locked in metal cages to protect them from desecration.

Regardless of their current state, all graves display names of the dead, and the briefest of biographies summed up simply by dates of birth and death. Photographs of the face of the deceased enamelled or engraved on some headstones embody the words and give depth and substance to absent biographies. The images of the dead give a sense of presence and militate silently against forgetting. The effect is uncanny, since this mirrors the display of the photographs of the dead found on family altars in all Vietnamese homes. The city of the dead mirrors that of the living.

Similarly, in ceremonies in Buddhist temples during the seventh lunar month, Buddhist monks and nuns read long lists of names of people who have died in previous years and whose names relatives want read publicly for merit-making. Reading the names of the dead is a long ceremony. The gathered worshippers pray for the souls of those who are named and whose ashes rest in urns on long rows of shelves in carefully tended funerary halls. Here, as opposed to the cemeteries, Buddhist pagodas concentrate the power of dead souls in their demarcated enclosures. They domesticate and sublimate it in ritual.

I ask Lam and other people who have placed their parents' urns in Buddhist temples why they did so. Echoing what others said, Lam replies: 'I travel a lot for work. I worry that I may miss important dates in the ritual calendar.' She means that monks' prayers and the supernaturally potent milieu of the Buddhist temple provide ritual protection to her mother's remains, even if she is absent. Her recently widowed father joins in the conversation and adds, 'I worry about the neglect and abandonment of these cemeteries. Such terrible places.' Here again, the question concerns the demands of remembering the dead, as opposed simply to the threat of oblivion and anxieties of decay and abandonment. During the Buddhist name-reading ceremonies worshippers line up in long rows in a packed hall, all wearing the light grey robes of the lay follower, a moment of gathering and display of society to itself, as Durkheim would have it.

Image: faces of the deceased on tombstones

In cemeteries newer tombstones display a photograph of the deceased. The face of the deceased is represented by a photograph taken close to the time of death, for instance as an elderly person for those who died in old age.

For North Vietnamese Army soldiers and National Liberation Front guerrillas a name and the national crest of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam peer outward from the grave. In military cemeteries in southern Vietnam, the process of naming and display is often abbreviated: many of the dead were only known through nicknames or first names, their dates of birth unknown. In some cases, they are identified only as 'woman', 'man' or 'anonymous' – piercing reminders of the chaos of war, although provincial governments since the 1990s have invested heavily in the refurbishing and upkeep of military cemeteries. In some cases, a photograph is displayed on

a military grave, invariably showing the face of a very young man or woman next to the date of his or her 'sacrifice' (*hy sinh*). The concept of sacrifice anchors this display of anonymous or abbreviated biographies. In Vietnamese military and war martyrs' cemeteries, individual identity of the dead is always already subsumed in the national discourse of sacrifice, a sacrifice of blood for the eternal life of the nation.

This poses a problem for the dead of the 'old regime' (*che do cu*). I put this term in quotation marks because most older southern Vietnamese loathe this phrase, which disdainfully implies that their dead were on the losing side of history. The display of images of the dead from the 'old regime' and its soldiers cannot be officially recognised. They may be honoured privately, but not recognised as such, in the public sphere or in cemeteries. As soldiers of the defunct Republic of Vietnam (1955–75, with Saigon as the capital) they are the ignominious dead, the ghost soldiers who cannot be named, and whose memory cannot be honoured publicly. Official narratives of the victorious Communist Party skirt the death and continuous, if spectral, presence of these soldiers. It is rendered as absence, subsumed under narratives of a heroic People's War, of the People-as-One⁷ rising to fight foreign aggression. Graves of soldiers of the US-backed Republic of Vietnam are forgotten, ignored, their memory privatised and held to be the responsibility of families of the deceased soldiers, provided they keep quiet about their memories of violent death. The neglect and abandonment of graves in southern Vietnamese cemeteries is often linked to the presence of these unclaimed dead: many families of dead soldiers of the 'old regime' fled repression and 're-education' in the 1970s and 1980s. They left as 'boat people' (*vuot bien*), leaving behind graves that are now at the centre of contention over the presence of large numbers of unclaimed tombs in Saigon's cemeteries.

The face of the deceased on a headstone locates a tomb in relation to several places and sites, and symbolically in several directions at once and along different axes. These images materialise the deceased who peer out from their graves, inhabiting them. But they also call and make a demand on the living, on relatives, descendants and passersby. The dead interpellate the living. Unlike in Western European or American cemeteries, Vietnamese graves do not display epitaphs recalling career, familial belonging or important biographical facts (writer, artist, etc.) that contextualise the life of the deceased. Here the dead are located by means of a name, birthplace, a date (and, sometimes, a time) and place of death, accompanied by

a photographic portrait reproduced on enamelled ceramic. Neutral formulas, such as 'peaceful rest' sometimes figure above or underneath the name. These words and symbols identify the deceased primarily as belonging to a family and a religion, by means of two series of Buddhist and Christian symbols: the swastika, Buddhist symbol of the wheel of the law (*Dharma*) and karmic laws of birth, death, reincarnation and rebirth (*samsara*), as well as the lotus flower, Buddhist symbol of purity; and wheat garlands and the cross for Catholics.

Practices vary and photographs are not uniformly affixed to headstones, though most recent graves include a medallion portrait of the deceased. One effect is that the dead are preserved as alive, by means of a portrait that becomes an image of them in death. This is not a death mask, an image of the corpse, but rather an image from when they were alive.⁸ Descendants choose photographs of the dead carefully. These portraits are not exuberant. Smiles are thin and subtle. The face, photographed head-on, fills the oval medallion or rectangular frame: a biography condensed in the portrait and the image of a face. This type of portraiture and the effect of repetition from grave to grave helps identify (with) the dead by recognising them as ancestors – an endless indebtedness by means of which living descendants can recognise themselves as such and locate themselves in kinship and social terms in relation to the deceased. This recognition is an ethical demand (Hegel 1977: 270; Levinas 2000: 82, 105; Mbembe 2003: 14). Here the demand of the other, displayed and conveyed by a photographic image of the face, is the demand of the deceased, dead and yet still alive and able to place demands on others from the realm of death. It is in part a demand for immortality, a wish. But it is also a debt that must be enforced and that the dead enforce on their descendants. To refuse that debt, by improperly paying respects to the dead, by not tending to the graves and the needs of the dead would run the risk of having the deceased turn into ghosts and malevolent spirits.

When graves are abandoned or untended, when cemeteries become dumping grounds overgrown with vines and weeds as a result of administrative neglect, these demands fail. This is not an ethical breach *per se* in the case of families who left or disappeared in the wake of war and the chaos of emigration. People bemoan the fact that graves were abandoned, but do not blame directly those who left as refugees: it is considered part of the violent aftermath and harsh sorrow of war, a sorrow that is best left unvoiced. But it is an ethical failure, and people see it as such, when authorities and

Figure 4.2 The face of the dead, peering out from an abandoned grave.

local officials neglect their duties of caregiving and keeping the dead properly sheltered when cemeteries are not properly managed. Then these fractured memories and threats of abandonment and oblivion index the violent return of something heavily repressed but active within the recent history of Vietnam.

Naming the dead

Naming the dead, the display of names and photographs of the deceased, establishes claims over the land and inscribes it with social norms and an ethical mark. In the name of the deceased and the ancestors, families disavow death – not the unavoidable facticity of death *per se*, but the decaying presence of the corpse. In the wake of funeral rituals, by means of names and photographs etched into headstones, the corpse is transformed into an ancestor, a principle of ideally unending filiation and descent (Hertz 1960: 77–9; Watson 1982). Oblivion, symbolised vividly by the growth of vines and vegetation over the tombs, is the return of something threatening, best forgotten, the materiality of decomposition – something that rituals,

funerals and naming claims over a small rectangle of earth for the corpse below do their best to occult. In the abandonment and oblivion of these cemeteries images of decay resurface. These images of decomposition sneak in and seep into consciousness. The threat in this something that resurfaces stems from the ways it imposes itself. One cannot evade and forget it, or easily put it out of mind (Bataille 1991: 80; Siegel 1983: 9).

Ideally, cemeteries provide a mirror image – cities of the dead mirroring those of the living. The mirror image here, however distorted, is threatening and uncanny. These places become ‘dead zones’ because they don’t seem to stand up to ethical norms of proper behaviour toward corpses of the dead (Posel and Gupta 2009: 301). Here something reasserts itself, something that is best kept at bay, tentatively but successfully in funeral rituals and ancestor worship. The neat demarcation between the worlds of the living and the dead is not a principle in Vietnam: quite the opposite. These two ‘worlds’ are best understood as the contact zone between the visible world of social relations and the invisible but efficacious world of spirits and the dead (Lévi-Strauss 1992: 246).

The process of naming is extensive. Its deep ritual and familial ramifications extend to political and administrative realms. The problem in part is that administrative failure is almost complete: failure to name, register, count and administer, and govern the dead, who are not cared for properly. The problem of governing the dead mirrors that of governing the living. Official calls for law and order, for cleanliness and public hygiene when the government is eager to blame the criminality of these areas, are undermined by the brute facts of poverty and official neglect in rapidly urbanising contexts.

Dead zone: contamination and symbolic pollution

The territory occupied by these cemeteries is an actual place, wedged between Saigon’s airport and industrial zones, and surrounded by marshlands and dense residential areas. But this geographical territory also maps (or is mapped on to) and masks another reality. The territory is both real and imaginary. Through the intervention of an ‘outside’, of something else that terrifies and escapes language, it becomes imaginary, the territory of fears and anxieties, including social anxieties about ‘social evils’ because of the poverty and chaos in the area.

'Dead zone' for Vietnamese here means derelict and vague spaces, on the outside, in areas under construction and in thresholds where the city is expanding: liminal areas, unmarked, unclear, unregistered, out of direct municipal and state control, unclear spaces where all sorts of crimes are imagined to take place. These are also spaces of the imagination, anxious spaces where criminality and threatening perpetrators are imagined to reside and roam.⁹

As opposed to the notion of cemeteries as resting places after a long and eventful life, this 'dead zone' threatens and undermines the very image of 'good death' and peaceful eternity (Bloch and Parry 1982: 15; Kwon 2006: 12–16). Other images and other thoughts come to mind anxiously. As we saw with Lam and her father, one witnesses and, on the basis of media representations, one imagines crime, gambling and prostitution taking place in these graveyards – forms of excessive social behaviours and transgressive exchange that shock, because they have no place here. They destabilise the fragile scaffolding of ritual exchange with the dead in this place of repose. Yet the point is that this place is active: the territory is crowded, this is a place of labour peopled by workers who are imagined to be loud and coarse, drink too much, use drugs, have sex with prostitutes, etc.

Contamination (imaginary, symbolic or real) disturbs the 'good death' of people buried here. Something that should have remained out of sight comes to the fore and becomes visible. Contamination, juxtaposition and mixing create anxiety, and perhaps terrify in some cases. Pollution is no longer a figure of speech. Anxiety about the return of the dead, of death that returns, including in the figure of ghosts, is not figurative in this case, but the real event of the reappearance of decay and abjection, the anxious contiguity of threatening figures of prostitutes and junkies roaming at night with polluted run-off from the graves into waterways and water tables in the area. Pollution in this dead zone seeps in and becomes unbearably real and anxiety-producing when its source is identified as 'death itself' (which is an impossible thought, supposedly, but not here). The ritual scaffolding and apotropaic justifications of funerary rites are compromised.

The symbolic pollution of death rooted in decomposition of the corpse is domesticated in ritual (Siegel 1983; Watson 1982). The idea of cemeteries as resting places, too, aims to domesticate this threat: it delineates proper spaces for death, territories supposed to be marked off and domesticated. In these 'dead zones', on the other hand, something escapes. There is run-off. Bodily fluids from corpses ooze and seep into the ground, polluting drinking sources of the living. Hygiene is threatened, and 'social hygiene' problems begin to fester and seep

into view as well, especially when relayed by mass media. There is something unclear and transgressive in this area, and this something 'unclean' extends to sources of lawlessness imagined to be located in poverty – in lack of education, poverty and criminality associated with 'social ills' and people living outside the confines of the law.

This brings into view more complex demands of organisation and less easily located questions connected to governing spaces of death. The problems of governing these large, complex spaces seem intractable: indeed, the 'solution' of the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City, which sits in a distant, imposing colonial building in the city centre, has been to decide to raze and relocate the Binh Hung Hoa cemeteries, in effect to eliminate them. This answers demands of a past that will not sit still with more of the same aggressive policies which pretend that the violent wartime past simply no longer exists. Oblivion here is clearly an attempt to forget in order not to face the complexities of that past and the moral claims that some Vietnamese may be able to make in its name.

The city government wants to remove graves and raze these cemeteries because they are a chaotic mess, symbols of disorder, pollution and contamination. But the underlying causes for the apparent chaos in these fallow zones of decay and half-abandoned cemeteries can be traced to precise causes, namely war itself. In order to avoid confrontations over this past that will not sit still, the authorities, instead of addressing it politically, decide to continue to skirt it and pretend it simply never happened. There is something peculiar to this temporality and the political discourses about the past displayed in this removal of cemeteries. As in Hong Kong or Singapore, places where pressure on land for building and infrastructure is intense, the removal of cemeteries is framed first and foremost as a necessary aspect of economic development and growth (Kong and Yeoh 2003; Teather 1999, 2001).

Pressures on land in the city core led workshop and textile factory owners to establish themselves in these poor, outlying districts where real estate and rents are cheap. The personal ties and arrangements that helped create these industrial zones now undermine official attempts at registration and control. Over time, the murky processes by which lands were purchased and leased out make it nearly impossible to clearly ascertain who controls which lands and on what terms. Parts of the cemetery lands themselves have been leased out to state-owned factories, and graveyards have shrunk over time.

Today the city government – with its fragmented jurisdictions and unclear lines of authority – tries *ad hoc* to re-establish control

over these areas and over processes by which public and private lands are apportioned, sold and leased. This reveals anew a strange temporality, in which the past figures as a great chaotic 'before' (*ngay xua*) – which may be further cut off and classified as 'before liberation' (before the end of the war on 30 April 1975) or 'before market economy reforms' (late 1980s), etc. But in the meantime, 'development', 'modernisation' and economic growth have also meant the establishment of entirely new land laws and regimes of property rights, as well as a rapid and massive expansion of private property and speculation on real estate in Vietnam. Cadres from Ho Chi Minh City's People's Committee and district-level municipal agencies placed themselves in a position to apportion real estate projects and enrich themselves in the process. Urban planning and questions of sovereignty have been undermined by government officials in city- and district-level People's Committees, the Planning and Investment Office and the City Architect Office of the municipal government acting as 'intermediaries' in large real estate transactions.

This goes hand in hand with a sort of folk 'common sense' in which the city is classified into good and bad zones and, accordingly, neighbourhoods and populations themselves as either 'good' or 'bad' – popularised by the phrases 'bad people' (*nguoi xau*) to refer to criminals and 'complicated areas' (*phuc tap*) for neighbourhoods with supposedly intractable social problems. In other words, a moralistic middle-class map of urban zones and society arose over time, based on anxieties about criminality and on blaming the poor for their poverty and lack of access to education and social services. This moralisation extends to discourses on cleanliness and contamination in poor urban areas and graveyard zones. On the other hand, the term 'dead zone' is also used by people who live in these areas to point out that they have been abandoned by callous authorities and left behind without any support. In the wake of scandals after journalists unearthed the problem of cancer caused by industrial pollution and water contamination in Binh Hung Hoa graveyards, the official solution has been large-scale removal of cemeteries and people from these 'problematic' areas.

Zones of neglect and abjection

The municipal government of Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City has tried without much conviction or success to close down the textile and plastics factories that dump waste directly into the marshes around

Binh Hung Hoa cemeteries. Factory owners and managers bribe local cadres in order to stay in business and continue to pollute. The government has also tried to regulate illegal dumping of trash and close down illegal garbage dumps that sprouted in the marshes (People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City 2008). Levels of water contamination have also been tested. But with pressure from the municipal government not to admit to large-scale and widespread contamination problems, tests came back negative and inconclusive (Government of Vietnam, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment 2008). Local residents have a ready answer: tests results were manipulated and the problems hushed up. To them, it is yet again the same pattern of exploitation and abuse of the poor. For residents corruption is the root cause of the widespread pollution and contamination, the abuse of locals and neglect of the cemeteries. Lam notes plaintively, 'The whole society is corrupt. This is what you have to do in order to make a living and survive.' Lam's father, a former journalist, is more direct: 'This entire society is rotten,' he says.

Care for the dead in cemeteries and the management of death as a question of public administration have become a scandal because the problem is broader than simply families paying for the care of their dead. Cemeteries are managed by local administrations, yet personal networks of patronage undermine management and strategic planning. For local residents, the abandonment and neglect of these cemeteries are symptoms of the government's neglect for the people. Local officials base their governing practices on fees and profit. For Lam, 'If they cannot make money from something personally, it will never happen.' There is no visible way to profit from the care and maintenance of cemeteries. 'You see, this is why we have these problems. They don't care about the poor people who live here,' she adds.

The 'solution' of the municipal authorities to deal with pollution, overcrowding and abandoned graves is to remove the cemeteries. This apparent solution only displaces problems temporarily, by tearing out the local social fabric and carving out new zones for land development and speculation. This 'solution' is also an attempt to erase and forget the past. The problems in these 'dead zones' stem from at least one generation of neglect and official incompetence and impunity, since the end of the war in 1975.

Cities are rezoned by excluding and removing the poor. This is in spite of the fact that workers, the poor and people engaged in the informal economy have got by and built these neighbourhoods from

scratch without official help and support in areas where the government provided none of the basic environmental and social services: no drinking water, no sewers, patchy electrical power and bad schools. More recent discourses about 'modernising' urban infrastructure are intimately linked with speculation on land, and land deals financed by domestic and foreign capital. The poor and the neighbourhoods they have built become impediments (Davis 2004: 15–16). And so are the dead. Both need to be removed and pushed further out into marginal lands on urban peripheries.

As we have seen, for Hegel the ethical nature of the family is revealed in the act of burial and of caring for the dead (1977: 270–2). In Vietnam these are also essential principles, relayed by ancestor worship and Buddhist rituals of care for souls of the deceased, including those of the anonymous and abandoned dead. But, as we saw here, because of contrary forces of poverty, mobility of the poor and the abjection of pollution and contamination, the poor are placed outside of the social. The difficulties these neighbourhoods experience in terms of livelihoods and lack of support from the government have rendered them 'complicated'; as the local colloquial idiom has it – and this is now held against residents of these poor districts. The cemeteries are indeed 'dead zones' and 'complicated' areas where the world of the dead and the living intermingle in problematic ways. The informal economies of the *Lumpenproletariat* in these neighbourhoods interact with and feed on addiction, gambling and prostitution. This mostly stems from the inability of the government to regulate the burial of the dead and maintain cemeteries, and provide adequate social services, education and ultimately jobs to local residents.

In the context of the impossibility of concerted popular political action – in the absence of political structures and mechanisms for the accountability of elected officials, and without a vigorous and independent press with investigative journalism – moral claims based on weak ethical principles of shaming are one of the few avenues for comment if not contestation about the unfolding environmental problems and social struggles in these dead zones.

Notes

- 1 In 'The Living and the Dead' (ch. 23 of *Tristes Tropiques*), C. Lévi-Strauss discusses the range of attitudes toward the dead across human societies, which are always rooted in respect. He opposes two ends of a spectrum,

with many intermediary attitudes across different cultures: from a 'contract with the dead', where if properly engaged ritually the dead return only at propitious intervals, to societies where the living put constant demands on the dead and 'press them into service' (Lévi-Strauss 1992: 233). He notes that in all societies 'a form of sharing cannot be avoided' between the living and the deceased (233).

- 2 For Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (paragraphs 452 and 453) the ethical nature of the family is revealed in the act of burial and of caring for the dead (1977: 270–2). I work through this insight by focusing on violations of what Hegel analyses as fundamental ethical norms revealed in the care for the dead.
- 3 In 'Miasma', Taussig (2004) reflects on the interactions between marshes, mud, decay and death. He builds on Bataille's discussion of the fear of corpses and decomposition in ch. 3 of *The Accursed Share* (Bataille 1991). My discussion builds on both of these theoretical approaches to death, decay and violation.
- 4 I borrow the expression from Buck-Morss's discussion of 'wild zones of state violence' in the first chapter of her *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000: 21).
- 5 In *After the Massacre* anthropologist H. Kwon discusses the centrality of the notion of 'house' (*nhà*) to Vietnamese moral classifications of death and to two interrelated form of dwelling: 'the tomb is a house for the dead that shelters the body and demonstrates the deceased's social identity' (Kwon 2006: 13).
- 6 In these passages, I am elaborating on the notions of pollution and dangers of death as discussed by Mary Douglas, especially in ch. 1 of *Purity and Danger* (1966).
- 7 C. Lefort articulated the concept of the People-as-One (*le Peuple-Un*) as an essential component of twentieth-century totalitarian thought, in both Nazism and Stalinism. See ch. 8, 'The Logic of Totalitarianism', and ch. 9, 'The Image of the Body in Totalitarianism', in his 1986 book.
- 8 For a contrasting view of the role of photographs in funerary practices, and analyses of Javanese understandings of corpses and fears of contagious death, see Siegel 1983. My own interpretation of practices surrounding images and names of the dead in Vietnam is heavily indebted to Siegel's ongoing ethnographic analyses of death, naming and uncanny encounters (Siegel 1969, 2006, 2011).
- 9 The theme of living in graveyards recurs in Vietnamese literature, to stress the abjection of extreme poverty and destitution. For a contemporary example in the form of a short story first published in Hanoi in 1995, see Nguyen Manh Tuan 2003.

References

- Bataille, G., 1962, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights).

- Bataille, G., 1991, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. II, *The History of Eroticism*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books).
- Bloch, M. and J. Parry, 1982, 'Introduction: Death and the Regeneration of Life', in M. Bloch and J. Parry (eds), *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, pp. 1–44 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Buck-Morss, S., 2000, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- Davis, M., 2004, 'Planet of Slums: Urban Involution and the Informal Proletariat', *New Left Review* 26: 5–34.
- Douglas, M., 1966, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- Government of Vietnam, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, 2008, 'City cemetery contaminates residents' water', www.monre.gov.vn/MonRENET/Default.aspx?tabid=255&ItemID=55272 (accessed 30 August 2010).
- Hegel, G. W. F., 1977, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Hertz, R., 1960 [1907], 'A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death', in *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. R. and C. Needham, pp. 27–86 (Glencoe, IL: Free Press).
- Kong, L. and B. S. A. Yeoh, 2003, *The Politics of Landscape in Singapore: Constructions of a 'Nation'* (New York: Syracuse University Press).
- Kwon, H., 2006, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Lefort, C., 1986, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, trans. J. Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- Lévi-Strauss, C., 1992, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. J. Weightman and D. Weightman (London and New York: Penguin).
- Levinas, E., 2000, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. B. Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).
- Mbembe, A., 2003, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture* 15(1): 11–40.
- Nguyen Manh Tuan, 2003, 'Living by the Tombs', in W. Karlin and H. A. Thai (eds), *Love after War: Contemporary Fiction from Vietnam*, pp. 386–99 (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press).
- People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City, 2008, 'City to move Da Phuoc and Binh Hung Hoa cemeteries', www.eng.hochiminhcity.gov.vn/eng/news/default.aspx?cat_id=513&news_id=5786 (accessed 11 August 2010).
- Posel, D. and P. Gupta, 2009, 'The Life of the Corpse: Framing Reflections and Questions', *African Studies* 68(3): 299–309.
- Siegel, J. T., 1983, 'Images and Odors in Javanese Practices Surrounding Death', *Indonesia* 36: 1–14.
- Siegel, J. T., 1969, *The Rope of God* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Siegel, J. T., 2006, *Naming the Witch* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).
- Siegel, J. T., 2011, *Objects and Objections of Ethnography* (New York: Fordham University Press).

- Taussig, M., 2004, 'Miasma', in *My Cocaine Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Teather, E. K., 1999, 'High-Rise Homes for the Ancestors: Cremation in Hong Kong', *Geographical Review* 89(3): 409–30.
- Teather, E. K., 2001, 'The Case of the Disorderly Graves: Contemporary Deathscapes in Guangzhou', *Social and Cultural Geography* 2(2): 185–202.
- Thorsheim, P., 2011, 'The Corpse in the Garden: Burial, Health, and the Environment in Nineteenth-Century London', *Environmental History* 16(1): 38–68.
- Watson, J. L., 1982, 'Of Flesh and Bones: The Management of Death Pollution in Cantonese Society', in M. Bloch and J. Parry (eds), *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, pp. 155–86 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).