

Luminol historiography

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Luminol historiography is a research practice that exposes underlying layers of spilled blood in human-inhabited sites. The sites include architectures, other lived spaces, and inhabitable – once or continuingly – geophysical forms. Proposed practitioners bring along metaphorical buckets of luminol, a chemical compound used to illuminate hidden blood in crime scenes, and a strong supply of brushes. They splash luminol historiography across the fettered landscapes, along human roads and activities, on new and old buildings. Some of the sites ripple and pulse, gobble up the luminol and glow.

In this particular imagining of historiography, luminol is mostly metaphorical: the work is carried out in archival research, personal interviews, ecological change observations, studies of building plans and hiring (or impress) practices. Luminol historiographers might borrow crime show bearing to give themselves courage in difficult scenes – after all, they’re investigating underlying violence and suffering. Any given surfacing or careful cleansing may elude our historiographers, of course, and underneath there is always another underneath, the pressure of built history is so great, the palimpsest of earth’s so generous.

Blood can be moral and emotional as well as biological. It is part of our identities and economies. Some historical buildings glisten with gold made out of literal blood: one might wish real luminol to be applied to core samples of church and state gold laminate. Some cultural structures shine with the losses experienced by people who gave their life meanings and times to those structures without any real connection, sense of co-ownership, or recompense. Many buildings or roads may need a modified luminol compound, more like blood-money illumination, to show their sheens of obliteration. Some monumental statues might similarly glisten.

Luminol historiography names a version of historiographic impulses, which overall seek to render the once-occurring into explanatory graphemes: to explain and present in writing, photos, drawings, installations, to describe excavated finds held under light. In this case, the focus is on bloodshed. The

term came to me as an image of the researching body picking through the details and surfaces of cultural places in order to illuminate hidden traces of violence. I was mentoring a student who was thinking about how a modern colonial city got built, the violent conscriptions and quick buildings, and what that city still now overlays, what its shininess might obscure in ordinary and enduring human trauma.

A city is a human-thickened ground that exposes and conceals its traces in layered living spaces, contingent lots and playgrounds, wired offices, current interactions, supported and renewed ideas of oldness. Luminol historiographers can splash their luminol across a city's surfaces: Launceston, Mont Royal, Santiago, Sioux City, Mareb, Fuente Grande, Tāmaki Makaurau. The names of cities – the notions, surnames, takeovers that inspired those names – can be sprayed to see what's hidden. It might seem easier to point the brush of luminol historiography at a city's bold erasures than it does to examine swaths of unbuilt ground.

But any site can show its suffer density with application. Look at Erín Moure's poetry studies of forest areas in the Ukraine, how the plants coming out of ashen ground transmute the bodies of murdered people buried underneath. The ground's a sponge of forgetting spilt, a ready geoarchive compared to the more dissipating geoarchives of air and water. Take the luminol bucket and splash it on that ground – metaphorically of course, since we don't need another poison thrown on earth as we look for what's there, what isn't, what's wafted away or carefully repressed. Take luminol historiography to the waters, too. Find more ways to translate some of the difficult things that Te Awa Tupua has borne and floated on.

History, of course, shows up any time, despite being often obscured by the swamping presentism of cultural acts and structures. As many have noticed, history has its measure in what is left out as much as in what's included. And deliberate and unconscious forgetting, cuttings of past significances out of a present, are commoner than perceptions of contiguity and continuity between past and present. The present is, for many contemporary cultures, snipped from continuity with a past, and forgetting, as many thinkers about colonialism and its posts have written, is a central feature of cultural narratives.

And where would we be without letting go? There'd be no room for reimagining and renewal. Yes: we know that time is an invention for making sure that everything doesn't happen all at once. Yet new human imaginings are always on literal and metaphorical middens of some kind, always new growth happens like plant clumps atop what's already grown. When a person speaks with another person, histories of relations also transpire within their addresses. When the building is fully surfaced, everything that went into its making is still transpiring within its purposes. And luminol is, after all, crafted to wake up what's hidden.

Although the luminol application might be largely metaphorical in luminol historiography, the brushes are real. They serve for definite acts of inscription: pen and ink, site-specific placemark, keystroke of historiographic record. Think of writing with luminol pens and computers, theoretical techne that can make us consider all our devices for such making, interfaces and records. What computing devices are we working with? What are their costs and devotions, their mined ingredients, their histories of replication and trash. What if our devices shimmered with their costs in blood when we held them under luminol light?

Some kinds of blood – of birth, of already well-recorded wars, of abattoirs – are to be expected. Many kinds of power relations are theoretically transparent. So when our researches open up literal and metaphorical bloodletting to view, we have to think about what portions are apparently inevitable, waiting to be known for their details, and what are deliberately hidden, pushed into some criminal events of cultural fashioning, ideologically resistant to extrication, or previously known but carefully erased. When we perform interactions with each other and the structures of our exchange demonstrate historical violence, how do we expose, record and address that violence?

We ourselves are full of blood. We are sites and forms of living. What happens when we spill luminol on our own bodies? Does our blood shine through the skin? What is the story of that blood – have we spilled ourselves; is there an epigenetic revelation to be had? Where and what are our portions of doing and done-to, in the songs of violence? What happens when we answer those questions?