

Book Review

Pollution is Colonialism

by Max Liboiron (2021)

Durham, NC: Duke University Press

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Pollution is Colonialism: An Interdisciplinary Book Review

This is an interdisciplinary review of *Pollution is Colonialism* by Max Liboiron, from the perspective of research into the ethics of travel writing and the representation of indigenous communities in SWANA regions. The book considers themes of land, colonialism, and pollution in an exploration of how research might become anticolonial and fully aligned with Indigenous knowledge and science.

Keywords: colonialism; environmentalism; indigenous; pollution; interdisciplinary.

I came to this book simply through curiosity, yet with no hyperbole I can say that it has utterly undermined my approach to my PhD thesis in the most exceptional way, prompting me to question everything from methodology to alignment. My discipline is English Literature, yet, given the title I wondered whether there might be overlaps with my research into colonialism in travel writing (and as Liboiron might write, spoiler: there are). Liboiron’s academic background crosses disciplines from humanities to science, creating the possibility for a truly interdisciplinary discussion. It is not so much that Liboiron directly brings in points or arguments from other disciplines, but more that this background of diverse ways of reading, learning, and approaching academic thinking has, of course, informed the production of this book and their current scientific research.

That research is on marine plastic pollution at the CLEAR labⁱ in Newfoundland, Canada and it underpins the book’s central tenet, which is how scientific research practices can become actively anticolonial and intentionally align themselves with Indigenous science and knowledge. Drawing in work by a wide community of researchers, including Edward Said, Sara Ahmed, Eve Tuck, and Anguksuar, Liboiron frames a reminder for the reader that colonialism is (still) about land/Land.ⁱⁱ They point out that dominant theories of pollution often assume a violent right to indigenous Land,

ⁱ “Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR) is a collective of researchers into marine science from different disciplines. On the website homepage they state that it is: “a feminist, anti-colonial, marine science laboratory, which means our methods foreground values of humility, equity, and good land relations. We’re working to do science differently.” The community is made up from researchers at all points in their careers, from high school interns through to professors (CLEAR, 2022).

ⁱⁱ Land (capitalised) is differentiated from land (uncapitalised) as having a societal, spiritual and environmental relation to the indigenous community referenced. Although Liboiron has expressed discomfort with the use of capitalisation they admitted that it was for now the most effective way to highlight that difference until a more nuanced approach can be found (Liboiron, 2022).

even when the goals are intended to be beneficial. Terms such as “dominant” and “good relations” are suggested in place of ‘Western’ and ‘ethics’, to decentralise and destabilise terms that have become routine in academic writing. By doing so, Liboiron is suggesting a process of researching and doing science that *stands with* indigenous communities and acknowledges and resists dominant power relations. They raise our need to recognise that taking on “Indigenous survivance and resurgence” words such as ‘decolonisation’, is colonial (Liboiron, 2021a, p.26).

The book is structured with a substantial introduction and three chapters that centralise around the main research questions: ‘Land, Nature, Resource, Property’; ‘Scale, Harm, Violence, Land’; and ‘An Anticolonial Pollution Science’. The final chapter contains a short conclusion that actively leads the reader into the bibliography, with an invitation to use the ideas and thoughts within the book to make space for good relations. If a reader might be tempted to bypass the acknowledgements section, then be aware that the context and the methodological approaches are laid out from the earliest lines of this book. Opening with Land acknowledgements for the territories on which the book was written and the research conducted, the first footnotes appear here, pointing out that the Land acknowledgement was written *collectively*, with leaders of Indigenous governing bodies. This lucidity about where research and knowledge has been collaboratively produced, or where it stands on others’ shoulders, is a constant throughout the book, both in the footnotes and in the main text. These footnotes, under Liboiron’s pen, are given a creative life that impacts deeply on how we read and how we engage with the text and methodologies. They are a place of conversation, with other authors and with the reader, a place of humour and explication, and a space where obligations are acknowledged and shared.

This method of using footnotes as an entirely dynamic space which operates *alongside* the main text creates a very different experience for the reader. Paratextual material has often been relegated to the side-lines by academia, with footnotes limited to being a place of reference points for citations. Watson (2015, p.55) suggests that they have also served as a “surreptitious form of textual imperialism”. Footnotes specifically have been used for the relegation of Indigenous theory, viewed as a gendered space, and operated as a site of authorial expertise and authority on foreign places and people (particularly in travel writing). In general, they have been “subordinate to the main text” (Genette 1987 cited in Watson, 2015, p.55). Liboiron, however, treats them as “a place of nuance and politics, where the protocols of gratitude and recognition play out” (Liboiron, 2021a, p.1). They even directly engage with, and thank, the reader with a direct and charming “Hello, Reader!” (Liboiron, 2021a, p1), not just to the unknown (probably white, perhaps settler) reader, but also specifically, young, indigenous readers (Liboiron, p.1). Zerby (2002) considered that footnotes had the potential to be ‘humanistic’ and Liboiron takes this into a further realm of conversation, obligations, community, and specificity.

If perhaps I had to reread paragraphs in the main text because I had disappeared down a rabbit hole in the footnotes, then it only served to enhance my reading and learning experience. When interviewed about using unglossed language in translations of Arabic texts, Layla AlAmmar (2022) asked: “Why don’t you come to us? A little bit”.ⁱⁱⁱ Reading a book requires active learning, or ‘stretching’ (Nielson, in AlAmmar 2022), and I heartily agree that a reader should do some of the hard work, particularly in an anticolonial context. Liboiron explores what it is to research in a way that is not unidirectional and that is not *extractive*, discussing how we can adjust the way we read and therefore move towards good relations.^{iv} They share their own experience of what this might look like, and one of the glorious things about this book is that so much within it can inspire reflexivity across and into other disciplines. Liboiron discusses where dominant science and dominant academia intersect with indigenous knowledge and science, but this is a conversation that does not have to be limited to science. Liboiron is unambiguous in their statement that the book might not ‘travel well’ and that elements of the contents may speak specifically of the Land where they were produced. This reminder of specificity is necessary and useful, however, for me—with the exception of some of the science data which was interesting but not directly relevant for travel writing research—this entire book travelled.

As a researcher concerned with the representation of indigenous communities in books, this text gave me the opportunity to reflect on my own dominant thought patterns and approaches to good relations. It turns out that they have not been so good, and my practice is extractive and ‘creepy’ (Liboiron, 2021a). As a researcher and teacher, I have perpetuated potentially harmful relations and practices, all whilst believing it to be both academically acceptable, and beneficial in the long run. Stepping outside of my discipline and listening to the ideas and methodologies in Liboiron’s book has pulled me up short but also given me tools to move forward as part of the community. For researchers everywhere, whether the topic of plastic pollution is immediately relevant to their research or not, discussions of colonialism, where power lies and how we enact it, will be. Liboiron has created a text from a place of specificity that reaches far beyond discipline and place.

ⁱⁱⁱ Full comment by Layla AlAmmar: “Why don’t you come to us? A little bit. And maybe going to google something might spark other books that you might read. It might be a portal for you coming closer rather than us always domesticating and making it easier for you” (AlAmmar 2022). Liboiron also uses unglossed terms written in Michif (Liboiron, 2021a).

^{iv} In their blog post about the #Collaborary project, Liboiron suggests that we start reading in a *reciprocal* way, viewing the texts “not as a site to mine for goods or away to achieve a list of accomplishments, but as a gift, an event, a body of work, and entities with their own terms” Liboiron, (2021b).

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