

CONCLUSION: WHY TOXIC HERITAGE MATTERS

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The central premise of this collection is that exploring toxic heritage as both a material phenomenon and a concept is a critical part of grappling with the damage humans have caused to the planet. In order to address this damage, we need a shared understanding of the material realities of the world, and that requires embracing environmental harm as a central heritage of modern human history (Gan et al. 2017; Garcia & Bauzà 2021; Fiske 2020; McNeill and Engelke 2014). It means naming historical conditions that brought us to this present – extractivism, carbon-based economies, environmental racism, settler-colonialism, and ongoing geo-political exploitation (Liboiron 2021; Moore 2017; Pulido 2017). It also requires paying attention to the politics of toxic heritage and the ways it traces the faultlines of social inequalities and other exercises of power. These are central issues for critical heritage studies, as other volumes in this series demonstrate, and this collection locates toxicity and environmental harm squarely in that critical heritage conversation. While heritage is historically founded with imperialism and settler colonialism (Bennett et al. 2017), critical perspectives have developed to reconfigure heritage as a tool for constructing a just future (Turunen 2020). This collection addresses a key component of any just future, namely making visible the harms of unjust, exploitative practices for people and the planet and framing them as a central part of modern human heritage.

This idea that the toxic pollution of the planet is largely invisible and that we are habituated to it experientially and ideologically creates a framework for considering the idea of toxic heritage, particularly through a critical heritage lens which is at its heart about memory and politics. Environmental justice scholars (e.g. Bullard 1993, 1994, 2018; Davies 2022; Liboiron 2021; Pulido 2015; Sze 2018) have long argued that the suppression of knowledge of toxic contamination is a political exercise. Imperceptibility is a form of privilege, and habituation is a strategy of survivance.

Consequently, the work of remembering, commemorating, and publicly surfacing these hidden toxic histories is a potent form not merely of environmental advocacy but of political resistance. Toxic heritage stands, therefore, as a counternarrative to the denial and amnesia that often serve corporate and state interests, just as it has the potential to activate citizen awareness and advocacy. The stories of pollution, contamination, and their effects on people's health and livelihoods are particularly compelling when they engage those affected populations in participatory heritage strategies. For example, authors in this volume document the efficacy of toxic tours (Baptista), community-based design (Valderrama), citizen science (Filippelli), virtual storytelling through Climate Museum UK (McKenzie), and public humanities projects (Sevcenko). These interventions are collectively a response to what Amelia Fiske has called our "chemically saturated present" and part of "a reconfiguration of toxicity – as a socio-material process, epistemic concept, and embodied experience – in order to work towards political and environmental, as well as epistemological, justice" (Fiske 2020, 1).

The authors in this collection approach the topic from a variety of disciplinary perspectives including history, archaeology, geography, and artistic practice. Across the chapters, case studies, and visual essays, they investigate a wide array of sites from six continents and toxic materials including chemicals, ocean plastics, e-waste, building materials, sewage, radioactive materials, mortuary waste, heavy metals, and mine tailings. The contexts are widely divergent as well – agricultural plantations, mining sites, factories, dry cleaners, nuclear plants and storage facilities, petrochemical plants, public housing, museum collections, household trash, dumps, military sites, underwater shipwrecks, and battlefields. The authors reveal the complex and creative engagements with these toxic legacies, as well as the structures and processes complicit in how they are managed and remembered.

As diverse as the particular materials and circumstances are, the collection is also unified in its centering of the people impacted by the environmental harms. It highlights the urgency and ubiquity of toxicity that is threatening the planet's livability. The weight of the findings also exposes the complex intersections of toxicity with memory practices in formal and informal heritage settings. The contributions comprise both an examination of the politics of toxicity and an exposé of its extractive roots and often exploitative consequences.

The hope is that this collection does not merely advance contemporary scholarship on the emerging topic of toxic heritage, but that it spurs conversation among heritage professionals, affected communities, environmental scientists and advocates, and anyone else who is interested in creating change. Our premise is that thinking about places of environmental harm as a heritage will help engage public audiences in the complex history of environmental harm, its consequences today, and possibilities for a more just, sustainable future. To the extent that heritage is the stories we tell ourselves about our past, naming these environmental harms is a potent way to register and even claim damage to the earth as our inheritance. David Lowenthal provocatively asserted that "History is for all, heritage for us alone

Heritage passes on exclusive myths of origin and endurance, endowing us alone with prestige and purpose.” (Lowenthal 1998: 8). These stories from around the globe attest to a collective origin story for our modern world. Lowenthal’s ostensible inclusionary premise of heritage “for us” demands that we reckon not only with a planetary human heritage, but that we understand the very biome is an integral part of the “we” in the stories we tell about ourselves. This notion of toxic heritage compels us to recognise the cumulative historical burden and ongoing everyday ecocide around us.

The collected work in this volume demonstrates that heritage need not be an authorising practice, reinforcing dominant narratives, and legitimising status quo power dynamics. Several of the contributors here explore ways that heritage allows critical engagement with pasts that leave toxic legacies. Schofield and Pocock explore how engaging in archaeological research can support communities to see the toxic harms of plastic as a legacy which can be challenged. Rankin et al. discuss how the authorising framework of heritage management can surface toxic harms to indigenous communities which have been hidden through centre/periphery dynamics of isolation. Fiske uses both tours and graphic narrative techniques more commonly associated with valourising heritage to reveal harmful pasts in the Ecuadorian Amazon, and Baptista’s toxic tours similarly expose the intersections of unjust practice that have created Newark’s sacrifice zone. Engaging with toxic materials as heritage challenges the relationship between history and heritage when, as many of this volume’s contributions attest, the past is intentionally deployed in the present to highlight environmental injustice and to advocate for more equitable futures.

Just as the heritage framing for environmental harm allows us to understand the human stories of environmental harm, the toxic framing of the heritage described here also brings strength to the discipline. Many of the contributors describe circumstances where heritage practice is assumed to be valourising. To name something as heritage is to select it for continuity. If heritage is a gift from the past to the future, toxic heritage is the unwanted gift (May 2020). We understand practices of decontamination, reclamation, and the forgettings explored in this volume to be as central to heritage as the more commonly discussed designation, conservation, valourisation, and remembrance. They are linked. Whether toxic materials are treated as heritage, or that status is resisted, the practices of heritage often contribute to narratives of progress, purity, and productivity that exacerbate the material harms of these sites and perpetuate the impact on communities.

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