

# TOXIC HERITAGE: AN INTRODUCTION

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## Premise and Genesis

This collection represents a cross-disciplinary conversation about the intersection of heritage as a field of discourse and practice, and toxicity as a material and social reality. It brings together authors from varied disciplinary perspectives and methodologies to explore toxic heritage as both a material phenomenon and a concept. In case studies, visual essays, and substantive chapters, scholars draw on research around the world to provide an in-depth examination of toxic heritage as a global issue. Our definition of toxic heritage has two components. First, it includes the history of the processes and substances (toxins and toxicants) that create or threaten physical harm to environments and the life supported within them (Liboiron 2017). Second, it includes the intersections of that history of harm with both formal heritage institutions and informal memory practices. This focus on the materiality of toxic substances stands in contrast to other definitions that also include social and political toxicity and other forms of “dark heritage” (Wollentz et al. 2020: 299), although the physical and metaphorical are often entangled. The attention to memory practices, processes of heritagisation, lived experiences, and the ways in which interpretations of past environmental harm are entangled with fields of power center this work within critical heritage studies.

The genesis of this volume is the confluence of two research projects. For May, the work was part of the Heritage Futures project (Harrison et al. 2020), particularly her contributions to the essay “Toxic Heritage: Uncertain and Unsafe” (Wollentz, May, Holtorf, and Högberg 2020), which was, in turn, an extension of her longstanding investigation of industrial heritage. For Kryder-Reid, the catalyst was participating in the Climates of Inequality project (see Ševčenko, this volume) and her community-based, collaborative research on the pollution of Indianapolis waterways and its impact

on marginalized communities. Her previous research on stakeholder-defined values of heritage (Kryder-Reid et al. 2018), led to questions about how sites of environmental harm are treated as heritage and how heritage sites attend to their histories of environmental harm. May and Kryder-Reid (hereafter “we”) connected to develop a session on toxic heritage at the 2020 London Association of Critical Heritage Studies (ACHS) meetings. In spite of the need to switch to a virtual session due to the pandemic, the conversation was substantive, and we were encouraged to reach out to other contributors for a publication. It quickly became clear that scholars from a variety of disciplinary, geographic, cultural, and institutional perspectives were working on the topic, but not necessarily in conversation with each other.

As the responses to our call for papers came in, we found them both affirming and devastating. The intersections and frictions among the contributions raised important issues and illuminated emerging lines of inquiry into toxic heritage. Clearly, this was an important, even urgent, topic. At the same time, reckoning with the pervasiveness and insidiousness of the manifestations of harm explored by the authors was at times overwhelming. The illnesses, exposure to noxious substances, and living conditions amidst waste were heartrending. In this global snapshot, the lines of privilege are starkly drawn by contrasting exposomes, and yet no one is spared the consequences of human impact on our planet. The shadow of toxic heritage now extends in a quite material sense across every continent and community.

The other context for the genesis of this volume is the mounting evidence for the scope and scale of our intersecting environmental crises – climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. As many of the contributions attest, the increasing urgency of these crises is often met with persistent complacency, deliberate indifference, denial, and even paralysis at individual, community, and governmental levels. The volume seeks to respond to both the planetary emergency and the inertia by examining the place and role of heritage in meeting the existential crises of our era. It asks, what is the role of critical heritage studies in probing the politics of toxic heritage and illuminating the fields of power in which these sites operate? In this sense, the volume is activist scholarship that seeks not just to understand, but also to spark conversation and spur change.

## Themes

The project is international in scope and interdisciplinary in its approach to the cumulative environmental burdens of modern human history. The combined weight of the studies offers a chilling view of the scope and scale of the toxicity and the unevenness of its impacts across lines of social inequality in what has been described as the “patchy Anthropocene” (Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt 2019). The consideration of toxic heritage as a planetary phenomenon highlights the scale and complexity of issues that transcend the typical national boundaries and chronologies of heritage. Instead, toxic heritage must consider eco-centric narratives and account for “the great acceleration” of the post-WWII years (McNeill and Engelke 2016).

This range of perspectives also offers insight into the particular manifestations of toxic heritage in diverse materialities and cultural contexts. It therefore raises interesting questions about the similarities and differences of transnational trends such as deindustrialization, waste management, and the introduction of synthetic chemicals, as they are negotiated in particular fields of power and experienced by people in unique cultural contexts.

Another theme running through the volume is the exploration of what it means to bring the ideas of toxicity and heritage together and how it advances thinking about the relationships of the present to the past and to the future of a damaged world. Authors draw on various intellectual traditions such as Michel Foucault's idea of biopolitics, Ron Nixon's (2011) work on slow violence, and Haraway and Tsing's work on other-than-humans and multi-species alliances, to locate the intersections of toxicity and heritage. The result is an array of ways to bridge the gap that typically exists between thinking about places as toxic and thinking about them as heritage. Bringing the concepts together helps make connections across scales of impact (cells, bodies, families, communities, ecosystems, nations, oceans, planet) and the parallel scales of entangled social and economic relations. It explores the specific ways that legacies of toxicity, contamination, and pollution intersect with the formal and informal heritage practices in different cultural contexts. Conversely, it tackles the resistance to, and even rejection of, the idea that our human toxic legacy can be understood as heritage (Holtorf; Wateau et al., this volume).

Another contribution of the collection is that it situates toxic heritage squarely in political and social arenas. In Palestine waste is wielded as an instrument of political oppression (Stamatopoulou-Robbins). Papoli-Yazdi shows that the status of both waste and heritage are conditioned by the power that changes the every day to the toxic in Tehran. Evia et al. explain how the bioaccumulation of pesticides and nutrients in soils not only affects animal, human, and ecosystem health but has had an impact on the intangible heritage of traditional dairy farming practices and the struggle for a sense of place and value of their lifeways. As McIvor notes, "The industrial past continues to linger on in the present in polluted soil, rivers, dirty buildings and in the bodies and memories of Glasgow's people." In Cusack-McVeigh's examination of contaminated museum collections, we see the effects on living communities and their social relations with their ancestors as the harms of colonialism are perpetuated even amidst efforts to repatriate toxic museum collections. Schofield and Pocock show how the materiality of plastic offers a socially useful metaphor that connects pasts with futures. Both McKenzie and Valderrama offer their experience of using the structures of heritage to provide a focus for action.

Central to this grappling with the impacts and harms of toxic heritage is a recognition of the disparate effects across lines of social inequalities. The downstream effects across geopolitical boundaries, as e-waste recycling contaminates communities and bodies in Ghana (Little and Akese) and across generations, as with WWI chemical weapons contamination (Hubé and Bausinger) or gold mining in California (Hoskins). They highlight the impacts on the meaning and significance

of place and land, particularly impacts on Indigenous communities (Rankin et al., Joyce). These framings of toxic heritage also center communities not just as populations with adverse health effects but as communities with agency who wield heritagisation as a tool for advocacy and environmental justice, as in the toxic tours described by Baptista and Fiske and Fischer, Filippelli's connection between heritage and activism surrounding lead contamination citizen-science, and Benussi's account of people caring for their families' graves in the shadow of Chernobyl.

A theme, or perhaps tension, running through the volume is the relationship between history and heritage. This was also something we considered when putting the volume together. Many of our contributors come from disciplines focussed on researching the past – establishing what happened. This volume builds on environmental humanities exploration of toxicity (e.g. Müller and Nielsen 2023; Sarathy, Hamilton, and Brodie 2018) with a particular focus on how we engage with those pasts today – hence the sections structured around framing, politics, activism, narrative, and interventions. All of these are contemporary practices that engage with toxic pasts. How do histories of environmental damage resonate with the proud narratives of industrial heritage (e.g. Shackle, Hannis and Sullivan, Weinberg and Figueroa) or the economically powerful roles of local industry (Lou, Pearson and Renfrew, Gardner, Muniz)? Where in the valorized narratives of war memory, national pride, and sacrifice is there space for accounting for enduring ecological impacts (e.g. Carter et al., Hubé and Bausinger)? Conversely, how, in contexts that struggle against negative stereotypes and marginalization, such as the public housing projects investigated by Elizabeth Browning and the copper industry heritage in de-industrialized Swansea explored by May, do histories of heavy metal contamination connect with public memory? These conflicts are particularly challenging when the perpetrators are not simply a profit-driven, extractivist corporation, but include the role of workers who applied the chemicals as part of their standard practice, as with agrottoxins (Evia et al.). In the case of retail dry cleaning (Kryder-Reid et al.), the complicity extends throughout the supply chain from manufacturer to consumer.

## Organization and Format

The volume is organized into sections exploring five themes:

- 1 “Framing toxicity” explores fundamental issues of conceptualizing environmental harm as heritage including considerations of the nature of toxicity and its implications for understanding human heritage in the Anthropocene.
- 2 “The politics of toxic heritage” considers the role of policy, stakeholders, politics, and fields of power in which the sites and stakeholders operate.
- 3 “Affected communities, activism, and agency” focuses on the impact of environmental harm on communities and the ways in which people, as biological citizens, workers, community activists, and environmental justice advocates, have responded.

- 4 “Narratives of toxic heritage” examines the narratives and discourse practices around toxic legacies.
- 5 “Approaches and Interventions” highlights the ways in which individuals, organizations, and industries operate in the creation and enduring consequences of toxicity, including reflections on the role of heritage studies and organizations in the construction of toxic heritage.

Within this thematic organization, the book includes three formats of contributions – chapters, case studies, and visual essays – that each have distinct purposes. Chapters present substantive research on a variety of toxic heritage materials and contexts from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Case studies focus on a specific set of empirical data that exemplify issues or point to interventions. These analytical case studies help to connect the concepts of toxic heritage to practical applications, advocacy, and activism. Visual essays of images with extended captions offer an alternative format of scholarly communication that gives authors an opportunity to address the visual logic of sites, explore the aesthetics of toxic heritage, and reflect on the meaning of visualization (and invisibility) of toxic heritage. The visual essays also address important emerging strategies to democratize data, such as a graphic essay and a citizen science-generated digital platform. In addition to the chapters, case studies, and visual essays, and to this introduction and Alice Mah’s foreword (xix–xxi), we offer section introductions as a “connective tissue” to frame questions and integrate the diverse contributions in each section.

We thank the contributors for sharing their important and timely research and for advancing the exploration of the work of heritage in the damaged world.

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