

SECTION 3

INTRODUCTION: AFFECTED COMMUNITIES, ACTIVISM, AND AGENCY

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This section foregrounds the impact of environmental harm on communities and the ways in which people, as biological citizens, community activists, and environmental justice frontline workers, have responded. A central premise of this work is that toxic materials are not only unevenly distributed, but unevenly perceived. For example, industries may use their privilege to sanitise places with dangerous legacies. Communities may resist or become habituated to risks that are unavoidable and unwanted legacies that must simply be endured (Wateau et al., Browning). The community-centred studies highlight the agency of people to advocate for their rights and to be advocates for their communities in the face of systemic and structural forces. They may wield heritage as a tool for self-determination and advocacy (Fiske) and navigate toxic heritage as it becomes a bargaining chip between communities and developers negotiating the future of contaminated places (Lou).

Heritage as a form of cultural practice is inherently concerned with community engagement and participation. An important issue that toxic heritage brings to the fore is the fact that the management of toxic materials often excludes members of the public from sites and landscapes. As Cusack-McVeigh argues in the case of Indigenous objects treated with arsenic in museum collections, it is not merely the object that is poisoned, but the relationships with ancestors and spiritual integrity of the community that are endangered. Evia et al. wrestle with the tensions of reckoning with the damage of past practices when that same history is also the legacy of family, work, lifeways, etc. This section also raises important issues about the conditions and constraints of engaging with toxic materials as heritage and how that differs from other types of heritage. Toxic heritage can be something to be remediated, faced (Evia et al.), avoided (Wateau et al.), or indeed compensated

(Lou) depending on the context. For example, there are ethical concerns to navigate and sensitivities to the experiences of affected communities that may be impacted by gentrification and displacement, even as the sources of contamination are removed (Browning), as well as the dangers of stigmatizing contaminated communities (Evia et al.). Fiske explores, for example, how tourism can engage with toxic heritage without valorising or sensationalising it.

These contributions raise questions about how we identify and define affected communities as the harm from toxic materials crosses borders and transgresses temporal boundaries. It also recognizes the importance of identity and perception, demonstrating that not all those harmed feel part of the same community. The multiscale impacts of toxicity experienced by communities also raise questions about how harms are experienced in the slow violence of long-term exposures – premature death, illness from birth, unexplained chronic illness, and other consequences of bioaccumulation – and the ways those harms are manifested in oral histories, private collections, and other forms of memory practices that circulate outside of mainstream channels.