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“This is a book about relations”: Pollution is Colonialism by Max Liboiron

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“This is a book about relations”: Pollution is Colonialism by Max Liboiron

Cover Page Footnote

I acknowledge the Syilx (Okanagan) People as the traditional custodians of the land on which I live and work. This book review was written upon their unceded ancestral homelands. I would also like to thank the invaluable encouragement and advice of my supervisor, Professor Astrida Neimanis.

"This is a book about relations": *Pollution is Colonialism* by Max Liboiron.

***Pollution is Colonialism* by MAX LIBOIRON.** Duke University Press 2021 \$33.95

Reviewed by **THOMAS LETCHER-NICHOLLS.**

Pollution is Colonialism is an important, assured, and generous book that will offer so much to so many. In the book, Max Liboiron (Red River Métis/Michif) (they/them) has, to borrow their words, "built a book" that is essential reading for scholars, students, and anyone who is interested in both interdisciplinary work and sustainability. "Built" here is a verb of generosity and gratitude, and it appropriately gives expression to this book as an enduring, collective achievement made of hard work. Liboiron is an Associate Professor in Geography at Memorial University and founder of the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR). They have built a book that is certainly interdisciplinary, but in the most inclusive and expansive sense of the word. The book draws on and intervenes in many disciplines, including, but not limited to, environmental sciences; discard studies; geography; politics; feminist Science and Technology Studies (STS). And it is deeply invested in exploring ways of seeing and knowing that imagine what Liboiron calls a "*particular otherwise*" (20). But it also pushes interdisciplinarity beyond research to include a community of family members, civic groups, and nonhuman actors. This is a book about community; the obligations that we have for one another; and our obligations and relations to Land, which in its proper, capitalised name refers to all those things visible (rocks, trees, water) and invisible (spirit, events, memories) that make up a place in Indigenous cosmology. Land, for Liboiron, is "the unique entity that is the combined living spirit of plants, animals, air, water, humans, histories, and events recognised by many Indigenous communities"; however, "land" (lowercase) is "the concept from a colonial worldview whereby landscapes are common, universal, and everywhere, even with great variation" (7n19). This is a book about colonialism and genocide, but also survival and life. Above all, as Liboiron says, it is a book "about relations" (ix).

Pollution is Colonialism will also appeal to a non-academic audience that is interested in the entanglements of science, politics, and social justice. In their footnotes, Liboiron extends invitations to many different readers. This is a book for fellow members of Indigenous communities; it is for activists and researchers; it is for "fellow nerds" and "super-nerds" of science (93). Liboiron has also appeared in *Teen Vogue*, podcasts, and radio (Liboiron "How Plastic"; "When Fish are Kin"). Their work is accessible and important for a wider audience.

"My goal is to do science differently," writes Liboiron early in the text (ix). *Pollution is Colonialism* situates current, "dominant" scientific research methodologies within the framework of colonial land relations, that is, the continuing colonial assumption of access to Indigenous land. Pollution should also be understood within this context as a form of violence. But the book also contends that this need not be the case. Liboiron shows that there are ways of doing science and understanding pollution otherwise through good Land relations. The book is built from three main chapters: "Land, Nature, Resource, Property," "Scale, Harm, Violence, Land," and "An Anticolonial Pollution Science." But equally important are the "Acknowledgements" and "Introduction" sections, along with the "Bibliography" and "Index" (essentially, the whole book is rigorous, illuminating, and often funny). As an interdisciplinary text, the book's bibliography, which actively aims for inclusive

representations, will offer any reader fascinating threads to follow in many areas of interest from sciences to politics.

This book will change the way you think about reading and writing. Liboiron's footnotes are sites of generosity, kindness and sometimes frustration. Sometimes they will have you moving through the text in a non-linear way. Liboiron makes what they call the "imperfect methodological decision ... to identify all authors the way they identify themselves" because of the way Indigenous scholars are usually introduced with their nation/affiliation while white or settler scholars usually go unmarked. "Not cool" (3n10). When I (white/settler) came to write this review, I wondered how to do it—how would I narrow my focus? What would be included and excluded? Liboiron's book will make you think carefully about such things, and push you to reflect on the way you read and cite work. Liboiron cites Joe Dumit's essay "How I Read" as a riposte to the "dude-core practice of tearing texts apart" (31n 124). Liboiron writes:

I often—usually—read extractively, looking for bits I can use. I had been reading in a Resource relation that is unidirectional, assessing texts solely for my own goals and not approaching them as bodies of work, events, gifts, teachers, letters, or any number of other ways that would make unidirectional, extractive relations seem rude and out of place. (35)

Liboiron also shows that the current popular trend for "Indigenous Knowledge" can be extractive: "[t]he legacy of dominant and imperial science eating up and getting fat off of local and Indigenous knowledge is fashionable again today in the grant-supported drive for Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), Traditional Knowledge (TK), and Indigenous Knowledge (IK)" (53n 46). In short, *Pollution is Colonialism* had me reflecting on many of the ways that I go about reading/writing/citing, and it should be required reading for all students (and many beyond that).

The book begins with an "Acknowledgements" section that is a Land acknowledgement. The text was written on the ancestral homeland of the Beothuk, while Liboiron and CLEAR's research is done in Newfoundland, the ancestral homelands of the Mi'kmaq and Beothuk, and Labrador, the ancestral homelands of the Inuit of Nunatsiavut and NunatuKavut and the Innu of Nitassinan (vii). This section is also an introduction where Liboiron acknowledges "where my knowledge comes from, to whom I am accountable, and how I was built" (vii). For students and more experienced researchers alike, this section models an ethics of gratitude, recognition, and generosity. It will also be essential for anyone interested in the ethics and politics of Land Acknowledgement.

The "Introduction" posits the idea that "methodology is a way of being in the world" (1). As described above, Liboiron contends that dominant scientific methods today (even when used with good intentions) reproduce colonial land relations. But this could be otherwise; Liboiron writes that "methodologies...are a key site in which to enact good relations (sometimes called ethics)" (7). This discussion will have scholars and students alike re-thinking truisms and assumptions about research methods, as Liboiron shows that much research relies on extractive assumptions of access to Indigenous land. For example, students and researchers that are thinking of doing "field-work" will be moved by Liboiron's argument that the terms "*fieldwork* or *field site*...imply an outside, a Natural wilderness, a

terra nullius ready for scientific discovery by settler academics" (68n101). In the course of the rest of the book, however, Liboiron offers a model for doing research otherwise.

In chapter one, "Land, Nature, Resource, Property," we begin to unravel our typical understandings of those terms. Liboiron shows us that these terms are undergirded by the conceptual framework of "Resource relations," a core part of colonial ideology that justifies the logics of extraction and control of land. As Liboiron shows, "threshold theory" underpins much dominant science; this theory posits that a certain amount of contamination is justifiable (even desirable) in order to make use of land. These colonial land relations also ensure that this control extends into the future (36). For interdisciplinary scholars, this chapter will also be instructive because it asks us to think about the relations that make up our own disciplines and ways of thinking (79). What might be colonial in our approach to our research? How might we be assuming access to L/land or ideas that do not belong to us?

Chapter two, "Scale, Harm, Violence, Land," focuses on relations surrounding the violence that is wrought on Land. This chapter will be especially instructive for those whose focus is activism and engagement. The chapter asks us to step back from a focus on pollution as "harm," which is understood as the question of "how much" plastic or chemical might sneak into our bodies. Instead, Liboiron asks us to focus on the idea of "how" or "why," which is related to *violence*. Colonial land relations justify the violence of systems that allow pollution to be released into the world. Alongside this analysis, there are wrenching footnotes about genocide (107n103, 107n104). Liboiron draws on the work of Michelle Murphy to explore the concept of *afterlife*, which is "the condition of being already co-constituted by material entanglements . . . and also the condition of being open to ongoing becoming" (89). Referring to the well-known photographs of albatross carcasses containing and surrounded by plastic, Liboiron pushes back against the way that these images are mobilised as symbols of "peril and doom" (106). They explain that scientific research shows that albatross in fact "do not tend to die from ingesting those plastics" (104). As a species, albatross simply have a high mortality rate among their young. Ingesting plastic probably has health consequences for the albatross, but it is not usually the cause of death (105). This does not mean that we can justify or ignore plastic pollution, but that albatross (who Liboiron describes as "effing stars") demonstrate "survival and success" despite plastic pollution. Albatross are thus "all about Murphy's afterlife" – life persevering with and beyond contamination (106). Moreover, says Liboiron, to use albatross as symbols of "peril and doom" is another form of bad relations: it is "rude," by which they mean that it "erases the considerable agency of albatross" (106n101). "Please, stop. Thank you" (106).

Readers will leave this section thinking about plastics differently in terms of *scale*, which "is not about relative size . . . [but] about what relationships matter within a particular context" (84). Building on the analysis of "threshold theory," Liboiron shows that *any* level of pollution or contamination (even if, in theory, one is not sick) is unacceptable (87). What matters is not so much whether we choose to consume something from a plastic bottle with BPA, or fish that is contaminated: this is almost unavoidable, and in the case of cultural food systems that rely on fish, very important. What does matter is that this contamination is allowed to happen in the first place at the level of industrial plastic production. When we think about *scale* (the relations that matter) and *specificity* (what is happening right here, in our neck of the woods), we realize that we need to address the violence of full-scale plastic production, and the colonial land relations that allow contamination to occur—only then can our L/land relations be otherwise.

Liboiron positions the third section of the book, “An Anticolonial Pollution Science,” as that which will be most useful for a “variety of contexts that do not focus on either pollution or the natural sciences”—even though it is my hope here that I have shown how this is true of the whole book (7). This third section explores the anticolonial science of CLEAR through its methodology. “[A]nticolonial methods in science,” says Liboiron, “are characterised by how they do not reproduce settler and colonial entitlement to Land and Indigenous cultures, concepts, knowledges (including Traditional Knowledge), and lifeworlds” (27). Here Liboiron delves into the concept of “obligation.” According to Liboiron, the *how* of doing anticolonial science is not a process, but rather a form of obligation to one’s relations. In other words, when you do science, you have obligations to your relations: this means that every act needs to be guided by your principles and values. To do this, CLEAR uses protocols, such as not using earphones when dissecting fish because they are L/land and “it’s rude to tune out your relations”—just as it is rude to elide the agency of albatross and treat them as a Resource (122). Importantly, moreover, our obligations and relations are always shaped by the notion of “specificity.” Liboiron says that our obligations rely on “a deep specificity based in place and in the relations to which we are accountable” (138). Different places, relations and contexts will dictate different obligations and methods. This is not a form of relativism: rather, it is an attentive connection to our L/land relation. I left this section thinking: how can I do work that attends to the specificity of the place where I work and the relations that follow?

For interdisciplinary scholars and students (as well as those motivated to do anticolonial research), the discussion of the notion of “compromise” will be especially interesting (134). Liboiron writes that compromise recognizes that “we are always caught up in the contradictions, injustices, and structures that already exist, that we have already identified as violent and in need of change” (134). Compromise engenders obligations to “incommensurability,” by which Liboiron means things that “do not share a common ground for judgement or comparison” (136). In their introduction, Liboiron wrote that one of their “primary struggles in writing this text is how it obliges me to different worlds and readers simultaneously” and this means that “[t]here are moments [in the text] that might appear contradictory, at odds, or mutually exclusive because they are” (33). Liboiron’s discussion of “compromise” will be helpful for anyone thinking about how to navigate and negotiate differing epistemologies, cosmologies, and value systems; and it will be affirming for anyone looking to be a force for good in their field.

Pollution is Colonialism closes by considering how “readers [might] relate to this text and its ideas, once we leave the shared page” (155). Throughout the text, Liboiron is thinking about their relations and obligations to their readers. I wrote towards the beginning of this review that I was concerned about reading as “Resource”; and on the final page Liboiron writes that they hope that “the book is not used as a Resource” (156). Rather, the real hope is that *Pollution is Colonialism* might “generalize” out in an instructive way for other disciplines, all with their own relations and obligations (156). *Pollution is Colonialism* is, then, (among many other things) a gift; a model for doing science otherwise; a manual of methodology, which is also “a way of being in the world” (1n1); and a “dessert” (35, 37). Some of my most memorable moments as a student have been those when my world is changed by a revelatory work. *Pollution is Colonialism* is one of those texts.

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