

FOREWORD

Reckoning with toxic heritage is an urgent collective task. It is also unsettling work. It requires confronting painful truths about the roots of toxic injustice with courage, honesty, and humility. This collection takes up this task, delving into questions of legacy and memory in the context of pervasive toxic harm to multiple species and environments. The concept of toxic heritage is framed in this collection as heritage relating to the “materiality of toxic substances” (Kryder-Reid and May), exploring tensions between preservation and destruction in inherited material realities. Bringing together perspectives from critical heritage studies and interdisciplinary studies of environmental toxicity, the contributions demonstrate how the roots of toxic injustice stem from the extractive and dispossessing logics of capitalism and colonialism, yet how they also provoke forms of resistance.

When I first heard the term “toxic heritage,” I must admit that it made me uneasy. In my research on deindustrialized and polluted communities, I have always thought about toxicity in a negative light, as pernicious harm which must be stopped. While attentive to the complexities of lived experience, my research takes a decisively anti-toxic stance. Thus, it was difficult to accept toxicity as part of heritage. However, as I have come to appreciate, engaging with toxic heritage in its myriad meanings opens possibilities for critical intervention and healing.

Few people want to own toxicity as a part of their heritage, especially if ownership implies accepting responsibility for toxic production and harms. But for people who experience illness or loss from toxic harms, the suppression of toxic histories represents a form of violence. Several years ago, when I was researching the declining chemical industry in Niagara Falls, a university friend from England moved to the nearby city of Hamilton in Canada for work. She associated Canada with “nature” and was dismayed to find that Hamilton was an old steel city. If she

had known that it was such a polluted industrial city, she confessed, she would have thought differently about moving there. She sent a photograph of herself next to Lake Erie to her friends, cropping out the steelworks in the background. At the time, I thought this was a strange thing to do. However, as several authors in this volume detail, the impulse to erase toxic histories is common, and it can have long-standing consequences for public memory and environmental health.

The undeniable material reality of toxic harm across the planet underscores the importance of recognising toxic heritage. According to scientists, toxic chemical pollution has recently crossed a “planetary boundary,” posing a risk to the stability of Earth systems and intersecting with the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, and a range of overlapping ecological problems (Persson et al. 2022). Toxic substances are found in bodies, places, and ecosystems, enmeshed in the fabric of life. Yet around the world, toxic hazards are disproportionately concentrated in racialized and marginalized communities (Pellow 2017). Kryder-Reid and May (in this volume) situate the unequal planetary impacts of toxic harm within the context of the “patchy Anthropocene” (Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt 2019). This idea adds nuance to the Anthropocene narrative, which many scholars have criticized for being too universalistic and human-centered (see Haraway 2015), and for suggesting that “all humans are implicated in and affected by colonialism, capitalism and industrialization in the same ways” (Whyte 2017: 259).

From extractive mining debris to military waste; contaminated industrial cities to toxic agricultural land; arsenic-laced Indigenous sacred objects to climate justice museum practices, this collection speaks to the planetary scale and scope of toxic heritage while acknowledging its deeply unequal effects. One of the most difficult challenges of acknowledging toxic heritage in many places is stigmatisation, which exacerbates social and environmental inequalities. Moreover, when histories of contamination come to the surface, new risks and responsibilities emerge. Places with newly revealed toxic legacies – sacred lands, public parks, rolling countryside – face the challenge of confronting the implications. In some cases, local responses to toxicity are to find ways of living with pollution and re-imagining their relationships with place. In other cases, residents, activists, and community organizations work together on collaborative interventions to reframe toxicity and waste in their struggles for environmental justice.

If recognition implies a kind of acceptance of material reality, then what are the political and ecological implications? What aspect of toxic heritage, if any, should be preserved, especially if the harmfulness endures? What should be done with toxic heritage? The beauty of this collection is that it addresses such profound questions, offering insights grounded in specific contexts, while resisting easy answers. The methodological thread that unites the array of contributions is a shared commitment to grapple with difficult toxic legacies, across different perspectives, cultures, and scales. From an ethical standpoint, the collection explores toxic heritage in a spirit of humility, with the aim of recovering from toxic harms and moving toward just

futures. It does not resolve the tensions between heritage and toxicity, but it does offer new ways of thinking about the entangled relationships between toxic pasts, presents, and futures.

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References

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