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Lands and Bodies: Disrupting Colonial Biases through Methodology

Pollution Is Colonialism

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Lands and Bodies: Disrupting Colonial Biases through Methodology

by Ellen Ahlness

Ellen Ahlness is a Race and Gender writer for *Education Maksad* and an Arctic Studies researcher. Her scholarship centers on examining Arctic Indigenous activism and political organization resulting from health and livelihood challenges presented by an increasingly warming Far North. Her current work has shifted to emphasize the impact of technologies on health—particularly across race and gender lines—in formal organizational settings. Her work can also be found in *Ecologia Politica*, *World History Connected*, and *Managing Multicultural Scandinavia*.

Book under Review: Liboiron, M. 2021. *Pollution Is Colonialism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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There are many things that disproportionately affect Indigenous populations across the globe: climate change, rising sea levels, and natural resource extraction in ancestral homelands are but a few of the many issues that are the focus of environmental justice scholarship. The recent COVID pandemic greatly impacted the economic, social, and health outcomes of American and European Indigenous populations (McLeod 2020). Data from the early pandemic revealed a concerning trend: even though a majority of the Western population greatly reduced their transportation and consumption, global pollution rates hardly changed (Tian et al. 2021). The people who bear the brunt of this continued pollution are Indigenous and colonized peoples globally.

This unjust reality is the focus of *Pollution is Colonialism*. The text challenges environmental discourses that propose populations have “rights” to consumption and disposal. Liboiron confronts the dominant assumption that the goal of environmental politics is to *mitigate*, rather than eliminate pollutive practices. In a world where environmental degradation so drastically affects ways of life, interrupts traditional livelihoods, and even threatens survival, how can we justify *any* amount of pollution as tolerable? How can any amount of harm be an acceptable loss? Liboiron argues that colonialism is a pragmatic and intellectual practice with entitlement at its core, fundamentally shaping the way we treat both land and knowledge. Divided into an introduction and three parts on methodology, colonialism, and pollution, each segment deals primarily (though never unilaterally) with these subjects in turn.

Part I, *Land, Nature, Resource, Property*, opens with the foundational premise of Liboiron’s work: environmental pollution is not only indicative of colonialism, but is a fundamental pillar of the colonial relationship to land (7). Liboiron argues that, rather than a natural

byproduct of consumption, pollution is an invention of colonialism (36). This reads reminiscent of Mead's argument that war is not a given result of human interaction, but an invention (2015). In both cases, the implication is clear: it is erroneous to blindly accept these large-scale harms as necessary, if undesired, byproducts of social development. Power dynamics are not a necessary byproduct of interactions, though the condition of entanglement—whether between men and women or humans and land—often imagines parties to be in conflict, rather than parts of a broader system. The latter view is in line with holism, which is well-articulated in Indigenous and Traditional Knowledges (ITK), articulating the connection between body, mind and emotion, and also the connection between humans, other life, and earth systems.

Part II, *Scale, Harm, Violence, Land*, demonstrates the linkages between anti-colonial land relations to reproductive justice, continuing in a long tradition of environmental justice and ecofeminism (Plumwood 1991). Parallels between bodies (human and otherwise) and land advance the argument of holism. Liboiron grapples with the way damage from adverse events, such as pollution, cause bodies and lands to become further entangled together. Just as the body is linked to mind and spirit, the land is made up of entanglements among water, soil, minerals, microscopic life forms, and more.

Finally, Part III, *An Anticolonial Pollution Science*, articulates how colonialism is directly, if not always intentionally, facilitated through dominant scientific research and knowledge dissemination. Liboiron acknowledges that challenging the status quo is neither an easy nor rapid process. Describing this resistance as *constant* and *painstaking*, Liboiron encourages readers to find hope in the ongoing practice of consistently and deliberately evaluating and selecting methodologies in their own work. Widespread efforts to do so may lead to less universalized, less whitewashed, and less differentiated relationships between people and land (78-80).

A significant portion of the book is dedicated to engaging methodology, particularly through acknowledging and demonstrating how colonial assumptions and biases persistently pop up in knowledge production, reproduction, and dissemination. This focus on methodology carries through the book in a fine, unbroken ribbon. Nearly all of the science and research conducted as part of land relations borrows from dominant Western scientific the-

ories, tools, and techniques. As a result, challenging the dominant mode of land relations (e.g., *domination*) starts with adopting new tools. Liboiron establishes through concrete examples how these tools can be applied, for instance, how the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR) is progressively anti-colonial in its embracing of specificity and environmental holism (20-21, 26).

Pollution is Colonialism teaches readers about the inherent colonial nature of research and the methodologies it entails. Perhaps its most valuable contribution is in providing a blueprint for anticolonial science research. Even activities as simple as adopting statistical measures, isolating variables, presenting information uncritically through graphical form, or applying template sampling patterns all represent the unchallenged perpetuation of colonial techniques. Liboiron invites readers to more deeply consider how knowledge travels and surfaces in the political framing of land or earth systems.

Readers may find themselves surprised or taken aback at some of Liboiron's prescriptions. After all, these are some of the most foundational aspects of environmental studies that students are taught in public education. Yet these challenges to what has become common-sense thinking in science is precisely what is so beneficial about Liboiron's contribution. It demonstrates how deeply engrained our reliance on these tools truly are, and the discomfort we may feel being asked to change them demonstrates how deeply these non-holistic ways of knowing are entrenched in our systems of knowledge. As such, while the specific methodological critiques and recommendations may be most directly applicable to graduate students and professionals, the considerations *Pollution is Colonialism* advances may be even more relevant to general readers. The earlier we "learn to unlearn," the more readily we can transition to methodologies and theoretical frameworks that undermine unfettered pollution.

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