

Colonial, Decolonial, Anticolonial – the *How* in Doing Science

Review by Rasmus Rodineliussen

Liboiron, M. 2021. *Pollution Is Colonialism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

So, I ask of you, Reader, how do we write and read together with humility, keeping the specificity of relations in mind? How do we recognize that our writing and reading come out of different places, connections, obligations, and even different worldviews, and still write and read together? (p. 31)

Max Liboiron (Métis/Michif) poses the above question in the recent book *Pollution Is Colonialism* (2021), and I find it crucial for the overall argument of the book. You might have noticed that Liboiron got a "mark" in parentheses after her name; that is one way of addressing the above question. Liboiron explains that it is customary to mark "indigenous authors with their nation/affiliation, while settlers and white scholars almost always remain unmarked" (p. 3). In this book, Liboiron has opted to reproduce the mark of those who introduce themselves that way and to note those who do not by writing "unmarked" in parentheses behind their names. I found this utterly intriguing, as I agree with Liboiron that the context one comes from has implications on who we are, what relations matter to us, and not least, what structures of power we can use/or/and are subject to. To follow suit, let me introduce myself as Rasmus Rodineliussen (Swedish), although I would also like to add (white, male) in order to acknowledge further the privileged position I do come from – like it or not. Being explicit of our origins might be a first step to writing and reading together with the specificity of relations close in mind.

Pollution Is Colonialism is an intriguing read, written in a clear and sometimes joking language (which, at least for this reader, really allowed points to go through with a laugh), on a very important and timely topic: plastics pollution, science, and colonial relations. Liboiron defines the book as a methodological text meant to assist and inspire ways of doing science differently, to do Anticolonial Science. The book has an introduction setting the stage, followed by three chapters. Chapter One, *Land, Nature, Resource, Property*, and Chapter Two, *Scale, Harm, Violence, Land*, are meant to prepare the reader to understand and engage with the more methodologically oriented Chapter Three, *An Anticolonial Pollution Science*. Throughout the book, make sure not to miss out on the footnotes – they are something special, a place of intriguing discussions, sarcastic comments, jokes, important suggestions for reading, and more. Foot/endnotes, as important as they often are, are seldom as captivating as these – enjoy, I sure did.¹

The Introduction sets the scene of the book, which is mainly in a Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR) in Labrador, Newfoundland, Canada. The research focuses on plastics pollution and how scientists map its impact on wildlife. One of the driving arguments of the book is that pollution is not simply a symptom of colonialism, but rather a medium of and for colonialism, colonial relations, and appropriation of L/land (the capitalized L does here indicate that the understanding of Land is context-specific, rather than land as a universal word).²

1 Hello, back at you, Max, and thank you for a thought-provoking read.

2 See footnote 19 in the Introduction for a more substantial explanation of L/land.

Liboiron places colonialism in relation to both environmentalism and capitalism, showing that although capitalism and colonialism often enjoy one another's company, this is not always the case. And in the same way, environmentalism can also enact colonial relations even when research or activism is done with good intentions. Finally, Liboiron explains that the work at CLEAR is not *decolonial* but *anticolonial* in practice. This with the argument that decolonial science can be a colonial practice in that ideas and relations continue to be appropriated (p.26). The last point of the Introduction is to stress further the importance of specificity when discussing plastics (as there are numerous variants), the *We*, and otherwise. Without specificity, it is not possible to clearly state what one wants to say, to whom, and from what position one seeks to make this claim.

Chapter One shows how pollution and colonialism are tied together, or rather, that pollution is a means for colonialism. "Under what conditions does managing, rather than eliminating environmental pollution make sense? That would be colonialism" (p. 42). Here Liboiron distinguishes between *environmental pollution* and *modern environmental pollution*, arguing that it is the latter that is inherently colonial in how it poses claims on L/land. The chapter ties together Land, Nature, Resource, and Property in a discussion on approaches towards pollution. Two key concepts are the *Threshold Theory of Pollution* and *Assimilative Capacity*. According to their believers, these two do indicate levels of contamination that are below the threshold of what nature can assimilate on its own – it is only when levels rise above the threshold that pollution occurs. This, then, allow industry and societies to pollute, even giving them the right to do so (p.57).

Chapter Two begins with Liboiron stating, "Not all pollution is colonial" (p.81). This statement is based on her understanding of pollution as a set of lived relationships between, say, humans, plastics, and a body of water (Land Relations). The discussion moves toward that of scale, with the explanation that "Scale is not about relative size. Scale is about what relationships matter within a particular context" (p. 84). Scale is then put in relation to Harm/Violence, where violence is the potentiality of causing Harm. This is important.

The problem with assuming that a 0 percent plastic ingestion rate is the same as saying that plastics is all right is what I call a scalar mismatch. It conflates relationships, specifically the foraging habits of one species of fish with the violence of a system that allows plastics to exist in every environment ever tested (p. 85).

With the understanding that plastics are everywhere, Liboiron continues with the idea of the "alterlife," meaning that there is no separation between human bodies and pollutants, but instead a mutual and ongoing co-becoming (p. 89). Accepting the idea of the alterlife provides the opportunity to look at what relations matter, or in other words, focusing on systematic violence rather than specific Harm.

Chapter Three begins with the question, "How will we do science today?" (p.113). Liboiron sets out several examples of how the group of researchers at CLEAR do anticolonial science by focusing on good L/land relations – for example, not taking the right to conduct scientific experiments on animals/nature for given, seeking explicit and informed consent from indigenous/local communities prior to research and publication of research findings, and more. She stresses the importance of acknowledging obligations rather than responsibilities to Land relations. She argues that an obligation is not subject to choice; responsibility is. And if seeking to do anticolonial science, attentiveness to these relations is not a choice; they are an obligation.

Pollution Is Colonialism is an essential read for those interested in Science, Environmental Activism, STS, Pollution, Colonialism (including decolonialism/anticolonialism), Indigenous Studies, and Discard Studies, to mention a few. I especially recommend it for graduate students to assist with thinking about relationships within their field of research. One key takeaway from the book is how Liboiron writes about compromise, not as a failure, but as a matter of fact reality, one

has to begin somewhere – this book is a somewhere.

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