

# Book Review

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**Liboiron, Max. *Pollution is Colonialism*.  
Durham: Duke University Press, 2021, 197 pages.**

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With climate change near the forefront of our contemporary anxieties, new books (academic and otherwise) highlighting various aspects of environmental degradation are not in short supply. Liboiron's *Pollution is Colonialism* proves a meaningful addition to this conversation by being both deeply theoretical and refreshingly practical, subverting some of the prevailing scientific narratives about environmental pollution without in any way reducing the sense of importance or urgency about the topic. *Pollution is Colonialism* sits at the intersection of science studies, Indigenous studies, and feminist scholarship, challenging so-called "universal" mainstream scientific practices in exchange for downscaled, anti-colonial ones. Liboiron, founder of the Civil Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR) at Memorial University in Newfoundland, draws on their experiences pulling plastics out of fish guts in the Newfoundland marine environment. The book offers a call-to-action to reexamine and change the methods and taken-for-granted assumptions that have come to define scientific practice and cause disproportionate harm to Indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups.

The introduction sets the stage for the themes that will surface throughout the book. Part of this stage-setting is carefully situating CLEAR's work in the context of Newfoundland and Labrador, the land on which the laboratory sits. Liboiron's attention to specificity here is a practical enactment of the asserted importance, running throughout the book, of one's relations and obligations to the land. These obligations are always specific, not universal. The reader thus gets a sense of the ways in which the geographic setting influences the research being done. This is a thread that will be woven throughout the rest of the book: a challenge to the so-called universality of dominant science that considers a method or theory that works in one place will work everywhere.

This introduction serves as a primer on several themes that will recur often throughout the rest of the book, such as (anti)colonialism, incommensurability, and obligation.

In Chapter 1, Liboiron develops the argument that is the book's title: pollution (or at least modern environmental pollution) is colonialism. Pollution, as it currently plays out at the hands of corporations, assumes ownership and access to land as a resource, denying the relationships that already exist with that land. A large part of this chapter explores the widely-accepted notion of assimilative capacity, which argues that pollution of the environment is acceptable up to a certain threshold. Liboiron challenges the logic of this assumption, wrapping it in a broader discussion of land, resources, extraction, and the dangerous assumption of access to pollute others' lands and bodies. The evidence for the claims offered in this chapter is a mix of scientific data and personal anecdotes from CLEAR's lab and Liboiron's advocacy work. The issue of environmental pollution is couched within both the scientific and the social. Graphs about oxygen replenishment rates in rivers sit alongside broader theoretical questions about land and property, working together to paint a multi-faceted picture of the colonial implications of pollution.

Chapter 2 starts and ends with a question: What is a chemical? Much of this chapter is filled with data that highlight the alarming salience of harmful chemicals in our environments and bodies. Plastics, we are left to conclude, might be killing us. Yet Liboiron subverts the expected doomsday rhetoric with a twist: Plastics, too, are "Land" in the sense that they form relations and blur the lines between people and their environments. Plastic contamination, the book argues, must sit within a larger conversation about reproductive justice, taking into consideration the ways people already live in relation to their environments. Again, concrete scientific data about plastic, mostly coming directly out of CLEAR's lab, are coupled with theorizing alongside Indigenous and other scholars about interrelated themes around land, resource, and obligation. In this chapter especially, the reader gets the feeling of tension that comes with assimilative capacity, or arguments that give space for a certain, acceptable amount of pollution. This is a tension Liboiron treats carefully, making it clear that seeing plastic as Land does not return us to threshold theories of pollution. Through this, it becomes clear that the kind of argument Liboiron is making is a much more nuanced one than the mainstream scientific discourses that would try to absorb and simplify it.

Chapter 3 gives practical examples of what anti-colonial research might look like, drawing from situations encountered by CLEAR at various stages of the organization's existence. As CLEAR worked through and learned from these situations, the result was the development of certain protocols about how to properly conduct anti-colonial research, such as paying attention to one's thoughts and feelings when working with a fish carcass in order to respect one's relations and obligations to it. Anti-colonial research, Liboiron suggests, takes place in a wider community. For example, CLEAR now engages in an extensive community peer review process, even if this makes the research more vulnerable to being shut down. This chapter is the clearest in offering productive ways forward, making it a valuable read for scientific communities or anyone interested in understanding how perverse colonial relationships play out in concrete ways even in a seemingly neutral laboratory setting. The reader is also struck by the messiness of the process, and the fact that there is no one, straightforward path to decolonizing research. CLEAR continues to make mistakes and learn from them. Lab members continue to do things wrong, and then systematically apologize for them and move on. It is the learning and subsequent reworking of the process, this chapter seems to say, that matters most. This chapter most clearly highlights the mix of process and relationship that defines a feminist, anti-colonial science in a highly practical sense.

Liboiron's commitment to challenging prevailing methodologies plays out not only in the book's content, but also in its format. *Pollution is Colonialism* not only suggests scholarly methods but also embodies them across its pages. Extensive footnotes sometimes fill half the page, and are used to make further commentary, give gratitude to scholars the author has learned from, and even tell entire stories that are relevant to the text. Liboiron not only discusses identity and positionality in the abstract but adds an identity marker in parentheses ("Métis," or "settler," or just "unmarked") to each scholar interacted with throughout the book. Coded into the paragraphs and footnotes are comments that question and dialogue with the nature of academic writing itself, highlighting the colonial elements present not only in the lab but also in the scholarly manuscript. The resulting text is so unexpected that it requires the reader to learn and practice a new way of reading. At first, the reader may find the sheer volume of notes distracting, as reading requires sporadic jumps between the body of the text and the footnotes. Some re-reading and backtracking are required to keep up with what is being argued. If sometimes

cumbersome in practice, the technique is intriguing theoretically, as it becomes an effective embodied metaphor for the sort of reimagining of academic scholarship Liboiron advocates throughout the book.

*Pollution is Colonialism* is an enlightening and potentially challenging book for readers across multiple disciplines. While scientific audiences will likely benefit the most from its practical implications for anti-colonial lab practices, its theoretical contributions make it an interesting read for those in the social sciences (broadly defined) as well. Perhaps its unique format would make it interesting to scholars of all disciplines who have wondered what it would look like to break out of the traditional structure of academic writing and reimagine it in new, anti-colonial ways. Of course, if one is to take Liboiron's arguments seriously, no new structure of scholarship should be imagined to be universally relevant. Still, the invitation is open.