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Pollutionⁱ

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(Annotated transcript. Original voiceover is a performance and includes an enactment of noise pollution.)

Pollution is ecological.

The political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett: when something is called “ecological” it signifies a “necessary implication in a network of relations ... persistent tendency to enter into a working system.”¹

Pollution is part of a more-than-human network of relations – human, nonhuman, technical.

Philosopher Alphonso Lingis: there is a “murmur of the world” that is the “echo of the vibrancy of things. To be, for material things, is to resonate.”²

Pollution resonates. It is now part of the murmur of the world.

It is common to think of pollution primarily in terms of its materiality e.g. anthropogenic contaminate emissions into the air and anthropogenic contaminate discharge into water.

A focus on pollution as object/material may lead to overlooking how it is inextricably bound up with the operations of power.

To get at how pollution and power are entangled it can be helpful to explore pollution through the social.

Professor of Law, John Nagle, teaches us that before the Twentieth Century society pollution was understood as something occurring outside the natural environment. “Pollute” and “pollution” used as terms to refer to the “violation, perversion, or corruption of moral standards.”³

Pollution has and continues to be connected to moralising discourses.

Anthropologists have examined rituals of various societies that determine what and who they regarded as pure and what and who they regarded as impure.

The classic treatment is Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966). Douglas points out that declaring something or someone ‘dirty’ has been used as a way to mark out and safeguard a particular ordering of a society.

¹ Bennett, “The force of things,” 365.

² Lingis, *The community*, 6.

³ Nagle, *The idea of pollution*, 14.

“Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.”⁴

Dirt is disorder. Dirt is pollution when it refers to matter out of place and troubles the categories of a socially constructed system of classification.

Eradicating ‘dirt’ is an act undertaken to organise and police the borders and boundaries of classificatory systems to signify what and who is considered safe and dangerous, good or bad, belongs or does not belong, acceptable and unacceptable.

For example, one can think of how refugees and immigrants trouble borders and the systems of classification of the communities they travel to. They will often be identified with dirt, crime, disease, contamination.

Pollution.

This process of identification is a marking out of territory, an operation of power that serves to ensure the newcomers ‘learn their place’ in the order of things.

Transgression of borders and categories is matter out of place.

Violence is employed to put matter(s) back in order.

Pollution and power are inextricably linked.

Pollution as social co-mingles with pollution as contaminate matter.

Pollution, of course, also matters as *matter* and is inextricably linked with power.

To illustrate this let’s go to a place with a long history of pollution.

During the 1970s and 1980s there was a sharp decline in industry in this part of the United Kingdom. It is deindustrial.

A long history of high-level pollution (air and water) and associated impairment of health
Asthma, allergies, eczema, cancer.

Stigma of being a “contaminated community”.

Pollution is stigma.

There is discrimination against the community, affecting school experiences, marriage, employment.

When elsewhere, the people from here been classified as ‘matter out of place’ when ‘over there’.

Shown a photo: “you can see how it used to be, all fired up. It was always buzzing. Now it’s dead-like. When I come here it helps me to remember how it was.”

Pollution as nostalgia.

Pollution *and* capital can mean being accepted.

⁴ Douglas, *Purity and danger*, 35.

When capital and pollution have divorced, one is just left with pollution, in one's blood, in one's diseases, in one's cognition, in one's emotions, in one's memories, in one's skin, in one's futures.

A decommissioned oil rig issues forth metallic booms.

Petrochemical stacks spit plumes of fire.

The river is one that salmon swarmed to. "So thick you could walk on their backs" say one old-timer.

The Salmon are still here, some have adapted. Most did not. Birds, seals, and foxes have returned. Toxicity has lowered human footfall. Nonhumans persist. Adaptation. A making do. A surviving.

They prompt the question: "how will YOU live with it?"

A resident:

I've come to love this setting. It sort of beautiful. It's beautiful because it's ugly ... It's us. Does that make sense?

In late capitalism pollution, decay, and ecological crisis has resulted in an aesthetics being referred to as "ruin porn," "deindustrial sublime," or "smokestack nostalgia". This is not voyeuristic fascination for those who are surviving.

The pollution aesthetics arrived at is arguably part of What Anna Tsing calls an "art of living on damaged planet."⁵ Making do.

The statement by the resident also brings into relief how Living with pollution involves - according to geographer Anna Lora Wainwright - negotiating diverse, competing, and sometimes contradicting "languages of valuation."⁶

We walk along a promontory formed by discarded iron ore slag.

The pollution, that is, the slag manages the flow of the river.

The promontory has formed through a more-than-human creative co-constitution of slag, river, sea currents, capitalism, human labour, heat, cold, and geochemistry.

Is it too much to say that pollution is not only destructive but also creative?

A 'pollution geography' emerges.

Hazardous warning signs mark out toxic zones. A carving up of space.

Pollution is geography.

The signs function as symbolic performers of safety, acceptability, health, and 'cleanliness'.

Pollution cannot be contained so easily.

Pollution transgresses.

A pollution geography makes it look like everything is under our control.

⁵ Tsing, *The mushroom at the end of the world*.

⁶ Lora-Wainwright, *Resigned activism*, xxix.

It Isn't.

Elsewhere, pollution mingles with race to produce unjust ecological realities.

Pollution is violence.

We can see how pollution is violence through Dorceta Taylor's book *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (2014). The study takes us to the United States of America to teach us about the contamination of low income communities that predominantly house Black and brown peoples.

Environmental racism.

People of colour are disproportionately negatively exposed to the effects of pollution.

The violent domination, control, and killing of Black and brown bodies through pollution grant's white communities privileges and unearned resources. The lives and well-being of Black and brown people are sacrificed to afford white people a safe and clean (pure) environment to live in.

Example: Detroit.

Much of Detroit's heavy industry—steel making, oil refining, and coal-fired power plants—has been clustered in the majority-Black neighbourhoods in the southwest part of the city.

Nitrogen dioxide and sulphur dioxide are pumped into children's lungs.

Lead poisoned waters quench thirst.

Communities are systemically marginalised to reproduce a white supremacist social ordering of society.

White supremacy is entangled with pollution.

To move away from toxic sites is to be 'dirt.' Matter out of place.

The response is a white-supremacist socio-political-military industrial complex mobilising to 'clean things up'.

Put. People. Back. In. Their. Place.

Put matter 'Back. In. Order.'

In his book *The Three Ecologies*, Felix Guattari a French psychotherapist, philosopher, semiologist, and activist shares an experiment conducted by biologist Alain Bombard, who takes a "healthy, thriving, almost dancing octopus" from polluted seawater and places it into a tank of unpolluted seawater."⁷ The octopus sinks to the bottom of the tank and dies.

The octopus experiment is a powerful analogy for how we are intimately entangled with and orientated by pollution.

We now think, feel and act with the rhythms, flows, surges, and throbbing of pollution that is material, social, sensual, psychological, and violent.

⁷ Guattari, *The three ecologies*, 29.

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ⁱ Evers, Clifton and Davoll, James. "Pollution." *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020). <https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

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