Max Liboiron. 2021. *Pollution is Colonialism*. Durham: Duke University Press. xiv + 197 pp. Figures, bibliography, index. $24.95 (eBook)

When I started reading Max Liboiron's book *Pollution is Colonialism*, mostly intrigued by its very unusual title, nothing could have prepared me for what I found. It was certainly not a book only about plastics as pollutants. In its 197 pages lies an emotive, immersed commentary of the state of knowledge, research and ethics that concern us all as social scientists, whether or not we study plastics, or indeed, pollution. As I study neither plastics nor pollution, it is to these larger themes that my review will speak. These mirror the organisation of the book into an introduction, and three chapters, broadly to do with land and nature, scale and violence, and finally, an anticolonial science.

The first lesson I learnt from this curiously wonderful book is to situate my identity as a diasporic Indian woman, employed as an academic in a Western university for the better part of two decades, into the heart of what I do, and not only at a surface-level consciousness. The book is united in its concern with decolonisation, but quite differently from the kind that I have observed on Western campuses. At the outset, Liboiron patiently explains why it is not just imprecise, but also unjust and unethical, to conflate colonisation with various, different forms of oppression. This conflation has the effect of 'domesticat[ing] colonialism' (p. 15), with the result that any number of strategies and actions are brought under the umbrella of decolonisation. From this perspective, while academics like myself are busy *decolonising* university curricula and earning brownie points for it, colonial land relations remain securely in place. This is an abhorrence.

As a Metis writer, Liboiron contemplates 'settler anxiety' at length and decolonisation of the university-syllabus variety is nothing more than a 'premature [desire for]

reconciliation' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 8–9). Decolonisation is necessarily disruptive and cannot be done in a friendly way, like over cups of coffee. Seared by Liboiron's critique, I took heart from making sense of other things. Colonialism in the historical sense may have ended, but as India's case abundantly shows, both dominant Eurocentric colonial/modern values and modes of internal colonialism persist. The presumption of access to Indigenous lands, under the guises of projects of improvement, also known as development, continues to be the cause of unfolding and interlocking exploitations. Colonial land relations in this sense serve as the bedrock for capitalist development. Decolonisation has clearly not happened.

Besides, the use of decolonisation as metaphor for every kind of struggle is clearly a problem amounting to the appropriation of terms of 'Indigenous survivance and resurgence' (p. 26), and must be resisted. Yet, there is profound value in recognising the tradition of decolonial thought that agitates against colonial values as a cause of current injustices, particularly with reference to land use and current distribution patterns. Latin American environmental justice theorists have developed a series of core ideas around decoloniality that are inspired by and influenced by indigenous peoples' life projects. And importantly, as Liboiron points out, there is tremendous mutual respect between the critical traditions that grow out of these life projects. Rather than subsuming all struggles under the same banner of decolonisation, there is a need to respect difference and specificity, because our individual obligations towards progressive change depend on it. Solidarity too needs to be decolonised. Who am I within the broader category of 'we' is a question I have been asking a lot.

In chapter 1, Liboiron argues convincingly how science, backed by extractive colonial ethics and Lockean morality (ideas of value tied in with the principle of maximum use), has enslaved both land and nature, while producing pollution as a de facto property right. This explosive argument draws from the dominant theory of self-purification-cum-assimilative capacity (the Streeter-Phelps equation), which refers to the amount of waste material that can

be discharged into water without causing disastrous ecological consequences. However, the logical (mal)-extension of settling on a quantitative threshold of pollution has been to produce a justification of not merely the ability to waste, but indeed, the *right to do so*. Anyone who has encountered mining projects in India will relate viscerally to this phenomenon. Sacrifice zones are the areas under the curve, below which it is strictly okay to pollute, extract, or in other ways, *develop*.

In chapter 2, Liboiron demonstrates why it is never enough to simply look for evidence of harm when, really, we should be talking about violence. Regardless of whether we find plastic in any given fish species, the pipeline that moves plastics into waterways remains the same. Instead of focusing on harm, and trying to ameliorate it, we need to consider violence instead, which is the source of all harms. In fact, it is only if we regard the structural violence of development processes, can we envision interventions at the right scale to impact upon the most important relationships. Consumer avoidance, typically an environmental intervention to tackle plastic pollution, can only go so far when broader processes of financialisation underpinning extraction remain unchanged.

Besides, avoidance is based upon the highly questionable concept of separating human (body) and polluted (Nature), when the reality is of co-constitution or 'alterlife' (p. 106). The deeper message of the book is to desist from thresholds and to embrace relationships instead. When Liboiron writes 'plastics *are* land' (p. 106, emphasis mine), what they mean is that the pollution, language, eating and obligation are '[all a] part of the same bundle' (p. 108). It is simply not possible to separate the two, and therefore, an epistemic approach that tries to isolate harm via thresholds cannot protect people.

In the final chapter, Liboiron eloquently espouses their anticolonial lab (CLEAR—Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research), where scientific methods are defined by one key point: not reproducing settler/colonial entitlement to land, knowledges and

lifeworlds. It is very difficult, indeed as researchers, to contemplate immense questions of genocide 'while standing at the bench [in a lab] with a beaker in your hand' (p. 122) (or a notebook for that matter), but it is possible to abide by protocol that is steeped in obligation. In my reading, this is an obligation we all bear, to creating an 'epistemology where the relationship … is more important than the thing itself' (p. 116). This necessarily means considering very carefully how to work within (if not outrightly rejecting), the Eurocentric academy with its obsession around impacts. I was always aware of the use of data as a financial transaction, but reading Liboiron, I also learnt that such knowledge creation itself rests on 'imaginaries of land as property' (p. 136). How far are we willing to go to prevent ourselves from becoming implicated? *Pollution is colonialism* certainly offers some thought-provoking answers.

REFERENCES

Tuck, E. and Yang, K.Wayne. 2012. 'Decolonization is not a metaphor.' *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (1): 1–40.

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