

Editorial: Toxic Subjectivities

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Featured image: photo credit: Petter Rudwall, unsplash.com

This issue marks the one-year anniversary of *Toxic News*. It has been a significant year for toxic issues around the world. The sense of cautious optimism following the Paris climate change agreements last December already seems worlds apart. The [Alberta tar sands are still burning](#), the Brexit vote threatens to unravel environmental protections in the UK, and a vehement climate change denier is running for the US presidency.

It has also been an important personal journey for each of us at Toxic News. Through our editorial and research work, we have become more sensitized to toxic issues: from greater awareness of our complicity in environmental injustice through our high consumption lifestyles; to deeper concern about toxic exposures in our everyday lives; to reckoning with the truly frightening implications of the climate crisis.

But this journey has also been inspiring, sharing stories about how people live with, understand, and resist toxic environmental challenges.

At some points, this journey has led to a sense of disorientation and powerlessness, in the face of such monumental challenges. Toxicity is uncertain and deeply politicized. Faced with toxicity at multiple levels and scales, it can be a paralyzing issue. But this journey has also been inspiring, sharing stories about how people live with, understand, and resist toxic environmental challenges.

This issue addresses toxic subjectivities – different people’s experiences and confrontations with toxicity – at varying levels and scales. The stories span evacuation retreats in Japan, a polluted town in Serbia, an electronic waste site in Ghana, and industrial pollution controversies in China. The narratives show contrasting gendered dimensions of collective toxic subjectivity, between societal roles of women and mothers in Cousins’ study, and the macho bravado of muscular heroism in Jovanovic’s study. They also examine the importance of colonial legacies, and how environmental hazards of toxic exposure and climate vulnerability are concentrated in poor, marginalized communities.

The stories in this issue show tensions between values about what is “good” or “bad”, with competing values around health and safety, livelihoods, and economic development. They also highlight tensions in collective identity, or toxic subjectivities, how people experience, endure, and attempt to resolve their complex subject identities within toxic landscapes.

In the opening article, Deana Jovanovic focuses on the [ways that people living in the heavily polluted industrial town of Bor in Serbia cope with the “smoke”](#). Although *Borani* (Bor

residents) acknowledge that there are risks in living in such a polluted place, some residents have adopted an ironic narrative of “heroic endurance under the smoke”. They represent themselves as nearly invisible, having developed a super-human immunity to pollution through prolonged exposure.

Following this theme of endurance, Elicia Cousins explores [how families in Fukushima spend time away from contaminated areas in evacuation retreats](#), as a way of minimizing harm, particularly to children. Her account is both political and personal, showing the ways that ordinary citizens have mobilized in the face of invisible hazards and neglect by the state. They have little choice but to endure everyday life in areas with radioactive contamination, but they place hope on these retreats as spaces of physical as well as emotional recovery.

This political question- of what is to be done- is explored further in [Peter C Little’s piece about “pyropolitics” in Agbogbloshie in Ghana, the infamous electronic waste dump](#). Peter discusses tensions between different visions and experiences of toxicity in Agbogbloshie. This site has attracted global attention as a top toxic threat, with a host of journalists, photographers, and non-governmental organisations, and polarized narratives about what is “good” and “bad” for the intractable problems of public health and economic survival. Peter challenges simplistic explanations that either vilify or celebrate particular practices of burning or recycling e-waste. He calls our attention to the complex negotiations, dilemmas, and difficulties of everyday electronic “pyropolitics”.

[Zhang Hubiao addresses the question of political action at a broader national scale, providing a sociological perspective on the significance of PX events in China](#)—large scale public controversies surrounding PX (paraxylene) plants. The first mass public anti-PX protest occurred in the city of Xiamen in 2007, and over the past decade, there have been a number of similar mass protests against PX in cities throughout China. In many ways, PX has become a byword for toxic pollution in China. The knowledge controversies surrounding PX have parallels with environmental controversies around the world, with competing interests from state, community, corporate, and civil society representatives.

Contested toxic expertise was the focus of [the first public engagement event of the Toxic Expertise project](#), held on 3rd November 2016 at the Shard in London. Thom Davies reports on the key themes of the event and the thought-provoking contributions from our speakers. During this event, we pointed to deep tensions about how expertise is valued. On the one hand, there is growing public mistrust of experts. Expertise is all too often misused, manipulated, or ignored. On the other hand, we rely on expertise, despite its flaws, for advancing social justice, economic development, and environmental protection. Through this afternoon, we raised the provocative questions: Has expertise itself become toxic? If so, how can we detoxify it?

Finally, [Leon Sealey-Huggins shifts our attention from the micropolitics of everyday life to the geopolitics of climate justice, oil development, and postcolonialism](#). He provides a sobering overview of the politics of oil development and indigenous rights in Belize, a Caribbean country that joins other island nations in the climate justice plight of “1.5 (degrees) to stay alive”. The article highlights the gap in media attention about climate issues, where the issue of coral bleaching received a great deal of attention in the case of Australia, but has been sidelined in relation to a similar story in Belize. It also points to the ways in which

colonialism and environmental hazards are interlinked, both historically and in the present day.

Together, these stories from around the globe the important challenge of how to make connections- politically and analytically- across different scales of toxic expertise, justice, and experience.