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Herausgegeben von Sean Ireton

Mit Beiträgen von Heather I. Sullivan,
Caroline Schaumann, Gundolf Graml
und Sabine Wilke



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Introductory Essay: Purity and Pollution – German Texts, American Contexts

In his recent novel, *Bleeding Edge* (2013), Thomas Pynchon conjures a symbolic scene of America's "national bad habit," namely its "inability to deal with refuse." The main character Maxine Tarnow, a private detective who in a certain plot-twisted episode finds herself pursued by the DEA, flees by powerboat past the western edge of Staten Island, the fabled garbage dump of New York City. As Pynchon elaborates, here lies "toxicity central, the dark focus of Big Apple waste disposal, everything the city has rejected so it can keep on pretending to be itself." A more detailed inventory of New York's long-accumulated detritus runs as follows:

Every Fairway bag full of potato peels, coffee grounds, uneaten Chinese food, used tissues and tampons and paper napkins and disposable diapers, fruit gone bad, yogurt past its sell-by date that Maxine has ever thrown away is up in there someplace, multiplied by everybody in the city she knows, multiplied by everybody she doesn't know, since 1948, before she was even born, and what she thought was lost and out of her life has only entered a collective history [...]¹

Maxine is thus confronted with "a collective history" by which Pynchon suggests that waste defines, or at least documents, our modern existence. Trash *collection* is thus more than a weekly event that takes place on every sidewalk or at the end of every driveway in America; it has, rather, become a crucial component of our cultural *collectivity*. Bury it, burn it, even separate it all you want – rubbish remains inseparable from our human condition in the age of the Anthropocene. In Pynchon's words, "this 'looming and prophetic landfill' constitutes the "perfect negative of the city in its seething foul incoherence."² But there is more to Staten Island than meets the eye – or greets the nose. Maxine soon passes by Isle of Meadows, a 100-acre parcel of marshland that in the 1990s managed to escape incorporation into the Fresh Kills Landfill and now enjoys the status of a nature preserve. It is off limits to humans (and their discarded junk) so that herons, egrets, and nature in general can recover, perhaps even thrive, amidst the surrounding toxic landscape. As Maxine notes along these lines, this "piece of the ancient estuary [is] exempt from what happened, what has gone on happening."³

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- 1 For all of the above citations, see Thomas Pynchon: *Bleeding Edge*. New York: Penguin Press 2013, p. 166-67.
 - 2 Pynchon: *Bleeding Edge*, p. 167. Compare also in this context A.R. Ammons's book-length (and National Book Award-winning) poem *Garbage* (1993), which I forgo discussing here, in part because it has already received its share of ecocritical attention. See for instance Lawrence Buell: "Toxic Discourse". In: *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Spring 1998): p. 639-65, esp. p. 664-65; and his (recycled) chapter, also entitled "Toxic Discourse," in Lawrence Buell: *Writing for an Endangered World. Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press 2001, p. 30-54, esp. p. 53-54.
 - 3 Pynchon: *Bleeding Edge*, p. 167.

In this segment of the narrative, Pynchon puts his finger on the problem of civilization and its ineluctable excess: pollution. Indeed, he points to a fundamental dialectic – to “that perfect negative,” whether in a technical photographic or more philosophical Hegelian sense – that underlies the modern civilizing process. For even as we generate far more waste than we know what to do with, we nostalgically look back to paradisiacal purity and, in our less myopic and more proactive moments, look forward to a future of environmental-ethical integrity. The primeval Garden of Eden versus the modern-day Garbage from Eatin’ is reflected in the Isle of Meadows versus the Fresh Kills Landfill. Of course not every patch of land has managed to evade toxification, but there is always the possibility of at least partial depollution. Currently, there are over a thousand landfills in the US that have been converted into nature sanctuaries or public recreation sites. One example, whose name says it all, is the 165-acre Mount Trashmore Park in Virginia Beach, where visitors can exercise on trails constructed around and atop the – now verdant – mountain of refuse; they can even fish in two manmade (and presumably detoxified) lakes. Other such Trashmore-like makeovers exist, some even bearing the same name, whether formally or informally. The town of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, for example, has recently organized a 5-kilometer run to the top of their 208-foot-high Mount Trashmore and is hatching further plans to open the site for skiing.⁴ Mount Everest is no Mount Trashmore per se, but it has definitely become a mountain of ever more trash, necessitating special “clean-up” expeditions to remove the tons of litter (oxygen bottles, fuel canisters, tents, sleeping bags, etc.) left behind by decades of climbers who prioritized the summit bid over the environmental intactness of the mountain. When Jamling Tenzing Norgay, the son of Edmund Hillary’s climbing partner on the first ascent of Everest back in 1953, came to Miami to promote his book *Touching My Father’s Soul*, he scaled a different kind of garbage-strewn highpoint. Jamling, himself an experienced mountaineer and the leader of a team that summited Everest in 1996 (and that shot a popular IMAX film released two years later), was led up the highest promontory in sea-level south Florida, namely the South Dade Solid Waste Disposal Facility, locally known as “Mount Trashmore.” Though this reputed mountain consists of compacted layers of inorganic refuse, as opposed to solid conglomerate rock, who is to say that its ascent is any less of a “natural” or “ecological” experience, especially given our present predicament in the Anthropocene? Indeed, Miami-Dade County’s Trashmore contains its fair share of organic waste including, purportedly, human body parts and dead whales, while Everest harbors an obscene amount of anthropogenic debris.⁵ So where is one to draw the line between purity and pollution? Isn’t our environment really but an amalgam of “nature-culture” or “natureculture,” as some ecocritics have argued and lexically proposed? The boundaries between purity and pollution are perhaps, by extension, equally fluid or blurred. Purity-pollution, puritypollution, one might in turn modestly propose ...

4 See for example the websites <https://www.solidwasteagency.org/#/> and <http://thegazette.com/2013/07/18/officials-again-consider-climbing-skiing-potential-at-mountain-trashmore/>. Accessed June 28, 2014.

5 For the details of this unconventional climb, see <http://utdailybeacon.com/opinion/columns/untitled-column-by-jerry-f-becker/2001/jun/29/everest-proves-to-be-no-match-for-landfill-climb/>. Accessed June 28, 2014.

The linguistic history of the term “pollution” underscores this very point. As Greg Garrard observes in his now-standard volume *Ecocriticism*, “pollution” stems from the Latin verb *polluere*, meaning “to defile.” Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries it shifted in signification from an individually based ethico-theological term denoting moral impurity (especially masturbation) to the broader environmental valence that it now enjoys. As Garrard summarizes: “The process is exemplary in that it highlights how people had to learn to hate their own detritus, as well as indicating the deep cultural roots of the fear attaching to such immoral emissions.”⁶ The linguistic roots of *polluere*, however, run far deeper and may afford greater insight into the cultural significance of defilement. *Polluere* is a verb related to the noun *lutum* = “mud”/“clay” (cf. the past participle *pollutum*); the adjective *luteus* = “dirty”; and the verb *lutare* = “to smear with dirt.” This Latinate word-complex derives from the verb *luo*, which means, among other things, “to wash” and, more figuratively, “to appease” or “to atone” (much like the Greek cognate *luo*). It is most likely a back formation from *lavo*, which has contributed to the English language words such as “lave,” “lavatory,” “lavabo,” “latrine,” and “lather.” Only when compounded with the prefix *pol-/por-* (“forward”) does *luo* acquire the meaning of “to make dirty.” While the precise etymological details remain indeterminate, some kind of dialectic is clearly at work in these various philological entanglements connoting dirtiness and cleanliness. Obscure folk etymologies and archaic linguistic puns may have further clouded the matter, and a certain mystery of usage will therefore always seem to thwart any definitive attempt to resolve this riddle. Nevertheless, in particular cultural-historical contexts there may be an implicit – perhaps for ancients, obvious – association between purity and contamination. For instance, Romans might have seen the possibility of a pun, if not also an opportunity for some folk-etymologizing, by deriving *lutum* from a past participial form of *lavo* (such as *lauatum*, *lautum*, or *lotum*), based on the logic that mud is soil “washed away” from, say, a riverbank. In classical Greek society, some conflation may have prevailed between the hygienic states of pollution and purification due to the custom that women who washed corpses in preparation for burial were, by guilt of association, deemed to be unclean. Greek literature is full of such liminal moments between sully and cleansing. One of the most prominent examples occurs in Book 10 of the *Iliad*, the “Doloneia.” Here Odysseus and Diomedes wash, indeed purify, themselves of the blood, sweat, and grime of battle by wading in the sea and then bathing in polished tubs of water, whereupon a final rubdown with olive oil follows. It is hard to imagine, even by modern sanitary standards, a more thorough ablution.⁷

The last thing I wish to do is engage in reductionist – some would say manipulative – Heideggerian etymological practice. But I find this linguistic background fruitful for contextualizing the four essays contained in this special number of *literatur für leser*, for at the core of each lies a fundamental tension between purity and pollution.

6 Greg Garrard: *Ecocriticism*. 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge 2012, p. 8. John Passmore further specifies this connection by pointing out that the Puritans designated masturbation as “self-pollution” and wet dreams as “nocturnal pollution.” See John Passmore: *Man’s Responsibility for Nature. Ecological Problems and Western Traditions*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons 1974, p. 60.

7 For the etymological details of my preceding observations I draw on Walde-Hofmann’s *Lateinisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*. 4th ed. Two vols. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag 1965. I am also indebted to Dan Hooley, Raymond Marks, and Anatole Mori of the Department of Classical Studies at the University of Missouri for their assistance in my linguistic and semantic pursuit of the word “pollution”.

Caroline Schaumann alludes to this dialectic in the very title of her article, “Reinheit und Schmutz in Texten von Luis Trenker, Heinrich Harrer und Hans Ertl,” and then grapples with its many encoded manifestations in climbing narratives from all three world-class mountaineers. In their diverse accounts of alpine exploits from around the globe, the same basic dynamic plays itself out: the purity (and masculinity) of firm névé and solid ice stands against the polluting menace of (feminine) liquidity, especially in the form of melting snow and the resultant risk of avalanches, rockfall, or softened snow bridges. But in the idealized realm of icy summits and swinging ice-axes, the climber rises above the contagion of civilization and dodges the dirty domain of the three F’s: *Frauen*, *Fluten*, and *Flüssigkeiten*.

In his contribution, “‘Innen blüht Europa, außen wachsen die Ränder’: Eine kulturökologische Analyse der Reiseessays von Karl-Markus Gauß”, Gundolf Graml confronts the issue of pollution through the perspective of a contemporary Austrian travel writer. Gauß problematizes the relation between the bioregional autochthony of a marginalized people, here the Roma populace in Slovakia, and the normative notions of a privileged political entity as embodied by the European Union. In the process of this cultural clash, the question of environmental impurity versus ecological integrity proves to be both ethically and geopolitically complex. Graml further manages to shed abundant light on various topoi of “toxic discourse” as delineated by Lawrence Buell in his typology of an emergent literary-cultural genre. These include: (1) the hegemonic oppression of threatened communities by corporate or governmental powers; and (2) the “gothification” of human squalor and environmental pollution as uncovered by the exposé.⁸

Another category of toxic discourse includes the “mythography of betrayed Edens.”⁹ In her article “The Poetics of Waste and Wastefulness: Fatih Akin Films Garbage in the Garden of Eden,” Sabine Wilke shows – similar to Graml – the cultural-ecological collision between the rampant pollution in a so-called “developing” country (or at least in an unindustrialized province of an increasingly modernized state) and an enlightened, perhaps even morally righteous, European take on the problem. Of course this enlightened perspective happens to come from a Turkish-German filmmaker who has ethnic roots in the region and knows how to make an evenhanded and nuanced documentary. Beyond questions of its critical and popular reception or its potential social-environmental impact, all of which Wilke addresses at length, there can be no doubt that Akin’s *Müll im Garten Eden* (2012) bears witness to Turkey’s rapid transformation into a modern toxic nation, just like the US, with teeming landfills that pollute the air and poison the waters. Akin’s film thus translates into images the words of Edward Abbey regarding postwar America: “what *intolerable* garbage and what utterly *useless crap* we bury ourselves in day by day.”¹⁰

Garbage is probably the most visible or otherwise noticeable – olfactorily, for instance – index of pollution. Other pollutants are less conspicuous, yet all the more pervasive and pernicious. In *Silent Spring* (1962) Rachel Carson famously brought to public

8 See Buell: “Toxic Discourse” and *Writing for an Endangered World*, p. 30-54. Cf. also the convenient summary of Buell’s arguments in Garrard: *Ecocriticism*, p. 14-15.

9 Buell: “Toxic Discourse,” p. 647; *Writing for an Endangered World*, p. 37.

10 Edward Abbey: *Desert Solitaire. A Season in the Wilderness*. New York: Ballantine Books 1971, p. 193.

attention the total contamination of our environment, putting forward the bold claim: "For the first time in the history of the world, every human being is now subjected to contact with dangerous chemicals, from the moment of conception until death."¹¹ Later environmental bestsellers like Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (1989) continued to explore and expose the anthropogenic onslaught on our planet, in this case the damage caused by a newly determined wave of contaminants such as acid rain, CFC emissions, and greenhouse gases. Granted, as McKibben points out in reference to the scientist Lynn Margulis, the radical increase of atmospheric oxygen through the spread of bacteria some two billion years ago "was by far the greatest pollution crisis the earth has ever endured."¹² Yet this logic is predicated on the strict definition of pollution as the process of putting matter in the wrong place and, moreover, in quantities that are too large for this place to remain unaffected in some way. As John Passmore poses the key question: "What makes a place 'wrong'?"¹³ Of course the real, game-changing issue in today's Anthropocene is the dramatic extent to which the planet is being adversely influenced by human-generated, anthrop-obscene toxins. Heather I. Sullivan's opening article "Dirty Traffic and the Dark Pastoral in the Anthropocene: Narrating Refugees, Deforestation, Radiation, and Melting Ice" grapples with this very dilemma. Her analysis, informed by dirt theory and refracted through the genre-theoretical prism of the dark pastoral, traces the transfers and transgressions between so-called "pure" and so-called "polluted" realms – however anthropologically constructed these may be. The case studies that she presents span three centuries of German literature and include texts by Goethe, Droste-Hülshoff, Gudrun Pausewang, and Ilija Trojanow. Furthermore, they encompass diverse forms of pollution that have emerged since the Industrial Revolution and, from a literary-ecocritical standpoint, progressively substantiate Buell's final generic criterion: "totalizing images of a world without refuge from toxic penetration."¹⁴

I conclude this introductory essay with some further insight from the American icon Edward Abbey, who has notoriously equated modern toxic civilization with "syphilization" and more specifically classified his countrymen under the species name *slobivius americanus*.¹⁵ But let us not forget that Abbey was no holier-than-thou nature spokesman and that he loathed being called an "environmental writer." Nor should we forget that he composed a portion of his (non-environmental!) classic *Desert Solitaire* (1968) in a rundown apartment in the rundown city of Hoboken, New Jersey, amidst the fumes of "sulfur dioxide," "the odor of sewer gas," "ferocious packs" of rats, and armies of German cockroaches (*Blatella germanica*) that seemed right "out of Kafka."¹⁶ Although, for the greater part of his life and work, he reveled in the purity, aridity, and austerity of the Desert Southwest, he was also able to appreciate the

11 Rachel Carson: *Silent Spring*. 50th Anniversary Edition. Boston: Mariner Books 2002, p. 15.

12 Bill McKibben: *The End of Nature*. 2nd ed. New York: Random House 2006, p. 54.

13 See for instance the definitions given by Passmore: *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, p. 45; and Garrard: *Ecocriticism*, p. 6.

14 Buell: "Toxic Discourse," p. 648; *Writing for an Endangered World*, p. 38.

15 See Abbey: *Desert Solitaire*, p. 199 and p. 238. To be fair, the term "syphilization" actually stems from his friend Ralph Newcomb, with whom Abbey took a float trip down the Colorado River right after the construction of the Glen Canyon Dam, as narrated here in the chapter "Down the River."

16 Edward Abbey: "Manhattan Twilight, Hoboken Night". In: *The Journey Home. Some Words in Defense of the American West*. New York: E.P. Dutton 1977, p. 89-101; here p. 90-91.

“infinite richness” and “ecology” of his temporary urban-industrial abode.¹⁷ Nor was he, on the flipside, averse to civilizing/syphilizing his pristine desert habitat now and then. As recounted in *Desert Solitaire*, he rolls an old car tire into the Grand Canyon and fantasizes about decorating an isolated Utah juniper with tinsel and other tawdry Christmas trash.¹⁸ The following anecdote is even more provocative. While driving through northern Arizona, “one of the most exhilarating landscapes in the Southwest,”

I tossed my empty out the window and popped the top from another can of Schlitz. Littering the public highway? Of course I litter the public highway. Every chance I get. After all, it's not the beer cans that are ugly; it's the highway that is ugly. Beer cans are beautiful, and someday, when recycling becomes a serious enterprise, the government can put one million kids to work each summer picking up the cans I and others have thoughtfully stored along the roadways.¹⁹

Here, in Abbey's unapologetic act of despoiling the quintessential American John Ford landscape, the lines between purity and pollution become vexingly blurred. But then again, speaking (with Bill McKibben) of blurry, pure-impure lines, are not most roads in America – even in the most hopeful of landscapes – but “linear landfills?”²⁰

17 Abbey: “Manhattan Twilight, Hoboken Night,” p. 91.

18 See Abbey: *Desert Solitaire*, p. 246, p. 328.

19 Edward Abbey: “The Second Rape of the West.” In: *The Journey Home*, p. 158-88; here p. 158-59.

20 Bill McKibben: *Wandering Home. A Long Walk across America's Most Hopeful Landscape: Vermont's Champlain Valley and New York's Adirondacks*. New York: Crown Publishers 2005, p. 74.