

<http://somatosphere.net/2017/10/toxicity-waste-detritus-an-introduction.html>

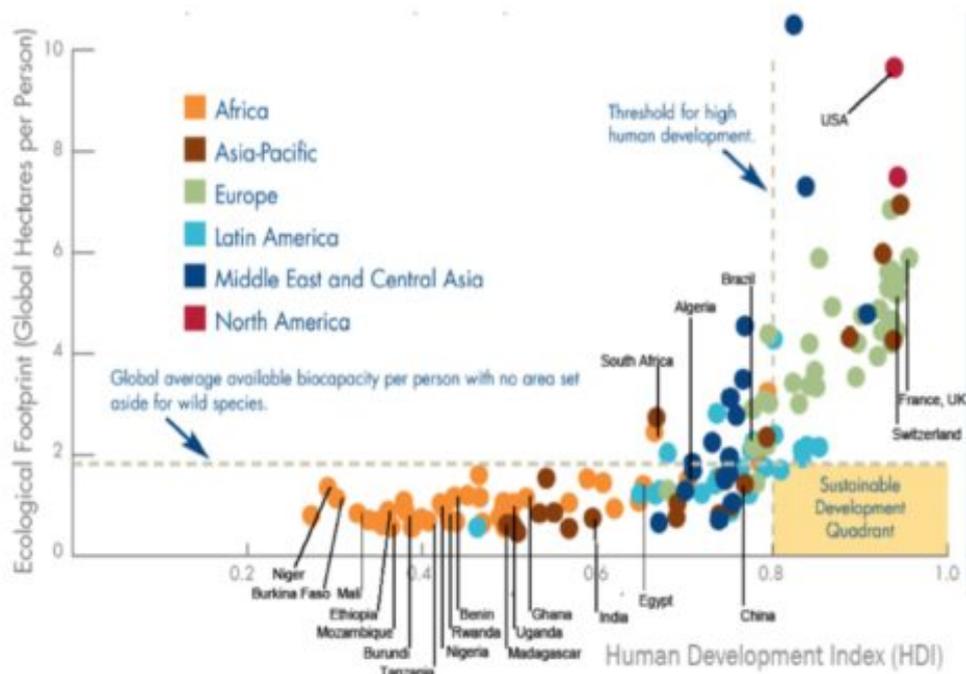
Toxicity, Waste, Detritus: An Introduction

2017-10-10 10:37:30

By Pamila Gupta and Gabrielle Hecht

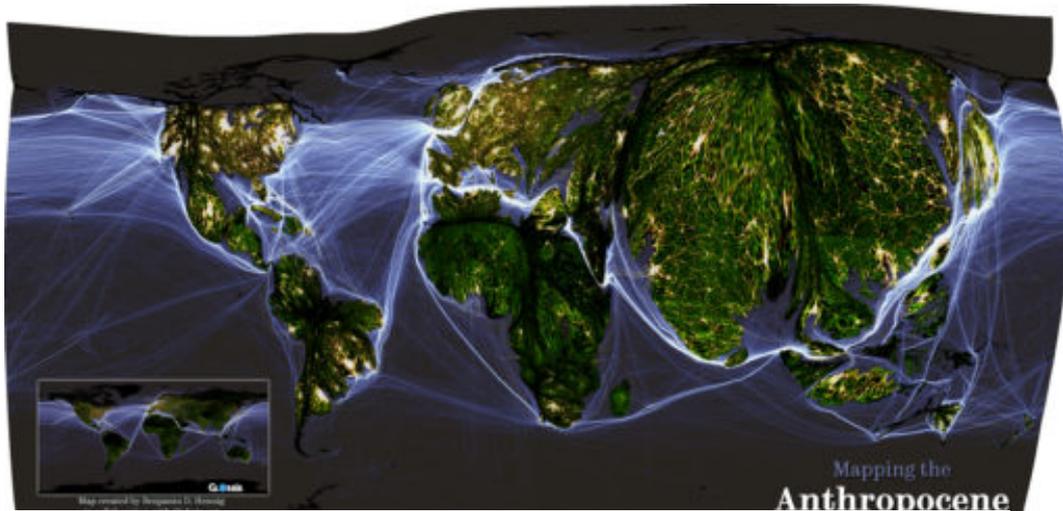
Planet Earth has entered the time of the Anthropocene. For natural scientists, this means that human activity, taken as a whole, has come to rival geological and biophysical forces in its effect on the planet. Disturbing material comparisons communicate the deep weirdness of this fact. For example, there's now [enough concrete](#) on the planet to produce a 2mm thick, full-scale replica of Earth, and enough plastic to completely wrap that replica in cling film. In the time of the Anthropocene, humans are turning the planet inside out, redistributing matter, putting molecules out of place.

The responsibility and benefits of wasting the planet – and toxifying the bodies that reside on it – are wildly, but unsurprisingly, uneven. Charts and maps readily capture such inequalities. You can critique the UN's Human Development Index on many fronts, but it comes in awfully handy for visualizing aggregate differences between ecological footprint and economic prosperity:



Visualizing inequality in the Anthropocene. Source: World Wildlife Fund 2006, via work by Daniel D. Moran, Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

Some creative mapmakers have found even more striking ways of presenting these inequalities:



Equivalent area map of night lights, major roads, railways, power lines, pipelines, overseas cables, airlines, shipping lanes. Source: <http://www.viesoftheworld.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/AnthropoceneMapping.jpg>

As both of these visualizations make abundantly clear — with a lower HDI cluster of mustard dots representing Africa in one, and the lush expanse of green Africa standing out in the other — the African continent registers a lower ecological footprint than many other parts of the world, while displaying significantly higher levels of inequality. South Africa — [often called the most unequal society in the world](#) — pops out of these images for its intense industrial development. Does this contrast imply that South Africa is a particularly toxic place? Beyond the striking yet predictable pictures presented by such visualizations, how might we understand the toxification of our planet more generally if we start in Africa? How can African places offer purchase on the nexus of waste, toxicity, and violence that currently drive global change? What genealogies of toxicity, waste, and detritus emerge by tracing horizontal circuits across the Global South, or within Africa itself? How does dwelling in the cleavages and interstitial spaces that emerge in such circuits open up new toxic forms, relations, and vocabularies?

Such questions formed the starting point for the papers in this collection, which arises from a sustained collaboration between scholars at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Michigan.

Generously funded by the Mellon Foundation, the broader collaborative project aims to explore the dynamics between theory and empiricism in the African humanities. Within this framework, a subgroup of scholars in history, anthropology, literary studies, and media studies at both institutions pursued the theme of toxicity, waste, and detritus in the Global South. Along the way, we were joined by a handful of scholars from other universities. This collection emerges from a series of workshops and conversations conducted over a two-year period.

The ontological indeterminacy of the waste/value dialectic formed a starting point for our conversations. As social theorists have long observed, materials can be waste in one context, and commodities, resources, or art in another. Changes in value are never clear, unidirectional, or fixed in time and space. We examined the political geography of this indeterminacy in African and other “Global South” contexts. We saw toxic waste not only as a mirror of social, political, and economic conditions, but also as an active agent shaping those conditions. A focus on toxicity and detritus led us to the “slow violence” of fast capitalism, exploring the perpetual state of living in ruins and amidst rubble (industrial and otherwise). Residues, topographies, and littorals offered points of entry and exit.

How, we wondered, could we better locate the global in the African local? How could we think beyond repair in and from Africa? Some authors rotate the compass, so that African things and places come to reflect or refract American and European processes. Africa offers new starting points: sites of beauty to learn from, as well as places where poop ends up, ports are left to dwindle, mercury levels rise, and lakes become ever more polluted. Other authors introduce vocabularies for thinking about global change (geological and otherwise), tracing Anthropocenic shifts in the ground beneath our feet. Patented technologies, industrial mining, and fantastical architectural designs create disturbing ways of living and being. Their discourses and geographies cannot be easily contained or demarcated.

The collection begins with a set of meditations on each of our organizing keywords: toxicity, waste, and detritus. From there, essays on “forms” and “flows” will appear weekly. We end with three closing meditations on “futures,” in the hope that readers will experience the collection as a set of invitations to further conversation.

If you accompany us on this journey, you will find yourself gazing upwards to the sky or peering down below the surface of our deep oceans. Perhaps you will share our consternation at high-rise urbanscapes, rotting fish carcasses, human-built islands, garbage patches lost at sea, at the drift, dust, and dumps that envelop us. We hope to show you how materialities of waste signal the quickened media in which they take form and travel,

how everyday circuits of inclusion and exclusion are brought into question. We invite you into the toxic sensorium, addressing the sights, sounds, smells, and taste of toxicity, registering “empathies of waste” and “critical detritus.” Meditations become mediations. Forms and flows bring forth fluids and fluidity, morphing into uncertain futures, racialized bodies, and bleached beaches.

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AMA citation

Gupta P, Hecht G. Toxicity, Waste, Detritus: An Introduction. *Somatosphere*. 2017. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/2017/10/toxicity-waste-detritus-an-introduction.html>. Accessed October 16, 2017.

APA citation

Gupta, Pamila & Hecht, Gabrielle. (2017). *Toxicity, Waste, Detritus: An Introduction*. Retrieved October 16, 2017, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/2017/10/toxicity-waste-detritus-an-introduction.html>

Chicago citation

Gupta, Pamila and Gabrielle Hecht. 2017. *Toxicity, Waste, Detritus: An Introduction*. Somatosphere. <http://somatosphere.net/2017/10/toxicity-waste-detritus-an-introduction.html> (accessed October 16, 2017).

Harvard citation

Gupta, P & Hecht, G 2017, *Toxicity, Waste, Detritus: An Introduction*, Somatosphere. Retrieved October 16, 2017, from <<http://somatosphere.net/2017/10/toxicity-waste-detritus-an-introduction.html>>

MLA citation

Gupta, Pamila and Gabrielle Hecht. "Toxicity, Waste, Detritus: An Introduction." 10 Oct. 2017. Somatosphere. Accessed 16 Oct. 2017.<<http://somatosphere.net/2017/10/toxicity-waste-detritus-an-introduction.html>>