

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

BOND, DAVID, 2022, *Negative ecologies: Fossil fuels and the discovery of the environment*, Univ of California Press, 262 pp., ISBN: 978-0-52038-678-5

Keywords: Negative Ecologies, Fossil Fuels, Disaster, Toxicity.

Negative Ecologies is a prime ethnographic book on toxicity and disasters caused by the fossil fuel industry. Both beautifully and intricately written, the book offers various fundamental case studies of the social and environmental consequences and costs of our exemplary commodity - crude oil. It is also a book grounded in a broad critique of industrial capitalism.

In the *Introduction*, Bond starts by placing crude oil at the center of attention, à la Michael Watts (2004; 2005). Oil as a commodity - with its staggering profit, the extraction of which brings destruction as the norm - is the protagonist of the book. The destructive impact of crude oil extraction cannot be contained within the given structures of inequality, and it is “protected” by deep investments and by the law, shielding it from resistance, protests, and activism (3). Bond argues that it has become common sense to “protect” the oil economy and that no disaster is huge enough and not enough lives and livelihoods are lost to make oil finally accountable. Why? Are we just blinded by the riches that oil brings, or have we built around us a knowledgeable discourse of negative ecologies that transform paradoxes into norms? By *negative ecologies*, Bond refers to the detrimental impacts of human activities on the environment, resulting in ecological degradation, loss of biodiversity, and disruption of natural systems and communities. He highlights the urgent need for sustainable and regenerative practices. Throughout the book, Bond argues that addressing issues of toxicity and environmental pollution requires not just technical solutions, but also broader social and political changes that challenge the structures of power and inequality underpinning resource extraction and industrial capitalism more broadly.

Bond started fieldwork in 2010, studying the aftermath of the BP oil spill among the coastal communities of the Gulf of Mexico. How residents experienced the disaster was one of the author’s primary research questions. Soon, it became clear to the researcher that the life

experiences of the locals and the technological reasoning around the spill were in dissonance. The contrast between the promise of oil and the resulting negative environmental impacts drew Bond's focus towards the distressed state of the world (12). Anthropology does often focus on the negative aspects of society, so why is Bond's book so important? Because in *Negative Ecologies* Bond uses a poetic and eloquent tone to convey a sense of respect and awe of the destruction brought by oil. Case studies used by the author include the trans-Alaskan pipeline, coastal communities devastated by oil spills, toxic fallout from spills, contaminated waters, scorched forests and disappearing mangroves. All these cases of ecological fallout are protected by the mantra of profit, by its fiscal promise, by the utopia of global wellbeing it claims will ensue. The book evokes dreadful images, and the reader's attention remains fixed on the environment.

The book focuses on North America, on how we manage the effects rather than how we confront the causes of disasters. Bond gives a history of the categories and series of destruction that convinced scientists, citizens, and policymakers about how "toxic thresholds and impact assessments extend the life and consequences of the use of fossil fuels, retain them within the jurisdictions" (7). They indeed turn the attention away from material harm, engineering hubris and optimism (8). Thus, Bond claims that crude oil "doings" have made the environment visible and politically important.

In Chapter 1, Bond starts with the history of the concept, "Environment," a "footloose" concept (see also Timothy Morton in his book "Being Ecological"). The environment, often conceived of as a concern of the developed world, has been marginalized in terms of its historical significance, frequently relegated to a lower priority. The chapter is about the tight connection to western-made power, the materiality of negative ecologies and how we have let the "unbound destruction become ordinary" (29). According to Bond, the "current arrangements" become untenable when we focus solely on the negative extremes rather than considering the nuances in between.

Chapter 2 chronologically presents disasters and their governance. Starting with Bond's favorite case, the BP oil spill - as a scientific object - and with a touching representation of the "sickened" residents of the Gulf Coast one year after the disaster, Bond shows how the dangerous mix of knowledge production, performance and corporate agendas create certainty and credibility (73). Illnesses, embodied toxicity, wide dispersion of hydrocarbons in all the elements where people live after protests, testimonies at hearings and litigations could not reach

the type of legitimacy which was hoped for (73-77). Bond shows how the legal processes were entangled with politics and corporations could “buy off” knowledge and research by putting extensive resources into contracting top notch scientists to conduct research and draft reports on the impact and consequences of the spill (76). In this way, the oil spill became a performance. In this chapter Bond also shows - and this was one of his earlier arguments (Bond, 2013) - how disasters do indeed *help* the industry. For instance, after the Exxon Valdez disaster a “legislative and technological mastery” (79) of the spill was then used a precedent and guideline to the consequent BP spill giving legitimation to oil spill expertise unilaterally brought by those who had caused the oil spill to begin with. The same with deep water research on the effects of much elusive “subsurface oil” (80) where research could only be conducted by large expenditures which never came to conclusive results and thus having not reached that “degree of certainty” liability could not be assessed (81). The chapter concludes with a thought-provoking paragraph about the “technology of consensus” extensively promoted in public.

Chapter 3, a fully ethnographic chapter, appears like a long digression into the story of Fort McKay and Fort Chipewyan since the sixties. It presents archival research into old environmental assessments of this area of Alberta, Canada known for its tar sand disaster. After decades of destruction by hydraulic fracturing (fracking) and extensive pollution across vast areas, Fort Chipewyan is a sad result of experimental programs of monitoring oil and water pollution. It is a case of capital funded scientific knowledge and scientific expertise that formalize, sterilize, and naturalize the impact of oil industry disaster. Fort Chipewyan is also a case of the corporations trying to put on an ethnographic lens, learning about traditional knowledge and local uses of the land to then standardize them and license to other oil companies (99). This is a chapter which shows how conflicting interests - of the residents and of the oil company - creates different scientific analyses and expertise and a struggle by native populations to be involved in environmental governance.

Chapter 4 is on the materiality and the significance of pipelines which have increasingly become present in the lives of many communities and have become arenas of environmental activism and protests which cross time and space. The materiality of perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) is the central protagonist of Chapter 5. This subtle, slippery (123) and extremely resistant and toxic chemical has the property of entangling itself not only with living bodies and other natural matters, but also with class-action lawsuits (123). In this chapter, Bond shows how the controversial PFOA contamination is defined “in the dialectical tension between...the open nature of [PFOA] and the effort to pull PFOA into something more solid and prosecutable”

(124). In this chapter, toxicity is presented as both a lived and theorized category. Thus, the author presents several ethnographic vignettes where the residents affected by contamination narrate their tragic stories. These are not only stories of suffering and frustration, but also are stories of chronic neglect, paternalism and disempowerment taking place at home, at school, at the factory, at the doctor's office, community meetings, and finally in court showing how the invisible presence of toxicity had crept itself into the public realm.

Finally, Chapter 6 is another case study on the mangrove in St. Croix and the HOVENSA refinery. The petrochemical contamination due to several oil spills has drastically reduced the mangroves with dramatic consequences for the livelihoods of the local people. Again, the scientific documentation created by these consequential spills had finally given visibility to the mangroves which throughout the years had been seen as "a lingering anachronism best cleared out so the future of industrial modernity could finally arrive" (158).

The chapters of the book rotate around different cases from Canada to the Caribbean, but what keeps them all together is that they highlight the violence that characterizes the hydrocarbon industry in North America. The materiality of fossil fuels linked to the negativity of fossil fuels brings new networks into life. Bond calls these networks "injured," underlying their vulnerability and the negative effects of fossil fuels (18). Bond suggests that, "negative ecologies open the door for ethnography to grapple with the destructive legacy of modern progress without first domesticating it into complicit institutions or theoretically departing from its contingent history...turn[ing] ethnographic attention back to materialism" (21).

In *Negative Ecologies*, Bond's approach to toxicity is grounded in a broader critique of the social and environmental costs of industrial capitalism where the harms caused by toxic pollution and environmental degradation are not accidental, but rather the result of systemic inequalities and power imbalances that prioritize profits over people and the environment. Bond's approach also emphasizes the importance of understanding the experiences and perspectives of affected communities, particularly those that are historically marginalized or excluded from decision-making processes related to environmental policy and regulation. In revealing the multifaced negative ecologies, Bond seeks to address environmental harms in ways that are equitable and inclusive.

The book's greatness lies in its unreserved depiction of the profound encounters that individuals undergo following disasters, encompassing both evident disasters like the BP spill, and more nuanced, imperceptible instances such as the ongoing PFOA contamination. These dramatic

experiences come strongly to light when confronted with the scientific and regulatory apparatus which produced knowledge, facts, and reality about disasters, and which is often legitimized at the expenses of individuals, families, and communities.

Works Cited:

Bond, D. (2013). Governing disaster: the political life of the environment during the BP oil spill. *Cultural Anthropology*, 28(4), 694-715.

Morton, T. (2018). *Being ecological*. MIT Press.

Watts, M. (2004). Resource curse? Governmentality, oil and power in the Niger Delta, Nigeria. *Geopolitics*, 9(1), 50-80.

Watts, M. J. (2005). Righteous oil? Human rights, the oil complex, and corporate social responsibility. *Annu. Rev. Environ. Resour.*, 30, 373-407.

Marianna Betti holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Bergen, Norway. She has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Kenya, Norway and Italy. Her research interests lay in the fields of political ecology, the anthropology of development and religion and the anthropology of oil.



© 2024 Marianna Betti