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Toxic Necro-Waste

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The concept of necro-waste is a fascinating one, with a wide application across the social sciences. Something that I wanted to highlight in this reply was the toxicity of necro-waste. Olson acknowledges this by discussing how necro-waste can cause harm to labour.¹ [1] The example that he gives is the embalming fluids which can poison the embalmers working with them. This also applies to cremated remains, which can be breathed in by the crematorium staff handling them, causing breathing problems. But, for me, the toxicity of necro-waste goes beyond its materiality. It's also socially polluting as toxicity can be drawn from the meaning of the corpse materials.

Ian Brady's Remains

The question over what to do with the remains of the British serial killer, Ian Brady, demonstrates this point well. Between the years of 1963-1965, Brady, along with his accomplice, Myra Hindley, abducted, tortured, and murdered five children between the ages of 10-17. They then buried four of the victims on Saddleworth Moor. The body of 12 year old Keith Bennet is believed to still be buried [there](#). Brady died in May and, four months after his death, the coroner's inquest was held. For those four months, his corpse was held in a ['monster morgue'](#), alongside the Manchester bomber, Salman Abedi.

It was not long after Brady's death that the media reports turned to the question of what would happen to his remains. Christopher Sumner, the coroner that handled the body, stated that it would not be released until [two assurances](#) had been made. First, there would need to be a funeral director and crematorium staff willing to work with it. Second, Brady's cremated remains were not to be spread on Saddleworth Moor.

Yet, Brady was born and raised in Glasgow, and it was believed that he wanted his cremated remains to be scattered there. However, Glasgow council were quick to state that his remains were not to be scattered on their [lands](#). Thus, from early on there was a tight control over where Brady's remains could and could not be disposed of.

This control exhibited in the management of Brady's corpse is not unusual. Myra Hindley died in 2002 and there was a similar reluctance from funeral directors to work with her body. In the end, the final resting place of her remains was kept secret from the public and the funeral director that carried out the ceremony was never named for fear of their reputation being [tarnished](#). In a sense, these mechanisms of control demarcate the remains as poisonous. There's a reluctance to house them. Nobody must know where they have been disposed of as the meaning of the disposal site will change.

Ian Brady as Toxic Necro-Waste

The meanings associated with the remains of Ian Brady transform them into a form of toxic necro-waste. If necro-waste is a way of categorising corpse materials as waste, toxic necro-waste is a way of contextualising the most harmful and poisonous aspects of this waste. This

¹ See Olson, 2016, 335.

could be present in their materiality, as stated at the beginning of this reply, or could also be present in the meaning of the waste material.

In the discussion above, Brady's remains are comparable to barrelled radioactive waste, in that they are tightly controlled to prevent poisoning the environment. Much of this control, however, emanates from the meaning of the corpse materials. While Brady may now be deceased, the depravities that he committed do not simply go away. His corpse still holds the meaning of these because it is the vessel through which they were committed. The challenge becomes what to do with that vessel.

Disposing of Toxic Necro-Waste

The concept of toxic necro-waste problematizes the process of disposal. Indeed, Mary Douglas understands disposal as an act of putting something beyond a threshold. It is a way of creating boundaries and order. [2] However, the disposal of something also includes disposing of that 'thing's' meaning. [3] The meanings attached to Brady demarcated him as something poisonous to society while he was alive. His body had been locked inside [Ashworth hospital](#) since 1985. It had been disposed of from society during this period as it was barred from the public, and suitably pacified. But, now that he's dead, his corpse sits in an uncertain space. It has not yet been disposed of and, thus, not yet repositioned in the social order.

When necro-waste is physically disposed of, its meaning still remains. People visit grave sites to mourn, wear objects containing cremated remains, and visit sites of mass murder, such as the Cambodian killing fields. Brady will have no grave site. When the material disposal is carried out, the final location of his remains will likely be kept a secret. He will, however, continue to exist in the public consciousness through documentary, film, and television adaptations.

Toxic necro-waste brings these questions of disposing of necro-waste back to the forefront. There's clearly more to be said about the interaction between necro-waste and the process of disposal. How, for instance, does society dispose of the socially poisonous when the disposal of meaning is incompatible with the physical process of disposal? These questions stretch necro-waste further than the fields of death care and health care. It's a cultural waste too.

Troyer hinted at this with his sub type '*Anxiety Producing Necro-Waste*'. [4] Toxic necro-waste feeds into necro-waste on the movie screen. The story of Brady is told and retold until the meaning becomes adapted. In a sense, the toxicity becomes more consumable. It moves from being akin to barrelled radioactive waste to being similar to a cigarette. Cigarettes are still toxic, but we are happy to disregard the negative effects for the positive, psychological ones. Similarly, Brady is still toxic, but public fascinations with the morbid lead to a disregarding of this toxicity. It has been re-established as consumable through media. [5] This could be an attempt at disposing of the socially poisonous.

Toxic Necro-Waste

Bigger questions over cultural waste come out of this, but these are too big to adequately address in this reply. Though, what I hope that the concept of toxic necro-waste demonstrates is the powerful role that necro-waste can play in understanding contemporary culture. Perhaps this could be extended in further publications. Either way, the concept of necro-waste clearly has an exciting future. Its wide application across the social sciences guarantees this.

References

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