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Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice (Albma Rhetoric Cult & Soc Crit)

Phaedra Carmen Pezzullo

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Tourism is at once both a beloved pastime and a denigrated form of popular culture. Romanticized for its promise of pleasure, tourism is also potentially toxic, enabling the deadly exploitation of the cultures and environments visited. For many decades, the environmental justice movement has offered —toxic tours,— non-commercial trips intended to highlight people and locales polluted by poisonous chemicals. Out of these efforts and their popular reception, a new understanding of democratic participation in environmental decision-making has begun to arise. Phaedra C. Pezzullo examines these tours as a tactic of resistance and for their potential in reducing the cultural and physical distance between hosts and visitors.

Pezzullo begins by establishing the ambiguous roles tourism and the toxic have played in the U.S. cultural imagination since the mid-20th century in a range of spheres, including Hollywood films, women's magazines, comic books, and scholarly writings. Next, drawing on participant observation, interviews, documentaries, and secondary accounts in popular media, she identifies and examines a range of tourist performances enabled by toxic tours. Extended illustrations of the racial, class, and gender politics involved include Louisiana’s —Cancer Alley,— California’s San Francisco Bay Area, and the Mexican border town of Matamoros. Weaving together social critiques of tourism and community responses to toxic chemicals, this critical, rhetorical, and cultural analysis brings into focus the tragedy of ongoing patterns of toxification and our assumptions about travel, democracy, and pollution.

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