



Toxic Autobiographies in Portugal: Memory, Resistance and Co-Production of Knowledge Within the Academia

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Assuming the production of knowledge, in its procedural perspective, as an important element of the epistemological debate about the ontology of the knowledge produced by the academy and its engagement with the contemporary reality, this article aims to present a reflection of the process of participative production of knowledge by a group of researchers of the Ecology and Society Workshop (ECOSOC-CES) in the transnational project Toxic Bios, coordinated by Professor Marco Armiero. We will present the transdisciplinary methodology and pedagogy adopted, discussing this research experience and some of the results.

Being an contraction of Toxic Autobiographies, Toxic Bios is a project of the KTH Environmental Humanities Laboratory, Stockholm (funded by the Seed Box, Mistra-Forms Environmental Humanities Collaboratory) with the participation of several countries for the co-creation of autobiographies of toxic contamination (Toxic Bios Project site, 2018). The hubs are distributed in seven countries (Brazil, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey) but the principle is that new hubs can continuously join the project.

The Toxic Bios project is the continuation of a project developed by Marco Armiero (2014) in his research on the waste struggles in Naples, Italy, where he edited a book in which eight women wrote their stories of activism and contamination (Armiero 2014)

Toxic autobiography is a distinct result of marginalized groups denouncing the environmental injustice in which they feel trapped (Armiero and Sedrez 2014), breaking the silence of the subalternized and excluded voices of those that experience the inequalities of this acts of injustice and the consequences of colonization of knowledge (Santos 2010). A map of all the biographies collected is one of the project outputs, and is shown in Image 1. Images 2 and 3 are part of the 10 Portuguese biographies available in the Toxic Bios map.

According to our experience and interpretation concerning the project main goals, we would like to reinforce three aspects: 1) the participatory research on contamination and resistance within civil society movements, 2) valuing the toxic autobiography as a distinct result of marginalized groups denouncing the environmental injustice in which they feel trapped, and 3) a prototype of bottom-up counter-history of phenomena of slow violence (Nixon 2011), challenging the oppressive narratives of progress, the commons, and science that contribute to the construction of an epistemic injustice (Santos 2017).



Map of the Toxic Bios Project. Source: Toxic Bios Project site (2018)

The adopted way of doing science aims to reflect on the barriers of scientific methodology, deepening the understanding of participatory science as a result of the influence of different social, political, cultural and ethical variables (Latour 1999) and the consequent disappearance of the distinction between power (science) and truth (social) (Callon 1986).

The research carried out by ECOSOC-CES (within the framework of national teams) collected personal stories, in video, text, sound or image formats, that articulate the individual and collective experience of mobilization against toxic contamination, through transformative actions to challenge power (Khasnabish and Haive 2014) and realign the concept of sustainability with dialogue about the environmental injustice suffered by subaltern communities and their struggles (Velicu and Kaika 2015) concomitantly building strategies toward just sustainability both in the Global North and Global South (Agyeman 2008).

By adopting an ontological understanding of the autobiography as a empowering act of knowledge production that addresses the epistemic exclusion of the affected persons and communities, questioning the domination and the co-optation of history, the ECOSOC-CES adopted as a guideline of action the co-production idiom (Jasanoff 2004), as a continuous process of re-working and mobilizing different ideas, forms of knowledge, and perspectives, and developing trust between those concerned (De Marchi and Funtowicz 2003).

In the course of the research process, particularly in an initial phase of mapping, Portugal's sparse environmental historical record before 1974 (dictatorship decades from 1926 to 1974) was evident, specifically in terms of its actors and processes of collective mobilization. This same fact evidenced the disconnection between previous and current environmental justice movements in Portugal, in particular with regard to the adopted processes of disclosure of the disruption situation of environmental osmosis in the public sphere and the mobilization of civil society against it, thus representing a loss of relevant knowledge.

It is possible to identify in several narrative biographies and trajectories a discourse that articulates the individual experience with the group resistance, the articulation often of various causes, struggles, themes and desires that led to contamination and / or popular mobilization, showing an interconnection with the biological, the economic, and the system of industrial production and consumption, among other aspects.

Each story is constructed by the networked individual, an association with other / different actors – human and nonhuman – and their dynamics – being (re)defined as they associate and participate in alliances, conflicts, and mediation processes (Callon 1986; Latour 1999).

The narratives revealed a porosity permeated by stories that intersect and others that diverge, considering that space represents a considerable influence on the construction of the self and on the personality references of the individual. They are also conducive to the creation and verification of the existence of multiple worlds (Escobar, 2015). The videos, audios, and texts collected evidence memories of stories, perplexities, and anguishes related to the territory, to the knowledge, to community heritage, to the existent and co-constructed learning and sense of connection with the place, and to the mobilization, the thinking and the construction of alternatives around contamination.

The autobiographies revealed testimonies of contact with various toxic substances, present in the places of the participants' geographical loci of socialization, work and leisure, as well as in the food and water they consume, always with the constant threat of contamination and fear.

This fear of these "toxic forces" is evident in the discourses of complexity and uncertainty concerning the constant transcorporeal affectation, where the internal and external borders of people and bodies are not rigid (Alaimo 2010). The stories speak of human suffering, other affected living beings, communities and the natural environment, devalued local knowledge, and a lack of public action and participation in the construction of information that influences public decision processes, as well as the need to break the silence.

The autobiographies collected consider the intergenerational injustice of such epistemicide (Santos 2010) reporting the lack of information about the consequences of the toxic contamination for the future, thus reaching people who are currently living with the contamination, as well as future generations. An injustice that contributes to a change of symbolic and concrete representations of nature for human beings (Shiva 1992).

As one reads the collected autobiographies, it becomes evident that there is an understanding and recognition of the creation of economic activities accompanying the polluting activities, and of the systemic operationalization of nature as a tool for the production of goods and growth of economies, dominated by internationally articulated economic groups, exercising the hegemony of power for the defense of their interests in capitalist accumulation.



Autobiography of António Pinto and Rosa Maria Pratas concerning the water and air pollution in Aveiro due to industrial activity. Source: Toxic Bios Project site (2018).

The production-destruction dialectic (Porto and Freitas 2000) is often referred to, with the polluting corporation and its products having an important role in society. The ideology of technological optimism (Porto, 2007), which advocates that technology can itself control and solve the impacts generated by its processes and products, is very present in proposed solutions for the reorganization of territories and economies.

This dialectic activity is patent in autobiographies as a participative process of construction of knowledge, understood as a right to human dignity, exerted in the biography of the individual and her/his memories through an everyday process of oppression and colonization of the space occupied by capitalism. Thus, it causes both fear and inner conflict between the individual, her/his memories in relation to space, her/his heritage and the space he experiences on a daily basis.



Autobiography of José Luís Almeida Silva and the mobilization against the creation of a nuclear plant in Ferrel.
Source: Toxic Bios Project site (2018).

In the context of the manipulation of a history created from top to bottom, using an oppressive logic, the Toxic Bios project aims to broaden the scope and positioning of academic intervention within society, mobilizing non-oppressive methodologies of knowledge creation, in an open and participated way. Through this process, and specifically in the case of the Toxic Bios team in Portugal[1], the contribution of this process of dialogue through the use of the material produced to strengthen the environmental justice movement in Portugal was evident, providing a structured and reliable assessment of particular historical processes, from the perspective of the affected persons and communities.

This is a process whose outcome contributes to supporting the various individuals who are the protagonists of the autobiographies, and concomitantly, victims of direct threats and lawsuits by polluting companies.

Footnotes

[1]

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