

Breaking Points: Mediated Contaminations, Infrastructural Toxicity

Andrea Bordoli

Since spring 2022, I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the mining town of Schefferville, Northern Quebec, and the neighboring Innu community of Matimekoshe–Lac John (MLJ). Nestled on Quebec’s north-eastern border with Newfoundland and Labrador, at the heart of the mineral-rich Labrador Trough, this territory falls within the Nitassinan—the ancestral, unceded yet unrecognized homeland of the Innu. This article focuses on a recent case of water contamination resulting from a containment basin breach at one of the region’s mining infrastructures. First, framing the incident as infrastructural violence, it highlights the complex dynamics of making contamination visible beyond local boundaries. Second, by examining one of the state-led, science-based responses to this infrastructural failure, it explores the value of thinking with infrastructural toxicity to address more precisely infrastructural violence in settler-colonial/Indigenous contexts.

Of Black Bears and Red Waters

In spring 2019, an image of a black bear drinking red-tinted water from the shores of a lake near Schefferville appeared in several [provincial newspapers](#). Captured by Conrad André, a member of the Innu community of MLJ located adjacent to the town, this photograph was shared alongside concerns for the environmental impact of mining in the region. [When questioned by the media](#), Tata Steel Minerals Canada (TSMC)—currently the area’s only active mining company, despite mining here dating back to the 1950s—dismissed concerns, explaining that the “authorities had been informed” and that the water’s coloration was “an innocuous byproduct of mining operations.” Furthermore, a TSMC spokesperson urged everyone to remember that “the site in Schefferville is a mine, and not a candy shop.”



A black bear drinking red water.
Photo: Conrad André
Spring 2019.

The company’s statement, however, stood in stark contrast to the perspective of the MLJ Band Council. Bands are the governing units of Indigenous Nations in Canada, established under the 1876 Indian Act. In a [release published shortly afterwards](#), representatives of the MLJ Band Council reported that regular observations had identified more than twenty contaminated sites near TSMC mining operations. These assessments were conducted jointly by community members and an independent environmental agent hired by the Council to assess the contamination levels. In order to substantiate their claims, the media release included a series of aerial photographs documenting a significant spill of contaminated water from one of TSMC’s containment basins in the Goodwood area, located on Newfoundland and Labrador territory. This visual evidence—captured by independent filmmaker Benoît Desjardins, commissioned by the MLJ Band Council to document the spill from a helicopter—established a connection between the red waters as witnessed and a widespread leakage affecting multiple regional waterbodies.

Following these developments, the case received increased attention on the Quebec side of the border, where both Schefferville and MLJ are located. [Quebec’s Ministry of the Environment](#) described the images as “disturbing” and “worrying,” calling for further investigation into the environmental impacts of the spill. Province premier [François Legault personally pledged](#) to send specialists to Schefferville for a thorough assessment. Meanwhile, some [members of the MLJ community took action](#) and erected

↓ *Aerial views of the Goodwood basin spill.*
Photos: Benoît Desjardins
Spring 2019.



a blockade to halt TSMC's iron ore transportation. Concurrently but independently, Patrice Couture, a professor in ecotoxicology at the Institut National de la Recherche Scientifique in Québec City, launched a research project "MiraNor: Towards Restoration and Protection of Fish Habitats Affected by Mining Activities in Northern Quebec." Focused on assessing freshwater reserves and fish health in northern Quebec's mining regions, the project included a fieldsite in the Schefferville–MLJ area.

Mediated (Remote) Contamination: Infrastructural Violence

At the time my fieldwork began in 2022, the red waters situation was still a pressing concern for the MLJ community. Many were frustrated by TSMC's inaction, as the breach in the Goodwood basin remained unrepaired. This fueled a sense of disillusionment, amplified by the fading media attention since the case was first reported. Some community members particularly lamented the lack of communication regarding the events of spring 2019. By this point, the only concrete measure taken was a fine of 33,373 CAD imposed on TSMC for multiple violations of the Canadian Environmental Protection Act. During an informal conversation, one interlocutor and MLJ community member¹ shared:

*It has been three years, and we are still waiting for the breach to be repaired...
If this had happened down South, they would have addressed it sooner. Here,
nobody cares, and we still don't even know if the water is contaminated or not.*

¹ For privacy reasons I anonymize interlocutors, except for those whose names were already made public through media.

This account underscores the critical role of geographic distance and (in)visibility when addressing contamination in remote mining contexts. Scholarship on contamination, pollution and toxicity often highlights their uneven geographical and social distribution (Geissler and Prince 2020). These contexts are shaped by the interplay of slow (Nixon 2011) and infrastructural (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012) forms of violence, both of which emphasize the incremental and often hardly visible nature of contamination and toxicity. Addressing the infrastructural violence of the Goodwood basin breach thus requires engaging with its spatial and visual (media) dimensions across different scales (Dewan and Sibilila 2023). While the effects of the spill were clearly evident to residents, this localized visibility remained largely disregarded, obscured by the region's remoteness (Saxer and Andersson 2019) and by factors limiting the circulation of images documenting the case, such as the lack of independent media on-site and the overall sensitivity towards mining in the region. Broader attention emerged through the production of further visual evidence—a form of community-led "aerial activism" (Moscato 2020)—precipitating extensive media coverage and the subsequent involvement of scientists and public officials.

The challenge, then, lies in translating localized visibility into wider awareness and accountability, particularly among those with the power to enforce concrete change and address the material (infrastructural) origins of contamination. However, sporadic bursts of attention and intermittent, superficial demands for accountability are insufficient. Effective responses require ongoing engagement, decisive intervention, consistent follow-ups and transparent communication—not only to remediate environmental harm and hold the perpetrators accountable, but also to ensure that local communities remain informed and actively involved.

“Bad Land Relations”: From Infrastructural Violence to Infrastructural Toxicity?

In the fall of 2022, MiraNor’s initiator Prof. Couture shared some of the project’s preliminary findings with the MLJ community. He highlighted the challenges of evaluating toxicity in subarctic environments, particularly due to the cold climate and low levels of biodiversity, meaning that any biological samples will necessarily be limited. Furthermore, he explained that specific fish species collected in the region were being analyzed to determine whether contamination in their habitats and bodies exceeded acceptable thresholds. Following Prof. Couture’s presentation, a member of the MLJ community asked about the potential risks of contamination for humans, given that many people there regularly eat locally caught fish. Prof. Couture answered:

The data collected can’t be used to answer such questions with certainty. Our project focuses on evaluating contamination in freshwater and fish health, which is already very challenging in this research setting.

Mining landscapes around Schefferville.
Photo: Andrea Bordoli
Summer 2022.



During the collective meal closing the event, another community member voiced his views on the matter:

How do they measure contamination? How can they separate water from fishes, fishes from humans? And the image of the bear drinking red water? I don't understand. [Why are] we only talking about fish here...?

By juxtaposing Prof. Couture's preliminary ecotoxicological reports with the reactions of MLJ community members, a disjuncture emerges between infrastructural failure, governmental and scientific responses, and local concerns and perspectives. Contemporary scientific models of evaluation, including the threshold theory of toxicity evoked by Prof. Couture, assume that water and land possess an assimilative capacity able to absorb and retain certain levels of toxic substances. These analyses, by necessity, disentangle species and elements from one another, abstracting them from their relational contexts. Moreover, as Prof. Couture acknowledged, determining threshold levels for individual species is particularly challenging in such contexts.²

² See Fontaine et al. 2023.

Métis scholar Max Liboiron critiques such perspectives for reproducing “bad land relations,” arguing that they “strip away the complexities of Land—including relations to fish, spirits, humans, water, and other entities” (2021: 39–40). Beyond scientific evaluations based on threshold theories, how should toxicity be addressed in this context? How would an understanding of the Goodwood basin failure through the lens of infrastructural toxicity contribute to this analysis? Shifting the focus from (infrastructural) failure and violence to toxicity may help capture the elusive, hard-to-pinpoint nature of the harm at play here. Framing violence by its toxic dimensions offers a more precise way of understanding the “bad land relations” reproduced through standard scientific evaluations of environmental harm. These evaluations are not toxic merely because of their contingent and debatable scientific models and protocols, but because they perpetuate fundamental colonial disruptions to land and those who dwell in it (Voyles 2015; Montoya 2016, 2018; Liboiron 2021). Infrastructural toxicity thus throws into relief the ways in which toxicity is embedded within extractive infrastructures, particularly in contexts shaped by settler governmentalities and Indigenous dispossession. It also highlights how these infrastructures reproduce fundamental colonial disruptions, both materially and conceptually.

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