

"Cultivating an Ability to Imagine": Ryan Walsh's *Reckonings* and the Poetics of Toxicity

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Abstract

For nearly two decades since Lawrence Buell defined and anatomized "toxic discourse" in *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (2001), the storying of toxic experience has received fruitful theoretical and literary attention. Throughout the world, citizens have come to terms with the reality that we live on a poisoned planet and the poisons in our environment are also in ourselves—the poisons our industrial activities spew into the air, water, soil, and food are almost imperceptibly ("slowly," as Rob Nixon would put it) absorbed into all of our bodies (through the process Stacy Alaimo described as "transcorporeality"). Biologist and literary activist Sandra Steingraber stated in *Living Downstream: A Scientist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment* (1997) that we must "cultivat[e] an ability to imagine" in order to appreciate the meaning of our post-industrial lives. In this essay, I focus on Ryan Walsh's new collection of poetry, *Reckonings* (2019), and on Pramod K. Nayar's recent ecocritical study, *Bhopal's Ecological Gothic: Disaster, Precarity, and the Biopolitical Uncanny* (2017), in order to propose and define an evolving "poetics of toxicity."

Keywords: Poetics of toxicity, toxic discourse, slow violence, transcorporeality, ecoprecarity.

Resumen

Durante las casi dos décadas desde que Lawrence Buell definió y diseccionó el "discurso tóxico" en *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (2001), la narración de la experiencia tóxica ha recibido una fructífera atención teórica y literaria. En todo el mundo los ciudadanos han llegado a un acuerdo con el hecho de que vivimos en un planeta envenenado y de que los venenos en nuestro entorno también están dentro de nosotros—los venenos que nuestras actividades industriales arrojan al aire, agua, suelo y comida están siendo absorbidos (por medio del proceso que Stacy Alaimo describió como "transcorporalidad") casi imperceptiblemente ("lentamente", como diría Rob Nixon). La bióloga y activista literaria Sandra Steingraber expuso en *Living Downstream: A Scientist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment* (1997) que debemos "cultivar la habilidad para imaginar" para apreciar el significado de nuestras vidas post-industriales. En este ensayo me centro en la nueva colección de poesía de Ryan Walsh, *Reckonings* (2019), y en el reciente estudio ecocrítico de Pramod K. Nayar *Bhopal's Ecological Gothic: Disaster, Precarity, and the Biopolitical Uncanny* (2017), con el fin de proponer y definir un "poética de la toxicidad" en evolución.

Palabras clave: Poética de la toxicidad, discurso tóxico, violencia lenta, transcorporalidad, ecoprecariedad.

In *Living Downstream*, her 1997 memoir of industrial contamination and its public health ramifications, Sandra Steingraber invokes the environmental justice mantra familiar from such works as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* and Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge* (both published in 1991): we have paid too high a price (in the

form of pollution and illness) for our military and industrial activities. In explaining the problem of society's acceptance of contaminated drinking water, Steingraber places responsibility not only on corporations that directly cause such contamination but on the gullible—and unimaginative—public that tolerates damaging industries. This failure of imagination is also, to a considerable degree, a failure of language, of communication. Steingraber writes:

Cultivating an ability to imagine these vast basins beneath us is an imperative need. What is required is a kind of mental divining rod that would connect this subterranean world to the images we see every day: a kettle boiling on the stove, a sprinkler bowing over the garden, a bathtub filling up. Our drinking water should not contain the fear of cancer. The presence of carcinogens in groundwater, no matter how faint, means we have paid too high a price for accepting the unimaginative ways things are. (211)

This "mental divining rod" to plumb the subterranean depths where toxic waters carry the unseen, unimagined byproducts of our industrial society is also needed to imagine and "reckon" with the scarcely perceptible dangers of the surface world, the streams and soils we can see with our very eyes but without fully appreciating the chemical alterations these phenomena may have undergone when located near or downstream or downwind from factories or other sources of toxicity. Lawrence Buell, who coined the term "toxic discourse" in his 2001 volume *Writing for an Endangered World*, recognized toxicity as one of the defining features of the planet as we entered the new millennium, writing, "The fear of a poisoned world is increasingly pressed, debated, debunked, and reiterated" (30). Writers and scholars in the years since Buell's book appeared have pushed the frontiers of toxic discourse, and recent examples of toxic poetry have achieved especially poignant renderings of human life on a poisoned planet, capturing what ecocritics such as Pramod K. Nayar have come to describe as a condition of "ecoprecarity."

Ryan Walsh's poetry collection *Reckonings* (2019), for instance, functions as a mental divining rod in telling the story of Spelter, West Virginia, where the DuPont Corporation operated a zinc smelter from 1928 to 1950 before shutting down the site and leaving the community with a de facto Superfund dump. In *Horizon* (2019), his probing new meditation on the meaning of place, Barry Lopez proposes that "Each place on Earth goes deep. Some vestige of the old, now seemingly eclipsed place is always there to be had" (60). Born and raised in West Virginia (and currently a resident of nearby Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), Walsh thinks of Spelter, the "seemingly eclipsed place"—the place that precedes the zinc plant—as a place irretrievably linked to industrial poison.

Again and again, the poet tries to "go deep," as Lopez would say, to know the essence of this Appalachian landscape on fundamental, pre-industrial level. What would it mean, he seems to ask, to know West Virginia as if coal mining did not exist or as if full remediation of the ravages of mining-caused toxicity were possible? In "Appalachian Spring," the second poem in Walsh's collection, it appears at first that there is the possibility of innocent beauty:

Spring breaks across Appalachia.
One morning dawn light dazzles;
hens cluck in the hen house
and the backyard magnolia
froths with pink-lipped petals,

like salmon leaping fervently
against a waterfall's white hem. (5)

But the "frothing" flower petals foreshadow later references in the book to tainted waters in post-industrial West Virginia, such as "that coppery, sulfuric hue / the North Fork of the South Branch— // the way it caught the summer glow / and threw it back tarnished" (12), as Walsh begins his evocation of the damaged place in the poem "In the Frame of Innings, Pendleton Country, WV." At the end of the earlier poem, "Appalachian Spring," the promise of innocent rebirth is, in fact, dashed:

Come next daybreak, grass blades
glitter in a killing frost;
the shock of scattered blossoms spreads
severed hands in mute applause. (5)

The power of Walsh's poetic rendering of post-industrial toxicity often comes from the verbal process of holding out flashes of hope and beauty, then retracting such promises by revealing the toxic reality, much like spring blossoms wilted by "a killing frost," celebratory "applause" muted by the viewer's understanding of a bitter truth. In describing Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), one of the Urtexts of modern toxic literature, Buell points to a tendency to "gothicize" narrative description in such work, noting that "Gothification becomes most lurid when the victim has never had a choice" (42). Rather than highlighting "lurid," grotesque images of contamination or disease, Walsh's poetics of toxicity typically foregrounds the yearning for a healthy, innocent sense of place (represented through images of spring and childhood).

In his anatomy of toxic discourse, Buell invokes philosopher Martha Nussbaum's notion of "the literary judge" in pointing out the judgmental perspective of literature that engages with the risks associated with the poisoned world, describing it as "a discourse of allegation or insinuation rather than of proof" and arguing that "its very moralism and intensity reflect awareness that the case has not yet been proven, at least not to the satisfaction of the requisite authorities" (48). Many of Walsh's poems explicitly describe industrial, medical, and legal processes and conditions. "Expert Testimony (Perrine v. DuPont, 2008)," we learn in the Notes at the end of *Reckonings*, "is lifted from part of the testimony of plaintiff expert witness and soil scientist Dr. Kirk Brown" (66): "We all know that someone / something / will kill you // People / should consider / cancers / could be / failures // Nature / children / adults / exposed // get it on the skin / ingest it // breathe it // drink it / Through careful study / we know / how much // children breathe // Risk / published / in the / air" (22). The erratic spacing of the poem suggests the testifying scientist's ponderous, meditative, pained emphasis on the public's murderous exposure to contaminants. Walsh's Notes also reveal that the 2007 lawsuit resulted in a \$382-million verdict for damages against DuPont, so poems like this one (and the entire *Reckonings* collection) are representations of legal and scientific determinations, not mere allegations of environmental and public health damages (66).

Walsh's Notes provide a web link to Dr. Brown's actual testimony; in comparing the testimony transcript with Walsh's poetic condensation, it is fascinating to see how the poetry crystallizes the various pathways of contamination (touching the skin, ingestion,

breathing, drinking) from the more diffuse and equivocal testimony. The poet also elides the scientist's quantitative statement about the probability of cancer: "The cancers that we found—or the probability of increased cancers that we found: the people living within the class area range from 7 times 10 to the minus 6 or 1 in a million, so that's an increase of cancer of 1 in a million. / So we're 100-1000 times greater than the minimum risk which is often considered by the regulatory community as being acceptable" (Transcript, January 2010). The witness's harsh testimony of increased risk of cancer is translated by the poet from numerical probabilities into biological activities as a way of vivifying the delivery processes and enhancing readers' empathy for the victims of contamination.

A few pages later, in "New River," we encounter a suicidal story where West Virginia induces its own contamination and someone's brother ("your brother") kills himself by leaping into the contaminated ("foaming") river:

West Virginia dug at its veins until
something dark emerged: a shadow
that stained the hands, smudged the sky,
burst the slurry dam in our minds.
Silica, bituminous coal, opioids:
Extraction and injection.

...One night

in May your brother zipped himself into
a black bag. Your blue Honda ditched in the lot
at the overlook. Hands felt the rail. Frog choruses
in the distance. Will, you left the bridge
became part of the air,
part of the crazed foaming river. (24)

The poisoning of the land, water, and air in West Virginia, the economic collapse of the region when the polluting industries shut down, and the personal despair (often linked to drug addiction) are implicitly conflated in the poet's words, extraction from the land leading to the injection of opioids into the bodies of local people.

The next poem, "Spelter, West Virginia (Unincorporated)," is a bitter play on the rural ("unincorporated") existence of company towns that now sit on contaminated land ("soiled ground") that is still owned by large corporations, even though the mines and smelters have shut down. "It's not what you think," the poem begins:

DuPont owns the soiled ground.
They're on the hook for containment,
The fate and transport of contaminants,
site reclamation, health monitoring, cash settlements.

And still the bottle smash of green glass
Is all that's left of the playground.
A plastic Kroger's bag caught in the chinking—
Spelter's only banner.

The rusted hulk of the smelter
And the small brick church
Where some got on their knees.

This isn't unique.

Superfund towns bloom like poppies, the pox,
the beet-red cheeks of Joe Domingo,
who worked swing shifts with your uncle.
But who will recall a single fact from this place?

If they can call us white trash, then it's okay
to drink up, blot out, mine, blast, frack, and fuck
every hole and deposit. Then dump,
flush, dredge, and spoil away every bit of us,
all we have left.... (25)

Lost in the legalese of containment, contaminants, reclamation, monitoring, and cash settlements is the physical, sensory experience of this place (one of many "Superfund towns"), the fragments of broken bottles and fluttering grocery bags. The poet writes from the perspective of the forgotten, abandoned, damaged local people—from the perspective of the physical environment that has been blighted by industry. His words seek to overcome the amnesia of a society that has used the minerals of this place, its life energy (in the form of coal) but cannot "recall a single fact from this place."

The most poignant tones of Walsh's collection, for me, are those of wistful nostalgia, a yearning to know and wholeheartedly love the pre-industrial "Wild Perfection" of Appalachia that now seems unattainable. Early in the book, we encounter a three-line "Fable":

Once upon a time
there were rivers and streams
you could drink from. (17)

The punch-in-the-gut bluntness of the final line—literally, the "punch line"—is reinforced in later poems by repeated references to frothy, oily, chemical-laced "rivers and streams" whose waters permeate Appalachia. The dashed hopes of "Appalachian Spring" and the nostalgia of "Fable" converge in the poem "Wild Perfection" toward the end of the book, where the first-person speaker recounts an experience wading in a local river with someone ("you") and his son (in the note on page 67, Walsh dedicates the poem to "Sebastian Matthews and his son, Avery Climo Matthews"). Having read so many poems in this book about contaminated water, the reader wants to shout out to the characters of the poem, "Do not touch that water! You probably won't find any salamanders or crawdads there, and if you do, they may glow in the dark!"

The nostalgic moment in "Wild Perfection" comes when the poet states:

If only we could
all run widdershins back to some Saturday
afternoon along a stretch of river

before rivers spoke a tongue
of polychlorinated biphenyls, heavy metals,
aluminum, valleys gone to rust or ruin,

it might resemble this thin rush of clear-
seeming water and flakes of sky reflected.

The strange word "widdershins" describes an impossible, counter-clockwise direction, a reversal of the course of the sun even—and the use of such a word intensifies the desperate impossibility of reversing time and know the true, pure, Lopezian nature of this place. As if this primordial yearning were not enough, the poem concludes with the devolutionary couplet:

Daddy, he said on the winding drive home,
When I was a fish, I lived in that river. (56)

Just as the poet nostalgically contemplates a time before the rivers of his native place spoke a language of multisyllabic toxic chemicals, his friend's son imagines a time before his own existence and possibly even before the emergence of the human species when wild fish lived in this mountain river and when we were those fish. This is where poetry becomes the "mental divining rod" that Sandra Steingraber describes in *Living Downstream*, a powerful tool of the imagination that enables readers to understand the difference between the places we dream of and the places we actually inhabit. As mentioned above, in contrast to the lurid approach to the toxic Gothic that Buell has described, Walsh adopts a rather different strategy in "Wild Perfection," relying on the nostalgic innocence of his friend's son to move the reader.

In his book *Bhopal's Ecological Gothic* (2017), Pramod K. Nayar describes the visual and literary texts that were created in the wake of the December 1984 Union Carbide disaster in India, a toxic leak that immediately killed 30,000 people and over time resulted in some 500,000 deaths, many due to genetic mutations. Traditional Gothic texts, Nayar writes, "invoked themes of a return to the past and transgression and often employed an aesthetics of fear" (xiv). "The Bhopal Gothic," however, "is fundamentally an ecological Gothic because the texts continually point to the haunting of Nature—primarily soil, water but also the 'natural' bodies of humans and animals—even as they examine the nature of this haunting by unholy liaisons, hybrid bodies, the monstrous, among others, that impact the survivors" (xvi-xvii). Nayar further emphasizes how the post-Bhopal body politic, as represented in such works as Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* (2007), "imbricates bodies, machines, chemicals with the state, corporate bodies and transnational capital" (xvii). While the Spelter Gothic of Walsh's poems differs in certain key ways (such as the multinational aspect) from the Bhopal Gothic that Nayar studies, both varieties of "toxic Gothic" discourse are the means by which artists and writers seek to imagine and communicate the Nixonian slow violence of the world that we inhabit, the haunting and invisible violence that operates beyond our view or on a scale that exceeds our sensory abilities. The poetics of toxicity also operate within the psychological and physiological realm of "precarity" that Nayar discusses in his book, the conditions that result from "an exposure to the world, which then inflicts injury" (xviii). Walsh's representation of haunted innocence in such poems as "Appalachian Spring" and "Wild Perfection" accords well with the condition of haunted precarity that Nayar explores. In fact, Nayar concludes his book with a discussion of Raghu Rai's photograph "Burial of an Unknown Child," highlighting the "certain tenderness" with which a hand brushes dirt from the face of a child who has perished due to the Bhopal disaster. Nayar quotes Yael Shapira in noting

how the photograph creates an "unassimilable convergence [of] 'a radically purified ideal and a scandalous, spectacular grotesque'" (Nayar 141). Likewise, Walsh's poems bring purity and toxicity, beauty and the grotesque, into "unassimilable convergence."

Just as Nayar describes the images that enable us to be haunted by toxicity decades following an incident that produced harmful contamination, Sandra Steingraber has suggested that our ability to imagine environmental toxicity is closely related to "imagery and storytelling": "We will remember a number if it's attached to a story that we heard because we can remember the story. The number is part of the story and therefore we can remember it" (Slovic, "The Meaning" 194). Other environmental humanities scholars, such as Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures* (2010), have explained what might be called "the poetics of toxicity," emphasizing how writers represent the fundamental, inescapable "transcorporeality" (Alaimo's word) of our lives in the material world—the fact that our bodies (and our imaginations) are inextricably connected to the world around us, including the poisons we release into the world through our industrial activities (3). Ryan Walsh's *Reckonings* joins such recent books of poetry as Adam Dickinson's *Anatomic* (2018) and earlier volumes such as Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* (1938) and Maria Melendez's *How Long She'll Last in This World* (2006), to form a poetic canon of literary toxicity, telling stories that seek to transform abstract legal and scientific data about quantities of contaminants in an ecosystem and legal determinations of risk and causality into poignant, meaningful stories.

Walsh's approach, as befits the title of his collection, has a sharp political edge to it, suggesting in the opening definition of "reckoning" that the ensuing poems may serve as "an act of counting" (i.e., cataloging the damages done to the land and people)), "a statement of a sum due" (i.e., there is a debt owed by those who caused this damage), and "a settlement of accounts: a day of reckoning" (i.e., the poems are calling for justice)—the notes on pages 66 and 67 describe the history of Spelter and the 2010 legal settlement between DuPont and residents of Harrison County. By contrast, works such as Dickinson's 2018 book are both political and phenomenological, juxtaposing sentences like "I wear multinational corporations in my flesh" and, in the next breath, "But I also wear symbiotic and parasitic relationships with countless nonhumans who insist for their own reasons on making me human" (9). The poetics of toxicity encompasses both Walsh's social reckonings and Dickinson's gasping assertion: "I am a spectacular and horrifying assemblage" (9). Such writing is essential to our efforts to "cultivate an ability to imagine," as Steingraber put it, the toxic byproducts of industrial society that course slowly and invisibly through our environment, through our air, water, soil, and food, and through our own bodies.

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