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## The Posthuman Body as an EcoGothic Wasteland in Allison Cobb's *After We All Died* and Adam Dickinson's *Anatomic*

# ABSTRACT

The focus of my inquiry are environmentally inflected metaphors and discourses of toxicity which inform the contemporary North American posthuman lyric. This provisional generic category of the posthuman lyric has been inspired by the recent shift from an anthropocentric understanding of lyric subjectivities to a biocentric perspective which repositions human epistemologies in relation to more-than-human matter. The posthuman angle questions the concept of the sovereign human self, stressing transversal ontologies, open to inter-agential exchanges, diverse biosemiotic processes and communication loops. My primary interest is in poetic representations of the human body as a transversal, toxic, catastrophe- and death-haunted wasteland. The volumes chosen to problematize those processes are Allison Cobb's *After We All Died* (2016), an elegiac meditation on the dying human species and anthropogenic change, and Adam Dickinson's *Anatomic* (2018), which probes the leaky perimeters of the chemical self using an electronic microscope and burden tests of the poet's own bodily tissues. The posthumanist angle which informs the analyses is supplemented with an ecoGothic one, as both critical paradigms can be seen as interrogatory discourses which probe human fears and hopes concerning the "edge of the human" and the recognition of non-human agency. Within the ecoGothic framework, nature is seen as "a contested site"—a "space of crisis," where human and non-human ecologies interact and co-produce meaning. This double lens will be used for the study of posthuman imaginaries and Anthropocene affects employed by Dickinson and Cobb.

**Keywords:** posthuman lyric, ecoGothic, biosemiosis, transcorporeality, wasteland.

## INTRODUCTION: THE POSTHUMAN LYRIC AND ECOGOTHIC BODIES

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As observed by Tom J. Hillard in his study of 19<sup>th</sup>-century American ecoGothic, the new materialist turn in the humanities foregrounds the inseparability of the environment from the body. Within this framework, the body is a transversal onto-epistemological continuum in which various agencies and semiotic processes, including non-human ones, interact and communicate (27). Similarly, in her seminal monograph *Bodily Natures*, Stacy Alaimo speaks of the necessity of reimagining human corporeality as “a trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (2). However, the full realization of the interconnectedness comes at a certain price, as Hillard argues, and it can be as liberating as it is terrifying. Alaimo does not explore the fear factor in her own inquiry, but, as further pointed out by Hillard, she does acknowledge “the immediacy and potency of all that the ostensibly bounded, human subject would like to disavow” (Alaimo 4). Indeed, if humans are no longer “the center of things, but nodes in a decentered network” (Weinstock, “Anthropocene” 19), the sense of danger and vulnerability increases, and the human conception of subjectivity is displaced by a “a messier (gothic) territory of matter” (Edwards et al. xviii).

The ecoGothic return of the repressed and the attendant ambiguous affects will be central to my own interrogation of the trans-corporeal subjects and non-human agencies in the two selected volumes of North American poetry. The ecocritical and posthumanist philosophical frameworks informing my analysis includes the ecoGothic perspective, within which, as noted by Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils, “all of us are already uncanny ecoGothic subjects, traversed by the automaticity of our nonhuman origins and affectivity” (12):

The indistinction of the human and nonhuman and the agency of the nonhuman environment become determining forces on and in the human world, determining forces that are largely disavowed as humans strive to conceive of themselves as conscious, rational, and volitional selves. The shaping force of the human’s immanent nonhuman origins and of the agentic nonhuman world—disavowed, repressed, denied—can always be counted on to return with a haunting and uncanny force in the Ecogothic. (Keetley and Sivils 12)

Seeking to conceptualize the tenets of ecoGothic as a form of critical praxis, rather than a separate genre, the Italian critic David Del Principe emphasizes its corporeal focus: “the EcoGothic examines the construction of the Gothic body—unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman,

posthuman, or hybrid—through a more inclusive lens, asking how it can be more meaningfully understood as a site of articulation or environmental and species identity” (1). Thus, the ecoGothic view offers “a nonanthropocentric position to reconsider the role that the environment, species, and nonhumans play in the construction of monstrosity and fear” (Del Principe 2). The scholar argues further that the contemporary breach between human and more-than-human ontologies stems from “the periods of seismic, industrial, mechanical, or technological growth that radically destabilized conceptions of non/human identity” (2). Andrew Smith and William Hughes supplement Del Principe’s angle by pointing out that ecocritical thought and the Gothic can be seen as interrogatory discourses which problematize human fears concerning the “edge of the human” and non-human agency. Within the ecoGothic framework, nature is seen as “a contested site”—a “space of crisis,” where human and non-human ecologies interact and co-produce meaning (Smith and Hughes 2–3).

This lens seems especially fitting for the study of the corporeal self in the poetry of the “self-conscious Anthropocene” (Keller 1).<sup>1</sup> I wish to look at the human body as an ecoGothic “space of crisis”—a transversal, toxic, catastrophe- and death-haunted landscape. My contention is that what emerges from the encounter between the posthuman lyric and ecoGothic concerns is the contemporary wasteland poem, in which many ecological anxieties, affects and questions are foregrounded and creatively interrogated. What I am specifically interested in are environmentally inflected metaphors and discourses of toxicity. Both the wasteland and the toxic body can be considered near-metaphors, since they exist at once as material realities and productive interrogatory tropes. Thus, the wasteland poem, as conceptualized here, is a variant of “the crisis poem,” perhaps best exemplified by T. S. Eliot’s modernist classic itself, in which the poet recognizes the limitations of the existing epistemologies, along with the inadequacy of the inherited forms of expression, in confrontation with the ruined or disappearing world.

Significantly for my inquiry, *The Waste Land* begins with a death of nature: as observed by Barry Spurr, it is “mediated through the reversal of the reverdie tradition in poetry, wherein springtime (April) is portrayed as the annual period of fertile renewal” (57). A series of interconnected deaths follows (Spurr 57), and the poem “unfolds in sites of crisis that

<sup>1</sup> The term was coined by Lynn Keller in her monograph *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (2017). Keller explains that she formulated it “to provide a term, distinct from the label for the geological era that may have begun centuries ago” and to stress “the awareness that humans have come to be the dominant force affecting planetary systems” (1).

are themselves *in extremis*” (McIntire 179). The landscape is gradually decomposed through images of sterility, desolation, human and urban decay, and disintegrating forms, including “the rattle of the bones,” the river’s “broken tent,” a scavenging rat “dragging its slimy belly,” and the unburied corpses (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 42–43). The all-pervading mood is one of despair and melancholy—“The nymphs are departed” (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 42), and with them a hope for the solace of pastoral nature and its restorative powers. Eliot’s wastelanders are disconnected spectres, walking and empty corpses, “neither living nor dead” (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 38); Western mythologies no longer hold, becoming part of the detritus.

Also in an environmental sense, the post-war world has become “a stony rubbish,” a lifeless, parched desert, where “the dead tree gives no shelter . . . [a]nd the dry stone no sound of water” (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 38). As noted by Gabrielle McIntire, Eliot’s vision is deeply ecocritical, as the poet “consistently shows sensitivities to fragile or degraded environments” (178). The dominant settings of the poem are “ones of topographical and environmental extremes (the polluted cityscape and the desert),” with very few places of refuge, such as hyacinth gardens, riverscapes and the briefly mentioned wilderness (McIntire 186). “In *The Waste Land*,” the critic argues further on, Eliot

simultaneously renders the postwar world as quasi-apocalyptic and replete with personal, political, spiritual, and cultural problems that threaten to unravel all meaning. In suggesting that ecological crises accompany these other problems of early twentieth-century modernity, Eliot pushes us to consider the analogies between compromised environmental exteriors and a complex range of similarly polluted interior states. (178)

The polluted and spiritually “dry” interior is evoked also by the recurrent figures of void in another of Eliot’s most celebrated poems.

We are the hollow men  
 We are the stuffed men  
 Leaning together  
 Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!  
 Our dried voices, when  
 We whisper together  
 Are quiet and meaningless. (T. S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men” 56)

The hauntological trope of “hollow,” “empty,” “stuffed men” with “dried voices” whispering inaudible and meaningless communications (“The Hollow Men” 56) further reveals Eliot’s ecoGothic sensibility.

The spatial trope of the desert in *The Waste Land* is indicative of a post-apocalyptic emptiness; however, for the modernist poet the desert in its mythical dimension also articulates a dystopian desire for the “still point”—an urge to arrest the world’s chaos and its apocalyptic darkness, for, as Wallace Stevens points out in “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” the desert is a blank canvas, where “nothing must stand between you and the shapes you take” (183). Thus, the horrors informing Eliot’s poetic wastelands are balanced with a desire of such a tropological and metaphysical “still point,” reconciling opposites and shielding the human consciousness from the entropy of “broken images.” The attendant realization informing Eliot’s quest for a new version of the absolute is that its fulfilment equals death—“the final meeting,” where shapes no longer take on form, the colours fade, the life force is “paralysed,” and “gesture” remains “without motion” (Eliot, “The Hollow Men” 56).

A more poignant version of the modernist wasteland poem, resonating strongly with Allison Cobb’s penchant for the grotesque, is Wallace Stevens’s “The Man on the Dump,” with its central ecologically flavoured line—“the dump is full / Of images” (201). Like that of Eliot, Stevens’s wasteland imagery connects the existential, the metapoetic and the environmental condition. And yet, where Eliot’s imagery strives towards a form of blankness, hollowing, and erasure, Stevens probes the material and the metaphysical detritus as a living ecology which is subject to decay. The poet-philosopher is here positioned within the landscape of abject urban trash and aesthetic debris, on a literal and symbolic dump, among broken Romantic tropes and rubbish, including “the mattresses of the dead, / Bottles, pots, shoes and grass” (203). In search of renewal, clarity and self-knowledge, Stevens provocatively recycles the excessively pastoral tropes of nature, “the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew” (202) and intertwines them with the “unpoetic” and haunted consumerist wasteland, consisting of very specific, humdrum objects such as “old tin cans,” “lard pails,” or “the wrapper on the can of pears” (201–02). For Stevens, the dump becomes compost where “[o]ne feels the purifying change” (202) and where the imagination can re-engage with the real world and its material processes. Man is, however, still at the centre of this change, and the individual imagination asserts its power over the (im)material dislocations, anthropogenic detritus and contingent ecologies. Considering poetic representations of waste, Lawrence Buell argues that Stevens’s dump is predominantly “a symbolic location,” a “repository of used-up images”; in short, that the poem fails to address environmental issues (664). However, the poet’s preoccupation with the materiality of objects and spaces, their irreducible thingness, paves the way for Cobb’s and Dickinson’s poetics of waste and their ecocentric interrogations of transcorporeal matter.

As observed by Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures*,

[m]atter, the vast stuff of the world and of ourselves, has been subdivided into manageable “bits” or flattened into a “blank slate” for human inscription. The environment has been drained of its blood, its lively creatures, its interactions and relations—in short, all that is recognizable as “nature”—in order that it become a mere empty space, an “uncontested ground,” for human “development.” (1–2)

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In my article, I wish to investigate ecoGothic tropes and wasteland imagery within the contemporary posthuman lyric, which offers a counter-narrative to such emptying and flattening representations of non-human matter and man’s ecological inscriptions. In dialogue with the modernist wasteland poem—which is predominantly anthropocentric in its themes, spatiotemporalities, and attitudes—my focus will be the trope of the body-as-multispecies-crowd and the trope of the body-as-wasteland, as exemplified in two volumes that mobilize a number of non-anthropocentric perspectives, heeding Alaimo’s call for “more potent, more complex understandings of materiality” (2) and different interrogations of “the material substance of the self” (3). What I hope to demonstrate is that Dickinson’s and Cobb’s interrogatory poetics, operating at the intersections of poetry, autobiography and science, offer a fresh approach to the contemporary sense of an ending.

The provisional generic category of the posthuman lyric, which I shall use throughout, has been inspired by the recent shift from an anthropocentric understanding of lyric subjectivities to a biocentric perspective, which repositions human epistemologies in relation to more-than-human matter. The posthuman angle unsettles the concept of the sovereign human self, stressing transversal ontologies, open to inter-agential exchanges, diverse biosemiotic processes and communication loops. To illustrate those processes, I have selected Allison Cobb’s *After We All Died* (2016)—an elegiac meditation on the dying human species which shifts between the human and the non-human point of view and includes the perspective of various species and organisms, including cancer cells—and Adam Dickinson’s *Anatomic* (2018), in which the poet probes the leaky perimeters of the chemical self, turning an electronic microscope and burden tests on his own bodily tissues. The problems to be considered in the analysis include the positioning of the human body within the poems’ conceptual framework as well as the dominant tropes, exploring the porous boundaries between the human and the non-human. As will be argued in my reading of a few selected poems, both authors problematize the threat of self-extinction, the return of the bio-chemical repressed, and

the felt and lingering ecological catastrophe. To interrogate the extreme limits of the self and a sense of an ending, both authors deploy ecoGothic spatiotemporal tropes of spectral and abject bodies, permeable thresholds, dark mirrors, as well as decaying and apocalypse-haunted wastelands. These tropes often convey ecoGothic affects such as curiosity, paralysis, anxiety, paranoia, fear, and horror.

Naturally, it must be noted that Cobb and Dickinson belong to different cultural and literary traditions (American and Canadian, respectively), and their ecoGothic imaginaries are shaped by diverse social, geopolitical, and aesthetic legacies. Such ecoGothic categories as the wilderness, the frontier, and the Native as the colonial Other bind the histories of the two countries, but the national and colonial ideologies differ in many ways. As noted by Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte, “Gothic tropes have emerged in Canadian literature as integral to the postcolonial interrogation of national identity constructs and dominant representational practices” (x). Among the multiple functions of Gothic modalities in Canadian writing, the critics include “convey[ing] experiences of ambivalence and/or split subjectivity resulting from the inherent incommensurability of conflicted subject positions that have emerged from a colonial context and persisted into the present” (xi). During the formation of the nation-state, Gothic was often used in Canada “to textualize a form of white history that cast colonized or invaded peoples and the colonial landscape as a ghostly or monstrous threat to the civilized (white) world” (xi), hence the recurrent tropes of the personified wilderness, “haunted” by “the spirit of savagery” (xii). Invoking Margaret Atwood’s notion of survival in the wilderness, which structures the Canadian settler experience and the emergent culture, Shoshanna Ganz similarly points out the ecoGothic trope of nature as “the ever-present and fearful monster seeking to swallow human beings whole” (88). On the other hand, however, Canada, similarly to the USA, was considered by some as too pragmatic and “too new for ghosts” (Susanna Moodie qtd. in Sugars and Turcotte xiii), a land without history and thus devoid of the right conditions for the emergence of the monstrous and the supernatural (Sugars and Turcotte xii–xiii). The affects that accompanied those ambivalent engagements with the Gothic ranged from fear, sublime pathos and paranoia—stemming from what Northrop Frye dubbed the “garrison mentality” (qtd. in Sugars and Turcotte) of the settler-invader faced with “the unsettled wilderness” (xii)—through guilt over “the illegitimate appropriation of Native lands” and the status of a colony that is itself a colonizer (xiv), to the traumatic alienation, forgetfulness and confusion resulting from the perpetual state of “internal and external disquiet” (Sugars and Turcotte xvi). Similarly,



Justin D. Edwards contends in *Gothic Canada* that the disquiet stems from the ecoGothic desire to “eradicate unsettledness and settling down at the cost of other cultures and nations” (xx).

In an essay on the frontier Gothic, Kevin Corstorphine points to a similar mixture of idealism, denial and horror in the American variety of the genre, whose roots he considers inherently dystopian: “In the search for a new Eden, this wilderness becomes a source of both idealism and anxiety” (120). Citing numerous studies of American attitudes towards the nature/culture divide—including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Roderick Frazier Nash, Frederick Jackson Turner, Marianne Noble and Allan Lloyd-Smith—the scholar traces the shifting and historically contingent meaning of the word *wilderness*, emphasizing the anthropocentric anxieties at its heart, for *the wild* was used to denote “the place of wild beasts,” the uncultivated land, and all kinds of “creatures not under the control of man” (121). Significantly for my study of the unbound posthuman body, this loss of control involved the human beings themselves and could be extended both onto the wider body-politic and the individual human body-as-wilderness.

In the same essay, based on Teresa A. Goddu’s revision of the American Gothic canon, Corstorphine considers yet another context that is crucial to my analysis. Engaging with established ahistorical readings, Goddu argues that “[t]he Gothic’s connection to American history is difficult to identify precisely because of the national and critical myths that America and its literature *have* no history” (9). The critic dismantles this notion by uncovering, in early American Gothic writing, a repressed historicity in the form of the “Indian, demonized as a devil, and the wilderness, turned into a bloody landscape, not only to replace but exceed their British [Gothic] types” (Goddu 72, qtd. in Corstorphine 123). The American variety of the Gothic deals with “specific sites of historical haunting, most notably slavery” (Goddu 10). Indeed, as shown by Goddu, the dislocation from history and orientation towards the future and progress is a convenient and dangerous illusion, an ecoGothically charged myth that served to keep the national conscience clean, and to hide both the rapacious exploitation of the land and the colonial structures of power. As noted by Allison Cobb, “[w]e are the inheritors of a violent, exploitative culture. We live in a nation built on genocide, slavery, and the ethos of maximum exploitation of resources” (Cobb and Davids). The purported “absence” of the past and the rejection of pre-colonial cultures as either non-existent or always already doomed excluded Native Americans and African Americans from the category of humanity, also justifying the policies of environmental injustice, racial othering, as well as the uprooting, brutalization, and extermination of Indigenous and African peoples. Thus, uncanny Gothic



bodies, ghosts, animals, and monsters in the North American tradition must be read within those geohistorical trajectories, dystopian Western ideologies, and conceptualizations of nature, since they problematize the destructive economies and imaginaries shaping the relationship between humans and their surroundings.

Such, then, are the contexts that underlie Cobb's and Dickinson's interrogations of the borders between human bodies and non-human matter. Both poets employ the scientific understanding of the corporeal and ecological condition of humanity to reengage with what Edwards et al. call "the environmentally repressed" (xii). As mentioned above, ecoGothic should also be viewed as an aesthetic response in a time of crisis—it addresses "the particular terror of unsettlement" (Iurcotte 76), be it geopolitical, ontological, epistemological, psychological or aesthetic. As I argue further, the ecoGothic tropes and transgressive forms in their poetry serve as reactions to a state of personal as well as ecological emergency and unsettlement.

## THE OVERCROWDED SELF IN THE BIOCHEMICAL WASTELAND: ADAM DICKINSON'S *ANATOMIC*

Dickinson's *Anatomic* is an experimental volume, created at the intersection of poetry and science. It is based on medical burden tests<sup>2</sup> to which the poet's own body was subjected for a period of two years. Using blood, urine, faeces, saliva tests and electroscopic imaging, Dickinson seeks to grasp the outer perimeters of his corporeal self. His quest is for a legible and truer story, a more comprehensive dissection and autographing of the self. What he discovers underneath the epidermis, however, is not an Eliotesque void, arrested motion and dry whimper, but a rich, noisy biosemiotic world—a leaky inscape, swarming with life and transversal metabolic scripts, often illegible and independent of the speaker's will:

I wear multinational companies in my flesh. But I also wear symbiotic and parasitic relationships with countless nonhumans who insist for their own reasons on making me human. I want to know the stories of

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<sup>2</sup> As Stacy Alaimo explains in *Bodily Matters*, body burden is "a measure of one's cumulative exposure to dangerous substances" (97). Burden tests involve sampling tissues and fluids and mapping causal genes for rare metabolic traits and disorders. Lee et al. provide a more detailed definition: "[B]urden tests collapse rare variants in a genetic region into a single burden variable and then regress the phenotype on the burden variable to test for the cumulative effects of rare variants in the region" (224).

these chemicals, metals, and organisms that compose me. I am an event, a site within which the industrial powers and evolutionary pressures of my time come to write. I am a spectacular and horrifying crowd. How can I read me? How can I write me? (Dickinson 9)<sup>3</sup>

This overcrowded self is thus not only writing and reading itself, but is being written and read by countless and somewhat spectral “nonhuman others” that keep hijacking, questioning and unsealing the boundaries of the corporeal tissues. In Dickinson’s poems, hormones “conjugate the subject,” white cells constantly signal to invisible adversaries, and the tongue becomes an unreadable map, while fats are the new subconscious, storing the poet’s biochemical pasts. Indeed, *Anatomic* may serve as an illustration of Keetley and Sivils’ broader observation that

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[f]rom the conventional image of the maiden in the ruined castle, imperiled by secrets that almost always turn out to be familial, by strangers that almost always turn out to be human, the ecogothic turns to the inevitability of humans intertwined with their natural environment—to humans surrounded, interpenetrated, and sometimes stalked by a nonhuman with an agentic force that challenges humans’ own vaunted ability to shape. (7)

In Dickinson’s book, the repressed biochemical scripts of the transversal body return with a vengeance, manifesting their uncontrollable, spectral powers of communication, but also posing a threat to the anthropocentric conceptions of the bounded self. The agentic but ungraspable force of enzymes—described by the poet as “the unmanned messianism of hormones” (40) whose “signal slips undetected” (24)—translates also into a discontinuous mashup of discourses which comprise autobiographical confessions, scientific terms, technical vocabularies, and work-in-progress photographs. The microscopic imaging, which I have discussed elsewhere (see Ambroży “The Post-Human Lyric”), further contributes to the questioning of the inner/outer boundaries, as exemplified by uncanny electronic enhancements of the poet’s urine and sweat particles. Resembling extra-terrestrial terrains and dim caverns lit in crimson chiaroscuro, the images possess an illegible abstract quality and evoke a hauntingly sombre mood.

What interests me in Dickinson’s engagement with the tropes of spectral haunting, stalking and interpenetration, are the ecoGothic affects expressed in the confessional “I am a spectacular and horrifying crowd,”

<sup>3</sup> All quotations from Adam Dickinson’s volume *Anatomic* (The Coach House, 2018) are used with the permission of the Author and the Publisher.

namely the combination of curiosity and horror upon confronting the body as a toxic site, vulnerable to “chemical trespass” (Alaimo 83). The anatomic peering into the molecular sublime is somewhat reminiscent of Ishmael’s peering into the depths of the ocean in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*—the compulsive quest for self-knowledge exposes biochemical vortices rather than Cartesian truths, returning the bodily uncanny that both fascinates and horrifies the poet. Interestingly, the metabolically ghosted body appears as “this hopeful monster” (Dickinson 24) and “a survivor,” with an incredible adaptive capacity and an equally strong power of self-annihilation:

One part of you,  
as an act of survival,  
starts eating another part. This is a membranous decision  
  
in which the crowd,  
having mistaken  
its periphery, resembles  
its prey  
(22)

What both frightens and fascinates the speaker is the growing sense of lost control over the actions and processes of the body: “My greatest fear is to be helpless, vulnerable, incommensurately scaled to my torment,” the speaker confesses in the poignantly titled “Scale” (94). In this ever “inter-signalling kingdom,” “[c]ommands spread / horizontally / in a crowd,” and the “executive force” (94–95) may be located everywhere and nowhere. The anxiety which stems from the ever contingent, open peripheries of the self-as-crowd comes to the fore in the piece called “Circulation.” Here the central image is that of the liquifying body which succumbs to proliferating microbic spectres: “If they worked together, the microbes could eat us in a few days. Our bodies would blacken, liquify, and run into the streets” (54). This potential liquefaction, which turns the body into amorphous black slime, is a serious threat to the integrity of the human subject, as it exposes the futility of our attempts at policing human ontologies. In fact, slime is a frequent trope of abject horror—“it is a revenge of matter, which seeks to swallow the known and bounded world into its own amorphousness,” as Kelly Hurley observes in *The Gothic Body* (38). In Dickinson’s book, the lack of contour is reflected on the level of language, which thickens in denser prose pieces, breaking down and rarefying into molecular cascades of words, thus imitating unpredictable microbiotic dis-articulations as well as hormonal rhythms:

cense  
cents  
scents  
scene

cite  
cyte  
sight  
site (Dickinson 78)

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As noted by Xavier Aldana Reyes, in his essay on Gothic affects, “the purpose of the gothic is to scare, disturb, disgust” (16–17), and the accompanying psychosomatic reactions towards the Gothic object include confusion, paranoia and emotional paralysis. Those affects inform Dickinson’s anatomic project, as shown in the following passage from the poet’s medical diary, incorporated into the volume:

When the results started to arrive, I felt tense. A door was about to open into a mailroom filled with incommunicable antibodies strung from a bare wire. I read them quickly not wanting to let my eyes linger on anything alarming. When I came across a chemical that measured among the top percentiles, I panicked. I felt sick. Cortisone dripped. Death comes like a letter that folds its recipients. (Dickinson 30)

Interestingly, as Dickinson discovers, the posthuman anxiety is “a form of auto-immunity” (54), at once alienating the conscious self from the enzymatic wilderness of the body and enfolding it within its menacing communications. The extreme reactions, both physiological and emotional, enhanced by the overlapping scientific and emotional vocabularies, draw from the repertoire of Gothic affects—terror, which, as Ann Radcliffe claimed in her essay “On the Supernatural in Poetry” (1826), “awakens the faculties to a high degree of life,” and the more visceral horror, which “contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them” (403). Thus, the enzymatic hauntings result in a similar affective tension between heightened self-vision and disabling fear and panic. This leads to an existential trauma—here implied also by the recurrent Gothic trope of the “open door,” which exposes the vulnerability of our “imagined” (Dickinson 42) human contours and protective shields: “The doors I locked, and locked again, opened behind my back” (68), observes the speaker, grappling with the unboundedness of his life story, overexposed by medical surveillance and ghostly cohabitants. Similarly, in “Circulation,” the discomfort with the “stopmotion ponds” of microbes on the poet’s hands results in the obsessive handwashing—another gesture of separation which strips the epidemic barrier of its protective layer—the hands are sanitized to the point

of sterility (54). As noted by Laura R. Kremmel, “the gothic imagination unsettles the notion of the sanitized, isolated corpse at the core of human exceptionalism” (272). Dickinson’s Gothic tropes and affects expose the biochemical feedback loops which threatened the “sanitized” conception of the human self. The body sealed off from “the intra-active”<sup>4</sup> assemblages of microbes becomes a besieged fort with an illusory sense of safety.

The posthuman perspective expands the temporalities of the poet’s biochemical inscape. In the introduction to *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Keetley and Sivils observe that the ecoGothic “casts its net still further back than does the gothic into the era of prehistory, into our prehuman (and nonhuman) origins” (5). In *Anatomic*, the cells become attentive “scriveners” in the biochemical “archives”—storing memories to which the poet has no access, and which connect him to the pre-conscious biographical past and its indeterminate symbiotic ecologies. “In the prehistory of the gut, / getting off this planet / means getting someone else / to take the wheel” (Dickinson 44), the speaker observes in “Shotgun, Called It.” The ecoGothic temporality also informs the following poem, dedicated to polychlorinated biphenyls:

When my mother’s breasts were building my brain, her milk sent me a postcard from the postwar boom. The message was scrambled. Proprietary. Windborne elsewhere’s outfall spikes. Face-swirled factories with disjunctive hair loss. Heat-wave skin. Malignant neoplasms of indefinite dose. Headquartered in the subtext were inscrutable companies conflicted with interest, like urban forests or chlorine, sending people to work under crumbling narrative arcs. (Dickinson 34)

Those broadening spatio-temporal vistas reach beyond the personal history of the poet and embrace the less definite Anthropocene temporalities and spatial scales, marked by “recursive scripts where industrial innovations find their way back into the metabolic messaging systems of the biological bodies that have created them” (Dickinson 31). The narrative arcs of the poet’s life indeed “crumble,” as the body’s absorptive membranes are “ghost-written” (Dickinson 34) and contaminated by post-war environmental residues, including carcinogenic pollutants, inherited from his mother’s body. Those crumbling scripts belong to the Gothic mode’s “negative aesthetics,” as formulated by Fred Botting, who argues that Gothic texts are defined by “an absence of the light associated with sense, security and knowledge” (1–2). This hesitant condition is captured in Dickinson’s poems through the trope of lamps in the bodily archive which uncover

<sup>4</sup> The term “intra-active” used by Karen Barad in *Meeting the Universe Half-Way* refers to “the mutual constitution of entangled species” (33).

the terrifying site of the “burglarized flesh”: “The guy who brings his own lamp to the archives is not fucking around. The guy who finds his archive filled with lamps is terrified of his burglarized flesh. The lights were on the whole time” (53). The corporeal self—overexposed by the alienating light of the microscopic gaze—paradoxically loses “its sense of cumulative contour” (53), calling for a different mode of auto-biographing.

The transversal aspect of Dickinson’s ecoGothic inheritance is captured also in poems addressing Canada’s colonial past and the continuing socioecological impact of racial injustice. In the prose poem “The People of Grassy Don’t Have a Mercury Problem, They Have a Drinking Problem,” the author evokes the history of “one of Canada’s worst environmental disasters” (Porter), namely the poisoning of Northwestern Ontario’s English-Wabigoon River system which runs through the territory of the Grassy Narrows First Nation. A local paper company’s dumping of tons of mercury into the river in the 1960s and 70s affected the health and economy of three generations of the Ojibwe peoples. According to Jody Porter, author of the CBC documentary *Children of the Poisoned River*, ninety percent of the population suffered from neurological effects and many people died because of related health problems or suicide. The most recent tests of the water show that the problem has not been solved and that the community continues to struggle with the lethal consequences of chemical dumping.

Dickinson engages with the transgenerational catastrophe which haunts Grassy Narrows, foregrounding the toxic discourse about the disaster. The “talk,” like the lethal mercury in the river rapids, spills over the discursive field, downplaying the socioecological injustice and the suffering of the victims:

There was talk that the waters were not polluted, and if they were polluted, then the company was not responsible. There was talk that nothing escaped from the plant, and if anything did escape, the company did not know it was harmful. There was talk that bodies were not actually poisoned, and if they were poisoned it was because of what goes into them, the weekends in Kenora, the altered dream-states that break into leaf in this culture, but culture urine and vomit in the streets of that culture. (Dickinson 65)

The repetition of words and of entire structures (“there was talk of making a national park to solve the problem . . . There was talk of the problem . . . There was talk that the waters were not polluted”), negations (“They were *no longer* themselves,” “the company *did not* know”), hedging and modalities (“*if anything* did escape,” “*if they were* poisoned,” “which *seemed*

heartbreaking and unnecessary”) (65, emphasis mine) are hijacked by the poet from biased media coverage as rhetorical tools of environmental neo-imperialism that takes over the land and the bodies, colonizing the language and the minds. The discourse serves to dilute the causation, the economic privilege and the agency of the polluters, and to dehumanize the victims. The Grassy Narrows community becomes “the problem-people” who are “spread onto maps folded into animal shapes on long car trips through the wilderness” (65). Represented either as abstract tourist attractions, points on the map, catering to the whites’ utopian nostalgia for true wilderness, or as drunkards and drug addicts whose perspective can be conveniently dismissed as unreliable, they are no longer victims but are seen as an uncontained, wild, and abject ecoGothic menace (65).

In “Toxic Discourse,” Lawrence Buell observes that “self-identified victims of environmental illness” are often “[left] oscillating between implacable rage and uncertainty,” as the legal and scientific complexity of an investigation in such cases often results in the failure of ecojustice (660). The insidious solipsistic “talk,” as shown by Dickinson, does not belong to the Indigenous people—they are deprived of voice and disempowered by the legalese and probabilities of science, and left with the risk and harm whose sources are difficult to prove. Significantly, Dickinson recognizes his own situatedness as the economically and socially privileged white settler and a “talker” haunted by the ecoGothic guilt: “And here I have it in my blood talking, a settler methylated by the privilege afforded by the problem’s extremities shaking with poorly connected dreams” (65). The vague language, as exposed by the poem’s reductive rhetoric, is poignantly disconnected from the absolute reality of the chemical contamination and the resultant deaths of the people in Grassy Narrows. There is no real sense of culpability behind those conditional “ifs” of the media coverage, and the speaker’s “poorly connected dreams” further signal the rapture in the collective horizon of environmental future. Dickinson seems also to address the limits of compassion from a position of privilege and distance, drawing our attention to the gap between the abstract quality of liberal guilt and the horrifically real “slow violence” (Nixon) of ecological damage. The bizarre spectrality of the official rhetoric reproduces neo-colonial oppression, along with its semiotic networks of power, and shows how language can cynically “relocate” chemical waste to the space of the Other. It points to the mistreatment of the victims as a residue of the settler’s historical necropolitics<sup>5</sup> which saw Indigenous people as vanishing, doomed to death, or as ghosts. The Indigenous bodies represented as an abstraction, the abject and ghostly Other, are juxtaposed in the poem with

<sup>5</sup> I am using the term “necropolitics” after Achille Mbembe (11–40).



an urge to really “touch” the problem: “the problem could be touched and when touched it would grab back like the rapids in that river” (Dickinson 65). Both the “touch”—ironically resonating with the pastoral mythologies of “untouched” wilderness—and the ecoGothic “grip” of the river are curiously ambiguous tropes. On the one hand, they recognize the material agency of the wounded ecosystem, its revenant toxicity, ready to return the rapacious “grab” (Dickinson 65) and strike back with a vengeance. On the other hand, what they also imply is the need to abandon the vantage point of a distant aseptic spectator which creates boundaries and objectifies the Indigenous peoples and more-than-human matter. The shift from the specular to the haptic is an attempt to reconceptualize the geography of the self as part of the increasingly vulnerable, scarred and toxic body of the land, but the violence of the river’s response seems significant. “The touch” cannot be trusted, for it extends into historical time, forever haunted by past transgressions, pervasive environmental racism, centuries of exploitation, the white settlers’ acquiescence as chemical consumers, and economic abuse of the land. The dream of a stable connection and intimacy, as pointed out by Jonathan Kertzer, “when shared by some and imposed others . . . can be obsessive and therefore monstrous” (119). Dickinson stresses the potential monstrosity of the universalizing discourses of toxicity which disregard socioeconomic difference and usurp the right to speak from the position of the victim. Using repetition, self-reflexively linked to the speaking subject in the final line, the poet points to the limits of imagination and lyric intervention as a mode of ecological connection: “All this talking and I am beginning to repeat myself. Myself” (65). Repetition is the stuff of Gothic dreams and nightmares—a figure of stubborn spectrality which unsettles stable identities, creating an interval of difference, of the uncanny, which renders the self vulnerable to further divisions and displacements. For Dickinson, the awareness of the enmeshment of bodies and ecologies enhances the spectrality of the inviolate self—after all, the Western subject is the product of the Anthropocene and its environmental violence.

If “the Anthropocene is a waking nightmare,” as Rune Graulund proposes (45), Dickinson’s *Anatomic* does not offer a safe refuge from it; rather, it wakes us into a higher degree of self-consciousness regarding our socioecological and ontological entanglements in environmental damage. Dickinson’s aesthetic artifice and various experiential and conceptual paradigms create a rich discursive-material sphere which destabilizes the cohesive self on multiple levels. The poetic anatomy of the posthuman body proves that we are “an array of bodies,” “an agentic assemblage” (Bennett 121), with multiple spectral actants and processes. Man is no longer presiding God-like over the posthuman dump, as in Stevens’s wasteland poem, but is the center of its pathological socioeconomic

metabolism reaching back to the deep ecological past and into the deep future. In Dickinson's volume, the fragile reassertions of "Myself" are intertwined with the constant recognition of the body's transformative relations with ecoOthers, be it human species, hormones, microbes, widespread radioactive waste or invisible microplastics. In Stacy Alaimo's apt words, "we inhabit a corporeality that is never disconnected from our environment . . . we are permeable, emergent beings, reliant upon the others within and outside our porous borders" (156).

### LESSONS IN MORTALITY: ALLISON COBB'S *AFTER WE ALL DIED*

Like *Anatomic*, Allison Cobb's *After We All Died* underscores the interconnections between human corporeality and more-than-human nature. Formally, the book is also unsettlingly complex, as the poet shifts between various onto-epistemological perspectives and agencies, including those of the doomed human and animal species, invasive organisms, such as rats or ants, but also microbes, cancer cells and plastic pollutants. To tackle various kinds of an ending and multiple and interconnected threats of death—"global death, species death, even our own deaths,"<sup>6</sup> as the poet admits in an interview with Christy Davids—alternative idioms need to be invented, capable of showing the entangled discursive and biological bodies and their shared vulnerability vis-à-vis the impending anthropogenic disaster.

The equally significant personal angle, as aptly argued by Joshua Schuster in his essay "Elegy after Allison Cobb's *After We All Died*," reveals the gendered and ethnic implications of her gaze, "lay[ing] bare her own archly situated viewpoint." In the poet's own words, "I filter the world through my own white, female, queer, worker drone, non-reproductive being" (Cobb, *After* 51). However, the poet often switches to the collective "we," as in "Ark," where the idea of god is a joint feat of the human imagination: "god we created / all without form and void" (Cobb, *After* 5). The apostrophic "you" plays a role as well, for example in "I made this," where the speaker directly addresses the listener to create a sense of complicity in the crimes against the environment: "You know how it is, *mon clown*" (Cobb, *After* 11), or in "I forgive you," in which the addressee is the speaker's flailing and mortal body. Each pronoun establishes a different relation and shows the self as a complex interface, where numerous others intersect and come into contact. As the poet contends, "[w]e *want* to be

<sup>6</sup> All quotations from interviews with Allison Cobb as well as her volume *After We All Died* (2016) are used with the permission of the Author.

in relation, and we need to be—we wouldn't survive without others. It seems like being human is figuring out how to exist at that interface of self and other" (Cobb and Davids). In an interview with Brian Teare, the poet elaborates on her understanding of that relation:

Our global-scale crises of pollution, disease, and nuclear threat ask us to understand the reality that we are not individuals, but that we are networks and ecosystems—like trees, and fungus, and coral—enmeshed and interdependent, linked in time and space with all else. Proceeding from this knowing makes much of our contemporary culture and its waste feel . . . obscene, which is a word that originally meant "something that bodes ill, foreboding." (Cobb and Teare)

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As with the multi-generic composition of *Anatomic*, Cobb hybridizes her discourse, employing elements of prose, poetry, autobiography, and scientific essay. In prose pieces, she engages with historical and scientific research, for example on the survival of cancer cells in superorganisms or the development of nuclear weapons, which leads to all kinds of questions, including that of ethical responsibility in science as well as exploitation of vulnerable bodies in biochemical research.<sup>7</sup> Equally vital for her project are autobiographical elements, linking the poet and her body directly with scientific experiments, such as nuclear bomb tests and deployments, and the resultant radioactive pollution, which had a great impact on the local and global environment. Significantly, Cobb was born and raised in Los Alamos, or "Lost Almost," as Cobb's father jokingly labelled the city, named after the cottonwoods—"a tree that means / water in the desert" (Cobb, *After* 80). This city in New Mexico was selected for the Atomic Research Laboratory, which developed the first atomic bomb and the first thermonuclear-fusion/hydrogen bomb ("Los Alamos, New Mexico"). "My town"—the speaker reflects in "The Poem of Force"—"holds / some of the planet's most / dangerous substances that kill / by moving invisibly through cells and scrambling the atoms that make up flesh and bone" (Cobb, *After* 74). Her father, a physicist, worked in one of the military research labs as "Director of Threat Reduction" (37), and was personally involved in the nuclear research which led to the testing and production of bombs. As the poet confesses in the diaristic piece "Sentences, August, 2014," "[e]very breath I drew from

<sup>7</sup> She investigates, among others, the biopharmaceutical research conducted on the cancerous cells of Henrietta Lacks, who was "the descendent of white plantation owners in Virginia and black female slaves" (Cobb *After*, 63) and who died of cervical cancer after a series of failed radioactive treatments. Her cells were then extracted from her body and replicated in labs across the world for further experimentation and research, including developing vaccines and testing the effects of nuclear radiation. Lack's family has not been made part of the huge profit generated from the research (Cobb *After*, 63).

birth canal to about age 22 was made possible by nuclear war” (38). As in the case of Dickinson, who used his own body for mapping his relationships to the multispecies Other, Cobb’s interest in cancer is also deeply personal (38): radioactive and chemical waste, one of the chief environmental causes of cancer, has been an integral part of her childhood surroundings and life story. The author, at risk herself as “a non-reproductive woman,” a witness to the suffering of many women in her life, confronts the disease as follows: “I am thinking of the women cancer has killed, leaving raw pain trails through the lives of people I love: Alicia’s best friend, Paul’s mother, Ethan’s mother, Carol’s mother, Jill’s mother, Deborah’s sister, Kathy, Stacy, Julie, my aunt Diana, Leslie, Lesley” (53). This sense that her own body, autobiography and family history are coextensive with the environment and “embedded in a much bigger, weightier history” (Cobb and Davids), which includes the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, echoes Adam Dickinson’s interrogations of the nuclear residue and toxic chemicals in his mother’s breast milk, and his own engagement with environmental injustice as the legacy of Canadian colonial history. As pointed out by Keetley and Sivils, “in the traditional Gothic, the past returns usually as ‘the sins of the fathers’” (4); in the ecoGothic, in turn, those sins extend beyond the personal to the transgenerational and global biocultural scale.

Generically unstable, and—like *Anatomic*—designed to break down the increasingly untenable “substance of the self” (Alaimo 8), Cobb’s book offers a confusion of tones—the elegiac, embittered, sorrowful, angry, compassionate, and melancholic are counterbalanced with the comic, ironic and hopeful. Cobb reflects on this instability as her way of avoiding “anticipatory mourning,” the debilitating atmosphere of “doom and gloom,” haunting the environmental debates today:

There is an almost melancholic, romantic tone that can happen, and there can be a kind of pleasurable charge in that, which I find a bit disturbing—as if we can get caught up in enjoying our own self-hatred and guilt, and get pulled into that morass. I am in that too—certainly, I feel those instincts—but I wanted to try to move beyond them. (Cobb and Davids)

In “You were born,” the poet addresses directly that convenient melancholy that “let us who are wealthy in the West / relax into our sadness about the end / of all the stuff we destroyed without knowing or trying” (Cobb, *After* 99). Thus, the uneasy and shifting affects belong to her way of “staying with the trouble,” to borrow from Donna Haraway, rather than surrendering agency and succumbing to what Paul K. Saint-Amour describes as an “anticipatory mourning, a mourning in advance of loss” (25). “Staying

with the trouble,” however, “requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (Haraway 1).

Like Dickinson, Cobb continuously questions the human-centred narrative arc, but her explorations of transcorporeal posthuman wastelands reach even further. Whereas Dickinson’s biochemical autographing relies predominantly on the notion of the corporeal, breathing and conscious self, even if its psychosomatic boundaries ultimately prove contingent and illusory, Cobb sees the body as “owned already” (Cobb, *After* 30)—a ghost that is watching its own funeral but cannot quite understand that it is dead (28). The poet admits to “her ongoing obsession with compost: disparate elements brought together, mixed up, grotesque, delightful, unsettling. A way to grapple with mortality that turns it into something else” (Cobb and Tatarsky). This obsession echoes Haraway’s engagement with the issue of material decomposition in *Staying with the Trouble*, where it is considered integral to our understanding of sympoietic relations between human and more-than-human matter. Reflecting on her affiliation with posthumanist philosophers, Haraway proposes:

We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities. Philosophically and materially, I am a compostist, not a posthumanist. Critters—human and not—become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding. (97)

Although Cobb recognizes this “sympoietic tangling” in her work, her focus is extended to posthumanist residues of substances and bodies that will not decompose, but thrive in their “monstrous endurance,” often beyond human life (Cobb and Tatarsky). “You are only a skin / bag for your microbiome, my clown friend,” “a human meat car [for bacteria] to get around in it,” the speaker observes in “I made this” (Cobb, *After* 8). In one of the pieces, the poet adopts the vantage point of a cancer cell writing its elegy for the dying human race and the fading world. The poem, as the speaker admits, is a failure:

There is  
no other poem but this one, a heap  
of broken images where the sun beats  
on the dead trees and the dry stone gives  
no sound of water, only failure, from Latin “to trip,  
dupe, deceive” (100)

Clearly in conversation with *The Waste Land*, Cobb evokes Eliot's bleak apocalyptic landscape, drawing our attention to the failure of an anthropocentric vision that treats nature as background to, and objective correlative for, human suffering. The survivor of Cobb's failing world is not the spectral Fisher King, but the immortal and ever-replicating cancer cell: "regular cells have a life span—they die after a certain number of divisions—but cancer cells don't. If they didn't kill off their host, cancer cells could keep going, they live forever" (62), the speaker informs us in a section ominously called "Sentences," and it is this ghostly resilience that fuels the book's ecoGothic imaginary. Cobb thus offers us a peculiar non-anthropocentric song of mourning that forces the reader to reflect on the ecological doom of the Earth and the human species. The opening poem, titled "I forgive you," is a darkly humorous backward glance:

I forgive you fingers. I forgive you wrists and palms. I forgive you web of veins, the nameless knuckles, twenty-seven bones, the nails and moons below. . . . I forgive you cells, all one hundred trillion, the inner ocean that has ebbed and flowed across three million years. I forgive you every part performing all the intricate and simple tasks that make this mass alive. I forgive you all for already having died. (1–2)

Like Dickinson, then, Cobb adopts an anatomic perspective, listing and mourning every part of the body, as she interrogates biosemiotic and transgressive powers of cancerous cells, but her choice of the posthumous perspective is significant. In this "mock-blazon" (Schuster), the degeneration of individual organs and cells gains an ecoGothic dimension, for this "inner ocean that has ebbed and flowed across three million years" is curiously unbound, enmeshed with the non-human environment and implicated in the fading "pulse" of the world (Cobb, *After* 26). In *After We All Died*, "the implacable 'inheritance' in time, an unforgiving return of the past in the present" (Keetley and Sivils 4), characteristic for traditional Gothic temporalities, does not fit within the human space- and timescale; rather, like "hyperobjects," the past is both local and "non-local" and stretches across millennia and into an unpredictable future (Morton 46). Referencing Timothy Morton, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argues that "hyperobjects—including climate, genetics, capitalism, and the ocean—end the world for the protagonists; this is sometimes in the literal sense of overwhelming them and forcing them into an intimate relationship with their own mortality and other times in the sense of undoing the notion of 'world' as a coherent, unified concept" ("Hyperobjects" 203). Cobb's figure of the "ocean of cells," interconnected with the larger processes of genetic evolution and environmental change, signals such an "undoing,"

along with the need to establish new human-non-human ontologies which would acknowledge both the dissolution of legible boundaries and the limits of our traditional frameworks of mortality.

In “Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene,” Roy Scranton offers valuable insight into such necessary intimacy with death, which, as pointed out by Stephen Collis (see “Nursing the Machine That Killed Us”), can also illumine Cobb’s project:

For humanity to survive in the Anthropocene, we need to learn to live with and through the end of our current civilization. . . . The rub now is that we have to learn to die not as individuals, but as a civilization. . . . The sooner we confront our situation and realize that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, the sooner we can get down to the difficult task of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality. (Scranton)

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In Cobb’s book, as Collis persuasively argues in his review of the volume, the apocalypse has already happened, and yet the poem does not offer any consolation or easy way out, even if there is, in this elegy, a deep sense of tenderness for the dying planet. “What the book does,” the critic observes further on, “is accept the premise that the threshold has been crossed, and for all intents and purposes, the human project is done. Now the postmortem can begin” (Collis). Since we have all died already, Cobb’s gift of death is a ghost-written manuscript, a radical Gothic narrative about the living dead—the enduring adaptive cancer cells, infinite and bizarrely transcendental plastics, ultra-resilient ants and rats, omnipresent nuclear and industrial pollution that make up the “deep future” of the planet. “I lived to haunt you,” the zombie-cell confesses in “The Things You Loved” (Cobb, *After* 20), as it enumerates various man-made toxins and endocrine disruptors that impact the human DNA and cause cancer. Those are “the things” that the humans, as “king[s] of all creatures,” loved so much that we have allowed them to change our internal and external ecosystems, fusing the bodily and the environmental catastrophes:

hold this and think  
 the thing you love  
 the most what you most want  
 inside you, mixed in  
 with excrement in fifteen  
 thousand years when someone digs it up. Think  
 the thing you loved so much  
 you conjured it in labs to live inside the flesh of every animal to saturate  
 your own well-fatted flanks, king  
 of all the creatures. So these



must be the names for things you loved  
so much you peed on all the earth  
and all its living things which you then ate  
to concentrate its thickest dose inside  
your pearl-white fat and rearrange your  
DNA and gene expression: aldrin, dieldrin, DDT, mirex, toxaphene, and  
TCDD. Heptachlor, hexa  
-chlorobenzene, and the PCBs nestle in your  
genes with you and chlordecone and the hexa  
-chlorocyclohexanes. The mark  
of all you loved. (21)

As noted by Maged Zaher, Cobb “will make us confront the ways we manufacture and encounter death: cancer, bombs, atomic bombs.” In “I made this,” the speaker addresses the human species as “a skin bag for [its] microbiome” (Cobb, *After* 9), drawing transversal linkages between the geopolitical and the microbiotic colonization of lands and bodies. In an interview concerning her most recent book, *Plastic: An Autobiography* (2021), Cobb recognizes her own complicity in the process: “I continue to dwell entangled in the contradictions and complicities of living as a privileged person in a settler colonialist system that profits off of consume-and-dispose violence” (Cobb and Tatarsky). As also noted by Dickinson, who similarly interrogates the bioaccumulation of “military, industrial, and agricultural history” in his own fat cells (31), this “slow violence” of anthropogenic frameworks translates into cultural practices which threaten human and planetary matter—the fat-based Western diet, the consumerist lifestyle producing omnipresent microplastics and waste, radioactive residue in soil and water, petrochemical toxins used as softeners in cosmetics and packaging which affect metabolisms and genes. They are “the ecological uncanny” (Edwards et al. xiii), slipping out of human control and collapsing the boundaries between bodies and habitats.

In the second poem in *After We All Died*, poignantly titled “Ark,” the body itself becomes the precarious titular vessel, drifting on the “sea of zombie *haute coo*” (5). However, characteristically for ecoGothic sensibilities, the locality and the bodies merge, and their future is not survival, since there is no protective container for the flesh which has “nursed the machine that killed us,” as the speaker states in “After We All Died” (107). Contradicting the consolatory and proleptic discourses of apocalyptic literature, Cobb replaces the eschatological fatality of Mankind’s End with a cold look at the failed and dangerous ethics of metaphysical transcendence: “Certain people believed themselves alive. They built arks to save themselves and their favorite TV couples. . . . But like the ship in Coleridge’s poem, the boats only filled up with corpses”

(106). The posthuman ark is a ghost ship steered by a decomposing corpse, drifting on a “slimy sea” towards a landscape of death without redemption. Resonating with Dickinson’s abject image of black liquefaction, Cobb’s slime trope captures similar fears about transversal corporeality under constant threat of phenomenological dissolution.

“This is our death,” announces the speaker in the final lines of the titular poem. “We share it, we who come after the future. . . . The task of such selves is not to live. It is to refuse all the terms of this death into which we were birthed. Maybe then, learning to be dead, something can live” (Cobb, *After* 107). Thus, learning to be dead becomes a crucial challenge, involving a recognition of the violence of human-centred perceptions which underlie our approaches to the environment. “You god / we chemists” (5), the speaker admits in “Ark,” evoking the biblical creation myth, but rewriting it from a biocentric angle:

god we created  
 all without  
 form and void—the sea  
 Of zombie *haute*  
*coo*—here comes all  
 the flesh you ever ate  
 in living form with eyes  
 to look you back (Cobb, *After* 5)

As noted by Karen Barad in her essay “No Small Matter,” the void

is not the background against which something appears but an active, constitutive part of every “thing.” As such, even the smallest bits of matter—for example, electrons, infinitesimal point particles with no dimensions, no structure—are haunted by, indeed, constituted by, the indeterminate wanderings of an infinity of possible configurations of spacetime mattering in their specificity. Matter is spectral, haunted by all im/possible wanderings, an infinite multiplicity of histories present/absent in the indeterminacy of time-being. (G113)<sup>8</sup>

In keeping with Barad’s reflections, the biblical *ex nihilo*—the formless void—takes on animal flesh in Cobb’s apocalyptic elegy. The monstrously reproducing cancer flesh is a constitutive part of “spacetime mattering”—

<sup>8</sup> The quote comes from *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (edited by Anna Tsing et al., 2017), which is divided into two intertwined parts, titled, respectively, “Ghosts on a Damaged Planet” and “Monsters on a Damaged Planet.” The numbering of the pages reflects that structural split, with the capital letters G (for ghosts) and M (for monsters) before each page number, marking the respective thematic section of the monograph.

the im/possible spectral matter that “looks back” and “devours back” with a powerful and vitalist agency, returning the gift of death inscribed in its own origin. “When was it that everything first died? Maybe it was when humans first made their way to new territory lacking human predators” (Cobb, *After* 106), the speaker speculates in the final poem. The multiple answers to that grim inquiry take us across the deep history of anthropogenic change, revealing man’s predatory relation to the environment: “a what-I-want’ lens on the world,” as Cobb describes it (105). The environmental is always also personal here: “The truth is banal: I started out dead, a girl-thing, white to the root, borne up by the race spoils of total war and the blast force of nuclear love. I give birth to this death and I am it, and you, and you, and you—” (107).

Tracing the etymology of the word “poison,” the speaker notes that it comes from the German word for “gift” (15), via “the Greek *dosis* for dose—a giving” (15). As if in accord with the aporetic value of “poison-as-gift,” whereby the gift is “this death [we] are in,” the affective tone of the book becomes complicated, oscillating between expressions of love and fear, humour and horror, anger and apathy, cold irony and tenderness. What Cobb’s ecoGothic wasteland shares with Dickinson’s metabolic quest is the Gothic affect of anxiety that spreads over and infects the entire discursive structure with lingering epistemic and emotional unease.

## CONCLUSION

In my concluding remarks, I wish to return to Eliot’s trope of the “hollow men” and their ghostly whispers as they try to dwell, zombie-like, in the modernist waste land. What I have tried to evidence in my inquiry is that the posthuman lyric rewrites Eliot’s Gothic melancholia and his spectral imagination from more-than-human perspectives. The contemporary wasteland poem, as exemplified by Cobb and Dickinson, engages with the environmental uncanny, which comes both from within and from without, unsealing the borders of the sovereign self and questioning the universal ideal of the human. Like its modernist predecessor, it interrogates the existential crisis coextensive with the anthropogenic degradation of the material world. The tropological framework of the poem borrows from the Gothic imaginary to unsettle the human-centered spatiotemporalities and uncover the natureculture’s ecological hauntings. The contemporary wastelanders are malleable biological bodies, hyperobjects, sympoietically linked to multispecies ecoOthers, planetary metabolisms, and interconnected habitats. They do not preside over the wasted landscape, nor are they capable of finding

refuge in the recycled mythologies of a pastoral wilderness, as the invisible toxic substances flow through their bodies and minds.

We are living in what Nils Bubandt aptly calls “the spectral moment”—“a time of undecidability” (Bubandt G128), which calls for more radical modes of attention and a non-escapist and non-fatalistic engagement with the world’s impending waste and ruin. As aptly put by Haraway, “[w]e—all of us on Terra—live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times. The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response” (18). Suspicious of their anthropocentric and ethically charged situatedness, both Dickinson and Cobb confront their readers with unbound posthuman environments, vibrant materialities, multi-species habitats, whose communications are often illegible, unnoticed and unchanneled, but resilient, valid and entangled with our own. Stacy Alaimo argues that the “more-than-human world” is never “an empty space,” but “a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions” (2). As shown by the poems, the bodies’ symbiotic and sympoietic liaisons may be vulnerable, but their indeterminacy and reactivity to the slightest shifts in the ecosystems bring new and productive assemblages of meaning and feeling. Jane Bennett proposes that we should view “the inflection of matter” as “vibrant, vital, energetic, lively, quivering, vibratory, evanescent, and effluent” (328). The posthuman uncanny spectrality seems to reflect that conviction, as implied by Cobb and Dickinson, for it lies not so much in the hollowness and absence of flesh and voices, which dominated Eliot’s imaginary, but in their overabundance: in the latent semiotic energies and their hidden scripts. As observed by Tsing et al.,

[w]e live on a human-damaged planet, contaminated by industrial pollution and losing more species every year—seemingly without possibilities for cleanup or replacement. Our continued survival demands that we learn something about how best to live and die within the entanglements we have. We need both senses of monstrosity: entanglement as life and as danger. (M4)

Edwards et al. similarly argue that “[t]o live in the Anthropocene is to recognize that transgression, excess and monstrosity are no longer anomalies in human life but inextricable parts of it” (xi). Both Dickinson and Cobb work to acknowledge that the corporeal self is a fragile, damaged and biochemically haunted environment whose boundaries are nevertheless strongly enmeshed in other forms and structures of vibrant and resilient matter. As Cobb admits, it is “opened to the gaps, and the cracks and all that flows through them” (*After* 69). This collaborative

vulnerability of all life forms calls for broader emotional registers than environmental grief, lament, or nostalgia. “In our post-utopian moment,” as Evelyn Reilly contends in “Environmental Dreamscapes and Ecopoetic Grief,” “maybe there’s still a way to wake to a kind of sober hopefulness, even if colored by our pre-dawn apocalyptic fears, something which has probably been our animal task since the beginning of the species.” Borrowing complex and often contradictory Gothic affects, such as curiosity, fear, terror, horror, anger and disgust, the poets retain that “sober hopefulness,” while teaching us how to be dead so that “something can live” (Cobb, *After* 107).

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