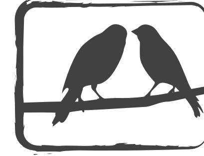

In the "Fissures of Infrastructure"

Poetry and Toxicity in "Garbage Arcadia"

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Abstract This article offers an account of "toxic infrastructures" as mutually material and discursive arrangements operating in the postwar, postcrash, and settler colonial landscapes of the United States. It specifically responds to Jennifer Scappettone's multimodal poetic work *The Republic of Exit 43*, developed after the author's discovery that the industrial landfill site she grew up alongside in New York had been classified by the US Environmental Protection Agency as requiring federal intervention. Tracing Scappettone's poetic geographies from the "corporate dump" of Syosset Landfill to the more (in)famous waste site Fresh Kills, the article argues that Scappettone exposes the ways that certain bodies and ecologies are rendered physically and conceptually toxic and implicates readers in the uneven social, embodied, and ecological conditions of composition and response. It suggests that Scappettone's practices of collage, salvage, and collaborative performance destabilize lyric subjectivity to address a "garbage arcadia" compounding the material accumulations of US consumerism and neoliberal financialization with longer processes of dispossession and displacement. Reading this text with feminist materialisms and Julian Talamantez Brolaski's queer Indigenous poetry, the article considers how poetics might reckon with the material conditions and residues of uneven wasting and generate situated, critical, and relational approaches to toxic infrastructures.

Keywords poetics, toxic infrastructures, waste, transcorporeality, settler colonialism

In 1983 the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) placed the "ex-copper rod mill and free-for-all landfill" close to where poet and scholar Jennifer Scappettone grew up on the National Priorities List of sites in urgent need of "cleanup" owing to high levels of health and environmental risk.[1] Located in a "postindustrial cul-de-sac" on Long Island, New York, Syosset Landfill was used by a string of chemical corporations between 1933 and 1975 with little to no environmental regulation. Scappettone's discovery of the landfill's status as a "Superfund site" led to years of investigation and an ongoing body of work, including the focus of this article, the hybrid poetic text *The Republic of Exit 43*:

1. Scappettone, *Republic of Exit 43*, 15. Syosset Landfill was on the Superfund list until 2005.

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Outtakes and Scores from an Archaeology and Pop-Up Opera of the Corporate Dump (2016). *The Republic of Exit 43* is a multimodal work: the book published by Atelos Press includes found text and diagrams from legal cases relating to toxic sites, photographs, collages, and digital art, and the work also exists in a range of other physical and virtual iterations, including geotext web installations developed with code artist Judd Morrissey, and site-specific performances with choreographer Kathy Westwater.[2] This article focuses primarily on the book, in dialogue with poetry by Mescalero/Lipan Apache poet Julian Talamantez Brolaski and performance conceived by Westwater. Throughout, I linger with the question of what poetry can do to index and intervene in toxic infrastructures as a form of de- and recomposition across bodies and spaces.

In Scappettone's work, notions of toxicity are mobile and multifaceted, mutually conceptual and material. Substances pass between bodies and environments, accumulating and altering, revealing what Stacy Alaimo calls *trans-corporeality* or the ways that the human is "intermeshed with the more-than-human world."[3] Toxicity also operates as a rhetorical and biopolitical device for delineating *which* bodies in *which* environments are most exposed. Right from the beginning of the book, Scappettone foregrounds the social and bodily workings of toxicity as the conditions for poetics. In the introduction or "Underture," she writes that her discovery was

> . . . a fact whose unabstraction I seemed to feel coursing below
> her motions
> & through our organs and through the concurrent
> valves of Mom's chemo and the unparallel afflictions
> of an increasing toll of friends, unreadied.[4]

Scappettone traces the corporeal impacts experienced by those living in proximity to hazardous waste sites as they transfer physically and emotionally between bodies. Slipping between pronouns—from the personal *I* through the more distanced *her* to a collective *our*—these lines suggest the (bio)accumulations of toxicity. They also perform the material destabilizations of toxic substances troubling bodily boundaries, challenging notions of a lyric or expressive subject as an individual, isolable entity. This approach reworks the provisional subjectivity of feminist avant-garde poetics, calling attention to the embodied, ecological, and sociopolitical conditions and processes of (poetic) speech. It enables us to ask how poetics might *matter* in toxic conditions.[5]

2. For details of different iterations of the work, see Scappettone, "An Archaeology of the Dump."

3. Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms," 238.

4. Scappettone, *Republic of Exit 43*, 15. Excerpts from *Republic of Exit 43* are reproduced with permission from Jennifer Scappettone and Atelos Press. For reasons of space, formatting may differ slightly from the original text.

5. In emphasizing *matter* as verb and noun, I follow Heather Milne's usage in *Poetry Matters* to discuss the ways that contemporary feminist experimental poetry (including Scappettone's *From Dame Quickly*) critiques neoliberal biopolitical modes of governance through formal and compositional practices that call attention to the materiality of language and conditions of utterance.

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In an essay written in response to Nathaniel Mackey's 2016 lecture "Breath and Precarity," Scappettone argues that poetry uncovers "the medium of vocality" as "a substantial one—that of air."[6] Tracing the notion of inspiration in Western poetic traditions (*inspiration* meaning, literally, "the drawing in of the breath into the lungs in respiration" as well as its more poetic usage[7]), she claims that poetry has historically resisted the abstraction of other kinds of discourse. When "apprehended across its plurality of sensory demands," poetry makes present embodied and environmental conditions as capacities and constraints for utterance in a "community of breathers":

> These conditions situate the poetic notion of inspiration within an expanded sensorium where breath is acknowledged not only as its literal foundation, but an agent subject to contemporary realities of contamination and chokehold. As air is life-giving in some places, but injurious in others—and as some are given the opportunity to breathe freely while others are not—this notion of inspiration highlights the uneven distribution, even the privatization, of rights and resources assumed to be shared equally by all. Air's condition as the commons we all inhabit, like it or not, makes breathing itself a survival strategy, and a political tactic.[8]

The politics of breath and inspiration in toxic environments destabilizes and "unabstract[s]" traditional lyric coherency, as Scappettone moves beyond individualized (masculine) subjectivity and expression.[9] The poet becomes what Scappettone describes as an "author-externality," unintentionally embedded in and altered by the toxic effects she identifies as well as their relation to existing structures of class, race, and gender.[10] Readers are also implicated as variously toxified bodies, and in this sense the work's challenge is to push beyond liberal environmentalist modes of awareness and recognition. *The Republic of Exit 43* asks how a poetics of embodied composition and response might interact with structural critique as part of a messier reckoning with the material conditions and residues of uneven wasting and exposure.

It is in this context that my analysis turns from a framework of *toxic environments*, or what Lawrence Buell has theorized as *toxic discourse*, to *toxic infrastructures*.[11] In my

6. Scappettone, "Precarity Shared," 46.

7. *OED Online*, s.v. "inspiration, n." www.oed.com/view/Entry/96980 (accessed December 2018).

8. Scappettone, "Precarity Shared," 47–48.

9. In this sense, Scappettone extends and politicizes the highly influential postwar poetics of American poet Charles Olson, whose "Projective Verse" (1950) is concerned with "certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings." Olson, "Projective Verse," 239.

10. Scappettone, "Jennifer Scappettone." The author externality also approximates what Mel Y. Chen calls an *intoxicated method*: a "hypothetical mode of approach that refuses idealized research positions by 'critically disabling' the idealized cognitive and conceptual lens of analysis" and takes seriously the implications of "inhuman" and embodied processes affecting critical and creative capacities and practices. Chen, "Unpacking Intoxication," 25.

11. Lawrence Buell identifies a genealogy of "toxic discourse" in US environmental writing that presents the "shock of awakened perception" in a "betrayed" pastoral disrupted by chemical risk and environmental harm. Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*, 35.

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use of the term *infrastructures* I draw together Michelle Murphy's concept of chemical infrastructures—which refers to the spatio-temporal distributions, movements, and mutations of industrial chemicals in more-than-human worlds—with Lauren Berlant's more affective and performative definition of infrastructure as "the movement or patterning of social form . . . the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure."[12] Bringing these two definitions together allows me to foreground poetics as a medium that not only calls attention to spatio-temporal distributions and patterns but also embodies the processes of their making and unmaking. In what follows, I show that Scappettone's range of formal techniques and performative practices offer a compelling "living mediation" of toxic infrastructures emerging in particular sites such as Syosset Landfill and larger structures pertaining to what Andreas Malm, Jason W. Moore, and others have named the Capitalocene.[13] One of the central claims of this article is that these toxic infrastructures are mutually material and discursive, and that *The Republic of Exit 43* constructs a poetics to mark the ways these material-discursive formations of waste and toxicity feed into the simultaneously embedded and volatile underpinnings of social, political, and ecological life in what Scappettone calls *garbage arcadia*. The toxic infrastructures this article traces are contextually specific but shaped by wider dynamics compounding settler-colonial frameworks of place, nation, and personhood with corporate interests, material accumulations, and uneven geographies of exposure.

Although Scappettone suggests that her work is "plagued by the ethics of disentanglement and the doubt that investigative journalism might suit the business better than poesy," she also contends that "poetry gives body to the fissures of infrastructure; its orchestrations force intimate and public matters, digestion, respiration, and expression, to inhabit the same byways . . . sounding the entanglement of a personal ethos with a collective one."[14] In this article, I investigate *how* such poetics manifest, tracing the ways that *The Republic of Exit 43* assembles an archive or archaeology of toxic infrastructures, but also—more speculatively, incrementally, and mercurially—explores possibilities for embodied and collective life in and against such infrastructures. In the first half of the article, I focus on destabilizations of lyric subjectivity and the making of toxic, wasted bodies and spaces via the abandoned "corporate dump" of Syosset Landfill and the salvage practices of Scappettone's familial and literary genealogy. The second half recontextualizes Scappettone's use of found language and collage in the more (in)famous Fresh Kills Landfill site, attending to the contradictions and violences of capitalism's wastes but also "restoration" projects and environmental discourse premised on ongoing dispossession and displacement. Brolaski's *Gowanus atropolis*, sited at New York's polluted Gowanus Canal, offers an important point of (dis)connection between

12. Murphy, "Chemical Infrastructures," 105; Berlant, "Commons," 393. By attending to conceptual frameworks entangled in toxic infrastructures, I seek to bring an additional dimension to other recent theorizations such as Hecht, "Toxic Infrastructures"; and Touhouliotis, "Weak Seed and a Poisoned Land."

13. Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*

14. Scappettone, *Republic of Exit 43*, 16, 106.

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these two strands of the article. Brolaski's work makes connections between Indigenous dispossession and the rendering-toxic of lives and lifeways in the place currently known as the United States, and also explores the ambivalent possibilities of toxicity for disrupting socially legitimized categories of gender, sexuality, and species. I argue that Brolaski's work amplifies Scappettone's case for a poetics that "takes the risk of coursing where it's not wanted," and raises questions and challenges for collaborative tactics of *poiesis* as a socioecological and spatial practice in the context of ongoing settler colonialism.[15] Together, these works enable and demand critical reflection on the ways embodied communities are differentially implicated in and affected by toxic infrastructures, as part of situated efforts to generate responsive, responsible forms of relation.

Toxic Embodiment

> Her lips are Aroclor 1248, a type of PCB.
> Her lips are N-butyl alcohol.
> Her lips are trace levels of copper, zinc, lead, cadmium, chromium, nickel, cyanides, arsenic, mercury, selenium, silver, *191 chloroform, hydrazine, manganese and phenol.
> Her lips are hydroxides of chromium, aluminum and iron.[16]

These lines open the poem "Till They Are Incandescent" in the middle of *The Republic of Exit 43*.[17] Beyond simply naming chemicals, this poem repurposes the language of a 1997 legal case concerning Syosset Landfill, in which residents of Oyster Bay demanded that the chemical corporations that had dumped waste at the site for decades pay the costs of dealing with the hazardous substances left behind. Most of the residents' claims were ultimately dismissed.[18] In the poem Scappettone's repetition of "her lips" at the beginning of almost every line builds up a kind of infrastructure as the form underpinning the accumulation of claims and counterclaims altering, undermining, and in tension with one another in the treatment (or failed treatment) of the abandoned landfill site. However, the formally patterned claims of "lips" do not have equal weighting; rather, the poem mediates the uneven conditions of legal and ethical (un)accountability in sites of exposure to and of toxicity.

Importantly, the poem's lyric speaker is both subject and object, embodied in the repeated "her lips." Although presented synecdochally as an isolated body part, the

15. Scappettone, *Republic of Exit 43*, 106.

16. Scappettone, *Republic of Exit 43*, 76.

17. The poem literalizes the metaphorical premise of Jean Toomer's poem "Her Lips Are Copper Wire" and subjects the blazon tradition of Western poetry to material and chemical de- and recomposition, building on Toomer's own refiguring of blazon in the context of American modernity and slavery's afterlives in *Cane* (1923).

18. *Town of Oyster Bay v. Occidental Chemical Corp.*, 987 F. Supp. 182 (E.D.N.Y. 1997), law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/987/182/1804598/ (accessed July 28, 2019).

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speaking lips are constituted transcorporeally, an assemblage of elements moving between micro and macro scales. As Alaimo notes, “Tracing a toxic substance from production to consumption often reveals global networks of social injustice, lax regulations, and environmental degradation.”[19] Accordingly, the poem moves from the local materialities of “wastes from Hooker’s concrete pits which contained glycols, tetrachloroethylene, Styrene-Butadiene Rubber” through “the laws of the state of Delaware” and “various ‘Hooker’ names” to a point at which “upon information and belief, her lips are a wholly owned subsidiary of a corporation organized and existing under the laws of Japan, with principle offices in Tokyo, Japan.”[20] Hooker is the former chemical company that dumped at Syosset Landfill and is associated with the infamous toxic landfill at Love Canal. Scappettone disperses the lyric subject through the various (dis)locations of corporations as they escape legal and ethical accountability. At the same time, the poem’s fragmented subjectivity unfolds in the context of a juridical system in which corporations are able to claim legal personhood to access rights, enter into contracts, and own property.[21]

Bleeding into other toxic bodies emerging from the site, the poem’s “lips” extend the slippage between subjects at the beginning of *Exit 43* to involve more-than-human elements across global and local scales while simultaneously attempting to testify to the metonymic displacement of corporate legal responsibility for environmental harm. Crucially, Scappettone does not offer a linear narrative of cause and effect or even a material archive adequate to accountability. In the contested site of the corporate dump, the claims of lips are continually repeated and reformulated, as if stuck on a glitch. The poetic site is a place of “hearsay” and a “matter of sharp dispute,” a set of claims that fail to register against corporate bodies with rights to legal personhood and material and speculative resources beyond those of already toxified subjects and communities. “Till They Are Incandescent” foregrounds the potential effects of accumulations of industrial chemicals through destabilizing lyric subjectivity, but also indexes the instability of claims made in and against the toxic infrastructures of contemporary capitalism’s environments. The rendering of speech as “hearsay” becomes tethered to the rendering-toxic of bodies that do not matter when capital accumulation is at stake.

Salvage Poetics

The Republic of Exit 43 addresses this rendering-toxic conceptually but also historically and geographically, in particular through the “POPs-Up Interlude” collages that form

19. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 5.

20. Scappettone, *Republic of Exit 43*, 76–77.

21. In *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Company* (1886) the US Supreme Court granted legal personhood to the Southern Pacific Railroad Company, using Roscoe Conkling’s interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution to claim that its legal protections could apply to corporations. The Fourteenth Amendment (1868) was originally introduced to grant citizenship to formerly enslaved people who had been emancipated. See Winkler, *We the Corporations*.

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visual interruptions between each main section of the book. The "POPs-Up Chorus" consists of the "players" that pass through Scappettone's text, less identifiable speakers and voices than transcorporeal agents and affects. "POPs" refers to "persistent organic pollutants," organic compounds that resist biodegradation and linger and accumulate in human and nonhuman bodies, but the chorus also consists of "EPA, H_2O, CEOs, VOCs, Pb, PRPs, organics, arsenic, MAY, ESQ. Etc."[22] Manifested through Scappettone's poetic tactics of parataxis and collage, this chorus further challenges the possibility of an individual lyric subject, suggesting the ways that toxicity both becomes attached to certain bodies *and* unworks notions of bodies as bounded organic forms.

Through the use of found text and their material form, the collages also apprehend the rapid shifts and longer-term seeds of financial and ecological crisis. The scraps of text come from pastoral lyric, American epic, corporate reports, and a wide range of other sources—some easily identifiable through a web search and others more obscure, but all inviting readers to participate in tracing the circulation of language as both discourse and matter.[23] As *Exit 43* unfolds, it develops its own economy of circulation, as some scraps and quotations reemerge elsewhere in the book or other iterations of the work.[24] In her analysis of contemporary experimental ecopoetry, Harriet Tarlo refers to "textual recycling" as a poetic practice with an "eco-ethical" capacity to call attention to the textual, material quality of poetry and its embedment in wider fields of material and intellectual property.[25] Scappettone's use of found text and collage in *Exit 43* participates in such textual recycling, but the work shifts the emphasis from the more liberal environmentalist associations of recycling to the politics and poetics of salvage.

In her account of electronic waste, Jennifer Gabrys writes that "to salvage is to repurpose objects, to recycle some elements and discard others, to reinforce materials and rescue parts that are momentarily resonant and that operate in some way that had yet to be imagined." It is "at once a poetic and political activity; it rematerializes the sets of material relations that enabled the manufacture, consumption, and movement of goods in the first place."[26] In *Exit 43*, such activities have a social and familial

22. Scappettone, *Republic of Exit 43*, 17. "POPs" are persistent organic pollutants but also refer to pop-up windows or "pests of the internet that assailed surfers of yore with unsolicited advertisements or warnings" (*Republic of Exit 43*, 16) and also, perhaps, "privately owned public space." "EPA" is the US Environmental Protection Agency, "VOCs" are volatile organic compounds, "Pb" is the chemical symbol for lead, and "PRPs" are potentially responsible parties.

23. As Scappettone has discussed in a recent essay, poetic and critical practices such as web searching are also implicated in toxic infrastructures owing to the uneven wasting, toxification, and dispossession of economies of materials like copper, which underpin "the wireless age's reputed democracy of knowledge." Scappettone, "Agitating a Copper Lyre," 343.

24. Here Scappettone draws on a genealogy of literary modernism that explicitly brings together poetry and waste through techniques of bricolage and juxtaposition. For example, reflecting on Charles Baudelaire's figure of the chiffonier, Walter Benjamin writes, "Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse." Benjamin, "Paris of the Second Empire," 48.

25. Tarlo, "Recycles," 122–27.

26. Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish*, 132.

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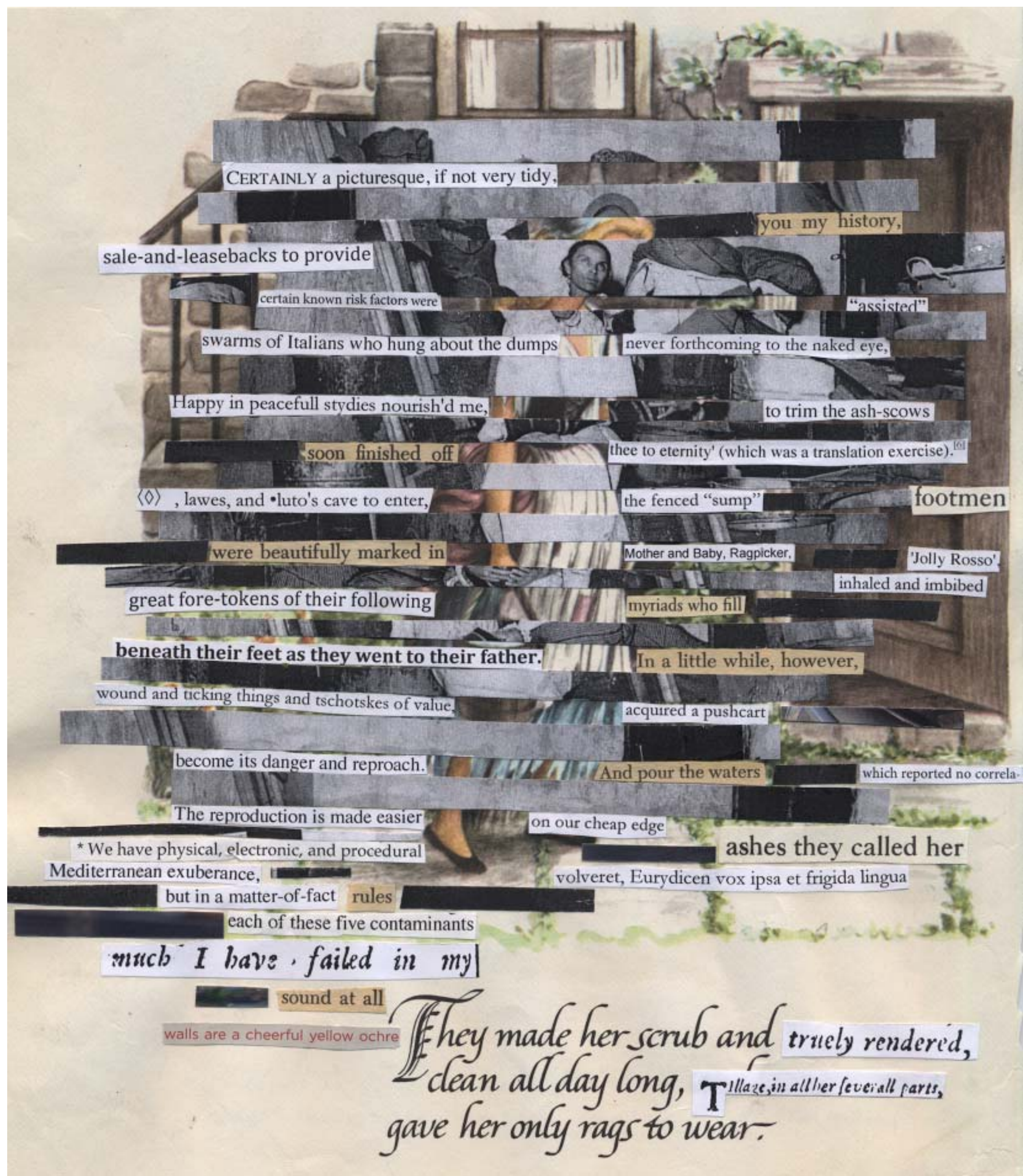

Figure 1. Untitled (Imagine a Cinder-Wench) (2015), collage from Jennifer Scappettone's *The Republic of Exit 43: Outtakes and Scores from an Archaeology and Pop-Up Opera of the Corporate Dump*, 89.

history. In the unusually figurative collage at the beginning of the section titled "Leave Loom: A Memory," Scappettone splices a black-and-white photograph of a woman cradling a baby in a tenement flat with an illustration from *Alice in Wonderland* and collaged pieces of text (fig. 1).

The photo is taken from Jacob A. Riis's pioneering work of photojournalism *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890) and is titled "In the home of an Italian rag-picker, Jersey Street." Several of the scraps of text in the collage

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quote directly from Riis, including one referring to the "swarms of Italians who hung about the dumps."[27] Scappettone's great-grandfather was one of several millions of Italians who migrated to the US in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; upon arrival, he acquired a pushcart and made a living selling items picked from the waste. Riis's metaphoric and metonymic use of *swarm*—slipping between human and animal, insect, pest—positions the ragpickers as conceptually as well as physically proximate to the waste from which they made their living, pointing to the ways that waste and toxicity get stuck to certain bodies along class and racial lines. In this period, Italian Americans faced frequent prejudice and even violence in the United States as the boundaries of whiteness were tested and reconfigured through large-scale immigration, although they were ultimately aligned with the social and institutional advantages on the white side of the "color line."[28] Calling back to this social history, Scappettone's salvage poetics work from available materials, indexing practices of creative survival in and against racial and class structures, and inseparable from *Exit 43*'s ecological ethics and aesthetics.

The "sets of material relations" Scappettone's salvage poetics "rematerialize" are also those of US postwar consumerism and neoliberal financial capitalism. In addition to its material manifestation as a collateral effect of increasing accumulations of waste, toxicity has an important conceptual role as the underside to a rhetorical framework binding economic growth to notions of health. For instance, in the middle of the collage beginning "and every now and then a great crash," we find the line "and losses on those stinky assets would be absorbed."[29] This fragment of language is taken from a blog post written by the BBC's former business editor Robert Peston in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007–8; Peston refers to the US's means of recovery as a "Septic Bank"[30] (fig. 2). As Mel Y. Chen has shown, the rhetorical framework of health and toxicity that operates widely across US public discourse and social and economic policy came to particular prominence during the financial crisis through the naming of *toxic assets*, financial assets whose values had fallen to the extent that there was no longer a market for them.[31] Chen traces the slippages of such rhetoric "between the imagined neoliberal national body, against which toxic financial products threaten ill health, and the metonymic subpopulation of the toxic that must be alienated from the accepted flow of capital for that nation's own security."[32] In Chen's account this "metonymic subpopulation" is predominantly made up of poor, racialized, disabled, and queered populations who are presented as threatening to the reproduction of propertied heteronormative

27. Scappettone, *Republic of Exit 43*, 89.

28. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival.* The "color line" is a phrase used by W. E. B. Du Bois to describe persistent racial inequality in his 1903 work *The Souls of Black Folk*.

29. Scappettone, *Republic of Exit 43*, 95.

30. Peston, "First Septic Bank (Revisited)."

31. Chen, "Unpacking Intoxication," 25–29.

32. Chen, "Unpacking Intoxication," 26.

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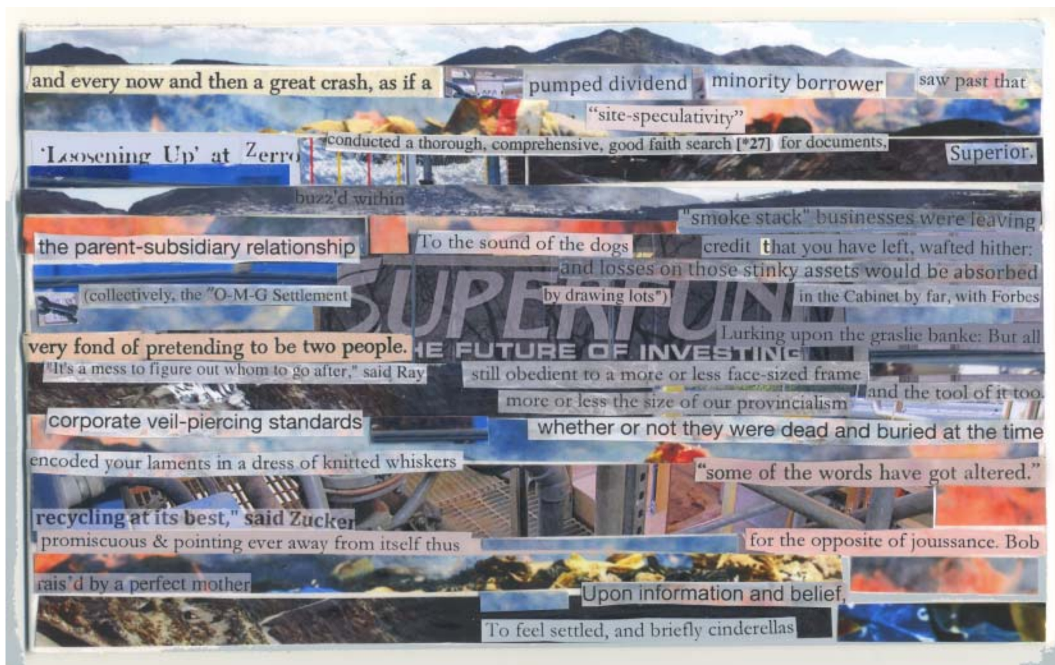

Figure 2. and every now and then a great crash (2016), collage from Jennifer Scappettone’s *The Republic of Exit 43: Outtakes and Scores from an Archaeology and Pop-Up Opera of the Corporate Dump*, 95.

whiteness, bound up with capital accumulation, and closely tied to ideas of the health and growth of the nation-state.

Yet Scappettone also engages metonymy more distinctly as a poetic practice. As the poet Lyn Hejinian writes, metonymy works across “several simultaneous but not necessarily congruent logics”; by contrast with metaphor, it “preserves context, foregrounds interrelationship. . . . While metonymy maintains the intactness and discreteness of particulars, its paratactic perspective gives it multiple vanishing points.”[33] We have already seen metonymy at work in Scappettone’s reproduction of Riis’s “swarms of Italians who hung about the dump,” but in the POPs-Ups, Scappettone mobilizes metonymy more extensively as a poetic logic to suggest material relationships between ostensibly divergent or even juxtapositional references. For example, in “‘smoke stack’ businesses were leaving” in the collage above, the “smoke stack” is a metonym for factories and industries manufacturing products such as iron, steel, chemicals, and electricity, owing to the large chimneys traditionally used and the high volumes of pollution created by these industries. When read from left to right across the page, the line runs on to “the parent-subsidiary relationship” below. This phrase, used in business, refers to larger companies that own or control “subsidiaries,” but the metaphor of the parent also operates metonymically to gesture toward corporate legal personhood, responsibility, and relation.

33. Hejinian, *Language of Inquiry*, 148.

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The reference to parent-subsidiary relationships connects to another depiction of a "parent" in the scrap in the bottom left-hand corner: "rais'd by a perfect mother." Here, Scappettone's salvage poetics combine metonymy with intertextual references and overburdened puns to create additional, nonlinear trajectories across the collage, including trajectories that call attention to the frameworks of normative "healthy" social and economic (re)production that Chen critiques.[34] In this example, as elsewhere, Scappettone reworks a foundational text of the American literary canon, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. The scrap is taken from the longer line "well-begotten, and rais'd by a perfect mother" from the poem "Starting from Paumanok"; Whitman's speaker is (re)produced through filiation and gendered economies of care. In Whitman's poem this line is combined with other kinds of subject formation associated with American national identity; Whitman speaks of "roaming many lands," serving as a soldier, and retreating into the woods, each seemingly reliant on geographical expansion: "Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World."[35] Behind the scraps of text in Scappettone's collage, the background reads "SUPERFUND / [T]HE FUTURE OF INVESTING." As we have seen, Superfund is the name of the EPA program to clean up sites associated with hazardous waste, but it also shares its name with another Superfund, a "managed futures" investment company.[36] Together, these present a mythic America of propertied white pasts and futures, combining heteropatriarchal reproduction,[37] colonial exploration and military conquest, and the fruits of the "undiscovered asset class" of financial futures.[38] The POPs-Up connects citizen, nation, and economy, whose "healthy" reproduction is juxtaposed with the "stinky assets" and corresponding "subpopulation" (to use Chen's term) whose "losses" must be "absorbed."

In this sense, the POPs-Up holds multiple layers of meaning in dialogue and tension, as the assemblages constantly recontextualize, disrupt, and pollute both individual entities and larger themes or narratives. Not all scraps have equal weighting in a linguistic economy in which power is unevenly distributed among utterances, and here metonymy and intertextuality become poetic tools to work through recurring tropes and implicit assumptions underlying rhetorics of waste and toxicity as they play out materially across bodies and spaces. Coming to the page, readers also become implicated in making trajectories through the mass of language and matter: which connections do we notice, and which do we miss or even erase? To further examine the

34. Scappettone demonstrates nonlinear reading in her spoken performance of the POPs-Ups on Leonard Schwartz's radio program *Cross Cultural Poetics*, taking unexpected routes through the scraps of text and returning to repeat and reformulate earlier constructions. Scappettone, *Cross Cultural Poetics*.

35. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 11.

36. *Financial futures* refers to contracts to buy or sell financial products at a specified future date for a specified price. The International Monetary Market (IMM) created in 1972 was the first financial futures exchange.

37. Addressing discussions around queerness in Whitman's poetry is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article.

38. Baha, "Our Story."

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workings of waste and toxicity as they shift from rhetorical framework to material locale, Scappettone grounds her salvage poetics in another New York waste site: Fresh Kills on Staten Island.

Fresh Kills, Old News

Fresh Kills originally opened in 1948 as a temporary landfill site, but then stayed open for more than fifty years. The POPs-Ups' appearance as layers of accumulated language is in fact quite literal; when "garbologist" William Rathje and his team started excavating Fresh Kills in the late 1980s, they found "decades-old fractions of legible newspaper" and other textual matter preserved in the landfill's anaerobic environment, which they could use to date the waste.[39] In 2001, after years of public pressure, the landfill eventually closed, only to be reopened briefly to take the debris of the 9/11 attacks. Around a third of the material from Ground Zero was taken to Fresh Kills to be sorted, some of which was subsequently identified as human remains. In this context, the subsequent and ongoing long-term transformation of Fresh Kills into a public park almost three times the size of Central Park is closely tied to ideas of restoration on multiple fronts. The public discourse surrounding the rebranded Freshkills Park presents it as an aftermath to the disrupted pastoral of both potentially toxic waste matter *and* the infiltration of toxic subjects, "restoring" ecosystem, community, and national health through creating spaces for wildlife, leisure, scientific experimentation, and technological innovation. For example, in *The Fresh Kills Story*, a documentary made by Andy Levison in 2012, the Staten Island deputy borough president Ed Burke says, "It would be *poetic justice* if Fresh Kills—once an environmental nightmare—became an environmental beacon by having green energy technologies in place."[40]

Scappettone's own approach to this "garbage arcadia" is more ambivalent. In an earlier version of the prose-poem essay on Fresh Kills in the middle of *Exit 43*, she writes, "The infrastructure of our responses mingles utopian aspirations for remediation with the indigestible, the residual."[41] Margaret Ronda argues that forms of residue and "remainder" recur in American poetry written in the Great Acceleration, the period of rapid and intensified economic growth, technological innovation, and ecological ramifications to which Scappettone attends.[42] Just as Ronda figures the remainder as the shifting remnants of past and ongoing natural-historical processes, in *Exit 43* the "indigestible" and "residual" are not just actual toxins and preserved matter beneath Fresh Kills's high-tech drainage and ventilation system and impermeable plastic liner, legible markers of the human accumulation of waste. They also suggest the slow violences and displacements of garbage arcadia. Scappettone describes Fresh Kills as "already the

39. Rathje and Murphy, *Rubbish!*, 101.
40. Levison, "Fresh Kills Story"; emphasis mine.
41. Scappettone, "Garbage Arcadia," 146.
42. Ronda, *Remainders*.

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crème de la crème of garbage, dominated by household rather than industrial waste" in contrast to the Syosset dump cited at the beginning of the text. The eventual closure of Fresh Kills relied on further displacements of waste: under pressure from local residents, the New York Department of Sanitation agreed in 1999 to "export the City's trash to South Carolina instead."[43] Scappettone's interconnection of multiple waste sites in *Exit 43* points toward interlocking material and conceptual systems of "waste management" that rely on the categorization and displacement of waste, bodies, and ecologies.[44]

As Max Liboiron writes, the disposability and "waste colonialism" on which late capitalism is based assumes not only uneven waste infrastructures operative within and beyond the borders of the nation-state but also access to Indigenous land and the fundamental treatment of land as property in settler states such as the US.[45] The alignment of Indigenous land and waste is historically significant; as legal scholar Douglas Sanderson (Amo Binashii) has shown, British Crown appropriation and occupancy of Indigenous lands was defended using the category of "waste and unoccupied land."[46] In *Exit 43*, interconnected dynamics of settler colonialism, waste, and toxicity are implicit in the "shifting, metamorphic foundations of the new pastoral," emerging through overburdened usages of language relating to "settlements" (financial and otherwise) and Whitmanian American poetics.[47] In an earlier collage, Scappettone quotes additional material from "Starting from Paumanok" (fig. 3).

Paumanok is one of the Native American names for the place now known as Long Island. Yet the poem begins with "*was* no one" (italics Scappettone's). Originally part of a longer line from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, when combined with Whitman's supposedly "solitary" speaker "roaming many lands," this reference to "no one" might also be aligned with American environmental aesthetics of pastoral and wilderness.[48] It implies the *terra nullius* logic of the Doctrine of Discovery used by European settlers to justify colonization and the ongoing erasures of Indigenous people and lifeways through dispossession and forced assimilation.[49] Here I note a necessary tension

43. Scappettone, *Republic of Exit 43*, 100–101.

44. As Robert D. Bullard's scholarship on environmental racism has shown, black and economically disadvantaged communities are disproportionately exposed to toxicity in places designated as "sacrifice zones." Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie.* On a more global scale, Gabrys theorizes "geographies of disposal" through which toxic electronic waste ends up in poorer regions in the Global South, exported by wealthier nations for "reuse and repair." Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish*, 15.

45. Liboiron, "How Plastic Is a Function of Colonialism."

46. Sanderson, "Residue of *Imperium*," 348–49.

47. Scappettone, *Republic of Exit 43,* 102.

48. Similar sentiments are repeated in the discourse around Fresh Kills; as one local naturalist stated, Fresh Kills "looks like a prairie you'd see in the Midwest somewhere." Trezza, "Where Coyotes, Foxes, and Bobolinks Find a New Home." As William Cronon has argued, such aesthetics implicitly reproduce settler colonial spatial and identity formation through nostalgic imaginaries of a "pristine" landscape free of Indigenous bodies. Cronon, "Trouble with Wilderness."

49. Miller et al., *Discovering Indigenous Lands.*

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Figure 3. was no one / way went Alice (2015), collage from Jennifer Scappettone’s *The Republic of Exit 43: Outtakes and Scores from an Archaeology and Pop-Up Opera of the Corporate Dump*, 57.

between what I have described as salvage poetics in Scappettone’s work and tendencies of “salvage ethnography” we might identify in Whitman’s poetics, upholding Indigenous languages and place-names but doing so from a settler position that relies on the loss or absence of Indigenous people.[50] In this context, *Exit 43* could engage more deeply with settler colonialism as a structuring dynamic of the language and landscapes from which it salvages, including Fresh Kills as a garbage arcadia site of contradiction whose “restoration” is implicitly premised on settler concepts of place and land.

Queer Indigenous Toxic Poetics

Julian Talamantez Brolaski’s *Gowanus atropolis* (2011) more explicitly addresses the ways that settler colonialism functions as part of toxic infrastructures. The book’s title refers to the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn—a vital industrial transportation route in the nineteenth century that was placed on the EPA Superfund list in 2010—and the work combines investigations of transcorporeal and toxified lyric subjectivities to address interconnected and violent structures of toxification, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy. Like Scappettone, Brolaski also refers to “myths of manahatta”:

50. *Salvage ethnography* is a term generally associated with early anthropologists such as Franz Boas, who attempted to document what they saw as “vanishing” cultures threatened with extinction owing to modernization.

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from the woodlands of new york
lenape nation
sovereign L-train
the weckquaesgeeks
& reckgawawancs
& melville's "manhattoes"
mahicans mohegans
unamis munsee delawares
lenni lenape
oneida cayuga
onandaga seneca
mohawk
usually just "indians"
"basically algonquins"
"were" residents[51]

Brolaski names a range of Indigenous nations whose traditional territories make up the place currently known as New York, using quotation marks to differentiate these names from the categories and misnamings used by settlers: "manhattoes," "indians," and "basically algonquins." Brolaski also uses quotation marks around "were" in "'were' residents," with a similar function to the italics in Scappettone's "*was* no one," suggesting the erasure of Indigenous bodies, relations, and lives through their consignment to the past tense. Both linguistic moves point toward the ways that Indigenous land could be cast as *terra nullius* or "waste and unoccupied" for settler accumulation and redefinition.

However, Brolaski's poetics go beyond critique of colonial discourse, foregrounding contemporary currents and longer trajectories of Indigenous and queer thought that attend to the means by which certain bodies are wasted. These poetics also attempt to unfix categorizations of bodies and their reproductive capacities. For example, in "murder on the gowanus," Brolaski writes through classical and early modern lyric (there are references to Ben Jonson, George Peel, Thomas Wyatt, and William Shakespeare, among others) to sing a eulogy for Sludgie, a young minke whale who died in the Gowanus Canal in 2007. Brolaski's approach is less directly material and visual than Scappettone's salvage poetics, which explicitly engage language and poetry as waste matter. Yet the reworking of Renaissance lyric to address a whale across a slick of oil creates similarly hybrid—and transgressive—subjectivities and relations. The poem's speaker is slippery and multiple, filtered through the scraps of poetry and currents of potential infection identified in "toxified" subjects: "s/thing keeps / on testing me for tb."[52] In addressing Sludgie, the speaker does not merely look on but riskily inhabits a "beastly

51. Brolaski, *Gowanus atropolis*, 55. Excerpts from *Gowanus atropolis* are reproduced with permission from Ugly Duckling Presse.

52. Brolaski, *Gowanus atropolis*, 42.

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p.o.v." (point of view), resisting socially legible bodily or species identities and coming into proximity and even transcorporeal exchange with poisoned sustenance and demonic desires. Like Scappettone's chorus, Brolaski's "beastly p.o.v." disrupts stable categories of body and environment and also more visibly undermines discrete categorizations of human and animal, sex and gender.

"astonishd fish" develops a multifaceted critique of toxic infrastructures and their normative modes of capital accumulation and species and social reproduction. The poem begins with an epigraph from the late US senator John McCain, who when arguing for more offshore oil drilling claimed that "the fish love to be around those rigs!"[53] This claim repeats arguments used by oil companies, based on marine biology research that shows decommissioned oil platforms to be highly productive environments for some fish (without commenting on the impacts of fossil fuel extraction and climate change on animal populations).[54] However, like *Exit 43*, "astonished fish" relates these infrastructures to financial and ecological crisis. Brolaski writes that "eche rig shattrs / the hrt & the gut & the spleen / of fanny-freddy infamy." Beyond its suggestion of a typecast heterosexual scandal, "fanny-freddy infamy" alludes to the US Treasury's takeover of the Federal National Mortgage Association (known as Fannie Mae) and the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation (known as Freddie Mac) in 2008 during the financial crisis. The highly visceral language of "the hrt & the gut & the spleen" suggests the bodily and material impacts of intensified resource extraction, economic instability, and gender norms as part of socioecological infrastructures grounded in the (re)production of capital. These impacts are not confined to the human, as Brolaski asks why the fish were not given "indemnification" for harms done in the Gowanus and beyond.

"astonishd fish" also contributes to *Gowanus atropolis*'s wider efforts in unfixing sex and gender categorizations and norms, including beyond the narrow borders of the human.[55] The middle stanza of the poem starts, "the fish began to speak queerly / something that never will happen before."[56] Here there is a disruption in the order of things, not only through the apparent queerness of the fish but also through the mixed tenses and temporalities of the second line. This disruption holds particular weight in the context of toxicity; as several queer and feminist environmental scholars have pointed out, there is abundant scientific and public discourse on the "gender bending" effects of endocrine disruptors such as PCB from plastic pollution on human and animal life, yet scientific data on this issue is uneven. Murphy notes in her article on chemical infrastructures along the St. Clair River that the proliferation of state-funded research on sex-ratio changes in the round goby fish contrasted with a distinct lack of attention

53. Terkel, "Fish Oil Salesman."
54. Claisse et al., "Oil Platforms off California."
55. Brolaski, *Gowanus atropolis*, 28.
56. Brolaski, *Gowanus atropolis*, 28.

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to observed effects in the Aamjiwnaang First Nation community living beside the river.[57] However, Giovanna Di Chiro cautions that

> The very *real* issue of the myriad grave consequences (in terms of both mortality and morbidity) of the widespread contamination and worldwide bioaccumulation in bodily tissues of hazardous chemicals known as POPs (persistent organic pollutants) becomes distorted by the alarmist focus on one piece of their toxic story. That selective telling of the story which zeroes in on toxic chemicals' role in disturbing hormonal systems, damaging the reproductive organs, and creating sexual instability and impairment has functioned strategically to appeal to the society's basest fears of an ominous disruption in the normal gender order and ultimately the challenge to heteronormativity.[58]

Brolaski's poem doesn't provide a solution to these tensions. Instead, it tests and inhabits queer, "beastly," and ambivalent perspectives while also foregrounding ongoing, difficult relations in toxic environments. The poem ends with a question: "what the heck ys love / my brinkly protocol?" Positioned at the edge of the bank bordering the water, Brolaski questions how it might be possible to find or make forms of being and relating in obligation and response to others in toxic conditions while refusing stable species boundaries, heteronormative modes of reproduction, and appropriative and extractive approaches to land.

Read together, Scappettone's and Brolaski's texts suggest the challenges but also the possibilities of a poetics that seeks to contest toxic infrastructures while simultaneously rejecting calls to restore pure or pristine bodies and landscapes as blank spaces for the (re)production of white heteropatriarchy, capital accumulation, and wasted and toxified "externalities." Crucially, both involve readers in a process of piecing together language and matter to expose the construction and reproduction of toxic infrastructures, while undermining the possibility of an objective lens or scale through which to view them. In this context, finding routes through and making material connections means inhabiting the poetics critically and corporeally, reflecting on our own embodied and situated positioning and the ways that this feeds into and is shaped by structures and relations beyond individual embodiment. In the conclusion that follows, I consider the possibilities of such poetics to relocate modes of embodied inhabitation in collective practices.

Strung Out

On a bright but blustery day in November 2011 a group of people gather on the top of a hill on Staten Island. The group consists of artists, dancers, performers, musicians, and poets along with other audience participants, and the hill they are standing on is made

57. Murphy, "Chemical Infrastructures."
58. Di Chiro, "Polluted Politics?," 202.

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of landfill, decades of the city’s waste: compressed, lined with plastic, layered for drainage, ventilation, and protection, and topped with grass. This is *PARK #2*, a site-specific participatory performance conceived by choreographer Kathy Westwater in collaboration with Scappettone and design director Seung Jae Lee. Westwater asks the people gathered to take part in a “structured wandering” exercise around one of the covered landfill mounds. Each audience participant makes contact with one of the performers, whom they are asked to keep within their sight as they explore the pastoral hillscape dotted with methane gas release pumps. Both performers and participants are invited to wander without a preplanned trajectory, their traversal of the space open to contingency, agency, and chance, yet conditioned by conscious relationality and mutual obligation in terms of physical proximity and attention.

After the wandering exercise, performers and participants come together toward the top of the hill. Their entanglement with one another but also with waste is literalized through scraps of salvaged “trash text” threaded on long strings and held in tension between the moving bodies of performers who pause to shout the words of the trash text—like a fragmented, avant-garde poem—through makeshift loudhailers into the wind. Finally, they drape the lines of rubbish over a single dancer, their limbs caught up and their movements labored, contorted and intoxicated, against the eerie, high-pitched sound of Tamio Shiraishi’s saxophone crossing the hill. The event ends without a flourish, as the performers walk off casually across the hill, unceremoniously breaking the relationality established during the initial wandering.[59] By remaining constantly aware of and proximate to one another, the participants complicate a wilderness paradigm of lone, individualized explorers in an empty land, performing modes of ecological and interpersonal sociality. The use of trash text and the dancer’s labored movements refuses the covering over of toxic infrastructures and gestures toward the implication of liberal subjects in the constraining and wasting of others.[60]

Clearly, it matters *which* bodies and subjects participate in and become legible through social poetics such as *PARK*: what are particular bodies’ historical and material relations to the space, and how does their presence or nonpresence remake that space? We can approach this question by comparing *PARK #2* to “Stonewall to Standing Rock,” a poem by Brolaski published after *Gowanus atropolis*, during the protection of Standing Rock from the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) in 2016. Brolaski foregrounds poetry as a spatial practice embedded in histories of Indigenous and queer struggle, joining up spontaneous riots by the LGBT+ community in Greenwich Village in 1969 to protest against police violence with Indigenous and decolonial movements around #NoDAPL and Mní Wičóni (Water is Life). Brolaski contrasts these movements with the kinds of restoration practices embedded in places like Fresh Kills:

59. Westwater, “Kathy Westwater’s Park Fresh Kills #2.”

60. This is what Elizabeth Povinelli calls “extimate existence.” Povinelli, “Horizons and Frontiers.”

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> can you make a sovereign nation a national park how condescending
> instead just tell them to honor the treaty
>
> what can poetry do it
> cant not do nothing
> it must undulate w/the 2.30pm dance music . . . [61]

Brolaski does not romanticize poetry, but rather makes it part of a collective effort to unsettle colonial arrangements of land and waste. Again, *which* bodies participate and *how* they participate in these movements matter. The protection of Standing Rock against the oil pipeline loops back to Scappettone's articulation of the uneven conditions of "contamination and chokehold" shaping possibilities for living and poetry. Toxic infrastructures at Standing Rock are embedded in the fast and slow violences of land dispossession and hostile governance in settler colonialism, clearly visible in the police use of teargas and water cannons against Native water protectors.[62] These atmospherics feed into far longer trajectories of apocalypse facing Indigenous communities and relations, challenging more recent (settler) narratives of environmental breakdown and the Anthropocene.[63]

In this context, *PARK* stands as a brief moment in the expanded temporalities of Fresh Kills's inhabitation, dispossession, wasting, and transformation. Whereas techno-managerial responses to the challenges of accumulating waste and toxicity often replicate dispossession, displacement, and differential wasting as their operating conditions of progress and capture, the poetics I have discussed here elaborate embedded, intoxicated social infrastructures to highlight the uneven distributions of toxicity and longer-term violences constitutive of sites such as Fresh Kills. But Scappettone's and Brolaski's poetics also work to make mutually implicated relations from the debris. These are the stakes of what Murphy calls *alterlife*:

> Alterlife names life already altered, which is also life open to alteration. It indexes collectivities of life recomposed by the molecular productions of capitalism in our own pasts and the pasts of our ancestors, as well as into the future. It is a figure of life entangled within community, ecological, colonial, racial, gendered, military, and infrastructural histories that have profoundly shaped the susceptibilities and potentials of future life. Alterlife is a figuration of chemical exposures that attempts to be as much about figuring life and responsibilities beyond the individualized body as it is about acknowledging extensive chemical relations.[64]

61. Brolaski, "Stonewall to Standing Rock."

62. "Slow violence" is a now well-known concept developed by Rob Nixon to describe the lingering and often imperceptible effects of environmental degradation on racialized and (post)colonial populations in the Global South. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor.* Kristen Simmons discusses the threat to breath for Native water protectors at DAPL's infrastructural "choke points" in her article "Settler Atmospherics."

63. Whyte, "Indigenous Science (Fiction)"; and Davis and Todd, "On the Importance of a Date."

64. Murphy, "Alterlife," 497.

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PARK suggests modes of toxified life beset by uneven entanglements and complicities, creating possibilities for relation and co-implication across toxic infrastructures without the promise of healing or restoration. When placed in dialogue with Brolaski's poetry, the accountabilities of these modes of relation multiply: accountabilities to water, fish, ways of living beyond dispossession and containment through racialized and gendered structures, and to trash itself, "an acrid reminder of the elements of the *oikos* cast off in the interests of economy."[65] In this context, I have suggested that poetry "gives body to the fissures of infrastructure" when it works from and among the trash.

Recounting *PARK*, Scappettone reflects on the unpredictabilities, disappointments, and struggles of relational poetics in tension with their craft and care:

> the chorus's strophe and antistrophe alternated between programming, reproach, absurdity, whimsy and lament—the rectangle of strung language finally folding in upon itself as we rushed toward the center of the mound, tangling and formulating of a sudden a bewildering web . . . jingles whipping in the redoubtable unimpeded winds of Fresh Kills, increasingly impossible to read and sing, committed instead to strained memory.[66]

Scappettone opens up questions of what it might mean to be "committed" in and against toxic infrastructures. How might an uneven poetics of breath participate in the endurance and destabilization of the toxic from a place of solidarity, vulnerability, and humility? How might an entangled poetics be performed—rather than instrumentalized—as part of ongoing anticolonial, feminist, and nonanthropocentric practices? Here and elsewhere, Scappettone and her collaborators and interlocutors collectively compose a salvage poetics, breaking up the boundedness of "bodies" and "toxins" acting upon one another. These poetics resist making toxified subjects legible in the terms of discrete bodies and linear structures of cause and effect, while also exposing the simultaneous slipperiness and stickiness of toxicity operating in logics that reproduce the uneven and often violent modes of organization of capitalism's ecologies. However, in the process Scappettone rejects the possibility of an impartial or unentangled critical perspective, making complicity a necessary condition of toxic embodiment. In the messy web of obscured evidence and narrowed legibility in state and corporate modalities of making sense, *The Republic of Exit 43* holds out a commitment to strained memory with others—toxified bodies and collectives—as a mode of assembly and reassembly, in/organically, across toxic infrastructures' seepages, slippages, and containments.

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65. Scappettone, *Republic of Exit 43,* 111.
66. Scappettone, *Republic of Exit 43,* 109.

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