# TOXIC ENTANGLEMENTS: ADVERTISING AND MATRIAL TOXICITY IN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE LITERATURE

by

SARAH AMBER PRESTON

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of English
and the Division of Graduate Studies of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

September 2023

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

Student: Sarah Amber Preston

Title: Toxic Entanglements: Advertising and Material Toxicity in Environmental Justice Literature

This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of English by:

| | |
|---|---|
| Sarah D. Wald | Chairperson |
| David Vázquez | Core Member |
| Kirby Brown | Core Member |
| Christopher Chávez | Institutional Representative |

and

| | |
|---|---|
| Krista Chronister | Vice Provost for Graduate Studies |

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Division of Graduate Studies.

Degree awarded September 2023

© 2023 Sarah Amber Preston

# DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Sarah Amber Preston

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

September 2023

Title: Toxic Entanglements: Advertising and Material Toxicity in Environmental Justice Literature

Brand names, advertisements, and marketing strategies fill the pages of much contemporary ethnic American literature that engages with issues of environmental justice. In *Toxic Entanglements: Advertising and Material Toxicity in Environmental Justice Literature,* I argue that advertising is central to the political critique of the contemporary ethnic American environmental justice novel, which I define as a contemporary novel by an Ethnic American author engaged in environmental justice critique. In particular, reading these novels' engagement with advertising showcases the "toxic entanglement" of material and cultural toxins, or racism and other oppressive forces. Further, I propose that since discursive, or cultural toxins are enmeshed with material toxins—they are mutually constitutive—disrupting one will disrupt the other. The internalization of these authors' narratives by readers hinders the process of reinforcing culturally toxic narratives and ostensibly stems the flow of material toxins as well.

The interdisciplinary nature of this project brings together the subfields of environmental justice cultural studies and critical advertising studies. In *Toxic Entanglements*, I examine the short stories and well-known contemporary ethnic American novels of Helena María Viramontes, Thomas King, and Ruth Ozeki. Their works exemplify the sharp political critiques being made in creative fiction as they engage with environmental themes and advertising. This

project reveals all aspects of advertising as constituting critical components in a web of toxic entanglements that serve to perpetuate the material toxins with which they are entangled. It insists that the fight for environmental justice is not just material; it is discursive as well.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am extremely thankful for the many wonderful professors who have guided me and inspired me along this academic journey. These include Lara Bovilsky, Mary Wood, Tara Fickle, Courtney Thorsson, and Sharon Luk, with a special thanks to my dissertation committee Kirby Brown, David Vázquez, Christopher Chávez, and Sarah Wald. David and Kirby, your mentorship early on in this process is invaluable to me. Sarah, I would not be even close to where I am and who I am as a scholar without your bold, compassionate, kind yet firm, honest leadership.

I would like to thank my dedicated writing group and dear friends, Will Conable, Megan Reynolds, and Abby Johnson for keeping me on track and keeping me sane. I could not have done this without your support and your friendship through this process. Thank you to my other colleagues whose love and support kept me going: Molly Hatay, Cassandra Galentine, Lisa Fink, Katherine Huber, Teresa Hernández-Reed, Madhura Nadarajah, and Alexandra Garner. Even if I had never finished this program, it would have been worth moving my family here just to know you.

I would also like to thank all the staff who run the Department of English (and more), without whose help none of this would be possible. Melissa Bowers, Kathy Furrer, Susan Meyers, Karen McClain, David Yorgesen, Christina Lujin, and Julie Anderson, thank you!

I am forever grateful to the American Council of Learned Societies for helping fund this project through the Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowship and for the job market training they provided.

Finally, I cannot thank my wonderful family enough. Thank you to my parents who loved and supported me through every triumph and hardship along the way, taking my girls in when we needed help and coming to the rescue in times of need. Thank you to my beautiful girls, Bella and Aijah Preston, for always believing in me, loving me, and being so patient with this long, difficult process. You are the reason I do any of this. Thank you to Joanne Preston, who consistently made this journey possible through her love, support, understanding, and unwavering commitment to see me cross this finish line. Your prayer, encouragement, reality-checks, and sense of humor have carried me through.

To my beautiful, inspiring girls, Bella, and Aijah. To their father, Bart Preston, without whom these girls, and possibly this project, would not exist.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

I. INTRODUCTION: THE TOXIC ENTANGLEMENT OF ADVERTISING AND MATERIAL TOXICITY IN ETHNIC AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE LITERATURE ........ 13

The Inseparability of Discursive and Material Toxins: “Toxic Entanglements”..... 15

Environmental Justice Cultural Studies and Critical Advertising Studies............... 18

Environmental Justice, Greenwashing, NAFTA, and Neoliberalism as Context .... 26

Chapter Overview ........ 30

Conclusion ........ 32

Works Cited ........ 33

II. FEELING THE BURN: MARKETING AND TOXICITY IN THE WORKS OF HELENA MARIA VIRAMONTES ........ 35

Fried Ends and Formaldehyde: Creating a State of Want in “Miss Clairol” ......... 38

A Sun Maid Desire: Marketing and “Cides” in *Under the Feet of Jesus* .............. 54

“ass-colored peachy flakes”: Advertising and Urban Toxins in *Their Dogs Came with Them* ........ 64

Conclusion ........ 74

Works Cited ........ 76

Chapter Page

III. CONTROLLING THE NARRATIVE: TOXIC ENTANGLEMENTS IN THOMAS KING'S *THE BACK OF THE TURTLE* .... 80

"There's one just right for you!": Brochures as Toxic Invitations .... 83

"Still, it was a good show": Public Relations and Toxicity .... 94

"A very fine watch": Advertising, Consumer Culture, and Environmental Catastrophe .... 104

"I don't suppose we can just sink it"/ "It's about community": Dorian and Sonny as Contrasting Responses to Crisis and Healing .... 113

Conclusion .... 118

Works Cited .... 119

IV. "ALL THIS FOR THE TAKING!": TOXIC ENTANGLEMENTS AND DRAMATIC DISRUPTION IN RUTH OZEKI'S *MY YEAR OF MEATS* AND *ALL OVER CREATION* .... 122

Wal-Mart and Wives: A Toxic Double in *My Year of Meats* .... 126

"Desirable" and "Wholesome": BEEF-EX as Transnational Transmitter of Toxins .... 135

Shifting Focus: Disrupting Toxicity .... 139

Pesticide Potatoes and PR Promotion: Toxic Entanglements in *All Over Creation* .... 145

"you'd think you could actually *kill* someone with public relations": Toxic PR Narratives .... 148

Talking Cows and Mutated Potato Heads: Disrupting Toxic Corporate Narratives through Brandalism and Subvertising .... 156

Conclusion .... 165

Works Cited .... 166

V. AFTERWORD: TOWARD AN INVESTIGATION OF TOXIC ENTANGLEMENTS IN GOVERNMENT-FUNDED PROGRAMS .................... 170

Works Cited .................................................................................................... 174

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1. Figure 1: 1981 Miss Clairol Advertisement........................................................ 38
2. Figure 2: Sun Maid Raisins........................................................................ 54
3. Figure 3: Coppertone Billboard ................................................................ 64
4. Figure 4: Brandalism.ch ........................................................................... 123

# I. INTRODUCTION:
# THE TOXIC ENTANGLEMENT OF ADVERTISING AND MATERIAL TOXICITY IN ETHNIC AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE LITERATURE

“If the consumption of individual goods leaves that whole area of human need unsatisfied, the attempt is made, by magic, to associate this consumption with human desires to which it has no real reference. You do not only buy an object: you buy social respect, discrimination, health, beauty, success, power to control your environment. The magic obscures the real sources of general satisfaction because their discovery would involve radical change in the whole common way of life.”

—Raymond Williams, *Advertising: The Magic System*

“She is busy cutting out Miss Breck models from the stacks of old magazines…” (Viramontes “Miss” 103). “Sonny taps out Dad’s favourite Native song, the one from the old Hamm’s beer commercial” (King 66). “Estrella read [billboards] over and over:…*Swanson’s TV Dinners, closest to mom’s cooking!*” (Viramontes *Under* 31). Sun Maid raisins, Quaker oatmeal, Aqua Net hairspray, Love Cries perfume, Calgon bath soak, Breck hair dye, Coppertone sunscreen, Spudee potato seeds, Brioni ties. Brand names, advertisements, and marketing strategies fill the pages of much contemporary ethnic American literature that engages with issues of environmental justice. Reading these texts through the dual lenses of my undergraduate training in marketing and my graduate training in close reading, it became apparent that these references to advertising and marketing were neither coincidental nor incidental to the cultural work of these texts. Rather, in this dissertation, I argue that advertising is central to the political

critique of the contemporary ethnic American environmental justice novel, which I define as a contemporary novel by an Ethnic American author engaged in environmental justice critique.

*Toxic Entanglements: Advertising and Material Toxicity in Environmental Justice Literature* works toward answering the questions, why do ethnic American novels that engage environmental justice themes so often center advertising? What critique does this allow authors engaging environmental justice to make that they could not make otherwise? How do these authors see advertising playing into the entangled, co-constitutive quality of discursive or cultural toxins and material toxins? How does ethnic American fiction that centers environmental justice depict advertising and toxic entanglements that affect women and marginalized communities, or marginalized women, particularly? How do environmental-justice-focused authors work to disrupt the effects of enmeshed discursive and material toxins? Ultimately, I argue that criticizing advertising and marketing is central to the cultural work of the contemporary ethnic American novels engaged with environmental justice themes. In particular, reading these novels' engagement with advertising showcases the entanglement of material and cultural toxins. By *cultural toxins*, I mean racism and other oppressive forces, as defined by John Blair Gamber, who goes on to explain *cultural toxicity* as a society that becomes literally unlivable for its inhabitants.

In *Toxic Entanglements,* I examine the short stories and well-known contemporary ethnic American novels of Helena María Viramontes, Thomas King, and Ruth Ozeki. Their works exemplify the sharp political critiques being made in creative fiction as they engage with environmental themes and advertising. Moreover, they suggest the ways that advertising facilitates the "toxic entanglements" of cultural and material toxicity. I explore representations of advertising in these literary texts set against the backdrop of the advertising climate when they

were written to uncover the way these authors expose the intertwined nature of discursive and material toxins. This provides an analysis of the articulation between ideology and economics and the pathways this articulation creates for the movement of material toxins, especially to marginalized communities. Further, I propose that since discursive, or cultural toxins are enmeshed with material toxins—they are mutually constitutive—disrupting one will disrupt the other.

**The Inseparability of Discursive and Material Toxins: "Toxic Entanglements"**

Within the texts I chose for this study, I examine these authors' engagement with what I call "toxic entanglements." Fundamental to my claim that environmental justice-focused literature has the power to disrupt systems of exploitation and the flow of material toxins is the understanding that the discursive is intertwined with the material. I term this relationship between material and discursive toxins "toxic entanglements," meaning both that each piece is toxic (i.e. discourse and pesticides), and that the entanglement itself is toxic in that the pieces are co-constitutive and thus work to perpetuate toxicity. Because metaphorical toxicity can have toxic material consequences and material toxicity becomes a talking point that can become metaphorically toxic, the entanglement, or co-constitution of the discursive and material is itself a breeding ground of toxicity: the entanglement breeds toxicity. I imagine this entanglement in much the same way as Donna Haraway conceives of "naturecultures"—or the idea that what has been imagined as "nature" and "culture" are so tightly interwoven they cannot be separated—and as Stacy Alaimo conceives of "trans-corporeality"—or the human body as enmeshed with and inseparable from nonhuman nature, as evidenced by the permeability of the body and the ability for nonhuman agents to pass through and within the body. Similarly, the toxic entanglement of

discursive, or cultural, or ideological toxins and material toxins are enmeshed in such a web that to disrupt one part of the web would necessarily disrupt the others.

Advertising is a key component of this toxic entanglement. The perpetuation of material toxins through advertising is often peddled through culturally toxic messages. Advertising often draws on hegemonic narratives which exclude marginalized subjects. Stuart Hall explains that the dominant hegemonic position "employs a narrative that naturalizes the existing order for social groups" and is usually revealed through commonly used and repeated representative anecdotes (976). Advertising relies on these anecdotes which reinforce a narrative "that naturalizes the existing order for social groups." In this project, I reveal the ways material toxins and cultural toxins are deeply entwined. I argue that these environmental justice-focused texts regularly disrupt the "dominant hegemonic position," which bears cultural toxicity, through their engagement with advertising campaigns in their creative works. The ways environmental justice authors expose toxic entanglements through representation is disruptive in that since discursive toxins and material toxins are mutually constitutive, disrupting one will disrupt the other. The internalization of these authors' narratives by readers hinders the process of reinforcing culturally toxic narratives and ostensibly stems the flow of material toxins as well. Further, these authors also illustrate disruption in their texts through the actions of their characters, providing examples of how to push-back against discursive and material toxicity.

I employ the term *disrupt* in the relationship between environmental justice authors and dominant narratives to point out both its efficacy and its limitations in unsettling dominant hegemonic positions. Definitions of *disrupt* and *disruption* range from relatively mild—"a break or interruption in the normal course or continuation of some activity, process, etc."; "to prevent something, esp. a system, process, or event, from continuing as usual or as expected"—to rather

intense—"the action of rending or bursting asunder; violent dissolution of continuity; forcible severance." Whether it is an "interruption," a "preven[tion]" or a "violent dissolution," one thing is for certain: a "normal" system or process is thrown into disorder. I am particularly interested in the word *normal* here: I argue that the continual poisoning of at-risk communities produces a discourse of normality which in turn allows the perpetuation of this poisoning.[1] Thus, if a disruption is a "break or interruption in the normal course or continuation of some activity, process, etc.", then what these authors are doing is interrupting the course of this discourse that works to perpetuate this poisoning and harmful ideologies, or cultural toxins. The phrase "continuing as usual or expected" points to hegemonic ideology which is continually reinforced through these marketing campaigns. If a disruption interrupts this, as I argue the authors in this study enact, that means the internalization of their narratives are hindering the reinforcement of culturally toxic ideology and ostensibly stemming the flow of material toxins.

Though this prevention through disruption is powerful, there are obvious limitations to its efficacy. One could argue that if *disruption* is a "violent dissolution" of the normal flow of activity, then we should see the dominant hegemonic position undone by these counternarratives, and the flow of toxins thus restricted. I posit that the disruption these texts trigger work more like fissures in the foundation of an edifice: the more cracks in the foundation, the less stable the building becomes. Over time, these small, yet cumulatively disruptive fissures lead to the crumbling of the entire structure. As environmental justice-focused texts such as Viramontes's, King's, and Ozeki's become increasingly widely read, as evidenced by their regularly being anthologized and adopted for classroom use and university study, these disruptions become more

[1] I am not the only one to argue this point. As will be discussed shortly, Julie Sze, Giovanna Di Chiro, and Kelly Fritsch argue this as well.

substantial as greater numbers of the U.S. population are exposed to their critiques of discursively perpetuated environmental injustices.

**Environmental Justice Cultural Studies and Critical Advertising Studies**

The interdisciplinary nature of this project brings together the subfields of environmental justice cultural studies and critical advertising studies. Critical advertising studies is important to bring into environmental justice cultural studies due to its focus on marketing, which is essential to better understand the kinds of critiques contemporary environmental justice creative writers are making. At the same time, environmental justice cultural studies adds to critical advertising studies by revealing how marketing is represented in literature with environmental themes, aiding in the understanding of the far-reaching cultural impact of these campaigns.

Advertising, because of its role in creating want, is a particular driver of ideological and material toxicity. Critical advertising scholars—including Raymond Williams, Judith Williamson, Sut Jhally and more—argue that advertising has a strong ability to entice coupled with an inability to fulfill the desires it creates. According to Sut Jhally and James Twitchell for example, "what's real about advertising is its appeals [and] what's false about advertising is the answers it provides to those appeals" (n.p.). As well, Raymond Williams speaks to advertising's purpose as being "to preserve the consumption ideal from criticism inexorably made of it by experience" (188), meaning that advertising will never deliver on the promises it makes; this is revealed through the consistent experiencing of this conundrum as a consumer. Further, advertising scholars such as Williams, Jhally, and Naomi Klein contend that advertising not only reflects culture back to itself in its attempt to capitalize on the values of its consumers, it creates a fantasy world in problematic ways (including via the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, for example) that then becomes part of the cultural imaginary. *Toxic Entanglements* intervenes in

this conversation by engaging an environmental justice cultural studies lens, which helps to reveal the relationship between cultural toxins such as racism and sexism reflected in the ads that concern critical advertising scholars and material toxicities such as pesticides and air pollution that concern environmental justice scholars. Advertising facilitates the movement of material toxins to vulnerable communities, which is particularly insidious given the desire advertising creates that ostensibly was not there otherwise and which cannot be fulfilled in the first place.

Environmental justice cultural studies engages cultural artifacts in the quest to better understand and thereby confront issues of environmental justice. Environmental justice as it pertains to this study is understood as the uneven distribution of environmental burdens and benefits. These uneven burdens tend to fall on people of color, Indigenous people, the poor, women, and those living in the Global South. Environmental justice importantly redefines what is meant by "environment"—against conservationist or preservationist environmentalist ideas of pristine "nature"—as where we live, play, work, and learn (some include where we pray). *Environmental racism* is a concept stemming from the environmental justice movement that I engage in this work. I draw my use of this term from human geography scholar Laura Pulido's definition of environmental racism: "racial minorities' disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards." It is the intentional or unintentional systemic exertion of white power over non-white people through environmental policies and decision-making that proponents of environmental justice are fighting (17). In other words, while many issues of environmental justice are due to environmental racism, this is not true of *all* environmental justice issues; the burden women bear, for example, would not necessarily constitute environmental racism.

It is important to note here that many Native studies scholars contest environmental justice and environmental racism as being applicable frameworks for the material reality of

Indigenous people in the U.S. in the same way it is for non-Indigenous people. They argue that settler-colonizers have been manipulating and degrading resources for Indigenous people since contact—1492—and that environmental racism loses its meaning when *every* contact between Indigenous people and colonizers is entangled with environment and resources (Voyles 7, 24). Thus, while scholars often cite the moment of environmental justice's birth as stemming from the protest by a predominately African American community in Warren County, North Carolina against a PCB landfill in 1982, many Native scholars insist the fight for environmental justice started for them much earlier and resist environmental racism as a useful term for their experiences. The work of this dissertation values these varying perspectives in its analysis, recognizing both the social movement of environmental justice as a catalyst for changing environmental policies and allowing underrepresented voices to be heard in debates around environmental issues, and recognizing that Indigenous peoples have been in this fight for centuries.

Environmental justice is a complex and capacious field. I have come to focus this project on just one of the issues that concern those in the battle for environmental justice: toxic exposure. My interest in uneven toxic exposures emerged from the texts themselves; the ethnic American authors in this study use advertising to think through the relationship between material and cultural toxicity. We can see this in Viramontes's depiction of her protagonist Estrella's vision of the Sun Maid raisin advertisement while working in fields coated with pesticides. We see this in Ozeki's depiction of a marketing campaign created to induce Japanese women to consume toxic meat by peddling toxic images of American culture. We see this, too, in King's representation of brochures erasing histories, inviting tourists to view or occupy "uninhabited" land; many of these tourists end up harming wildlife and vandalizing the Native reserve. I see the

work of environmental justice in these novels as revealing the increased exposure to toxins to marginalized communities, going after the pervasive corporate messages through various marketing techniques that allow these exposures to persist, and coming against individualistic approaches to combat these exposures. They instead advocate for a communal response, center the work of grassroots activism, use corporate advertising methods against themselves, send counter-messages, and disrupt the exposure to material and cultural toxins. The fight for environmental justice is not just material; it is discursive as well. In this fight against material and discursive toxicity, marginalized people may be the most affected, but together they are powerful. These texts reveal that while marketing messages can be disrupted by individual acts, the most radical work is done in solidarity, against the neo-liberal individualism promoted by corporate America.

Environmental justice cultural studies, especially alongside a critical advertising lens, is a useful framework for analyzing and better understanding issues of environmental justice. I build on Noël Sturgeon's groundbreaking work in *Environmentalism in Popular Culture: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and the Politics of the Natural* (2009). Sturgeon argues for the importance of historically and culturally specific analyses that take into account the interconnection of cultural production, political economy, and ideological representations (11). She further claims that what sets environmental cultural analysis apart is its critique of the "politics of the natural," or the power that naturalization holds in justifying inequalities and hierarchies in Western culture (12). The maintenance of the inequalities through discourses of naturalization have material consequences for those kept in subordinate positions within the hierarchy and hinder our ability to effectively address environmental degradation as well.

Environmental justice scholars Julie Sze, Kelly Fritsch, and Giovanna Di Chiro also take up issues of normality and its material consequences, with a focus, as mine is, on toxicity. These scholars are interested in the ways in which discourses surrounding toxicity reify the category "normal"; Di Chiro and Fritsch in particular look at how popular discourses around toxicity reinforce white heteronormativity and hence reproduce cultural toxins. These discourses of normality circulating around toxicity are intertwined with the material. I build on this scholarship by examining creative fiction that critiques advertising for perpetuating cultural toxicity—and thus material as well—and the ways these cultural artifacts disrupt this cycle. The discussions around discourses that normalize certain behaviors are enriched by an examination of advertising as a site of perpetuating "normal" dominant ideals due to the unique role marketing plays in creating a state of want, both in terms of desire for and lack of certain idealized outcomes. This state of want ultimately induces one to willingly, yet unwittingly, invite toxins into the body that they would not have otherwise. It is the normalizing of the behaviors advertising presents—for example, dying one's hair frequently at home—that facilitates both culturally and materially toxic consequences, such as exposing (especially Black, Indigenous, and women of color) to carcinogenic substances.

In terms of an environmental justice framework for analyzing literature, I build on literary methodologies outlined by scholars such as Julie Sze. In *The Environmental Justice Reader*, published in 2002, scholars such as Sze and T.V. Reed explain the need for ecocriticism—or the study of the relationship between literature and the environment—to take on an environmental justice lens through which to analyze literature. Sze argues for the importance of cultural and textual analyses to examine issues of environmental justice, emphasizing the fact that they broaden the academic field of environmental justice studies and aid our understanding

of the effects of living with environmental racism. She challenges the tendency, or bias as she calls it, for environmental justice advocates to dismiss questions of theory and ideology in favor of immediate remediation of environmental harms, as the hazards involve life and death situations. Sze posits that this dismissal limits environmental justice as an analytic frame and argues for the importance of understanding such ideologies and discourses that eventually manifest into these imminent discussions of life and death.[2] Thus, Sze challenges environmental justice scholars and activists to look to literature as a means of understanding and creating interest in issues of environmental racism and injustice.

I build on Sze's convictions to argue that literature is important for critiquing the role of advertising in masking racial practices that facilitate the absorption of toxins. Literature provides a creative space which can be used to evoke emotion, make the invisible seen, and potentially move a reader to action. In *Sharing the Earth: An International Environmental Justice Reader* (2015) editors Elizabeth Ammons and Modhumita Roy point out the usefulness of written and spoken words as a site of analysis and inspiration and explain that the call for environmental justice must do more than just make people understand what the issues are, it must affect their hearts, conscience, and spirits as well. They posit that literature has the ability to do that (2). Thus, their argument is for literature as a means to invoke pathos in its audience, with the assumption that this emotion will lead to action. Additionally, environmental humanities scholar Rob Nixon points out in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) that literature makes the invisible visible. Literary form and genre can be used to create immediacy for an otherwise "slow violence," or, "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional

[2] Sze, Julie. "From Environmental Justice Literature to the Literature of Environmental Justice."

violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). He argues that our conditioning to view violence as a dramatic, spectacular event (bombings, shootings, falling bodies, etc.) hinders our imagining of a sometimes more insidious form of violence enacted across large spans of time and distance. He posits that writer-activists can aide in making people understand (and care about) slow violence via writers' ability to represent in their literature that which is unrepresentable otherwise. He explains: "In a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses" (15). The threat of the material toxins I explore in this project, such as pesticides, formaldehyde, and Agent-Orange-type defoliants, are largely "inaccessible to the immediate senses"; these environmental justice authors' fiction makes it "accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats." Through the world-making capabilities afforded by the form of the novel, and the direct, power-packing punch of a short story, the ways of imagining the slow violence of toxic exposure in these texts reveals the entanglement of the material with the discursive. Viramontes, King, and Ozeki reveal the lived reality for the marginalized and exploited subjects of a racialized global economy that gets occluded by advertising narratives.

Critical advertising scholarship frequently and skillfully looks at issues of gender, race, and exclusion in advertising and marketing campaigns. My work adds to these analyses by approaching critical advertising through representations of advertising in ethnic U.S. environmental justice literature, which allows us to examine how environmentally justice focused authors deploy advertising in their literature as a means of political critique. Much of the critical work that has also approached advertising and literature has prioritized canonical white novels, focusing on the Victorian novel or the marketing *of* novels, especially in the early

twentieth century, with the focus on more recent novels, notably in Andrew Spencer and Adam Szetela's work, tending toward white male authors.[3] *Toxic Entanglements* contributes to critical advertising studies' work on fiction by prioritizing ethnic American novels rather than the white canon. This brings a more culturally diverse and gendered account of the kinds of critiques authors from underrepresented and environmentally vulnerable backgrounds make through their engagement with advertising and marketing.

Spencer and Szetela's scholarship on advertising in literature, while offering important contributions, provide cases in point to the Anglo bent in the field. In an analysis more aligned with my own, Andrew Spencer examines the role of advertising in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. He argues that advertising works in such a way as to induce "voluntary exploitation" which eventually leads to "forced assimilation" for the Joad family; he proposes that the naïve Joads become a commodity in the U.S. capitalist system wherein large agricultural businesses need workers, so they advertise for them using handbills. The Joads (and many others) buy into the lie that they will have easy work with good pay and relocate to California, only to find that thousands of others have responded in kind and they have become expendable labor. In this way, they become not consumers, but commodities themselves, as businessmen use them when necessary and then "dispose of" them, replacing them as needed. Spencer points to Steinbeck's attention to the Joad family as particularly vulnerable to the lure of advertising due to their socio-economic position and their ignorance of the burgeoning industrialized world of agriculture. In an article focused on a more recent work, Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, Szetela argues that

---

[3] An important recent work on advertising in literature which addresses the tensions between the critique authors make of advertising in their novels and the reality of their embeddedness in the system of advertising (in selling their novels) is Michael L. Ross's *Designing Fictions: Literature Confronts Advertising*. His focus lies mostly in representations of characters working in the advertising industry in the novels rather than the advertisements themselves represented in the novels (as I do). Another important work on the influence of marketing on the selling of books at the detriment of the critique these books can make of marketing is Jennifer Wicke's *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement & Social Reading*.

DeLillo intentionally stunts Jack's personal development in the novel to critique advertising's influence on late capitalist consumers. He employs three popular advertising techniques from the time the novel was written (the late 1970s and 1980s)— personalization, product symbol, and lifestyle association—to examine Jack's development (or lack thereof) in the novel. Szetela claims DeLillo provides a sharp critique of commodity fetishism that is integral to the capitalist mode of production and that "[t]hrough satire, DeLillo points his readers toward the ridiculousness of a person and a system that endows consumption and commodities with fantastical meanings" (para. 35).

Although both analyses provide important insights into the ways authors use advertising in fiction to critique the "magical system" of advertising, as Raymond Williams calls it (335), my work adds to advertising in literature scholarship a more ethnically diverse, intersectional analysis of advertising in contemporary literature which provides a new lens through which to read these novels. Neither Steinbeck nor DeLillo attends to race and marginalization the way the authors in this project's work does so thoroughly. While these works critique capitalism and commodity fetishism, Helena María Viramontes, for example, critiques the ways Mexican-American subjects bear a greater burden under these systems of capital accumulation. Mainstream mass advertising campaigns conceal the toxic effects of advertising on marginalized subjects; the body of work in this dissertation brings much needed attention to this reality.

**Environmental Justice, Greenwashing, NAFTA, and Neoliberalism as Context**

Along with engaging environmental justice cultural studies and critical advertising frameworks, the timeframe in which the texts in this project were published is important to understanding the critiques these authors are making. The texts in this study were published between 1987 and 2014. This a time in which the environmental justice movement emerged and

began to gain traction, companies began heavily “greenwashing”—or making false or misleading claims about the environmental benefits of their products, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, and neo-liberalism arose. In other words, it was a time in which people in the U.S. were particularly aware of environmental issues, companies were capitalizing on this, and blame was being shifted from corporations and policies as the source of social inequality to the individual. These issues saturate the ethnic American novels in this study written under these conditions.

As a response to rising environmental concerns, corporations began greenwashing their products and services to appeal to the heightened environmentally conscious state of their consumer base. These practices started as early as the 1960s and were initially termed “ecopornography” by former Madison Avenue advertising executive Jerry Mander. Mander implicated oil, chemical, and automobile corporations, along with industrial associations and utilities in spending millions of dollars on ad campaigns to make their industries appear environmentally friendly while spending a fraction of that on actually working to fulfill those claims. The term “greenwashing” arose in the 1980s after Chevron released a massive marketing campaign to convince the public of its dedication to care for the environment. This practice then bourgeoned in the 1990s in response to the 20th anniversary of Earth Day, after which multiple polls revealed that consumers in the U.S. placed a company’s environmental reputation at the top of their list of what influenced them to purchase a product. U.S. and multinational companies responded with "recyclable, "biodegradable," "ozone friendly," or "compostable” labels on products, mostly with no overseeing body to validate these claims. This practice continues, of course, and many times works well within the neoliberal framework that puts the onus on the individual; for example, instead of beverage corporations cutting their massive plastic

production, they tout their plastic bottles as 100% recyclable, putting the responsibility on the consumer to mitigate the environmental degradation caused by single-use plastics. It is within this context that Viramontes, King, and Ozeki engage advertising in their texts to push back against these false and damaging corporate narratives.

Aside from "Miss Clairol" (1987), these texts were all also written in the wake of the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was enacted in 1994 and created free trade between Canada, Mexico, and the U.S. The adverse economic and social impact of NAFTA was, and continues to be, great. Many U.S. companies moved their facilities to Mexico to cut costs, while the companies that remained cut wages to compete with those who relocated; thus, many Americans lost jobs while those jobs that were left paid less. As for the Mexican workers, there was an increase in maquiladora worker exploitation as they faced harsh working conditions with no protection. Additionally, NAFTA put some 1.3 million Mexican farmers out of work due to the U.S. flooding the Mexican market with its subsidized corn, which they could now export, along with other grains, for below cost. Many of these workers had little choice but to enter the U.S. illegally to save their families from starvation, risking their lives or losing them in the process, and working in unprotected, underpaid positions if they made it across the border. Further, in an attempt to keep up with the market, the Mexican land suffered, with farmers clearing massive amounts of land to grow grain and applying extra fertilizers and chemicals which resulted in $36 billion per year in pollution (Carnegie). It is within this context that Viramontes, Ozeki, and King craft their tales which hint at in some cases, and more directly critique in others, the conditions brought forth by this free trade agreement.

NAFTA reflects neoliberal policies, which arise broadly in the 1990s. According to critical race scholar Jodi Melamed, neoliberal policies include "free trade and open markets,

financial liberalization, deregulated corporate and financial sectors, priority given to speculative capitalism (profit through asset leveraging, stock markets, and credit baiting), privatization of lands and resources, and international financial and regulatory institutions (e.g., the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization) with the power to force nation-states to comply with free-market policies and ideologies" (29). Deregulated corporate sectors and the privatization of lands and resources have exacerbated environmental injustices, including harsher working conditions, more exposure to chemicals, and less access to basic human resources provided by land and water, especially to already disadvantaged populations. Accompanying these policies is the (reemergent, hence the "neo" in the name) ideology that success or failure lies on the shoulders of the individual, erasing systemic injustices. Recalling the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" American Dream-type ideology of the early 1900s, neoliberalism suggests that there is no reason one should not be able to do well in this free and open global economy. It implies that the market is the best distributor of resources; it will all work out. Viramontes, King, and Ozeki reveal through their intricate tales of marginalized characters' experiences with the market that there is much more at play in their subjugation than simply not pulling up hard enough on their bootstraps.

While I would argue that as cultural artifacts, most contemporary novels reflect some form of the advertising and marketing world that saturates U.S. (and most) Western societ(ies), I would also argue that the texts in this study are exemplary of an environmental justice engagement with advertising more specifically. As well, not all environmental justice literature necessarily engages advertising in the head-on manner these texts do. In short, I chose these particular texts due to the context in which they were written, the manner in which they are taught, and their engagement with advertising and marketing.

**Chapter Overview**

In chapter one, "Feeling the Burn: Marketing and Toxicity in the Works of Helena María Viramontes," I examine Chicana author Helena María Viramontes's critique of environmental racism, the toxic entanglement of advertising and material toxicity, and the potential disruption available through these readings in "Miss Clairol" (1987), *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), and *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007). Through her groundbreaking literary production over the past thirty years, she has taken on a number of ubiquitous marketing campaigns—such as Coppertone, Sun Maid Raisins, and Breck. She uses these to expose the way their advertisements induce women of color to engage in harmful practices to reach an unattainable ideal of white beauty in "Miss Clairol," to occlude environmental racism in *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *Their Dogs Came with Them*, and to facilitate the movement and absorption of material toxins into the body in all three texts. Viramontes moves from having her protagonist subscribe to marketing messages in "Miss Clairol," to resisting and critiquing them in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, to finally acting to dismantle them in *Their Dogs Came with Them*.

Chapter two, "Controlling the Narrative: Toxic Entanglements in Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle*," analyzes Cherokee author Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle*, bringing in many of his other works to support this reading, which delivers a complex representation of the ways marketing, conspicuous consumption, and public relations narratives intertwine to perpetuate the poisoning of Indigenous, local, and global communities. I first explore King's critique of brochures in the novel as a connection to tourism and as invitation to acquire Indian land. I then examine King's depiction of the ways public relations (PR) departments operate in the face of crisis, comparing Dorian and his PR department's responses to the responses in lead

PR scholar Timothy Coombs's Crisis Management textbook. These responses allow the continuation of the poisoning of communities—Indigenous communities at a higher rate than white communities—to go essentially unchecked. The next section follows King's critique of late capitalist consumer habits through Dorian, CEO of Domidion—a Monsanto-type agri-giant—as conspicuous consumer. Dorian has succumbed to marketing's messages that he can find happiness and human connection through commodities and has no regard for what his purchasing habits mean for the environment. Finally, I detail King's positioning of Sonny as literary foil to Dorian in presenting two possible responses to environmental crisis and recovery: one that leads to further impending destruction and one that leads to hope and resiliency.

In chapter three, '"All This for the Taking!": Toxic Entanglements and Dramatic Disruption in Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation*," I trace the toxic entanglements of advertising and material toxins through Ozeki's first two novels. *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation* both take the industrial food system to task, so work well analyzed together. In *My Year of Meats*, I examine representations of material and ideological forms of toxicity in both domestic and transnational spaces through an analysis of the ways in which Wal-Mart acts as a literary double to BEEF-EX, a U.S. lobby organization that represents meats of all kinds. I take a close look at the way the BEEF-EX-sponsored show *My American Wife!* works as the insidious advertising campaign that peddles cultural toxins to induce Japanese housewives to purchase and subsequently ingest material toxins. The protagonist in the novel, Jane, then disrupts this transnational transmission of toxins via the very mode in which they are perpetuated in the first place: through a video. My move to *All Over Creation* scrutinizes the public relations (PR) narratives put forth by agricultural giant Cynaco's PR firm Duncan & Wiley, illuminating the ways its narratives work to facilitate the continued poisoning of land and people. It then

moves to the ways Ozeki uses a colorful group of anti-transgenic food resistors calling themselves "The Seeds of Resistance" to disrupt advertising narratives through acts of subvertising, or using mock advertisements to counter corporate messages.

*Toxic Entanglements* ends with a brief Afterword that gestures toward the fieldwork I had planned to do regarding the Women, Infants, and Children program, funded by the U.S. government. I had noted that some of their educational materials were working to facilitate possible toxic outcomes, similar to the way advertising works. My plan was to conduct interviews and administer surveys to women in the program to better assess the influence WIC's educational program has on what these women purchase and feed their families (this was approved through the IRB process). Ultimately, the study was ceased due to continuing COVID concerns. The Afterword offers a brief discourse analysis of comments left by WIC participants in response to an educational video in lieu of the (preferred) method of interviewing these participants.

**Conclusion**

Putting these novels in conversation with one another through the lenses of environmental justice cultural studies and critical advertising studies allows for a fuller understanding of the ways multiple and multiply vulnerable and historically underrepresented people are affected by environmental burdens. It reveals all aspects of advertising as constituting critical components in a web of toxic entanglements that serve to perpetuate the material toxins with which they are entangled. Perhaps most importantly, reading these works together paints a multifaceted picture of the possibilities for potential flourishing despite these environmental burdens, and potential push-back and disruption of these toxic entanglements.

Works Cited


Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self.* Bloomington, 2010.

Ammons, Elizabeth and Modhumita Roy, eds. "Introduction." *Sharing the Earth: An International Environmental Justice Reader,* U of Georgia P, 2015.

Di Chiro, Giovanna. "Polluted Politics? Confronting Toxic Discourse, Sex Panic, and Eco-Normativity." *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire,* edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, Bruce Erickson, Indiana UP, 2010.

Fritsch, Kelly. "Toxic Pregnancies: Speculative Futures, Disabling Environments, and Neoliberal Biocapital." *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, edited by Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara, U of Nebraska P, 2017, pp. 359-380.

Gamber, John Blair. *Positive Pollutions and Cultural Toxins: Waste and Contamination in Contemporary U.S. Ethnic Literatures*. U of Nebraska P, 2012.

Haraway, Donna. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness.* Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003.

Hall, Stuart. "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular.'" *Cultural Resistance Reader,* edited by Stephen Duncombe, Verso, 2002, pp. 185-92.

Jhally, Sut and James Twitchell. "Advertising: A Debate! Sut Jhally vs. James Twitchell." *Stay Free! Stay Free!* Summer 1999.

King, Thomas. *The Back of the Turtle.* HarperCollins, 2014.

Nixon, Rob. "Introduction." *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor,* Harvard UP, 2011.

Ozeki, Ruth. *All Over Creation.* Penguin Books, 2003.

---. *My Year of Meats,* Viking, 1998.

Pulido, Laura. "Preface" and "Subaltern Environmental Struggles." *Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles in the Southwest,* U of Arizona P, 1996.

Reed, T.V. "Toward an Environmental Justice Ecocriticism." *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics Poetics & Pedagogy.* Adamson, Joni, Mei Mei Evans and Rachel Stein, eds. U of Arizona P, 2002.

Ross, Michael L. *Designing Fictions: Literature Confronts Advertising*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2015.

Spencer, Andrew. "Voluntary Exploitation and Forced Assimilation: John Steinbeck's Critique of American Advertising in *The Grapes of Wrath*." *The Journal of American Culture,* vol. 40, no. 4, 2017, pp. 313-324.

Sze, Julie. "Denormalizing Embodied Toxicity: The Case of Kettleman City." *Racial Ecologies,* edited by Leilani Nishime, Kim D. Hester Williams, U of Washington P, 2018, pp. 107-122.

---. "From Environmental Justice Literature to the Literature of Environmental Justice." *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics Poetics & Pedagogy.* Adamson, Joni, Mei Mei Evans and Rachel Stein, eds. U of Arizona P, 2002.

Szetela, Adam. "Fetishism and Form: Advertising and Ironic Distance in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*." *European journal of American studies,* vol. 13, no. 2, summer 2018, n.p.

Wicke, Jennifer. *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement & Social Reading*. Columbia UP, 1988.

Williams, Raymond. "Advertising: The Magic System." *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays,* Verso, 1980, pp. 170-96.

Williamson, Judith. *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising,* Marion Boyars, 1978.

Viramontes, Helena María. "Miss Clairol." *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Charting New Frontiers in American Literature*, edited by María Herrera-Sobek and Helena María Viramontes, Arte Publico, 1988, pp. 101-5.

---. "Miss Clairol." *Los Angeles Times Magazine,* 30 June 1991, pp. 23, 36-7.

---. *Their Dogs Came with Them.* Atria Books, 2007.

---. *Under the Feet of Jesus.* Plume, 1995.

Voyles, Traci Brynne. *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country,* U of Minnesota P, 2015.

# II. CHAPTER 1:

# FEELING THE BURN:

# MARKETING AND TOXICITY IN THE WORKS OF HELENA MARIA VIRAMONTES

> Advertising is the catalyst that fuels the nation's economy…it serves as a visual, tangible manifestation of capitalism and the system's systematic enslavement of those operating under its purview… people are manipulated, exploited, and enslaved by the system that advertising creates and perpetuates.
>
> -Andrew Spencer, "Voluntary Exploitation and Forced Assimilation" 2017

According to an article put out by Californians for Pesticide Reform published in August of 2020, the number of farmworkers sickened by pesticides is dramatically increasing. The author reviews a report from 2017 that reveals this number has more than doubled in one year, from 135 farmworkers falling ill in 2016 to 323 in 2017, and roughly one third of those cases occurring despite following instructions properly. These statistics are for California alone. As many scholars, statisticians, and public health officials have noted, these numbers are likely much lower than the actual number of farmworkers affected by pesticide poisoning, as many will not be recorded due to lack of medical care or fear of deportation in the case of undocumented workers. Further, as medical anthropologist Seth Holmes points out, agricultural work is connected with a fatality rate five times higher than those who do not work in agriculture, with workers experiencing increased rates of "nonfatal injuries, musculoskeletal pain, heart disease, and many types of cancer" (101). In terms of cancer rates, for breast cancer alone, which is caused by many factors aside from pesticide poisoning, including exposure to toxic chemicals in

hair dye, the American Cancer Society estimates that in the U.S. "[a]pproximately 41,760 women and 500 men are expected to die from breast cancer in 2019." Reading these statistics offers important insight into the issue of toxic exposure; however, what is missing is the real, human story that can evoke a different level of empathetic identification which has the potential to move one to action on behalf of those suffering.[4] Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* offers one such story of the poisoning of a migrant farmworker, while her other fiction creates empathetic identification for working single mothers, gang members, the unhoused, and many others who are often overlooked by society and are regularly at a greater risk of being exposed to harmful toxins. Julie Avril Minich claims that cultural critique offers "an account of the unjust social relations that shape policy and of the narrative processes that naturalize and reify systemic injustice" (36). This chapter examines the role of advertising in Viramontes's "Miss Clairol," *Under the Feet of Jesus,* and *Their Dogs Came with Them* as part of these narrative processes that work to uphold systemic injustice and occlude environmental racism.

Advertising is a particularly toxic discourse that bears insidious consequences in terms of material impact and thus provides rich ground for critique of the U.S. (and global) racial capitalist system. From her short story "Miss Clairol" (1987), to *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), and finally through to *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007), Viramontes's consistent engagement with advertising effectively exposes the entanglement of material toxicity with discursive toxicity. I term this relationship between material and discursive toxins "toxic entanglements," meaning both that each imbricated piece is toxic (i.e. discourse and pesticides), and that the entanglement itself is toxic in that the pieces are co-constitutive and thus work to perpetuate toxicity. Viramontes's fiction reveals the lived reality for marginalized and exploited subjects of

[4] "Empathetic identification" is Paula Moya's term concerning the work Viramontes does with her characters in *Under the Feet of Jesus*. ("Reading as a Realist." *Learning from Experience*)

a racialized capitalist global economy that becomes occluded by advertising narratives. In this chapter, I examine the role of advertising in perpetuating this toxic entanglement and the ways in which Viramontes's works expose anxieties about how advertising recreates cultural toxicity. Her works are particularly useful in their depiction of the disruption of these cultural toxins: each of these texts reveals the entanglement of cultural (discursive) toxins with material toxins and stems the flow of these toxins through a creative representation of their effects on particularly vulnerable subjects. Exposure of toxic entanglements through representation is disruptive in that since discursive toxins are imbricated with material toxins—they are mutually constitutive—disrupting one will disrupt the other.

In what follows, I examine Viramontes's critique of the toxic entanglement of advertising and material toxicity, and the potential disruption available through these readings in "Miss Clairol," *Under the Feet of Jesus,* and *Their Dogs Came with Them.* In the earliest work, "Miss Clairol," Viramontes portrays a single, factory-working mother who has been lured in by popular beauty campaigns aimed at white women. In her attempt to create a fantasy world to which she can escape the difficulties of everyday life, she inadvertently exposes herself to carcinogenic toxins she could have otherwise avoided and puts her daughter on the same path toward possible illness. In *Under the Feet of Jesus,* Estrella, a migrant farmworker who is coming of age, is not portrayed as falling prey to advertising's enticements; in fact, she critiques the Sun Maid campaign as a gross misrepresentation of reality and reads ads on billboards to practice her literacy. Viramontes's juxtaposition of Estrella and the Sun Maid maiden, among other campaigns in the novel, reveals the toxic entanglement of the material and the discursive as the narrative promoted through the campaigns occludes the everyday poisoning of farmworkers and the racialized capitalist system in place to produce food in the U.S. *Their Dogs Came with Them*,

Viramontes's latest novel, has Ermila—another coming of age protagonist who is an orphan in East Los Angeles—not only critiquing a Coppertone advertisement, but also actively ripping the ad from the billboard. The toxic entanglement of the material and the discursive is made explicit through the physical interaction with the representation of hegemonic ideals. Each of these texts work toward disrupting the normal flow of discourses, and thus, potentially the flow of material toxins as well, as each protagonist becomes increasingly aware of and hostile to marketing's messages.

**Fried Ends and Formaldehyde: Creating a State of Want in "Miss Clairol"**

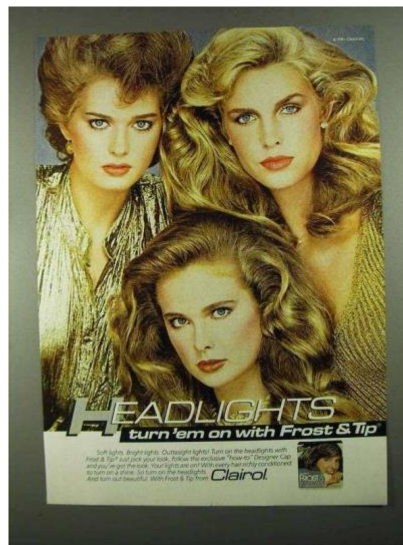


Figure 1: 1981 Miss Clairol Advertisement
bonanza.com

Viramontes's 1987 short story "Miss Clairol" is a strategic site at which to begin an examination of her engagement with advertising as a means to expose the toxic imbrication of the material and the discursive facilitated through advertising. As Viramontes's critique of the effects of advertising develops through time—from this story in 1987 to *Their Dogs* in 2005—her protagonists become increasingly hostile toward the marketing industry. In "Miss Clairol," her protagonist subscribes to the messages advertisements send, endangering her through its enticements. In *Under the Feet of Jesus* her protagonist rejects the images put forth by the

industry and actively critiques them in the text but is still endangered by the messages due to others subscribing to them. In *Their Dogs,* her protagonist not only rejects the messages of the industry, she actively works to dismantle them as they physically harm her.

"Miss Clairol," the focus of this section, critiques dominant narratives about beauty standards and their material impact, particularly on women of color. The story relates Arlene—a factory-working single mother—and her ten-year-old daughter Champ's (Ofelia's) experiences as Arlene prepares for a date. It opens with the pair in a K-Mart store, Arlene searching for the perfect hair color and eye shadow for the evening, shoplifting these items on her way out. As the story progresses, we get a glimpse into the inner thoughts of each character—Champ as she searches for her brother to come home and prepares a bowl of Campbell's soup, and Arlene as she prepares herself both physically and emotionally for her new, potentially exciting experience with an unknown man. The story ends with Arlene getting into the car with this man as Champ looks on, wondering when her mother will return.

Relatively little criticism has been written on this important early work by Viramontes; however, this scholarship points to Viramontes's indictment of advertising in perpetuating harmful ideals in Arlene and Champ's lives. In "Tapestries of Space-Time," Margarita T. Barceló argues that Viramontes's emphasis on space and time is characteristic of her short and long fiction and that because of this, using space-time as an analytic tool, along with reading her works intertextually, is integral to theorizing her work. Within this analysis, she situates the characters in the Terrace Flats housing project at the height of Chicano nationalism and argues that "Viramontes offers sardonic commentary on an industry that profits from and perpetuates beauty myths," includes a plethora of name brands in order to "parod[y] the relentless target marketing schemes of the cosmetics industry," and that though the advertising industry trades on

creating fantasies into which one can escape, due to "the tremendous responsibility of single parenthood, [Arlene's] fantasy of 'spinning herself into Miss Clairol' permanently remains just that, a fantasy" (126, 129).

Speaking of a broader range of Latinx authors in "The Ambivalent Thematics of Commodity Fetishism in Contemporary Lantina/O Narrative Fiction," Michael Walonen reads "Miss Clairol," "Barbie-Q," and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in order to examine the ambivalent relationship Latinxs have with commodities: they are both a means by which they may either escape current realities or somewhat assimilate into US culture, and a potential cause of alienation from community and homogenization of Latinx identity. He examines "the confluence of socio-spatial deterritorialization, social marginalization, and identity formation within a social milieu saturated with commodity fetishized relations" for Latinx subjects as represented through literature (420). He asserts: "*Miss Clairol* illustrates how for peripheral subjects existing on the margins of the center, commodities become a means of associating with the center's values, norms, and hegemonic vision of a good life" (423). He helpfully details what is wrong with the "fetishism of cosmetic commodities" that offer her the fantasy of an easier life (423): "the first is that striving for white ideals of beauty alienates her from '[her] traditional value systems' and social roles while still not allowing [her] any real ingress into bourgeois Anglo-American society"; the second is that even what she is offered in terms of "commodity fetishized sexual attractiveness" is only a mass-marketed second-class version compared to that offered to the social and economic elite (423).

My claims concerning "Miss Clairol" fall in line with Barceló and Walonen's analyses in their focus on beauty myths, the unfillable desire marketing creates for Arlene, and the ambivalent nature of the benefits and drawbacks of entertaining fantasy through commodity

fetishism. However, I tie these desires and dangers to more than never being granted entrance into bourgeois Anglo-American society (but perhaps feeling a bit better nonetheless by these purchases); the desires induced by these advertising companies leads to the literal poisoning of these already vulnerable populations.

Viramontes litters “Miss Clairol” with marketing campaigns and brand names. This tactic leads the reader to consider the damaging aspects of the pervasive and enticing multi-billion-dollar cosmetics industry, an industry that may be responsible for the development of cancer in those who frequently use their products. Aside from taking its title from a well-known advertising campaign, Viramontes’s “Miss Clairol” mentions five additional campaigns—Breck, Calgon, Maybelline, Aqua Net, and Love Cries —for a total of six in its roughly four pages. These six campaigns aimed at women—arguably *white* women—set the parameters for protagonist Arlene’s world and set the stage for her daughter Champ’s future. As scholars of advertising point out, the abundant references to brand names “illustrat[es] how every stratum of society is bombarded by advertising messages” (Spencer 317) and provides a parody of “the relentless target marketing schemes of the cosmetics industry” (Barceló 126). The flooding of Arlene and Champ’s lives by cosmetic marketing campaigns that can never deliver what they promise, even as a “‘cheap and tawdry’ mass market Kmart version, as opposed to that available to the U.S.’s socio-economic elite” (Walonen 423), is egregious enough in its profiting off unfulfilled desires. Perhaps more egregious, however, is that in a similar way to the campaigns in *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *Their Dogs Came with Them*, these ads also work to facilitate the flow of material toxins into Arlene and Champ’s lives, increasing their risk of developing cancer and other toxicity-related diseases.

The advertising campaigns in "Miss Clairol" provide a means of escape from the harsh realities for Arlene, a factory-working single mother, while covertly enticing her to absorb carcinogenic substances. Just as Arlene is preparing to leave for the date for which she has taken the rest of the story to prepare, the narrator relates: "Arlene is a romantic. She will dance until [her] dress turns a different color, dance until her hair becomes undone, her hips jiggling and quaking beneath a new pair of hosiery, her mascara shadowing her eyes from the perspiration of the ritual dancing, spinning herself into Miss Clairol, only stopping when it is time to return to the sewing factory, time to wait out the next date, time to change hair color. Time to remember or to forget" (38). Arlene uses the idyllic world of advertising to create her own fantasy world, one in which she is allowed to dance until her hair comes undone and forget about her "real" life at the factory as a struggling mother. The passage reveals the discrepancy between a Disney-type fantasy and the fantasy of a laboring single mother. The beginning of the selection, "Arlene is a romantic," is a seemingly straightforward declaration; however, we already see here the separation between the idyllic world advertising entices her to strive for and her material reality. What does her being a "romantic" look like? Not like the Disney movies where she will be swept away via horse and carriage by a handsome prince and attending animals, nor like Miss Clairol who undoubtedly has a line of suitors awaiting her emergence from her beautiful home in order to escort her to a night on the town. No, her romance consists of sweat, coming undone, jiggling, and forgetting. Like Cinderella, she will dance until her dress turns a different color, but not because the clock strikes midnight, because she will be sweating the sweat of ritual dance. She will not glide across the floor gracefully; she will jiggle and quake. For Arlene, "a new pair of hosiery" is romantic. This is a luxury reserved for date night.

The use of the term “romantic” for Arlene is aligned not simply with romantic love, as preparing for a date may suggest, it also connotes an idealized view of the world she inhabits; this idealized view must be maintained through ritual.  Miss Clairol, Breck, Maybelline, and the rest have offered her a “more palatable sense of reality” which “offers a flight from the reality principle that would force Arlene to accept the very limited and marginalized material circumstances into a fantasy realm where she is accepted, valued, and validated” (Walonen 423). It makes sense, then, that Arlene would consistently work to recreate this fantasy. The romantic that she is—as the text states that Arlene “is a romantic”—does not envision a once-in-a-lifetime type of romance; hers is a regular ritual. The role of her mascara emphasizes this: “her mascara [is] shadowing her eyes from the perspiration of the ritual dancing”; it doesn’t shield them, it shadows them. If sweat hits the mascara, moreover, the mascara will run into her eyes; thus, the emphasis is not on the role of mascara as protection or even beauty-enhancing, but instead on the ritual of wearing the mascara as part of her ritual of forgetting. The use of the word “ritual” here indicates the function of the dance as necessary for Arlene’s emotional health. I refer here to the psychological element of *ritual* that does not necessarily have to do with religion or social rites, one in which a person maintains a regular routine as a means of easing anxiety. In this particular instance, Arlene’s ritual seems to align most closely to this conception: it is a routine that if not performed, does not allow her to release her stress. This routine in Arlene’s life is thus important to her well-being: the ritual of forgetting allows her to discharge the tensions of her daily life. The repetition of “her” in the first string of clauses—"dance until *her* hair becomes undone, *her* hips jiggling and quaking beneath a new pair of hosiery, *her* mascara shadowing *her* eyes from the perspiration of the ritual dancing”—and “time” in the second—"only stopping when it is *time* to return to the sewing factory, *time* to wait out the next date, *time* to change hair color”—

reinforces the feeling of ritual. The repetition of the word *time* also draws attention to the brevity of the fantasy the ritual allows; like Cinderella, she cannot permanently occupy this ideal world. The repetition of the *her*s leads up to the "spinning [of] herself into Miss Clairol," at which point it winds down all the way to the final brief sentence: "Time to remember or to forget." The long string of clauses which repeat the *hers* and *time* is sandwiched between two short sentences that say just as much, if not more, than the long sentence placed between them: "Arlene is a romantic"; "Time to remember or to forget." As "Arlene is a romantic" sets up the description of what will occur on her date, giving us a picture of what romance means for her, "Time to remember or to forget" sums up what will take place following the date. Arlene can either remember the night she had before if it was great or forget it if it wasn't. She can remember her present life in the sewing factory, or she can forget it through escaping into her memory of the night before. She can remember that she is a romantic or forget that she has these passions burning inside of her. She can remember that she has a daughter waiting for her, watching her every move getting ready for her date, or she can forget all of that and just be Miss Clairol, but only until it is time to perform the ritual that maintains her fantasy once again.

Arlene's ability to choose whether to remember or to forget affords her a certain agency, but this agency is also circumscribed by her reality and refuses her a healthy choice. In her analysis of the Chicana feminist work Viramontes employs through her protagonists, Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs claims, "Viramontes subverts victimization" (2) and "brings us choice—a choice that is put on feminist agendas, signifying freedom" (14). She argues that "the young women characterized in her short stories exemplify a certain agency that patterns a new feminism…" (13) evident in this agency to subvert victimization through choice. Does Arlene "subvert victimization"? One could argue that she is a victim to her circumstances, likely

slighted by a man and condemned subsequently to remain on the factory floor all day only to come home to single-handedly take care of her children. Is her “spinning into Miss Clairol” a push against this life she is ostensibly doomed to lead? Does her choice to leave her daughter unattended so she can dance the night away “signify freedom”? As Barceló points out, “The industry ‘trades on this reality and the fantasy of escape’ ... Arlene’s appearance is one of very few arenas where she can exert some measure of control” (129). I concur with Barceló that she can exert control in this area, expressing agency. It may even be considered heroic in light of her circumstances, an opposition to despondency or inaction. But it is a fraught freedom. She can choose to look however she wants for this fantasy life, but also as Barceló relates, “given the tremendous responsibility of single parenthood, her fantasy of ‘spinning herself into Miss Clairol’ permanently remains just that, a fantasy” (129). More pressing than the fact that Arlene will never be able to adequately escape into the fantasy marketing has created for her despite her agency in choosing this fantasy, this “agency” is leading her to engage in risky behaviors based on the levels of carcinogens to which she is exposing herself in the process of maintaining her romantic outlook.

Arlene’s marketing-inspired beauty routine significantly increases her risk of contracting a toxin-related medical condition, and specifically cancer. Research has revealed a clear link between (at least) bladder cancer and the ingredients found in hair dye, and recent studies have found a strong correlation between permanent hair dye and breast cancer. Studies at the turn of the 20$^{th}$ century (2001) found that Formaldehyde, a common preservative used in hair dye, “has been linked to cancer and fetal damage in utero,” while p-Phenylenediamine, another common ingredient found in hair dye, ‘[a]fter adjustment for cigarette smoking, [is] a major risk factor for bladder cancer[;] women who used permanent hair dyes at least once a month experienced a 2.1-

fold risk of bladder cancer relative to non-users."[5] These are just two of the many potentially harmful chemicals found in hair dye, including ammonia, coal tar, and resorcinol to name several others. This would especially be true in the 1980s, the temporal setting of the short story, before stricter regulations were in place due to the findings of such studies. These risks increase, as most toxic poisonings do, with increased exposure: "Risk increased to 3.3…among regular (at least monthly) users of 15 or more years." In other words, the longer one uses hair dye, the higher their chances of getting cancer. In the more recent "Sister Study" published in December 2019, scientists studied 50,884 women living in the U.S. and Puerto Rico who have sisters with breast cancer to determine their chances of getting cancer from certain variables.[6] Researchers found: "Overall, women who regularly used permanent hair dye in the 12 months before joining the study were 9% more likely to develop breast cancer than women who didn't use hair dye." According to yet another recent study (2017), "Women who had salon-applied dyes had a lower risk of breast cancer than those who applied dyes at home" (Bomgardner, n.p.). Due to the long list of colors reported by Champ to have been sported by Arlene, which I will discuss presently, one can assume she has been regularly using these at-home permanent dyes (as she is unable to afford a salon dye job, evidenced by the fact that she felt she had to steal the at-home dye) for some time and will continue to do so.

Part of Arlene's fantasy, whether apparent to her or not, is that she as a Chicana can achieve white standards of beauty. The constant reaching toward this standard exposes her to higher levels of various material toxins than her white counterparts. In the multitude of advertisements for Clairol, Breck, and Calgon from the 1970s and 1980s there is a dearth of

---

[5] "Use of permanent hair dyes and bladder-cancer risk." *National Center for Biotechnology Information*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, https://www.nlm.nih.gov/. 2001.

[6] Study published in the *International Journal of Cancer*.

brown bodies represented. These models tend to be light-skinned blonde or brunette women with flawless complexions and straight, white teeth. In a conversation I had with Viramontes, she related that she and her sister were "obsessed" with the Breck models and would spend hours clipping their photos out of magazines. One day she realized that she would never look like them because she was not white. She realized that she had been fed, and internalized, white hegemonic ideals of feminine beauty, the standards of which she and her sister could never live up to simply due to the color of their skin. This obsession plays out through both Arlene and Champ, who have either yet to realize or yet to admit they could never become Miss Clairol or Miss Breck due to the discrepancy between idealized white beauty and their own brown skin and dark hair. Instead, we see Arlene repeatedly reaching for this standard: "Arlene has burned the softness of her hair with peroxide. It breaks at the ends and she needs plenty of Aqua Net hair spray to tease and tame it…For the past few months she has been a Light Ash blond, before that Miss Clairol Flame redhead, before that Champ couldn't even identify the color, somewhere between orange and brown: Sun Bronze" (23). Arlene not only changes from reality to fantasy every time she goes out with a man, she changes the fantasy from man to man, as she changes hair color with each date. In each fantasy, she reaches to obtain imposed standards of white beauty and an escape from her harsh reality, to the extent that her hair becomes essentially disfigured through its constant manipulation. The discursively toxic message that one must have a certain whitewashed look to be beautiful facilitates the movement of material toxins, and at a higher level than to those who either find no need to dye their hair, or need less die for the job, as their hair is lighter to begin with.

Given the connection between hair dye and cancer—among other health issues such as respiratory problems and neurological toxicity—Clairol and other major hair and cosmetic

companies' inducement of women to buy and use such products facilitates the movement of toxins.[7] Further, the exposure to, and thus consequences of, these toxins are felt disproportionately by women of color. According to the Sister Study, "Black women who used permanent hair dye every 5 to 8 weeks or more in the 12 months before joining the study were 60% more likely to develop breast cancer than women who didn't use hair dye." White women were 8% more likely. Thus, the study found not only a strong correlation between permanent hair dye and breast cancer, it found a much higher risk for black women than "non-Hispanic white women." The effects of the dyes on "Hispanic" women were not detailed and there appears to be little data on this.[8] Given that the genetic makeup of a "Hispanic" woman is mixed, it is reasonable to assume that her risk is at least as increased as the white woman's and may reach toward that of the black woman's. The article goes on to say that researchers are not quite certain as to why white women who use hair dye did not see the increase in risk. They suspect that it could be due to the difference in particular products used by Black women, "or that variations in hair texture alter the amounts of dye that are applied or absorbed through the skin" (Rabin). In other words, women of color arguably use different products and need to use more dye more frequently than their lighter-haired counterparts to achieve the look they want due to the extra steps and extra product it takes to dye darker hair. The extra steps lead to increased exposure to toxins. Though Arlene is not black, she also needs to engage in these extra steps, evidenced in

[7] Various ingredients found in hair dye have been linked to respiratory problems, asthma, allergies, altering hormone function, and immune and neurological system toxicity.

[8] "A Review of Cancer in U.S. Hispanic Populations" published in *Cancer Prevention Research* in 2012 reveals that Hispanics have lower incidences of breast, colorectal, lung and prostate cancers—the most common cancers in the US—but have a higher mortality rate due to late detection on less screening. It further concludes that Hispanics have a higher rate of cervical, gastric, liver, and gall bladder cancers. It claims further research needs to be done to pinpoint why these things are true and recognize that there are differences based on genetic makeup based on country of origin, etc.

the text through Arlene's burning of her hair with peroxide, a step taken to first lighten the hair before the new color is applied.

Thus, the marketing of these products deals a double blow to women of color: it excludes them from representation in their campaigns, reinforcing whiteness as an integral component of what makes one beautiful, and it does this while creating a "state of want" in both senses of the word: lack and desire.[9] In so doing, it entices women to expose themselves to toxins which would otherwise be avoided. Judith Williamson explains that "[t]he technique of advertising is to correlate feelings, moods or attributes to tangible objects, linking possible *un*attainable things with those that *are* attainable, and thus reassuring us that the former are within reach" (31). This explains well what is going on with Arlene, who desires magazine glamour and escape from her harsh reality, but can never reach them. She buys the dye with a need to feel beautiful and as if she is living a different life, but it fades quickly, and she needs more dye, meaning she will apply more toxins to her scalp. She soaks in her Calgon bath but can never be "taken away." That Arlene is Mexican American only adds to the chasm between the myth and real life, as she is excluded from hegemonic ideals of beauty, leaving her in a perpetual state of want and likely perpetually exposing herself to carcinogens. The representation of this chasm reveals the ways advertisements facilitate a greater exposure to toxins to women of color than white women.

Arlene's obsession with imposed beauty standards lays out a dangerous path for her daughter as well: this pattern will become generational if not disrupted. As she leaves for her date, it is not only Arlene who sees herself as Miss Clairol, Champ visualizes this as well: "Arlene's lipstick left a kiss stinging on Champ's cheek. She rubs it off, watches Miss Clairol depart, wonders what time Arlene will return" (38). Champ recognizes that the fantasy of Miss

---

[9] I take this phrase and attendant explanation of *want* from Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*. See chapter three for greater context.

Clairol lives only as long as the date, and she wonders how long it will last this time. Instead of turning her off to this pattern, however, the text repeatedly suggests that Champ is on her way to engaging in the same fantasy, indicated by the fact that her mother promises to "show [her] how [she] can look real pretty, too" (37), and that she "cut[s] out Miss Breck models from a stack of old magazines, …collects the array of honey-haired women, puts them in a shoe box with all her other special things" (38). While Arlene promises to teach her daughter how she too can reach for this white idealized beauty—and perhaps find some reprieve from their difficult lives—Champ is giving herself her own education on the topic, collecting a myriad of samples from the magazines in the back of her mother's best friend's garage. This reveals Champ's trajectory toward engaging in the same practices as her mother in seeking to be a particular kind of beautiful. Thus, not only are these campaigns enticing the current generation, they extend to the next generation as well; the cycle is set to continue as a new consumer comes of age, guided by the direction of her mother who has fallen prey to advertising's lies. Arlene's present—and arguably Champ's future—constant changing of hair color in an attempt to escape reality and meet unreachable racialized beauty standards is not just devastating to watch, it also puts Arlene and Champ in consistent contact with dangerous toxins.

Viramontes disrupts the ideologically, or culturally, toxic flow of hegemonic white beauty ideals by way of revealing these ideals for what they are: unattainable myth. Details such as the burnt nature of Arlene's hair, the long list of colors she has donned, and the wondering of how long it will last this time repeatedly iterate the fact that this beauty standard, and the escape to a perfect life it promises, is an unreachable dream. The strategy of packing six women's beauty marketing campaigns into a short story about a single mother "who has worn too many relationships, gotten too little sleep," working in a sewing factory who cannot afford a single

"special dress" effectively reveals the discrepancy between the world the advertising campaign creates and Arlene's lived experience. Further, Viramontes's choice to not actually show Arlene in the sewing factory or taking care of her children (Champ is making her own dinner from a can of soup while Gregorio is off somewhere unknown by the family and the reader) emphasizes the importance of the fantasy for Arlene in this moment as it has been many times before. That this is, in fact, fantasy is not lost on the reader: it is clear at every turn that she is reaching for something she cannot attain. Because she is a financially struggling woman of color, she is barred from American beauty and the American Dream, and exposed to material toxins at a higher rate than a white woman looking to attain the same ideal.

The tensions between fantasy and reality, ideology and Arlene's real conditions of existence are left unresolved by the short story's ending—or rather, endings. "Miss Clairol" was first published in *Chicana Creativity and Criticism*—a collection of works by and about Chicanas edited by María Herrera-Sobek and Viramontes—in 1988 and was then published in the *Los Angeles Times Magazine* in 1991. Though very similar, there are some important differences between these versions: the *Chicana Criticism* version has profanity in both English and Spanish while the *L.A. Times* version has none, the *Chicana Criticism* version offers much more interiority for Champ than the *L.A. Times* version, and perhaps most significantly, the endings vary considerably. The *Chicana Creativity* version reads, "Champ yells goodbye. It all sounds so right to Arlene who is too busy cranking up the window to hear her daughter" (105). In the *L.A. Times* version it reads: "Arlene's lipstick left a kiss stinging on Champ's cheek. She rubs it off, watches Miss Clairol depart, wonders what time Arlene will return" (38). In the first version, there is a clear message of neglect for her daughter; Champ is yelling after her mother, but her mother is too busy getting settled into her date to notice. Arlene does not hear her

daughter. It sounds so right to her, this date and fantasy night, but what she doesn't hear is her daughter: a reminder of the real responsibilities that await her return. She is already gone, though she has not actually left yet. The ending is focalized through Arlene: this is her fantasy and we are in it with her while Champ is rolled out of it. In the second version, there is still the sting of the daughter being left alone— "wonders what time Arlene will return"—but there is a greater emphasis on the alternate personality Arlene embodies when she goes on her dates. "Miss Clairol" is now acknowledged by both Arlene and her daughter in the later version, whereas it is only acknowledged by Arlene in the earlier version: Arlene "spin[s] herself into Miss Clairol" in the first and second version; Champ "watches Miss Clairol depart" only in the second version. In Arlene's version, she seems entirely unaware that she is shutting Champ out, but in Champ's version, Champ is acutely aware of what is going on. It is Champ who must deal with her mother's consistent fantasies. How does she deal with them? Both versions suggest it is through TV, Campbell's soup—Walonen points out that Campbell's is associated with "comfort, domesticity, and a mother's loving ministrations to her child" as perpetuated through intensive advertising campaigns (423)—and Breck models, all of which offer an opportunity for Champ to escape into her own unattainable fantasies. Once again, this points to her falling into the same trap. The story ends, either way, with the suggestion that this ritual will persist, and that this ritual will deeply affect Champ.

Though the story itself offers no resolution to the tensions between fantasy and the reality of Arlene's material conditions —the very tensions advertising relies on to continue to profit—it still effectively causes a disruption for the reader. In conclusion to what Viramontes shared with me about her own experience with her obsession with these ads, when she realized she could not attain the white ideal of beauty, she ceased striving for it. Thus, the interruption of a toxic

narrative of ideal beauty led to the interruption of the flow of material toxins via the cessation of repeated hair dye use. Extended beyond the scope of Viramontes's personal experience, this widely circulated story among both the general public and literary scholars—readers of the *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicana Creativity and Criticism*—has the potential to cause a similar awakening among its readers. This awakening is the disruption of a toxic narrative that disrupts the flow of toxic beauty ingredients at especially elevated levels for women of color. Though Viramontes does not explicitly expose the toxic nature of hair dye in the story itself, the hyperawareness of the inundation of cosmetic marketing campaigns in these women's lives that induce Arlene to participate in perpetuating a fantasy that will never become reality is enough to make one pause and consider if this is worth it—for Arlene and perhaps for oneself. Due to the toxic entanglement of the discursive (advertisements) and the material (toxins), one arguably does not need to be made explicitly aware of the toxins in order for disruption to occur: disrupting the discursive will disrupt the material due to their interconnection. The exposure of the relationship between the advertising narrative and toxic hair dye use makes this poisoning less "normal." This is just one area in which Viramontes exposes the myth of advertising and disrupts its narrative, and thus, disrupts the material toxins facilitated by the perpetuation of the myth. In *Under the Feet of Jesus,* Viramontes does in fact reveal the material toxins facilitated by advertising narratives within the text itself as she takes on the unevenly distributed burden of pesticide exposure.

**A Sun Maid Desire: Marketing and "Cides" in *Under the Feet of Jesus***

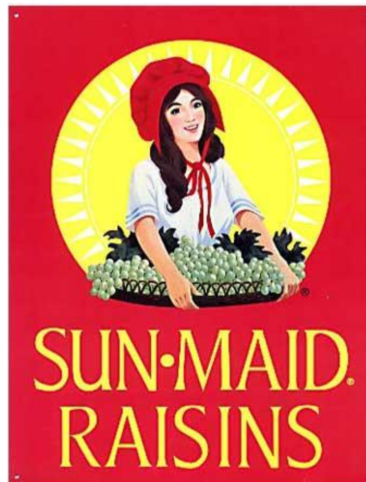


Figure 2: Sun Maid Raisins

Viramontes' 1996 novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* extends her critique of advertising and further disrupts its narratives by way of exposing the toxicity to which migrant farmworkers are subjected, and which becomes occluded through marketing campaigns. Representations of advertising campaigns run throughout *Under the Feet of Jesus* just as in "Miss Clairol," and serve as a contrast to lived experiences, highlighting the toxic entanglement of advertisements and material toxicity. Through her engagement with advertising in the novel, Viramontes indicts the racial capitalist system that exploits marginalized workers who "feed the nation" at the same time that it feeds America images that erase these workers in order to profit off their labor.[10] *Under the Feet of Jesus* tells the story of thirteen-year-old Estrella and her family as they migrate to a new location for work and settle in for a time. Focalized primarily through Estrella, the novel centers on the accidental poisoning of Alejo as he and his cousin are "stealing" peaches off the trees. Estrella's family takes him in, and eventually leaves him at the hospital after a

[10] In regard to the term "racial capitalism," I pull on Laura Pulido's explanation of the term in that "racial difference, similar to gender inequality…creates a variegated landscape that cultures and capital can exploit to create enhanced power and profits" (7).

climactic confrontation between Estrella and the nurse at the clinic who will not help him, taking the last of their money for administering this information.

Advertising appears often in the novel to expose myths that occlude the lived experiences of marginalized subjects. As revealed in "Miss Clairol," advertising's myths are primary to the way it creates desire. In *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *Their Dogs Came with Them,* Viramontes shifts who is being induced by these myths from her protagonist—Arlene in "Miss Clairol"—to hegemonic mass consumers. Her baring of the myth meant to create desire in mass consumers uncovers the toxic entanglement of advertising and toxicity in a distinctive way from that in "Miss Clairol." Whereas Arlene participates with advertising to create her own romantic fantasy which enables her to better bear life's burdens, Estrella not only is unable to, but refuses to participate in advertising's fantasy world. One of Viramontes's most pointed commentaries on the discrepancy between advertising myth and lived reality in the novel (and also most talked about among scholars) lies in the representation of the Sun Maid raisins campaign Estrella imagines while she works, to which she not only does not subscribe, but she critiques:

> Carrying the full basket to the paper was not like the picture on the red raisin boxes Estrella saw in the markets, not like the woman wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out grapes with her smiling, ruby lips, the sun flat orange behind her. The sun was white and it made Estrella's eyes sting like an onion, and the baskets of grapes resisted her muscles, pulling their magnetic weight back to earth. The woman with the red bonnet did not know this. Her knees did not sink in the hot white soil…. The woman's bonnet would be as useless as Estrella's own straw hat under a white sun so mighty, it toasted the green grapes to black raisins. (50)

This moment in the text, where the narrator poignantly contrasts the advertiser's utopian depiction of labor with the harsh reality thirteen-year-old Estrella faces as a migrant farmworker, has gained well-deserved attention from Latinx and Environmental Justice critics. Sarah D. Wald points out, "The Sun Maid raisin woman who 'did not know' suggests a typical consumer uninformed about the process of production… [and] conveys Estrella's knowledge" (575). Additionally, Sharla Hutchinson states that "Viramontes integrate[s] common consumer images alongside portraits of farmworker life, bringing together both the consumer product and the means of production…[which] functions to raise awareness about farmworker exploitation" (974). Sarita Cannon adds, "Viramontes juxtaposes the bounty of the natural world with the mass-produced 'foodlike' products for two reasons: to show how alienated we are from the origins of our food and to underscore the allure of capitalist culture and its prepackaged foods that many people who are poor rely on to feed their families" (54). These analyses contribute to the wider conversations on which critics have focused in the novel, including environmental racism, citizenship, agency, literacy, and rhetoric, among other important concepts Viramontes theorizes in *Under the Feet of Jesus*.[11] My focus here draws on these conversation, but lies more primarily on the ways advertising specifically facilitates the movement and absorption of material toxins. The exponentially higher exposure to toxic pesticides faced by these farmworker communities is considered "normal" in part due to the narrative advertising perpetuates.

[11] For a discussion about citizenship (versus denizenship) in the novel, see Sarah D. Wald's "Visible Farmers/ Invisible Workers: Locating Immigrant Labor in Food Studies." For a discussion on agency and citizenship in the novel, see Janet Fiskio's "Unsettling Ecocriticism: Rethinking Agrarianism, Place, and Citizenship." For a discussion on literacy in the novel, see Paula Moya's chapter "Reading as a Realist: Expanded Literacy in Helena María Viramontes's Under the Feet of Jesus" and David James Vázquez's "Their Bones Kept Them Moving: Latinx Studies, Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and the Crosscurrents of Ecocriticism." For a discussion on rhetoric and environmental racism in the novel, see Dora Ramírez-Dhoore's "Dissecting Environmental Racism: Redirecting the 'Toxic' in Alicia Gasper de Alba's *Desert Blood* and Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*." This list is far from exhaustive and is not meant to cover every important scholarly work that engages with the text.

The Sun Maid raisin advertising campaign not only masks the lived experience of the migrant farmworkers laboring to bring their product to fruition, but it also effectively facilitates the movement of material toxins as well. It accomplishes this through creating a state of want in consumers for a product that necessitates the use of poisonous substances to achieve maximum yield. As Ester Hernandez highlights in her artistic reworking of the logo in the piece *Sun Mad*, Sun Maid raisins are not in fact "naturally made" in the California sun; they are instead "Unnaturally Made with Insecticides, Miticides, Herbicides, Fungicides." Farmworkers laboring to get the fruit from the field to the table get exposed to these various "cides," or "killers" on multiple levels: through working directly with sprayed fruit, through drift from the spray due to living in very close proximity to the fields, and through contaminated water supply. If the workers have access to these fruits as sustenance (the novel reinforces the notion that most do not), therein lies yet another occasion for exposure. From this list of possible sites of pesticide (and herbicide, fungicide, and miticide) contact, it becomes clear that those who do not work directly with, and live closely to these sprayed fields suffer much less exposure to these poisons. Stacy Alaimo insists on exposures such as these as being an ethical and political act that forces us to "reckon with—rather than disavow—such horrific events and to grapple with the particular entanglements of vulnerability and complicity that radiate from disasters and their terribly disjunctive connection to everyday life in the industrialized world" (5). This is precisely what advertisers want hegemonic society to forget through their (false) representation of the idyllic conditions under which the companies' goods they represent are produced. Erasing the exploited, exposed laborers from the picture of production reifies the dominant, hegemonic position while material toxins flow freely among and in the forgotten workers.

The Sun Maid raisin campaign is not the only representation in the novel of advertisements that catch Estrella's eye and expose the material effects of toxic advertising, despite the inability for these advertisements to draw Estrella in. Advertising's enticements are lost on Estrella as she practices her literacy skills by reading billboards due to her restricted access to books. In her chapter "Reading as a Realist," Paula Moya points out that in *Under the Feet of Jesus* words are essentially meaningless unless they refer directly to actions or objects or transmit meaning from one "human consciousness" to another. She reads the scene in which Perfecto teaches Estrella how to use the tools in his toolbox to describe how Estrella is taught to "read" the world through the use of tools—material items that allow her to build and create—whereby she subsequently gains "complete literacy" or "the 'ability to participate competently and confidently in any level of society one chooses'" (178). Moya explains, "By portraying the process of learning to read as similar to the communicative process by which an apprentice is instructed in the use of tools, Viramontes portrays the acquisition of knowledge as necessarily intersubjective and tied to the material effects that words (as tools) have on the world" (180). When it comes to gaining literacy in terms of the written word, billboards along with "newspapers thrown in trash cans at filling stations, or oatmeal instructions" (Viramontes 31) and a catechism chapbook provide her with words to read, but the words are essentially meaningless to her; these words do not translate to a meaningful action, object, or intersubjective exchange of knowledge. The newspaper is in the garbage, so it can be assumed it is "old news," not to mention that she is reading these at filling stations, where the family more often goes to get groceries rather than fill a vehicle with gas (thus, the filling station itself is irrelevant for that which it is purposed for Estrella). Given the poignant scene in which Estrella is drumming on the empty Quaker oatmeal box to try to distract her siblings from their hunger, the instructions for

the oatmeal are also irrelevant. As for the chapbook, Moya argues that Estrella rejects her Catholic background. From a materialist perspective, this makes sense. If she cannot "use" the words in the chapbook to immediately alleviate her and her family's situation, gain some knowledge that will help her practically, or help her better read society, then it is also irrelevant to her. Adding to this collection of irrelevant reading material, the narrator provides a list of examples of the advertisements she reads over and over: "*Clorox makes linens more than white…It makes them sanitary too! Swanson's TV Dinners, closest to Mom's cooking. Coppertone—Fastest Tan Under the Sun with Maximum Sunburn Protection*" (31). The words on the billboards have no meaning beyond what she can use them for: to practice her reading skills. None of these advertisements are relevant for Estrella and her family: they do not own a washing machine, they do not own a microwave or an oven, and "suntan lotion sounds like a cruel joke to someone who is already brown and for whom the sun is associated not with leisure time and lolling on the beach, but with sunstroke and unquenchable thirst" (Moya 197). Here the material and the discursive are clearly disconnected for Estrella, but this nonetheless does not diminish the impact of these words on her material existence. Though she cannot make us of these words beyond employing them in her self-directed reading practice, their impact, specifically that of those found in the advertisements, certainly affect her and her family's material condition.

In its effects on Estrella's material conditions, the wording of the Clorox campaign stands out due to its reference to whiteness and sanitation: two aspects apparently needed to get a chance at a sufficient education. Estrella is acutely aware of her hygiene when she is at school, pointing out that the teachers were "more concerned about the dirt under her fingernails" than helping her learn how to write (24). This attention to hygiene is a reflection of the historical

connection between race and cleanliness in America. In *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States,* historian Carl A. Zimring traces the evolution of the American citizen from "Christian" to "White," bringing the morally clean implications with it; thus, when white and clean are conflated, it invokes a sort of spiritual as well as physical cleanliness. He further explains, "In the nineteenth century constructions of race, white supremacists stained Native Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans with assumptions that their skin, bodies, and behaviors were somehow dirtier than the skin, bodies, and behaviors of 'white' people" (6). Through his historical analysis, he concludes that anxieties about race and dirt are persistent from the time of Jefferson to today and that these anxieties have material consequences. For Estrella, whose darker skin marks her as somehow "dirtier" than her white classmates, this material consequence is the dearth of attention needed to garner a sufficient education. The lack of education, as her friend and love-interest Alejo points out, is what will keep her in the field suffering intense exposure to pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, and miticides. Thus, the reification of the myth through Clorox's advertising campaign that whiteness is cleanliness bears material consequences for Estrella—namely, lack of access to education—and by extension darker-skinned migrant farmworkers in general, and creates pathways for their poisoning through toxic exposure. The connection between the campaign's message that being white and sanitary is desirable and Estrella's failure to live up to either of those dominant hegemonic ideals indicts the advertising industry for its role in perpetuating normalizing discourses which reify social hierarchies and facilitates the flow of toxins to vulnerable populations outside of advertising's target market.

The Coppertone advertisement, while complicating the relationship between "clean and white," perpetuates a different cultural myth that serves to occlude the material realities faced by

racialized migrant communities, and hence allows for the poisoning of their bodies to persist. The hegemonic-dominant position (and myth) revealed through these advertisements can be stated thus: though being naturally dark-skinned is generally read as being “dirty,” tanned white skin is a reflection of engaging with the outdoors, and by extension, according to Sarah Jaquette Ray, healthfulness. Ray argues that “contemporary environmentalism and its attendant recreational practices or outdoor adventure extend early-twentieth-century conceptions of social Darwinism in their focus on ‘fitness,’ self-sufficiency, and purity” and maintains that in this line of thinking, “reconnecting with nature means having a fit body” (31). Coppertone’s promise that it will offer the “*Fastest Tan Under the Sun with Maximum Sunburn Protection*” (31) assures its users that they will become just dark enough to reflect their connection with nature—and thus, their fitness—without it causing them harm. The demographic targeted by this ad campaign is both “fit” enough to play outside, and “white” enough to get burned while doing so; enhancing their enjoyment of the sun while protecting them from injury is the aim of Coppertone’s project. This focus on whiteness and healthfulness ignores the “naturally” brown farmworker facing dangers arguably far more menacing than a sunburn: the risks of sunstroke, heat exhaustion, poor nutrition, dehydration, and persistent exposure to toxic chemicals. The ad complicates the “clean and white” myth by introducing the “right” kind of brown as a sign of health. In this way, the association between brown and healthfulness—that if one is tanned, they must be fit and enjoying the outdoors—obscures the reality that many brown workers are not healthy due to the risks they are exposed to everyday, and that engaging with nature is not an adventure to be had, but a necessity to survive. The connection between tanned bodies and healthfulness diverts attention away from the health risks faced daily by farmworkers laboring in the sun, thus allowing for the exposure to pesticides, herbicides, miticides, and fungicides to persist. Thus,

while Estrella uses these billboards, ubiquitous in California at the time, to read, the effects of their message, though lost on Estrella, directly impacts her living conditions.

The Coppertone ad further contributes to the persistence of poisoning laborers in that its claim to provide the "*Fastest Tan Under the Sun*" promotes a connection between fun and sun that obscures the difficulty of agricultural labor. This seemingly innocuous connection between fun and sun quickly, yet unconsciously leads the reader to connect this with frivolity, and thus, expendability. Williamson gives insight into how this process works. She explains that advertising "sets up connections between certain types of consumers and certain products" and that "having made these links and created symbols of exchange it can use them as 'given,' and so can we…. Once the connection has been made, we begin to translate the other way and in fact to skip translating altogether: taking the sign for what it signifies, the thing for the feeling" (12). In other words, the meaning-making of advertisements works through quick associations. Invoking the myth previously discussed of sun exposure equaling a healthy enjoyment of nature, the ad correlates Coppertone (the certain product) with light-skinned—easily burned, desiring a tan—subjects (certain consumers). This type of consumer is voluntarily frolicking in the sun; thus, in taking the sign (the ad) for what it signifies (fun in the sun), Coppertone (the thing) becomes "the feeling" of frivolity. Coppertone as the feeling of frivolity may at first seem harmless. However, the implications of this connection are quite dangerous: if sunscreen is being associated with recreational use, fun, and therefore frivolity, then when fieldworkers are perceived as being brown, the association is made (very quickly and unintentionally) that their work is somehow fun and frivolous; therefore it is expendable. This sun-exposure/frivolity/expendability association allows consumers—arguably mainstream society as this is a mass advertising campaign—to view any activity associated with sunscreen use as frivolous and unnecessary, allowing the

public to dismiss the conditions fieldworkers face every day. This benefits both consumers, as they are able to enjoy the fruits of a racialized, exploited labor force through lower prices on goods, and the company, as their product does not face the same sort of regulations that true medicinal aid does, though it is supposed to protect consumers from potentially catastrophic health consequences. In underlining the uneven environmental burden that falls on Mexican and Mexican American migrant farmworkers, partly through her use of the ubiquity of marketing messages perpetuated by billboards at the time, Viramontes indicts racial capitalism in its exploitation of racialized workers to gain profit. Her use of advertising to do this exposes the toxic entanglement of the discursive and the material as a driver that both perpetuates toxic discourses (of expendability, for example) and material toxins (as in pesticides, for example).

Different than the relationship Viramontes sets up between Arlene and advertising in "Miss Clairol" in which it is Arlene who is enticed by its messages and therefore invites toxins into her body, in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, it is the mass consumer's desire for these products that leads to the "normal" poisoning of the Mexican American subject: since the labor of the Mexican American is erased in advertising messages and whiteness is reinforced as desirable, the hegemonic mass consumer continues to purchase the goods advertising promotes with either no thought of the effect it has on laborers or a justification for their purchases regardless of the effects because they have internalized marketing messages that deem these laborers dirty and expendable. Just as the normalizing discourse of advertising shifts from Chicana subject—Arlene in "Miss Clairol"—to mass consumer in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the disruption of the toxic entanglement represented in the text shifts as well. In Dean Franco's "Metaphors Happen," he describes the potential effect on the reader Viramontes's work can have. He explains that "both miracle and metaphor are the effect of a receptive reader whose own readiness to read forms a

network with the novel" (345) wherein "[t]he miracle occurs to the extent that a reader bears a vision of another, better way of being in the world and seeks to make it real" (347). In other words, it is the reader's ready engagement with the text and willingness to see a better way of being for the "Other" because of it that allows for the miracle of action to occur. In the case of *Under the Feet of Jesus,* as scholars such as Sarah D. Wald, Mary Pat Brady, Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs and others have pointed out, Viramontes humanizes the experience of marginalized subjects, making it more difficult for readers—many of whom are mass consumers—to ignore their plight. When the miracle of a reader choosing to take action occurs, perhaps by refusing to buy certain products laden with pesticides, this not only disrupts the advertising narrative that food is produced in idyllic conditions, it simultaneously disrupts the exposure to pesticides, herbicides, fungicides and other cides experienced at a uneven rate by vulnerable populations existing at the bottom of the racialized hierarchy racial capitalism requires.

**"ass-colored peachy flakes": Advertising and Urban Toxins in *Their Dogs Came with Them***

Figure 3: Coppertone Billboard

Viramontes's novel *Their Dogs Came with Them,* published roughly twenty years after "Miss Clairol" and twelve years after *Under the Feet of Jesus,* continues her trend of representing advertising campaigns as a means to critique environmental racism and expose the

toxic entanglements of the discursive and the material. This critique bears resemblance to that in *Under the Feet of Jesus* in that her protagonist wholeheartedly rejects the Coppertone advertising campaign she encounters. However, here Viramontes more explicitly exposes the toxic entanglement of advertising and toxicity by way of her protagonist physically ripping the ad she rejects while pieces of the ad stick to her, causing her emotional and literal pain. From "Miss Clairol" through to *Their Dogs Came with Them*, Viramontes's critique of advertising via her Mexican American protagonists progresses from Arlene subscribing to advertising's messages aimed at mass consumers which induces her to engage in toxic beauty routines, to Estrella finding no use for advertising's messages as she uses the words presented as nothing more than tools to build her literacy skills—except to point out the discrepancy between her experience and that displayed in the Sun Maid ad—to Ermila actively attempting to destroy them.

The pain Ermila feels when she encounters the Coppertone ad is tied to conquest and neocolonialism. In *Their Dogs Came with Them,* Viramontes engages the Coppertone billboard in much the same way she employs the Sun Maid campaign in *Under the Feet of Jesus*—as a stark contrast between the discursively toxic world presented by advertising and the lived, material reality of marginalized subjects. However, in her engagement with the Coppertone ad in *Their Dogs,* Viramontes directly links this discrepancy to the effects of settler-colonialism and conquest. She derives her title for the novel from Miguel Leon-Portilla's *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, as she makes explicit in the epigraph by quoting the passage from which it came: "Their dogs came with them, running ahead of the column. They raised their muzzles high; they lifted their muzzles to the wind. They raced on before with saliva dripping from their jaws" (partial quotation). The novel, set in the 1960's and 1970's in a Los Angeles neighborhood being ripped apart by the laying of several freeways, connects this

modern displacement with those felt due to the “loss of indigenous land to the Spanish, the loss of Mexican land to the US government, and the loss of the barrio to Los Angeles’ urban renewal projects” (Wald 73). Mary Pat Brady explains, “This epigraph clearly ties the freeway story to the history of colonialism and links the rescaling of Los Angeles to the very coloniality of power that ensnared the *Américas* in a global capital vision. The bulldozers are the new dogs…” (176). As Sarah D. Wald points out, *Their Dogs* illuminates the “human costs of the construction of the modern city and insists we read these forms of violence as a continuing consequence of settler-colonialism” (73). The novel tells the stories of multiple lives in the Eastside, Los Angeles, including those of “gang bangers,” the homeless, the mentally ill, and the orphan. The connection between these lives is the disorientation and alienation they suffer due to the tearing apart of their neighborhood to make way for a freeway. The story line I focus on is Ermila’s, the orphan who has been through many foster homes before ending up in the care of her maternal grandparents. In this narrative, she works at a used car dealership, has a tight group of girlfriends, and a boyfriend who is a prominent member of a local gang. It is through Ermila that Viramontes confronts the Coppertone ad. Ermila encounters the ad as she waits for her consistently inconsistent boyfriend and member of the McBride Boys gang Alfonso, or “Big Al,” down at Laguna Cliffs, only to be greeted by her not-really cousin Nacho (Ignacio) who, unbeknown to Ermila, has beaten Alfonso and locked him in the lifeguard tower in order to clear the path to expressing his love for Ermila.

Ermila’s reaction to the advertisement brings to the fore the ever-present history of conquest in contributing to her present situation, which includes higher levels of exposure to toxic substances. As Ermila initially heads to the beach, she comes into contact with the billboard, her hand bandaged as the result of a viscous bite from a possibly rabid dog placed in

her room to keep her under guard: "Then Ermila had pressed her palm on a crinkled, weatherworn billboard to slip off her shoes and the ass-colored peachy flakes of the Coppertone girl smudged Ermila's bandage as well" (237). When Ermila sees the gargantuan picture of a pup pulling at the underwear of a little blonde girl, Ermila is angry that the little girl is *embarrassed* of all things: "Her unmasked and untanned buttocks embarrassed the girl and Ermila couldn't fathom why. Angry, maybe. Frightened, yes. But embarrassed? At a dog biting *her* ass? This just didn't make sense" (245). Ermila surmises that the appropriate response should be anger or fear, two emotions tied to conquest and signaled by the presence of the dog in the ad. Gloria Anzaldúa details what happened to the Indian people of Mexico during the Conquest that would generate these types of emotions: "At the beginning of the 16th century, the Spaniards and Hernán Cortés invaded Mexico and, with the help of tribes that the Aztecs had subjugated, conquered it. Before the Conquest, there were twenty-five million Indian people in Mexico and the Yucatán. Immediately after the Conquest, the Indian population had been reduced to under seven million. By 1650, only one-and-a-half-million pure-blooded Indians remained" (5). She explains, "Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape." As Ermila gazes upon the ad, she does not see fun in the sun; instead, she is reminded of what dogs after bodies and properties represents. This is one of the many dangerous images of dogs that occurs throughout the text: there are rabid dogs "necessitating" the quarantine of Ermila's neighborhood, the dogs of conquest referred to in the epilogue, and the dogs as bulldozers as Brady points out. The dogs of the Spanish conquest and the bulldozer dogs are tied together in conquest; the rabid dogs justify the surveillance of their own neighborhood by the (neo)conquerors. Ermila is nursing a wound inflicted by one of these vicious neighborhood dogs meant to keep her under watch—"The dog gnashed its fangs, striking her, a mighty sting" (75)—

just as the dogs the Spaniards mentioned in the epigraph brought with them were meant to terrify those whom the Spaniards wished to conquer. As Ermila gazes at the pup on the billboard, while it likely appears to mass consumers to be engaged in a playful act, she perceives the pup to be violent given that she only sees the bulldozers and rabid, dangerous dogs on a daily basis. That the little girl in the picture is embarrassed, rather than angry or fearful, simply does not register with Ermila: she can't imagine that a dog coming after her property and her body should cause embarrassment: that girl should be terrified and infuriated, both by the dangers posed by the dog and the societal and environmental injustice that proceeds from such an "attack."

Ermila's encounter with the Coppertone billboard not only reveals the lingering effects of conquest and the discrepancy between her and a mass consumer audience's reading of the billboard, it is also a particularly fruitful site to examine the toxic entanglement of discursive advertising formulations with material reality: Viramontes literalizes the connection between advertisements and the body through Ermila's physical encounter with the material representation of an ideology displayed in the form of a billboard. The discursive is manifest visibly through the materiality of the "crinkled, weatherworn" billboard itself. The "ass-colored peachy flakes of the Coppertone girl smudged Ermila's bandage" (237); in other words, the materiality of the representation of the ideology literally deposits itself onto Ermila's *body*. Hsuan L. Hsu, in his excellent examination of metonymy as effective environmental justice literary form, likens this smudge to a stain, and points out that Ermila should not have been so near the billboard, that this billboard "intended for the light-skinned viewers enclosed in automobiles, was not designed to be approached so closely" (161). This, he claims, makes for a relationship between the body and the environment "not idyllic or 'natural,' but awkward and conflicted…" (161). This "awkward and conflicted" relationship highlights the discrepancy

between the "idyllic" world the advertisement portrays and the reality that is Ermila's—and many Others'—actual existence. The idyllic world of advertising is ruptured when its weathered material makes contact with whom it fails to represent.

The depositing of the flakes onto Ermila's body also complicates the relationship between text, body, and image, pointing again to their co-determinant relationship. Pieces of the Coppertone girl's image coming into contact with Ermila's wounded arm have the effect of reminding her of the pain in her reality: "The dog bite beneath the sandy gauze had begun a renewed throbbing as if Ermila's eyes reminded the wound of its pain. An account of today's experiences including the girl's ass had been deposited all over her bandage…" (245). Here, there is a constant back-and-forth between image and lived reality. The image becomes material as pieces of it get deposited on Ermila's bandaged body. This act alone does not cause pain, however. It is Ermila's eyes that remind her of the pain in her arm; it is the image that conjures up the feeling of pain. Ermila's emotional response is intimately tied to her physical response. In the second sentence, Viramontes does not use commas to separate "including the girl's ass" from the independent clause. This has the effect of putting the depositing of paint from the billboard, a seemingly insignificant event, on the same plane as "today's experiences": her being bitten by the dog, vandalizing a car in retaliation of one of her best friend's molestation, and getting stood up by her boyfriend. Just as the Coppertone girl's emotion—embarrassment—evokes an intense reaction from Ermila, the material from the billboard causes Ermila intense agitation, to the point of causing physical pain.

Further complicating the text/body/image relationship, the ass-colored peachy flakes that affix themselves to Ermila's bandage attaches ideology to the matter that then attaches itself to the body. We tend to think of ideology that "penetrates" the body as ideas, or immaterial: they,

or it, are born in the body, through the mind, disseminated via various material or discursive means, then absorbed by other bodies (in the form of a message—as cultural studies or rhetorical analysis explains). Alaimo reminds us in her theory of trans-corporeality that it is not only the discursive that enters the body (in this case, the mind): *all* matter has the potential to traverse the "boundaries" of the corporeal as well. Viramontes exemplifies this by ascribing ideological meaning to the matter that carries the message: the peachy flakes (the matter) are literally imprinted with the message; a message that normally gets discursively transferred into the body has, in its material form, been transferred *onto* the body (and then eventually, as trans-corporeality suggests, into the body). Coppertone's message still enters the mind, but its material contents remain without until the paint seeps into the flesh, at which point, both message and material will have infiltrated Estrella's body. This works to literalize the interdependent relationship once again between ideology and the body: the ideology is stuck to the body; the ideology's dissolution upon contact with Ermila's bandage represents its breakdown when reality permeates the marketing world. This illustrates the multi-directional nature of trans-corporeality "in which bodies extend into places and places deeply affect bodies" (*Exposed* 5): Ermila's body enmeshed in and changed by the world disrupts illusions of an idyllic world just as the message disrupts Ermila's emotional state and the paint making its way into her flesh would eventually disrupt her physical well-being.

The paint from the billboard is not the only way in which Ermila is exposed to toxins. Though Ermila is not a farmworker like Estrella laboring in the sun whose work and exposure to toxins is occluded through an association with frivolity, the Coppertone ad in *Their Dogs Came with Them* still works to occlude the elevated exposure to toxins faced by racialized communities through this same feeling of frivolity. Just as Estrella's rate of contact with noxious substances

due to her field work is dramatically higher than that of more economically privileged, white citizens, Ermila's exposure to urban toxins is considerably higher than those who have access to suburban homes and white-collar jobs. Viramontes illustrates the toxins spilling into the air at this particular historical moment, when neighborhoods in East Los Angeles were torn apart by bulldozers making way for freeway construction (speaking of another character in the same neighborhood): "By Monday, the earthmovers would be running again, biting trenches wider than rivers; the groan, thump and burr of noise of the constant motors would weave into the sound of her own breath whistling the blackened fumes of dust and crumble in her nasal cavities" (168). In a different, yet similar scene, the narrator relates, "The thick, choking stench of blackened diesel smoke rose from the dump trucks, and bulldozers blew carbon exhaust into a haze" (27). Viramontes's descriptions suggest that levels of pollution are substantially increasing due to the construction of the freeways. These levels do not decrease post-construction, however. Robert Bullard states that "[m]any federally subsidized transportation construction and infrastructure projects cut wide paths through low-income and people of color neighborhoods"[12] and that after construction of these freeways is complete, the increase in volume of traffic carries increased risk to explosions, accidents, and spills, not to mention the dramatically increased exposure to diesel and gasoline emissions. According to Bullard and Glenn Johnson, "African-Americans and Latinos live in these Los Angeles communities with the dirtiest air; the South Coast Air Quality Management District estimates 71 percent of African-Americans and 50 percent of Latinos live in areas with the most polluted air, compared to 34 percent of white

[12] Bullard, Robert. "Introduction." *Highway Robbery: Transportation, Racism, and New Routes to Equity.* Edited by Robert Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel O. Torres, South End, 2004, pp.4.

people."[13] There is no doubt that Ermila's health is compromised by the environmental racism inherent in these projects and their residual effects.

The Coppertone advertisement works to occlude these circumstances, and thus perpetuate the poisoning and inhibit the healing of Ermila and her community, similarly to the way it operates in *Under the Feet of Jesus.* As in *Under the Feet of Jesus,* the association remains strong between Coppertone and frivolity, and this association causes consumers to see those who are brown as engaging in frivolous, expendable activity; however, in *Their Dogs Came with Them* the emphasis lies not with farmworkers, but on the struggling youth of the inner city. Whereas in *Under the Feet of Jesus* Viramontes only gives us the text on the Coppertone billboard Estrella reads, in *Their Dogs Came with Them,* we get the added details of the accompanying image which works to enhance the feeling of frivolity expressed by the words: a little blonde girl's backside is revealed as a pup playfully tugs at her bottoms. Looking at photographs of the billboard at which Ermila would likely be looking (taken of the Coppertone billboard in Los Angeles circa 1968), we are actually given additional text as well: in every depiction of this ad from the time period in which the novel is set, the words "Don't be a paleface!" accompany it. According to the image on this billboard, childhood is ostensibly a time for frivolity and play. One should be running down the beach without a care in the world. A puppy likewise connotes frivolous play. This pup is not yet a guard dog, a hunting dog, a sheep dog, or any other working animal; he is someone's pet. The Coppertone girl has no concern that the dog will *actually* attack her, as the dog Ermila encounters does. She has the luxury of being embarrassed by this pup, rather than fearful or angry. This girl does not have to worry about urban toxins; she is not being held against her will in her room by her grandparents as Ermila is:

[13] *Just Transportation: Dismantling Race and Class Barriers to Mobility.* New City Publishers, 1997.

she is at the beach, after all. As for not being a "paleface," clearly this girl is blonde-haired and blue-eyed and prone to burn. Her biggest concern is not getting a sunburn *while also* not being a "paleface." This harkens back to the healthy, able-bodied enjoyment of nature and complication of clean and white in the ad's depiction in *Under the Feet of Jesus*.[14] Ermila's brown skin and placement on the beach can be associated with the frivolity that comes with youth: the connection is made that if one is brown, young, and on the beach, that one is care-free and engaged in playfulness, able to change their location or circumstances by mere wishful thinking. Thus, the billboard works to occlude the true horrors of Ermila's life, as she sits soaking wet waiting for a boyfriend to never come, hoping she will not have to bus all the way back to where she came from only to be trapped again in her house, her neighborhood under quarantine as the machines rip through it, displacing the ones she loves while spewing toxins into the air that make it difficult for her to breathe.

The healing that needs to occur goes well beyond a bandaged arm, and the narrative in need of change is greater than the Coppertone ad alone; however, taking on this pervasive advertisement—watching it crumble and dissolve as it comes into contact with that whom it fails to represent—creates one significant disruption in the toxic entanglement between the material and the discursive. Whereas Estrella critiques the Sun Maid ad and uses the others to further her literacy skills, Ermila takes it a step further when she actively and materially dismantles the problematic advertisement—aimed at hegemonic mass consumers and occluding the lived experience of those on the margins—even as it stains her in the process. Set in a time when "Western modernity's project of civilization" (Moya) entails the ripping apart of racialized neighborhoods for freeway construction, exposing them to high levels of noxious substances,

[14] The term, or course, is also a derogatory term used by Native Americans for Euro-Americans. Thus, not being a paleface ostensibly both makes one more attractive and less likely to be called this derogatory term.

Viramontes's creative fiction based in all-too-real circumstances works to expose the interconnection of advertising and material toxins. Ermila's circumstances—and those in a similar position—are occluded by dominant narratives, perpetuated through myths found and widely disseminated through mass marketing campaigns. Ermila's antagonistic contact with the ad works to make her circumstances appear less normal to the reader as they are starkly contrasted with the fun and frivolous experience at the beach displayed by the billboard. The idyllic world of advertising, and the culturally toxic discourse it represents, is brought down—overturned—through its contact with the material world of those who do not have access to even a vestige of what this advertising world promises them. This breakdown of the campaign within the novel has the potential to create the miracle of a reader moving forward in an ethical way with this knowledge of the true effects of "progress" for those whom it displaces, disrupting the toxic entanglement that facilitates exposure to poisonous substances.

**Conclusion**

Viramontes's repeated engagement with advertisements in her creative fiction works to disrupt the toxic entanglement of discursive advertising campaigns and material toxins. Through her groundbreaking literary production over the past thirty years, she has taken on a number of ubiquitous marketing campaigns to expose the ways in which their advertisements induce women of color to engage in harmful practices to reach an unattainable ideal—as in "Miss Clairol"—occlude environmental racism—as in *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *Their Dogs Came with* Them—and facilitate the movement and absorption of material toxins into the body—as illustrated by all three texts. Ironically, as more and more of her novels and short stories containing this disruption sell through the very means which she critiques (advertising and capitalism), the more disruptive these messages become as a greater number of readers are made

aware of the discrepancy between advertising messages and the lived experience of marginalized populations. This discrepancy disrupts the discourse of normality that allows for the poisoning of these populations to more easily persist through its ability to obscure the real consequences of toxic exposure.

As evidenced by the consistent reaction of students in my Introduction to Chicanx/Latinx Literature course, encountering these texts causes the reader to come to an awareness of the toxic messages of marketing and advertising, especially in relation to racialized hierarchies, and moves people toward making different decisions in their own lives. These reactions in my students have ranged from being more attentive to where their food comes from and how it is produced (committing to only buying ethically produced food) to my Advertising major now intent on changing the dominant messages contained in marketing campaigns once he gets into the industry. Universally, it has opened their eyes to the realities many communities of color face in stark contrast to what is projected by the advertising industry. As these counternarratives spread, so does the disruption. Eventually one hopes that the system will begin to shift in a such a way as to curb both the material and cultural toxins facilitated, especially to vulnerable populations, through advertisements.

In the next chapter, I expand Viramontes's disruption beyond the Unites States and take on the environmental and settler-colonial travesties faced by Native Americans who are also particularly vulnerable to toxic entanglements. While Viramontes's work is almost exclusively set in California, effectively depicting the experiences and challenges of Mexican American subjects, Thomas King engages both the United States and Canada, focusing on white and Native American subjects in his critiques. In what follows, I analyze King's *The Back of the Turtle,* bringing in many of his other works to support this reading, which delivers a complex

representation of the ways marketing, conspicuous consumption, and public relations narratives intertwine to perpetuate the poisoning of Indigenous, local, and global communities.

## Works Cited


"A Review of Cancer in U.S. Hispanic Populations." *Cancer Prevention Research,* 2012.

Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self.* Bloomington, 2010.

--- . "Introduction: Dwelling in the Dissolve." *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times,* U of Minnesota P, 2016, pp. 1-14.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza.* Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

Barceló, Margarita T. "Tapestries of Space-Time: Urban and Institutional Spaces in Helena María Viramontes's Short Fiction." *Rebozos de Palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader,* edited by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, U of Arizona P, 2013, pp. 122-44.

Bomgardner, Melody M. "Cancer Risk Studies Raise Questions about the Safety of Long-Lasting Hair Dyes." *Chemical & Engineering News,* vol. 98, no. 17, May 30, 2020, n.p.

Brady, Mary Pat. "Metaphors to Love By: Toward a Chicana Aesthetics in *Their Dogs Came with Them*." *Rebozos de Palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader,* edited by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, U of Arizona P, 2013, pp. 167-191.

"Breast Cancer Facts & Figures 2019-2020." *American Cancer Society,* www.cancer.org, 2019. Accessed 6 Jan 2020.

Bullard, Robert. "Introduction." *Highway Robbery: Transportation, Racism, and New Routes to Equity.* Edited by Robert Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel O. Torres, South End, 2004, pp.4.

Bullard, Robert and Glenn S. Johnson. *Just Transportation: Dismantling Race and Class Barriers to Mobility.* New City Publishers, 1997.

Cannon, Sarita. "Organic Food for the 'Lunchables' Generation: Transformational Multiculturalism in the New Millennium." *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, pp. 42-59.

DePolo, Jamie. "Permanent Hair Dyes, Straighteners Linked to Higher Breast Cancer Risk." *Breastcancer.org,* reviewed by Brian Wojciechowski, M.D., 9 Dec 2019, n.p.

Fiskio, Janet. "Unsettling Ecocriticism: Rethinking Agrarianism, Place, and Citizenship." *American Literature*, vol. 84, no. 2, June 2012, pp. 301-325.

Franco, Dean. "Metaphors Happen: Miracle and Metaphor in Helena María Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them.*" *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2015, pp. 344-62.

Grewe-Volpp, Christa. '"The oil was made from their bones': Environmental (In)Justice in Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 12, no. 1, winter 2005, pp. 61-78.

Gutiérrez y Muhs, Gabriella. "Introduction." *Rebozos de Palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader,* edited by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, U of Arizona P, 2013, pp. 1-23.

Haile, Robert W et al. "A Review of Cancer in U.S. Hispanic Populations." *Cancer Prevention Research,* vol. 5, no. 2, 2012, pp. 150-63. doi:10.1158/1940-6207.CAPR-11-0447.

Hernández, Ester. *Sun Mad*. 1982.

Holmes, Seth M. *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States.* U of California P, 2013.

Hutchison, Sharla. "Recoding Consumer Culture: Ester Hernández, Helena María Viramontes, and the Farmworker Cause." *The Journal of Popular Culture,* vol. 46, no. 5, 2013, pp. 973-990.

Hsu, Hsuan L. "Fatal Contiguities: Metonymy and Environmental Justice." *New Literary History,* vol. 42, no. 1, winter 2011, pp. 147-168.

Jhally, Sut and James Twitchell. "Advertising: A Debate! Sut Jhally vs. James Twitchell." *Stay Free! Stay Free!* Summer 1999.

Minich, Julie Avril. "Greenwashing the White Savior: Cancer Clusters, Supercrips, and *McFarland, USA*." *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial*, edited by Sarah D. Wald, David J. Vázquez, Priscilla Solis Ybarra, and Sarah Jaquette Ray, Temple UP, 2019, pp. 35-51.

Moya, Paula M. L. '"Against the Sorrowful and Infinite Solitude": Environmental Consciousness and Streetwalker Theorizing in Helena María Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them*." *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial*, edited by Sarah D. Wald, David J. Vázquez, Priscilla Solis Ybarra, and Sarah Jaquette Ray, Temple UP, 2019, pp. 250-66.

--- . *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles*. U of California P, 2002.

Ramírez-Dhoore, Dora. "Dissecting Environmental Racism: Redirecting the 'Toxic' in Alicia Gasper de Alba's *Desert Blood* and Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus.*" *The Natural World in Latin American Literatures,* 2010, pp. 175-195.

Ray, Sarah Jaquette. *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture.*" U of Arizona P, 2013.

Sellen, Jane. "Number of Farmworkers Sickened by Pesticides more than Doubled in One Year, According to State Report." *Californians for Pesticide Reform*, Aug. 24, 2020, www.pesticidereform.org. Accessed 6 Jan 2020.

Spencer, Andrew. "Voluntary Exploitation and Forced Assimilation: John Steinbeck's Critique of American Advertising in *The Grapes of Wrath*." *The Journal of American Culture,* vol. 40, no. 4, 2017, pp. 313-324.

Szetela, Adam. "Fetishism and Form: Advertising and Ironic Distance in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*." *European journal of American studies,* vol. 13, no. 2, summer 2018, n.p.

"Use of permanent hair dyes and bladder-cancer risk." *National Center for Biotechnology Information*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, https://www.nlm.nih.gov/. 2001.

Vázquez, David James. "Their Bones Kept Them Moving: Latinx Studies, Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and the Crosscurrents of Ecocriticism." *Contemporary Literature,* vol. 58, no. 3, fall 2017, pp. 361-391.

Viramontes, Helena María. "Miss Clairol." *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Charting New Frontiers in American Literature*, edited by María Herrera-Sobek and Helena María Viramontes, Arte Publico, 1988, pp. 101-5.

---. "Miss Clairol." *Los Angeles Times Magazine,* 30 June 1991, pp. 23, 36-7.

---. *Their Dogs Came with Them.* Atria Books, 2007.

---. *Under the Feet of Jesus.* Plume, 1995.

Wald, Sarah D. "Refusing to halt'; Mobility and the Quest for Spatial Justice in Helena María Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them* and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*," *Western American Literature*, vol. 48, nos. 1&2, 2013, pp. 70-89.

---. "Visible Farmers/Invisible Workers: Locating Immigrant Labor in Food Studies." *Food, Culture and Society,* vol. 14, no. 4, 2011, pp. 567-86.

Walonen, Michael K. "The Ambivalent Thematics of Commodity Fetishism in Contemporary Lantina/O Narrative Fiction." *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies,* vol. 25, no. 3, 2016, pp. 419-430.

Williamson, Judith. *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising,* Marion Boyars, 1978.

Zimring, Carl A. *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States.* New York UP, 2015.

# III. CHAPTER 2:

# CONTROLLING THE NARRATIVE:

# TOXIC ENTANGLEMENTS IN THOMAS KING'S *THE BACK OF THE TURTLE*

> And we need to remember one thing: the advertising industry, and more than ever, the public relations industry, wouldn't be spending all this money to maintain and push this elaborate, corporate, commercial vision of the world if they weren't afraid people might otherwise come to see the world through a different lens, one that's more in tune with social values rather than the hollow, materialistic values of consumerism.
>
> -Sut Jhally, *Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse,* 2017

In March 2013, Suncor, owner of Petro-Canada, had a water-pipe leak from their oil sands site on the Athabasca River that spilled an estimated 35,000 liters of industrial wastewater into the river over a ten-hour period. Their public relations spokesperson claimed there was "a short-term, negligible impact on the river" while also denying any impact from a similar spill from their company two years prior, claiming the investigation was closed because the company "couldn't have seen it coming" (theglobeandmail.com). This real-life example is an impetus for Cherokee author Thomas King imagining toxic spills, their impact, and recovery from them in his novel *The Back of the Turtle* (2014). In his work, King takes narratives that minimize the irreparable damage caused by companies like Suncor and disseminated by public relations teams to task, as they effectively allow the toxification of the landscape to continue unchecked.

*The Back of the Turtle* delivers a complex representation of the ways marketing, public relations narratives, and conspicuous consumption intertwine in a toxic entanglement to

perpetuate the poisoning of local and global communities. The novel is dually set at the fictional agribusiness giant Domidion's headquarters in Toronto and Samaritan Bay, a fictional town on the Western Canadian coast. *The Back of the Turtle* follows Dorian Asher, CEO of Domidion who is battling a mysterious disease he suspects may be caused by some sort of toxin, and Gabriel Quinn, a Native American and one of Domidion's head scientists who disappears from the company after he realizes he is responsible for the destruction of the lives of animals and people in and around Samaritan Bay. Gabriel journeys to Samaritan Bay where he purposes to end his life as a sort of retribution for his part in releasing GreenSweep into the area—the toxic, Agent Orange-type defoliant (SDF 20) that broke loose of its confines and decimated the land. This accident, which local residents term "The Ruin" or "That One Bad Day," was also responsible for the death of his sister and nephew, who were living on the Smoke River reservation near the bay in the area when the spill occurred. After Gabriel's first attempt at suicide fails, he meets Mara, his sister's best friend; Nicholas Crisp, a trickster-type non-Native man who regularly gathers the remaining inhabitants of the area together; and Sonny, a neurodivergent boy who helps run the now vacant local hotel, the Ocean Star, for his Dad, whom he does not remember has passed away. Meanwhile, Dorian and his faithful, stoic assistant Winter deal with various previous and impending disasters caused by their company, making sure Domidion's public relations department relates the proper information to protect stock prices. While Gabriel cannot live with himself for his part in the GreenSweep disaster, Dorian unrepentantly juggles the media and his personal life through the multiple catastrophes of the corporation's leaking waste ponds and the disappearance of the *Anguis*, Domidion's giant ship filled with the remaining GreenSweep that is lost at sea after multiple "poorer" countries deny its access to their ports. Dorian deals with the pressures of his life through ostentatious purchases

which only work to assuage his discomfort when someone affirms his taste in whichever commodity he has indulged.

In what follows, I first explore King's critique of brochures in the novel as a connection to tourism and as invitation to acquire Indian land. In Sonny's internalization of and responses to marketing messages promoted through tourist brochures, King reveals the ambivalent nature of tourism on local communities and complicates Sonny's character. Further, the two-dimensional nature of the tourist brochure works to erase full, lived experiences in the places marketers advertise, facilitating the notion that these places have no history and are awaiting occupation. This invitation is aided by advertisements that depict what King calls "Dead Indians" while erasing "Live Indians," adding to the empty history an unoccupied space. I then examine King's depiction of the ways public relations (PR) departments operate in the face of crisis, comparing Dorian and his PR department's responses to the responses in a lead PR scholar's textbook. These responses allow the continuation of the poisoning of communities—Indigenous communities at a higher rate than white communities—to go essentially unchecked. The next section follows King's critique of late capitalist consumer habits through Dorian as conspicuous consumer. Dorian has succumbed to marketing's messages that he can find happiness and human connection through commodities and has no regard for what his purchasing habits mean for the environment. He puts his personal health, his relational health, and the health of the planet at risk in pursuit of what advertising promises and cannot deliver. Finally, I detail King's positioning of Sonny as literary foil to Dorian in presenting two possible responses to environmental crisis and recovery: one that leads to further impending destruction and one that leads to hope and resiliency.

Through the intimately connected relationships between consumption, the advertising that promotes such consumption, and the public relations accounts which Dorian works so hard to control, King reveals the toxic entanglement of marketing narratives and the perpetuation of materially toxic disasters. In *The Back of the Turtle*, King takes his critique far beyond his usual localized settings in his other fiction, such as *Green Grass, Running Water* and *Medicine River,* and beyond Viramontes's localized settings in her fiction explored in the previous chapter, to examine the global impacts of environmental toxins and the narratives that facilitate them.

**"There's one just right for you!": Brochures as Toxic Invitations**

While Helena María Viramontes most often turns to billboards for her advertising critique—a common marketing site in the Los Angeles and Central Valley of California where her works are set—King almost single-handedly relies on the brochure for his representation of advertising messages.  Perusing through King's creative works, one would be hard pressed to find a book that does not at least mention a brochure as a means by which to advertise any number of things, most commonly, the attractions a particular place has to offer. Starting with his first novel, *Medicine River,* where Medicine River resident Harlen Bigbear hands protagonist Will Horse Capture a brochure detailing the highlights of the town, this trend continues through King's works, including *Green Grass, Running Water*, where the narrator describes brochures explaining the advantages of owning property on Parliament Lake and attractions along a sight-seeing tour. In *The Back of the Turtle*, where we see the most blatant critique of corporate toxic narratives, the use of brochures multiplies. Brochures are used to advertise everything from the token tourist attractions, to Mara's school in Paris, to Dorian's new condo, to even the multiple procedures available to Dorian to treat his ailments. It is significant that King chooses this medium for these messages over other marketing media such as television commercials,

billboards, radio ads and the like for at least two reasons. First, brochures are closely tied to tourism, which is a complex theme in King's works. The brochures' enticements of tourists to visit a particular town and see particular sites can become imbricated with material toxicity as human traffic potentially destroys habitats and turns the local people into objects to be viewed for pleasure. Additionally, brochures portray images and shorthand messages that reduce or erase the complex histories and relationships of the places they advertise, leaving these areas more prone to destruction and the taking of such areas – settling – stealing, as slick slogans can lead to their devaluation by those who internalize such messages.

*The Back of the Turtle* explores the ambiguous implications tourism can have for a community: it can both bolster their economy and exploit their culture, land, and resources. Along with his choice to use the brochure to connect tourism to the Bay, he selects Sonny as his primary character through which to explore this relationship. Sonny has many Christ-like similarities due to his relationship with Dad (read The Father; Sonny the Son). However, Sonny's character is much more complicated than simply being connected to the Bible, though nearly every chapter focalized through Sonny includes Biblical references. Each of these chapters also reveals thoughts about tourists; in fact, Sonny is the only character to directly refer to travel brochures advertising Samaritan Bay attractions. Sonny's relationship with tourists and advertising, the land and wildlife, and his community reflect important nuances which complicate his character and communicate the complex relationship between tourism and the destinations to which tourists travel.

Marketing messages put out by the creators of Samaritan Bay travel brochures to entice tourists to visit its sites are entangled with the material effects of these messages. The first mention of a brochure in *The Back of the Turtle* occurs when Sonny reflects on Beatrice Hot

Springs, one of the main attractions in the area: "Nine descending pools of varying temperatures. There's one just right for you. That's what the brochure at the motel says. There's one just right for you" (52). Sonny has internalized the marketing message from the brochure in such a way that it comes out automatically when he thinks about the hot springs; the message and the material of the springs have become inextricably intertwined. This marketing narrative appears innocent enough on the surface; however, when one fails to consider the impact of the effects of this marketing—increased foot traffic in ecologically vulnerable areas, for example—the message takes on a toxic quality.

The next scene involving brochures extends the implications of the first: not only does Sonny have the commodified narrative of the Beatrice Hot Springs running through his mind at the very thought of the springs, but he sees the loss of tourists as primarily negative. This instance is much more than a mention, in which Sonny finds himself in town looking through the window of the Samaritan Bay Tourist Information Centre, which used to be open seven days a week and is now only open on weekends. Sonny misses "the tourists who used to rent rooms at the Ocean Star Motel" (103) and feels bad for the workers inside with nothing to do:

> Inside, he can see the racks of colour brochures and the big turtle meter on the wall. Sonny feels sad for the information worker who has to stand behind the desk on Saturdays and Sundays, waiting for the Laytners of Bracebridge, the Warltiers of Penticton, and the Hodges of Toronto to come in to get their plastic bags filled with free brochures. Sonny wonders if he should go to the centre in disguise. He could pretend to be a tourist and take every brochure the information person offers. Good job, he could say in an encouraging voice. Good job. (103)

Partly due to the marketing Sonny is consistently exposed to, his focus remains on the empty tourist center. He fails to consider the impacts tourism has on the environment. Countless tourists visiting Beatrice Hot Springs both boosts the economy in Samaritan Bay and harms its natural flora and fauna, causes excessive noise, and leads to theft and vandalism on the reserve. Evidence of high foot traffic and possible damage to Beatrice Hot Springs lies in Sonny's reminiscing about the "salvage" he used to get from the tourists dropping items along the heavily wooded trail: "Other than the beach, the best place to find salvage is along the sides of this trail. The trail to the hot springs is steep and Sonny has seen people stumble and fall, and when they stumble and fall they can lose things. Wallets, cameras, towels, water bottles, cellphones. The list of things that people can lose on the trail is long and exciting" (52-3). Since this is one of the best places to gather salvage, it is likely a common event that these things are dropped, indicating the trail is highly trafficked. Though the damage itself is not illustrated in the text, with the falling bodies and items along the trail—especially those things left behind that can become litter if Sonny does not salvage them—damage to the trail is inevitable. Suffice it to say, it is no secret that high human foot traffic into river areas can have devastating effects on the surrounding environment,[15] yet Sonny, due to the repetition of marketing messages coming at him through brochures, primarily hears the message that tourists need to come and experience the spring that is "just right" for them. My point here is not to blame Sonny for his inattentiveness to ecological matters, but rather to point to the toxic power of advertising messages. Advertising, as a product of consumer capitalism, works to indoctrinate its listeners to the ways of consumerism. As King states in *The Inconvenient Indian*, "It's what advertising is about, the training of generations of

---

[15] Ralf Buckley states in "Environmental Impacts of Recreation in Parks and Reserves," published in *Perspectives in Environmental Management*, "Typical impacts [of tourism] in parks and reserves include soil erosion and compaction, damage to vegetation, disturbance to wildlife, water pollution, increased fire frequency, vandalism and noise" (243).

consumers who will remain loyal to particular products" (110). In this instance, it is not a particular product, but a particular lifestyle, one in which tourists trampling the land becomes only a positive occurrence. This association between livelihood, or even usefulness (as in the tourist centre jobs) and tourism perpetuates the abuse of the land, allowing it to continue uncritically. While it can be argued that this toxic narrative does not necessarily perpetuate material toxicity in the town, it sets up the narratives—and the social, political, and industrial conditions—that do.

Though Sonny regularly misses the destructive ecological implications of tourism, at the same time he is not simply a pawn in advertisers' schemes and victim to its toxic narratives. Sonny's bold actions reveal a resistance to the toxic effects of marketing messages he internalizes through brochures. While scholars such as Irene M. Morrison and Ana María Fraile-Marcos have proposed that Sonny's character primarily functions to reveal the Christian strand in King's intersecting origin stories through his relationship with Dad, there is more to Sonny than this. Irene M. Morrison points out that "Sonny can not only be seen as synecdoche for Christ, but also as a symbol of the recklessness of Christian attitudes about dominion over the earth" (55). It makes sense that Sonny would primarily focus on the loss of tourism in the area if Sonny represents the Christian strand in King's narrative as Christianity is intimately tied to Manifest Destiny, an ideology that stems from the belief that the Christian God destined the young United States to bring civilization and democracy to the entire North American continent. Manifest Destiny is a white supremacist ideology which justified the theft of Native land and the removal of its inhabitants.[16] With Christianity tied to Manifest Destiny, Sonny as associated with

[16] This sentence was taken from a conversation I had with Indigenous scholar Kirby Brown. Further reading on this includes Maria-Letizia Freiin von Bibra's "Manifest Mythmaking: The Role of US 'Manifest Destiny' in Nineteenth and Twenty-First Century Indigenous Dispossession." *Webster Review of International History,* vol. 2, no. 2, 2022, pp. 15-31.

these ideals would not consider what kind of impact an influx of tourists—or newcomers—would have on the land, an attitude which is abetted by toxic advertising messages. However, I propose that Sonny is not so simply a symbol of reckless Christian attitudes as Morrison suggests. Late in the novel, Sonny remembers that he needed to tell "tourists to leave the turtles alone. Don't touch, he used to tell the tourists who came to the beach to watch the turtles. Don't touch" (430), clearly pointing to a disturbance of wildlife. Sonny's warning reveals that his concern for the turtles' wellbeing supersedes his concern for enjoyable tourist experiences. Further, as he contemplates the return of tourists as signs of the healing of the land begin to show, he thinks to himself that he will not take them to the hot springs, coming to this conclusion after having witnessed the kind of community-building that takes place there. Perhaps most notably, Sonny builds a tower using bits of consumer waste, shells, bones, copper wire from the reserve, rocks, and other organic and inorganic materials and lights a flame atop it which summons the remaining and new-coming people in the area to come together. He does this after witnessing the return of the first turtle after The Ruin (or as he calls it "That One Bad Day"), the same turtle whom he helps protect as she makes her way back to the ocean. Thus, though Sonny has been internalizing toxic advertising messages put out by a myriad of brochures as he runs them over in his mind, leading him to primarily see the loss of tourism as a terrible occurrence, this does not necessarily lead to him abetting tourists in their careless and destructive habits. He protects the wildlife, purposes to protect the sacred places, and uses what tourists leave behind to bring the community together. Sonny's relationship with travel brochures and his love of tourist

excitement is tempered by some of the realities of what comes with tourism; in this, his character reveals the ambivalent nature of tourism for communities.[17]

Sonny is not the only character who misses seeing people coming in and out of the area; Nicholas Crisp laments their absence as well, which underlines the life-giving aspect of tourism. Further, it is the prospect of the return of tourism at the end of the novel that provides hope to both non-Native and Native inhabitants in Samaritan Bay. The narrator relates Crisps' state of mind as he ventures through town: "As Crisp walked the streets, he was saddened by the empty storefronts" (158)—a condition caused by the lack of tourism after The Ruin. On the other side of this ambivalence about tourism then, there is a real sense in which the influx of visitors can keep a town alive. Both the empty storefronts which "sadden" Crisp and the empty tourist centre that makes Sonny "feel sad" point to the loss of income, excitement, and the opportunity to interact with those outside of the community that tourism can bring. At the novel's conclusion, the prospect that the tourist industry can be revived in Samaritan Bay leaves the entire community full of hope. When Mara inquires about the state of the hotel, Crisp replies, "The Chins [the crew that wrecked with the *Anguis*] have experience on cruise ships, as it turns out, and you knows that Jun-jie can cook. They're going to help the lad with the motel, and it's expected that business will support the lot…As well, two of the cousins are mechanics and have plans to fix the old bus and offer tours of the environs" (495). In response to this news, Mara breaks down in tears: "It had been unexpected. The tears. Mara tried to fight them back, but without success, and her shoulders began to shake" (495). Along with being a sign of relief, this response, as she explains when Gabriel and Crisp express their concern, is tied to her concern for

[17] Though Sonny exhibits growth in recognizing the negative impacts of tourism when he thinks he will not bring tourists to the hot springs after experiencing connections there, that he was protecting the wildlife and complaining about noise before the novel's time begins points to his ongoing ambivalence toward tourism: he both welcomes it and sees harm in it.

the reserve where her family home is located and seems to indicate that she has hope it might be revived as well. There are, then, two sides of this tourist industry: life and death.

Despite her great relief at the end of the novel that tourism will return to the Bay, Mara reveals the dark side of tourism and how it can be used to further denigrate Indigenous people and land. In Shoshannah Ganz's compelling article connecting the mercury poisoning in Minamata, Japan with King's representation of the poisoning in Samaritan Bay, she points out that Mara's speech at the reserve evokes the concept of "dark tourism," or "the tourist and related industry that are devoted to the seeking out, commodification and consumption of 'death, disaster and atrocity" (5). When Mara takes Gabriel out to the reserve so they can hang the portraits she has painted of the lost inhabitants, she tells him of the looting that took place after the people died or fled the reserve: "Mara could feel the anger creep in at the corners. 'Genuine Aboriginal ghost-town souvenirs. Own a piece of creepy misfortune. Hear the cries of the dying in every teacup. Feel the cold hand of death on every place setting…An eBay special. Bid early, bid often. Use the security of PayPal'" (280). Mara speaks to perhaps the darkest side of tourism, one that relishes the artifacts of the dying by variously celebrating or lamenting Indigenous death. The fact that the residents have left their belongings which then become available to tourists as "Aboriginal ghost-town souvenirs"—expressed by Mara by way of mock advertisements—due to the poisoning of their water and land brings to the fore the toxic entanglement of advertising and material toxicity. Brochures obtained by tourists locally, by way of the Tourist Centre and beyond, as indicated by the "the Laytners of Bracebridge, the Warltiers of Penticton, and the Hodges of Toronto" coming to "get their plastic bags filled with free brochures" (103), entice visitors to view the area. This also indicates an invitation in the sense of marketers inviting settler incursions into Indigenous lives and lands, not only to "view" these

spaces but also to “occupy” and, in some cases, own them. These are the very intentions of Manifest Destiny and ongoing settler colonial projects, the logics of which insists settler removal of Indigenous people and the appropriation and exploitation of their land and resources.

This invitation put out by marketer’s brochures also has the effect of causing damage to the Native community’s homes as well as the land. Upon her and Gabriel’s first visit to the reserve, Mara thinks to herself: “He hadn’t even crossed the barrier. Not like the tourists and transients who had tramped through the reserve, invaded homes, scavenged for souvenirs, and marked the buildings” (105). In this particular case, then, marketing’s invitation leads to these tourists vandalizing residences and stealing from the dead, the dead who are so due to the careless greed of the agribusiness that unleashed poison on the land. This egregious act of theft then becomes part of Mara’s mock marketing message detailed above as she relates the role of the commodification of death and disaster, the commodification of *everything* being a characteristic of late capitalism. Thus, the toxic message of capitalism is deeply enmeshed with the material toxicity it unleashes and the effects of this toxicity. We see this commodification of everything play out as the use of brochures multiplies in the narrative; in addition to selling the sites, they sell education, housing, and health care as well, all of which are also wrapped up in the dynamics of intrusion, occupation, ownership, and appropriation.

King’s use of brochures as the primary advertising medium also reveals the brochures’ slick sloganeering and 2D photographs to be poor substitutes for the substantive relationships places such as Beatrice Hot Springs can facilitate. While the text on the brochures Sonny reads exclaims, “There’s one just right for you!” (52) implying that you can come and experience just the right temperature for your liking, King discloses that there is much more going on here than simply a soak. It is at Crisp’s annual birthday celebration held at the hot springs—his home—

where Crisp dramatically relates the story of The Woman Who Fell from the Sky—from which the title of the book is derived as this woman rides on the back of a turtle—while Mara and Gabriel remember their own versions of the story in this collective storytelling tradition. It is here where Crisp's story is revealed—how he got to Samaritan Bay, how he and Sonny are nephew and uncle and Dad is/was his brother, how Dad and he had a falling out and how Dad passed away (though we don't know how). And here there is the feeding of the refugees, or survivors from the *Anguis* (though the reader does not know yet who they are) as they sneak food in the shadows along with Sonny who also gathers his food undetected. Relationships are building at the hot springs even in the darkness of the woods, behind the scenes—relationships that will be key for the regeneration and survival of the town. It is likely Sonny's witnessing of this relationship building here that leads him to conclude, as stated earlier, that when the tourists return, he will not take them here. These life-giving stories and relationships are flattened or erased entirely by the flattened nature of the brochure, both in image and in text. The brochure is a one-dimensional composite of what one wants to see of a town or attraction that erases the real, lived experiences in that town or about that attraction. This erasure makes it easier for newcomers and corporations to occupy, appropriate, and misuse land, a land that has no substance anyway according to these representations.

Similar to the way slick brochures erase lived experience in the places they advertise, brochures and other advertisements also erase the people who are living these experiences. They do this through the veneration of what King calls the "Dead Indian" while effectively erasing the "Live Indian." This erasure of real, live Indians works in conjunction with the flattening of experiences to disseminate the toxic message that these places with no history also have no population and are thus prime real estate for settlers' enjoyment. All of King's works at least

allude to, if not explicitly and repeatedly address, the idea of the "Vanishing Indian" or the "Dead Indian," as he calls it in *The Inconvenient Indian*.[18] He explains: "Indians come in all sorts of social and historical configurations. North American popular culture is littered with savage, noble, and dying Indians, while in real life we have Dead Indians, Live Indians, and Legal Indians" (53).[19] He further explains that Dead Indians "are the stereotypes and clichés that North America has conjured up out of experience and out of its collective imaginings and fears" (53). Live Indians are the actual Indians who no one truly sees because they are content with their images of Dead Indians, and worse, "North America has decided that Live Indians living today cannot be genuine Indians" (64). Pertinent to my discussion is that King uses advertising and branding to illustrate North America's fascination with the Dead Indian and the subsequent invisibility of the Live Indian; this invisibility can dangerously lead to expendability and is perpetuated through marketing messages. His lists include the Jeep Cherokee, Land O' Lakes butter, American Spirit cigarettes, Crazy Horse Malt Liquor, Winnebago motor homes, Red Man Tobacco and much, much more. Though King exhaustively lists these brands and products—technologically simple and complex—he consistently returns to the simple brochure as a means by which to represent advertising in his creative fiction. Certainly, there are more ways to advertise such products than just a brochure; however, the brochure holds a unique symbolic value in both its ability to flatten lives and experiences and in its connection to tourism.

[18] I use the term "Indian" here and throughout my analysis because it is the term King chooses to use throughout his works. He explains why he uses this term in *The Inconvenient Indian*: "Lately, Indians have become First Nations in Canada and Native Americans in the United States, but the fact of the matter is that there has never been a good collective noun because there never was a collective to begin with…I am fond of both of these terms, but for all its faults and problems—especially in Canada—'Indian,' as a general designation, remains for me, at least, the North American default" (xiii).

[19] Legal Indians, which are less relevant to this particular discussion, are those "who are recognized as being Indians by the Canadian and U.S. government…while North America loves the Dead Indian and ignores the Live Indian, North America *hates* the Legal Indian" (*The Inconvenient Indian* 69).

Advertising messages turn increasingly toxic as they metaphorically work to kill Live Indians to save the Dead ones, and thereby facilitate the flow of material toxins more readily into Native communities. Branding and advertising images erase the Live Indian to depict the Dead Indian, justifying the viewer/occupier's experience on the basis that there are no Live Indians anymore. This attitude and its consequences are made apparent in *The Back of the Turtle* via the looting of the Smoke River reserve; whether or not those invited to the area by the brochures went with the intention to vandalize or steal property, the realization when they arrived that they were dealing with dead Indians justified their actions as they took what they felt belonged to no live person anyway. Thus, the toxic message related through advertising that there are no Live Indians bears devastating material consequences for the people and the land. The mentality advertising creates—that Dead Indians pictured in advertisements are authentic Indians while Live Indians do not really exist—paves the way for the poisoning of Live Indian communities at a much higher rate than white communities.

**"Still, it was a good show": Public Relations and Toxicity**

Paid advertisements such as those depicting images of Dead Indians are not the only branch of marketing that facilitates the poisoning of Live Indian communities: public relations departments perpetuate this as well. The public relations department, present in any major company, differs in important ways from the advertising arm. With advertising, since the company pays for advertisements, marketers control when and where the advertisements will be disseminated along with controlling the content of the ads. With public relations, the company still controls the content of the message, but is not necessarily in control of when or where this message is distributed; while the company controls the content, the media controls when, where, and for how long the message will be available. In the traditional sense, public relations is

responsible for bringing positive attention to the company via press releases and gaining the attention of the media. However, in recent times, it has been necessary for public relations to engage in crisis management: responding to either the rumor of crises or actual crises caused by or within the company.

Crisis managers work to mitigate what German sociologist Ulrich Beck theorizes as risk culture. Beck posits that we have transitioned from a society that is scrambling to produce enough resources (modern industrial society) to a society that now needs to manage the risks inherent in the production of goods and food (what he terms "reflexive modernity"). These risks include "irreversible threats to the life of plants, animals, and human beings" and are no longer localized: one company's toxic production consequences in one location can, and often does, affect communities across borders and even oceans (13). As companies work to manage these real and perceived risks Beck details from their production processes, it becomes necessary for them to employ specialized personnel to handle the public's understandably highly emotional responses to these risks. Crisis managers work hard to ideally prevent any risk from becoming a crisis, and in the case it does become a crisis, to "clean up the mess" so to speak, both literally by deploying cleanup crews for issues such as toxic spills, and discursively as they work to repair the company's image and restore stakeholders' trust in the company.

*The Back of the Turtle* illustrates the consequences of the risks Beck lays out and the narratives companies use in an to attempt to occlude them. King's fictitious representation of Dorian (Domidion's CEO) and Domidion's public relations (PR) department call attention to the real-life textbook responses to crises by PR departments at large. These textbook responses work to allow the poisoning of land, water, the more-than-human world, and people (and Indigenous people especially) due to corporate negligence to continue essentially unchecked.

Although Dorian and Domidion are fictitious, King draws on disturbing real-life strategies used by practicing crisis managers in handling the spills at the Athabasca River and Kali Creek (The Ruin). In the novel, Dorian as CEO acts as the crisis manager rather than a member of the PR team, though he works closely with the head of PR in planning his responses. Timothy W. Coombs, highly regarded in the field of public relations as an expert and teacher of crisis management theory and practice, in his textbook *Applied Crisis Communication and Crisis Management: Cases and Exercises,* outlines the various theories and approaches to crisis management.[20] Among the theories Coombs outlines, there are two that stand out as being most aligned with what Dorian and thus Domidion implement: those of Image Repair Theory (IRT) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Both theories focus on repairing the reputation of the company through various dissociation tactics: tactics in which the company distances itself from the crisis in one way or another. The crisis response strategies in IRT fall into five categories: Denial, Evading Responsibility, Reduce Offensiveness (make the crisis look better to stakeholders), Corrective Action, and Mortification. Dorian and the team engage in each of these phases, with the exception of Mortification, in which the company admits guilt, expresses concern, and asks for forgiveness (though Coombs instructs companies to try to shift blame and report corrective action, which Domidion does).

Both Denial and Evading Responsibility—called “Scapegoating” in Situational Crisis Communication Theory—are key strategies in IRT and SCCT that Domidion engages. When Dorian learns of a massive fish kill in the Athabasca River before the holding ponds’ dams actually break, Dorian urges the company to deny the leakage is from their ponds, what IRT calls

[20] It’s interesting to note that the top textbook in the UK for dealing with these issues is called *Risk Issues and Crisis Management: A Casebook of Best Practice*, directly using “risk” in the title. The textbook refers to “risk issues” frequently throughout and offers similar guidelines for dealing with them. It also defines our society as a risk society, though they do not refer to Beck when doing so.

“simple denial.” He says if no other company is making a comment, they shouldn’t either, as that would be an admission of guilt:

“But none of our dams have failed?”

“No,” said Winter. “The dams are holding.”

“Then this might not be our problem.”

“The level in one of our holding ponds has been dropping rapidly for the past two weeks.”

“Don’t we have emergency protocols in place to handle situations such as this?”

“We do,” said Winter. “We’re pumping fresh water into the pond to keep the level where it’s supposed to be.”

“Our exposure?”

“Syncrude, Imperial, Royal Dutch Shell, Suncor all have holding ponds along the river,” said Winter. “There are over sixty companies in the immediate area.”

“So it will be difficult to determine where the problem originated…Do we have a Rapid Response Team on site?”

“We do,” said Winter. “They’re keeping the media away.”

“Who’s taking point?”

“Public Relations. They’re considering a press release.”

…

“Are any of the other companies issuing press releases?”

“No.”

“Then neither should we” (114).

In this exchange, though Winter makes it clear that it is their pond that is rapidly losing its contents, Dorian chooses to engage Denial as well as Evading Responsibility, an easy shift in light of the myriad of companies along the river. This tactic at best is understandable in that there is not yet concrete evidence that their ponds are in fact responsible and may be seen as only mildly unethical at this point. However, Dorian's textbook responses become increasingly more unethical when the company's culpability is confirmed. As the truth surfaces that it is in fact Domidion's holding ponds that have collapsed (they go from simply leaking to completely collapsing), and after the media discovers The Ruin, Dorian asks Winter, '"Who was responsible for spraying GreenSweep at Kali Creek?"' Winter replies, '"Independent contractor out of Prince George."' Dorian asks, '"What about the company responsible for the construction of the holding ponds at our tar-sands facility?"' After finding out it is one of their subsidiaries, he turns to PR point person Victoria Lustig and instructs: '"Us PR's usual sources to leak Domidion's intention to sue the former for negligence and the latter for breach of contract, and I want you to start a serious conversation on the possibility of sabotage"' (439). This exchange not only reveals Dorian's desire to evade responsibility at any cost, it also points to the company's history of making this a habit, as indicated by "PR's usual sources." This behavior depicted in a fictional novel appears too egregious for reality; however, we see in Coombs's work that this is a textbook response to crisis. Dorian's inability to take responsibility for the crises Domidion has caused and the toxic narratives he insists on disseminating allow for the company to continue its poisonous industrial habits essentially unchecked.

In Dorian's outburst of a response to the offenses charged against Domidion piling up, he remains on the path of IRT and SCCT's suggested crisis response. Dorian continues to evade responsibility by taking the "Accidental" approach: "things just happen sometimes" (Coombs

10) and combines this with Reducing Offensiveness by "Bolstering: remind[ing] stakeholders of past good work by the organization and/or prais[ing] those who are helping with the crisis" (Coombs 10). On their own, these tactics appear reasonable, but when depicted in practice, they can become quite insidious, as King illustrates for readers. Dorian decides he will take the offensive as CEO rather than being apologetic or contrite. Dorian tells Winter, '"I don't want us looking guilty, because we're not."' '"It is our facility,"' Winter reminds him, to which he replies, '"Yes…of course it is. But the occasional spill is the price we pay for cheap energy, and I think we should say this"' (305). And say this he does on Manisha Khan's television show *En Garde*: '"The modern world runs on energy, Manisha. Domidion can't change that. The spills are unfortunate, but our first priority has to be the security of the nation and the protection of our children's futures"' (425). Dorian identifies with his audience here by using children, appealing to pathos by invoking fear that if the company were to shut down in any way, "our" nation would not be secure and "our" children's futures would be in jeopardy. He uses the word "our" more than once to make it appear that the corporation's priorities match that of the general population's when that could not be further from the truth. The use of children in his rhetoric, especially given he has none of his own, evokes mainstream environmentalism's focus on the child in its fight for environmental justice at the expense of occluding other lethal outcomes of toxic poisoning.[21] Dorian's argument here ironically works similarly in focusing attention on the importance of reproductive futurity, eliding issues of other possible tragic outcomes from the company's supposed mission to feed the world. At the same time, Dorian commits a logical fallacy in presenting a false dichotomy, or false dilemma: either "we" deal with occasional spills

[21] See, for example, Giovanna Di Chiro's "Polluted Politics? Confronting Toxic Discourse, Sex Panic, and Eco-Normativity," where she argues that the over-emphasis on reproductive futurity obscures equally damaging consequences of poisoning.

and feed the world or “we” don’t feed the world and people starve. The first falsity here is that the “we” dealing with the spills are almost never the “we” who are ostensibly trying to feed the world: these spills have far greater consequences for vulnerable populations than for those at the top of the corporate ladder, as King illustrates in his story. Further, he leaves no room for another solution in which his company ceases its harmful activities by finding a better way to feed the world. This fallacy is essentially encouraged by IRT as practitioners are told that bolstering and minimizing the damage done are fair and effective crisis management solutions. Earlier in the novel, Dorian explains in response to environmentalists coming against the company, “Like it or not, without the initiative and vision of companies like Domidion, the world would starve” (43). Dorian controls the PR narrative by pointing to the spills as accidents; the price North America pays for cheap energy and to “feed the world”—which is not happening as hordes of people around the world are starving, including in North America—and to protect “our children’s futures.” “Things just happen sometimes,” as Coombs puts it in his explanation of this crisis management tactic.

While “praising those who are helping with the crisis” may seem magnanimous, King once again reveals how this tactic can be used to unethically deflect responsibility. In perhaps one of the most disturbing exchanges between Dorian and the PR department (another disturbing exchange to follow), Dorian admits that the cleanup crew is there for nothing more than show behind the scenes while telling the public via *En Garde* that the crew is doing an excellent job. The narrator relates, “Dorian knew that the equipment and the trucks were mostly for show, knew that the dioxins and the heavy metals were already on the bottom of the river, where neither the booms nor the vacuums could reach them. Still, it was a good show…” (410). On Manisha’s show, Dorian insists the opposite is true: ‘“We have crews on the river right now. We

expect that it will take several weeks to clean up the discharge. And we will be there until the cleanup is complete"' (424). Manisha replies, '"We've talked to experts in the field who say that the damage is already done, that the cleanup is simply for show,"' to which Dorian responds, '"Let me assure you that Domidion doesn't spend millions of dollars simply for show"' (424). Indeed, that is exactly what Domidion is doing. In spending millions of dollars for this "show," they are saving millions more in investors' dollars, not to mention repairing the corporation's reputation so future investments will remain secure. The narrator relates, "[Dorian] had spent much of the day fielding questions from managers of large pension funds who were heavily invested in the corporation…No, he insisted, now was not the time to sell" (304). Dorian, acting as his own head of the PR crisis management team and using well-tried crisis management solutions, unflinchingly lies to the Manisha and the public, simultaneously saving his investments and allowing toxic runoff to saturate the rivers and surrounding areas without regret.

Dorian not only uses crisis management solutions to protect his investments, he also is prepared to use them to hide the truth that The Ruin, along with most of Domidion's other travesties, disproportionately affects Native communities. This is skewed through public relations narratives sanctioned by Dorian, which can be most closely associated with the crisis management tactic SCCT calls "Justification." The textbook states, "The crisis manager tries to minimize the perceived damage associated with the crisis. The response can include stating that there were no serious damages or injuries or claiming that the victims deserved what they received" (Coombs 16). Yes, this is actually what Coombs writes: "claiming that the victims deserved what they received." Though we do not see this outright in the media outlets such as *En Garde,* we see the truth of this in an exchange between Dorian and his PR representative, Lustig:

"There have been several communities along the Athabasca adversely affected by the spill."

"And by 'adversely affected, you mean…"

"A higher than expected mortality rate."

"People are dying."

"Fortunately," said Lustig, "most of these are Native communities where the mortality rate is already higher than the norm."

"Higher than the mortality rate in…white communities."

"Making it difficult to determine whether the additional deaths are the result of the spill or lifestyle."

"We're talking about poverty."

"Along with alcoholism, drug use, and irresponsible behavior." (437-8)

In this appalling exchange between Lustig and Dorian, Lustig minimizes the perceived damage by pointing to the ways Native people are already more likely to die prematurely.[22] The sentiment behind Lustig and Dorian's logic in listing the reasons for this mortality rate hints that Native communities may have gotten what they deserved, since they engage in "irresponsible behavior." The combination of the real mortality rates and the discursively perpetuated stereotypes surrounding Native communities paves the way for toxic capitalist agendas to materialize.

[22] The conversation between Dorian and Lustig also reveals a number of truths, even if by literary representation, of the current state of many Native communities. Speaking to the current state of Canadian First Nations people, a recent study found that "on reserve mortality rates are…striking: Status First Nations girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are five times more likely to die than girls of this age in the general Canadian population. Status boys of the same age on reserve were four times more likely to die than boys in the general population" (Friesen). Those off reservation did not fare much better with mortality rates for both boys and girls around four times higher than the general population.

Lustig and Dorian subscribe to a neoliberal logic that individualizes health and wellbeing and ignores the structural factors that contribute to uneven death rates. A significant structural factor in this regard is that of settler colonialism. Environmental scholar J.M. Bacon describes settler colonialism and its consequences in what they term "colonial ecological violence": "settler colonialism is an eco-social structure which produces/maintains drastic and enduring inequalities between settlers and Native peoples. This structure disrupts Indigenous eco-social relations [the relationship between a society and the biotic world that society relies upon], and in so doing produces what I call colonial ecological violence, which results in particular risks and harms experienced by Native peoples and communities" (1). Bacon lists the ways colonial ecological violence is perpetuated through ongoing projects of settler-colonial and eco-social elimination, including forced removal, genocide, ending political status, forced assimilation through boarding schools, loss of tribal land holdings, renaming culturally significant places and more. Among these projects which have led to Native peoples' "higher than expected mortality rate" are underrepresentation and misrepresentation and the poisoning of food and water, all of which Domidion itself is guilty of enacting, contributing further to this violence. Instead of admitting this however, the conversation between Dorian and Lustig primes them for any interaction they may need to have with the media on this subject as they scheme about how to deflect the blame away from Domidion. They do this by employing toxic crisis management narratives that perpetuate harmful stereotypes, ignore structural factors, and thus facilitate the continuation of noxious substances flowing into these communities. Further, the living conditions already faced by these Native communities created through ecological colonial violence allows for conversations like this to manifest in the first place, exposing at a greater depth the entangled nature of discursive and material toxicity.

Lustig's insidious suggestion that the PR team should take advantage of the higher-than-white-populations mortality rate among Native communities to cover up the real devastation wrought by their massive corporation reveals these populations as expendable—collateral damage to the "necessity" of big business, or the price society must pay for the services Domidion provides in "feeding the world." Dorian and Domidion are literary representations of actual scenarios Coombs's case book covers which reveals the tactics Coombs promotes are meant solely to protect companies without any thought toward healing or restoration for those harmed. King uses this representation to examine the power of PR narratives to control public perception and allow the continued poisoning of Indigenous communities at a higher rate than white communities through irresponsible corporate action and greed.

**"A very fine watch": Advertising, Consumer Culture, and Environmental Catastrophe**

In another illumination of toxic entanglements, King represents Dorian as the quintessential conspicuous consumer. Dorian uncritically makes ostentatious purchases of items he does not need to ensure his status in society, feel better about himself, and attempt to fill the hole that a loss of human connection has left. While Domidion represents all that is wrong with capitalism at a corporate level, especially in agribusiness—its poisoning of the planet while claiming to feed it, its primary concern for lining investors pockets over safety and more—Dorian epitomizes all that is wrong with individual spending habits in consumer culture. Each time Dorian feels down, he finds himself in a high-end shop being conscientiously attended to by the sales staff, purchasing goods such as ties, cologne, and expensive watches. He is advertising's perfect audience, wholeheartedly believing in the magic system, as Raymond Williams calls it (335), in which tangible objects are connected to human desires and marketed to the public as being able to fulfill these desires when in fact, they cannot. What may not be as

obvious is the connection between Dorian's extravagant spending habits and the environmental destruction they engender. Dorian stands in for all who buy things they (we) do not need and throw perfectly good items in the garbage. The amount of energy it takes to produce these goods and the afterlife they have rotting (or never rotting) in garbage dumps is destroying the planet. It is toxic marketing messages to which Dorian succumbs, consciously or otherwise, that perpetuates these materially toxic practices, revealing this as another toxic entanglement in need of disruption.

The current extraction and production processes needed to supply the demand of twenty-first century North American consumer culture is unsustainable. With the current processes of production, there has long been no shortage of goods. The problem lies in creating a desire for the goods produced so that capitalism can continue; it requires constant economic growth. This is where advertising comes in. Without advertising creating the desire for products, the "modern factory" would "suffocate under its own product" (Williams 335). In fact, Williams asserts that capitalism could not function without advertising. The problem with this economic growth promoted by advertising, of course, is the cost of industrial production which requires massive amounts of resources, raw materials, and energy. As environmental sociologists John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York point out, "The notion that economic production in general under the present system can continually expand without ecological waste and degradation…goes against the basic laws of physics" (43). The plundering of the Earth is intimately tied to, if not directly a consequence of the culture that advertising has created—to Dorian and all who have succumbed to its messages that things will make people happy. Foster, Clark, and York continue, "The essential problem is the unavoidable fact that an expanding economic system is placing additional burdens on a fixed earth system to the point of planetary

overload" (17). The current level of consumption, promoted and perpetuated by advertising messages, is leading to irreversible destruction of the planet.

It is not solely the extraction and production process that becomes an environmental concern, however; it is also what these products emit—such as exhaust from cars—and finally what happens to them when they are discarded, with plastic bottles, for example, taking at least 450 years to decompose. In historian Susan Strasser's *Waste and Want*, she explores how U.S. society transformed from reusing "trash" as building blocks for new materials to extracting, producing, distributing, and throwing away with no reuse in sight. She explains how the poor, and especially poor children, scavenged for scraps that could be used or sold to merchants. Most people, even middle classes, did not have the resources to simply throw clothing out—they used it until it was threadbare and then used what was left for cleaning rags, rugs, or patches for other clothing. As industrialization took root and U.S. society transitioned to a consumer society, people began discarding an immense number of things, from packaging to broken items, to things that were perfectly good that they just did not want anymore. She explains, "Many of these things are designed to be used briefly and then discarded; many are made of plastics and other materials not easily reused, repaired, or returned to nature" (16). This, she points out, has a devastating effect on the environment: "Economic development has created persistent assaults on the global ecosystem from air and water pollution and global warming, as well as from solid waste. These problems are urgent…" (16). Thus, it is not just the purchasing of things that brings the planet to this critical state, but the use and discarding of these things as well: from extraction to production to use and finally to disposal, the consumer culture promoted through toxic advertising messages is entangled with toxic material consequences of pollution and degradation.

Advertising plays an essential role in this process by creating desire for things one does not need in order to line the pockets of those at the top. Its job is to create new desires so the money keeps flowing, with no regard for the destructive outcomes. As communications and media scholar Sut Jhally explains, advertising cannot see the future and cannot see collectively: its job is to create a personal desire for the here and now. He states, "To the extent that [advertising] talks about our individual and private needs it pushes discussion of our collective issues to the margins. To the extent that it talks about the present only, it makes thinking about the future difficult."[23] Current and impending environmental catastrophe is a pressing future-focused conversation advertising both detracts from and perpetuates through creating desire for things one does not need. In terms of advertising's effect on personal relationships, Jhally explains, "The great irony is that…[consumption] draws us further away from what really satisfies us—meaningful human contact and relationships—to what doesn't: things." He further elaborates: "The market appeals to the worst in us—greed, selfishness—and discourages what is the best about us, things like compassion, caring, and generosity." Advertising pushes its audience to think only about the here and now, lures people toward things for satisfaction rather than meaningful relationships, and tends to appeal to selfish desires rather than those marked by kindness.

King paints Dorian as the model consumer in these respects. His life is already full of material things that are unfulfilling, yet he continually buys more in the hopes that will change. When Dorian enters his favorite shop, he immediately admits, "I don't need anything," to which the salesperson replies, "If need was all I sold…I'd be out of a job" (177). This exchange reveals the way capitalism operates and prompts readers to stop and really contemplate that fact: if

[23] Jhally, Sut, director. *Advertising and the End of the World.* Media Education Foundation, 1997.

consuming was solely based on need, the system would crumble. As Dorian is connected to Domidion, which is so unashamedly committing environmental atrocities, the reader is primed for further ills committed by Dorian. Intertwining the corporate actions with Dorian's brings to the fore the destructive habits of both corporation and individual in this system that advertising perpetuates for capitalist gain. Dorian cannot see the future further out than the next news reel that will draw attention away from the disasters his company has caused. He has no children for whom he needs to ensure the planet is livable. His decisions are based on what will make him feel better right now and who will see these purchases so he can maintain his high social standing. As Foster, Clark, and York relate, "Capitalists pursue their own interests to maximize profit, above and beyond any other interests, subsuming all natural and social relationships to the drive to accumulate capital" (75). While Domidion ships the highly toxic GreenSweep out to sea with no regard for what will happen to it in the future, Dorian buys one more extravagant and unnecessary watch with no regard for where this watch will end up when he decides he needs the newer, more expensive model.

Dorian's consumer habits not only show no regard for the future, but they have also had a devastating effect on his health. Dorian suffers from a mysterious illness that he believes results from toxicity in his recently purchased "high quality" bed. Dorian and his now estranged wife Olivia put up with a "violent odour [from the mattress] that irritated their eyes and set the both of them to coughing" for much longer than was healthy (39), especially since "the guarantee only covered manufacturer's defects" (40). Months later when the couple return to the store with their continued concern, the store manager—apparently, they have asked to speak to someone above the associate's head—asks, "Aside from [the sore throats], how does the bed feel?" When Dorian says it is comfortable, the manager replies, "And that's the most important thing, isn't it?" (40).

In the end, he gives the couple a discount on a top-of-the-line mattress cover for "people with heightened sensitivities" (40). This experience with the mattress store staff perfectly represents the capitalist's drive for profit at the expense of all else, in this case, human health. The manager's response to Dorian and Olivia's concerns refuses to put any responsibility on the product or manufacturer, effectively blaming Dorian and Olivia for being too sensitive. His selling the couple a cover for people with heightened sensitivities alludes to a suspicion that the couple may have an increasingly more common condition, Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS). This would be convenient for the store since, as environmental scholar Stacy Alaimo points out, "There is no standard medical test for MCS…nor even a standard definition" and some believe it is solely "a psychosomatic, hysterical condition" (114). This removes all culpability from the capitalist enterprise. Here, Dorian is given the same dismissive treatment in response to toxic exposure he gives so many others as CEO of Domidion: deflect blame from the corporation and place it on those affected. However, Dorian seemingly has a choice to become less affected by this toxicity whereas those his company harms do not. Unfortunately for him, he does not choose to give up this precious commodity as he is entangled in the marketing messages that keep him and his wife captive: all that really matters is that he has the best mattress from a high-end store that makes him comfortable here and now, relieving all his current pressures, even if it kills him in the end.

Dorian further buys into one of the most effective strategies in the advertising industry: to make consumers believe products can fulfill their human desire for family life, romance and love, sexuality and pleasure, friendship and sociability, leisure and relaxation, independence and control of life—the top things for which Americans surveyed over the years have expressed a

longing.[24] King exposes the lie that the acquisition of commodities can fulfill or facilitate these needs through the journey he takes readers on through the upscale Bloor Street shops with Dorian. On the way back from his visit to the doctor which left him convinced he is dying and the doctor is not telling him, Dorian instructs his driver to take him to Rosen's, a high-end menswear store. After being greeted by the salesperson, Robert, who clearly knows him ("How have you been?" "Fine" "And Mrs. Asher?"), Dorian finds himself cursing out loud while waiting for Robert to return with a selection of ties. Robert excuses Dorian's behavior: "We have pressures. That's why we shop" (179). This prompts Dorian to immediately choose the gold Brioni tie, a recognizably expensive choice.[25] Following Robert's logic, and the reason we see Dorian in the store in the first place, this should relieve his pressures; however, this still does not calm Dorian. He tells Robert that he has a friend who is dying—referring to himself but not wanting to admit it—and asks him, "what would you suggest I might buy for him to raise his spirits?" (179). It seems the gold tie is not enough to "raise his spirits." As he reflects on this moment, he outright admits to himself that his purchases had not assuaged his discomfort: "Rosen's hadn't been enough…He had taken his time with each purchase, allowing the salespeople to confirm the value of quality and the pleasures of status. But none of it had cheered him. Twelve thousand dollars and he was still depressed" (191-2). Note here how Dorian needs the quality of his purchases acknowledged for them to mean something; if no one recognizes the status of his purchases, these purchases have failed him; hence, his inability to understand why they did not work to cheer him. He doesn't give up hope, however. He immediately reasons, "Maybe he hadn't spent enough" (192). Dorian has been so conditioned by consumer culture,

---

[24] Jhally, Sut. *Advertising and the End of the World.*

[25] According to Brioni's website, this tie would cost anywhere between $270 and $400.

driven by marketing, that he refuses to believe he cannot buy his way into happiness. Dorian, swimming in material abundance as a "benefit" of the unethical company he heads, is drowning emotionally and psychologically. The market cannot save him.

Further, Dorian looks to the world of commodities to fulfill his desire for companionship; these false connections allow Dorian to continue to focus on the present and himself, ignoring any material consequences of his toxic purchasing habits. As Dorian's wife becomes increasingly elusive, extending her stay in Orlando long beyond what she claimed—soon after informing him of her intent for divorce—Dorian finds superficial connection in the marketplace: "Meeting Arlene at Royal de Versailles for the first time and chatting with Geoffrey in the cologne department of Holt Renfrew had delighted him more than he would have expected…He had been comfortable inside the stores, behind the glass, surrounded by the merchandise, pampered by the sales staff" (349-50). Dorian finds himself more comfortable in these shops than he is in his own home. He feels protected and taken care of. He uses these economic connections as a stand-in for real human connection. It is not just the merchandise that he looks to in order to provide fulfillment, it is the entire experience of acquiring the goods that gives him temporary, superficial fulfillment as well. While Dorian's marriage is falling apart, he finds comfort in the cornucopia of consumer goods. When he should be attending to his wife's concerns and needs, he is instead wondering what he can buy to assuage his loneliness, making superficial connections with salesclerks which will ultimately last longer than his marriage. In this way, the market has completely captivated Dorian, turning his gaze inward and completely off what should be his most meaningful relationship, his health, and the devastation his company is causing. He is certainly not concerned with the impact his purchases make on the environment. The toxic messages saturating North American culture promoted through capitalism's voice—

advertising—effectively occludes the real, toxic consequences of unbridled consumerism: waste, pollution, and overall decimation of the land.

The circumstances surrounding Dorian's largest purchase, coming late in the novel—a 6.8-million-dollar condo in the upscale Hermes building—highlights once again the way he attempts to fulfill his needs through consumption and hearkens back to the way brochures operate in the novel. Dorian decides he will buy this condo shortly after receiving the news that his wife is leaving him. He wants to return to the Hermes, "where the hotel staff knew who he was and were waiting to welcome him home" (471). At this point, the hotel staff are completely unaware of Dorian's plans to acquire the condo in the building; he is creating a fantasy of a homelife based on his ability to purchase it. He does not need a deeply committed relationship to make a home, he has the illustrious Hermes for that. Remarkably, Dorian buys this condo sight unseen; his only viewing of the property is by way of a colorful brochure. The realtor asks Dorian, after showing him the "large brochure" and answering a few questions, "Wouldn't you like to see it first?" to which Dorian replies, "No need" after instructing him to put in an offer (483). He bases his decision solely on a two-dimensional photo layout (along with the feeling it gives him). This interaction becomes more significant when considering the dialogue when the realtor tells Dorian the names of the condos for sale, the Miliken and the Leeson: "The residences have names?" Dorian asks. "The names can be changed of course…Depending on the owner" replies the realtor (483). Dorian decides on the name "The Asher," his last name, as he looks at his phone one last time to see if his wife had called to say she changed her mind. There are several striking things happening here. For one, the brochure flattens the experience of the condo as it flattens the Hot Springs and everything else it tempts its viewers with. In this way it allows the interested party to create their own fantasy of what this space could be for them, what

needs it can fulfill. Dorian has no interest in seeing the three-dimensional, real-life space he is about to settle into. He does not want to know its history or how it feels inside the condo; in fact, like settlers into stolen Indian land, he wants to completely erase any history of this place by changing its name and giving it a new one in his own honor. Further, Dorian's glance at his phone one last time hoping for a message from his soon-to-be-ex-wife before naming his biggest purchase suggests once again that these purchases are filling in for genuine, intimate human connection.

The toxic entanglement of advertising messages, conspicuous consumption, and the destruction of the Earth becomes elucidated through King's representation of Dorian as consumer and CEO of Domidion. Dorian's personal spending habits, aided and abetted by marketing messages, both rob him of true human connection and his health and contribute to the decimation of the land through the waste this type of consumption produces and the resources needed to facilitate the production of those things eventually wasted. However, as I will detail in the following section, King also reveals a healthier way to respond to toxic messages and material toxicity.

**"I don't suppose we can just sink it"/ "It's about community": Dorian and Sonny as Contrasting Responses to Crisis and Healing**

Throughout *The Back of the Turtle,* King writes Sonny as Dorian's literary foil. Sonny's simple lifestyle in which he obtains what he wants or needs through salvaging what others lose provides a stark contrast to Dorian's fast-paced-work-while-on-the-treadmill lifestyle in which his purchases define him. Perhaps most importantly, however, is that Sonny provides an alternative response to environmental crisis and recovery, a much healthier, more sustainable response than that of Dorian and Domidion's. As we have seen, Dorian is intent on sweeping

these disasters under the rug and employing tried-and-true crisis management responses that minimize the incredible loss these disasters have had on people and the environment in order to keep stock prices up and maintain his elaborate lifestyle, changing absolutely nothing in the way Domidion does business. Sonny, on the other hand, sets out to build a tower that will bring the local and global community together, all the while facilitating the return of the turtles to the ocean as they begin to regenerate after "That One Bad Day."

About halfway through the novel, King begins making blatant associations between Sonny and Dorian; first to show how the two are connected and equally vulnerable, and later to bring to the fore their opposing recovery strategies. After sneaking in and out of Crisp's party at the hot springs, Sonny retreats to his room at the Ocean Star Motel, where he finds *The Sound of Music* on the classic movie channel. Sonny "likes most of the songs. He especially likes the song about the deer, and sometimes he dances along with the children as they sing…" but he "doesn't like the German soldiers," muting the movie when they show up, reasoning that "[b]ad things aren't nearly so bad when there's no sound" (241-2). Sonny finds childlike enjoyment in the film, allowing himself to sing, dance, and even make up his own words to the songs while shutting out anything that would disturb this revelry. Meanwhile, on the opposite coast and in the early hours of the morning, Dorian finds he is unable to sleep and nearly deliriously ends up also singing and dancing to the same Turner Classics film: "He had stayed up and watched the entire movie. Worse, partway through the film, he had begun singing along with all the songs. At one point, he had actually come off the couch and danced around the room like an idiot" (269). It is apparent by the wording in this passage—"Worse"; "like an idiot"—that Dorian believes himself to be above the childish behaviors of singing and dancing along with the movie that Sonny gleefully indulges in; however, indulge he does, and this indulgence signifies a connection

between not only the humanity of both characters, but the childlike vulnerability of both. Dorian has been made particularly vulnerable through his battle with the unknown ailment, which he believes to be connected to toxicity. Sonny has been made vulnerable by way of the well-known toxic spill Dorian is ultimately responsible for. While Dorian possesses all the trappings of life that should ostensibly allow him to buttress himself against the threats of the outside world, he, like Sonny, is not immune to toxicity related health issues.[26] Further, Dorian's actions in the GreenSweep catastrophe, or lack of action, dramatically effected, and continues to effect Sonny's life. In *The Sound of Music* twist, Sonny's actions of singing and dancing seemingly affect Dorian's life. Just as it appears impossible for Sonny's reaction to the film to affect Dorian's, Dorian appears to have no clue how his actions (or more accurately, decisions) have affected Sonny's day-to-day existence. Both Sonny and Dorian are alone in hotel rooms watching the same movie, yet their emotional responses to the film are quite different, even if their actions are parallel.

As the novel comes to a close, King once again sets up parallel actions between Sonny and Dorian; in this instance, he uses cherry pie to contrast Dorian's loneliness with Sonny and Crisp's connection that supersedes contemporary capitalist consumerism. As Dorian is completing his meal during which he meets with the realtor and buys his condo, sight unseen, Dorian is unable to acquire a piece of cherry pie (or any pie) from the upscale restaurant; instead, he is offered "excellent lemon pound cake with a raspberry compote" (482). Dorian is gravely disappointed, left alone with no pie. Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the country in Samaritan Bay, Sonny is having quite the opposite experience. As Dorian is becoming further alienated from what should be his most intimate relationship—his marriage, Sonny is reconnecting with

---

[26] This is in accordance with Ulrich Beck's theorization of "risk society" in which all are vulnerable to the risks produced by industrial society.

his Uncle Crisp after constructing a tower using, among organic materials, discarded consumer goods to bring all people in the area together. Crisp rebuilds relationship with his nephew through offering him his favorite food items: toasted cheese sandwiches and cherry pie. In this contrast, the pie represents a basic human need for connection: no one, not even the CEO of a multi-billion-dollar company, can buy what comes from true, meaningful human relationship. In a rare moment, even the server at one of the nicest restaurants in town cannot tempt Dorian to buy what he is offering based on the validation of that purchase: Dorian feels he is truly missing something.

Sonny's tower further contrasts with Dorian's behavior and pushes back against advertising's toxic messages. A group of survivors—Taiwanese crew members shipwrecked from the *Anguis*—and local newcomers gather around Sonny's tower in the cherry pie scene as they watch the first turtle lay eggs and return to the ocean after The Ruin, discussing how the inhabitants of the Bay will rebuild the town and the community. The narrator relates that Sonny's tower is "pieced together with shells and bones and assorted consumer waste" (345). This assorted consumer waste is the waste Sonny "salvages" throughout the novel, contrasting Sonny's scavenging for "salvage" with Dorian's conspicuous consumption. In many ways, Sonny's attention to picking up the waste tourists drop to make something useful out of it represents the healthier, older relationship to things pre-industrialization while Dorian's consumption habits are a clear commentary on current consumer culture. While Dorian creates all kinds of consumer waste with his frivolous purchases to make himself feel better and deal with pressures, Sonny repurposes this waste to bring people together. Climate justice scholar Naomi Klein points out that in the effort to curb climate change, "a worldview will need to rise to the fore that sees nature, other nations, and our own neighbors not as adversaries, but rather as

partners in a grand project of mutual reinvention" (13). Sonny's tower is pieced together with symbolic representations of all three of these components ("nature, other nations, and our own neighbors"): shells and bones from nature, consumer waste from around the world, and copper wire from the local reserve. This tower brings people together for the project of "mutual reinvention." Sonny essentially reverses the process that marketing creates: while advertising attaches our true social desires to things, promising that which it cannot deliver, Sonny uses discarded things and repurposes them to light a fire that will draw people into deep and meaningful relationship and ultimately rebuild that which was lost—not through rebuilding things but through rebuilding relationships.

Dorian represents all that is wrong with the current economic system, especially as it pertains to environmental degradation, while Sonny provides readers with a glimpse of what life could be like were we to focus on ground-up community building—locally and globally—and working together to rebuild a better, vibrant existence. Klein explains, "we have not done the things that are necessary to lower emissions [or other actions to reduce climate impact] because those things fundamentally conflict with deregulated capitalism, the reigning ideology for the entire period we have been struggling to find a way out of this crisis" (10). Dorian's company freely dumps its toxic waste, both in their backyard, so to speak, and in poorer nations with nearly no regulation or push-back. On the other hand, Sonny approaches the catastrophe in a manner more akin to what Environmental Studies scholar Sarah Jaquette Ray explains as "reframing environmentalism as a movement of abundance, connection, and well-being [that] may help us rethink it as a politics of *desire* rather than a politics of individual *sacrifice* and consumer *denial*" (7). Though the novel leaves readers with Dorian feeling better emotionally and physically as Domidion recovers financially from the blows it experienced during the high-

profile catastrophes for which it was responsible, suggesting that business will continue as usual and engender more disasters, readers are also left with a sense of hope from what is happening in Samaritan Bay. Ray argues that hope leads to efficacy and resilience, both of which King sets his characters on a trajectory toward in the end. On the difficult path toward a healthier future, one needs to be able to imagine what that might look like. Sonny's community-building efforts among the rejuvenation of wildlife gives readers a chance to imagine just that.

**Conclusion**

King's tale of two worlds bridged by toxic disaster does not invite settlers into Indian land as brochures do. Rather, it invites readers to gain a clearer picture of the consequences of the actions of both corporations and individuals on the environment and society in late capitalist consumer culture. If advertising tends to keep its audience from considering the future, building true community, or allowing them to focus on real issues that need to be urgently addressed, King's work exposes the lies and motives of the marketing industry while imagining a future with land and community well-being at its center. Whereas Domidion destroys the planet in spectacular ways—large spills and huge ships full of toxic waste being set adrift on the oceans—Dorian as conspicuous consumer helps destroy it little by little, day by day through wasteful purchases. Domidion—or rather, Dorian at the helm of crisis communication—fabricates and promotes toxic public relations narratives which allow devastating environmental consequences to continue, while pulling from the degraded material condition of the marginalized people these disasters affect most to justify their toxic narratives and actions. King engages the brochure as his primary representation of the toxic advertising that draws people into occupied spaces—tourists to Samaritan Bay, the Reserve, and the Hot Springs and Dorian into the condo at the Hermes. This medium draws attention to tourism itself, the flattening of the stories these spaces

hold, and invites settler incursion into spaces ranging from Native land to illustrious condos. Dorian, himself a product of consumer culture, succumbs to advertising's toxic narrative that things will fulfill you and that there is no need to think about the future; there is no need to consider the environmental or emotional consequences of purchasing or "settling" decisions.

On the other hand, King theorizes what a non-consumerist, community-and-nature-centered outlook might mean for the future through Sonny, who is happy salvaging what others have lost, protecting turtles both from tourists who overstep boundaries and from birds who wish to pick them off as they make their journey to the ocean, dancing in revelry uninhibited to songs about favorite things, and building a tower to summon locals and international visitors alike. Through both the commonalities and contrasts between Dorian and Sonny, Toronto and Samaritan Bay, King offers readers the chance to experience two very different responses to environmental crises and examine the role that capitalism—and its ubiquitous voice that is advertising and marketing—plays in the perpetuation of toxicity. Dorian's story makes it clear that if big corporations' actions continue along the lines they have been going for decades, environmental disasters will follow. Sonny's story leaves readers with the hope that we can "*thrive* in a climate-changed world" and encourages us "*to desire, not fear, the future*" (Ray 17).

## Works Cited

Bacon, J.M. "Settler colonialism as eco-social structure and the production of colonial ecological violence." *Environmental Sociology,* 28 May 2018, pp. 1-11.

Beck, Ulrich. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity.* Translated by Mark Ritter. Sage, 1992.

Buckley, Ralf. "Environmental Impacts of Recreation in Parks and Reserves." *Perspectives in Environmental Management*, 1991, pp. 243-258.

Cryderman, Kelly. "Suncor spill site in Athabasca River also had incident in 2011." *The Globe and Mail. Theglobeandmail.com,* 28 March 2013, accessed 27 Sept. 2022.

Coombs, Timothy W. *Applied Crisis Communication and Crisis Management: Cases and Exercises*. Sage, 2014.

---. *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding*. Sage, 2007.

Di Chiro, Giovanna. "Polluted Politics? Confronting Toxic Discourse, Sex Panic, and Eco-Normativity." *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Indiana UP, 2010.

Foster, John Bellamy, Brett Clark, and Richard York. *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth.* Monthly Review Press, 2010.

Fraile-Marcos, Ana Maria. '"Who's going to look after the river?" Water and the Ethics of Care in Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle." Canadian Literature,* no. 238, 2019, pp. 66-82.

Freiin von Bibra, Maria-Letizia. "Manifest Mythmaking: The Role of US 'Manifest Destiny' in Nineteenth and Twenty-First Century Indigenous Dispossession." *Webster Review of International History,* vol. 2, no. 2, 2022, pp. 15-31.

Friesen, Joe. "Mortality rates for First Nations young women and girls may have worsened: study." *The Globe and Mail,* www.theglobeandmail.com, 26 May 2019. Accessed 6 May 2020.

Ganz, Shoshannah. '"Now I am Become Death": Japanese and Canadian Industrial Contamination in Michiko Ishimure's *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease* and Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle*." *A Journal of Canadian Literary and Cultural Studies,* vol. 7, 2018, pp. 9-14.

Jhally, Sut, director and featuring. *Advertising and the End of the World.* Media Education Foundation, 1998.

---. *Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse.* Media Education Foundation, 2017.

King, Thomas. *A Short History of Indians in Canada.* U of Minnesota P, 2013 (originally published by HarperCollins in 2005).

---. *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America.* U of Minnesota P, 2012.

---. *The Back of the Turtle.* HarperCollins, 2014.

---. *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative.* U of Minnesota P, 2003.

Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate.* Simon & Schuster, 2014.

Morrison, Irene M. "Stories to Stop the Apocalypse: Indigenous Mythmaking as Solidarity-Building Practice in Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle.*" *South Atlantic Review,* vol. 83, no. 3, Fall 2018, pp. 44-62.

Ray, Sarah Jaquette. *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet.* U of California P, 2020.

Regester, Michael and Judy Larkin. *Risk Issues and Crisis Management: A Casebook of Best Practice.* Kogan Page, 2005.

Strasser, Susan. *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash.* Metropolitan Books, 1999.

Williams, Raymond. "Advertising: The Magic System." *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays,* Verso, 1980, pp. 320-36.

"What we do." *Suncor. Suncor.com,* 2022, accessed 27 Sept. 2022.

# IV. CHAPTER 3:

# “ALL THIS FOR THE TAKING!”:

# TOXIC ENTANGLEMENTS AND DRAMATIC DISRUPTIONS IN RUTH OZEKI’S *MY YEAR OF MEATS* AND *ALL OVER CREATION*

“Something not far from the surface of the public psyche is delighted to see the icons of corporate power subverted and mocked.” -Naomi Klein, *No Logo*.

“This fight, waged in all places,
on all networks and circuits of communication
is the responsibility of all who believe another world is possible.

This is our battle-cry, our semiotic war,
our rage against consumer mis-philosophy,
and the machines of predatory corporatism,
that block out the sun
burn our atmosphere

We steal this space (from capitalism)
and we give it back to you for free
for the communication of possible futures

So imagine, if you will, another world
Emptied of mad empires,
Manufactured fears,
Paranoid dreams
and marauded lands.

Now imagine the sounds of those memories
crushing in your hands.

Instead of the facile dreams of consumer products and
the shadow festival
of fake-estate lifestyle choice,
pacifying with wealth those who remember,
smart-drugging the next generation of revolutionary minds.

We are people, not targets.

It might be time to listen to the rage inside,
the rage against more of the same
the rage because another world must be possible,
a rage against the atrophy of hope.
A rage against the changing climate, bullshit jobs,
division, fear.

So we subvertise here for hope,
hope that is never too late to start.

Take this space.
Silent rebels, and loud dreamers,
take this space,
young pacifiers and old lovers.

Don't hide in the shadows, steal their space,
their damaging words and aesthetics.

We take this space back to speak truth to power,
to oppression, to injustice,
against those that would have us give our lives,
our brightest years,
of all that we are and could be
to the serpent of consumption
perpetuating a world we don't believe in
distracting us from each other in favour of ourselves,
destroying our ability to think and fantasise wildly.

We, who are you, have come to realise that
to dream is the beginning,
all that remains is action,
to reclaim the space to express.

Brandalism."

-Brandalism Manifesto

Figure 4: Brandalism.ch

In 2022 Brandalism activists—activists using subvertising, or mock advertisements to counter corporate messages—"highjacked over 500 corporate advertising spaces replacing

adverts with satirical artworks denouncing the role of aviation industry advertising in the climate crisis" (brandalism.ch). Their work could be seen across the UK, Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Belgium and France. This form of resistance to corporate messaging is something these activists have been participating in since 2011 when the group was founded and most often consists of concerted attacks on ad campaigns during high profile events, such as COP21 in Paris. Their counter-ads consistently expose the devastating environmental impact occluded in multinational corporate marketing campaigns. Most recently, Brandalists took over 400 Toyota and BMW billboards in protest of their aggressive anti-climate policy lobbying.

Brandalism activists are far from the first of their kind. Climate justice scholar Naomi Klein explains in her book *No Logo* that "culture jamming"—or "adbusting," or "subvertising" as Brandalism calls it—has been alive and well at least since the Great Depression, when the stark contrast between advertisements and lived experience were at an all-time high. Disconcerted by the lies of advertising, people began climbing billboards and drawing moustaches on models' faces. Klein has observed an uptick in this kind of activity more recently as multinational corporations place their high-priced ads in everything from high school baseball fields to bathroom stalls. She notes in the film based on her book that "we're seeing more and more direct action. I think that there is a new impatience out there, that people aren't waiting to be granted rights that are already ours, that are already enshrined in law" (39:53).

Ruth Ozeki expertly captures this impatience and frustration with the inundation of advertising in every sphere of public and private life—as well as advertising's empty promises and devastating environmental consequences—in her first two novels. *My Year of Meats* (1998) and *All Over Creation* (2003) detail the ways corporate food giants use toxic messaging to sell their materially toxic products which have been proven, directly or indirectly, to harm those who

ingest them. Perhaps more importantly, these two novels also detail forms of resistance to these narratives and the foods they promote.

*My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation* often gain critical attention from literary and environmental humanities scholars who find it worthwhile to analyze these works as a complimentary set that provides complex commentary on the multiple problematic facets of the U.S. (and global) food system. I find this method useful as well within the context of my examination of the toxic entanglement of advertising and material toxins in environmental justice literature written by and about those most affected by environmental injustices. *My Year of Meats* takes the U.S. industrial meat industry to task while *All Over Creation* speaks to many ills of the industrial agricultural industry, specifically those producing potatoes; in other words, in these two novels, Ozeki enlightens readers to the truth about the "all-American" diet: meat and potatoes. Both novels are also deeply engaged with issues of gender and sexuality, revealing that violence against women is a crucial component of the toxic entanglement of marketing and material toxicity. As part of the tactic Ozeki uses to bring these issues to light, *My Year of Meats* has advertising as a core component of the plot—both in the sense of storyline and as a secret plan to carry out something harmful—while *All Over Creation* flips advertising narratives to push back against these plots in the form of subvertising.

In what follows, I will trace the toxic entanglements of advertising and material toxins through *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation.* I first examine *My Year of Meats,* positing Wal-Mart as a literary double to BEEF-EX, a U.S. lobby organization that represents meats of all kinds. Through this doubling, Ozeki effectively illustrates the devastating ways cultural and material toxins in America make their way overseas, inflicting harm especially on women at home and abroad. I take a close look at the way the BEEF-EX-sponsored show *My American*

*Wife!* works as the insidious advertising campaign that peddles cultural toxins to induce Japanese housewives to purchase and subsequently ingest material toxins. With protagonist Jane Takagi-Little at the helm, however, the flow of material toxins is disrupted by way of Jane disrupting the advertiser's messages. My move to *All Over Creation* first scrutinizes the public relations (PR) narratives put forth by agricultural giant Cynaco's PR firm Duncan & Wiley, illuminating the ways its narratives work to facilitate the continued poisoning of land and people, before moving to the ways Ozeki uses anti-transgenic food resistors "The Seeds of Resistance" to disrupt advertising narratives through acts of subvertising. Putting these two novels in conversation with one another as well as with the novels discussed in previous chapters allows for a fuller understanding of the far-reaching impact of the toxic entanglement of advertising and material toxicity and gives readers a wide range of tactics for disrupting this entanglement and moving forward.

### Wal-Mart and Wives: A Toxic Double in *My Year of Meats*

*My Year of Meats* has garnered significant critical attention due to its complex representations of the effects of global capitalism on women's bodies and its engagement with gender and ethnicity. Scholars have examined such issues as "cosmofeminism" (Black), "corrective eco-justice" (Fish), "radical hospitality" (Garrigós), "the authentic" (Kalejahi), an ethics born from the splitting of maternal subjectivity (Schoeffel), chaos and "spontaneous regeneration" (Spoth and Warner), and "transnational politics of race and gender" (Cheng). Though these are important contributions in understanding violence against women's bodies and the measures that can be taken to come against it, there has yet to be a discussion of the ways in which the toxic discursive formulations in the novel facilitate the movement of material toxins, which unevenly affect women's bodies. My work examines representations of the entanglement

of material and ideological forms of toxicity in both domestic and transnational spaces through an analysis of the ways BEEF-EX promotes its tainted meat overseas via toxic advertising tactics.

This section examines representations of co-constitutive material and ideological forms of toxicity in both domestic and transnational spaces through an analysis of the ways in which Wal-Mart acts as a literary double to BEEF-EX. *My Year of Meats* relates the story of Japanese-American Jane Takagi-Little, a documentary film maker, who is hired by BEEF-EX to produce the show *My American Wife!* in order to promote U.S. meat consumption in the Japanese market. In creating a show in which she is mandated to display "wholesome," "all-American" values (12) "to induce in…Japanese wives a state of *want*" (35), Jane discovers the disturbing reality of the meat industry she is paid to promote: the animals from which this meat comes are injected with powerful abortives and antibiotics that are toxic especially to women. Her desire to subvert representations of dominant narratives of white, middle-class American hegemonic values morphs into an ethical drive to expose the toxicity that pervades the meat industry, both materially and ideologically.

Critics have named Akiko Ueno, a Japanese woman living in Japan and wife of *My American Wife!* creator John Ueno, as Jane's literary double. In the same way critics have positioned Jane and Akiko as "doubles" (Cheng), I explore the possibility of Wal-Mart as a double of BEEF-EX. Tellingly, Jane and her crew hunt for potential American wives for *My American Wife!* at the local Wal-Mart, only to deploy them in BEEF-EX's intercontinental capitalist agenda. Though both are U.S. companies, one is represented as aggressively pursuing the foreign market, disregarding the ethical implications of what it is pushing on transnational consumers, while the other unsympathetically targets patrons for profit on U.S. soil; as BEEF-

EX exports its poisonous ideals and material poisons across national boundaries through the deployment of retro-American family ideals and hormone-injected American meat, Wal-Mart is busy pumping ideological and material poisons into the homeland through the inducement of mass consumerist desire ("*want* is *good*" (Ozeki 35)) and alarmingly easy access to toxic substances (such as the same hormone-laden meat, and pesticides) for financial gain. I argue that the Wal-Mart/BEEF-EX double powerfully illustrates the disturbing ways in which consumerism works to facilitate the absorption of dangerous, material toxins through its deployment of toxic discourses, or advertising tactics.

In order to draw out the ways in which Wal-Mart and BEEF-EX work as doubles that effectively facilitate the distribution of toxins in the U.S. and abroad, I first focus on the passage in the novel that describes best how Wal-Mart is functioning as a representation of U.S. consumerism and economic imperialism. The passage, coming early in the narrative, sets up two of the driving themes that persist throughout the novel: U.S. expansion (at the detriment of those who inhabit the spaces into which the U.S. expands) and the toxic effects of global capitalism, especially on women's bodies. These two themes are connected through the capital expansion of the American meat industry into Japan, the products of which carry hormones particularly dangerous to women's bodies. Told from the protagonist Jane Takagi-Little's point of view, the scene describes her Japanese film crew, Suzuki and Oh's, encounter with U.S. consumerism. In this selection, Ozeki uses Wal-Mart both as literal repository of U.S. mass-consumerism as well as a metaphor for U.S. imperialism. She does this to underscore the various facets of desire capitalism creates in subjects—accomplished in large part through advertising—and hint at the destructive nature of its outcomes, particularly on women, as it crosses national boundaries:

> [W]hat really impressed them was the sheer amplitude of America. I'll never forget the look of astonishment that lit up Suzuki's moonlike face the first time he walked into a Wal-Mart. To a Japanese person, Wal-Mart is awesome, the capitalistic equivalent of the wide open spaces and endless horizons of the American geographical frontier. All this for the taking! Your breast expands with greed and need and wonder. I followed Suzuki around the store as he pored over a dozen brands of car caddies, fingered garden hoses, and lingered on the edge of Lingerie, watching farmwives choose brassieres. (Ozeki 35)

Ozeki opens this paragraph by relating what "really impressed" Suzuki and Oh: "the sheer amplitude of America" (35). Rather than following this declaration with a description of hours upon hours of travel, or some other similar indication of the enormity of the U.S. landscape, however, there is an immediate shift to, and thus, correlation with the arguably quintessential symbol of U.S. mass-consumerism, Wal-Mart. In other words, what impresses the Japanese men is not the amplitude of space, but the amplitude of goods. Ozeki explicitly makes this shift for the reader by linking the superstore to the American frontier, with its "wide-open spaces and endless horizons" (35), indicating the neo-imperialist nature of U.S capitalism: where the initial frontier was "geographical," this new eternal horizon is economic.[27]

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, scholars and activists alike have frequently viewed Wal-Mart as a rich site to provide commentary on the current state of U.S. capitalist enterprises and globalization. As Rebekah Peeples Massengill points out in her article "Wal-Mart Wars," "Wal-Mart is an ideal topic for the study of political discourse about capitalism simply because its sheer size and market influence place it at the heart of debates over

[27] Throughout this chapter I use "U.S." rather than "America" to refer to the United States of America in order to keep from privileging the U.S. as *the* America (in that there are South and Central Americas as well as nations other than the U.S. in North America). However, in certain instances such as this I will use the term "America" to keep its connection to the original reference, as in "American frontier" or "American Dream."

globalization, deregulation, and capitalism itself in the twenty-first century" (28). Wal-Mart has effectively reorganized the way labor, distribution, and manufacturing operates in America. Its "sheer size" is reflected on the company's website at the top of the "About Us" page:

> What started small, with a single discount store and the simple idea of selling more for less, has grown over the last 50 years into the largest retailer in the world. Each week, nearly 270 million customers and members visit our more than 11,700 stores under 65 banners in 28 countries and eCommerce websites. With fiscal year 2018 revenue of $500.3 billion, Walmart employs approximately 2.3 million associates worldwide. (*Walmart.com*)

Founder Sam Walton, previous owner of small-town variety store Ben Franklin, opened the first Wal-Mart store on July 2, 1962 in Rogers, Arkansas. In just ten years, Walton had fifty-one stores. As the quote above indicates, it is now the largest retailer in the world, having not only taken over the nation in sales, but also having pervasively expanded into transnational markets as well. Massengill points out its market influence, citing that Wal-Mart controls as much as 16% of the national grocery market and that it sells around 10% of all products made by major suppliers like Proctor & Gamble (32). With its sheer size and market influence, Wal-Mart has exorbitant control over all aspects of the supply chain and modes of distribution, setting the bar for other retailers and becoming emblematic of U.S. capitalism, both in its efforts at home and its diffusion into the global market. As Massengill suggests, and Ozeki highlights in the above passage through her reference to the American frontier, Wal-Mart's founding story illustrates the closely held American political ideals of free enterprise and the American Dream. As the story of Sam Walton's rise from Great Depression kid in small-town Arkansas to largest-discount-store-chain owner in the U.S. demonstrates, the American Dream is attainable due to our

freedom of entrepreneurship: “All this for the taking!” (Ozeki 35).[28] It is indeed an economic frontier. This idea has been perpetuated by the company itself through its earlier iteration of the Wal-Mart logo, in which they use “Frontier font”: WAL-MART “In 1964, the company selected a font. This ‘Frontier Font Logo’ was the first official and first consistently used logo in our history. It survived for nearly 20 years” (*Walmart.com*). It seems no coincidence that the logo survived until its taking of the open, economic landscape of America was complete.

In the novel, Wal-Mart as one part of the literary double remains tethered to the homeland of the U.S. Rather than evoking the desire for expanding geographic boundaries through the consumption of native lands, and Wal-Mart itself having succeeded in taking economic lands, the Wal-Mart experience produces a desire for the expansion of one’s personal goods through the consumption of nearly everything (a feature of late capitalism).[29] As Massengill suggests, “critics of consumption…worry that the capitalist engine has been so successful in the American economy that marketers must now convince consumers that they have more need of more goods more frequently than ever before” (36). This is reflected in the passage as Jane relates, “Your breast expands with greed and need and wonder” (35). The rhyming (and assonance) of the words *greed* and *need* suggests a closely tied relationship: the greed transforms what might at first be a want into a need, facilitated by the seemingly overwhelming feeling (indicated by the exclamation point at the end of the phrase “All this for the taking!”) that one has unlimited access to that which is before them. The description of the items Suzuki “pore[s] over” are representative of the types of possessions one ostensibly has

[28] For a comprehensive history of Wal-Mart, see Sandra Stringer Vance and Roy Vernon Scott’s *Wal-Mart : A History of Sam Walton's Retail Phenomenon.*

[29] Though Wal-Mart has clearly penetrated the global market, Ozeki’s depictions of Wal-Mart are solely in the U.S.; she uses BEEF-EX to examine large American corporations’ transnational agendas, which is why I argue that these companies act as doubles and that an examination of both companies is necessary to examine the ways in which toxins are transmitted through capitalist enterprises.

access to: “a dozen brands of car caddies,” “garden hoses,” and “Lingerie.” The multiple brands of car caddies signal the unlimited possibilities of car ownership, an idea promoted through mass marketing campaigns. With so many types of caddies, it is implied that in America, possessing a vehicle is the norm; this is simply part of the culture (that of course, marketing has created). Thus, one has access to these vehicles (which can be taken as making a person literally mobile, or can be extended to social mobility). The next stop is at the garden hoses, which represent domesticity, or the access to the type of housing that would allow one to enjoy a garden. Not only is one able to (and indeed expected to) obtain a vehicle in America, one is also able to obtain adequate (if not superior) housing, which is potentially the result of social mobility; thus, it is fitting that the hoses follow the caddies in the list. Finally, rather than stopping in the men’s clothing section in the superstore, which might simply indicate the access to proper attire, Suzuki ends up in the women’s lingerie section, signaling an access to women’s bodies, in one sense sexually (which will be discussed momentarily), and in another as “wives,” which completes the retro-American family ideal: car, house, wife. Thus, the idea is put forth that “All this for the taking!” encompasses not just material goods, but the (arguably toxic) American Dream as well. The film crew’s trip through Wal-Mart induces their desire for all they see, material or ideological, whether they “need” it or not.

It is also within this description of the men’s reaction and walk through the listed items in Wal-Mart where the language begins to take on sexual overtones, emphasizing the connection between the desire for commodities and sexual desire. Beginning with the use of the word “breast” in the phrase “[y]our breast expands” rather than the more common phrase “your *chest* expands,” Jane’s descriptions employ sexualized language, which speaks to the ways in which the consumption of objects is often entangled with the consumption of bodies: the desire for

"things" frequently causes the objectification of people—as in the case of harsh labor and sex for sale—that allows people to be consumed as "things" (indeed, the Japanese men who travel to America take full advantage of strip clubs, enjoying the "amplitude" of American women's breasts). Jane follows Suzuki around the store, watching him as he "pored over a dozen brands of car caddies, fingered garden hoses, and lingered on the edge of Lingerie, watching farmwives choose brassieres" (35). Suzuki's attention is first drawn to the seemingly unlimited options presented in material goods, he then shifts to "finger[ing]" a hose, and finally, he finds himself in the lingerie, "watching farmwives" (35). Once again, Ozeki uses a rhyme scheme to illuminate the connection between these arenas: Suzuki *fingered*, then *lingered.* The drawing of these two actions together through rhyme works to emphasize the first act, fingering, as more than simply examination: it eroticizes the language through its correlation to the act of lingering in the lingerie section, an act emphasized through the near homograph *linger*ed and *linger*ie. This section of the passage then, which begins with "[y]our breast" and ends with "brassieres," brings to the fore the connection between the fetishization of objects that capitalism invites and the fetishization of women's bodies.

The act of fetishizing is also an act of objectification; objectification is often the first step to violence—if one can imagine a subject as an object, the crimes committed against that subject become more justifiable to the perpetrator. Violence against women's bodies is a prominent theme in the novel, especially connected to global capitalism and the ways in which it distributes hormones which are particularly dangerous for women's reproductive organs: the meat products the show is meant to promote are later found in the narrative to be contaminated with damaging hormones. It is not surprising that Ozeki primes her readers for more graphic future representations of this violence through this more subtle commentary.

The equation of the U.S. with Wal-Mart, the comparison of its space to the American frontier, and the depiction of the film crew's reaction to it through the use of sexualized language all work to point to the neo-imperialist nature of U.S. capitalism, the enticement of capitalist commodities, the multifaceted desire it produces, and the violence it subsequently wreaks on women's bodies in the process. Wal-Mart is seen later in the novel as inflicting various forms of violence on women's bodies. Ozeki names Wal-Mart as the company that provides air guns to the Japanese film crew who uses them to "[shoot] out [the] tits and crotches" (34) of images of naked women for target practice. It is also Wal-Mart's delivery truck that crushes Christina Bukowsky, a young girl riding her bike, "leaving her paralyzed from the waist down" (132). Adding to the initial violence of striking the girl, Christina's mother Eleanor, who works for Wal-Mart, cannot get the company to pay for what they have done. Further, her boss refuses to give her time off to care for her daughter, fearing this would be an admission of guilt due to the lawsuit the family has filed against the company.  When Eleanor asks to be fired so she can at least collect unemployment, "again he refused, since it would be bad publicity for Wal-Mart first to crush the daughter, then to fire the mom" (133). Eleanor is forced to quit without severance to care for her child, which is its own form of violence. Though Wal-Mart executives are concerned over losing money in the lawsuit Christina's family has filed against them, their greater concern is "bad publicity," which would have a greater impact on their bottom line than any single-family lawsuit could ever have. Thus, the fate of Christina and her mother at the hands of Wal-Mart brings to the fore the violence against women in the pursuit of capitalist enterprises.

**"Desirable" and "Wholesome": BEEF-EX as Transnational Transmitter of Toxins**

The violence against women through inadvertent hormone consumption is then explicitly addressed through the representation of BEEF-EX, Wal-Mart's literary double. While Wal-Mart fuels the desire for commodities through its vast display of merchandise, BEEF-EX uses Wal-Mart's display to create desire in their Japanese consumers. Jane explains that she is using this Wal-Mart footage for the show *My American Wife!,* which she is producing for BEEF-EX, "filming *goods* to induce in…Japanese wives a state of *want* (as in both senses, 'lack' and 'desire'), because *want* is *good*" (35, emphasis in original). It is later revealed that the specific commodity for which BEEF-EX is creating "a state of *want*"—meat— has had horrendous effects on women's reproductive systems, a particularly disturbing discovery considering their target audience is Japanese housewives.

Transnational advertising becomes a toxic discourse in *My Year of Meats* as Wal-Mart's double BEEF-EX discursively transports what John Blair Gamber terms "cultural toxins" across borders in order to induce the desire for (masked) material toxins. Gamber explains, "I propose that we think of racism and other oppressive forces as what I term *cultural toxins*…cultural toxicity refers to a society becoming literally unlivable for its inhabitants" (8). The backers of the show *My American Wife!* give strict instructions to its producers to display white, heteronormative families whose members perform traditional gender roles. This sort of American family ideal creates conditions which make society unlivable for those who do not embody these standards, as they become the targets of racism, classism, and homophobia (or some combination of these depending on their subject position). The company demands these exclusivist American ideals because they think that this is the America Japan wants to see. Jane relates to the research staff for the show: "[M]arket studies show that the average Japanese wife

finds a middle-to-upper-middle-class white American woman with two to three children to be both sufficiently exotic and yet reassuringly familiar" (13). The producers are eager to capitalize on this research, visually and discursively exporting a culture in which the ideal woman is a white, heterosexual mother in order to move more (tainted) meat and thereby increase BEEF-EX's profits.

The Tokyo Office's expectations, both for what is ideal and for what is to be avoided in the subjects showcased in *My American Wife!,* work to perpetuate a toxic version of the U.S.; as directives for the show come down the lines of communication, it becomes clear cultural toxins will be transmitted to the Japanese audience. In a memo from the Tokyo Office to the American Research Staff for the show, number one on the list of "desirable things" for *My American Wife!* is "Attractiveness, wholesome, warm personality" while number five states, "Attractive, wholesome lifestyle" (12). On the list of "undesirable things" are "Physical imperfections," "Obesity," "Squalor," and "Second class peoples" (12). Though "wholesome" is not clearly defined, its juxtaposition with the list of undesirable traits provides a definition of what it is not: those things involving the disabled, overweight, poor, or of the lower-classes. This list contributes to classism and abilism, in conjunction with the aforementioned emphasis on whiteness and heteronormativity—all cultural toxins—inherent in a show meant to reflect U.S. culture. Jane snidely remarks to her lover, "The BEEF-EX people are very strict. They don't want their meat to have a synergistic association with deformities. Like race. Or poverty. Or clubfeet" (57). This list of "deformities" is reminiscent of what Sarah Jaquette Ray claims are characteristics of "the ecological other." Ray argues that "the figure of the disabled body is the quintessential symbol of humanity's alienation from nature, and that it underpins other kinds of ecological othering, including racial, sexual, class, and gendered othering…" (6). This is

important because "[n]ature…was invoked to protect and sustain American character and national identity" (38). In other words, if one is disabled (or has "deformities"), one is alienated from nature, and by extension, from American character and identity. Thus, on the basis of not appearing "American," the Tokyo Office participates in the act of "othering" that makes society unlivable for those who are othered. Jane immediately decries her complicity in this scheme: "Although my heart was set on being a documentarian, it seems I was more useful as a go-between, a cultural pimp, selling off the vast illusion of America to a cramped population on that small string of Pacific islands" (9). Jane's self-reference as a "pimp," a role traditionally filled by a male subject, highlights the ways in which women may equally contribute to the maintenance of the hegemonic patriarchal structure; to resist complicity in the perpetuation of this structure is extremely difficult for all subjects. Jane and her crew, even if reluctantly, thus aid in the transmission of cultural toxins overseas.

To ensure the Japanese housewives are receiving this (toxic) illusion of America properly, John, creator of the show, has created a questionnaire for his wife Akiko to fill out after each episode, evaluating aspects such as "Educational Value," "Authenticity," and "Wholesomeness" (21). In this way, Akiko becomes a sort of "cultural barometer," measuring the effectiveness of the cultural transmissions BEEF-EX sends overseas. When Akiko does not give the first show, featuring the closest representation to the Tokyo Office's expectations, a high score, especially in "Authenticity," John is furious; his hopes are foiled that Akiko (and by extension, Japanese housewives in general) will willingly take in American culture and habits—which includes a high intake of meats. These hopes are derailed by Akiko's ability to discern the constructed nature of the production: she is not "buying" what she sees—the happy, white, middle-class family—as "authentic" American culture. When Jane takes over production of the

show, she begins to film a more diverse glimpse into life in the U.S. Both Akiko's evaluations and the Japanese television ratings soar, but John and the representatives in the Tokyo Office are furious. They are firmly against Japanese wives getting the impression that anything other than the (American version of the) white, heteronormative, patriarchal family is the ideal. This reaction further reveals the investment BEEF-EX's advertising campaign has in visually and discursively transmitting cultural toxins across the Pacific for financial gain.

The exportation of these cultural toxins effectively facilitates the movement of material toxins—as indeed, they are entangled—in this case, those found in BEEF-EX's meat. Though Jane first begins to learn about the toxic nature of American meat through Dyann and Lara, a lesbian couple she films for the show, it is the filming of the Texas "Dunn & Son, Custom Cattle Feeders" feedlot that provides visual evidence of the claims Jane has been reading concerning the harmful effects of meat. Through her conversation with Gale, the son in "Dunn & Son," owner of one of the major U.S. beef suppliers, she discovers that they use an abundance of "growth supplements" in their meat. Additionally, upon her visit to the feedlot, Jane finds a discarded bottle of Lutalyse in the trash can, which Gale claims he uses to make the cattle miscarry because pregnant cattle on a feedlot only "eat, eat, eat" and that compromises their gains (263). Gale informs them that all heifers get the shot when they come in for processing "just in case" (263). The label on the bottle informs her that Lutalyse is "not for human use," that it is "readily absorbed through the skin and can cause abortion and/or bronchospasms," and that the use of it "in excess of the approved dose may result in drug residues" (262). Aside from the growth supplements Gale reveals is given to each cow, it now becomes clear that every heifer that comes in for processing also leaves with this extremely effective abortive on board. As the label indicates, this abortive is easily absorbed into the body. The consequences of contact with

noxious materials becomes most prominent through the character of Rosie, the five-year-old niece of Gale who, due to her constant exposure to the growth hormones and other drugs on the farm, has developed extremely prematurely: she has "two shockingly full and beautiful breasts," "a wiry tangle of hair" on her pubic bone, and has '"had some bleeding too"' (275-6). The toxic effects of this environment is manifest visibly in Rosie's prematurely developed body, and hints at the invisible effects these drugs may have on a countless number of fetuses, girls, and women. These effects are occluded by the industry to protect capital gain; despite visual evidence of the harm BEEF-EX's products inflict on female bodies, the backers of *My American Wife!* insist on targeting Japanese women for their hormone-laden products, thus working to facilitate the movement of material toxins across both corporeal and national borders.

That the effects of these drugs on young girls effectively speeds up their development into (voluptuous) women points also to the ways in which these material toxins are closely bound to sexual desire (and exploitation), which is enmeshed with consumer desire. In the Wal-Mart scene discussed earlier, Ozeki explicitly ties the desire for things to a desire for women's bodies. The white, heteropatriarchal advertising campaign then, not only promotes toxic ideology through its portrayal of the "attractive" white women, but it also promotes the ingestion of hormones that will lead to a subject ostensibly more closely resembling that which heteropatriarchy desires.

**Shifting Focus: Disrupting Toxicity**

Ozeki does not simply uncover the ways advertising works to facilitate the movement of the entangled cultural and material toxins in *My Year of Meats*, she importantly reveals a means for disrupting the flow of said toxins. Jane pushes back on the Tokyo Office's directives by filming a Mexican American family, a Black family struggling to make ends meet (the Purcells),

a family with many adopted children of Asian descent, the family of a disabled girl (Christina Bukowsky), and finally, a racially mixed lesbian, vegetarian couple (Lara and Dyann) with two daughters. These families all represent in one way or another the "deformities" the company points out earlier. When the show featuring Lara and Dyann airs, John and his colleagues lambast Jane. S. Kato, representing John's interests, rails, "How stupid to think of putting lesbians on morning family television!" (179). The use of the term "family television" here has two implications. The first is that watching lesbians on television is somehow inappropriate for children, that we as a society should be shielding the youth from witnessing such "perverse" lifestyle choices. This intentional shielding from view bares the lethal (for the lesbian) consequence of erasure; if the children do not see homosexuality represented in the media, any future representations will appear aberrant, further feeding into American hegemony. The cultural toxicity here is that of heterosexism, a toxicity that can make society literally unlivable for the LGBTQIA+ subject.[30] Second, "family television" connotes reproduction, something that lesbians ostensibly cannot "naturally" achieve on their own. Thus, Kato calls Jane "stupid" for thinking lesbians would be appropriate stars of a television show aimed at, and displaying, families. This cultural toxicity attacks the reproductive rights of the queer subject, perpetuating the notion that reproduction belongs only to the heteronormative family.

Further, Kato's insistence that Lara and Dyann are abnormal due to their homosexual relationship reifies notions of what Giovanna Di Chiro terms "eco(hetero)normativity" (202). M. Nakano writes to Jane that she should make programs "only about normal people" (183), further

[30] It is worth noting that this very issue has come increasingly to the forefront of U.S. politics. In what is being recognized as "culture wars," radical conservatives are fighting to erase representations of LGBTQIA+ lives and experiences from all public outlets, especially schools. This is making society unlivable for these subjects (as evidenced by high rates of suicide among this community), especially in areas where laws are being implemented to support this erasure.

underlining the supposed deviant nature of Dyann and Lara's family. Di Chiro explains that eco(hetero)normativity—as a cultural toxin—classifies LGBTQIA+ people as disabled, reinforcing "heterosexist, queerphobic, and eugenics arguments classifying some bodies as being not normal" (202).[31] This formulation is perpetuated through the current anti-toxics discourse which, in order to get people to respond to their agendas, draws on the fear of endocrine blocking toxins in the environment mutating the sex and gender of organisms, potentially stunting their ability to reproduce. This makes disability an environmental problem (hence the "eco") that particularly deems LGBTQIA+ subjects abnormal or disabled in light of this discourse (the "hetero-normativity"). By deeming Dyann and Lara abnormal, Nakano—and by extension the BEEF-EX executives—resuscitate "familiar heterosexist, queerphobic, and eugenics arguments" (202).

It is, ironically, the hormones found in the very meat BEEF-EX is promoting that can cause these gender and sexual "abnormalities" so abhorrent to the executives. In addition to the previously mentioned Rosie who is prematurely developing sexually, this is also evidenced by the Black Purcell family Jane wants to film for the show in which Mr. Purcell began to "sound just like a woman!" "And look just like one too, with them teeny little titties and everything!" (117) after eating chicken necks injected with hormones. This "destabilizing [of] normal/natural gendered body of humans," as Di Chiro explains it, gives the executives ample reason, according to their guidelines, to reject the Purcells for their show depicting "normal" American families. Though Jane loses this battle, she advocates to be able to portray stories such as the Purcell's in a show meant to represent American culture, pushing back on what is considered "normal" in the

[31] "As a cultural toxin" is my phrase here (a la John Gamber), not part of Di Chiro's explanation.

gendered body of humans.[32] John Ueno rejects Jane's choice to film this family, both on the basis that *My American Wife!* is "not for…black peoples" and due to their choice in meats (the choice of which being a food justice issue in that this is the only meat the Purcell family can afford) (119). Though Lara and Dyann's marriage is certainly not a result of some endocrine-blocking toxin, the conflation of such toxic effects with sexual deviance leads the show's executives to rail against both the Purcells and Dyann and Lara and to adamantly insist that they do not belong in the American Dream narrative perpetuated by BEEF-EX's toxic campaign.

Jane airing Lara and Dyann's show disrupts BEEF-EX's transmission of cultural toxins by presenting an alternate lifestyle to the one perpetuated by hegemonic, heteropatriarchal ideals. Importantly, Lara and Dyann are also the means by which Jane begins to learn the truth about the material toxins her show is promoting, highlighting the entanglement of cultural toxins with material toxins. In questioning the couple as to why they decided to become vegetarians, Dyann responds by sending Jane articles she has written on the subject. Dyann writes, "[The] drugs, hormones, chemicals, and poisons [found in meat] are being blamed for a host of modern human health crises, including dropping sperm counts and fertility rates, cancers, and our rising resistance to antibiotics. In addition, the 'diseases of affluence'—the heart attacks, strokes, and stomach cancers caused by too much meat in the diet—are killing Americans, Europeans, and increasingly the Japanese…" (206). After listing the various types of material toxins found in meat, Dyann lists various affects these toxins are having on the body, the first two of which have to do with impeding reproduction (without engaging the fears of destabilizing normal sexed and gendered bodies as eco(hetero)normativity does). Just as the cultural toxin of heterosexism

[32] Though it could be argued that Jane using Rosie's prematurely developed body in her documentary meant to expose the horrors of the meat industry works *against* normalizing unstable gender categories and inadvertently deems Rosie's body disabled.

attacks reproductive rights of those deemed “not normal,” these material toxins attack the physical act of reproduction through limiting viable conception. Further, Dyann’s list of those being affected brings to the fore the transnational movement of these toxins. Her statement that “increasingly the Japanese” are being affected by “too much meat in the diet” indicts the very BEEF-EX campaign Jane is heading up; the increase in meat consumption can be linked to the marketing of meat to Japan.

Lara and Dyann’s episode becomes a turning point for the novel and a primary illustration of disruption of the cultural and material toxic entanglement. It is Lara and Dyann’s show that leads Akiko to the realization that there are alternatives to family living as resistance to the white, heteronormative, patriarchal structure. Akiko embarks on a voyage of self-discovery and flees her emotionally and physically abusive marriage—in which she tellingly is forced to eat BEEF-EX meat which makes her vomit (materially toxic). She travels to the U.S. where she seeks out and is housed by Dyann and Lara. Akiko’s actions showcase the power of Jane’s disruption of the transnational transmission of cultural toxicity (and material toxicity as she will no longer be forced to consume this meat). Further, as Jane discovers the toxic effects BEEF-EX meat is having on bodies at home and abroad, she halts work for the show (she is fired) and begins to edit footage to prove Dyann’s statements. Her documentary is released and gains an onslaught of media attention. The results of this attention to the hazards of BEEF-EX meat are not delineated, but it is implied that Jane has also disrupted the transmission of these material toxins. Thus, what began as the desire to disrupt the flow of cultural toxins from the U.S. to Japan results in the disruption of the flow of material toxins along the same trajectory as well. This brings to the fore the entangled nature of discursive and material toxicity: disrupting any part of this entanglement will cause a ripple effect that ultimately disrupts the entire web of

toxicity. Ozeki puts to use the entanglement of cultural and material toxins to disrupt white heteronormative discourses through the disruption of material toxins: the revelation of material toxins in meat is paired with a televised exposure to a non-heteronormative, interracial couple which works to stem the flow of these entangled material and cultural toxins.

The passage detailing the Japanese film crew's reaction to Wal-Mart and the cultural toxins peddled overseas by BEEF-EX work in tandem to expose the ills of global capitalism and illustrates the power of the Wal-Mart/BEEF-EX double to open up a critique of these ills. The manufacturing of desire through endless aisles of available goods at Wal-Mart is used to create a feeling of want in BEEF-EX's Japanese housewives. BEEF-EX's marketing campaign launched through the show *My American Wife!* entices these wives to buy and consume American meat. This American meat is laden with growth hormones and abortive drugs that are particularly harmful to women's bodies, visible through Rosie's premature development, and invisible except through medical equipment for many others, including Jane. The toxic discourse of marketing, which "feeds the very worst kind of individualism possible in American life—a self-centered, infantilizing consumerist ethos that seeks immediate satisfaction that is never fully apprehended" (Massengill 36) facilitates the movement of material toxins found in meat across national borders. This form of toxic transmission is particularly insidious in that its consumers unwittingly, yet willingly invite the material toxins into their bodies: these consumers could ostensibly avoid the poisoning altogether yet are persuaded to invite them in through campaigns concerned only with capital gain. Ozeki's fictional account of this real-world travesty brings attention to this issue of utmost importance in our neoliberal moment, where the world faces deregulation of the international exchange of goods and the privatization of many industries that were previously controlled by government agencies. Within this global capitalist system, it is

imperative that we pay attention to, and attempt to eliminate, both local and transnational transmissions of material toxins through the toxic discourses that encourage us to willingly take them in.

**Pesticide Potatoes and PR Promotion: Toxic Entanglements in *All Over Creation***

While Ozeki centers the action and commentary in *My Year of Meats* around BEEF-EX's advertising campaign deployed through *My American Wife!,* in *All Over Creation* (2003) she shifts the focus to marketing's public relations (PR) arm, specifically crisis management, similar to Thomas King's critique in *The Back of the Turtle.* Further, throughout the novel, her anti-establishment characters calling themselves The Seeds of Resistance engage in what cultural critic Mark Dery terms *subvertising*: "the process of subverting advertisements to spoof, parody, satirize and flip the meaning of messages found in commercial advertising" (artsandculture). These actions push back against advertising and marketing's manipulation of consumer desire through the bold dissemination of otherwise unknown information about harmful aspects of products such as potatoes and milk. This exposes the toxic entanglement of advertising narratives and material toxicity and puts more control back into the hands of the consumer.

Through the interplay between mega-corporation crisis management personnel and grassroots resistance, Ozeki paints a vivid picture of both the power and deception of corporate marketing narratives and key strategies used to disrupt these narratives. That The Seeds of Resistance actively disrupt messages denying the toxicity of typical American foods reveals the toxic entanglement between advertising and material toxicity. *All Over Creation* follows the return of Yumi Fuller (or Yummy for the white folks who cannot pronounce her name) to Liberty Falls in Power County, Idaho following the news that her father is dying. Yumi—the daughter of a white father, Lloyd, and Japanese mother, Momoko—had left and not returned

since high school after her history teacher Elliot Rhodes seduced her, got her pregnant, and instructed her to have an abortion. This shamed her conservative Christian father and she fled, eventually ending up in Pahoa, Hawaii and mothering three children from three different fathers of varying ethnic backgrounds. Her childhood best friend, Cassie Unger (now Quinn), who called Yumi back to her parents' place, and her husband Will bought the Fuller farm after Lloyd began experiencing health issues, but included a clause that the Fullers can live in the house and have five acres until they pass. Cass has been taking care of the Fullers (Momoko has dementia and Lloyd multiple bouts with cancer and heart attacks) and needs Yumi's help—home care will not drive out far enough to do the job. Will and Cass have been trying to have a baby for years but have been unsuccessful, experiencing multiple miscarriages. Cass has battled breast cancer as well (her mother also died of breast cancer), and her and Will are suspicious that her ailments and their inability to carry a child to term have to do with pesticide exposure. Will decides to plant Cynaco's (a thinly veiled Monsanto's) NuLife (thinly veiled NewLeaf) potatoes which are spliced with Bt, an insecticide, in order to cut pesticide use but is unsure about what to believe about them. Meanwhile, a small band of hippies calling themselves The Seeds of Resistance have converted a Winnebago—the "Spudnik"—to biodiesel and are making their way across the country spreading awareness about the dangers of genetically modified foods. They discover Lloyd's literature against monocrops and agribusiness, favoring his wife Momoko's diverse seed saving and distributing business instead, and arrive on the farm to make Lloyd their guru. Though Lloyd does not normally take kindly to hippie types, he ends up becoming fond of them as they move in to take care of him and the land, doing a much better job than Yumi. The conservative Christian and the anti-GMO gang form an unlikely alliance against big business in general and Cynaco in particular, the representative of which is none other than Yumi's statutory

rapist, Elliot Rhodes, once again pointing to the interconnection between capitalist gain and violence against women.[33] After performing multiple "actions," The Seeds' activism culminates in a Fourth of July "Idaho Potato Party" on the Fuller ranch, where The Seeds pull up Will's NuLife potatoes (they forewarn him and reimburse him) and The Seeds are arrested. One of The Seeds, an adolescent from Montreal named Charmey, is pregnant by the newest recruit, a seventeen-year-old ironically named Frank Purdue. After the Potato Party, Charmey gives birth under Cass's care (Cass convinces the officers she needs to stay out of jail), the Spudnik blows up unexpectedly (likely due to tampering with it by various members of the community) and Charmey is killed. Frank decides to give the baby to Cass and Will to raise. Yumi and Lloyd reconcile, then Lloyd passes and Yumi takes her mom and the kids back to Pahoa, but not before The Seeds set up an online distribution channel to enable Momoko's seeds to continue being distributed and planted. Among the many complex relationships Ozeki sets up in the novel, the relationships between pesticide use and GMOs, corporate interests and individual farmer interests, grassroots activism and marketing tactics reveal the toxic entanglement of marketing discourse and material toxicity. They further demonstrate the ways the perpetuation of this entanglement can be disrupted through tactics such as subvertising.

My exploration of crisis management and subvertising in the novel adds to an already robust conversation surrounding Ozeki's work in general and *All Over Creation* in particular. Scholars have performed skillful analysis of the novel in regards to human hubris (Ueki), anxieties around transgenics (Wallace; McHugh), the rhetorics of anti-GMO environmental

[33] Or perhaps not too unlikely of an alliance according to Molly Wallace, who argues that the anti-GMO terminator seed debate shares much in common in the novel with pro-life discourse (sanctity of life narratives) to which Lloyd subscribes. Further, Anahita Rouyan argues that, similar to many Christian attitudes, anti-GMO discourses are rooted in Western, patriarchal, anthropocentric conceptions of nature in which humans ultimately have the say over the feminized earth.

utopianism and techno-utopianism (Rouyan), hospitality (Wallace), authenticity (Kalejahi), race and difference (Garrigós; Poulsen), chaos as resistance (Spoth and Warner), environmental justice (Poulsen; Kalejahi), ecofeminism (Garrigós), and women's bodies (whether violence against them or in their reproductive roles)(Schoeffel). Though this chapter incorporates many of these themes, especially environmental justice and rhetoric, it is unique in its sustained analysis of the role of advertising and its entanglement with material toxicity in the novel. Further, this chapter posits The Seeds' resistance in the form of subvertising as a heretofore unexplored push-back to powerful marketing messages in the novel.

**"you'd think you could actually *kill* someone with public relations": Toxic PR Narratives**

In *All Over Creation*, marketing messages are manipulated and controlled through Cynaco's outside public relations (PR) company hired to handle their crisis management, Duncan & Wiley (D&W), with Elliot Rhodes on the Idaho potato case.[34] Ozeki's use of a separate PR company works to focus attention on toxic narratives themselves in addition to the mega-corporations that produce them, rather than on one sinister company. This highlights the pervasive nature of these messages which have toxic material effects on humans and the environment. In Geek's—one of the The Seeds'—explanation of what D&W does, he states, "They specialize in damage control and crisis management, only they call it 'solution imaging' and 'media intervention' and 'constituency building.' Obfuscating crap…. They've spun for everyone from big tobacco to the petrochemical conglomerates, and now it's the gene giants. Basically, they suck" (179). In this one PR company, then, "obfuscating crap" is spun for companies destroying everything from human health to the health of the planet. It also clearly puts biotech companies in the same category as big tobacco and petrol in terms of how

[34] See previous chapter on Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle* for an in-depth explanation and examples of crisis management theory and strategies.

dangerous the effects of their products are, both in Geek's personal opinion as well as (being guilty) by association. As evidence of the through line for these companies, Elliot successfully wraps up his time with big tobacco to move into biotech (though admittedly potatoes were not his choice, rather, his superior's).

Ozeki's focus on the logic behind D&W's "spun" narratives rather than an individual corporate narrative is articulated well through Elliot's explanations of what he does and why he does it. He informs his lover, '"Tobacco is old, Jillie. Biotech is cutting edge. It's just a matter of finding the right angle…"' (167). In other words, he wants to be on the front lines of whatever is most controversial, which gives him power. Later, when Yumi asks what happened to the great, caring history teacher she once knew and asks how it is possible to now be "sort of a reporter" as he tells her, Elliot replies, '"What you think of as history is just someone's spin of a set of events. It's only a matter of who's more skillful at getting his version on the public record…I write stories. Most reporters approach history retroactively. My approach is more preemptive"' (226). Elliot's response underlines once again that it is not about authority in particular, but rather about the narratives themselves. What comes to be known as the truth about an event—whether it be an historical event or poisons being released into the environment—ultimately comes down to who tells a better story. Elliot's job is to find that story "preemptively"; that is, before the public has the chance to form their own opinions and tell their own stories about a given crisis.

Elliot's preemptive storytelling about cutting edge biotech centers on the launch of Cynaco's (again, clearly meant to be read as Monsanto's) NuLife (NewLeaf) potato which has been met with extreme resistance by protestors. D&W's tactic is to frame the protestors as pests to the industry, evoking feelings of fear and a protective instinct to combat the anti-GMO

narratives. The potato, listed as "*a U.S. Government Certified* ***PESTICIDE!!!***" (183) rather than a food, has *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) toxins built into its DNA to kill the Colorado Potato Beetle—the Burbank/Russet potato's most prevalent attacker—immediately after they eat the potato leaves. The NuLife potatoes' reputation has been further damaged by a *New York Times* article featuring a photo of a monstrous Mr. Potato Head, the effects of which are beginning to harm profit margins as companies become wary of buying a product involving so much controversy. D&W speechwriters give Elliot a speech entitled "*Political Activists or Just Plain Old Pests?*" to be presented at the Potato Promotions Council meeting in Pocatello, outside of Idaho Falls. In it, he is to state, "Whatever you call them, their politics are familiar: anticorporate, antigovernment, antiglobalization. And most offensive of all, anti-American… the target of their opposition is progress" (165). The repeated use of "anti" in framing the protesters' political stance is a familiar tactic used in any polarized debate to put the opposition in a negative light, as in the difference between naming someone "anti-abortion" as opposed to "pro-life'—these protesters could just have easily been called "pro-small-farm" or "pro-organic." The culmination of the accusation against The Seeds and other protestors is that they are "anti-American," which considering that America is essentially run by multi-national corporations in bed with the government, to be anti-corporate/government/globalization, one would then be anti-American, and considering the extreme cost of "progress" dating back from the foundation of America to the present, one might also consider the grassroots protestors anti-progress as well. However, to Elliot's audience, the farmers who rely on corporations and the government for their livelihood, this clearly makes The Seeds the enemy.

The presence of the protestors themselves at the Potato Promotions event—set up as the enemy—works to build momentum for Elliot's story that the Seeds and the like are attempting to

take down the industry, and in the process, these farmers' livelihood. The protestors' attendance gives the enemy a body, albeit a costumed body, on which farmers can focus their anger. One of the Seeds, likely Geek, dresses up in the demented Mr. Potato Head costume and yells antibiotech slogans as Elliot comes to give his speech. The narrator relates: "Elliot seized the microphone. 'You see,' he said smoothly, gesturing to the blundering spud and his cadres as they were hustled away by hotel security. 'This is precisely why your industry needs our help with pest control'" (181). He surmises next:

> He couldn't have done better if he'd planted the potato himself…. The presence of the enemy seemed to galvanize the growers, underscoring the subtext of Elliot's message: that their industry was under attack and they needed D&W's crisis-management services. He made a note to suggest to Duncan that they start paying protesters to show up at events like these. If he could find out who they were, some members of this group might even be recruited. There was nothing like a good confrontation to get the blood pumping. (181)

Elliot is prepared to use anything and everything to his advantage, and seeing the reaction garnered by the giant potato, he intends to contrive this situation in the future to add credence to his tale. Elliot's fuels the fire of polarization, taking the focus off the pesticide issue at hand and redirecting it toward a common enemy he has created through toxic rhetoric.

Elliot's penchant for using people and situations to spin his story—just as he used the young Yumi to satisfy his sexual desires—come up time and again in the novel, with Elliot proposing to use anyone from Shoshone spokespeople to Will, "a Vietnam vet, for chrissakes" (278) to bolster Cynaco's reputation and take the heat off the NuLifes. These moments reveal the toxic entanglement of discursive and material toxins as the narratives the companies produce

allow for the continued poisoning of the planet. In one scene, Elliot reads a newspaper at the café about a local tribe suing potato farmers due to groundwater contamination. The narrator relates, "He'd been pressing Cynaco to support InterTribal Agricultural Councils. Maybe he could even get a Shoshone spokesperson to endorse the NuLife—fewer pesticides mean clean water for our people, that sort of thing. Wisdom. Heritage. Indians always made for positive imaging" (188). Elliot's formulation of the impact of an endorsement from a Shoshone spokesperson invokes the Ecological Indian myth that due to Indigenous people's intimate relationship to the earth, they are all natural environmentalists and conservationists. Elliot plans to draw on this stereotype to bolster the reputation of the NuLife potato: if the Ecological Indian endorses it, who wouldn't want to buy it? There is, of course, a long history of corporations using Native people's images and symbols in an effort to make their product appear more "natural," pure, and closer to "the Earth"—and thus to sell more of these products—(Proctor & Gamble, Land-o-Lakes, Hamm's beer, e.g.).[35] The problem with the Ecological Indian, as Indigenous Studies scholar Kyle Keeler so aptly puts it, is that "it flattens complex relationships, systems of governance, and societal structures, simplifying and romanticizing Native peoples, rendering them more caricature than human" ("How Wikipedia"). Elliot and his corporate giant client clearly care nothing for these Indigenous people harmed by the runoff from pesticides likely manufactured by their company; they simply want to use a caricatured, ecological image to endorse their untested product. This moment points to the ways mega-corporations use toxic messages about Indigenous people that lump them into one homogenized category to promote products that will poison the very people the companies use to promote the product.

[35] For a more complete list of brands that capitalize on Native American images and themes and a more complete explanation of the ways companies deploy them, see Thomas King's *The Inconvenient Indian* and *The Truth About Stories* (mentioned also in the previous chapter).

Further, Elliot representing Cynaco attempts to use Will, potato farmer and Vietnam vet, for positive publicity by painting him as a victim and capitalizing on his supposedly quintessential Americanness. This true American has been directly harmed by the toxicity of Cynaco's product line, starting in Vietnam when he was exposed to Agent Orange and up through his present daily exposure to GroundUp (RoundUp). If Elliot succeeds in getting Will on his side, the story Elliot aims to disseminate about him will only work to perpetuate the poisoning of farmers and consumers. Elliot, however, pulls Will in by telling him the exact opposite: if he helps Cynaco he will be helping not only fellow farmers, but the world. After The Seeds rip out Will's NuLife potatoes, Elliot tells him, "We just want to see you recoup your losses, and in return we're asking you to help farmers everywhere by taking a stand to ensure that others in your position aren't victimized by this type of criminal mischief in the future" (313). Elliot proposes this as a win-win situation for Will: he gets to recover his losses *and* help other farmers in the process. Framed in this manner, who wouldn't agree to Cynaco's terms? Elliot further relates to both Will and Cass, "'Cynaco's not a monster…. Neither am I. There are millions of starving people out there. We're just trying to feed the world'" (315). This type of rhetoric occludes the consequences of the toxic methods the company uses in the process (not to mention they are clearly in it for profit and not "just…to feed the world"). In a conversation Will has with fellow farmers, he reveals the real material consequences of interacting with Cynaco's products used to supposedly feed the world: "In Vietnam, the government said spray and we sprayed…. Now I got this numbness in my arms that the doc says may be Agent Orange, only he can't tell for sure because of the exposure factor on the farm…. The wife's had a bout with cancer…. Mother-in-law died of it. Old Fuller down the road had part of his colon removed…. What it boils down to is we're sick of chemical inputs…" (219-20). Will's dialogue both

articulates the deadly effects of the chemicals he has been forced to interact with—by the government in the former scenario and by the way the industry operates in the latter—and points to the difficulty in proving corporate culpability of these deadly effects, a common and at times seemingly insurmountable obstacle in the fight for environmental justice. In asking Will to testify against the Seeds, Elliot asks him to help perpetuate a narrative that will have deadly consequences. Perhaps Cass's assessment of Seed activist Lilith's perception of marketing is correct: "you'd think you could actually *kill* someone with public relations" (397). The narrator ominously states, "Maybe you can" as the intro to the following section where Elliot packs his bags to leave Idaho.

When D&W realizes its crisis management tactics are not having the desired outcome in the U.S. as they are consistently disrupted by protestors and the media, they decide to shift their focus overseas, capitalizing on a narrative of corporate goodwill with their Golden Rice campaign.[36] If they can spin the story well enough, they hope for much less resistance, resulting in an increase in sales and thus further distribution of toxic consequences. Duncan, Elliot's boss, tells Elliot in the meeting where he fires him for losing Will as a witness: "They [Cynaco] want to take a step back and retool their entire presentation, targeting it to Asia and the Third World…. I've suggested 'Enlightened Compassion' as the motivating theme to drive the new campaign, which will focus exclusively on the human health benefits of GE crops, like Golden Rice and the other pharmaceutically enhanced lines"' (343-4). As with the thinly veiled NewLeaf potato and RoundUp, this instance also refers to a real-life Monsanto campaign. In this case, it points to Monsanto's hand in the distribution of Golden Rice—interestingly Ozeki does

[36] This turn by mega-corporations to a new overseas market after receiving pushback for harmful products is reminiscent of the BEEF-EX campaign in *My Year of Meats* aimed at Japan, with the beef industry needing to go in a new direction in light of the European Economic Community banning the import of American beef due it being treated with hormones.

not give this a pseudonym—to poorer countries in which Monsanto decided to provide its seeds modified to address vitamin A deficiency in developing countries for free and seemingly did not patent the product due to the positive press they were receiving for doing so. However, as Molly Wallace puts it, "In the context of *All Over Creation*…'Enlightened Compassion' is corporate spin, not genuine humanitarianism" (173). Once again Ozeki focuses on the narrative—or as Duncan calls it, their "presentation"—which, as in the use of Native American spokespeople and Vietnam veterans to gain the public's confidence and sympathy, is nothing more than a ploy to build trust despite the possible side effects of what their product may bring.

Ozeki published *All Over the Creation* in a period of much controversy over the efficacy of Golden Rice, with those opposing the rice accusing it of actually causing malnutrition instead of alleviating it. Critics pointed to repercussions for both human health and environmental health. For example, anti-GMO scholar and activist Vandana Shiva argued that the widespread planting of Golden Rice stifles biodiversity, uses exorbitant amounts of water, and is not only ineffective in treating that for which it was created—vitamin A deficiency—it can actually exacerbate it. She went so far as to claim that Golden Rice is "a hoax, and will bring further dispute to plant genetic engineering…" (np). This has since been disproven; however, at the time, many critics aligned with Shiva's widely disseminated analysis of the Rice. Ozeki's Cynaco narrative, in the context of this Rice accused of being a "hoax," is therefore toxic. Ozeki critiques this narrative and its entanglement with materially toxic outcomes. Thus, in the novel, D&W's strategy to turn the public's eye from pesticide products to the "human health benefits" of their "Enlightened Compassion" products turns out to be yet another toxic entanglement. This narrative facilitates the movement of a product that was believed to deplete bodily and environmental resources.

**Talking Cows and Mutated Potato Heads: Disrupting Toxic Corporate Narratives through Brandalism and Subvertising**

The Seeds of Resistance and their activist community spread across the United States disrupt crisis management narratives, and thus, the dissemination of material toxins through subvertising, or "ad-busting." The Seeds "actions," as they are referred to throughout the novel, consistently mock big business's agendas, usually by coopting a well-known branded character or remaking branded labels on foods, and—illustrating the words of the Brandalism manifesto in the epilogue—work to "agitate, educate and facilitate those who want to challenge corporate power" (brandalism.ch). The Seeds incorporate a variety of tactics in various spaces to undermine advertising narratives, specifically around food.

Similar to the way Ozeki uses a PR firm to critique PR narratives rather than a single company narrative (while also clearly indicting a particular company), The Seeds take action against the entire idea of marketing in public spaces (in addition to specific advertisements). In an action most explicitly meant to "[bring] back the commons" taken over by corporate advertising, The Seeds head to San Francisco to join other resistors in "Guerilla gardening. Defiance farming. Radical acts of cultivation" (257), or an act of gardening on land that is not legally the gardener's to cultivate with the intention of beautification, providing food for those who need it, or making a political statement. The Seeds and friends plant a variety of fruit and nut trees in median strips, "Food for the people, the leader explained" (256), and throw seed bombs of native flowers over the fences of military housing. The leaders tell Frankie that they are "liberating traffic strips and other public land sites across the city"; '"We're hacking the landscape, dude…Bringing back the commons"' (256). The giving back of the space to the people can be seen in their act of using the land to grow free, healthy food for residents. Though

the rebel gardeners are not explicitly addressing a particular advertising campaign, their radical acts of cultivation undermine capitalism itself—whose voice is advertising—by providing free food (no profit) and biodiversity (as opposed to corporate monocrops) on land "owned" by the government.

A more blatant form of subvertising enacted by The Seeds occurs when the group covers every potato-based product in the freezer section of Stop-N-Save with bright orange, handmade biohazard stickers. In this instance, The Seeds manipulate well-recognized warning labels to subvertise the risks the packaging fails to communicate. The stickers sport Charmey's "illustration of a spud overlaid with the skull and crossbones. Underneath the graphic read a warning: DANGER! BIOHAZARD! THESE POTATOES MAY CONTAIN A GENETICALLY ENGINEERED PESTICIDE!" (149-50). Rather than changing the packaging itself into a sort of subvertisement to bring attention to marketing schemes, The Seeds essentially vandalize the packages by marring them with pictures of skulls and crossbones. This disrupts at least two of the well-know "Four P's" of marketing strategies: product and place (the other two being price and promotion). According to the American Marketing Association, "the four Ps of marketing is a marketing concept that summarizes the four key factors of any marketing strategy" (ama.org). This foundational marketing concept was first introduced by Harvard advertising professor Neil Borden in the 1950s and is still highly regarded in the industry as essential components for marketing success. The Seeds intervene with marketing strategies by undermining the otherwise enticing product labels—"Potato Zesties," "Twice Baked Potatoes, three different flavors," "Curly QQQ's"—graphically labeling them toxic (149-50). While marketers work to make the public aware of the product that should fulfill a consumer demand, The Seeds work to make the public aware that this product is not what companies purport it to be. In the words of Y, a Seed,

"Stop-N-Save shoppers deserve to know what puts the zest in their Zesties and the curl in their QQQ's" (151). In terms of place, which refers to both the type of store in which a product is sold and where within that store (or online site) sellers want their product to appear, The Seeds make sure it is their message that is positioned well and draws the consumer eye rather than the original packaging: "They stood back and admired their work. All the boxes and bags of potatoes, stacked on the freezer-section shelves, now carried safety-orange biohazard labels, permanently and prominently displayed on their sides, facing the consumer" (150). The Seeds coopt marketing schemes for their own purposes. As Klein points out, "The most sophisticated culture jams are…counter-messages that hack into a corporation's own method of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended" (281). The Seeds use marketing's packaging to their advantage in disseminating the truth about these products. The entanglement between the discursive and the material manifests itself in this scene as material stickers are used to cover up marketing images that send messages discursively to entice consumers to ingest material toxins. Marketing messages lure people—and especially those on a budget as evidenced by the name of the store, Stop-N-Save (as opposed to a Whole Foods, for example)—into ingesting harmful toxins they may not have otherwise. The Seeds use subvertising to disrupt this toxic entanglement in the hopes that consumers will decide against putting these harmful products into their bodies.

In another form of subvertising meant to curb consumer desire for toxic products, The Seeds dress up in a Daisy the Dairy Cow costume and a mutated Mr. Potato Head costume to disrupt the marketing narratives that milk and potatoes are healthy American foods. The Seeds use well-known, well-marketed images to catch consumers' attention and flip the message on its head. In a scene where Yumi is in a hurry to pick the kids up from school to get them to the

hospital to pick up Lloyd, Geek is dressed as Daisy the Dairy Cow handing out pamphlets revealing how dairy cows are treated and how that affects their milk. The costume has the desired effect of drawing affectionate attention from the children: At the sight of the cow, "Poo [Yumi's baby] started to clap his hands and bounce up and down" (132). As soon as Geek has the baby's attention, he addresses Yumi: '"My name's Daisy the Dairy Cow, and I'm here to tell you some very interesting facts about the milk your children drink…"' (132) at which point Yumi cuts him off. He assumes that because the baby is taken with the Cow, the mother will be receptive of his message. Yumi being in a hurry is not willing to be slowed down by his facts, but this does not stop another of The Seeds, Frankie, from handing a pamphlet to Yumi's oldest son Phoenix before he gets into the car, effectively getting their counter-advertisement into the hands of consumers.

The Seeds' choice to use Daisy to spread their message is strategic in that it both pulls on popular conceptions of dairy cows as propagated through advertising campaigns and references a well-known cloned dairy cow named Daisy. Using cartoon-like cows to sell dairy products dates to the early twentieth century, when the Borden company began using Elsie the Cow as an image to mitigate the public's growing concern over the size of the dairy industry. According to journalist William Hart, "The populace began to think of Borden and the other major dairies as money-grubbing oligopolies. To address this, Borden began to focus on a friendly advertising campaign that would make them look better in the public eye." He goes on to say that "[a]t the height of her career Elsie was noted as the most famous icon in America." The Seeds use the very iconic image that "was to give Borden a softer, more humane look" to prime consumers for their anti-corporate dairy information sheet, a sheet they hope will bring consumers back to the reality that these companies are in fact only in the business for financial gain at the cost of both

bovine and human health. Further, "Daisy the Dairy Cow" is the name given to the cloned dairy cow that was making headlines at the time of *All Over Creation*'s publication. In a 2001 article titled "Daisy the Cow Delivers a Cloning Achievement," readers learn of the first successful reproductive feat by a cloned cow, Daisy. Later, (after *All Over Creation*'s publication date), another Daisy has not only been cloned, but her milk has been genetically modified to get rid of a "whey-protein called beta-lactoglobulin, or BLG," to which approximately one in twelve infants are allergic. As Hannah Osborne from the *International Business Times* puts it, "New Zealand researchers are engineering a herd of mutant cows capable of producing high-protein milk with potentially hypo-allergenic properties." The same company that cloned the sheep Dolly in 1996, AgResearch, is responsible for the project. As The Seeds are fervently anti-biotech, their deployment of Daisy the Cow to both use as a recognizable icon and point to biotechnical intervention is a meaningful and successful means by which to distribute their disruptive narrative.

Phoenix and his six-year-old sister Ocean's reaction to the messages put out by Daisy the Cow attest to the effectiveness of disrupting toxic narratives which curb the flow of material toxins due to their entanglement. Ozeki details the reaction of the siblings to the pamphlet: '"Oh, *gross*," Phoenix said, picking up the flyer from the seat. "This is *so disgusting*!"…. "It's this stuff called bovine growth hormone, and they shoot up cows with it." "You mean like drugs?" Ocean asked. "Why do they do that?" "So the cows'll make more milk, stupid." …. "This overmilking leads to a condition called mastitis, resulting in open sores on the udders of cows…that leak puss and blood into the milk you drink"' (135). Given this incredibly strong reaction to the information they have just received, it is easy to conclude that neither of these children will be ingesting milk in the near future. While mass advertising by the dairy industry

creates desire for their product while masking the material toxins present in the product, The Seeds' grassroots subvertising campaign works to curb this desire and expose the truth of the product's contaminants. The toxic entanglement of advertising and material toxicity is effectively disrupted by the iconic Elsie/Daisy gone rogue.

The Seeds continue to disrupt toxic entanglements through their deployment of a Seed dressed in a mutated Mr. Potato Head costume at potato promotions events and other actions of protest. The long-popular and famous children's toy is coopted to spoof genetically modified potatoes, sending the message that these potatoes are part technology, part food, and totally monstrous. The Seeds turn Mr. Potato Head into a sort of potato cyborg (if I can call it that), with a "screwy electrical coil spiraling crookedly out from the top of his head" (181) and later with "two bolts stuck in his neck and a badly stitched scar on his forehead" that Lilith added (258). Further, this Potato is wearing "a burlap contraption, held up by suspenders, which looked like a giant diaper" (87), which recalls the diapered Spudee potato brand icon featured in the novel. The narrator describes Will's cap: "The cap, from the Spudee Seed Potato Company, was decorated with a cartoon of a cute potato in a diaper. The company's motto was 'We handle 'em like babies'" (96). What a statement this must make for the locals, well aware of this ad, to see a giant, man-sized diapered potato with scars and wires poking out from what should be a flawless potato skin. It certainly undermines Spudee Seed's marketing team's attempts to make its potatoes look cute and harmless, instead pointing out the reality of what these potato seeds contain.

The Seeds use this diapered Potato Head for everything from yelling anti-biotech slogans at the Potato Promotions Counsel, to pie-ing the CEO of Cynaco,[37] to dancing him in when they

---

[37] This is reminiscent of Bill Gates getting a cream pie in the face in Belgium in 1999.

shut down the local Thrifty Foods store to educate consumers on the dangers of GMOs. The use of Mr. Potato Head as a costume and the rest of The Seeds engaging their bodies as a physical blockade around the Potato at Thrifty Foods illustrate a decidedly embodied means of subvertising: The Seeds use their bodies for anti-corporate messaging. Mr. Potato Head shows up at Thrifty Foods around Christmas time to challenge holiday shopper's assumptions about the foods they are buying using the famous children's toy to draw positive attention and is not quite as monstrous as he has appeared in other actions: "Now, Mr. Potato Head was not just any old spud. He was a sweet, sporty potato, friendly and dapper. He had big, googly eyes and lozenge-shaped ears, as pink as Pepto-Bismol. He wore a green leisure suit and a Santa Claus hat perched on top of his bald, orbicular head. He hung his cane over one arm and did a spudly little soft-shoe on his spindly green legs" (89). Geek as Mr. Potato Head adapts to the current context, Christmas time at a local store, artistically rendering himself relevant and attractive in the moment. As soon as he has the shoppers' attention, he positions his cart in a central location, "then danced along the aisles, distributing paper daisies and leaflets. By now the children, tired of waiting for their moms, were laughing and clapping. They ran to him and tugged on his burlap hide" (89-90). This interaction with the children is quite an advantage over postering over corporate images as subvertising movements like Brandalism do. Though posters will garner a larger viewership than the small circle around the children's icon, this experience with Mr. Potato Head will likely have a much greater lasting impact on the audience of kids and parents. This embodied resistance allows for a physical, material connection not offered by other means of resistance. The children are actually able to reach out and tug on the mock Spudee Potato diaper. Being that the mission is to stem the flow of toxins to the body through their message, this embodied form of resistance is not only relevant, but effective. The rest of The Seeds begin

passing out leaflets as well, encircling the Potato with shopping carts to slow the police down when they inevitably arrive. This human blockade succeeds in delaying their arrest and thus prolongs the duration in which they are able to disseminate their message. The Seeds' corporeal resistance to corporate messaging that leads to material toxins entering the body illuminates this toxic entanglement and disrupts the harmful narrative that facilitates the flow of these toxins.

Though The Seeds are decidedly not family friendly in the conservative, Christian formulation of the ideal—they finance their operation through vegetable porn and promote premarital sex among their members—their tactics prove highly effective for drawing children, and thus their parents, in to hear their message. This subsequently disrupts PR narratives. The Seeds use a version of the family-friendly, cute, diapered Spudee image to flip it on its head, combining its image with the well-loved children's toy. Not only is Mr. Potato Head the dancer friendly, he is familiar; one feels inclined to trust him. Once the spud has everyone's attention, he grabs a microphone and starts educating the crowd. He does a magic trick where he turns a tomato into a flounder, then another where he turns a potato into a large spray can of household insecticide. He then launches into his point: "This, my friends, is the perverted magic of biotechnology…. But genetic engineering is no joke, not when it comes to the food you feed your children" (92). He goes on to tell the crowd about the potatoes spliced with bacterial pesticide and presents a long list of GMO products of which the consumers are likely unaware. He concludes by shouting: "There's been no long-term testing of [GMO products] safety, but the government doesn't make them put warning labels on these foods…. Without labels, you don't even know what you are buying and feeding your families! … Your children are at risk! Their futures—the future of *life itself!*" (92-3). The surrounding patrons of Thrifty Foods are captivated by Mr. Potato Head's message and begin giving the items in their shopping carts a second

thought. Mr. Potato Head uses a PR-like tactic here to change the corporate narrative. Like the way Elliot painted The Seeds as anti-American and claimed NuLife potatoes are perfectly safe to a room full of captive listeners, Geek paints GMOs as the enemy, claiming they are putting children's lives at risk. Both are extreme narratives; Geek reacts to Elliot's extreme claims with a response of the same caliber, pushing radically against PR messaging. Once again the seeds coopt what should be a cute, friendly icon to draw attention to biotechnical interventions and disrupt the narrative that these foods are safe for human consumption, entirely subverting D&W's PR narratives.

The mutated Mr. Potato Head is quite successful in disrupting Cynaco's and other biotech company's narrative that pesticide-laden potatoes are safe for human consumption in the novel, illustrating well the way advertising messages and material toxicity are entangled. Evidence of this success comes early in the novel when Elliot's boss, Duncan, puts him on the NuLife case. The Seed's Potato Head has made it onto the cover of the *New York Times Magazine*. This creates an immediate need for PR intervention: "We're beefing up our Cynaco task force in response to all the recent protests. What we had in mind was developing a proactive management strategy geared toward their NuLife Potato line" (83-4). The PR firm is clearly nervous about this negative publicity and prepares the previously discussed counterattack. The ultimate testimony to the efficacy of this disruption, however, comes late in the novel when Duncan reveals to Elliot (as he is firing him) that Cynaco has decided to terminate the NuLife potato line: "Several of Cynaco's top french-fry and snack-food processors both here and in Canada are buckling under the pressure from the anti-GMO forces and are insisting on nonmodified, identity-protected products…. Cynaco is planning to terminate its NuLife potato line" (343). This leads to farmers not even planting the seeds they have remaining for these potatoes: "I'm

not going to plant them if people don't want to buy them" Will tells Cass (411). Thus, the aggressive subvertising campaign launched by The Seeds of Resistance has successfully disrupted Cynaco's aggressive advertising campaign. This, in turn, has disrupted the distribution of pesticide-laden potatoes; these pesticides will no longer be consumed. The toxic entanglement of advertising narratives and pesticides has been disrupted: Mr. Potato Head has ended NuLife's life.

Ozeki's depiction of The Seeds of Resistance highlights how these environmental justice novels resonate with a long history in the U.S. about disrupting corporate messages. The theoretical work these authors engage through their fiction helps us understand the true extent and implications of these forms of ongoing resistance.

**Conclusion**

Through *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation*, Ozeki reveals the culpability of toxic advertising and public relations narratives in the facilitation of the cultural and material toxic entanglement to those exposed to advertising's messages. Ozeki's depiction of Wal-Mart as repository for mass consumerism and perpetrator of violence against women alongside BEEF-EX's transnational campaign to promote the consumption of (tainted) American meats to Japanese housewives serves as a powerful literary double that exposes the egregious ways marketing works to facilitate the movement of entangled cultural and material toxins both locally and abroad. Ozeki's representation of public relations firm Duncan & Wiley exposes the way PR narratives operate to obfuscate the truth of the real or potential danger of untested transgenic products, allowing these products to continue to be sold and consumed despite these dangers.

At the same time, Ozeki illustrates the active disruption of these toxic narratives—and through entanglement, material toxins—by reworking corporate marketing tactics to tell a

different story. In *My Year of Meats,* Jane uses the very footage she is supposed to be garnering for *My American Wife!* to expose the truth behind the meat industry the show promotes. She uses film, BEEF-EX's marketing outlet of choice for peddling American meat to Japanese consumers, to reveal the toxic effects this meat is having on women and girls. In *All Over Creation*, Ozeki's Seeds of Resistance turn corporate packaging into warning labels, children's well-marketed icons into truth-disseminators, and popular biotech cows into leaflet distributors. These disruptions through Ozeki's fiction not only expose readers to the same truths of the industry the characters in her novels are exposed to, but the disruptions educate readers on possible tools for disrupting toxic narratives as well.

Set in conversation with Helena María Viramontes and Thomas King's environmental justice texts which center advertising and marketing in their depictions of material toxicity which unevenly burdens people of color and Indigenous populations, Ozeki's work foregrounds the particular violence toward women in her critique of toxic entanglements. While Viramontes's protagonists are unilaterally women in the texts in this study and her critiques are decidedly gendered, and while King engages gender critiques as well, Ozeki represents the violence against women in her novels much more graphically: one cannot turn a blind eye to the horror inflicted upon women in this capitalist system abetted by advertising. Each chapter of this project sheds new light on the complex, co-constitutive nature of cultural and material toxicity, revealed through advertising, as it is filtered through three very different environmental justice authors' critiques of these toxic entanglements.

## Works Cited

"About Us" and "Our History." *Walmart*, www.corporate.walmart.com/our-story/our-history. Accessed 17 May 2018.

Black, Shameem. “Fertile Cosmofeminism: Ruth L. Ozeki and Transnational Reproduction.” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2004, pp. 226-256.

*Brandalism.* www.brandalism.ch. Accessed 04 Jan 2023.

Cheng, Emily. “Meat and the Millennium: Transnational Politics of Race and Gender in Ruth Ozeki's My Year of Meats.” *Journal of Asian American Studies*, vol.12, no. 2, 2009, pp.191-220.

Di Chiro, Giovanna. “Polluted Politics? Confronting Toxic Discourse, Sex Panic, and Eco-Normativity.” *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire,* edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, Bruce Erickson, Indiana UP, 2010.

Fish, Cheryl J. "The Toxic Body Politic: Ethnicity, Gender, and Corrective Eco-Justice in Ruth Ozeki's My Year of Meats and Judith Helfand and Daniel Gold's Blue Vinyl." *MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2009, pp. 43-62.

Gamber, John Blair. *Positive Pollutions and Cultural Toxins: Waste and Contamination in Contemporary U.S. Ethnic Literatures*. U of Nebraska P, 2012.

Garrigós, Cristina. “Eating, Ethics, and Strangers: Hospitality and Food in Ruth Ozeki’s Novels.” *Critical Approaches to Ethnic American Literature,* 2020, pp. 134-53.

---. “Mixed and Proud of It: Women and Meat in Ruth Ozeki’s Fiction.” *Estudios de Mujeres, Volumen VII,* Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2010, pp. 65-77.

Harris, Summer. “Environmental Justice Storytelling: Sentiment, Knowledge, and the Body in Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats.*” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment,* vol. 24, no. 3, 2017, pp. 457-476.

Kalejahi, Saeed. “Politics of Food, the Culinary and Ethnicity in Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meat* [sic.]: An Ecocritical Reading.” *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature,* vol. 1, no. 1, May 2012, pp. 82-89.

Keeler, Kyle. “How Wikipedia Erases Indigenous History. Native Editors Are Fighting Back.” *Slate. https://slate.com/technology/2023/02/wikipedia-native-american-history-settler-colonialism.html*. 02 Feb 2023. Accessed 27 Feb 2023.

King, Thomas. *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America.* U of Minnesota P, 2012.

---. *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative.* U of Minnesota P, 2003.

Klein, Naomi. *No Logo: Brands, Globalization, Resistance.* Directed by Sut Jhally. Media Education Foundation, 2003.

Massengill, Rebekah Peeples. “Wal-Mart Wars: Moral Populism in the Twenty-First Century.” *NYU Press,* 2013, pp. 19-42.

McHugh, Susan. “Flora, Not Fauna: GM Culture and Agriculture.” *Literature and Medicine,* vol. 26, no. 1, spring 2007, pp. 25-54.

Ozeki, Ruth. *All Over Creation.* Penguin Books, 2003.

---. *My Year of Meats,* Viking, 1998.

Poulsen, Melissa. “Hybrid Veggies & Mixed Kids: Ecocriticism and Race in Ruth Ozeki’s Pastoral Heartlands.” *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies,* vol. 2, 2011, pp. 22-9.

Ray, Sarah Jaquette. *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture.*” U of Arizona P, 2013.

Rouyan, Anahita. “Radical Acts of Cultivation: Ecological Utopianism and Genetically Modified Organisms in Ruth Ozeki’s *All Over Creation. Utopian Studies,* vol. 26, no. 1, 2015, pp. 143-59.

Schoeffel, Melissa. “Thinking through the Pregnant Body in Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation*.” *Maternal Conditions: Reading Kingsolver, Castillo, Erdrich, and Ozeki*, Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 107-150.

Shiva, Vandana. “The ‘Golden Rice’ Hoax: When Public Relations Replaces Science.” *GM Watch.* *https://www.gmwatch.org/en/news/archive/2000/8831-golden-rice-hoax-when-public-relations-replace-science-26102000.* 26 October 2000. Accessed 22 Feb 2023.

Spoth, Daniel and Cleo Warner. “The Seeds of Chaos: Spontaneity as Resistance in the Work of Ruth Ozeki.” *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture*, vol. 14, no. 2, fall 2015.

Ueki, Teruyo. “Reading the American Landscape with a Double Gaze: On Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation. Asian American Literature Association Journal in Japan,* no. 11, 2005, pp. 90-95.

Vance, Sandra Stringer, and Scott, Roy Vernon. *Wal-Mart: A History of Sam Walton's Retail Phenomenon.* Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994.

Wallace, Molly. “Discomfort Food: Analogy, Biotechnology, and Risk in Ruth Ozeki’s *All Over Creation*.” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory,* vol. 67, no. 4, winter 2011, pp. 155-181.

---. "Ruth Ozeki's (Agri) Cultural Politics." *Novel Ecologies: Nature, Culture, and Capital in Contemporary U.S. Fiction and Theory.* U of Washington, 2006. Dissertation.

Xu, Wenying. "The Crisis of Regeneration in Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation.*" *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.,* vol. 45, no. 1, spring 2020, pp. 73-94.

## V. AFTERWORD:

## TOWARD AN INVESTIGATION OF TOXIC ENTANGLEMENTS IN GOVERNMENT-FUNDED PROGRAMS

After my husband died, leaving me with two small children, I sat alone in my room watching a video that shaped the research I do today. This video was required to receive Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits. The goal of the video was to teach moms how to get their children to drink three cups of milk per day. If your children have an aversion to milk, the video states, you can sneak the dairy recommendation in through cheese and yogurt. The mother in the video is a Black woman who is serving her Black son and his Asian American friend their milk. Studies show that approximately 60-80% of Black people are lactose intolerant while up to 95% of Asian Americans suffer from this condition ("Lactose Intolerance").[38] Many of the women in the WIC program with me were Black, Asian, Native American, and Latinx. Data from the government at this time reveals that nearly 50% of the women in this program are from these backgrounds.[39] This video, funded by the dairy industry, promoted its product as healthy without regard to its health consequences. Aside from lactose intolerance, as revealed in *My Year of Meats*, cows are injected with a number of hormones and antibiotics, and this gets expelled into their milk (Center for Food Safety). Further, milk is cited to be one of greatest sources of saturated fat in children's diets and can lead to childhood obesity and other complications

[38] "Lactose Intolerance: Information for Health Care Providers." *US Department of Health and Human Services*. Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/documents/NICHD_MM_Lactose_FS_rev.pdf. Accessed September 17, 2021

[39] https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/wic-racial-ethnic-group-enrollment-data-2016

("Health Concerns").[40] At the time WIC allowed for the purchase of dairy or soy milk only: the industry wanted to make sure it was dairy (though it is important to note that the soybean industry is also subsidized by the government). In this moment, I realized that women of color—and women in general—were being advised to feed our children a substance which would be toxic to many of them, even as the government was telling us it was healthy.

Watching WIC's sponsored milk video spurred me toward this dissertation project that examines the role of marketing in facilitating the movement and absorption of material toxins, and how and why this disproportionately affects women and the BIPOC community. Whether advertisements are overt—as in a television ad—or masked—as in an "educational" WIC video—literature provides a rich site in which to explore the toxic entanglement of advertising and material toxins. Through the use of billboards and brochures, televisions shows and magazine ads, Helena María Viramontes, Thomas King, and Ruth Ozeki expose the deep interconnection of the messages these media send with detrimental, if not fatal, material toxins. They illustrate the ways these toxins bear a greater impact on marginalized populations. Each chapter also reveals a means by which to disrupt these entangled toxins: increasing agency by using ads to learn to read rather than taking in their messages as in *Under the Feet of Jesus*; using discarded consumer goods to bring people together instead of subscribing to the message that we need new things to fulfill our lives as in *The Back of the Turtle*; or taking the very means by which marketers hope to disseminate their toxic narratives and disseminating a counternarrative through those same means as in *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation*. Literature allows for both a scholarly critique of this relationship, as I have attempted here, as

[40] "Types of Fats." *The Nutrition Source. Harvard School of Public Health.* *https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/what-should-you-eat/fats-and-cholesterol/types-of-fat/* and "Health Concerns about Dairy." *Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine.* https://www.pcrm.org/good-nutrition/nutrition-information/health-concerns-about-dairy

well as inviting those outside the walls of the academy to see a picture of what is truly happening behind adverting's slick veneer through storytelling. Further, this fiction encourages us to be better readers of the world around us.

While most people in the U.S. (and likely around the world) are skeptical of advertising messages, a brief discourse analysis I conducted recently of comments left by WIC participants on the milk video shows that many women in the program tend to trust what the government tells them in terms of nutrition. My original plan for this dissertation was to expand my analysis of the WIC program and the effects their educational materials had on women's choices of what to buy and feed their children. I submitted an IRB proposal and was approved for interviewing and surveying WIC participants in Lane County, Oregon; however, the director decided that COVID was still too concerning to allow me to meet with these women—she did not want to put them at risk. In light of this, I decided to catalogue the comments women had left about the milk video to get a sense of how the video influenced them. This is no substitute for a face-to-face conversation, but it did provide some insight.

Comments revealed that women who viewed this video were not only believing the information presented to them, but they were also eager to implement the strategies put forth in the video. The robust commentary left by participants in response to the video shows an overwhelming acceptance of the information.[41] Of the 578 comments, only six comments directly countered the narrative put forth by the video. Eleven mentioned drinking plant-based milks in response to the question, "What kind of milk do your kids drink?" and most of these were referring to the parent drinking plant-based milks while trying to give their kids cow's milk.

[41] As a former WIC participant, I have access to this commentary which is not accessible to the public. I thus will not cite this information to prevent any identities from being revealed (though participants already use screennames which mostly do not identify them on the comment board anyway).

Fifteen participants mentioned their children being lactose intolerant and wanting more information about what to do when the program is telling them they need to give their children dairy milk, but it causes them pain; they still seemingly believed the veracity of this government-sponsored film's claims. Comments such as, "2-4 cups a day for a 2 year old, wow! Need to give my child more milk" (sic) and "I also didn't know that kids over 9 still needed milk. Thanks" indicate these mothers' trust in the information as well as their intention to increase the amount of milk they will give their children. Further evidence of implementation comes in comments like, "I'm going to try those smoothies with my son and see if he'll like them... great ideas" and "Great tips about the parfait, too. Excited to try new things for my girls. Thank you!" An overwhelming number of comments expressed attitudes of gratitude for this essential information they can use to better the health of their families, which underlines the impact of these messages and their understandable trust in the government to relate reliable information to them.

In many ways, though these mothers may not trust advertising messages, mothers in the program have been primed for the government's message by the advertising industry. Another resounding theme in viewer feedback was the regurgitation of milk advertising text. A whole host of comments relayed some iteration of "Milk. It does the body good." Given the connection between the government and the dairy industry financially, it makes sense that advertising would go hand-in-hand with government recommendations, health or otherwise. Those in the government are fully aware of the havoc a sharp drop in milk consumption would have on the U.S. economy and the pockets of government officials receiving financial benefits from the dairy industry. It is in the government's best interest to promote milk to WIC mothers despite the

health risks involved; if advertising doesn't convince these moms, "educational programs" surely will, especially if the messages of the two mediums are congruent.

This brief case study of the way Women, Infants, and Children's educational material is discursively enmeshed with material toxins points once again to its toxic entanglement. Cultural and material toxins entwined with toxic advertising narratives consistently get promoted through government websites, organizations, and publications aimed at everyone from children (as in the MyPlate recommendations) to people with diabetes (as in the American Diabetes Association). Exposing these entanglements, which this project has worked to suggest will disrupt the flow of toxins facilitated by the entanglement, is a vital step that needs to be taken to move toward a more environmentally—and socially—just world. Creative fiction that centers and exposes toxic entanglements in the fight for environmental justice can make us better readers of what is happening in the world around us.

## Works Cited


"Health Concerns about Dairy." *Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine.* https://www.pcrm.org/good-nutrition/nutrition-information/health-concerns-about-dairy . Accessed 23 June 2023.

"Lactose Intolerance: Information for Health Care Providers." *US Department of Health and Human Services*. Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/documents/NICHD_MM_Lactose_FS_rev.pdf. Accessed September 17, 2021

"Types of Fats." *The Nutrition Source. Harvard School of Public Health.* *https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/what-should-you-eat/fats-and-cholesterol/types-of-fat/*. Accessed 23 June 2023.

"WIC Racial-Ethnic Group Enrollment Data 2016." *USDA Food and Nutrition Service*. https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/wic-racial-ethnic-group-enrollment-data-2016. Accessed 23 June 2023.