

THE POSTHUMAN EVOLUTION OF HAZARDOUS TRANSCORPOREALITY

TRACY K. SMITH'S POETICS OF WATER FROM "THIRST" TO WADE
IN THE WATER

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Abstract

This study analyzes Tracy K. Smith's poetry through the lens of ecological materialism and Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, which emphasizes the fluidity and vitality of bodies and their interconnectedness. Tracing the evolution of Smith's ethicopolitical concerns, I explore the elemental and transcorporeal forces in her work that create a poetics of fluidity. Additionally, I argue that Smith's poetic trajectory marks a significant shift away from humanist frameworks, advancing toward a politically charged conception of Black marginality. By examining Smith's poem "Watershed" in relation to Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, this study investigates the development of a posthuman lyric in Smith's later work, viewed through the lens of hazardous transcorporeality.

Keywords

ethicopolitical ecopoetics, hazardous transcorporeality, Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, posthuman lyric, Stacy Alaimo

About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

While Tracy K. Smith's (b. 1972) public stature as a prominent poet and cultural figure is well-established, academic scholarship on her work remains disproportionately limited, revealing an imbalance between her public acclaim and critical reception. Aspiring to address this gap, this study¹ examines Smith's poetry through the frameworks of new materialist and ecological posthumanisms, with a particular emphasis on materialist embodiment and transcorporeality. Drawing on Stacy Alaimo's conceptualization of transcorporeality as a "posthumanist mode of new materialism and material feminism," wherein bodies are enmeshed with and shaped by dynamic material forces (*States of Suspension* 435), I argue that Smith's poetic treatment of bodies—whether fluid, elemental, or ethereal—manifests a poetics of transcorporeal agency and ethical accountability.

Examining Smith's later work through critical posthumanism, which critiques the liberal humanist subject as autonomous and stable (Herbrechter 3), this research further explores how Smith reimagines agentic capacities² by embracing non-anthropocentric ethics and racial politics. Smith's later poetics in *Wade in the Water* (2018) marks a departure from the humanist models of her earlier work, exemplified in *The Body's Question* (2003). More specifically, while "Thirst" and "Wade in the Water" depict both human and nonhuman forms as agentic vitalities, it is in "Watershed" that Smith's ethicopolitical ecopoetics fully emerges. Building on Alaimo's concept of "hazardous transcorporeality" in her analysis of Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* (1938), I propose that Smith's "Watershed" similarly reveals the consequences of technological excess, ecological devastation, and environmental injustice. "Watershed" too exemplifies a posthuman ethicopolitics in which ecological agentism becomes imperative (*Elemental* 303).

*Wade in the Water*³ signals a significant evolution in Smith's racial politics. While rejecting reductive polarities in political discourse, Smith's later poetics as such embraces a politics of alterity and activism, transforming her being as an African American poet. This evolution is evident not only in her later poetry but also in her engagement with broader political actions, such as her support for anti-racist initiatives at Princeton⁴ (Smith and McArdle). By tracing Smith's posthuman trajectory, from her exploration of fluid and elemental bodies to her political reconfiguration of race and otherness, this article uncovers the emergence of a vital, hazardous transcorporeality in Smith's later work, positioning her poetics as a compelling intersection of ecological materialism, racial justice, and ethical accountability.

QUESTION OF THE BODY: HUMAN AND MORE-THAN-HUMAN MATTER

“Smith speaks a body language” (Smith and Young xi), as Kevin Young points out in his introduction to *The Body’s Question*. It is, in fact, not coincidental that Smith’s poetic oeuvre commences with the body as its primary focus. In “Thirst,” and other poems, bodies themselves carry the marks of difference, and act as sites for ethical and political commentary. However broadly, and despite its early placement in Smith’s first collection, “Thirst” does not fail to engage the otherness of such marked (marginal) bodies, in terms of gender, class, ability, and age. In fact, as one of the initial works in the collection, the poem is particularly significant in establishing later collections’ tone and focus.

Beginning *in medias res*— as most Smith narrative poems do— “Thirst” describes a peaceful cabin scene, wherein the poem’s persona, her partner, and an old, poor, but generous fisherman (Bagre) are interrupted by two drunk soldiers and their “leader” (Smith 10). After being kindly offered the whole bottle of what the persona and others had been drinking, the soldiers arrest her partner, nonetheless: “I didn’t want to see you / Climb onto the jeep of theirs—so tall / And broad it seemed they’d ridden in / On elephants yoked shoulder to shoulder, / Flank to flank” (10).

Before the soldiers sat down,
They stood there, chests ballooned.
When we showed them our papers,
They wanted something else.
One of them touched the back of my leg.
With your eyes, you told me
To come beside you. There were guns
Slung over their shoulders
Like tall sticks. They stroked them
Absently with their fingers. (Smith, “Thirst” 9–10)

Not only do the characters’ nonverbal communication and the narrative’s erotic undertones go beyond the human and linguistic, but the physical interweaving of the animal and machinic also invokes an early posthuman thread via the corporeal presence of “jeep” (“yoked shoulder to shoulder, / Flank to flank”), “guns” (“tall sticks”), and later “the fish.” The only clue to the poem’s examination of sexuality and gender (revealing the persona is female, for instance) is given when the reader is told about the soldiers’ phallic guns (“Like tall sticks. They stroked them / Absently with their fingers”) or that “They wanted something else.” Most political references in “Thirst” are thematic, conveyed through subtle lexical clues; while the poem evokes a politically charged atmosphere with terms like “soldiers,” “jeep,” and “guns,”

and critiques state corruption with words such as “Authority,” “liar,” and “abuse” (“Thirst” 9–10), as such, it refrains from engaging explicitly with politics.

Overall, the way “Thirst,” one of Smith’s earliest poems, engages with discussions of sexism, ableism, and ageism is indicative of how the centrality of the body in *The Body’s Question* shapes the ethicopolitical and ecological trajectory of Smith’s later poetics. The poem’s foundational role in establishing the later collections’ tone and focus culminates in *Duende* (2004), which affords a sharper critique of sexual or racial politics—a recurring theme also emerging in Smith’s lyrical memoir, *To Free the Captives* (2024).

Duende’s opening poem, “History,” functions as a modernized creation myth, unfolding through seven sections of formal experimentation and metapoetic self-reflexivity.

This is a poem about the itch
That stirs a nation at night.

This is a poem about all we’ll do
Not to scratch—

[...]

This is a story in the poem’s own voice.
This is epic. (Smith, “History” 5)

The poem’s language is attuned to the body: it is “a story in the poem’s own *voice*” “about the *itch* / That *stirs*” and how “Not to *scratch*” the body of a nation; it is not told in the *speaker’s*, but, rather, “in the *poem’s own voice*” (added emphasis); nor is it the story of the individual poet/lyric subject/poetic self, but that of a “nation”; it partakes more in the otherness than the self, and, in so doing, embarks on “epic” rather than lyric.

In one particularly evocative move, “History” tips into stark linguistic representation, highlighting the poem’s own material existence, or poem as matter:

Of course there are victims in this poem
victim victim victim victim victim
victim victim victim victim victim
victim victim victim victim victim
victim victim victim victim victim

victim victim victim victim victim
 victim victim victim victim victim
 victim victim victim victim victim
 victim victim victim victim victim
 victim you are here victim victim
 victim victim victim victim victim
 victim victim victim victim victim. (Smith, "History" 10)

In addition to its episodic form, anaphoric opening, stanza spacing, and historical and cultural collaging, which highlight the poem's form consciousness, the image of the writer's "fragile fingers" bears witness to its metapoetic self-reflexivity ("This poem is Creole. Kreyol. / This poem is a boat. Bato"), a deliberate erasure of the lyric "I":

Part Two: The New World
 There were always fragile fingers
 Winding cotton and wool—
 Momentary clouds—into thread.

Was always that diminishing. Word
 Whittled and stretched into meaning.
 And meaning here is: line. (Smith, "History" 6)

The poet simultaneously diminishes and grows ("Whittled and stretched") the chaos of words ("momentary clouds") into meaning, and thus form. The meaning in this poem, therefore, is "line," that is (metonymically) the poem itself: "Every poem is the story of itself" (8). In the poetic manifesto of her new poetry, Smith acknowledges that a poem is its meaning ("story"), which is also its form ("line").⁵ The poem achieves this as it evocatively embodies its story (that of a certain "history") as seen on how the concrete images of winding of cotton and wool into thread (evocative of the cotton field of the South where slaves laboured), and the whittling of words into poetic lines merge which both offer a genuinely embodied account of history. In a sense, the poem enacts how matter transpires into mind.

The poem's alternate history in "History," a poetic story ("Once there was") of genesis, pictures the creation of the world as both material ("world—the "great cloud / Of primeval matter. Atoms and atoms") and mental or linguistic ("word"—embodying mind processes of "believing," "nam[ing]," and "invent[ing]"). The distance between a "posthuman knowing subject" and the exceptionally essentialized human in anthropocentric thought results, in Rosi Braidotti's view, from the former's "primacy of intelligent and self-organizing matter" ("Critical Posthumanities" 1). With regard to

the debates about mind (intelligence, knowledge, and more) and matter, furthermore, Braidotti claims that such “subject” acts as “a relational, embodied and embedded, affective and accountable entity and not only as a transcendental consciousness” (“Critical Posthumanities” 1). Not quite satisfied with a given account of the human, as a consequence, Smith brings a more inclusive ontology into play through a poetics in which matter, however material or ethereal, emerges as transcorporeal (worldly) and agentic. “Matters remain hybrid mixtures of world and word,” as Neimanis, similarly, holds (*Bodies of Water* 77-78).

In Smith’s poems, the body is more often than not summoned or foregrounded in dreaming, remembering in absence, or death — as “volatile bodies,” in Elizabeth Grosz’s terminology (23) — that flow through a nexus of forces, bodies, and substances but will not die. From the aridity of the death threat in “Thirst” to the fluid and death-like dream in “Something Like Dying, Maybe” and “Night Letters” to the natur(e)al, organic, and vegetational, but actual deaths in “Drought” and “Nina Fantasma” Smith’s poetry is constantly resurrecting the body. “Nina Fantasma” in *The Body’s Question* pictures Isabel, the poem’s “Blessed ghost child / When her body let go its frail soul,” offering a combination of somatic, sensory, animal, vegetational, and elemental images that yield an organic experience of death. Her father’s “broom sighs *Isabel*,” as all the natural bodies surrounding the ghost child’s body also stand mourning “For cervine beauty. / For her footsteps in dust. / For Irma, / Her mother, who wept into the salt air / When they found her Reinita / Her tiny queen recumbent / In a nest of vines” (Smith, “Nina Fantasma” 12).

These bodies are enmeshed in “the substances and flows of environment” in Alaimo’s conceptualization (*Bodily Natures* 28). Carrying her body home, moreover, her father “followed where her fawn’s legs pointed,” as “what coursed in them coursed / Toward the narrow bed,” since, like her father’s, her recumbent “body [too] remembers” she should go back to sleep. In a similar manner, in “Something Like Dying, Maybe” (3), *Wade in the Water’s* opening dream sequence is a form of fluidity that enacts a liminal state between life or corporeality and death or ethereality. The book’s numerous scenes and cycles of sleeping, dreaming, and waking not only highlight birth, death, and return (if not rebirth), and thus organicity of life, but also turn some of the poems in *The Body’s Question* into a dreamlike fluid space where death and life, as well as body and spirit, merge. Hence, hardly does the disappearance of bodies or death transpire absence in Smith’s poems. As masses of energy, these fluid bodies only change forms but will never cease to be, a message that comes into fruition in “Watershed.”

Sketching “the interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures,” Alaimo’s conception embraces corporeality but also transcends material aspects of transcorporeality: “Potent ethical and political

possibilities emerge from the literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature” (*Bodily Natures* 2). The shift to such ethicopolitical focus on the contact zone marks a progression toward in Smith’s posthuman poetics. This evolution entails a gradual delineation from humanist ways of understanding the world and anthropocentric myths of origin:

Once there was a great cloud
Of primeval matter. Atoms and atoms.
By believing, we made it the world.
We named the animals out of need.
Made ourselves human out of need.
There were other inventions.
Plunder and damage. (Smith, “History” 14)

Reimagining atoms, animals, worlds, and humans as human “inventions,” “History” explores the possibility of undoing the “Plunder and damage” caused by human-centered perceptions (“believing”) and need-oriented exploitations. Remembering, renaming, and, remaking bodies, matter, and the material, therefore, “History” rewrites into new stories, the *history* of linguistic “inventions” (“We named the animals”) and material interventions (“Plunder and damage”), made (up) by human; as such, the poem sheds a critical light on ‘othering’ paradigms and anthropocentric practices of “Plunder and damage” embarking upon hierarchic categorization of “the world” into us (“ourselves”) versus them.

HAZARDOUS TRANSCORPOREALITY IN “WATERSHED”

Blood, bile, intracellular fluid; a small ocean swallowed, a wild wetland in our gut; rivulets forsaken making their way from our insides to out, from watery womb to watery world: we are bodies of water.
-Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water* (1)

Smith’s “thinking with water”⁶ situates her poetry within the realm of the “blue humanities,” a term Alaimo uses to describe the scholarship examining “aquatic zones, species, and topics [...] beyond human domains, requiring the mediation of science and technology” (“Introduction” 429). To be specific, *Wade in the Water*’s ethicopolitical achievement at the end of Smith’s evolutionary poetic trajectory compares with what Heather Milne identifies in the poet Rita Wong’s “poetics of water” as “a sustained ethical and political critique of the toxic triad of colonialism,

capitalism, and environmental devastation” (Milne 122). In addition, Kaitlin Hoelzer places Wade, which examines racial violence and environmental degradation rooted in extractive capitalism’s history of slavery and exploitation, in the context of what Katherine R. Lynes calls “African American reclamation ecopoetics” (98).

I approach Smith’s poetics of water within the framework of Alaimo’s ethicopolitical approach in her study of Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* (1938) to examine Smith’s appreciation of material, elemental, and transcorporeal vibrancies in “Watershed.” Aligned with Alaimo’s rethinking of capitalist and colonial “grand narratives” of “manifest destiny” that justify “the placement of toxic waste sites” and African Americans’ higher fatality rate, I read the transcorporeal way in which Smith’s poetics summons voices, aesthetic qualities, and discourses of race, ecology, technology, body, class, and poetry. In my examination of “Watershed” in parallel with *The Book of the Dead*, Smith’s poem can be taken for a twin account of Rukeyser’s collection. Smith’s description of Washington Works factory workers’ exposure to PFOA in a landscape of destitution, and horror is analogous to Rukeyser’s documentation, in “The Disease,” “The Doctors,” and other pieces in *The Book of the Dead*, of the corporate workers’ exposure in the Hawk’s Nest tunnel of Gauley Bridge to the toxic chemical SiO₂ (silica dust).⁷

A body among other fluid bodies and body fluids (of “water,” “blood,” “plasma,” and other biofluids) itself, the chemical agent — and the most agentic matter in the entire poem⁸—PFOA is “flushed into water or sewers” and therefore, “detected in: / American blood banks / blood or vital organs” (Smith, “Watershed” 49). “Watershed” does not represent a mere industrial crisis causing environmental catastrophe or genetic mutation (“DNA,” “birth defects” 49). The circulation of these hazardous fluids, rather, interrogates globalization (“circulating through,” “from,” “to,” “to everywhere,” “global” 49) and the hideous aftermath of capitalist and unethical technologization of human and nonhuman bodies:

We see a situation
 that has gone from Washington Works
 All that was important in life was the love we felt.
 to statewide
 All that was made, said, done, or even thought without love was undone.
 to everywhere
 it’s global. (Smith, “Watershed” 52–53)

As transcorporeal as the fluids (water, blood and other body fluids) spreading the PFOA element within and among the poem’s bodies (from lab to other animals

and human bodies to literal bodies of water) are its different voices, points of view, and discourses⁹ which crisscross toward the poem's conclusion: a more factual, disjointed, and detached sentence — prosaic and capitalized only once at its open (“We”) — in present tense, marked with broken pieces, outlining the “situation” (the first three lines; the fifth, seventh and eighth lines in the above excerpt) intersects with a more coherent (two individual lines), nostalgic (past tense verbs), and lyric (anaphoric) voice: “All that was important // All that was made.”

As agentic as dark matter and energies in Smith's third poetry collection *Life on Mars* (2011), which politicize the invisibility¹⁰ of blackness and race through space technology, PFOA too bespeaks peripherality and technoscience. Smith's figurations of matter and energy in “Watershed” and the way “dark” chimes with blackness and race in *Life on Mars* reveal how Smith's posthuman reformulation of the nonhuman agentic intersects with ecocritical frameworks that reveal “matter plays an agentic role in its iterative materialization” (Barad 177). “The question most forcefully animating this poetry,” as James Edward Ford III observes about Smith's work, “is what new forms of ethical connectedness must be thought and expressed” (162). Such ethical connectedness bridges the distance between the lyric subject and ‘others,’ turning Smith's earlier emotive and corporeal (affective) lyric into non-anthropocentric interplay of networks, vibrancies, and currents, which, rather, partakes of a posthuman poetics. This framework gives Smith the means to interconnect futurist technoscience with Africanness and capitalist economy with racial injustice.

Further transcorporeal affinities between Smith's and Rukeyser's poems exist in the agentic vatic voice (what I call a posthuman ghostly), a collective and elemental ethos that connects these poems' speaking voices with the ancient wisdom of the Egyptian Book of the Dead and its account of the Nile river floods—which also registers a body of water, bringing (non)organic, (non)material, and more-than-human vibrancies into sync. Therefore, by embracing these interconnections, Smith's poem embodies a transcorporeality among the vibrancies of humans, animals, ecological bodies, and bodies of water, and with a far more panoramic vision, also offers an appreciation of the transcorporeal inter-/intra-relationships between temporalities, spaces, writings, minds, and cosmologies.

Whereas *The Book of the Dead* fails to reconcile the competing aims of environmental justice and environmentalism to Alaimo's mind (*Bodily Natures* 58), Smith's *Wade in the Water*, I argue, develops into a fully-fledged transcorporeal and posthuman poetics. Unlike Rukeyser's “profoundly anthropocentric” vision (58), Smith's poem offers “a luminous warm water” that becomes symbolic of “love” through a reconciliatory cosmological transcorporeality, an elemental “connection with the eternal” (Smith, “Watershed” 53). Smith's treatment of racial, commodified, and technologized bodies corresponds with Rukeyser's reckoning with disease and waste in *The Book of the*

Dead, as well as the connection of race and racial accounts with pollution and noise—the “heart wrenching” sound of “radioactivity” in Earth’s “bleak, faded in color” (“Watershed” 51). Smith’s embodiment of disease in *Wade in the Water* through, or, rather, *as* infected, faceless, unnamed, and voiceless—invisible—black bodies, therefore, draws heavily from racial politics and historical accounts. “Watershed” politicizes bodies (of workers, animals, and natural elements) and their disintegration at the hand of industrial profiteering symbolized by factory waste. Like “the dust” in Rukeyser, it is a “green water” in “Watershed” that symbolizes “racist capitalism”¹¹ through a similar “hazardous transcorporeality” (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 54).

A “HISTORY” OF (METAPHORIC, POLITICAL, AND LITERAL) BODIES OF WATER: FROM “THIRST” TO “WATERSHED”

Comparably in “Thirst” it is the fish, another body of water, that emerge as the most ethical presence to the poem’s story. The fish in “Thirst,” whose perspective closes the poem, surface as a nonhuman force with agentic capacities, on a par with their human counterpart. Imbued with higher transcorporeal worldliness, the fish are more open systems than the poem’s human persona to their environment’s substances,¹² an openness that the poem recognizes and structures its whole “story” around. The survival of the fish as its most agentic force therefore is reflected in the poem’s final words:

Maybe this is a story
About the old man they called Bagre.
The one with the crooked legs
That refused to run.
Maybe this is a story about being too old
To be afraid, and too young not to fear
Authority, and abuse it, and call it
By its name, and call it a liar.
Or maybe it’s a story about the fish.
The ones hanging on branches
To dry, and the ones swimming
With eyes that would not shut
In water that entered them
And became them
And kept them from thirst. (Smith, “Thirst” 10-11)

Not only are the poem's fish important both as nonhuman subject and an extended metaphor, but they also represent the most significant agentic form in the poem. Smith's poetry as early as "Thirst" builds on an ethics of alterity in the form of fluid, watery, or porous bodies in relation to norms and conceptions of normalcy. As in almost all her poems, "Thirst" is not a tribute to the "Authority" (state or the "soldiers" in this case), but instead canonizes the marginal—the animal (more significantly, "fish"), the poor and "disabled" ("crooked") fisherman, and the female persona—poem's speaking voice ("One of them touched the back of my leg") through aspects of the body in a corporeal lyric of otherness.

Equally embedded in a poetics of transcorporeality as are "Thirst" and "Drought" in *The Body's Question* which reflects how material and nonmaterial bodies partake in a predominantly water-based existence. Describing her own shadow ("A gorgeous traffic") as a fluid existence, the persona watches it "rose and entered me": "A spasm, a spark, a sweet murmuring flame / That swallowed the creek-bed and spread, / Mimicking water" ("Drought" 31). Water becomes Smith's extended metaphor, encompassing both her methodology, as seen in the flow of the lines, and the poetic ethos invested in fluid assemblages.

Smith's posthuman lyric of otherness places it in the realm of transcorporeality in the sense that her new poetry reconciles the lyric speaker with the otherness of other beings and bodies, including the poem itself. This linguistic and bodily extensiveness foregrounds an intra- and/or interpersonal experience:

Every poem is a world.
 This poem is Creole. Kreyol.
 This poem is a boat. Bato.
 This poem floats on the horizon
 All day all night. Has leaks
 And a hundred bodies at prayer.
 This poem is not going to make it. (Smith, "History" 8)

Not only is this poem a "Creole" story of drowned bodies of Africans' forced relocation to "The New World" on slave ships, it is also matter and embodied. This poem is "a boat" with "leaks" and "a hundred [black] bodies" who are "not going to make it": "Sometimes this poem walks the street/And doesn't give a shit/[...]/ (A poem can lie)" (Smith, "History" 13-14). This new lyric rises above a construed individual subjectivity, however impersonal. It can both enact a walking bodily agency and also bind with the mind which underscores the ability to "lie."

The first person voice in "Watershed" does not characterize the individualistic, expressive, and emotive lyric subjectivity in Smith's early poetry (e.g. "Thirst"), but

rather foregrounds a material or ethereal vibrancy, a form of energy, as the locus of consciousness in this new lyric or its persona: “*I could perceive the Earth, outer space, and humanity from a spacious and indescribable ‘God’s eye view’*” (Smith, “Watershed” 50). The reimagining of existing lyric ontologies evinces a complete lack of reliance on individual, human, subjectivity, in turn creating a posthuman space for unnamed, uncanny entities or forces to flourish. Smith’s decisive turn to the posthuman in *Wade in the Water* is at least in part effected through an experimentally formal turn that produces a more radical political vision. Smith’s poetry develops central voices that this project finds collective, relational, embodied, and, most significantly, racial.

CONCLUSION

In Smith’s poetry, the centrality of the body and its openness to cross-border sensibilities equally accentuates the posthumanist approaches and anticipates similar valences in her transcorporeal poetics. Though less lyrical in sound and more experimental in form, Smith’s later poetry is also markedly harmonious, rhythmic, and grounded, evolving into a post-anthropocentric and more relational ethics of fluid bodies which this article argues to be a ‘posthuman lyric of otherness.’ This allows for an ethical exploration of newly perceived relations between organic and nonorganic matter, hence, the contention that the agentic transcorporeality featured in Smith’s later work is posthumanist and ethicopolitically directly embedded, rather than merely expressive and anthropocentric. Developing an ethicopolitical mode of posthuman imagination beyond the lyricism of her earlier poetics, as such, Smith’s later poetry comes to embody diverse forms of otherness and contemplate a more collective sense of existence. The posthuman affordances of this lyric mode enable a more tangibly inclusive inclusion of otherness.

The questions of body and fluidity are central to all Smith collections—especially *The Body’s Question* and *Wade in the Water*. In “Watershed,” more particularly, the boundaries between “the body” and non-body (shadow, ghost) are “deranged” (“Watershed” 49, 47). Smith’s poetics of water enclosing its marked and marginal bodies circulates from “Thirst” in *The Body’s Question* through to “History” and into “Watershed” in *Wade in the Water*. As “Watershed” politicizes its racial, animal, and natural bodies of water, “History” too commemorates Black bodies, uniting them with Rukeyser’s (mostly Black) dead bodies, resurrecting them throughout Smith’s entire oeuvre. Just like “the fish” “in water” (as opposed to “The ones hanging on branches / To dry”) that survive “With eyes that would not shut” in “Thirst,” the

other bodies of water in “History” and “Watershed” too are eternalized in Smith’s poetics of water thanks to the “water that entered them / And became them / And kept them from thirst.”

Notes

1. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Dr. Miranda Brun Hickman of McGill University and Dr. Hossein Pirnajmuddin of the University of Isfahan for their thoughtful reading of this article and for offering invaluable insights.
2. Irrespective of their inherited baggage, such terms as “subject,” “agency,” and “subjectivity” are still used in posthumanist theories. In this essay, however, such older terminology is used in relation to anthropocentric, humanist, or capitalist ideologies. Some posthuman theorists, Braidotti in this case, have appropriated the term “subject” to designate post-human affect. I use the term “agentic capacities” in the spirit of Diana Coole’s posthuman reconceptualizing of human(ist) agency “regarding the way agentic capacities are recognized to be distributed across animate, and perhaps also inanimate, entities” (451).
3. *Wade in the Water* offers a series of documentary poems that quote from varying source texts and archives (such as actual letters from black Americans or slaveowners) whose polyvocality challenges dominant notions of American identity, history, and law by hinging on racial and political violence. “The Greatest Personal Privation”; “Unwritten”; “I will Tell you The Truth about This, I will Tell you All about It,” and the like are among Smith’s poems that explicitly address slavery and racism in *Wade in the Water*, Smith’s most politically informed and formally innovative collection to date — *Such Color: New and Selected Poems* (2021) is Smith’s last poetry collection to date.
4. As one of the faculty signatories of the 2020 open letter to Princeton University demanding anti-racist action, Smith states: “We also want to think in big terms about what racism is, and we want to bring the vocabulary and the practice of anti-racism to the University. We’re not so good at recognizing the reality, and the pervasiveness, of systemic racism, and I think that is actually what drives so much of the inequity at Princeton” (Michaels and Smith 2020).
5. Repetition and other poetic techniques in “Thirst” and “History” serve both aesthetic and ethical purposes. In “Thirst,” Smith’s formal choices become particularly deliberate toward the poem’s close, where the repeated use of commas gives the final lines a stuttering, hiccup-like rhythm (“Authority, and abuse it, and call it / By its name, and call it a liar”). The tangible brevity of the closing lines amplifies the poem’s tension, slowing its pace and heightening the impact of its concluding statement. Notable are enjambments and meaningful line breaks or word placements. A case in point is the poem’s positioning of the object of the verb, “Authority,” at the beginning of a new line. In this case, “Authority” is displaced by a conspicuous caesura, pushed away from its governing sentence and onto the next line. As such, “Authority” gains prominence in its capitalized form and isolated position, which is further enhanced by the comma—a recurring punctuation mark that, along with the repeated “it,” punctuates the rhythm of the line (“and abuse it, and call it / By its name, and call it a liar”). This formal disruption underscores Smith’s critique, as the word visually and rhythmically asserts itself, functioning as both the grammatical and thematic center of the poem’s subtle yet forceful closure and mirroring the tension inherent in the abuse of power.

6. Derived from the title of the book *Thinking with Water* edited by Janine MacLeod, Cecilia Chen, and Astrida Neimanis. Neimanis's idea of embodiment, correspondingly, draws on a watery mode of existence which is "virtual, becoming, or materially intra-active," among "the diverse planetary bodies of water that sustain us" (76).
7. In addition, both Smith's and Rukeyser's accounts comprised of multiple voices, tones, and cinematic effects collaged into documentary realism, a "new genre," as Ange Mlinko in her reading of Smith's "lyric project" would acknowledge (417).
8. PFOA:
 - increased the size of the liver in rats and rabbits
 - (results replicated in dogs)
 - caused birth defects in rats
 - caused cancerous testicular pancreatic and liver tumors in lab animals
 - possible DNA damage from exposure
 - bound to plasma proteins in blood
 - was found circulating through each organ
 - high concentrations in the blood of factory workers
 - children of pregnant employees had eye defects
 - dust vented from factory chimneys settled well-beyond the property line
 - entered the water table
 - concentration in drinking water 3x international safety limit
 - study of workers linked exposure with prostate cancer
 - worth \$1 billion in annual profit. (Smith, "Watershed" 49)
9. These perspectives and discourses include the "I" speaker's—that is "God's eye view" (50)—versus third person objective or camera's eye point of view which underscore certain binaries such as the poetic and scientific, the lyric and documentary, and verse and prose.
10. In astrophysics, dark matter and energies are ascribed to all which excludes the visible universe, namely, the sun and other stars, Earth and other planets, and galaxies.
11. *Wade in the Water*, Kaitlin Hoelzer similarly argues, examines racial violence and environmental degradation rooted in extractive capitalism's history of slavery and exploitation, in the context of what Katherine R. Lynes calls "African American reclamation ecopoetics" (qtd. in Hoelzer 98).
12. Alaimo is aware that "the human body is never a rigidly enclosed, protected entity, but is vulnerable to the substances and flows of its environments" (*Bodily Natures* 28).

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