Waste in Verse: Forms of Waste in Contemporary North American Poetry

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Abstract: This article examines the intersection of waste, language, and contemporary North American poetry, arguing that waste is not merely a material crisis but a rhetorical and ideological construct. Drawing on various waste theories, the study explores how poets Martín Espada, Rita Wong, Evelyn Reilly, and Adam Dickinson engage with waste not only as a thematic concern but as a formal and linguistic strategy. Espada exposes the bureaucratic erasure of human disposability through acts of naming; Wong dissects the corporate euphemisms that obscure environmental violence; Reilly mirrors the endurance of plastic through poetic excess and fragmentation; and Dickinson reveals the infiltration of waste into the body itself. By treating poetry as a site of salvage, reclamation, and resistance, these works challenge the illusion of disappearance that underpins contemporary structures of exclusion and disposability. Ultimately, this article argues that waste and poetry share a crucial function: both unsettle categories, disrupt meaning, and refuse to vanish.

Keywords: Waste, North American poetry, Martín Espada, Rita Wong, Evelyn Reilly, Adam Dickinson.

Desechando versos: Formas de desecho en la poesía norteamericana contemporánea

Resumen: Este artículo examina la intersección entre desechos, lenguaje y poesía contemporánea norteamericana, argumentando que los desechos no solo son una crisis material, sino también una construcción retórica e ideológica. Basándome en diferentes teorías sobre los desechos, se analiza cómo los poetas Martín Espada, Rita Wong, Evelyn Reilly y Adam Dickinson abordan el desecho no solo como un tema, sino también como una estrategia formal y lingüística. Espada denuncia la deshumanización de las víctimas de migraciones forzadas llamándolas por sus nombres; Wong desarma los eufemismos corporativos que ocultan la violencia ambiental; Reilly refleja la persistencia del plástico mediante el exceso poético y la fragmentación; y Dickinson muestra la infiltración del desecho en el propio cuerpo. Al tratar la poesía como un espacio de rescate, reapropiación y resistencia, estos poetas desafían la ilusión de desaparición que sostiene las estructuras contemporáneas de exclusión. En última instancia, este artículo sostiene que los desechos y la poesía comparten una función crucial: ambos desestabilizan categorías, desmantelan los significados y se resisten a desaparecer.

Palabras Clave: Desechos, poesía norteamericana, Martín Espada, Rita Wong, Evelyn Reilly, Adam Dickinson.

Literature and poetry, even—or especially*—those animated by waste, are crucial for learning how to lead an ethical life.*

—Susan Signe Morrison

"That waste matters today," claim Brian Neville and Johanne Villeneuve, "will not be surprising, especially in the wake of a century whose career of destruction has irreparably altered our relation to the things and events of the past" (1). Yet waste matters not only in relation to the past, but also in the present, the future, and across disciplines. Recently, several scholars have elaborated on the subject of waste in the fields of philosophy, ontology and metaphysics (Scanlan 2006; Kennedy 2007; Viney 2014), ethics (Hawkins 2006); politics and economy (Humes 2012); waste disposal (Rogers 2006); or social history (Strasser 2000)—just to list some works that confirm John Scanlan's contention that "'garbage' (in the metaphorical sense of the detached remainder of the things we value) is everywhere" (8). This omnipresence of waste extends beyond material refuse and into language, aesthetics, and cultural narratives.

Drawing on theories from Scanlan, Zygmunt Bauman, William Viney, and Susan Signe Morrison, among others, this article examines how contemporary North American poetry engages with different forms of waste—whether human, environmental, or technological—not only as subject matter but as a site of linguistic and ideological struggle. Through the analysis of works by Martín Espada, Evelyn Reilly, Rita Wong, and Adam Dickinson, I argue that these poets expose how waste is not merely a material crisis but a rhetorical one, shaped by language that erases responsibility, obscures harm, and justifies disposability. Together, these poets show that waste is never merely discarded—it is narrated, contested, and redefined through acts of poetic resistance.

1. Waste in Theory

At the turn of the twenty-first century, scholars in several disciplines began to interrogate the inevitable detritus of relentless consumerism—trash, garbage, refuse, waste. Long treated as interchangeable, these terms have since been pried apart, their differences clarified by theoretical inquiry. Some have confronted waste in its raw materiality,

mapping its accumulation in landscapes both visible and unseen; others have traced its ethical, social, and political implications, revealing waste as both an object and a symptom, a product and a force. Recently, Sara Villamarín-Freire has examined how these perspectives converge, noting that "scholars share a common conception of wasted matter being a porous, malleable category, socially determined and thereby subject to temporal and spatial variation, and whose function is primarily related to processes of ordering and classification" (157). Waste, in this sense, is neither static nor absolute but is shaped by shifting material and social conditions, reinforcing the need to examine not only what is deemed waste, but how and why that designation occurs.

According to Morrison, waste "is always material (first) and figurative and metaphoric (second)" (8). William Rathje's *Garbage Project*, for example, treats waste as an archaeological artifact, a material record through which the patterns, contradictions, and deceptions of consumer behavior can be unearthed. Waste becomes an archive of excess that speaks to the habits of the present as much as to the ruins of the past. In *The Ethics of Waste*, Gay Hawkins shifts the frame, moving from the materiality of waste to the ethics and habits of discarding. For Hawkins, waste is not merely an environmental burden but a domain of embodied moral practice, shaped by affect, habit, and culturally specific routines. She writes that "our waste habits—all those repeated routines—leave their traces on our bodies and our environment" and actively "constitute an ethos and a sensibility" (15). Rather than focusing on overt structures of power or institutional exclusion, Hawkins reveals how waste practices are intimately tied to the formation of subjectivity—how we come to know ourselves through the everyday gestures of separation and disposal.

Where Hawkins foregrounds embodied habit, Stacy Alaimo foregrounds bodily permeability, theorizing transcorporeality as the continual movement of substances across human and more-than-human bodies. Waste, in this view, does not remain external: endocrine disruptors, heavy metals, and plastics travel through air and water, cross membranes, and accumulate in tissues. Transcorporeality reframes waste as a relational process rather than a stable object, making the boundary between organism and environment a site of inscription and risk. It

also clarifies why rhetoric matters: the terms by which we classify and manage "waste" organize who absorbs what, and where.

From this bodily scale, Bauman widens the lens to populations and institutions, arguing that contemporary capitalism does not merely generate discarded things; it manufactures discarded people. Modernity, he claims, "produces redundancy," systematically rendering individuals "superfluous, unnecessary, of no use" (12). Under globalization, entire populations are expelled from economic and social participation. These are the redundant, the displaced, the unemployable—figures who, stripped of both economic function and social recognition, become "human waste, with no useful function to play" (77) in the forward (?) march of history. Hence, exclusion is an intrinsic feature of the system: a mechanism of social disposal that pushes the unwanted to the periphery, beyond the visible and the legible. However, if modernity once had external dumping grounds—colonial territories, marginal spaces where surplus populations could be displaced—the global expansion of capitalism has now closed off these outlets. Today, redundant populations can no longer be exported; they are left to accumulate in refugee camps, slums, and zones of abandonment.

Other authors grant waste philosophical dignity, exploring its role in the history of reason and the ontology of time. Scanlan, for instance, conceives garbage as the structural excess of differentiation, the necessary residue of Western knowledge systems that function by classifying, organizing, and discarding. Garbage, he writes, is always produced in the act of distinction, "the bits, scraps, and leftovers of a variety of intact 'wholes'" (15), the waste of reason itself. Yet for Scanlan, garbage is not merely the detritus of categorization—it is also the shadow of temporality, the trace of history that modernity attempts to erase. In its obsession with cleanliness, order, and progress, modernity seeks to push waste out of sight, yet remains haunted by its inevitable return. As Scanlan notes, "[i]t is a history of disposal and tidying; of cutting off, chucking out, and of sweeping away the debris that lies on the territory of reason" (61). Much like the garbage that is removed daily from public view, the discarded remnants of knowledge vanish beneath "the presentation of an edifice of Reason as the perfectible, if not incorruptible, way of knowing" (61-62). In this way, Scanlan argues that garbage is neither simply material nor purely metaphorical;

it is an unsettling force that resists resolution, continually exposing the impermanence of meaning, the fragility of value, and the limits of knowledge itself.

In *Waste: A Philosophy of Things*, Viney understands waste as a fundamentally temporal phenomenon, arguing that it is not merely a problem of spatial displacement but a disruption of time proper. He introduces the concept of "waste-time," describing it as "a state of material being that is marked by temporal disorientation" (10). Viney claims that waste is not a static final state but an active temporal threshold, where discarded objects exist in an unstable tension between past use and future uncertainty. He describes waste as "both a material continuity and a temporal discontinuity" (29), emphasizing that not all waste results from an exhausted function—for example, some objects become waste without ever being used, while others remain suspended in ambiguous states of potential repurposing. Because waste persists beyond its intended utility, it not only lingers but also generates new relationships with time: it may decay, remain inert, or even return to circulation.

Unlike Bauman or Hawkins, Scanlan and Viney venture into the relationship of waste and art. Scanlan develops a "garbage aesthetics," focusing on waste as a conceptual and cultural force, particularly on how it disrupts systems of order and meaning. He acknowledges how twentieth-century artistic practices—especially those embracing refuse and discarded materials—challenge traditional ideas of artistic refinement. His discussion of modernity's obsession with categorization aligns with avant-garde artistic strategies that reanimate waste, from Joseph Cornell's assemblages to Duchamp's readymades. Yet, while his analysis of waste in art gestures toward literary fragmentation, he does not extend his framework to literature. This shift does occur in Viney, who moves from visual art to textual production, arguing that waste functions not just as a material or artistic concern but as a structuring force within literature itself. Crucially, Viney argues that waste is not just something we encounter—it is something we construct through acts of classification and narration, emphasizing that waste requires storytelling as a way to organize its temporal instability.

This dependability on language has Viney claim that waste operates as a structuring force within literature, influencing both composition

and interpretation. He focuses on modernist works like *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*, arguing that waste is not merely a theme within the poem but a formal principle that governs its construction. The poem, he writes, is "intimately bound to the process of critical writing that was necessary for its composition, disclosing the textual variants that go into the writing of waste and a textual archaeology that refuses to be limited to the flotsam and jetsam that appears at the poem's surface" (96). The excised lines, abandoned drafts, and palimpsestic layering of voices within *The Waste Land* mirror the function of waste itself, where discarded fragments remain present, exerting influence even after their supposed elimination. Viney highlights that the poem's composition was a labor of "sifting, combining, expunging, correcting" (96), a process that foregrounds waste as a structuring principle rather than a mere theme.

All in all, these theorists circle the same fundamental idea: that waste is not just about things but about systems of exclusion, classification, and temporality. The divergences among them concern emphasis, scope, and terminology more than first principles or the basic architecture of their arguments. In conversation with all of them, Morrison brings these insights to bear on literature, and poetry in particular. The *Literature of Waste* is the most comprehensive study of waste in English literary history, covering a wide range of authors—from Chaucer to Swift and Sterne, from Whitman to A. R. Ammons and Maxine Kumin. What distinguishes Morrison's approach is not only her scope, but her framing of waste as a poetic and ethical force. Waste in her reading is not merely a theme, but a set of formal and affective operations: poetry reanimates discarded language, metabolizes cultural refuse, and produces what she calls "eucharistic fragments"—moments of grace salvaged from what has been cast aside. Drawing from Baudelaire and Benjamin, Morrison casts the poet as a ragpicker, or what she calls a spiritual homeopath, someone who would cure "the alienation and disgust we all too often feel toward our own and others' waste and decay" (196). For Morrison, this work is both literary and ethical: to write with waste is to recognize what culture denies, and to transform abjection into attention.

Her "gleaning aesthetics" centers on the practice of poetic salvage: the collecting of leftover words, abandoned genres, and forgotten voices into new constellations of meaning. Drawing on practices of historical

gleaning—from biblical law to rural survival—Morrison proposes that poetry engages in a moral economy of fragments, revaluing the castoff as a mode of care. Her concept of "compost poetics" pushes this further: poetry, like compost, decomposes what no longer serves, but preserves its energy in new forms. In this sense, metaphor is not ornamental but ethical: a method of working with what remains. As she writes, "[r]ecycled literary waste, such as digressions, leftovers, puns, parody, and intertextuality—all are peculiarly—even touchingly—human" (12-13). Unlike Scanlan and Viney, who theorize waste's presence in knowledge and narrative, Morrison shows how poetry enacts waste through structure, tone, and form, producing not just reflections on waste, but waste as poetics.

Taken together, these frameworks suggest that waste is not merely a thematic concern but a structuring logic—social, temporal, and linguistic. Whether theorized as exclusion, habit, rupture, or salvage, waste unsettles boundaries: between value and excess, between presence and disappearance, between the body and its world. In what follows, I turn to contemporary North American poetry not simply to observe how waste is represented, but to examine how poetic form itself engages with waste—as medium, method, and metaphor.

2. Waste in Verse

While poets have long flirted with waste, refuse, and decay—sometimes in starkly literal catalogues, as in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and at other times in grand imagistic proliferations, as in Wallace Stevens's "The Man on the Dump"—the twenty-first century has ushered in more terrifying consequences of human excess. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch, an island of plastic waste twice the size of Texas, drifts in the ocean, while landfill cities like Bantar Gebang in Indonesia serve as both home and workplace for thousands of scavengers. Even Ammons's *Garbage*, a sprawling meditation on the cyclical nature of decay, fails to fully capture the scale of current waste crises or the ways poets now engage with them. As this section will show, contemporary poets approach waste not just as subject matter, but as method and form.

As discussed earlier, waste adopts its most harrowing form when it stands in for human beings proper, as when Bauman talks of an

"*acute crisis of the human waste disposal industry*" (6). This process of dehumanization is further reinforced through language. For example, Bauman examines the shift in terminology from "unemployment" to "redundancy," arguing that this linguistic change reflects a deeper ideological transformation. Unlike 'unemployment,' whose prefix "used to suggest a departure from the norm–as in 'unhealthy' or 'unwell,'" 'redundancy' suggests "permanence and hints at the ordinariness of the condition" (11). Furthermore, Bauman explicitly links waste rhetoric to how societies talk about marginalized populations, claiming that "[t]o be declared redundant means to have been disposed of because of being disposable–just like the empty and non-refundable plastic bottle or once-used syringe, an unattractive commodity with no buyers" (12). Unlike material waste, which can be physically managed, human waste lingers, haunting the borders of nation-states, confined to refugee camps, detention centers, and the open graves of the sea.

Espada's awarded book of poems *Floaters* is deeply engaged with political violence, memory, and the disposability of human life under systemic oppression. The book's title refers to a term used by the U.S. Border Patrol to describe migrants who have drowned while crossing the Rio Grande, reducing their bodies to nothing more than waste drifting in the current. The collection, which won the National Book Award, is a poetic act of resistance against state-sponsored dehumanization, calling attention to the ways in which language participates in exclusion and disposal. Nowhere is this clearer than in the title poem, which responds directly to the viral photograph of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his 23-month-old daughter, Valeria Martínez Ávalos, lying face down after drowning in June 2019. The image, widely circulated across media platforms, became an emblem of the violence faced by migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border.

In the piece, Espada critiques this linguistic disposal, calling attention to the callousness with which Border Patrol agents dismiss the drowned:

> Like a beer bottle thrown into the river by a boy too drunk to cry, like the shard of a Styrofoam cup drained of coffee brown as the river, like the plank of a fishing boat broken in half by the river, the dead float. And the dead have a name: *floaters*, say the men of the Border Patrol (6)

The passage lays bare the logic of dehumanization, where the drowned are not simply lost; they are discarded, swept into the same category as refuse, stripped of worth, left to drift beyond recognition. Espada's poem does not just echo Bauman's metaphor, it makes it gut-wrenchingly real. The bodies in the water, like plastic bottles, like Styrofoam cups, become part of the current, indistinguishable from the waste that floats beside them. Here, Bauman's theory of wasted lives is made visible in the most brutal way. In a world where exclusion and disposability dictate who is seen and who is forgotten, these deaths are not framed as tragedies to be mourned but as inevitable collateral—a consequence, rather than a crime.

Gillian Wylie has warned that Bauman's vision risks trapping the displaced in a purely passive role, as if their fate is sealed. She argues that "when no space is left for agency in the analysis and the system seems deterministic, the idea of humans as waste becomes irrefutable" (65). But waste, despite its connotations of abandonment, is not always inert. It lingers, resists, reemerges in unexpected places. And just as discarded matter has ways of disrupting the order that seeks to erase it, so too do the people whom Bauman's theory would label as 'wasted.' Espada's title poem "Floaters" refuses to let this process stand uncontested. If the state and its agents reduce migrants to waste, the poem fights back through invocation. To name is to resist disappearance, to insist on presence, to push back against the tide of dehumanization that treats the dead as an anonymous, discardable mass:

> And the dead have names, a feast day parade of names, names that dress all in red, names that twirl skirts, names that blow whistles, names that shake rattles, names that sing in praise of the saints: Say *Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez.* Say *Angie Valeria Martínez Ávalos*. (6)

Here, naming is an act of defiance. Espada does not simply honor the dead—he pulls them back into the world, refusing their disappearance, making us say their names aloud. In what Achille Mbembe calls necropolitics, the border becomes a death-world that normalizes exposure and withholds mourning; Espada's counter-naming interrupts that regime. The imperative "Say" is relentless, each repetition pushing back against the silence imposed by indifference or manipulation.

In an era where truth itself is fragile, not only words but even images are suspect. Even when the dead are named, their very existence is subject to manipulation and doubt. The poem opens with an epigraph quoting a Border Patrol Facebook group in which an agent cynically dismisses the viral image, writing: "I HAVE NEVER SEEN FLOATERS LIKE THIS, could this be another edited photo. We've all seen the dems and liberal parties do some pretty sick things" (6). The poet offers a chilling description of Óscar and Valeria's bodies, exposing the tension between visibility and erasure in the way their deaths are represented:

> No one, they say, had ever seen floaters so clean: Óscar's black shirt yanked up to the armpits, Valeria's arm slung around her father's neck even after the light left her eyes, both face down in the weeds, back on the Mexican side of the river (7)

This passage is not just a depiction of the dead; it makes visible the violence inscribed on their bodies. Unlike the viral photograph, which could be dismissed as a hoax or consumed as spectacle, Espada's poetic language fixes the image in the reader's mind. This form of 'necro-ekphrasis' does not soften but forces recognition. It is by capturing every unsettling detail—the twisted shirt, the waterlogged diaper, the way Valeria's arm clings to her father even after death—that the poem makes visible the brutal materiality of migrant death that political rhetoric and media discourse attempt to obscure.

To counter the dehumanizing claim that the image is a hoax, Espada restores what has been stripped away: Óscar and Valeria's history, their labor, their love, the very things that made them irreplaceable. "Say what we know of them now they are dead: Óscar slapped dough / for pizza with oven-blistered fingers. Daughter Valeria sang, banging / a toy guitar" (6). By invoking their names alongside these intimate details, Espada resists the state's rhetoric of disposal, which reduces the dead to mere bodies in the river, stripped of identity and past. But the poem does not stop at Óscar and Valeria; it refuses to leave Tania Vanessa Ávalos—the grieving wife and mother—silent and unseen. "There is another name / that beats its wings in the heart of the trees: Say *Tania Vanessa Ávalos*, / Óscar's wife and Valeria's mother, the witness stumbling along the river" (6). Through these invocations, Espada challenges the media's consumption of migrant suffering, replacing

anonymous victims with individuals whose stories demand to be told. Instead of a faceless tragedy, we encounter a father, a daughter, a mother left behind—a family whose lives extend beyond the moment of their death, resisting erasure through memory, poetry, and justice.

Bauman's terminology may be unfortunate, but his diagnosis remains incisive: modernity renders certain lives disposable. Yet, as Wylie cautions, this framing risks stripping the displaced of agency, reducing them to mere casualties of an inexorable system. Espada refuses this logic. "Floaters" does not accept the rhetoric of waste but dismantles it, insisting that the dead are not debris but names, histories, and lives that demand recognition. If dehumanization operates through erasure, then Espada's poem resists by forcing remembrance, ensuring that those lost are neither forgotten nor rendered abstract.

The global logics of disposability that Bauman and Wylie examine extend beyond human populations to waste economies, where discarded materials—just like redundant people—are cast off and displaced. If "Floaters" critiques the rhetoric of exclusion at the U.S.-Mexico border, Wong's "sort by day, burn by night" turns to the circuits of global e-waste, where cast-off electronics are funneled from wealthy nations to impoverished regions, making entire landscapes toxic. Waste does not disappear, rather, it migrates, much like the populations Bauman calls "human waste." Wong's poem forces the reader to recognize that, in a globalized economy, consumption and disposal are never localized. The wreckage of digital capitalism, disguised as progress, has a material afterlife, one that poisons those least responsible for it.

The poem centers on Guiyu, China, one of the world's largest electronic waste processing sites, where workers dismantle discarded computers, extract valuable metals, and inhale lethal toxins:

> circuit boards
> most profitable & most dangerous
> if you live in guiyu village,
> one of the hundred thousand people who
> "liberate recyclable metals"
> into canals & rivers,
> turning them into acid sludge,
> swollen with lead,

barium leachate, mercury bromide (46)

Like Espada, Wong underscores the importance of language, highlighting the rhetorical deception at the heart of global economies. In the line "liberate recyclable metals," the quotation marks invite the reader to confront the euphemistic absurdity of the phrase. Words like "liberate" and "recycle" connote freedom, renewal, and environmental stewardship, but Wong exposes them as mere corporate fictions masking environmental destruction and human suffering. Here, language itself is toxic, as it rebrands waste dumping as an ecological good, just as terms like "floaters" or "redundancy" obscure human loss.

This exposure of hidden toxicity is in line with Jussi Parikka's concept of the 'anthrobscene,' which dismantles the illusion of a clean digital world, revealing how technological progress is inseparable from material exploitation. As Parikka argues, "to call it 'anthrobscene' is just to emphasize what we knew but perhaps shied away from acting on" (12). Wong's poem directly enacts this revelation:

> o keyboard irony: the shiny laptop
> a compilation of lead, aluminum, iron,
> plastics, orchestrated mercury, arsenic, antinomy...
> sing me the toxic ditty of silica:
> *"Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-masse."**
> where do metals come from?
> where do they return?
> bony bodies inhale carcinogenic toner dust,
> burn copper-laden wires,
> peer at old cathay, cathode ray tubes.
> what if your pentium got dumped in guiyu (46)

The passage foregrounds the grotesque materiality of the digital, listing poisonous metals that are essential parts of everyday apparently harmless devices. What we type on, what we search with, what we consume through, all these devices are built on a foundation of waste. The very machines used to read Wong's poem are composed of elements extracted at a high human and environmental cost, only to be discarded and reabsorbed into an economy that turns past innovation into present pollution. The poem renders that loop as transcorporeal traffic, tracing how substances circulate across devices, waters, and bodies rather

than remaining a static inventory. This circularity—materials mined, processed, discarded, and inhaled as carcinogenic dust—renders digital capitalism fundamentally unsustainable. Wong forces the reader to acknowledge that there is no such thing as a "green" economy under the current system there is only displaced toxicity, outsourced destruction.

The closing lines of the poem recast Whitman's words in *Leaves of Grass* to challenge their optimism:

> what if your pentium got dumped in guiyu village?
> your garbage, some else's cancer?
> economy of scale
> shrinks us all
> global whether
> here or there
> collapses cancer
> consumes en-masse (47)

By echoing Whitman, Wong highlights the failure of democratic ideals under global capitalism. Wong's final lines collapse the distinction between "here" and "there," between producer and consumer, between the technological present and its catastrophic future. The digital age promised expansion and infinite possibility, but Wong reveals its true cost: a world collapsed under the weight of its own waste.

The scale of waste in Wong's poem is already immense, but it is still situated—we can point to Guiyu, to its acid sludge, its carcinogenic dust. Yet, as Reilly's poetry explores, waste is not only global but nearly incomprehensible in scope. *Styrofoam* digs into the eerie endurance of plastic—how it lingers, how it refuses to break down, how it unsettles any neat idea of waste just "disappearing." The collection's opening poem, "Hence Mystical Cosmetic Over Sunset Landfill," immediately establishes this paradox: "Answer: Styrofoam deathlessness / Question: How long does it take?" (9). This aligns with Viney's concept of waste-time, which argues that discarded materials are not simply removed from circulation but instead exist in a state of suspended decay, neither fully present nor entirely absent. The poem underscores this by dismantling the myth of biodegradability: "It is a misconception that materials / biodegrade in a meaningful timeframe" (10). Rather than decomposing, plastic undergoes fragmentation, breaking into smaller particles while

remaining chemically intact, accumulating across oceans, landfills, and even within human bodies. Through its recursive questioning and declarative assertions, the poem forces the reader to confront a waste system that is not linear but recursive, where disposal does not mark an end but an ongoing presence.

Reilly looks into this temporal disorientation by blending scientific jargon with the banal language of consumer culture, demonstrating how plastic waste originates not only an environmental crisis but a discursive and biological one. In Viney's terms, *Styrofoam*'s polymer temporality reads as waste-time: a material continuity with human-scale discontinuity, its fractured, postponing lines figuring plastic's temporal disorientation. The poem shifts registers from clinical precision—"Enter: 8,9,13,14,17-ethynyl-13-methyl-7,8,9,11,12,14,15,16-octahydro-cyclopenta-diol (aka environmental sources of hormonal activity)" (9)—to casual online product reviews: "*A low oven and a watchful eye turns bits of used plastic meat trays into keychain ornaments*" (10). This juxtaposition highlights the unsettling normalization the presence of plastic in daily life, where the same materials polluting oceans are also used in children's toys and household products. The reference to endocrine disruptors underscores how waste infiltrates not just landscapes but human biology, a concern that, as we will see, Dickinson's book *Anatomic* makes disturbingly explicit. Just as Viney argues that waste lingers in uncertain temporal states, Reilly shows how it also circulates through linguistic registers, where plastics are simultaneously toxins, commodities, and mundane objects of everyday convenience. By forcing these discourses to coexist, the poem unsettles the boundaries between contamination and consumption, making clear that waste does not remain separate from human life. Instead, it is metabolized, repurposed, and absorbed into both ecosystems and bodies.

The poem's closing section turns to the ocean as the ultimate site of waste accumulation, reinforcing the failure of human perception when faced with ecological transformation on an incomprehensible scale: "What the sea brought: poly.flotsam.faux.foam" (12). The fragmentation of words mimics the physical breakdown of plastic into microplastics, but rather than signaling decay, this fragmentation marks a new, insidious form of persistence. Reilly collapses the distinction between the natural state and the synthetic state, suggesting that plastic

has so thoroughly infiltrated marine ecosystems that it has become part of the sea itself. This blurring is underscored in the ironic reflection: "Gee, this.stationaryparticulatecloud actually improves the sunset" (12). Here, pollution is aestheticized, turning contamination into spectacle, just like waste-time warps our understanding of presence and disappearance. Just as Viney argues that waste resists resolution, the poem suggests that our visual world has already absorbed plastic into its atmospheric and oceanic registers.

"Hence Mystical Cosmetic Over Sunset Landfill" exposes the ubiquity of waste and how it has become so familiar that its pervasiveness is overlooked. Dickinson takes Reilly's criticism of the effects of microplastics on our organisms further, demonstrating how waste infiltrates the body itself. His *Anatomic* is a collection that turns the body into an archive that traces the ways in which industrial waste does not remain external but becomes part of our biological selves. By subjecting his own blood, sweat, and stool to chemical analysis, Dickinson enacts what Stacy Alaimo terms "trans-corporeality"—the recognition that human bodies are not discrete entities but porous sites of exchange, constantly absorbing and metabolizing the pollutants of their environments. As Alaimo argues, "human corporeality is inseparable from the more-than-human world" (2), a reality Dickinson makes explicit by cataloging the toxins, heavy metals, and endocrine disruptors within him. Through this methodological approach, Dickinson shows that contamination is never merely an ecological crisis but a lived, bodily experience that does not impact all bodies equally.

In the poem "The People of Grassy Don't Have a Mercury Problem, They Have a Drinking Problem," Dickinson directly engages with the legacy of corporate pollution and systemic neglect, centering on the mercury contamination of the Grassy Narrows First Nation in Canada. The title itself paraphrases racist dismissals, which reframed the symptoms of mercury poisoning as a consequence of alcoholism rather than industrial toxicity. The prose poem is structured around escalating layers of bureaucratic denial, each step further diffusing responsibility. Each assertion is hedged by a conditional, shifting blame further from the polluters: "There was talk that the waters were not polluted, and if they were polluted, then the company was not responsible" (65). Dickinson mirrors this rhetorical slippage in his syntax, using the phrase

"there was talk" as an incantation of official justification, a refrain that both signals the presence of wrongdoing and anticipates its dismissal. Once more, the poem reveals how environmental violence is not just material but discursive, imitating the language of reports and public statements that, rather than providing justice, serve to insulate power from accountability.

Indeed, beneath this ineffective drivel lies the broader history of settler colonialism. With the line "the fur trade was in there burning in a shooter" (65), Dickinson collapses time, connecting early colonial extraction to the present-day poisoning of Indigenous land and bodies. In the line of European trade networks that reshaped ecosystems and Indigenous livelihoods, contemporary industry continues this legacy by treating First Nations communities as expendable, another example of Bauman's "wasted lives." The poem suggests that the framing of mercury poisoning as a "drinking problem" is not an accidental misreading but an intentional distortion, one that shifts responsibility away from the industries and policies that have systematically exposed Indigenous populations to harm:

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

Here, Dickinson offers another example of language manipulation where a form of toxification is replaced with another: it is not mercury but alcohol "what goes in" the bodies, deflecting responsibility by implying uncivil behavior, unsurprisingly related to bodily fluids. "To create a self," explains Morrison, "you must discharge and reject that which is not you" (31), that is, 'savages' who urinate and throw up in the streets.

Near the end, the poet acknowledges his own role in the structures he critiques: "And here I have it in my blood talking, a settler methylated

by the privilege afforded by the problem's extremities shaking with poorly connected dreams" (65). Like many contemporary socially engaged poets, Dickinson includes a brief paragraph that helps readers understand the poem. Here, he explains that his "body is marked by certain demographic privileges," and that "that racism and economic marginalization can cause people to live in closer proximity to industrial pollution" (66). By testing his own body for pollutants, he demonstrates that industrial waste is not just external detritus but something that circulates within all of us, albeit unevenly. While Indigenous communities are directly poisoned, Dickinson's "methylation" remains metaphorical, an acknowledgment that environmental violence is distributed along racial and colonial lines. In positioning himself within this toxic network, Dickinson rejects the illusion of detachment, urging readers to do the same.

3. Conclusions

If waste is, as Scanlan suggests, the unavoidable byproduct of classification, then language itself plays a decisive role in shaping how we perceive, manage, and justify what is discarded. Poetry, a form that endlessly arranges, rearranges, and resists classification, must have an uneasy relationship with it. In this article, I have tried to show that contemporary North American poets transcend the conception of waste as an environmental crisis, exposing it as a rhetorical structure that insulates power, deflects accountability and obscures harm. The works of Martín Espada, Rita Wong, Evelyn Reilly, and Adam Dickinson present waste as more than material excess, making it salient as a discursive battleground.

Espada's "Floaters" reveals how the state weaponizes language to reduce victims to refuse, while his poetry staves off erasure through acts of invocation. Wong's poem dismantles the euphemisms of corporations, exposing how language becomes a site of contamination, but also involving readers in the pressing e-waste problematic. Similarly, Reilly's *Styrofoam* mirrors the unsettling endurance of plastic, demonstrating how poetry, like waste, accumulates, layers, refuses to decay. And Dickinson's piece pushes this further, showing how both toxic prejudices and heavy metals are found deep within our selves.

Ultimately, these poets do not seek to sublimate waste into metaphor or meaning, nor to offer it as the raw material for aesthetic redemption. Rather, they expose its unavoidable presence, and its capacity to infiltrate bodies, accumulate in language, and persist beneath the surface of political speech. Their work neither resolves nor transcends waste; it dwells in it, troubles its boundaries, stages its discursive evasions. What emerges is not a poetics of purification, but of entanglement; a refusal to discard what has already been cast off, and an insistence that what is deemed excessive, toxic, or abject remains central to how meaning, value, and harm are produced and sustained.

Notes

[1] Not to mention Carl A. Zimring and William M. Rathje's two-tome *Encyclopedia of Consumption and Waste* (2012).

[2] At stake are not only discursive categories but lived exposures. Environmental justice has long foregrounded how toxic burdens track lines of race, class, and migration—as in the work of Robert D. Bullard and Dorceta E. Taylor—making waste a question of labor, infrastructure, and political rights. Material ecocriticism has, for some time, treated matter as active and "storied," as developed by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, urging us to follow waste as it moves across bodies and environments.

[3] For an analysis of waste in Ammons's long poem, see Simal 2023.

[4] Image available at: www.npr.org/2019/06/26/736177694/a-father-and-daughter-drowned-at-the-border-put-attention-on-immigration

[5] Here, Timothy Morton's concept of "hyperobjects" becomes relevant: some ecological crises—climate change, microplastic accumulation, radioactive waste—are so vast in time and space that they exceed human perception. Wong unveils one of these hyperobjects (e-waste), but Reilly's work forces us to reckon with waste beyond the visible.

[6] A "shooter" is a small serving of strong alcohol, typically consumed quickly in one gulp. In Dickinson's poem, it functions doubly: as a literal image of drinking and as a metaphor for how historical violence—like the fur trade—continues to burn through contemporary bodies via industrial poisoning.

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