




9-1-2022

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#### **Recommended Citation**

Hoelzer, Kaitlin (2022) "'Something Large and Old Awoke': Eco-poetics and Compassion in Tracy K. Smith's *Wade in the Water*," *AWE (A Woman's Experience)*: Vol. 9, Article 3.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/awe/vol9/iss1/3>

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# “Something Large and Old Awoke”

*Ecopoetics and Compassion in Tracy K. Smith’s Wade in the Water*

## First Place

**B**OTH HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY BLACK POETS HAVE used their work to identify, condemn, and suggest solutions to problems stemming from racism in American society. Indeed, as Arnold Rampersad notes in his introduction to *The Oxford Anthology of African American Poetry*, many Black poets use “poetry as a vehicle of protest against social injustice in America” (xxiv). Art is inherently political, even when its arguments do not overtly engage in political debates. As Lorraine Hansberry argues, all art is rooted in a particular social and political consciousness. The choice is “not whether one will make a social statement in one’s work—but only *what* the statement will say” (5). According to these Black theorists, in order to fully understand any piece of art, readers must understand the social and political context of the work.

Pulitzer Prize winner and former U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith’s work is often understood only in terms of its formal and aesthetic qualities, rather than its political components. However, the two are actually interconnected—Smith’s formal choices serve to support her political arguments. Her fourth volume of poetry, *Wade in the Water: Poems* (2018), examines racial and environmental injustice, participating in what Katherine R. Lynes has termed “African American reclamation ecopoetics.” Whereas ecocriticism has traditionally focused on pastoral aesthetics, Lynes, Angela Hume, Camille Dungy, and other Black critics have expanded ecopoetics to address environmental degradation and the structural oppressions that connect environmental damage with ongoing racial injustice through both formal and thematic elements (Lynes 51). Black poets, such as Robert Hayden, Melvin Dixon, and Lucille

Clifton, for instance, have often been particularly sensitive to the connections between these injustices, having seen both racial violence and environmental degradation in their communities. African American reclamation ecopoetics is “a protest of human injustices to both other humans and nonhuman nature” (Lynes 55) and is a strong part of the contemporary Black poetic tradition.

My paper will discuss Smith’s examination of the connection between environmental degradation and racial injustice as well as her response to these issues with a call for compassion. In so doing, I will situate Smith’s work in a particular African American conversation about restorative justice, demonstrating how her focus on compassion extends contemporary African American reclamation ecopoetics. Many prominent Black liberation theorists and activists, including bell hooks, Brittney Cooper, and Charlene Carruthers, have noted the importance of what they variously call love, solidarity, empathy, community, and compassion in movements for social justice. They identify a feeling for others that respects differences, motivates people toward liberation for all, and does not shy away from reality as vital to any successful liberation movement. I will use the term “compassion,” which literally means “to feel with,” to describe this revolutionary feeling. *Wade in the Water* identifies the link between racial injustice and environmental degradation, and readers are “confronted by the real, / By the cold, the pitiless, the bleak” (72, lines 7–8); at the same time, Smith’s book is also infused with a compassion that provides optimism in the face of oppression. The poems “Watershed,” “Wade in the Water,” and “An Old Story” in particular draw attention to the damage done to both the environment and Black people in America, countering these injustices with a compassion deemed essential to countering unjust systems and bringing about healing.

## **African American Reclamation Ecopoetics in *Wade in the Water***

The critical ecopoetic tradition has failed to recognize and address the ways in which Black poets connect racial injustice to environmental degradation in their ecopoetry. Often, scholars identify African American poets who write about nature simply as race poets, ignoring their themes of nature. While race undoubtedly informs the work of Black nature poets, analyzing these poems from the perspective of race alone erases the connection of environmental degradation and racial injustice addressed in the poems and thus perpetuates this violence. However, contemporary conversations about Black nature poetry are beginning to address the intersection between race and the environ-

ment in what has become known as African American reclamation ecopoetics.<sup>1</sup> This important theoretical understanding has yet to be applied to Smith's work. Attention to racial injustice, environmental degradation, and the ways in which these issues overlap is present throughout *Wade in the Water*, making it part of the African American reclamation ecopoetic tradition. Smith's poems "Watershed," "Wade in the Water," and "An Old Story" synthesize issues of both environmental and racial injustice, illustrating the connection between the two.

"Watershed" is an African American reclamation ecopoem that uses long lists and global imagery to reveal the overarching system that creates both environmental degradation and racial injustice. Pulling lines and phrases from a 2016 *New York Times Magazine* article titled "The Lawyer Who Became DuPont's Worst Nightmare" as well as excerpts from narratives of survivors of near-death experiences, "Watershed" tells the story of a single instance of environmental degradation before universalizing the DuPont chemical crisis to argue that incidents of pollution and other environmental damage are indicators of an overall system that disregards the health and safety of both land and people. The poem opens with descriptions of the effects of the chemical perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), which caused "deranged" and "skinny" cattle with "hair missing," "brilliant chemical blue" eyes, "malformed hooves," and "lesions" and that are recorded "suffering slobbering / staggering like drunks" (47–53, lines 10, 20, 21, 23, 27–28). These horrifying descriptions come in short, disjointed phrases, illustrating the disturbing way the symptoms quickly cropped up in farmers' cattle, and are repeated throughout the poem. Smith tells the story of one tragic occurrence of environmental degradation in lurid detail, thereby illustrating the dire consequences of such careless actions.

Compared with more traditional ecopoetry, the images of environmental horror in "Watershed" may seem out of place. However, Camille Dungy, a Black nature poet in her own right and editor of the anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, writes that the category of ecopoetry must be expanded beyond the "placid and pastoral tradition," noting that "as we advance our view of what it means to interact with the natural world and include conversations about environmental justice, ecology, and historically-informed environmental practices, there will be more room for nature poetry that might be viewed as politically-charged, historically-based,

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1. See, for instance, Dungy, "On Black Nature;" Hume, "Toward an Antiracist Ecopoetics;" and Lynes, "African American Reclamation Ecopoetics." See also "'The Light That Insists on Itself in the World': Lucille Clifton and African American Consciousness" by Bonnie Raub in *CLA Journal*, vol. 51, no. 4, June 2008, pp. 356-77 as well as "Going Overboard: African American Poetic Innovation and the Middle Passage" by Evie Shockley in *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2011, pp. 791-817.

culturally-engaged” (762). Smith’s work enters this expanded region of ecopoetics, using nature poetry as a way to make an argument about the oppressive structures that create environmental degradation and racial injustice as well as the ways in which they might be dismantled. “Watershed” makes it clear that ecopoetry is far more expansive than has been recognized, acknowledging not just the beauty of the natural world but also the dangers it faces.

Smith moves beyond chronicling a single event as she describes the global problem PFOA has become and introduces a chorus of voices affirming the importance of protecting the environment. “Watershed” details PFOA’s widespread effect on livestock, wildlife, and plants through contamination of the water table in long lists. Smith writes, “Hundreds of thousands of pounds” of PFOA was “pumped . . . / into the Ohio river / [and] dumped . . . / into open unlined pits (lines 57–60). Another section reads,

PFOA detected in:

...

blood or vital organs of:

Atlantic salmon

swordfish

striped mullet

gray seals

common cormorants

Alaskan polar bears

brown pelicans

sea turtles

sea eagles

California sea lions

Laysan albatrosses on a wildlife refuge

in the middle of the North

Pacific

Ocean

(lines 130–46)

PFOA has been found in water and animals throughout the world, making it a global concern. The global imagery of “Watershed” demonstrates that single instances of environmental degradation are part of a global attitude that is dismissive of the environment. Angela Davis and Macarena Gómez-Barris assert that extractive capitalism creates the need to dominate the land, stripping it of salable resources and contaminating it with the toxic byproducts of production (Davis 163; Gómez-Barris xvii). Thus, environmental damage is a symptom of a worldview that disregards the land in favor of domination and

profit. The danger extractive capitalism poses to the environment is evident in “Watershed.” The DuPont chemical crisis does not only affect those in its immediate vicinity, nor is it the only environmental problem we face today—PFOA spreads throughout ecosystems and evokes other contemporary environmental issues. Spliced alongside these chilling descriptions and separated by italics are narratives of near-death experiences that call for better care for the earth, which continues to frame this problem as not an isolated incident but a global issue. In the poem, those near death are “swept away by some unknown force” and realize that “every individual thing glowed with life” and that the earth “is a true living being” that “has been weakened considerably” (lines 35–36, 79, 109). In “Watershed,” the earth seizes people near death and demands better treatment. Those near death see the world as an interconnected and interdependent whole, representing the way in which individual environmental threats become global problems.

“Watershed” also pays careful attention to the ways PFOA has affected the human population, arguing that individual environmental problems not only indicate a larger disregard for the environment but also disregard for the common humanity of oppressed populations. PFOA is toxic to humans, and through contamination of blood transfusions and drinking water, it has caused birth defects, cancer, eye problems, vomiting, and fever (lines 67–76, 115–19, 123–26). Black people are particularly threatened by the systems of domination and oppression created by extractive capitalism, and “Watershed” recognizes the “long history of environmental subjugation in which nature is contaminated by past acts of racial violence” as well as the fact that slave patrols, lynchings, and police brutality often make it unsafe to be outdoors as a Black person (Hume 80; Duncy 761). The environmental damage caused by extractive capitalism is tied to the historical and current domination and exploitation of Black people through slavery, which was one of the earliest manifestations of extractive capitalism. Thus, the poem’s condemnation of DuPont’s individual actions calls for a justice that acknowledges the worth and freedom of Black people and all humans.

“Wade in the Water” also exposes the violence that extractive capitalism inflicts on both Black people and the land by evoking slavery. Smith wrote this poem after seeing the Geechee Gullah Ring Shouters perform. At first glance, “Wade in the Water” seems to be about a lively performance with “handclaps” and “stomps” (15, lines 13–14); however, the dance in question has a tragic history that recounts the enslavement of the dancers’ ancestors. Geechee Gullah, which is the area along the Atlantic coast that includes parts of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, also refers to the enslaved people

who once worked there in cotton, rice, and indigo fields as well as the unique language and art that evolved in this isolated region (“The Gullah Geechee”). The Geechee Gullah Ring Shouters perform dances and songs created when their ancestors were enslaved in the Geechee Gullah region. The “rusted iron / Chains someone was made / To drag” (lines 15–17) are not simply an artful metaphor for the freedom that comes from creation, but are the literal history of Geechee Gullah dance. Smith describes the beauty of the dance causing “a terrible new ache” and “scraping at / Each throat” (lines 4, 25–26)—feelings caused by beauty’s juxtaposition with the horrors of slavery that inform Geechee Gullah dance.

“Wade in the Water” demonstrates that the environmental degradation exposed in “Watershed” is rooted in extractive capitalism’s long history of slavery, domination, and exploitation. Extractive capitalism relies not just on domination of the land, but also on an underclass of exploited laborers, created by the historical enslavement and disenfranchisement of African and Indigenous populations and maintained by modern-day anti-Black racism (Davis 163; Gómez-Barris xvii–xviii). The acknowledgement of the legacy slavery has left in the United States in “Wade in the Water” can be linked to environmental degradation. This legacy of human and natural plunder is depicted in “Wade in the Water” as the dancers pretend to wade in the water, invoking the water that carried enslaved people from Africa to the Geechee Gullah region. Like the descriptions of the claps and stomps in the dance, the image of water connects the performance to the injustices caused by slavery; however, this description of “the water / Where they pretended to wade” (lines 20–21) in particular also allows “Wade in the Water” to hint at the environmental degradation discussed in more detail elsewhere in the book.

In “Wade in the Water,” the Atlantic Ocean is metaphorically tainted by the forcible importation of enslaved Africans. With the knowledge that extractive capitalism created slavery, it follows that the waters of the world also have been and will be literally threatened by the environmental practices of extractive capitalism. In *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*, community organizers Charlene A. Carruthers asserts that “Capitalism, patriarchy, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy work together to destroy people and the land we depend on . . . We see this collusion in extraction of land and exploitation of people” (113–14). This collusion is evident in the context of slavery expressed in “Wade in the Water;” plantation slavery relied on unethical practices toward both human life and agriculture. Like other Black nature poems, “Wade in the Water” “register[s] the structural forces and forms of power that both racialize and subject raced bodies and

environments to degradation and violence” (Hume 80). Therefore, “Wade in the Water” participates in the tradition of African American reclamation ecopoetics by articulating an understanding of the ways in which extractive capitalism links both environmental degradation and racial injustice.

“An Old Story” closes Smith’s book with a haunting image of the devastation caused by domination and exploitation of both the land and Black bodies in the United States, therein arguing that these inextricably linked injustices are structural, not individual. The poem voices a land that is “livid” and “ravaged” and a people whose “every hate [has] swollen to a kind of epic wind” (75, lines 3–4), describing the damage done to both the earth and humans as “the worst in us... taken over” (line 5). “An Old Story” asserts that individual beliefs become codified by the dominant group, making the individual “hate” swell to “epic” proportions, cementing structural injustice in the United States that is more far-reaching than any one individual’s action. That the poem presents the end of the world as something that involves both structural environmental degradation and institutionalized human hatred argues that when racial injustice goes unchecked, so does environmental degradation, and vice versa. Because environmental degradation and racial injustice “work together” (Carruthers 113), these oppressions multiply for Black people. Black people not only face the daily threat of racial violence, but also are more likely to live in areas where the environment is poor, due to environmentally harmful governmental policies and corporate actions that disproportionately affect poor communities of color (Cole and Foster 10-11, 54-58; Hume 83). “An Old Story” asserts the structural nature of the problems of environmental degradation and racial injustice.

Like “Watershed” and “Wade in the Water,” “An Old Story” connects racial injustice and environmental degradation; however, “An Old Story” points this conversation toward future possibilities for compassionate change. The “swollen” hate and “ravaged” land build upon each other until they are countered with people taking “new stock” of each other and the land (lines 3-4, 14). “An Old Story” thus outlines the coming problems society will face if oppressive systems are not replaced by systems of justice and compassion. In this way, the poem reflects Lynes’ argument that African American reclamation ecopoetics take responsibility for the future, “demand[ing] stewardship of nature... and, in a manner of speaking, of other humans” (55). “An Old Story,” while condemning the injustices of the past, is also forward-looking, seeking to rectify past problems of environmental degradation and racial injustice in order to build a more equitable future for all. Scholar and writer Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor similarly notes that racism in the United States is



not only about Black people, but is a symptom of a broader unjust system, writing, “When Black people get free, everyone gets free, [and] Black people in America cannot ‘get free’ alone. In that sense, Black liberation is bound up with the project of human liberation and social transformation” (194). Reading Smith in this light, her poems seek to enact “human liberation and social transformation” that will create compassionate societal structures.

## Compassion in Tracy K. Smith’s *Ecopoetics*

*Wade in the Water* contends that neither racial nor environmental injustices can be defeated without compassion. Indeed, the book underscores compassion as a force for liberation, justice, and healing, therein also offering a new way of envisioning the focus on the future of African American reclamation ecopoetics. In so doing, Smith echoes what other Black women theorists of liberation, including bell hooks, Brittney Cooper, and Charlene Carruthers, have said as the center compassion as the foundation of any movement of restorative justice. They, like Smith, assert that compassion leads to community, allowing effective resistance movements because it disavows hierarchy and acknowledges the problems people face, creating mutual respect in which all members of movements are supported in their differences.

“Watershed,” “Wade in the Water,” and “An Old Story” in particular emphasize compassion as a weapon in the battle for human dignity and justice. These poems do not suggest that one should ignore the reality of injustice or rely on trite calls to “just love everyone” as the solution to systemic problems; rather, they pair compassion with an acknowledgement of ecological disaster and racist violence, because compassion—which literally means “to feel with”—requires that one acknowledges the injustice of the past and present to find healing in the future. Nor are calls for compassion a way to avoid concrete action, because “feeling with” requires both individual and collective work. bell hooks’s two books on compassion argue that compassion does not mean ignoring difficult realities, but instead “allows us to confront these negative realities in a manner that is life-affirming and life-enhancing” (*All About Love* 139). Thus, compassion, in the sense Smith and other Black theorists use it, motivates care and community to combat injustice and thus create a more equitable future.

For instance, “Watershed” demonstrates the way compassion creates recognition of and care for others in its use of quotations from near-death experiences juxtaposed with the story of DuPont’s pollution. These quotes articulate the speakers’ realization of the importance of compassion; near the

end of the poem, the speakers say, “Viewing the myriad human faces with an incredible, intimate, and profound love. . . . All that was made, said, done, or even thought without love was undone. . . . It was experiencing the luminous warm water that I felt the most connection with the eternal” (lines 147, 154, 158–59). In “Watershed,” it is not the story of DuPont that inspires the love the poem’s speakers feel. Rather, their epiphanies of compassion provide a counterpoint to DuPont’s actions, arguing that seeing “the myriad human faces” with compassion leads to a revolution in the way humans treat each other. One speaker’s inclusion of “the luminous warm water” extends this care to all of nature. In “Watershed,” compassion allows people to recognize and work to end wrongdoing. Systems of oppression like extractive capitalism and white supremacy thrive on an absence of care for others (hooks, *Salvation* 9–10), whereas compassion brings “clarity” that “tells us what kind of world we want to see” (Cooper 93–97, 273). Compassion, then, is a foundational component to combating systems of oppression, because it creates care for others and turns such care into action toward concrete change.

Furthermore, the multitude of unidentified voices in “Watershed” create a communal chorus that invites compassion. The poem pulls lines from many different people affected by the DuPont crisis and places them alongside thoughts from those who have had near-death experiences quoted above to form this chorus. Smith does not assign the characteristics of race, class, gender, or sexuality to the plurality of voices she includes, instead leaving them anonymous. This plurality suggests a need for solidarity across the traditional boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality, or, in other words, true compassion for the self and the other—a “concern for the collective good” (hooks, *All About Love* 97–98). This call resonates with other contemporary calls, revealing Smith’s collection to be part of a larger national conversation about the role of compassionate community in social movements. For example, the Black Lives Matter mission statement declares their ultimate goal of “co-creating alongside comrades, allies, and family a culture where each person feels seen, heard, and supported” (“What We Believe”). Social movements must combat the multiplicity of oppression under the combination of white supremacy, patriarchy, and extractive capitalism with a tool equally able to connect “the myriad human faces” across race, class, gender, and sexuality. Compassion is that tool, for it moves people toward solidarity and community while addressing the reality of past harms. In the same way systems of domination create a complex web that links racial violence with sexism, homophobia, and environmental degradation, “Watershed” illustrates that compassion can

create structures in which every person as well as the land on which they live is supported and respected.

In “Wade in the Water,” the repetition of the phrase “I love you” works to underscore compassionate community and elevate compassion as a liberatory force. Smith describes one of the Geechee Gullah Ring Shouters greeting her by saying, “I love you” (line 2). The woman repeats “I love you” again and again “as she continued / Down the hall past other strangers” (lines 7–9). In the poem, though the group does not know one another, they are “pierced suddenly / By pillars of heavy light” (lines 10–11). This declaration of love to a group of strangers, like the multiplicity of voices in “Watershed,” demonstrates the way compassion can create community, connecting people despite their differences. Carruthers argues that “liberation is a collective effort” (25) and therefore, “eradicating oppression requires us to identify connections” (32) and “[value] people enough to believe we can be transformed” (56). The performers’ insistence on love embodies Carruthers’ appeal for collective support.

The repeated refrain of “I love you” underscores compassion’s creation of community, but also demonstrates the way compassion also promotes care for the self, which is key to any revolutionary activity. The repetition of “I love you” among the Geechee Gullah descendant performers as they dance together voices their love for their community and thus implies their love of themselves as part of that community. They embody hooks’s emphasis that marginalized groups must shake off the self-hatred dominant power structures have instilled in them in order to find liberation, performing a compassion that identifies the self and other as worthy of love (*Salvation* 7–8, 41–66). Compassion makes resistance possible by providing support systems.<sup>2</sup> Because of this repetition of “I love you” to both strangers and Geechee Gullah descendants, every other action in the poem is inflected by diverse community created through compassion.

“Wade in the Water” personifies compassion, arguing that compassion itself has the power to temper injustice and loose chains. Compassion is infused “throughout / The performance,” manifesting itself “in every / Handclap, every stomp,” in “rusted iron / Chains,” and “in the water” (lines 12–16, 20). As compassion pierces the scene with light, the “rusted iron / Chains” of racial injustice and environmental degradation are “unclasped and left empty” (lines 16–18). This image clearly communicates the immense power compassion has to combat injustice; it is compassion itself, not any individual, that breaks the chains. hooks notes that compassion roots out “obsession with power and

2. For more on compassion’s ability to create support systems, see Black Lives Matter co-founder Parris Khan-Cullors’s memoir *When They Call You A Terrorist*, especially pages 5, 35–42, 67, 99, 106, 129, 138, and 164–66.

domination” and instead cultivates the idea that “everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well” (*All About Love* 87), and “Wade in the Water” echoes this sentiment. Further, in “Wade in the Water,” compassion “drag[s] us to those banks / And cast[s] us in” as well as pushes itself into each audience member, “scraping at / Each throat” (lines 23–25). “Wade in the Water” mimics a baptism and confirmation by the hand of compassion. That compassion itself performs these actions again illustrates its potency in resisting oppression. Compassion is not merely the motivator of liberation, it is the liberator itself.

The book’s final poem, “An Old Story,” invokes a creation myth of sorts to offer a vision of healing through compassion and argue that the structures of the world must be reimaged. “An Old Story” begins with a storm, “ravaged” land, and “swollen” hate—a picture of what the world might become if these twin oppressions of racial and environmental injustice are left unchecked. Eventually, however, “something / Large and old awoke” (lines 2-3, 4, 10–11). This force causes the people in the story to “[take] new stock of one another,” begin to sing together, and “[weep] to be reminded of such color” (lines 11, 14–15). Compassion can be read the “large and old” force coming back to life after being suppressed by hatred and destruction, reminding people of the brilliant and varied “colors” of the world. This awakening of compassion also brings healing to the ravaged world, replacing the storms with “a different manner of weather” and coaxing “animals long believed gone... down / From trees” (12–14). Of “An Old Story,” Smith has written, “I wrote this poem thinking it might be nice to take a stab at creating a new myth” that takes “the failings of the twenty-first century... and fashion[s] them into a story that culminates in humankind finding its way to a compassionate existence” (Gioia 181). The healing of relationships between humans themselves as well as between humans and the natural world that takes place in the poem comes from a reassessment of how the world functions and who those functions serve. This reassessment facilitates a creation of a society based on compassionate structures. Because “An Old Story” depicts a new society, it demonstrates compassion’s ability to incite expansive structural change, not merely individual transformation and community support.

In addition, this closing poem illustrates that compassion can transform resistance movements, making them inclusive and expansive and thus more effective at fighting the underlying systems of oppression that create myriad forms of injustice. In “An Old Story,” compassion guides people toward imperative structural change and thus, the poem argues that compassion is essential to truly remove systems of domination at their roots, rather than focusing only

on singular instances of oppression. As Akiba Solomon and Kenrya Rankin note in their book *How We Fight White Supremacy: A Field Guide to Black Resistance*, compassion is not a magical quick-fix, but is a guiding force that creates “an enduring form of resistance that is radical, expansive, and transformative at its core” (183). The theorists discussed in this paper agree that in order to be successful, social movements must promote structural rather than individual change and must do so by addressing injustice in all its forms. “An Old Story” depicts the way in which compassion gives social movements the power and scope to dismantle oppression at its roots.

## Conclusion

Near the beginning of *Wade in the Water*, we read, “For our own good we have to answer / For all that has happened” (23, lines 9–10). The collection as a whole offers up compassion as a way to answer for the injustices found therein. Compassion is undoubtedly good for communities and landscapes threatened by systems of injustice; however, healing the injustices caused by white supremacist extractive capitalism benefits all members of society. A society that functions through the exploitation and harm of others, including Black people and the land as well as other marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community, people of color, and women of all races, is a society that degrades all of its members, even the most powerful. Members of dominant groups, though not affected to the same extent, are nonetheless negatively affected by systems built on extractive capitalism, because those systems restrict individuality and creativity while requiring indifference to destruction and injustice. Such a society cannot remain stable for long. Compassion, on the other hand, prioritizes justice and dignity for all, ending environmental degradation and racial violence, as well as the personal restriction and moral apathy that spreads across unjust societies.

Tracy K. Smith’s book joins other contemporary Black women theorists’ in offering up a vision of a compassionate society that recognizes the value in all humanity and the earth and is committed to comprehensive structural change. In her touchstone essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde asserts that poetry “forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change,” thus laying “the foundations for a future of change” (224). Compassion makes the necessity of such change clear, but it is also the tools by which change is accomplished. Poetry gives us a place “to hint at possibility made real” (Lorde 225). In this vein, *Wade in the Water* creates a world in which to explore the radical revolution that compassion can

enact if we let it guide our actions and institutions. *Wade in the Water* urges us to start cultivating such compassionate revolution.

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