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“All That Was Important In Life”:

Toward a Compassionate Anthropocene in Tracy K. Smith’s “Watershed”

In Tracy K. Smith’s “Watershed,” the Pulitzer-prize winner and Poet Laureate juxtaposes accounts of ecological violence with individual eschatological experiences. Having been “powerfully compelled and disturbed by a Nathaniel Rich article about chemical pollution that appeared in the New York Times Magazine in January 2016” (“Interview”), Smith knew that she wanted to compose a found poem using lines of the report, although she didn’t know at the time what form that would take. Later, she “had the idea of marrying the facts from that article . . . with the narratives of near-death-experience (NDE) survivors” (“Interview”). What purpose might this juxtaposition hold? Even Smith herself admitted—while answering questions about this specific poem at Brigham Young University—“I like writing poems that I don’t understand.” Yet understanding a poem composed of spiritually fulfilling and environmentally destructive elements might contribute meaningfully to current dialogue concerning the age of climate change crisis and ecological anxiety. In fact, when viewing how “Watershed” (and Wade in the Water generally) coincides with Samuel Scheffler’s Death and the Afterlife, a monograph with grand implications towards conceptions of ecological crisis, Smith’s poem seems to yield a novel take on human egoism and the place of compassion in the Anthropocene.

Scheffler’s main project in the book is to consider the impact of ongoing human history—what Scheffler calls the “collective afterlife”—on the types of meaning we construct
within our lives. Largely venturing into new philosophical territory, Scheffler claims that we widely take for granted that humans will continue to live after us; he asks what impact this taken-for-granted assumption might have on our lives and the choices that we make. Proposing different thought experiments (such as what would happen if a person were to know that everyone they loved were to die thirty days after their own death, or considering the premise of P. D. James’s 1992 novel *The Children of Men*: proposing a cataclysmic event that made each and every human infertile), Scheffler examines how our behaviors would shift if this assumption were somehow unfulfilled. Notwithstanding an agreement on the broad concept, Scheffler and his scholarly responders (which are included in the book) disagree about the place of human egoism in this collective afterlife thesis: do we care about a collective afterlife because of our inherent and altruistic interest in the wellbeing of unborn and unrelated humans? Or do we only care because it adds more meaning to our own lives to consider them and how they will receive our accomplishments? In addition to offering various implications concerning the notion of a collective afterlife, Tracy K. Smith’s “Watershed” contributes to this conversation by proposing not only that human compassion is an integral element in the collective afterlife thesis, but also that only through compassion can humanity respond to and mitigate anthropogenic crisis.

Tracy K. Smith’s cosmic timeline in *Wade in the Water* actually aligns fairly well with Scheffler’s thesis concerning the collective afterlife. Scheffler explains that beyond a personal, individual afterlife, “we shouldn’t overlook how the collective afterlife supports the meaning of our finite, mortal lives here and now” (Scheffler 4). He claims that we derive great meaning from “occupying a place in an ongoing human history” (7). Furthermore, concerning the lives of those who are not our posterity but would nonetheless be able to live beyond us, Scheffler argues that “the fact that we and everyone we love will cease to exist matters less to us than would the
nonestxtence of future people whom we do not know and who, indeed, have no determinate identities” (45). He thus figures our own perceptions of life as just one contribution to a part of a sizable human history, spreading back long before us, and in which we can have a hand in the future. He claims that we make choices with future humanity in mind not because we feel an obligation towards them, but “simply because they matter so much to us” (78).

Smith presents a remarkably similar cosmic human relationship throughout Wade in the Water. Beginning her collection with a poem entitled “Garden of Eden,” Smith immediately begins tracing an ongoing human history to its mythical conception (notably, she does so through the ecological framework of the Eden story). Predominantly moving through her book chronologically, Smith recounts important movements in human history that have helped to give meaning to her own life—whether those stories are actually physically written down or whether they have been erased through marginalization and disenfranchisement. (For instance, she gives a voice to enslaved Africans through an erasure poem composed of lines from the Declaration of Independence in “Declaration.”) By doing so, she establishes the meaning of her own life in a deeply historical, anthropocentric narrative.

Moving past antiquity, though, Smith also looks forward during the final section of her book in order to compose a future human history passed on through generations. Rather than focusing on the cosmic future of a possible personal afterlife, Smith’s poetry seems to suggest that the future of humanity will be propagated through a generational—or collective—afterlife. In “Urban Youth,” for example, Smith characterizes her own childhood as containing its own kind of eternity. In the poem, she nostalgically speaks of watching “Hong Kong Phooey, Fat Albert & the Cosby Kids” (line 3) while also meditating on other memories such as her sibling’s trombone and her own experience of learning how to ride a bike. Through her use of temporal
imagery, such as it being “always autumn” (line 6) or how “so much now gone was only then beginning” (line 16), Smith fashions a perpetual temporality for childhood. Furthermore, by using a pantoum form for the poem that cycles periodically through repeated lines, “Urban Youth” moreover portrays a cyclical adolescence—one that never quite leaves its routine repetitions. Finally, through idealistic nature imagery such as “blue sky, flimsy clouds” (line 6) and “the hedges hummed with bees” (line 20), Smith imbues this eternal youth with idyllic, Edenic, and even heavenly connotations. As she relates, her childhood contained “every happy thing I’ve known” (line 24). Thus, through form and imagery, Smith casts youth as having some kind of ethereal eternity, some transcendent timeline contained within it.

Yet Smith does not only use this eternal youth to find a personal eternity in nostalgia about the past. Rather, she expands these eternal connotations to children everywhere and by so doing gestures toward a collective afterlife. In “Dusk,” after giving an account of her daughter’s formative years, the speaker exclaims, “I thought I’d have more time!” (line 20). The speaker’s own feeling of restricted temporality is juxtaposed with the eternal youth of her daughter. As she feels that she nears her own personal extinction, she nevertheless promotes the idea that life—an eternally young life—will continue one with her generations. The quotidian poems that surround “Urban Youth” and “Dusk” (such as “4 ½” and “The Everlasting Self”) thus serve to eternalize the progression from generation to generation and promote the idea of a domesticized collective (or generational) afterlife. Furthermore, Smith expands this eternal youth to include not only her own children, but those which Scheffler might term “future people whom we do not know and who, indeed, have no determinate identities.” For instance, in “Refuge,” Smith refers to “your sister in a camp in Turkey, / Sixteen, deserving of everything: / Let her be my daughter” (lines 14-16). Not only does Smith eternalize youth—and in particular the youth of her daughter—she
specifically expands this eternity to those she has never met through familial association. Smith figures a similar wonder for humanity in general in poems such as “Beatific” and “Charity.” Thus, Smith celebrates all of humanity—and specifically those of the rising generation—as inhabiting a space that is not constrained by time or worldly concerns. In the cosmic scheme that she draws from the genesis of humans in the garden of Eden to today, she figures the future as being passed on by her own descendants and even those who she has never met. She gathers meaning from knowing that humanity will continue on without her in an eternal autumn.

Yet by placing “Watershed” in the midst of this ongoing human trajectory, Smith gestures towards an ecological violence that might threaten the idea of the collective afterlife. In doing so, she actually echoes a similar concern among scholars. These critics have specifically used Scheffler’s theses in addressing concerns of climate change and anthropogenic crisis. Kirk Smith, for instance, connects Scheffler’s thought experiments to environmental concerns: “Climate change does not threaten human survival in the way that absolute infertility would, but climate scenarios exist that portray major disruptions in the continuum of human experience” (583). It would not be unreasonable to conclude, either—given the diverse ways that climate change may affect that planet—that such crisis could threaten all of human life. Regardless, Kirk continues to say that “threats to the future from climate change might so alter our belief in the nature of what human life and society will become that it threatens how we value ourselves and our own lives today” (585). In other words, Scheffler’s propositions (and Tracy K. Smith’s writings) coincide, and may even be convergent with growing fear about ecological anxieties.

“Watershed” thus stands as a key poem for understanding the viability of the collective afterlife and discovering its implications in the age of the Anthropocene. The erasure poem opens by foregrounding ecological themes: “200 cows more than 600 hilly acres” (line 1).
Immediately thereafter, Smith weaves in elements of violence and chaos. She describes how the “cattle began to act / deranged” (lines 9-10), detailing footage in which “images jump repeat sound accelerates / slows down / quality of a horror movie” (lines 13-15). Smith’s use of white space on the page creates a jumpy sound-image that mimics the jittery, unsettling horror of the footage she is discussing. In response to the landscape that she opens with, and in contrast to the idyllic version of her own childhood, Smith presents “a skinny red cow / hair missing back humped / a dead black calf in snow” (lines 20-22). In detailing the atrocious side-effects of DuPont’s abuse of the environment, Smith illuminates the trajectory from the garden of Eden at the beginning of the book to the fallen world of ecological violence. In fact, the world is no longer recognizable: “It don’t look like / anything I’ve been into before” (lines 30-31). Smith therefore presents a world that not only stands contrary to the beginnings of humanity, but threatens its anthropocentric existence with bleak finality.

Beyond implicating the collective afterlife through human-bred environmental abuse, Smith draws specific attention to afterlife theology by juxtaposing this anthropogenic death with personal near-death experiences. Immediately after establishing the world as different from “anything I’ve been into before,” Smith launches into one of these near-death-experiences: “I began rising through the ceiling of each floor in the hospital” (line 31). By setting personal afterlife experiences alongside ecological crisis, Smith parallels personal afterlives with the collective afterlife of humanity. Yet she also inevitably sets the poem up to comment on tensions between the near-death of individuals and the near-death of humanity through cataclysmic events. Near-death experiences offer a complex set of paradoxical propositions in and of themselves: such transcendent experiences certainly gesture towards the reality of an afterlife, yet they simultaneously seem to deny the reality of an afterlife through the imagined and
ultimately temporary state of their visionary elements. By including near-death experiences in the poem, Smith might thus comment that humans can only hope to come to terms with their inevitable demise by pretending to participate in a collective afterlife; after all, the near-death experiences in “Watershed” are replete with idyllic environmental images. Perhaps the “sky,” the “mountain range,” and the “thunderbolt” are a way of figuring the afterlife specifically without humans. However, if we take the near-death experiences seriously (which it seems that Smith does), then the paradigm changes. Instead of betraying the final death of all living things, the afterlife experiences interspersed in “Watershed” may actually hint towards what makes life meaningful and how to perpetuate this meaningful life on earth in spite of ecological crisis.

Smith herself describes the collection of near-death experiences as containing “vocabularies almost across the board” which “invoke the sense of Love as an original animating force, as the logic of the universe” (“Interview”). In the text, this love is coupled with the energy of life itself. In the second near-death experience, Smith relates that “every individual thing glowed with life” (line 79). Of course, this, too, is imbricated with biological and ecological significance: “Bands of energy were being dispersed from a huge universal heartbeat, faster than a raging river” (lines 79-80). This ecological theme follows throughout other visions, with God figured as “a luminous warm water” (line 157). Another experience describes “living waters,” living “grass,” and “the trees and the animals,” which “were more alive than on earth” (lines 99-100). This living, loving essence includes humans as well; one witness views “human faces with an incredible, intimate, and profound love” (line 147). Perhaps as a capstone, Smith asserts, “All that was important in life was the love we felt” (line 152). The most meaningful connection to the afterlife, then, is found in the love for others. Rather than seeing these images as wishful thinking
in the face of certain death, the connection of love, life, and ecological elements (including humans) portends the ability of each of these to transcend and outlast ecological crisis.

Tracy K. Smith thus acknowledges the importance of considering anthropogenic violence, but also offers an anecdote to its ills. In so doing, she enters a conversation concerning the collective afterlife and its implications on individual egoism. Scheffler argues in his lectures that the collective afterlife “suggests the limits of our individualism, in that it reveals that much of what we value . . . depends on implicit collective preconditions” (8). Two other notable scholars, Susan Wolf and Henry Frankfurt, disagree. Wolf claims that “many of the goals . . . are parasitic on the existence of other people, including . . . people who live on after we are gone” (117). Instead of limiting our own egoism, Wolf sees the collective afterlife thesis as exemplifying just how parasitic our egoism is. Likewise, Frankfurt contends that “it is not for the sake of others that we care about them” (137); rather, their imagined existence only serves our own interests. In response to these concerns, Scheffler qualifies his own argument, claiming that there is nothing necessarily altruistic about meaning derived from the collective afterlife, but instead that “the content of [a person’s] emotions and beliefs about what is worth doing . . . [is] highly sensitive to the fate of human beings . . . other than himself and his inmates” (178). Thus, current literature on the topic suggests that humans are not motivated out of compassion for those who follow after them.

Yet by juxtaposing an ecological threat to the collective afterlife and love-filled near-death experiences, Smith does seem to unapologetically link compassion and the collective afterlife. Akin with one of Scheffler’s arguments, Smith finds that both kinds of afterlife “have some of the same nonegoistic and nonindividualistic character” (Scheffler 69). Furthermore, taking the near-death experiences seriously, their collective cry seems to offer an antidote to the
environmental death in the rest of the poem: “All that was made, said, done, or even thought without love was undone” (line 154). Such a project of undoing collective harm with individual love actually fits in the context of Smith’s larger project. In accordance with Kirk Smith, who writes that “the inadvertent target of most such climate impacts is the most vulnerable” (584), Tracy K. Smith explains that she is “most committed to . . . [those] our culture continues to make most vulnerable: women, people of color, the lonely and disenfranchised” (“Interview”). Thus, along with her poems that explicitly deal with race, gender, and social issues, Smith’s poem “Watershed” still comments on those who are vulnerable to a lack of compassion—namely, the environment itself and those who are disproportionately affected by its demise.

Smith’s version of the collective afterlife helps to solve other potential problems that critics have discovered within Scheffler’s model. Pieter Vermuelen finds that Scheffler’s thesis is blindly anthropocentric, and that “the Anthropocene drives home the point that life is, in Eugene Thacker’s words, ‘human-centered and yet unhuman-oriented’” (11). He finds that since “human life in the age of climate change [is] the sum of terraforming assemblages composed of humans, nonhuman species, and technics” (12), that treating “humanity” as an insulated monolith is a worrisome western notion (15). However, by focusing on ecological violence to the environment itself, and by subsequently focusing the afterlife in terms that are ecological in nature, Smith transcends anthropocentric concerns about humanity itself. She figures a life in a post-crisis world that would be filled with humans, but also with life-imbued “trees and animals.” Since Smith’s project is in one sense “to erase some measure of the distance between one person and another . . . or between the poem’s speaker and its subject” (“Interview”), Smith’s poetry erases boundaries between humans and the environment. While privileging love, she also privileges an ecologically conscious view of the world as a complex web of environment-human relations.
Smith seems to culminate all of these notions in the last poem of her collection, “An Old Story.” In the poem, “every hate”—or lack of compassion—is “swollen to a kind of epic wind” (line 3). Human-caused ecological hate is transmitted through the environment itself, making the land “livid . . . and ravaged, like a rageful / Dream” (lines 4-5). Subsequently, “when we knew how little / Would survive us” (line 8-9)—that is, when the speaker acknowledges the collective afterlife and its corresponding anthropogenic threat—“something / Large and old awoke” (line 11). This “awakening” towards action then provokes “singing.” How might singing help to mitigate the effects of ecological violence on the collective afterlife? The singing actually references the eponymous poem for the overall collection, “Wade in the Water.” In the poem, singers teach the speaker how to inhabit an unqualified, unconditional love. Connecting this through to “An Old Story,” the singing brings “on a different manner of weather” (line 12), a change in the state of environmental affairs. Accordingly, “animals long believed gone crept down from the trees” (line 13). Thus, in the face of great cataclysmic danger for future generations, only unconditional love can reclaim an Edenic state that allows children to grow in a perpetually idyllic eternity. Compassion can respond to and combat anthropogenic concerns.

Smith’s *Wade in the Water* establishes the long history of humanity, from the Garden of Eden to a generational, collective afterlife. Although this afterlife is threatened by ecological crisis in the Anthropocene, references to love within the afterlife in “Watershed” suggest that such violence can be overcome, and the collective afterlife can be reclaimed. While some hold that the collective afterlife proves the egoism of individuals, Smith seems to posit that it rather proves the altruism of humanity, and that only through this altruism can the afterlife be saved from ecological (and by extension, racial, gendered, and social) violence. Only then will “we [weep] to be reminded of such a color” (“Afterlife” 15).
Works Cited


