



# Toxic mobilities and the politics of unending in Henrietta Rose-Innes's "Poison"

Ewa Macura-Nnamdi

## Toxic mobilities and the politics of unending in Henrietta Rose-Innes's "Poison"

The few readings of Henrietta Rose-Innes's short story "Poison" have so far focused on how it critiques the racial politics of eco-apocalypse and the ways narratives of the end are inflected by the privilege of whiteness. In this paper, I take a different approach, examining the eponymous poison and the ways it is narrated to challenge not merely the eschatological sentiments underlying the prevalent imaginaries of the future but also the (anthropocentric) idea of the end itself as an expected and natural denouement to the world. Reading the toxic conceptually, I suggest toxicity becomes a signifier of *no-end*. Inspired by recent scholarship on toxicity, especially Daniel Hofmann's stunning take on the toxic, I cull from its properties its resistance to endings, looking at how toxicity can help us think beyond human exceptionalism and the human species' extinction this exceptionalism propounds. I highlight, in particular, the motility and persistence of toxic matter, which unsettles what Achille Mbembe calls the regimes of borderisation. Mobile and enduring, travelling freely across all kinds of entities, human and otherwise, Rose-Innes' toxicity re-scripts the dominant narratives of eco-apocalypse, offering a vision of the future world which may be mutated yet is ongoing and fuelled by toxified, recomposed, perishable human bodies. **Keywords:** Henrietta Rose-Innes, toxicity, eco-apocalypse, end, mobility, "Poison".

### I

A "chemical regime of living" is a relatively novel historical conjunction, Michelle Murphy tells us, in which "not just genomes but the atmosphere, water, soil, nourishment, commodities and our very bodies are apprehendable as caught in possibly toxic molecular relations" ("Chemical Regimes of Living" 697). Ubiquitous, though unevenly distributed, this chemical regime problematises our temporal frameworks, both in how it confounds our comprehension of time and renders the human species temporally insignificant by comparison: "Constant exposure to industrial chemicals is paired with the fact that many of these chemicals persist in a geological time frame that exceeds the timescale of the human species, meaning chemical legacies will characterize the planet for both immediate and distant futures" (Liboiron, Tironi and Calvillo 332). This "new age of toxicity" (332) does not only inaugurate a temporal rescaling of the human species but also, consequently, intervenes into discourses of extinction, re-defining the horizon of the future as feasible *without* human life.

In this paper, I take up the capacity of the toxic to exceed fathomable temporalities and examine the critical potential of toxicity as represented in Henrietta Rose-Innes' short story "Poison" in order to challenge the eco-apocalyptic idea of the end as a temporal terminus of the environmentally degraded Earth. Foregrounding the longevity of the toxic, I posit toxicity as a concept to think with rather than as a specific reality wreaking havoc on environments and their inhabitants (human and other-than-human). Given its largely allegorical tenor, "Poison" lends itself to such a reading: the generically called, but never specified, toxic substance remains unnamed and otherwise unidentified. Most specifically, I focus on the properties of toxicity as perennially durable and on the motility of the poison as a signifier of unending and survival. Inspired by Achille Mbembe's recently offered reflections on the future of the Earth, I read the toxic as sabotaging the world-destroying processes of borderisation on one hand. On the other, I juxtapose the story's perishable bodies with the enduring materiality of toxicity. Both help inscribe unending as the horizon of the future outside the hubris of human exceptionalism.

Ewa Macura-Nnamdi is assistant professor at the Institute of Literary Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Silesia, Katowice, Poland.

Email: [ewa.macura-nnamdi@us.edu.pl](mailto:ewa.macura-nnamdi@us.edu.pl)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7177-4159>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v62i1.20953>

### DATES:

Submitted: 10 January 2025; Accepted: 31 March 2025; Published: 12 May 2025

## II

In one section of her introduction to *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature*, Jennifer Wenzel offers a challenge to the prevalent depictions of climate eschatologies, suggesting a disenchantment of the narratives of the end. If eco-apocalypse has been deployed as a genre of choice to speak of the imminent catastrophe triggered by environmental degradation and the ensuing climate change, it has been characterised by what she calls a “mode of unimagining the future” where “attachments to the status quo” fail to get loosened (32) and bring about a radical change. Significantly, for Wenzel the problem with eco-apocalypse lies in its too heavy investment in the “crisis of futurity” and an inadequate concern for the present (32). Following Mary Louise Pratt, Wenzel notes the temporal inequalities that mar the lives of those excluded from the narratives spawned by the crises of futurity. She asks: “What does it mean to be evicted from the future in this way: to confront not the ‘end’ of the world, but having been shut out of the temporal horizon of its desires and ends?” (32). At stake is a glaring contrast between “the future lost to climate change as the belated cost of modernity’s chain of ease, as opposed to never having enjoyed the benefits of modernity to begin with” (33). This contrast (but also this eviction from the future of the wretched of the world) comes into full view in the eco-apocalyptic narratives which envision the end as a civilisational regress into the deplorable conditions, aesthetic, material, and political of the Global South driven as they are by the fear that “the Third World’s present offers an image of the First World’s future” (36). Thus the trouble with the stories of the end is their failure to recognise the present as in need of radical transformation and their penchant for projecting this misrecognised present as the telos of the changing climate. The political impotence of eco-apocalypse, Wenzel argues, stems both from representing the “here as there” (36) and from concealing or disregarding the ongoing apocalypses already lived in the Global South.

In contrast to the politically barren scenarios so often offered by eco-apocalypse—and many Anthropocene—narratives, Wenzel suggests a turn towards the present and the “histories of exploitation that endure into the present” (41, italics in the original). “Such a capacity to reimagine alternative possibility in the present”, Wenzel argues, “might be able to grapple more meaningfully with pasts that aren’t even pasts, and futures—both imagined and unimagined—that may never arrive” (42). Wenzel’s concluding bid for a cultivation of “desires for something other than an ending” (41), for a re-oriented optics not only sensitive to the inequalities which have made many already live in catastrophic circumstances but also able to envision alternatives to the *now*, is not a call for a disregard of the tangible losses afflicting the human and the other-than-human worlds. Rather, it resonates with a need to find “ways of dwelling in the crisis” (Buell 291), with and in the damage already done.

Wenzel is not, of course, the only scholar to note and critique the futuristic narratives offering apocalyptic speculation about the end of times (which are mostly also imagined as solely human) and the multiple ways in which they conceal or disregard the historically determined and ongoing injustices and inequalities. Axelle Karera, for instance, speaks of the “rampant inability to imagine alternative futures outside an apocalyptic state of emergency that is mostly inspired by a narrative of vitality, and in which disposable life or ‘life-death’ remains largely unaccounted for” (33). Failure to heed ongoing “black suffering” and include “matters of race” in the discourses on the Anthropocene does not simply depoliticise these discourses but also renders the post-apocalyptic visions of the future mere repetitions of the present with its “anti-black racist practices” (34). Srinivas Aravamudan points to what he calls the “escapist philosophy of various dimensions of the hypothesis concerning the Anthropocene” which often aims to purge realities of the “human messiness in our involvement with the world” (20). Noting how ideas of extinction become mobilised in the service of right-wing extremism, Mbembe draws our attention to the increasingly popular narratives of replacement in which “the Whites, a ‘declining and dying race,’ are undergoing bio-racial substitution by the ‘hordes’ from elsewhere, so-called coloured peoples” (90). This “eschatological line of thinking” and its pernicious uses effectively occlude the minimal requirements for a re-inhabiting of the Earth, namely, the “right to breathe” (90–1) and the “right to a future” [...]. Both are requisite for a “truly planetary consciousness” and for the development of “a democracy open to all living beings, beyond species and races” (91). The “theologies of extinction”, as Mbembe calls them, not only traffic in hierarchical categories but remain blind to the existing structural inequalities destructive of the environment in the first place.

Examining ideas of the end across philosophical and cultural discourses, Ben Ware traces the different ways in which the immanent end is imagined to either arrive in a spectacularly sudden way or to keep arriving indefinitely to the pleasures of those awaiting it. In doing so, he camouflages the desire for the preservation of the status quo. As he puts it, “the desperate attempt to preserve the ‘human’ as it already exists under capitalism” is

simultaneous with a relegation of the ending to the future (27). Similar to Karera, Aravamudan, and Mbembe, Ware ties the preclusion of the end to a radical termination of present conditions. He argues that:

only the collective negation of *this world* ends the prospect of the end of *the world*. [...] To terminate the threat of the end (as the biological end of all things) will therefore mean beginning again at the end [...]: abolishing a mode of political and economic life which seeks to tether us all—the *yet to be born*—to a sick but undying present. (28–9, italics in the original).

These critiques of the various desires for the end are precisely critiques of *desires*: they probe their motivations and symptoms and reveal the less obvious meanings these desires conceal. They do not, however, question the very idea that the anthropocenic harm unfolding steadily and unevenly across different parts of the world will necessarily lead to *an end*. In other words, in eco-apocalyptic narratives and some of these critiques, *the end* is posited as an unquestionable culmination of a certain story of progress. Whatever the details of this story, the end is its assumed finale. It is a moment in time towards which everything is gravitating, which will mark an all-concluding caesura beyond which everything will cease to exist. The end is taken for granted as the telos of different destructive phenomena and deeds (past or present). Put simply, these narratives stipulate that there is going to be an end. Yet to posit an end in such a fashion is a thoroughly anthropocentric gesture, which rests on “human exceptionalism” because a vision of such an end can only make sense “from the human standpoint” (Ware 4). At stake is also an often tacit agreement that the end as envisioned, anticipated, dreaded, bemoaned, etc., is an essentially human end. It is often, therefore, imagined as the end of the human species with a concomitant assumption that the end of human beings will be the end of everything.

Noting, among other things, the “ecological melancholy that anticipates mass extinction”, Aravamudan reminds us, shrewdly, that:

the human is not the only subject or object. Endings are also mutations. The end of a singular species would still not be the end of all genres. There will be a post-ontological future of unnameable others [...]. What began as catachresis, the burdensome experience of ‘living in the end times,’ could morph into the birth of many brave new worlds populated by those that come after the subject. (25)

If not entirely along the lines of what I wish to suggest in this paper, Aravamudan nevertheless not only questions the finitude of the end posited by Anthropocene narratives but also challenges the very idea of an end as an expected outcome of the eco-apocalypse. His take on *endings as mutations* and his confidence in beginnings rather than endings not only displace humans as the locus and authors of the end but also invite a closer look at the possibility of displacing (the very idea of) the end from the horizon of the future.

In this paper, I follow Wenzel’s bid (shared by the other scholars) to cultivate “desires for something other than an ending” (41) on the one hand. On the other, I attempt to find ways of challenging the concept of the end as a culminating moment of eco-apocalypse and ponder what it could mean to inscribe *unending* into the narratives of the end of times. To do so, I turn to the toxic as a materiality with which to think of the concept of *no-end*. Probing its multifarious resistances to eschatology and its unperishable nature, I trace the imaginative use of the toxic as an exercise in thinking of climate catastrophe otherwise. Reading Rose-Innes’s short story “Poison”, a compact yet compelling narrative, I look at the imaginative work the toxic does to complicate the neat progression from environmental degradation to an apocalyptic denouement.

### III

If this reading of Rose-Innes’ story seems detached from realities marred and tragically affected by toxic environments, it is substantially motivated by the narrative strategy “Poison” deploys and its rendition of the chemical contamination at the centre of the story as an emergency. While offering enough details to geographically and nationally locate the story’s background (Johannesburg, South Africa), Rose-Innes nevertheless withholds significant portions of information, leaving the readers with almost generic narrative elements (human and other-than-human), including the eponymous poison. The sparsely fleshed context and mostly anonymous characters render the story almost allegorical, turning the human and other-than-human protagonists into representatives of particular genres.<sup>1</sup> If other readings of the story have mostly focused on how its genericity speaks of South Africa’s racial histories and realities in relation to eco-apocalypse (Thurman; Wenzel), I turn instead to the ways Rose-Innes thematises toxicity, shifting the focus from the realities of harm (the aftermath of the contamination the story narrates remains conjectural) to the imaginative and conceptual work the toxic does in the story.

First published in 2007, Rose-Innes' "Poison" is set in contemporary Cape Town and depicts an *en masse* migration from the city in the aftermath of a massive chemical explosion, which remains unspecified and unnamed throughout. Its protagonist, a young woman called Lynn, gets stranded at a petrol station together with a few other people who, like her, took too long to leave. The failing infrastructure (no gas in the petrol pumps, no cell phone network, no electricity, and no running water) and the looming post-explosion toxicity generate improvised collaborations, across class and race, among the few people now desperate to flee. They scavenge the remaining petrol; they share the money from the till to pay a taxi driver; they confer and plot in order to orchestrate an effective flight away from the poisoned city. Lynn, however, for unexplained reasons and to our bewilderment, is reluctant to leave and ultimately decides to stay behind at the station, on one hand seemingly reconciled with the effects of the explosion, yet on the other still somewhat confident in the protective power of the state.

Titled "Poison", the story naturally brings the toxic into its narrative focus. It not only revolves, conceptually, around the chemical explosion that sets the inhabitants of Cape Town into flight (and the story into narrative motion) but also offers a whole gamut of epithets describing the visual, haptic, and olfactory properties of the palpable, biological effects of the contamination. The presence of these various materialities of the toxic signifies more than the mere requirements of the genre. In one of the few readings of the story, Wenzel notes the generic character of its narrative ingredients: "The dead birds and mysterious oily rain falling from the sky are stock images of eco-apocalypse" (38). Wenzel is far from dismissing Rose-Innes' story on this ground, however. She looks at how Rose-Innes tampers with these standard narrative elements in order to remain attuned to the "histories of social division that perform the experience and imagination of eco-apocalypse" (40). Wenzel's critical interest, then, lies in how Rose-Innes rewrites the eco-apocalyptic imaginary in ways that enable the recognition of these divisions *in the present* and invite a vision of "futurity without reinscribing troubled histories" (38). In this paper, I also respond to the unique optics of "Poison" enabled by the story's handling of the toxic. Far from being simple generic elements to be found in numerous stories of eco-apocalypse, the images representing the toxic aftermath of the Cape Town explosion and their narrative significance offer the means with which to critique "the melancholy lure of eco-apocalypse" which continues to be driven by "the desire to imagine our own destruction" (Aravamudan 41). In "Poison", the toxic figures the persistence of the world, the durable and interminable continuity of what is other than human, challenging the temporal framework eco-apocalyptic narratives commonly deploy.

The toxic has often been described as perennially enduring (Murphy, "Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations"; Nixon; Nading), able to outlive other matter and organisms. That is, it can travel across bodies, space, and time (e.g. the name *persistent organic pollutants* aptly captures and reflects this potential). In the chapter suggestively titled "Ecologies of the Aftermath", in which Rob Nixon talks of the *slow violence* of the Gulf War, he reminds us that "Depleted uranium (DU)" used in the munitions deployed in the war "possesses a durability beyond our comprehension: it had a radioactive half-life of 4.51 billion years. When it enters the environment, DU effectively does so for all time, with consequences that are resistant to military metrics, consequences that we are incompetent to judge" (201). While not all chemical substances enjoy such an unfathomable and indefinite existence, other scholars have likewise noted their unique perdurability, their mutational existence across time and both human and other-than-human infrastructures. Murphy, for example, describes the persistent properties of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), noting how they continue into the "intergenerational future" (497) through the "temporal and geographical extensiveness of chemical relations" (498). Moreover, their "metabolic activations can cascade intergenerationally across bodies", which, Murphy concludes, "makes Monsanto, which manufactured most of the world's PCBs, a grand-kin of sorts, a toxic relation inscribed into energy infrastructures, white privilege, Indigenous dispossession, anti-blackness, water, and metabolism" (499). Writing of the materiality of plastics, Max Liboiron reminds us that they "have the capacity to act over generations, and even over millennia" (*Pollution is Colonialism* 10). Their ubiquity across "bodies, ecosystems, consumer products, and landscapes" (*Redefining pollution and action: The matter of plastics* 96) renders them mobile and persistent yet also challenging to science. As Liboiron puts it, "plastic pollution currently exceeds the ability of traditional scientific methods to explain its fate and transport, as well as its persistence and effects" ("Matter of plastics" 89). Beyond scientific discourses, in a more common parlance, the toxic has been credited with affects expressive of what is severe and irreparable. With the word toxicity itself signalling the "threat of permanence", Mel Y. Chen notes how it is differentiated from intoxication, which connotes "inconsequentiality, everyday tolerability and easy recoverability" (6).

There is yet another way in which the toxic signifies persistence and unending existence. In his astounding piece on toxicity, Danny Hoffman examines the material and conceptual remits of the toxic. Differentiating it from the cultural and political work *waste* does (understood as an object of displacement that serves to demarcate a whole gamut of boundaries), Hoffman suggests that the toxic “seems a different order of term. A poison beyond matter-out-of-place, something more than the by-products of an existing order. Is there need for a term that names what cannot be reclaimed?” For Hoffman, the toxic “name[s] a space beyond remediation. Forces that do not simply reinforce the existing order, however unequal or unjust”. Hoffman’s insistence on defining toxicity as what cannot be reclaimed also situates it in a temporal framework of infinity. To reclaim and remediate something inevitably entails endings and beginnings. *Reclaimed* evokes a usefulness that has come to an end and which is either being restored or replaced with a different kind. While Hoffman does not explicitly discuss the perennial nature of the toxic, his take on toxicity is premised on its persistence and resistance to being re-processed, to becoming something else, something less pernicious and noxious. Reclamations rest on a circulation of uses and their termination. Toxicity, in Hoffman’s understanding, is what resists being subjected to such processes.

If nothing is known about the unspecified chemical ominously travelling, in various forms and textures, out of Cape Town, Rose-Innes’ story nevertheless endows it with the temporal and material properties of the toxic. Described as “black grime”, a “coating of foul stuff”, an “alien gel”, “some tarry black precipitate”, sticky dampness enveloping the feathers of dead birds or grease oiling Lynn’s hair, the toxic is represented as a sticky ineradicable substance. Towards the end of the story, Lynn notes how “Blades of grass at the side of the road were streaked with black, and the ground seemed to be smoking, a layer of foul steam around her ankles”. If these epithets convey a sense of durability by evoking different degrees of stickiness, they are also redolent of a more lasting permanence. Signalled by colour and texture, and most explicitly referenced by tar, these images also speak of carbon. An epitome of environmental degradation but also of lasting durability, this elemental affinity lends the eponymous poison a life exceeding the temporal framework of the story. If the narrative carbonises the contamination to emphasise the interminable longevity of the unnamed substance, it also likens it to a massive bulk *unmovable* by human effort. “Concealing Devil’s Peak”, an imposing massif forming a backdrop to Cape Town, “an oily cloud [...] so black, so large” hung over the city. “Even as they watched, it boiled up taller and taller into the sky, a plume twice as high as the mountain”. The haptic and visual heaviness of the accumulating contamination concretises and fixes its presence in space as lasting.

Depicted as adhesive and thus either impossible or difficult to remove, yet also carbonised into timelessness, these images of viscosity not only connote permanence and a certain material recalcitrance but also contrast with the otherwise perishable bodies and objects. Whatever undoing the poisonous explosion portends, graphically rendered by the image of dead birds, the glutinous chemical enjoys an interminable life in comparison to other decomposable matter. This contrast is most compellingly conveyed by the juxtaposition of the toxic substances with Lynn’s physical fragility. At the beginning of the story, she is, in a sense, already dead, a somewhat proleptically and vicariously rendered fact revealed almost at the end of the narrative. It opens with Lynn realising she has been contaminated as she wakes up three days after the explosion, “with a burning in the back of her throat so horrible she understood it was no hangover”. As the story unfolds, she is progressively represented as a veritable body of toxicity: as “she felt the poisons gush out of her”, “her skin [...] oozing it” and “her eyes as pink as if she’d been weeping”. While nothing is known about the unnamed chemical and its hazards, the gravity of Lynn’s condition comes into full view towards the end of the story when Lynn spots dead birds: “She counted five small bodies of birds, feathers damp and stuck together”. These birds herald Lynn’s fate, evidencing the deadly damage caused by the chemical, a lifeless aftermath of exposure to toxicity, the carbonised materiality of which proceeds within an endless temporal framework. If Lynn remains alive until the end of the story, she is, nevertheless, narrated as outlived by the poisonous matter that has clearly already penetrated her body.

The story of “Poison” is woven around the juxtaposition of perishable matter with the material durability of the eponymous chemical. This narrative effect is conveyed not only by the carbonisation of the unnamed substance and the simultaneous erosion of human and other-than-human life. That is, via disparate temporalities they are capable of spanning. “Poison” endows the toxic with an ambulatory vitality which renders the abruptly stalled surroundings lifeless. Indeed, the story unsettles the familiar distribution of mobility by having human movement sabotaged or literally halted by the motile poison. The disruption is graphically signalled by the startling uselessness of the road Lynn contemplates: “Standing alone on the highway was unnerving. This was for cars. The road surface was not meant to be touched with hands or feet, to be examined too closely or in

stillness". The explosion suspends human traffic, turning the highway into a defamiliarised landscape in which the absence of moving cars is an eerie signifier of the locomotive infrastructures gone into disuse. The empty road signifies an end to human movement paradoxically effected by a shortage of fuel, another carbon-related matter, the carbonised chemical itself remaining mobile throughout.

"Poison" links the cause of the termination of movement with the toxic, rendering toxicity an agent of corrosion that effects and reveals the vehicular impotence of the infrastructures of mobility. When Lynn stumbles upon a dilapidated version of her Toyota, she proleptically and prophetically anticipates the failure of technologies propelling human movement:

Lynn laughed out loud. Her car! Her own car, twenty years on: the same model blue Toyota, but reduced to a shell. The remaining patches of crackled paint had faded to the colour of a long-ago summer sky. The roof had rusted clean through in places, and the bottom edges of the doors were rotten with corrosion. Old carpeting was piled on the back seat and all the doors were open. Seeing the smooth finish go scabrous and raw gave Lynn a twinge at the back of her teeth.

This image neatly encapsulates the unrelenting labours of toxicity, its material liveliness which manifests itself in its traversal of surfaces and its displacement and consumption of other matter and material. The car becomes, by contrast, an object of literal sedimentation, a deposited mobility whose locomotive potential is no longer able to produce and sustain movement.

If the failing infrastructures (the highway; the car) are represented as incapable of propelling the movement of human bodies, they also indicate an end to life. Indeed, the dramatic tenor of Rose-Innes' text rests on the management of flight, a successful escape from the contaminated city which the story depicts as a poisonous trap. The narrative establishes a direct link between the ability to travel, to be transported by the vehicles of mobility and survival. Yet the proximity of movement and toxicity in the production of death also manifests itself in a more tangible fashion as the chemical is envisioned as affecting the loss of the locomotive capacity of the human body. When Lynn ponders the possible modes of flight to use, she imagines the poison exhausting and impeding her body: "To leave the car would be to disintegrate, to merge with that shifting world. How far could she walk, anyway, before weakness made her stumble? Before the air thickened into some alien gel, impossible to wade through, to breathe?" Explicitly conflating moving and breathing, and thus moving and living, this vignette represents the toxic as killing movement and, thus, life.

In stark contrast to unmoving, dead, or dying bodies of objects and of humans comes the travelling toxic, depicted by the narrative as motile and fugitive: "The cloud was creeping higher behind her back, casting a dull murk, not solid enough to be a shadow. She could see veils of dirty rain bleeding from its near edge. [...] [It] was growing. As she watched, a deep rose-coloured occlusion extended towards her, pulling a wash of darkness across the sky". And later: "The clouds had retreated somewhat and were boiling grumpily over the mountain". Personified by the narrative, the chemical assumes a life of its own, conveyed, almost literally, by the vibrant ambulatory verbs, all of them expressing movement across space, an agential incursion into and an occupation of the atmosphere. In this rendition, the toxic travels freely, permeating atmospheric textures and traversing boundaries, indifferent to infrastructural shortages and shortcomings. Indeed, it is its capacity to move unhindered that the narrative conflates with its menace. Though never explicitly stated, the mass exodus from the city of Johannesburg appears to be a frantic flight from the advancing contamination, its encroaching clouds threatening to overtake the fleeing people.

The motile nature of the toxic is most vividly rendered with Lynn's tangible and visceral experience of the poison as her body becomes a locus of movement and stasis, life and death, end and endlessness. The beginning of the story depicts Lynn as already contaminated, the chemical engrafted into her bodily tissue. Three days after the explosion, "she'd woken up with the burning in the back of her throat so horrible that she understood it was no hangover, and that she had to move". She will never move, as we soon discover, trapped at the petrol station by the shortage of fuel, on the one hand, but also rendered immobile by the penetrative substance that has permeated

her body and made it incapable of moving (it is actually the latter that prevents her from joining the taxi as, at the very last moment when she is about to make her decision, the poison halts her in place):

her stomach hurt. [...] All at once her digestion seemed to have speeded dramatically. Guts whining, she trotted to the bathroom. [...] In the basin mirror, Lynn's face was startlingly grimed. Her choppy dark hair was greasy, her eyes as pink as if she'd been weeping. Contamination. Sitting on the black plastic toilet seat, she felt the poisons gush out of her. She wiped her face with paper and looked closely at the black specks smeared on to the tissue. Her skin was oozing it. She held the wadded paper to her nose. A faint coppery smell. [...] Her empty guts felt liquid, but strained to force anything out. The headache was back.

A leaky infrastructure for the mysterious toxic substances, Lynn becomes a site of transit as the chemical moves through and across her body while she remains immobile, rendered stationary by the very poison that now penetrates her pores and orifices. This image of Lynn's contaminated body vividly conveys the significance of the contrast the story establishes between the vibrancy of the toxic and Lynn's (imminent) lifelessness. Toxicity appropriates movement as its mode of existence while keeping the human body in check, unable to move and soon to perish. It simultaneously conflates immobility with an end, Lynn's poisoned body a herald of an ending she cannot undo. The story posits the poison as what continues, in space and time, through and across other matter, representing Lynn as proleptically dead, thus already stilled (irrespective of the infrastructural shortages that prevent her from moving).

Tying moving to living, Rose-Innes' story allies itself with Mbembe's recent reflections on what he calls the earthly community. In a somewhat startlingly prophetic way, "Poison" depicts the animating capacity of movement, its ability not just to set things and bodies in motion but also to thus infuse life into them. The narrative makes movement a signifier of life, thus offering, *avant la lettre*, a literary diagnosis of what Mbembe identifies as one of the processes characterising present times. In *The Earthly Community*, he speaks of "the dialectics of entanglement and separation" (70), a condition of simultaneously conflicting phenomena whereby, on one hand, "speed and an intensification of connections" have been generating an unprecedented ravelling of proximities, "a new distribution of the Earth and spread of population movements" (70). On the other, there has been a growing tendency "toward contraction, toward containment, toward enclosure, as well as various forms of entrapment, detention, and incarceration" (70). Within this novel dispensation, Mbembe argues that "to be alive, or to remain alive, is increasingly tantamount to being able to move speedily" (70). Driven by movement and its containment, both physical and virtual, this order necessarily valorises mobility, transforming borders into quasi-animate mobile structures with a life of their own which create "a segmented planet of multiple speed regimes" (71).

Mbembe notes that these phenomena are inseparable from a concomitant "merging of life and mobility" (73), a curious attachment of life to what is moving. As a result, not only does the human body get decomposed and recomposed, but "life itself is taken as something that can be calculated and recombined" (73). These Frankensteinian (re)assemblages go hand in hand with a "bifurcation between life and bodies" as "not all bodies are viewed as containing life" (73). Those considered unliving are "discounted bodies" (73) populating zones of exclusion and marked for disposal. "Dismissed as lifeless" (70), they are also bodies that are prevented from moving or whose movement is severely restricted. Whether it is the discounted bodies, hindered to move at their discretion, or the bodies of privilege, traversing borderisation grids, or the bioavailable bodies in transit, life comes to be understood as what has the capacity to move. This also means, if one were to infer it from Mbembe's analysis, that (unencumbered, uncontained) movement is a signifier of life, both its manifestation and its guarantor.

"Poison" no doubt offers itself as an allegory of the critical yet also exploitable value of mobility, of the ways being able to move saves and secures life. Indeed, the story revolves around a flight from the contaminated city and narrates the biological costs of thwarted or delayed movement, thus explicitly linking survival to mobility. There is, however, yet another, less conspicuous, affinity between life and movement which the story puts forward. If Mbembe's discussion of the conjunction of living and moving refers to human bodies and what derives from them, I suggest extending this merging to non-human substances and entities. If movement is now, as Mbembe argues, a sign of living, an act of relocation by which we recognise something to be alive, then this understanding clearly expands the remit of life, inevitably re-defining what it means to be living. Put slightly differently and in reference to the epigraph above, if what moves is what survives and lives, toxic matter may thus have become a paragon of living. It could indeed be argued that its persistence, its interminable longevity, is partly owed to its capacity to remain in transit, to travel across space and its various materialities, and hence across time. "Poison" narrates the

life of the toxic as incessant movement, its change of location what secures its existence. Amidst the human and other-than-human lives populating the narrative landscape of Rose-Innes' story, toxicity is the surviving subject.

Yet "Poison" is not a narrative interested in a re-distribution of life across non-human entities, a re-definition of what it means to be living (a project already put forward by new materialisms where all matter is seen as living and lively).<sup>2</sup> Its insistence on crediting toxicity with a certain perdurability which manifests itself in/via movement aligns the narrative much more compellingly with the destabilising work of the figures of the Desert, the Animist and the Virus which undermine what Elizabeth Povinelli calls geontology, "a set of discourse, affects, and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife" (4). Indeed, these figures' unsettling interventions do not consist in their bid for inclusion into the remit of what counts as life but their disruption of the clear-cut difference between Life and Nonlife. As Povinelli argues, "other forms of existence (other existents) cannot merely be included in the ways we have understood the qualities of being and life but will need [...] to displace the division of Life and Nonlife" (15). Such inclusion would obviously perpetuate the division between "the lively and the inert" (5)—that is, geontopower itself. For Povinelli, these figures are "diagnostic and symptomatic of the present way in which liberalism governs difference and markets in a differential social geography" (15); they are "expressions" of power and "windows into its operation" (15). Similarly, Rose-Innes' toxic both destabilises the Life/Nonlife division but also reveals and sidesteps the operations of power shaping the eco-apocalyptic narratives of the end. Rather than another vibrant matter, the toxic helps to imagine a world without us along non-eschatological lines, removing the ending from the horizon of the future.

To redefine living along these lines is not only to unsettle the eco-apocalyptic script and the human exceptionalism it rests on and reproduces. It is also to question and undo what Mbembe describes as the "dialectic of entanglement and separation" (70), two concomitant processes that define the conditions of living at present. The former results from increased mobility and acceleration (which gives rise to unprecedented proximity among people); the latter refers to containment, a tireless erection of borders and walls to keep certain populations apart. This paradigm is essentially about movement—either its freedom or prevention (70). It rests on "borderization", which results in "the creation of a segmented planet of multiple speed regimes" (71). This, in turn, derives from two different though related architectures of power: "the law of nations" (102) and a "new geometry of technology" (103), both which rely on "the logic of the barrier" (102). What Mbembe calls the earthly community, by contrast, calls for "porosities", "passages", and "bridges" (110) for a new conception of the Earth to emerge. "The combustion of the earth" has already radically subverted the processes of borderisation and the traditional geometries of power. "There can be no refuge", Mbembe claims, as "the boundary lies everywhere" (116). Such radical undoing of borders is a prerequisite for the coming of the Earth, a utopian project to be yet carried out. The Earth "is a name that will always refer to a reality that is unable to be found, to a time ever ahead of us, to a space opposed in all points to that of States, a space irreducible to that of empires and nations, with their countless walls, borders, and enclosures" (26).

Read in its allegorical tenor, "Poison" posits the toxic as a sabotage to boundaries. As its ontologies always gesture towards "a time ever ahead of us", its carbonised viscosity translatable into a timeless permanence, it meanwhile travels across walls and enclosures (including the epidermal enclosures of the human body). Along the way, it reveals and constitutes the world as essentially porous, thus setting itself against the anti-ecology of the dialectic of entanglement and containment. It is the uncontrollable character of the world revealed by the motile toxic substances as they travel across bodies and boundaries that proves to be the most unimaginable vision for Lynn. Her inability to conceive "the earthly community" together with her anti-ecological disposition more generally come into full view at the end of the story when Lynn regards the atmospheric manifestation of the chemical poisoning and is able to only perceive it as a bounded, containable, and clearly demarcated ocular phenomenon:

She'd been here three days and her head felt clear. While there'd been a few bursts of strange rain, the chemical storm had not progressed further down the highway. It seemed the pollution had created its own weather system over the mountain, a knot of ugly cloud. She felt washed up on the edge of it, resting her oil-clogged wings on a quiet shore.

As Lynn imagines her own body and the body of the world around her as (ideally) policeable entities (the only way, in fact, she is able to think of herself and her surroundings) whose contours distinctly and conspicuously delineate beginnings and ends, simultaneously (re)producing a sense of reassurance that comes with enclosures,

she both fails to envision the future as anything but a reproduction of the present while also succumbing to a vision of the world which continues without her:

Sooner or later, rescue would come. The ambulances with flashing lights, the men in luminous vests with equipment and supplies. Or maybe just a stream of people driving back home. But if rescue took too long, then there was always the black bicycle that she'd found leaned up against the petrol pump. [...] Maybe tomorrow, or the day after. And when this was all over, she was definitely going to go on a proper detox. Give up all junk food, alcohol. Some time soon.

Lynn snapped open a packet of salt-n-vinegar. Behind her, the last of the sunset lingered, poison violet and puce, but she didn't turn to look. She wanted to face clear skies, sweet-smelling veldt. If she closed her eyes, she might hear a frog, just one, starting its evening song beyond the fence.

These last paragraphs of the story merit a closer reading for the ambiguity they convey as they bring into proximity an apparent (yet misleading) confidence in a restoration of the receding world, a recapturing of a momentarily lost reality and the lives it accommodated *and* an indefinite deferral of that restoration, a withholding of what is expected to return but will not. The confidence manifests itself in Lynn's somewhat naïve belief in an uninterrupted provision of state security and in the ultimate arrival of help. Despite the deadly contamination, the machine of statehood is imagined as surviving the toxic odds. Relatedly, Lynn credits boundaries with a capacity to deliver an understandable, manageable, and redeemable reality, one where toxicity can be zoned off so that idyllic *green* worlds can continue to enthrall us with their clean natural beauty.

The juxtaposition of the purity of the veldt and the pollution epitomised by Lynn and the packet of chips (both of which, we can imagine, would make it *across* the fence, Lynn's toxic body and the chips as the only food she is left with) summons the familiar paradigm based on "colonial land relations" (Liboiron, *Pollution* 5) within which pollution is handled by practices of removal to land considered a site of assimilation for polluting substances and materials (10–2). Explicating their claim that pollution is colonialism, Liboiron point out that the availability of land as "a sink to store or process waste" (11) and, more generally, "access to Indigenous Land and its ability to produce value for settle and colonial desires and futures" (11) have been enabled by a preceding violence of the colonial appropriation of land (11). The very idea of environmentalism rests on the prior availability of land for the disposal of waste and other uses. This logic is clearly visible in Lynn's approach to the homestead behind the gas station. Once "on the other side of the fence", she muses: "Smelling its grassy breath, Lynn felt a tremor of adventure. She could be here for days" (104). Lynn now claimed the purity of the veldt as a space of respite from the contaminating outside: "Out back here, the sky looked completely clear, as if the petrol station marked the limit of the zone of contamination." It generates an uncomplicated sense of entitlement. She appropriates the zone of purity, bringing in her wake the settler-colonial attitude to land as she assumes she can simply take it and thus pollute it. As Wenzel notes, Lynn's stance is marred by "the difficulty of changing the environmental order of things and slowing down the momentum of harm" (39). Lynn's wistful gaze and appropriative deportment are enabled by and reproduce this paradigm that structures the world into the space of purity from which pollution is removed *and* the space of dirt, the value of which lies in its capacity to assimilate this dirt. The fence, a material symbol of Mbembe's borderisation practices, is a requisite for this paradigm to work. The veldt is not just a space to be colonised, but a future "sink to store or process waste" (Liboiron, *Pollution* 10), a piece of land which Lynn cannot perceive of other than as offering itself to her polluting practices.

But then the confidence Lynn displays cannot but be compromised by the unmistakable loss of the world she wishes was still graspable and appropriable. The lexicon of uncertainty ("sooner or later", "or maybe", "Maybe tomorrow, or the day after") intimates an already forfeited reality, speaking more of Lynn's wishful thinking (her desire to keep the world preserved as it is) rather than of certitude. Yet it is significant to note here that the concluding paragraphs of "Poison" do not offer themselves as narrating an end, even though ends are clearly portended and underway. These paragraphs gesture towards two critical horizons. One emerges out of Lynn's fatuous understanding of the end as an event that can be adjourned by a reproduction of familiar scripts premised on a belief in the liberal narratives of self-care on one hand and on an assumed elsewhere to which toxicities can be relegated in processes of detoxification on the other. In other words, to prevent the end from occurring, Lynn imagines it is sufficient to resort to self-discipline and control. Here, unending is tied to the reproduction of the same. The other horizon challenges and critiques the former. It boldly suggests that the end of Lynn's world (and her body) is not the end of the world as such. Whatever Lynn's lame predictions about the coming, miraculous salvation, she has already been contaminated, her body now toxic matter itself, amalgamated into other toxicities

and living a recomposed life beyond her intentions and choices. “Poison” is thus a decidedly against-the-grain narrative as the end of the world is re-scripted as merely accommodating a host of perishable entities (including the human being) yet continues in an unrelenting fashion. Offering a vision of the world without us as a viable project, the story represents toxicity as what outlives the discourses that render it removable and eradicable.

#### IV

Thematising the toxic as a motile matter, penetrative, durable, and destructive, Rose-Innes’ “Poison” re-writes eco-apocalypse into a narrative about endings *but also* continuities. Foregrounding and capitalising on the properties of the toxic as an embodiment of what lasts, what eludes the distinction between Life and Nonlife, what moves freely in an unhampered way across other bodies and entities, the story renders the toxic a signifier of unending. Represented as an obstinately enduring presence, toxicity constitutes a unique lens through which to examine and challenge both the desires for the end and the almost quasi-religious convictions that the future stores *an end*. Seen as an agent of incessant, unstoppable movement, the toxic, paradoxically, re-invents the future as a mutated yet ongoing temporality in which toxified human bodies make the world last rather than end.

#### Acknowledgement

Ewa Macura-Nnamdi's research for this paper was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, under research project *Weathers of the Future: Climate Change and Displacement*, grant number 2022/47/B/HS2/01820.

#### Notes

1. Other scholars have likewise noted the allegorical potential of the story. Christopher Thurman, for example, offers an “allegorical reading of the focalizing protagonist of ‘Poison’, Lynn, and her white identity” (61). Similarly, Wenzel notes the generic quality of the story, building her reading around race and class markers which render the story an allegory of South Africa’s “troubled histories” (38), with Lynn “a surrogate for the rapt but ultimately unmoved reader of apocalyptic narratives” (39). Both readings foreground the racial layers of the narrative, examining how the genericity of its elements creates a “microcosm of South African society” (Thurman 63).
2. The most well-known, perhaps, is Jane Bennett's concept of *vibrant matter*. For critiques of Bennett's “vibrant matter”, see, among others, Povinelli's *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*; Joseph Pugliese's *Biopolitics: Forensic Ecologies of Violence*; and Gabrielle Hecht's “Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality, and Violence”.

#### Works cited

Aravamudan, Srinivas. “The Catachronism of Climate Change.” *Diacritics* vol. 41, no. 3, 2013, pp. 6–30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2013.0019>.

Buell, Frederick. *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century*. Routledge, 2003.

Chen, Mel Y. *Intoxicated: Race, Disability, and Chemical Intimacy Across Empire*. Duke U P, 2023.

Hecht, Gabrielle. “Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality, and Violence.” *Cultural Anthropology* vol. 33, no. 1, 2018, pp. 109–41. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.1.05>.

Hoffman, Danny. “Toxicity.” *Somatosphere: science, medicine, and anthropology*. 16 Oct. 2017. <https://somatosphere.com/2017/toxicity.html>.

Karera, Axelle. “Blackness and the Pitfalls of the Anthropocene Ethics.” *Critical Philosophy of Race* vol. 7, no. 1, 2019, pp. 32–56. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5325/critphlrace.7.1.0032>.

Liboiron, Max. *Pollution is Colonialism*. Duke U P, 2021.

—. “Redefining pollution and action: The matter of plastics.” *Journal of Material Culture* vol. 21, no. 1, 2015, pp. 87–110. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183515622966>.

Liboiron, Max, Manuel Tironi, & Nerea Calvillo. “Toxic politics: Acting in a permanently polluted world.” *Social Studies of Science* vol. 48, no. 3, 2018, pp. 331–49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/030631271873087>.

Mbembe, Achille. *The Earthly Community: Reflections on the Last Utopia*, translated by Steven Corcoran. V2, 2022.

Murphy, Michelle. “Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations.” *Cultural Anthropology* vol. 32, no. 4, 2017, pp. 494–503. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.4.02>.

—. “Chemical Regimes of Living.” *Environmental History* vol. 13, no. 4, 2008, pp. 695–703. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25473297>.

Nading, Alex M. “Living in a Toxic World.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* vol. 49, 2020, pp. 209–24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-010220-074557>.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard U P, 2011.

Povinelli, Elizabeth. *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Duke U P, 2016.

Pugliese, Joseph. *Biopolitics of the More-Than-Human: Forensic Ecologies of Violence*. Duke U P, 2020.

Rose-Innes, Henrietta. “Poison.” *The Guardian*. 9 Jul. 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jul/09/caineprize>.

Thurman, Christopher. “Apocalypse Whenever: Catastrophe, Privilege and Indifference (or, Whiteness and the End Times).” *English Studies in Africa* vol. 58, no. 1, 2015, pp. 56–67. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00138398.2015.1045161>.

Ware, Ben. *On Extinction: Beginning Again at the End*. Verso, 2024.

Wenzel, Jennifer. *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature*. Fordham U P, 2020.