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Looking Away from the Material Self: Collective Ethics in Neoliberal Environments

Sarah E. Howden

In March 2020, as cases of COVID-19 were beginning to surge in America, a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), coronavirus testing supplies, and specifically ventilators started to worry health-care workers and government officials. President Donald Trump's response to these mounting concerns was to tell governors to try to get the equipment themselves (Martin). In an article in *The Atlantic*, "How the Pandemic Defeated America," Ed Yong notes that this response is indicative of America's approach to public health: "[A]s usual, health care was a matter of capitalism and connections." Yong further notes that hospitals in richer areas were able to buy their way out of any PPE deficit, whereas hospitals in poorer areas were unable to do so, which resulted in a rationing of their supplies. In August 2020, in an interview with Fareed Zakaria on CNN, Bill Gates critiqued the administration of COVID-19 testing in America, noting that wealthy people have access to tests with a much faster turnaround than those unable to afford such expenses. Since a quick lab turnaround for test results has been likened to PPE by the laboratory-medicine chair of the University of Washington, Geoff Baird (Madrigal and Meyer), it is clear that proper protective measures for COVID-19 are more readily available to the wealthy than the working class in America. Howard Koh, former Department of Health and Human Services assistant secretary during the administration of Barack Obama, notes that "some privileged parts of [America] are getting daily access and others have no access at all. We're never going to solve this pandemic until we give everybody access, particularly high-risk groups. That's the public health principle we always try to follow" (qtd. in Alltucker). This downloading of a crucial public response to the private sector is reflective of a neoliberal tendency to privatize all aspects of life; as Henry A. Giroux writes in *Against the Terror of Neoliberalism: Politics beyond the Age of Greed*,

"under neoliberalism everything either is for sale or is plundered for profit" (2). Whereas professional basketball and hockey players in the Orlando, Edmonton, and Toronto bubbles were privy to three tests or more a week, teachers, essential services workers, and schoolchildren were unable to access anything close to such levels of testing. This is one example of how neoliberalism favours the individual over the collective. But how does this dynamic bleed into the management of our bodily selves?

The emergence of personal genetic testing companies such as 23andMe exposes the effects of neoliberalism on our approaches to self-care and maintenance. As Rosi Braidotti notes in *The Posthuman*, biopower places the political moment in the "relational and self-regulating accountability of a bio-ethical subject that takes full responsibility for his/her genetic existence" (116). On the home page of 23andMe, users are encouraged to "take action on your health" by examining health issues, defects, and tendencies at the genetic level (www.23andme.com/en-ca/). The company markets personal genome testing as a technology that allows users to gain better perspectives on their material selves through analyses of their genomes. 23andMe suggests that this process of looking closely at one's own genetic traits will allow and encourage one to make more informed decisions about personal health. In constructing health screening as a personal responsibility, while failing to provide a sufficient examination of the environmental factors that influence one's personal health, these companies contribute to a trend in which gigantic responsibilities are downloaded onto individuals by encouraging them to take charge of their biogenetic selves.

Even if users of genetic testing services gain deeper understandings of their genetic markers and their genetic predispositions toward certain health conditions, they also engage in a form of hyperindividualism that elides questions of environmental health and places the burden of health protection entirely on the individual consumer. More generally, neoliberalism puts competition at the centre of social life. As Julie A. Wilson writes in *Neoliberalism*, "we have come to live in competition with ourselves, others and our social world" (2). Along similar lines, in *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, Alexis Shotwell observes the ways in which this neoliberal logic decollectivizes and divides. She writes that current discourses produce a self "imagined as a fortress, separable from the world, requiring defense against the world"

(11). This is where we arrive at our neoliberal predicament. The self-enclosed system, impermeable to the toxins, chemicals, and pollution lurking in the outside world, is impossible to achieve, especially when one undertakes this endeavour alone; however, neoliberalism operates on our hopes of achieving this state of purity so as to raise our biogenetic capital in the highly competitive market of life. Our inability to reconcile with the demands of bodily accountability leaves us feeling anxious about standards to which we will never live up.

If it were not enough, aside from producing debilitating anxiety, this predicament is also completely hegemonic. In an anthropological study titled "Doing Neoliberalism: Perverse Individualism in Personal Life," Meg Luxton interviews inhabitants of the Greater Toronto Area in order to illustrate the dynamics that underpin the self-care logic of neoliberalism. Many of the interviewees had recently lost their jobs because of illness, but many of them also blamed their situations on themselves, even when the illnesses were entirely beyond their control. Of the various interviewees, Luxton writes that "their sense of individual agency is reduced to a notion of choice, the concept of collective political action seems increasingly unimaginable, and they are inclined to assume that their circumstances are the result of poor choices they have made rather than that the choices available were problematic or wrong" (180). According to Luxton, this "obstinate and persistent belief that blames the victim by privatizing social problems" takes the principle of individualism and turns it into something perverse (172). Perverse individualism leads to a population of anxious and debilitated citizens highly aware of their sickness or failing yet completely unable to envision alternatives to their current situations. The current neoliberal environment relies on our unrelenting attachment to the notion of a free economy in which anyone, no matter his or her socio-economic background, can achieve success while pitting individuals against one another, and society in general, as personal gains come to outweigh social benefits. This produces weak, vulnerable, and closed-off subjects too tired and worn down from attempting to cope with the world and their perceived lack of choices to have the energy to form a collective resistance against the consuming and self-blaming logic of neoliberalism. The problem with pitting individuals against the collective of society is that individuals are what make up society. The inward turn of perverse individualism reduces our ability to imagine

an individual existing within the collective. How are we to cope with this all-encompassing regime?

In "Neoliberalism and the Limits of the Human: Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*," Kit Dobson turns to posthumanism as a possible pathway toward disrupting neoliberalism, asking "might neoliberal logic be more soundly challenged by contesting the logic of the human itself?" (268). I will explore this question through Adam Dickinson's material memoir *Anatomic*, tracing how certain elements of his poetics are coerced by perverse individualism, whereas other aspects resist this atomizing logic, reaching beyond the self-contained individual to search for collective solidarity. Based upon his scientific investigation of his own biological makeup, *Anatomic* challenges the logic of the human by zooming in on minuscule assemblages that make up the human body. Recognition of the countless and complex ways in which his material self is entangled with his exterior environment takes Dickinson down two parallel but distinct tracks of bodily management. On the one hand, the collection looks to the self and enacts a perverse individualism whereby he strives for bodily purity but becomes weak from, complicit with, and defeated by his inability to sweat out the toxins, starve the harmful bacteria, and rid his body of the unwanted chemicals that have invaded it. On the other hand, the collection recognizes the collective that comprises the human self and seeks out modes of collective resistance that leverage the power of numbers and cooperation to seek large-scale change. Drawing on Rei Terada's conception of "looking away" and Alexis Shotwell's call for a collective public ethics, I argue for an approach to biogenetic accountability that finds a middle ground between a complete denial of the realities of pollution and a hyperawareness of the toxicity that we are all subjected to as neoliberal industry standards and safety protocols continue to expose us to harmful agents while also making us individually responsible for managing these toxic burdens.

Part 1: Material Memoir and Perverse Individualism

In *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self*, Stacy Alaimo identifies an emergent genre of autobiography that she terms the "material memoir." Such a memoir "dramatize[s] life in risk society by showing how profoundly the sense of self-hood is transformed by the recognition that the very substance of the self is interconnected with vast biological, economic, and industrial systems that can never be

entirely mapped or understood" (23). Because the search to understand these "transcorporeal" networks often requires an engagement with medical and scientific discourses, material memoirs often thematize the process of scientific investigation (Alaimo 48). In Dickinson's collection, the technical descriptions of his method are mostly laid out in a series of poems that remain untitled on their respective pages but are labelled as "*Specimen*" in the table of contents or what Dickinson has cleverly labelled the "Corpus." These blocks of text vary in length and are accompanied at times by pictures with subjects discernible by the human eye and others intelligible only through the lens of a microscope. It is through this magnified lens that Dickinson looks at his material self, and it is through these poems that the collection begins to enact a perverse mode of individualism.

The title "*Specimen*" invokes the language of scientific writing. From the Latin *specere* ("to look"), the word *specimen* refers to a single item used for scientific study or display; additionally, since the word implies the scientific, it evokes notions of objectivity and the impersonal. Dickinson reduces himself to an object of study in order to gain a more scientific and therefore (assumed) sophisticated perspective. His bodily fluids are analyzed and transferred into sets of data points that can be communicated via descriptions, p-values, and charts and might therefore be translated into seemingly objective or positive knowledge.

The series opens with a description of a latex-gloved hand holding a vial of blood and the voice of an unnamed speaker who addresses Dickinson by his first name, "Adam" (14). Seemingly a medical professional, the speaker provides "Adam" with precise instructions regarding the sampling of various bodily fluids or "serums" in the poem (14). This is one of two poems in which the speaker is someone other than the poet. The other poem also begins with someone addressing Dickinson by his first name (93). Both of these unnamed speakers maintain a distanced and commanding tone, and their utterances are devoid of poetic devices or figurative language. Instead, the cool, instructive tone in each poem enacts the voice of perverse individualism: emotionless yet ambitious, surveying and commanding Dickinson to follow each required task perfectly. In one poem, he is instructed to obtain the right amount of serum at the right time of day, ensuring that it does not come into contact with specific surfaces (14); in another, he is reminded that he alone is responsible for mitigating the risks of the project if he wants

to receive any government grant or funding. The health monitoring and bodily responsibility required for this project ultimately rest on Dickinson alone.

Previous subjects of material memoirs, like the family in Susanne Antonetta's *Body Toxic: An Environmental Memoir*, often face difficulties when it comes to unearthing the truth of their contaminated pasts. Antonetta spends much of *Body Toxic* uncovering the traces of various environmental factors linked to her family's physical and mental health, noting that what initially brought her family to the polluted shores of America, and eventually to the most polluted area of America, eastern New Jersey, was the promise of prosperity. Alaimo writes that there is a particular struggle to "understand the substance of the self within a risk society that encourages ignorance and denial" (99).

Although Dickinson did face some difficulty obtaining his test results, these inconveniences resulted mostly from technical glitches during the sampling and testing of bodily fluids. In an interview with *Open Book* magazine ("'Human Endocrine System'"), he describes his process, which took seven years to complete:

> It took me a long time to sort this out, but I eventually arranged to have my blood and urine tested for chemicals such as pesticides, flame retardants, PCBs, phthalates, heavy metals, and other substances. With the help of some microbiologists, I had my microbiome sequenced from stool samples and from swabs of various parts of my body (hand, genitals, ear, nose, and mouth). The plan was to tell the stories of some of these chemicals and microbes.

In one poem in *Anatomic*, Dickinson describes how, when extracting blood, he must yank on the tourniquet with his own teeth (16), while in another poem he overviews his problem-solving tactics for mailing a sample of feces over the border (20). Although there are difficulties, these complications are not created by higher-level governmental or industrial forces attempting to cover up how we are contaminated by our external environments which in turn are contaminated by the pollution of industry or the unethical practices of corporations. Dickinson's project, in fact, was funded by branches of the Canadian government, such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, as referenced in the acknowledgements at the back of the book. In this neoliberal age, knowledge is accessible to those who desire it and are willing to pay for it. Although Dickinson used government

funding to cover the costs of his extensive lab testing, this reflected his private choice to use the funding in this manner rather than an effort by the government to make such knowledge available to all citizens by funding their individual lab tests.

This indicates a shift from 2001 when *Body Toxic* was published. As bodily accountability is downloaded onto individuals by corporations, the knowledge of one's imbrication with toxicity is no longer an issue for the larger-scale factors that affect levels of contamination. Instead, the individual now feels both a responsibility to take personal measures to purify and cleanse, which create additional industries of self-care and detoxifying products/services, and a false hope (in the style of a Berlantian optimism) that this pure state is achievable. The extensive and overwhelming knowledge of one's toxicity fuels the desperation for purification, and desperate subjects are ideal subjects from whom corporations can profit.

Increasingly problematic is the actual interpretation of Dickinson's test results. In *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Ulrich Beck notes that "the calculation of risks as it has been established so far by scientific and legal institutions collapses" in our modern world because of the uniqueness and entangled complexity of current risks (22). However, under neoliberalism, corporations have been able to use the uncertainty surrounding risk calculation to permit even further potentially harmful practices. Dickinson raises these issues in one of the "*Specimen*" poems in *Anatomic*: "There are no safe levels of any of the chemicals I was tested for. What is a safe level? What is an adverse effect? Industry welcomes the imposition of guidelines because this would give them permission to pollute people up to a line with impunity" (70). This uncertainty creates levels or scales that allow no valid comprehension of the actual effects that each individual might experience when coming into contact with toxic elements and therefore permits unethical practices to carry on; additionally, it creates a powerful effect of fear of the unknown. Misinformation about our material world disconnects us from the environment and creates endless channels of research that individuals must pursue if they are actually to obtain any amount of information about which products are safe to use. Even if an individual did rise with conclusions from the piles of conflicting scientific studies on a matter, their conclusions could be entirely wrong, and their solutions could lead to more harmful effects than using the product in the

first place. After Dickinson received his results, this was the circular path on which he embarked as he attempted to purge and cleanse his contaminated body.

When Dickinson reads the alarming results of his toxicity in one of the "*Specimen*" poems in *Anatomic*, the language of the series becomes more affectively charged, and the tone changes to include more poetic devices that communicate the effects that the results have on his psychosomatic state (30). In the poem, he notes that the results cause his cortisol levels to rise (cortisol is the hormone that one releases when stressed). This effect is mimicked in the rhythm of the lines that accompany his anxiety about the results: "I panicked. I felt sick. Cortisol dripped" (30). The short sentences and consonance of the sounds in each culminate to heighten the delivery of the following simile on death. Dickinson concludes that "Death comes like a letter that folds his recipients" (30), and this conclusion illustrates the sense of unease felt by the vulnerable subject upon realizing the ways in which her or his material self is implicated by the outside environment.

To cope with the contamination, Dickinson starts walking obsessively, sometimes up to twenty kilometres a day in the hope of sweating out some of the toxins (55). Throughout the series, anxiety constantly comes out with his breath, at times released through heavy breathing caused by exertion during his long walks: "I felt calm when I was walking. The anxiety temporarily diminished. . . . I wasn't dying when I was breathing this heavily. In and out. Nothing stayed for long. I wasn't anywhere. A cloud" (55). In these lines, a sense of comfort is attained through this heavy breathing, but in the "*Specimen*" poem that follows this one his breath evokes a level of desperation: "I am breathing only at the end of each breath. Anxiety is taxidermy animated by the inside of someone else's guts" (60). Throughout the series, all of his coping mechanisms begin to harm rather than help him. By competitively cutting calories with his own self, Dickinson ends up in the hospital for two days and remains anemic for months to follow (68). Furthermore, he notes that he has lost eighteen kilograms and feels "like shit and [takes] it out on the people closest to [him]" (58). This traps Dickinson in a cycle in which he lives his life "like a splinter being slowly driven into [his] own skin" (68), a simile that encapsulates the effects of perverse individualism. His quest to purify and manage his material self becomes a path toward self-harm, which illustrates the ultimate logical

failing that neoliberalism encourages us to cultivate. As Alaimo argues, our material selves are inseparably entangled with the exterior world; we are parts of that world. In a circular way, the neoliberal mode pits us against our material selves as our materiality imbricates us with our exterior environments in inseparable ways.

The final "*Specimen*" series poem ends on a note of resistance to the biogenetic responsibilities that neoliberalism assigns to its subjects. Here Dickinson asks, "What gives a company the right to its teeming instructions?" (125). He also gestures toward our transcorporeal existence by noting how we are knotted with our material surroundings when he states that "we envelop what we eat" (125). But, ultimately, the series ends with surrender and fracture. Dickinson follows these small gestures of resistance with the final declaration, "Here is my body and everything in it. Let the aliens take me to their mothership piece by piece" (125). This is the "anxious plea" that the blurb on the back of *Anatomic* claims the collection enacts; if we end our analysis with his journey on the path of perverse individualism, then that is all this collection can ever be. The "*Specimen*" series illuminates how the posthuman challenge to the logic of the human can be co-opted by neoliberalism, which coerces its subjects to practise perverse individualism with the promise of purity. What, then, might be an alternative to this neoliberal regime of biogenetic self-management? The rest of Dickinson's collection suggests that the answer might lie in the collective. But how can we turn away from attending to the heavy metals, chemicals, and other contaminants within to look to the collective when the current predicament of the self appears to require instant response and purification?

Part 2: Looking Away from the Material Self

An implicit ambiguity in *Anatomic* centres on a binary that captures our dualistic relationship with the material world. Agents both human and nonhuman carry within them negative and positive effects on our materiality. As Jacques Derrida notes in *Dissemination*, the *pharmakon* (or, for our purposes, a material substance) is always caught in the irreducible binary of both remedy and poison. Because of this, "there is no such thing as a harmless remedy, [and] the *pharmakon* can never simply be beneficial" (99). This is captured in two of Dickinson's poems in *Anatomic*, "Spectrum" and "The Sun Can Kill You," positioned side by

side in the collection. Close to the opening of "Spectrum," Dickinson states that "Sun exposure is a major risk factor for skin cancer. However, it has also been associated with strengthened bones, reduced risk of heart disease, and reduced risk of other cancers" (118). In this series of statements, one force, the sun, can have both remedial and harmful effects, and the human subject is exposed to both the benefits and the detriments of the nonhuman. In "The Sun Can Kill You," Dickinson notes that "The line between tonic and poison is the line between tonic and gin" (119). This statement references the duality of the *pharmakon* and reifies how irreducible the binary truly is. Additionally, the title of the poem evokes the sinister qualities of the nonhuman agents that we rely on to sustain life.

The titular and opening poem, "Anatomic," adds to this binary as Dickinson reflects on the "*necessary* and *toxic* ways, the *outside* doctors the *inside*," and the "*symbiotic* and *parasitic* relationships" that we have with the "countless nonhumans" that make us human (9; emphasis added). The refrain "I am a spectacular and horrifying crowd. . . . I am a spectacular and horrifying assemblage" (9) stresses the aspects of Dickinson's recognition of both the nonhuman forces within and the dualistic nature of his relationship with these forces. The human subject is made spectacular by the realization of its composition as an assemblage containing multiple forces within, but it is also made horrifying as some or many of the nonhuman agents are unwelcomed since they carry the potential for harm. Furthermore, the notion of self as a collective undercuts the rational sense of self-control that Enlightenment humanism stresses we possess. If there are nonhuman others within, then how much control do we have over them? How much control do they have over us? Dickinson questions this throughout the collection, and the effects are polarizing. He expresses this through the simile "I resemble a battery" (9), noting both the negative node and the positive node of the self as an assemblage.

Dickinson plays with the ambiguity between spectacular and horrifying throughout the collection, but notably the slippage between the two is enacted in a section of the "Disruptors" poem. On its own page, the portion reads thus:

> I will not
> let go
> of your hand.

No, I
will not
let go

of your
hand.
No matter

what,
I've got
you.

Feel my
hand,
I've got

you. (84)

The message of the poem changes depending on whom we consider the speaker of the poem to be. If the speaker is a welcomed companion, then the poem evokes a positive message of support, intimacy, and love. However, if the speaker is one of the many harmful toxins, chemicals, or microbes evoked in the collection, then the meaning is disturbing, for it suggests an unwanted entity that refuses to let go of its hold on someone. Because the speaker is never explicitly made clear, the sinister aspects of these lines haunt the potentially positive connotations. This irresolution produces a discomfort, for it is difficult to ignore or dismiss a potential threat; therefore, even though this poem might evoke a positive message, the supportive effects of intimacy and union can never quite reach readers as they view the negative potentials often present when dealing with ambiguity.

Neoliberalism relies on our natural tendencies to focus on the horrifying, toxic, and parasitic ways in which our embodiment is implicated in the material world and on a belief in the possibility of purification through self-management, and this is what Dickinson cannot resist in the "*Specimen*" series. In one of the poems, this quality is noted. He

again invokes the binary in the lines "My tests tell me I have a lower capacity for breaking down certain large-branched sugars. This can promote infection. But I also have lower gene counts for endotoxin, which may mean less inflammation" (60). Here Dickinson is presented with two facts about his body, one potentially negative, one potentially positive, but in the next line he follows these facts with the statement "All I hear is infection" (60). The positive is taken out of consideration since he cannot turn his focus away from the horrifying aspects of his embodiment, and this sends him spiralling down a path of perverse individualism. This is precisely how neoliberalism becomes so effective at co-opting the posthuman subject. How can one resist the urge to attend to the horrifying? Here I want to suggest that a healthy dose of denial might be necessary to resist the perverse neoliberal norms of purity. We need to look away from the terrible accident within in order to focus on collective efforts of resistance to the harming and individualizing effects of neoliberalism.

To be clear, when I suggest the employment of denial, I do not mean a complete and delusional refusal of our transcorporeal existence or of the body as an assemblage. That would be a step backward in our growing conceptions of subjectivity and vital materialism within the posthuman landscape. Rather, I suggest a form or degree of denial that Rei Terada conceptualizes in *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno*. Terada considers how we think about facts. There are, undoubtedly, facts: inarguable truths that we detect through our material surroundings. But we also have values, which are opinions about facts. The fact-value conflation reflects a conflict between science and ethics — between what is and what ought to be. We like and dislike certain facts, and whatever our feelings or opinions are on a specific fact becomes what Terada terms "fact perception"; furthermore, our perception of facts leads to knowledge and belief. In this affirmative mode, we perceive a fact and now possess particular knowledge and a certain belief. This mode of perception is enacted throughout the "*Specimen*" series, but it is especially highlighted in a poem in which Dickinson writes, "I am taking a deep dive into my own bodily fluids to try and read them. But the pool is an empty helmet. My magnified blood cells. My dark mirror stage" (50). Here the visual mode of reading is invoked along with the potent reference to the "mirror stage," in which infants look at themselves in the mirror and

realize their existence as individuals separate from what they once considered a complete and infinite world. Recognition of their own selves separates them from those who surround them. Furthermore, aspects of looking are invoked in the "Metabolic Poetics" section at the back of the book in which Dickinson creates mixed media or, perhaps more fittingly, mixed material poems through the combination of photos of his molecular self with captions beneath them. These captions at times are informative about or explanatory of the images above them, but at other times the captions do little to inform readers about what they are seeing. Throughout the collection, looking becomes a disruptive, confusing, and disheartening act, one that reminds readers of the original disruption of the mirror stage.

In "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function," Jacques Lacan argues that "the function of the mirror stage thus turns out . . . to be a particular case of the function of the imagos, which is to establish a relationship between the organism and its reality" (97). Lacan expands this argument to illustrate how the establishment of this relationship leads to a subject's revelation on her or his spatial relationship to reality. This allows subjects to progress from a fragmented view of their own bodies to a view of totality, reflected in the mirror before them. Paradoxically, in Dickinson's "dark mirror stage," his microscopic perspective actually leads to more fragmentation as Dickinson becomes intimately aware of the multiple "others" lurking within what was once hoped and considered to be a total, absolute, pure subject. This is in line with Lacan's dismissal of an actual absolute subject, which for Lacan is "unthinkable" (98). What follows in our formation of the self, or the "I," is a series of "ego defenses . . . and situates . . . hysterical repression and it returns at a more archaic stage than obsessive inversion and its isolating processes" (98). To cope with the shattering view of oneself as mitigated and fragmented by the other, the subject must defend or repress specific knowledge of his or her relationship with the other.

Whereas *looking at* Dickinson's fractured self is made horrifying throughout *Anatomic*, *looking away* from these disturbing facts and focusing on the spectacular collective within culminates in a more inquisitive, self-reflexive, and curious tone that runs alongside Dickinson's multiple self-discoveries. Additionally, Terada highlights an approach to how we consider or look at facts. In *Anatomic*, Dickinson's initial reaction to his disturbing level of contamination within brief-

ly touches on this mode. When Dickinson reads his results in the "*Specimen*" poem on page 30, he reads them "quickly, not wanting [his] eyes to linger on anything alarming." He initially wants to look away. Terada writes of "phenomenophilia," which she defines artistically as "looking away at the coloured shadow on the wall, or keeping the head turned to the angle at which the sunspot stays in view" (4). There is a tension between the affirmation of facts, which is fact perception, and the phenomenality of facts, which focuses on appearance and is able to resist the immediate endorsement of fact as reality. This tension relates back to binary modes of thinking that view the world as either this or that, either black or white. Dickinson explores these "all or nothing" sentiments in the poem "Agents Orange, Yellow and Red." It opens with "You are either for chlorine / or for the plague" (15). In this view, there is no middle ground. Farther along in the poem, Dickinson illustrates how neoliberal discourses force subjects to comply by not offering grey areas in which nuanced considerations of facts can be made. He writes that "Right now is the cleanest / we have ever been, and for this / you must love aerial defoliants / or you love communism" (15), and he further states that "You are for pulp / or for poverty. You respect / the Constitution or you stare / at the ground." Here individuals are implicated in issues of national scale; if they do not wholly concede to a specific opinion, then they are immediately positioned as being in opposition to that opinion. Ironically, the colourfully titled poem is unable to escape from this polarizing black or white mode, concluding with the lines "You are either / for the red or the white blood cells, / for the tops of trees, or the bottoms" (15).

Contrary to this binary thinking, Terada offers subjects a place within the grey area or within a spectrum rather than a position at either pole of a binary through her conception of appearance. Appearance is not the opposite of fact, but it is a hypothesis or a seeming; most importantly, it is not as definitive as fact perception. Terada writes that "perceiving an object as an instance of appearance comes to be experienced as postponing the requirement to endorse it as reality" (15). In looking away, we are offered "short term relief from unacceptable sentiments" (17-18). As long as we remain in the mode of appearance, we refrain from fact perception and elude affirmative judgment, and "the world feels lighter" (16). In the gap between our facts and our values, or what is and what ought to be, neoliberalism takes advantage of our

discomfort with dissonance. Looking away from a disturbing fact, or in Dickinson's case looking away from the overwhelming ways in which his material self is implicated in the environment, becomes a coping mechanism. Of course, Dickinson does not follow his initial instinct to look away in the "*Specimen*" series. One poem ends with a depressing simile for death (which I explored in Part 1). Death, which "comes like a letter that folds its recipients," signifies his perception of the fact of his impure self (30). However, for him, death has yet to come. Should Dickinson focus on the fact of his potentially deadly contamination? Does that lead to fruitful resistance? The question does not become whether it is right or wrong to use a bit of denial in trying times. Looking away becomes a psychological strategy that one can employ to cope with the unsettling realities of our neoliberal predicament and resist the slippage into perverse individualist modes of purity and isolation. Rather, the question becomes *how much* denial can we use before we slip into ignorance and step backward into Enlightenment modes of thinking about our material world.

In the poem "Spectrum," Dickinson raises similar questions: "The sunburn can be read as a message from our stars, our star, written into (at least temporarily) the kinked staircase of our genes. What does it say about the complicated matter of thresholds, about too much and not enough?" (118); furthermore, as echoed in "The Sun Can Kill You," "Cancer is always a risk of reading too deeply" (119). Here, suggestions of balance are considered, and more explicitly risks of reading too deeply in *WebMD* and coming up with a self-diagnosis of cancer are evoked. The concrete and typographical elements of Dickinson's collection also work on this level. Many of the poems contain strings of proteins, names of bacteria, or chemical compounds, all with varying amounts and measurements. Reading into and researching all of these epigraphs is exhausting. In the notes at the back of the book, Dickinson acknowledges the epigraphs simply as indicators of either a chemical or a colony of microbes, but by positioning them before the poems their meanings, or whatever implications they carry, are made more important than perhaps they are in actuality. The first page of the book lists all of the bacteria and where they are found on Dickinson's body; the other side of the page lists toxins. The number of characters on these two pages creates a wall of text that is incoherent and distracts from the poems. Furthermore, in the "Metabolic Poetics" section, virtu-

ally incoherent maps and images fill the pages with an overwhelming amount of data and information. This both reflects the intense intricacy of our embodiment and illustrates the amount of effort and time required to gain any level of understanding about how we are entwined with the nonhuman world. Shotwell comments on the complexity of our embodiment, stating that

> virtually any embodied situation, when seen in context, involves networks of connection so complex that we cannot even conceptually grasp them, let alone . . . make sufficiently nuanced, ethical decisions about them to understand ourselves fully in the right. Managing this constitutive complexity requires us to pre-sort our world, to enact some classification — or we freeze. (124)

In many ways, looking at the material self becomes a time-consuming, exhausting act that distracts from what is really important. It is only by looking away from ourselves that we can glance at the crowd of others in our peripheries.

Part 3: Crowd Control and Collective Ethics

When Dickinson looks into the microscope, he does not see purity, or singularity, or an Enlightenment-humanist, rational self. Rather, he sees groupings of cells, colonies of bacteria, and collections of matter that make up the self. Crowds, assemblages, heterogeneity, impurity, and the notion of the collective are themes that permeate the collection, running counter to the poems that stress the individual and singular. In *Poetry Matters: Neoliberalism, Affect and the Posthuman in Twenty-First Century North American Feminist Poetics*, Heather Milne observes how new and inventive approaches to poetry that focus on our materiality illustrate and enact fresh modes of relating or connecting to our posthuman world. She writes that "Contemporary ecopoetics establishes a continuum between and among humans, animals, and objects, and considers the vitality and agency of nonhuman actants" (97). By creating a collection of poetry that focuses on the agency of the nonhuman, and by giving these agents a voice through their respective poems, either chemical, microbial, or hormonal, Dickinson begins to illustrate this continuum of collective forces. This collective, rather than the singular or individual, is where our resistance to neoliberal regimes and large-scale hazards such as environmental destruction can begin to take shape

as it runs counter to the isolating, deteriorating, anxiety-inducing force of perverse individualism.

Shotwell highlights similar dynamics in which the neoliberal subject tends to focus on the individual self rather than the larger collective. She observes that human and nonhuman bodies/entities absorb many of the harmful excesses of capitalism through pollution and toxicity, yet "there is a sense in which the concern with individual agency is interestingly not in play when we aim to hold entities like corporations responsible, or call for them to take ethical action" (110). Ultimately, the issue hinges on tensions between what is good for the individual and what is good for the collective. It is increasingly important to remedy this tension when we observe how the individual is wrapped up in our conception of ethics. Shotwell writes that in humanist discourses "the individual is the locus of ethical analysis, and the conglomeration of individuals does not produce a collective standard good different in kind from what produces happiness for the individual" (110). Shotwell, along with bioethicist Susan Sherwin, calls for a conception and practice of collective and public ethics in order to address the large-scale issues that we face within the Anthropocene.

As Dickinson recognizes the assemblages within his material self, he attempts to locate similar forms of collective cooperation in the exterior world. The long poem "Hormone" runs through *Anatomic* counter to the "*Specimen*" series, containing nineteen sections that contemplate various forms of crowds and consider how the group dynamics within can work to mirror the group dynamics without. The word *hormone* connotes a grouping of molecules, and it comes from the Greek word *hormon*, which means "to set in motion." When "hormone" is compared to "specimen," which stresses the singular, the tension between these two modes is illuminated by Dickinson's form. These series are visually opposed to one another; the "*Specimen*" series appears italicized and on the left side of the "Corpus," whereas the "Hormone" series appears on the right side of the "Corpus," slightly faded in colour. Where "specimen" suggests a clear object, "hormone" connotes something more diffuse. Again, as I mentioned, the word *specimen* comes from *specere*, which means "to look." As Dickinson looks at the self in the "*Specimen*" series, he looks away from the self and considers the mobilization of the collective in "Hormone." Within the poem itself, Dickinson uses "appropriated and altered texts about crowds" and considers various

questions. How much makes a crowd? Who composes the crowd? How can and does the crowd work together? (145).

However, in this dynamic, the crowd or the collective becomes harder to define than the singular specimen. Although the latter can easily come into focus under a lens, either microscopically or with our own vision, the same cannot be said for a crowd scattered across our field of vision. As it invokes the notion of the collective, "Hormone" also speaks to the difficulties and tensions involved in organizing collective action. In particular, one of the "Hormone" poems highlights the difficulty of achieving consensus among a collective. Dickinson writes that "No matter how great / an idea begins to appear, / it is always torn apart / by the crowd" (98). Furthermore, the simplicity of non-collaboration is evoked ten lines later: "The simplest / form of power / is derived from a person's / own body" (98-99). This enacts a constant return to the individual self, and this dynamic is present in the "Hormone" poem on page 123. In alternating lines, a rallying cry begins, "We can take this park!" (123), but then dissolves:

> We can take this park tonight! . . .
> We can also take this park another night! . . .
> Not everyone may be ready tonight! . . .
> Each person must make their own autonomous decisions! . . .
> No one can decide for you. You have to decide for yourself! . . .
> Everyone is an autonomous individual! (123)

Organizing, assembling, and collectivizing are challenging, and throughout history group think has gone terribly awry. It is difficult for the nuanced realities of our multiple existences to cohere into a united front. This difficulty connects to Terada's emphasis on the differences between facts, feelings, opinions, and perceptions. Whereas a fact quintessentially represents a singular truth and provides a clear perspective to rally around without debate, feelings and perceptions open to multiple meanings, beliefs, and perspectives. Although Terada's act of phenomenophilia resists the affirmation and acceptance of norms, and in Dickinson's case offers resistance to growing trends of perverse individualism, the limits of its resistance are met when too many feelings, perceptions, and possibilities are brought together in an attempt to unite individuals within a collective.

Group think is further illustrated in the "Hormone" poem on page 103 in which Dickinson critiques the reasoning of crowds. He explores the rationale that, by consuming the organ of a "courageous foe," one can acquire the bravery of that foe, and then he illustrates the failings of that logic in the lines

> Because transparent
> pieces of ice
> melt in the mouth,
> so too must panes
> of glass. (103)

Here the beliefs and logic of the crowd are contrasted, ultimately pointing painfully to the failure of the collective to reason or make correct judgments and decisions; however, parts of Dickinson's collection do highlight the potential power of the crowd. The poem "Circulation" opens with "If they worked together, the microbes could eat us in a few days. Our bodies would blacken, liquefy, and run into the streets" (54). Although, in this quotation, the power of the collective is harmful to the individual, Dickinson does highlight the power that a collective of both human and nonhuman agents could possess and yield as resistance to neoliberal regimes. Through his critique of crowds, he raises crucial questions that must be answered and illuminates obstacles that must be overcome if we are to join together collectively, resist perverse individualism, and begin to respond effectively to the global problems both present and fast approaching in the twenty-first century.

Susan Sherwin takes up these issues in her article "Whither Bioethics? How Feminism Can Help Reorient Bioethics." She notes that, since current approaches to ethics focus mostly on individual morals, they are inadequate when addressing large-scale issues that involve the global population. Thus, Sherwin proposes a "new approach to ethics, dubbed public ethics, that simultaneously investigates moral responsibilities at multiple levels of human organization from the individual to international bodies" (7). Importantly, she recognizes that developing this approach will require the collective work of many theorists from multidisciplinary fields, for obviously the scope of public ethics goes far beyond any individual ethicist (9). As we attempt to look away from the individual, and into the beyond, our grasp of exactly what these ethics consist of, and of how they take shape, is harder to

determine confidently, for so much depends on teamwork and collaboration. But an additional obstacle that Sherwin identifies in regard to the development of these new ethics runs parallel to the predicament in which Dickinson finds himself as he recognizes the collective within. Sherwin writes that ethicists face difficulty when it comes to focusing on the most important questions, noting that "time and energy" can be spent on one issue that might have been better "used to pursue other important ethical questions" (19). Furthermore, "[we] are sidetracked, again and again, from examination of important but larger ethical questions by the apparent need to attend to the narrower issues that get put in our paths" (20). On this level, ignoring or *looking away* from these narrower paths becomes the only way to collectivize and work toward the unknown beyond by asking and answering larger-scale, public ethics questions.

In the poem "Independent Variables" in *Anatomic*, Dickinson writes that "Looking inside my body has done something to my body" (124). In looking to the collective, what can we do to it? Looking away from the self is the only way to glance at the collective possibilities in our peripheries, but it is hard to know for sure exactly what the "beyond" consists of until we are there. In "I Hope You Are Feeling Better," Dickinson takes up this stance: "By the time it appears, it has already happened. Dali's lobster is a boiled telephone. Napoleon goes to St. Helena" (122). These sentiments capture a certain level of recognition that we cannot predict and encapsulate the future until it is the present. Furthermore, the line "The lights stay on all night and no one sleeps" (122) addresses the effects associated with a constant looking at or surveillance of these issues. As Sherwin notes, time and energy are detracted from questions that really matter when we divert our attention to these narrow topics. Perhaps we need to turn off the lights and get a good night's sleep in order to approach tomorrow in the best way. Looking away allows individuals to recharge and refocus their energy on the collective. It is not a permanent state of denial but a point of consideration and seeming in the grey area that allows one to envision alternative ways of being in the future that reject the neoliberal trap of perverse individualism.

In her conclusion, aptly titled "The Point, However, Is to *Change* It," Shotwell writes that, "In the kind of world we live in now, a world of unimaginable complexity and difficulty, excellent epistemic work

is hard to come by — it is hard to know everything that matters, and hard to have a solid method for that knowing" (195). Looking away denies the notion that we should know everything and favours curiosity, hypotheses, imagining, and seeming over fact perception and judgment. As Shotwell writes, "turning toward politics means turning purity aside. . . . [I]ndividual action will never be sufficient to address what needs to be addressed" (204). Meditations on how to regroup saturate the pages of *Anatomic*. In the "Metabolic Poetics" section, Dickinson says that "The individual is a capital letter. Can we use it to spell something else?" (138). In looking away from ourselves, we can only glance at the possibilities. By tracing his slide into the neoliberal regime of purity, and by exploring the many materialities and various crowds within the collection, these poems coalesce into more than the "anxious plea" invoked on the back cover of *Anatomic*. Instead, the book asks us to look away from the material self for a moment to consider which collectives can resist the toxic agents and discourses with which both humans and nonhumans are entangled in the Anthropocene. Looking toward the collective is more important than ever because, as Dickinson writes, "what is inscribed in me, is in you, too" (9).

To return to Dobson's question that I posed at the beginning of this article, "might neoliberal logic be more soundly challenged by contesting the logic of the human itself?" (268). The facts that the very toxicities and impurities that reside in others also reside in us, and that bacteria, fungi, and other living micro-organisms work to compose the self, break down the neoliberal logic of a fortified, pure self and the perverse individualism that accompanies attempts to maintain this so-called purity. Dickinson's collection illuminates the failure of this myth of purity both poetically and scientifically. Collective action and public health become even more important when we consider responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the most effective responses to COVID-19, such as wearing a face mask, social distancing, and self-isolating, protect oneself, but additionally protect others. Although a face mask is a barrier that separates the self from the outside environment, it functions to protect those around the mask wearer more so than the person wearing the mask. In a study in *Nature Medicine*, "Respiratory Virus Shedding in Exhaled Breath and Efficacy of Face Masks," Nancy H.L. Leung and colleagues note that in fact "surgical face masks were originally introduced to protect patients from wound

infection and contamination from the surgeons (the wearer)" (676). A survey conducted in September 2020 by Leger, a member of the Canadian Research Insights Council, shows that eighty-seven percent of Canadians believe that wearing a mask is a civic duty because it protects *others* from the virus (18). In this sense, the "personal protective" aspect of this form of PPE is not so personal at all; it actually depends on a collective response. Just as quick lab-result turnaround can be likened to PPE, so too can collective behaviours.

Rather than advertising the use of face masks as some form of armour or barrier blocking outside contaminants from entering the wearer's body, campaigns that encourage the use of face masks highlight the interpersonal benefits through the ethics of social responsibility and care. In the United States, the Cleveland Clinic launched the "I Wear Because I Care" face mask campaign that underscores the use of face masks as a collective action defined by caring for others. In the campaign video, various mask wearers state for whom they wear their masks, whether specific family members, friends, co-workers, or even community members. At the end of the video, all of the statements culminate in "I wear [a mask] for you." This message departs from perverse individualism and neoliberal modes of self-care and points to large-scale, collective action in the name of care for our communities rather than just ourselves. The campaign actively looks away from the protection that face masks offer for the wearer and locates their protective power in securing the larger collective of which each individual is a member. Although access to testing, PPE, and other essential supplies illuminates the many ways in which responses to the COVID-19 pandemic can be taken down a neoliberal track of perverse individualism in which the burden of responsibility is placed on the individual and their own resources, other movements and responses surrounding large scale action insist on the importance of collective health. By exploring the ways in which Dickinson's collection illustrates the power of neoliberal logic to commandeer the recognition of our transcorporeal and material selves, looking away from the self to the collective becomes a crucial step in resistance to the furthering of neoliberal norms.

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