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John Blair Gamber, *Positive Pollutions and Cultural Toxins: Waste and Contamination in Contemporary U.S. Ethnic Literatures* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 248pp.



While the subject of waste has been a mainstay of environmentalist discourse for decades, John Blair Gamber's *Positive Pollutions and Cultural Toxins: Waste and Contamination in Contemporary U.S. Ethnic Literatures* (2012) is, surprisingly enough, one of the few monographs of literary ecocriticism yet devoted to the topic. This relative dearth of waste criticism may indeed reflect, as Gamber's study suggests, a lingering tendency among ecocritics to misconstrue the modern metropolis—a site where the majority of consumer waste is produced—as the antithesis of those redemptive natural places that nature-loving literature professors prefer to read and write about as well as repair (to). Gamber contends that ecocritical practice provides intellectual justification for a thinly veiled species of “white flight” that he dubs “blight flight, a longing to escape urban decay,” that environmentalist discourse both incites and sanctions (56). The express goal of *Positive Pollutions* is thus to combat prejudice against urban spaces by expanding readers' inherited definitions of both nature and community. The book proposes that humans and the things we make, from skyscrapers to landfills, are as natural as anything else in creation and, conversely, that the nonhuman elements of the world, which we all too often disregard in our accounts of the social, should be recognized as an integral part of the communities that define and sustain us. One immediate upshot (or consequence, as some might prefer to put it) of deconstructing the formidably resilient nature-culture binary is that it subverts the metaphysical grounds for ecocriticism's long-standing preoccupation with wilderness. The book thus responds to the directive—proposed by William Cronon almost twenty years ago in “The Trouble with Wilderness” and seconded in Lawrence Buell's analysis of “Toxic Discourse” a few years later—for ecocritics to pay more heed to the environments that the majority of people actually live in, thereby shifting the political focus of ecocritical study, and of environmental activism more generally, from wilderness preservation to environmental justice.

Garbage offers a promising trope for exploring such issues since it permits creative writers and the critics who read them to muse upon the suggestive symmetries between a municipality's castoff things and its castoff people. The book offers close readings of five texts of ethnic American literature in which garbage plays a significant role—Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Sower* and *The Parable of the Talents*, Alejandro Morales's *The Rag Doll Plagues*, Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife*, Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, and Gerald Vizenor's *Dead Voices*. Most of these writers and texts have already been written about by critics interested in questions of either ethnicity or ecology, but since ethnic studies and ecocriticism (at least of the first-wave,

wilderness preservation variety defined in the book's introduction) initially appear to have so little in common, Gamber's book works toward bridging the two critical approaches by choosing a thematic focus that appeals to the interests of both.

Like much critical writing on the topic of waste, *Positive Pollution's* biggest difficulty is in reining in a signifier whose conceptual malleability entails a playfulness that can easily run amok. In everyday speech, "waste" applies as easily to abstractions (time, talent, and life) as it does to various commodities that have lost their use or exchange value (or even just their novelty). With meanings already so diverse and ambiguous, things only get more convoluted when waste and its cognates (garbage, trash, filth, dirt, pollution) are figuratively equated with the subordinate term in a given conceptual binary (an abject, ethnicized other in the case of Gamber's book). Given waste's susceptibility to semantic slippage and thus its ability to comprise a diverse and even incompatible array of concepts and affects, recognition of waste as a material thing can all too frequently get subsumed in a welter of digressive metaphor.

We find many such digressions in Gamber's book thanks to the protean lodestones of his analysis. The phrases "positive pollution" and "cultural toxin," with few exceptions, focus critical attention on the metaphors rather than the materiality of waste. As readers of the book will discover, "positive pollution" refers more to an action (and one that often exists on a rather elevated plane of abstraction) than a substance. The list of topics that are "positively polluted" in and by the novels Gamber examines includes "static, rigid, or essentialist gendered identities" (61), historiography (62), a character lacking a nose and upper lip (64), "linear and unidirectional time" (64), a garden in which butterflies and hummingbirds fly in and out at will (77), "singular or absolute narrative power" (92), urban Native identities (116), the human-animal binary (117), boundaries between nations (122), and oral narrative (173). The only thing that doesn't seem to register as a positive pollution is actual garbage. The book therefore fails to deliver on its promise to examine waste as a real (not simply metaphorical) source of political resistance: "cast-off places, objects, and people can be regenerative sites of community building" (13). Real garbage's positive potential is addressed briefly in places throughout the book—for example, in a few paragraphs praising the *pepenadors* of Mexico and the related aesthetic ideals of *rasquachismo*, or in his application of the death-is-life tenet of "compost theology"—but these passages are overwhelmed by many others that deconstruct (or "pollute" to use Gamber's preferred metaphor) various binaries that represent deleterious processes of conceptual "purification" that relate only tangentially to garbage. Indeed, to judge by the majority of the examples included in the study, a book might traffic in "positive pollution" even if it contains no references to garbage at all, a versatility that I feel rather undermines the utility of the concept.

The book's second coinage, "cultural toxins," similarly indicates a departure from the material reality of trash with the modifier "cultural" clearly establishing the figurative nature of the "toxins" to be discussed. Despite this bent toward abstraction, this term, unlike "positive pollution," does more than patinate familiar deconstructive maneuvers. Observing that political discourse in the U.S. has long decried influxes of

various ethnic groups as an undesirable pollution of an idealized Anglo-American purity, Gamber suggests a radical reversal—namely, that we instead begin thinking of racism, misogyny, and homophobia as “cultural toxins.” We might note, however, that it’s not as if terms such as racism, misogyny, and homophobia have particularly positive connotations in the first place, so the call to deploy toxic discourse in the way Gamber proposes amounts to little more than a rhetorical nicety unless efforts are made to demonstrate that racism and other “cultural toxins” have a direct, negative impact on the environments in which they circulate. Undoubtedly they do—as long as there is an abject group upon whose homes the dominant industrial culture can foist its toxic waste products, there will be little motivation to deal with these wastes in an ecologically sound manner. The book offers a glancing treatment of this idea, particularly in the analysis of *The Rag Doll Plagues*, but a more rigorous probing of the material effects that various hate-fueled ideologies entail would prove “cultural toxins” to be a sharper critical tool.

The creation of waste is an unavoidable feature of all existence, exponentially more so within the anthropocentric context of industrial consumer culture. Attitudes of revulsion for the wastes we create underwrite a profound disavowal of its existence, a disavowal reinforced by corporate and municipal systems of disposal that ensure the most privileged members of our society need never think about where their trash ends up. Despite its flaws, Gamber’s book encourages readers to bring this disavowal into focus by raising a question that other ecocritics might join him in addressing: How might material waste, which has long been coded within environmental discourse as inimical to ecological well-being, be reconceived as a “positive” thing worthy of our care and concern?