DOI: 10.46585/absa.2025.18.2774

"I Was Something You Pick Up and Take a Swig of": Ecofeminist Toxic Discourse in Jennifer Clement's *Prayers for the Stolen*

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Abstract

Echoing ecofeminism's long-standing concerns with the interconnection between the oppression of women and the degradation of the environment as a consequence of patriarchal and capitalist systems, this paper suggests that Jennifer Clement's acclaimed novel Prayers for the Stolen *(2014) should be read as representative of an ecofeminist toxic discourse, which enables the oppressed, where weak women characters find agency in telling their story and drawing attention to the multi-layered toxicity they have had to face. Such a reading not only highlights the novel's preoccupation with and warning against pollution, toxicity, and overall environmental degradation – thus far explored by few scholars of Clement's work – but also illuminates the inescapable connections Clement repeatedly draws between how nature and women are physically and mentally abused and poisoned by the same toxic patriarchal and capitalist forces.*

Keywords

Toxic discourse, ecofeminism, toxicity, *Prayers for the Stolen*, Jennifer Clement

In his *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001), Lawrence Buell famously defines toxic discourse as a mode of writing which has helped authors express the "anxiety arising from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency."[1] The thrust of toxic discourse – "so vocal, so pandemic"[2] – has drawn inspiration from ecopopulist notions of environmentalism as an "anthropocentric […] instrument of social justice" rather than an ecocentric "emphasis on caring for nature as a good in itself."[3] In terms of structure, the discourse has typically been articulated with the help of a set of defining topoi, namely the shock of awakened perception of a disrupted/contaminated pastoral, totalizing images of a world where toxic penetration is inescapable and omnipresent, Gothic elements such as polluted underworlds, and the (often gendered) binary of the weak oppressed threatened by strong oppressors. Albeit contemporary versions of toxic discourse, adds Buell, may even permit the victims to "reverse roles and claim authority."[4] Overall, these formulas then "promote a unifying culture of toxicity notwithstanding recognition of such marks of social difference as race, gender, and class in determining what groups get subjected to what degree of risk."[5]

Jennifer Clement's acclaimed novel *Prayers for the Stolen* (2014) stands as a prime example of Buell's toxic discourse. Ostensibly a narco novel,[6] addressing the devastation brought about by

1 Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and the Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001), 31.

2 Buell, *Endangered World*, 31.

3 Buell, *Endangered World*, 33.

4 Buell, *Endangered World*, 36–44.

5 Buell, *Endangered World*, 44.

6 Joseph Patteson, *Drugs, Violence and Latin America: Global Psychotropy and Culture* (London: Palgrave, 2021), 159.

Mexico's ultra-violent war on drugs, Clement's text also dramatizes and critiques the intertwining between the patriarchal violence of both the narcos and the policemen and their exploitation and destruction of natural resources.[7] The novel is set in the pastoral setting of an unnamed remote village in Guerrero, Mexico, during the rise of cartel violence, and tells the story of a group of early teenage girls trying to survive in a world where there is little education, few employment opportunities, many absent fathers, and an omnipresent, all-permeating threat of being poisoned by pesticides sprayed by a corrupt military who are "paid by the drug traffickers, not to drop that damn Paraquat on the poppies and so they drop it wherever else on the mountain, on us."[8] It is also a world where the girls' futures, already bleak and precarious, can be stolen at any moment by the ultra-violent narcos. As the main protagonist, Ladydi, explains stoically, "All the drug traffickers had to do was hear that there was a pretty girl around and they'd sweep onto our lands in black Escalades and carry the girl off."[9]

This contribution argues, however, that Clement's novel also updates and heavily genders Buell's formula, creating a particular portrayal of a toxic culture where nature and women are simultaneously exploited as disposable resources and continuously poisoned – most strikingly encapsulated by Clement in her metaphor likening the girls to a plastic bottle. Ladydi's village represents Buell's contaminated pastoral: a seemingly untouched and isolated mountainous area, which serves, however, as a dumping ground for the military pesticides precisely because it is inhabited by women who the military and the narcos perceive as expendable. Furthermore, the novel's innocent and defenseless early-teenage protagonists are trapped by the toxically masculine oppressors in the form of narcos and soldiers. This doubly-toxic penetration seems inescapable and Clement, who interviewed dozens of "women who had been victims of Mexico's violence due to the government's declared 'war' against the drugs cartels" for her novel,[10] depicts Mexico – its village as well as the women's prison, where Ladydi finds herself later in the novel – as a hellscape with male monsters polluting nature alongside women's lives.

Echoing ecofeminism's long-standing concerns with the interconnection between the oppression of women and the degradation of the environment, as a consequence of patriarchal and capitalist systems, this paper therefore suggests that *Prayers for the Stolen* should be read as representative of an ecofeminist toxic discourse, which enables the oppressed, weak women characters to find agency in telling their story and drawing attention to the multi-layered toxicity they have had to face. Such a reading would not only highlight the novel's preoccupation with and warning against pollution, toxicity, and overall environmental degradation – so far explored by few scholars of Clement's work – but would also illuminate the inescapable connections Clement repeatedly draws between how nature and women are physically and mentally abused and poisoned by the same toxic patriarchal and capitalist forces.

7 Adrian Taylor Kane, "Collateral Damage: Nature and the Accumulation of Capital in Héctor Aguilar Camín's *El resplandor de la madera* and Jennifer Clement's *Prayers for the Stolen*," in *Ecofictions, Ecorealities, and Slow Violence in Latin America and the Latinx World*, ed. Ilka Kressner, Ana María Mutis, and Elizabeth M. Pettinaroli (New York: Routledge, 2020), 154.

8 Jennifer Clement, *Prayers for the Stolen* (New York: Hogarth Press, 2014), 36.

9 Clement, *Prayers*, 10.

10 Jeannie Ralston, "How Author Jennifer Clement Defends Freedom of Expression with Her Pen," Nexttribe.com, February 26, 2019, <nexttribe.com/magazine/jennifer-clement>.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism as a term was first introduced in 1974 by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne, who sought to strengthen the fight against discrimination by uniting two previously separate movements: ecology and feminism.[11] Ecofeminism then flourished as a social movement during the 1980s, when it focused mainly on the simultaneous oppression of women and nature and the connections with historical processes such as colonialism and capitalism.[12] Many ecofeminists at the time believed that women were closer to nature by virtue of their role as caregivers and parents[13] and this approach was often based on spiritual or cultural connections between women and nature. It was also a celebration of typically feminine qualities or skills, such as empathy or nurturing others.[14] This was soon met, however, with criticism for essentialism and for reinforcing the imbalance not only between men and women, but between nature and culture.[15]

By the 1990s, while debates around essentialism continued, ecofeminist theories also "continued to refine and ground their analyses, developing economic, material, international, and intersectional perspectives," explains Greta Gaard.[16] A wide range of topics and perspectives were examined and the movement began to overlap, for example, with the environmental justice movement and its ecocritical version, both emphasizing how environmental risks, poverty, and climate change disproportionately affect women, particularly in underprivileged communities.[17] In fact, as Gaard points out, "[m]any ecofeminisms […] initially foregrounded gender, species, and sexuality; environmental justice initially foregrounded race and class." In turn, "[T]heoretical developments in both fields have embraced an intersectional approach that professes to resist privileging any single category of analysis."[18]

The foundational understanding of ecofeminism has been rooted since the 1980s in the belief that humans, animals, and plants exist on the same level,[19] instead of human beings ruling over non-human entities. According to Vandana Shiva, however, capitalist patriarchy is anthropocentric as well as androcentric, and excludes marginalized groups such as women, indigenous people or people of other races beside Caucasian, alongside nature.[20] This results in a simultaneous domination

11 Francoise D'Eaubonne, *Feminism or Death: How the Women's Movement Can Save the Planet* (New York: Verso Books, 2022), 187.

12 Greta Gaard, "Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism," *Feminist Formations* 23, no. 2 (June 2011): 27–29.

13 Gaard, "Ecofeminism Revisited," 35; Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2016), 13.

14 Gaard, "Ecofeminism Revisited," 36; Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Bloomsbury, 1986), 53; Carolyn Merchant, "Introduction," in *Ecology. Key Concepts in Critical Theory*, ed. Carolyn Merchant (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2008), 23–24.

15 Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2020), 23.

16 Gaard, "Ecofeminism Revisited," 32.

17 Susan Buckingham, "Ecofeminism in the Twenty-First Century," *The Geographical Journal* 170, no. 2 (2004), 152.

18 Greta Gaard, "New Directions for Ecofeminism: Toward a More Feminist Ecocriticism," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 17, no. 4 (2010): 647.

19 Tzeporah Berman, "The Rape of Mother Nature? Women in the Language of Environmental Discourse," *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy* 11, no. 4 (October 1994): 182.

20 Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 70.

and "inferiorisation of the natural sphere"[21] and of women. An eco-socialist ecofeminist example of androcentric domination may be observed, according to Salleh, in how "women's bodies are treated first as if they were a 'natural resource', the uterus as organ of birthing labour being the material origin of 'formal labour' as such."[22] Women are also used as free labour in the sense of birthing and raising children – what Mies refers to as "housewifization"[23] – who then become part of the next-generation workforce.[24] Both Salleh and Mies therefore emphasize that women's ecological roles and their connection and likening to nature does not stem from biological innateness but from socio-economic roles rooted in history and patriarchy, while simultaneously highlighting the dependence of capitalism on women's unpaid labour.

Material ecofeminists expand the connection between patriarchal exploitation and dependence on natural resources, including women's (unpaid) labour, by drawing attention to environmental harm as materially imprinted rather than purely symbolic, arguing that human and non-human bodies are interconnected and penetrated by the surrounding environment.[25] This shift in focus by ecofeminists allows them to conceptualize how (women's) bodies are affected by the material and psychological toxicity produced by capitalist patriarchal structures, and forces.

One of the best-known representatives of this direction is Stacy Alaimo with her theory of "trans-corporeality," defined as "the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from 'nature' or 'environment'."[26] In other words, the human body is not an independent entity, but is always already entangled with the "more-than-human world." According to Alaimo, human bodies interact with and absorb matter, which is all around and ever-present, often in the form of toxic chemicals, endocrine disruptors acting as hormones, or air pollutants. Consequently, "It makes it difficult to pose nature as a mere background for the exploits of the human, since 'nature' is always as close as one's own skin."[27] Trans-corporeality therefore emphasizes how bodies are interconnected with networks of toxicity, industry, and ecological crisis – particularly given that vulnerable populations are disproportionately impacted by environmental exposures,[28] as environmental justice activists and thinkers have long argued.

Alaimo's work has inspired other ecofeminists to highlight the effects of toxicity on vulnerable – female, non-white, poor – bodies. Nancy Tuana's "viscous porosity" of the flesh conceptualizes, for example, the body's porosity as "a hinge through which we are of and in the world" and through which the impacts of (systemic) toxic exposure build up and persist within the body. Much like with Alaimo's concept, this is particularly relevant among vulnerable populations,

21 Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 45.

22 Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx, and the Postmodern* (London: Zed Books, 2017), 143.

23 Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, 182.

24 Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics*, 143.

25 Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, "Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory," in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Susan Hekman and Stacy Alaimo (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008), 2–3; Nancy Tuana, "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina," in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Susan Hekman and Stacy Alaimo (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008), 198–199; Gaard, "Ecofeminism Revisited," 34–35.

26 Alaimo and Hekman, "Introduction," 238.

27 Alaimo and Hekman, "Introduction," 238.

28 Alaimo and Hekman, "Introduction," 259–262.

because "The poor are less likely to be able to evacuate. They are less likely to have the cash needed to leave and to live elsewhere."[29]

Expanding on both Alaimo and Tuana's theories of the entanglement of human and non-human bodies, Cielemecka and Åsberg's theory of "toxic embodiment" finally shifts the focus to how toxicity is actually lived, felt, and embodied. As they note,

> the theme of toxic embodiment embraces extensive existential concerns around health and environment as we all interact with climate change, antibiotics, and untested chemical cocktails through the food we eat, the makeup we wear, the new sofas we sit on, or the environments in which we dwell.[30]

Their framing deepens earlier ecofeminist ideas by showing how toxicity affects not just the body, but also emotions, daily life, and people's overall sense of living in a disrupted world.

Cielemecka and Åsberg's concept importantly draws on the legacy of Rachel Carson and the work of Vanessa Agard-Jones in situating toxic embodiment within broader structures of power. They argue that: "[F]eminist and queer environmental perspectives [that] intersect with decolonial, antiracist, and indigenous ones" enable an "understanding how the toxicity of our environments is intertwined with power relations understood as toxic: racism, settler-colonial violence, corporate greed, militarism, and toxic masculinities."[31]

Overall, applying the combination of the aforementioned material ecofeminist concepts with Buell's toxic discourse framework to *Prayers for the Stolen* helps elucidate how the experiences with toxicity are produced and survived as well as culturally represented and narrated. In the novel, the omnipresent toxicity does not only represent environmental harm, but also the social and living conditions of the community. It symbolizes the gradually revealed systemic violence marking girls and women as polluted and disposable – showcasing that environmental and gendered injustice are inseparable. Buell's emphasis on unavoidable contamination mirrors and is enhanced by Alaimo's "trans-corporeality" – the entangled body and nature – as well as Tuana's "viscous porosity," which stresses the continuing and uneven effects of toxicity. Cielemecka and Åsberg's theory of "toxic embodiment," with its focus on the lived, felt, and embodied experience with toxicity, then echoes Buell's concerns with perspective and voice, unevenly distributed between the (typically gendered) oppressed and the oppressors. Finally, the resulting ecofeminist toxic discourse also adds critical vocabulary for defining and analyzing women's (bodies') experience with toxicity, be it in the form of poison, waste, or toxic masculinity.

Ecofeminist Toxic Discourse in *Prayers for the Stolen*

In the mountainous Guerrero, Ladydi and her mother, Rita, live in a dangerous world of poisonous animals, in "A hot land of rubber plants, snakes, iguanas and scorpions, the blond, transparent scorpions, which were hard to see and that kill. Guerrero had more spiders than any place in the

29 Tuana, "Viscous Porosity," 205.

30 Olga Cielemęcka and Cecilia Åsberg, "Introduction: Toxic Embodiment and Feminist Environmental Humanities," *Environmental Humanities* 11, no. 1 (2019): 101.

31 Olga Cielemęcka and Cecilia Åsberg, "Toxic Embodiment," 102.

world we were sure, and ants. Red ants that made our arms swell up and look like a leg."[32] Clement, however, signals that it is not the natural predators who the women in Ladydi's village should fear: it is men's paradoxical absence and presence that contaminates this pastoral space. As Ladydi explains early in the novel, "On our mountain, there were no men. It was like living where there were no trees."[33] The local women's husbands and the girls' fathers flee to the United States, they "shed their women and their children and walked into the great big USA cemetery."[34] Ladydi's description of the US here does not only refer to the women's loss of their male family members, however, but also to the fact that throughout the novel, men mean death and killing. For, even after the men have left Guerrero, the women "get AIDS from them, from their US whores."[35] Even Julio, Ladydi's first lover, kills a US Border Patrol guard when crossing to the US and now is on the run from the police, while pretending to be officially dead, "a drowned man."[36]

The local men's absence is also filled with the toxic(-smelling) and deadly presence of ever-lurking narcos and the army. For, as dangerous and poisonous as the local animals may be, Ladydi and her teenage friends discover, while hiding in holes in the ground from narcos coming to kidnap them – after all, "Guerrero was turning into a rabbit warren with young girls hiding all over the place"[37] – that "scorpions showed you more mercy than any human being ever will."[38] As Adrian Taylor Kane explains, "Human life is of no value to [the narcos and the soldiers] if it does not advance their battle for the accumulation of financial wealth."[39] And even when the girls manage to evade a kidnapping, the narcos find different ways to invade and poison their village and lives as they engage in the "commodification of nature"[40] to grow poppies in a nearby field: "We stood before the brilliance of lavender and black as a huge field, a bonfire of poppies appeared before us. The place seemed to be deserted except for a downed army helicopter, a mangled mess of metal skids and blades among the poppies. The field of flowers smelled like gasoline."[41] The presence of the narcos and the army is therefore imbued with a recognizable toxic smell. When the army's mission to spray the poppy field fails, it is gasoline oozing from the wreck. When it succeeds, however, it is the smell of deceptively sweet, but deadly pesticides, so familiar to the women now: "We all knew the sound of the army helicopters approaching from far away. We also knew the smell of Paraquat mixed with the scent of papaya and apples."[42]

As Buell points out, toxic discourse typically features male oppressors threatening weak women. Clement's narcos and their girl-hunting, however, as well as the army and their poison combine toxicity and masculinity into an environmentally-coded and complex version of toxic

32 Clement, *Prayers*, 12.
33 Clement, *Prayers*, 16.
34 Clement, *Prayers*, 14.
35 Clement, *Prayers*, 16.
36 Clement, *Prayers*, 113.
37 Clement, *Prayers*, 10.
38 Clement, *Prayers*, 58.
39 Taylor Kane, "Collateral Damage," 159.
40 Taylor Kane, "Collateral Damage," 159.
41 Clement, *Prayers*, 36.
42 Clement, *Prayers*, 36.

masculinity that is abusive in its preying on defenseless women, physically violent, and harmful to the women's physical health as well as to the land they inhabit. It is also all-permeating – affirming Buell's topos of totalizing toxic penetration, but with a clear gender framing – because the army often dump the powerful pesticides onto the village women, turning the local natural environment as well as the women into "casualties in an ongoing battle for the accumulation of capital"[43] inside Mexico's war on drugs. As Ladydi explains,

> When the helicopters came by and got rid of the stuff over our houses we could smell the ammonia scent in everything and our eyes burned for days. My mother said this was the reason she could never stop coughing. My body, she said, is the army's damn poppy field.[44]

As Tuana's concept of viscous porosity suggests, Paraquat here enters the soil, the water, the plants, the food, and ultimately the women's bodies, turning them into a waste site – a waste site they cannot, given their precarity and vulnerability, escape from, as Tuana points out. The bodily deformities and illnesses, in turn, serve as evidence of willful, systemic, and environmental neglect and mistreatment, heavily affecting politically and socially marginalized communities.

The teenage protagonists – Ladydi and her friends – are impacted even worse by the omnipresent and inescapable penetration of toxic masculinity of the narcos and the army as they grow up in a world full of poison, garbage, and deadly men. While the title of the novel ostensibly refers to the kidnapping of young girls, the plot gradually reveals that the girls also lose their health, their future, and their innocence as a result of the all-permeating toxicity and toxic masculinity at the root of the drug war. The girls grow up dressed, looking like, and referred to as boys – having teeth and faces blackened, hair cut short – because "The best thing you can be in Mexico is an ugly girl. […] As a child my mother used to dress me up as a boy and call me Boy [because] If I were a girl then I would be stolen."[45] The girls' growth is also stunted as a result of omnipresent poison in the air and the soil: "[W]e knew the cause behind the deformities on our mountain. Everyone knew that the spraying of poisons to kill the crops of marijuana and poppies was harming our people."[46] Doctors come to the region only rarely, "every few years to operate for free,"[47] and they arrive with an armed escort so that the narcos do not kidnap them. The village receives only "volunteer teachers, social workers, doctors and nurses" who "came as part of their required social work training."[48] Even then, the volunteers are so afraid of the narcos that "There were years when teachers simply gave up and left halfway through or years no teacher ever even showed up."[49] This is no place for girls to grow up and develop. It is a cemetery of their futures.

The army's toxicity reaches and disrupts far and deep – into the rarely used schoolroom as well as the innocent teenage girls' bodies – as Clement shows in the case of Paula, Ladidy's friend, who is "the prettiest girl in these parts of Guerrero. People said Paula was even prettier than the

43 Taylor Kane, "Collateral Damage," 160.

44 Clement, *Prayers*, 36.

45 Clement, *Prayers*, 10.

46 Clement, *Prayers*, 24.

47 Clement, *Prayers*, 19.

48 Clement, *Prayers*, 20.

49 Clement, *Prayers*, 62.

girls from Acapulco."[50] One rare school day, the girls – except for Paula – are on their way to school, when they hear a helicopter and start running for cover in the classroom. However, even there the poison reaches them: "As the scent grew stronger we could sense the poison creep in under the schoolroom door."[51] Terrified, the girls suddenly see Paula enter the classroom, "crying with her eyes closed and her lips pressed firmly together" because "she was drenched in the poison." Paula is standing in the doorway, helpless – a figure of Alaimo's trans-corporeality, representing the somatic experience of living within an environment drenched in poison – with the girls observing and realizing that "We all knew that if you got any Paraquat in your mouth you could die. […] Her dress was drenched and her hair dripped with the stinging liquid. Paula kept her eyes firmly shut. The herbicide can blind you too. It burns everything."[52] Paula is on the verge of becoming blind, a victim of severe chemical burning, losing both her health and beauty, while the male teacher, José Rosa, uselessly "watched in silence. He peered into the room from outside, and covered his mouth and nose with his arm, holding the white cotton shirtsleeve against his face."[53]

The scene does not merely show a dramatic moment of Paraquat poisoning of an innocent teenage girl on her way to school or the poignant inaction by the only man around. It also showcases – as Buell's inescapable toxic penetration, Alaimo's trans-corporeality, Tuana's viscous porosity, and Cielemecka and Åsberg's toxic embodiment all highlight – the inevitable changes in the human body caused by its contact with and absorption of the surrounding environment, including poisonous chemicals in the air and the soil. After the initial shock, the girls help Paula into the bathroom, where they "tried to clean her off with tap water, but it came out much too slowly, so we also scooped water out from the toilet bowl. We washed her eyes and mouth over and over again."[54] Paula is here being cleaned from the poison, but the girls wash it away with waste water – there is therefore still no escape from toxicity. Ladydi and her friends also realize that "We washed off the poison, but we knew much of it was inside her already. […] We knew she would not be able to reach a sponge into Paula's body, as if she were a bottle, and wash the poison out."[55] No matter how diligently the girls help clean Paula and take care of her, "wrapping her up in the frayed cloth curtain that hung in the schoolroom" and walking her "through the jungle, down to the highway, and back up to her house,"[56] Paula's life and physical health have been chemically altered, irreparably poisoned.

The alterations quickly reach the other teenage girls as well: "That night Estefani, Maria, Paula, and I menstruated for the first time. My mother said it was because of the full moon. Estefani's mother said it was because of the poison triggering something bad inside of us," Ladydi announces.[57] Clement here signals that this is what it is like to live, feel, and embody toxicity – masculine and chemical – as the girls are chemically forced by the army's poisonous actions to become adults

50 Clement, *Prayers*, 12.

51 Clement, *Prayers*, 50.

52 Clement, *Prayers*, 50.

53 Clement, *Prayers*, 51.

54 Clement, *Prayers*, 51.

55 Clement, *Prayers*, 51.

56 Clement, *Prayers*, 51–52.

57 Clement, *Prayers*, 52.

overnight. This moment captures the violent disruptions that toxicity brings to people's lives, as Cielemecka and Åsberg claim, the life-altering somatic experiences that Alaimo highlights.

Clement here also develops the protagonists' "toxic subjectivities" and highlights their "toxic intimacy," as Patteson notes.[58] Echoing Tuana, the girls' bodies are framed as porous to toxic matter and prone to toxic build up, which involuntarily triggers new biological and chemical processes. The girls' health and physical development now responds in sync to the toxicity that surrounds and is forced onto them. Their bodies are affected both inside and outside, as Ladydi "could taste the poison" while washing Paula: "Where some had rubbed onto my skin, I could feel the burning, which could turn a radiant poppy into a piece of tar the size of a raisin."[59] The recognizable toxic smell and the threat of death are, once again, depicted as omnipresent, all-permeating and, finally, utterly life-altering.

The army's spraying of deadly pesticide over the village ultimately helps the narcos' intentions as well, the two male-coded oppressive forces working in tandem to cause environmental and physical harm that help their causes. Not only does it forcibly transform the girls into adulthood, but it exposes the boy-like, made-ugly girls to the world, revealing especially the naked Paula for the beautiful woman she has always been. As Ladydi explains their sudden menstruation,

> [W]e knew what had really happened. José Rosa had seen Paula naked. He saw her dark skin and her breasts with their large, brown areolae and soft, black-red nipples and the black hair between her legs. He saw her young, teenage beauty. At that moment, we became one woman and it was as if he'd seen us all.[60]

Not long after, Paula is kidnapped by the narcos, meaning that, in the end, the Paraquat spraying by the army has literally and figuratively driven the girls out of their rabbit-holes like prey to be caught, (ab)used, and consumed by the drug traffickers. The spraying was not against predators targeting the drug traffickers' poppies, but targeted the narcos' desired prey.

While the scenes with the army's visible, olfactible, and harmful poisoning thematize and dramatize the simultaneous destruction of the environment and the women's health and futures, the violence of the narcos perpetrated against the kidnapped girls reveals multiple new layers of the novel's overarching portrayal of toxic masculinity. As Joseph Patteson aptly notes, *Prayers for the Stolen* "develops a disturbing vision of female bodies as ultimately disposable commodities, born of and destined for the trash heap,"[61] which is best exemplified by Paula. Unlike most of the kidnapped girls, she manages to return to her village – alive, but reverting into babyhood in reaction to her traumatic experiences as the narcos' sex slave:

> Paula's mother fed her from a bottle, gave her a milk bottle, actually sat her on her lap and gave her a baby bottle. Paula was fifteen then because I was fourteen. Her mother also bought her Gerber baby foods and fed her straight into her mouth with a small white plastic spoon.[62]

58 Patteson, *Drugs, Violence*, 168.

59 Clement, *Prayers*, 51.

60 Clement, *Prayers*, 52.

61 Patteson, *Drugs, Violence*, 155.

62 Clement, *Prayers*, 12.

After having to "sleep with [the most famous drug lord] McClane every now and again and to help pack the lion and tiger excrement around the drugs or rub a small film of the excrement on the outside of plastic packages,"[63] Paula is now a shell of herself, feeling used up after being reduced to a sexual object - a "slave-mistress"[64] – and a helping hand in smuggling drugs to the United States. She has become so physically and emotionally numbed and poisoned that when "black ants [are] swarming all over" and "crawl[ing] around her neck and behind her ears," she does not even "flick them off."[65] Once again, the poisonous danger coming from the surrounding nature does not compare to the toxicity caused by masculinity.

The levels of objectification and toxicity build-up, to echo Tuana's viscous porosity, in Paula are best exemplified by Clement's metaphoric likening of the girl to a plastic water bottle. As Paula explains to Ladydi upon her escape from the narcos, "I don't need to tell you that along the way I was a plastic water bottle, right? Paula said. I was something you pick up and take a swig of."[66] While bottles appear on numerous occasions in the novel – for example, used glass beer bottles symbolize Ladydi's mother's gradual poisoning with alcohol as a coping mechanism – Paula's brief assessment of her bodily and emotional experience serving the narcos encapsulates the totality of the layers of toxicity and toxic masculinity that the girls and women in the novel are forced to endure.

Plastic water bottles represent one of the cheapest, most easily accessible, and also disposable objects in the world – as do women in Clement's Mexico, where they are treated as a reusable as well as replaceable commodity that belongs to whoever takes possession of it. As Patteson puts it, the girls' bodies are "bought, sold and traded, physically devoured […] or simply used up and thrown away."[67] Moreover, like plastic bottles scarred, disfigured, and filled with backwash after use, the girls' bodies become mutilated and poisoned with rape, unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, handling of drugs and lion and tiger feces, and "cigarette burns on the inside belly-skin" of their arms.[68] In other words, by likening herself to a plastic water bottle, Paula describes the girls as vessels empty of emotions, used up by toxic masculinity, and filled with the remains of various types of toxic residue that builds up in and disrupts their bodies. This is what embodying toxicity, as Cielemecka and Åsberg's would suggest, feels and looks like.

While Paula eventually disappears with her mother from Ladydi's village and the novel's story, the main protagonist encounters another kidnapped girl – Aurora, who knew Paula – in Mexico City's women's prison where they both end up for murder. The prison fits Buell's topos of a Gothic, polluted underworld, albeit heavily gendered once again. Ladydi finds herself surrounded here by a one-armed child-killer from Guatemala, a father killer, and a British woman who happens to be the only "idiot [who] brings heroin into Mexico."[69] The prison also brims over with waste and toxic substances: "unlike the male prison across the patio, this world overflowed with rubbish bins filled with bloodied cotton and rags. In this women's world blood was exposed in the garbage, in the

63 Clement, *Prayers*, 65.

64 Clement, *Prayers*, 65.

65 Clement, *Prayers*, 64.

66 Clement, *Prayers*, 65.

67 Patteson, *Drugs, Violence*, 153.

68 Clement, *Prayers*, 65.

69 Clement, *Prayers*, 133.

unflushed toilet bowl, on sheets and blankets, and on the stained panties soaking in the corner of a sink. […] I knew I was standing on a lake of blood."[70] It is therefore not surprising that in a place where women are left to drown in waste and blood – like Ladydi's repeatedly poisoned village – the main protagonist encounters Aurora, a Gothic creature "as pale as one of those centipedes or worms one finds under rocks. They are pale because the creatures have never been in the sun" with hair "so thin her ears stuck out from her hair."[71] The animal simile evokes not just physical illness but also an analogy to natural places defined by decay – damps or dark holes under rocks where things are bound to rot and dissolve – which is what the kidnapped girls' lives may become.

With the Gothic, ghost-like Aurora, Clement depicts the trans-corporeal, somatic dimension of Paula's plastic bottle metaphor. Aurora fumigates the prison cells and has become addicted to aspirin for chronic headaches as well as to the poison she sprays the cells with. In Ladydi's telling, she embodies poison:

> Aurora opens the spout on the fumigation canister and smells the poison […] She takes the fumes deep into her body and this makes her sleepy. It's her sleeping potion. As I sat on Aurora's bed, the smell was overpowering. The odor had penetrated her bed, belongings, clothes, and skin.[72]

What Ladydi does not realize, however, is that Aurora is very much a part of her own story of poisoning, objectification, and violence. The reason why Ladydi "could smell the insecticide rise from [Aurora's] body in small gusts every time she took a breath"[73] is because Aurora has experienced the same abuse as Paula and more. The reason why she embodies poison is precisely because that is all she has been filled with and surrounded by ever since she was kidnapped when she was only twelve years old. Like Paula, she is now reverting back to childhood and innocence, drowning her toxic trauma in more poison, preferring poison-induced dreaming to living in pain. She is also treated like a small baby when "Violeta picked up Aurora in her arms like a bride or a baby and carried her off. […] Even though Aurora was older than me, she was like a child. Her hand was small like a seven-year-old's."[74]

Importantly, however, Aurora reclaims agency for the poisoned girls of Mexico and embodies resistance, both through her actions and her narrative. Ladydi eventually discovers that Aurora is wasting away in prison because she "killed five men" with rat poison. It took them "two days to die in a hospital in Tijuana," explains Aurora.[75] Her reason for poisoning them is both prosaic as well as poetic: "Everyone knew I made the coffee for the rats' meetings. Everyone knew there was a bottle of rat poison in the rats' kitchen under the sink. Rats need to be poisoned, right?."[76] Aurora believes that after having raped, abused, and poisoned her for months, the narcos deserve to die. She as a victim also reverses roles – to echo Buell here – and turns the very weapon with which the narcos and the army have been destroying young girls' lives across Mexico – poison

70 Clement, *Prayers*, 131.

71 Clement, *Prayers*, 130.

72 Clement, *Prayers*, 155.

73 Clement, *Prayers*, 136.

74 Clement, *Prayers*, 150, 163.

75 Clement, *Prayers*, 157.

76 Clement, *Prayers*, 157.

meant for vermin but sprayed on people – against them. According to Aurora, it is the narcos who are the real pest, preying on the weak, polluting their environment, and endangering their health, who must be poisoned. She is "proud of killing those men. It was her act of justice."[77]

Aurora also pays for the killing by ending up in prison, surrounded by more poison and blood – unlike many of the men that Ladydi and her friends encounter throughout the novel. The women's prison seems to be, however, a less dangerous environment than the male-controlled world outside. As Ladydi explains, "I never would have believed that someone who had shot a child in a break-and-entry robbery, killed twelve old ladies for their wedding rings, or murdered two husbands could loan me a sweater, give me a cookie, or hold my hand."[78] In short, given their violent and poisonous experiences with men, the women know how to take care of each other.

They also empower one another and claim authority over their stories, an important feature of Buell's toxic discourse. When Ladydi notices the burn marks on Aurora's arm – "If we're found dead someplace everyone will know we were stolen. It is our mark,"[79] Paula once explained to her – she stops judging Aurora for looking like a Gothic monster, and instead starts listening to her story. She consequently finds out that it is her own story: "It was this human centipede who told me the story of my life. […] I looked at Aurora and thought I was looking into a mirror. She knew my life better than I did."[80] Aurora tells everyone about Ladydi, Paula, Rita, and the waves of toxic masculinity they have survived. In the eyes of the other women, Ladydi becomes a heroine who stood up to heroin producers and dealers, to those who want to poison and devour women. Aurora's storytelling – giving voice to the tragedy and perseverance of the Guerrero women – turns Ladydi's life "into a wishbone. Aurora had brought both pieces together. She was the joint."[81] It also synecdochically gives voice to all the girls (in Mexico) who have been poisoned physically as well as by toxic masculinity.

Conclusion

Jennifer Clement's *Prayers for the Stolen* functions as an instrument of social justice with an anthropocentric focus on Mexican women's embodied experiences with toxicity and toxic masculinity. Through images of waste, polluted landscapes, and bodily harm, the novel reveals how disposability is both experienced and inherited. Structurally, it is therefore built around Lawrence Buell's elements characteristic of narratives of toxic discourse, while updating and gendering this critical framework with scenes reflecting and echoing ecofeminist concepts such as Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality, Nancy Tuana's viscous porosity, and Cielemecka and Åsberg's toxic embodiment. The resulting ecofeminist discourse around which the novel revolves enables Clement to narratively anchor Ladydi's story in a personal, tangible "moral framework of toxic

77 Clement, *Prayers*, 157.

78 Clement, *Prayers*, 127.

79 Clement, *Prayers*, 148.

80 Clement, *Prayers*, 148, 149.

81 Clement, *Prayers*, 148, 149.

discourse,"[82] where oppressed, poisoned women claim agency and gain voice over omnipresent toxic misogyny, if only for a brief moment. Ladydi's innocent narrative voice – tinged with magical realism while relating horrifying moments of toxic penetration – consequently compels the reader to develop an ecofeminist toxic consciousness of the enmeshment of women in – their somatic as well as emotional experiences with – the totalizing, Gothically poisonous violence of toxic masculinity and the exploitation and destruction of the natural environment.

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82 Lawrence Buell, "Toxic Discourse," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (April 1998): 653.

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Grant acknowledgement

This text is a result of the project SGS01/FF/2024 "Feminist, psychoanalytical and queer approaches to contemporary Anglophone literatures" supported by the internal grant scheme of the University of Ostrava.