Our civilization poisoned river waters, and their contamination acquires a powerful emotional meaning. As the course of a river is a symbol of time, we are inclined to think of a poisoned time. And yet the sources continue to gush and we believe time will be purified one day.

Czeslaw Milosz, from “Rivers” in Road-Side Dog

I grew up in the Green Empire. Magic City. The place was there, brimming in its mossy quietude, before the axes began to swing—cutting down the virgin pine forest on July 4, 1914, when the town was incorporated. The name comes from the Native American-named creek, “Boge Lusa,” where smoke-dark waters flow through the city.

The Great Southern Lumber Company was established by someone from Buffalo, New York, connected to Goodyear in 1906. By then, the presence of the Native American had been virtually erased; now there was a killing to be made from the great, towering pines.

During the 1950s Bogalusa seethed, a horbed for racism. Segregation, enforced by a minority, imposed inequality upon the majority of this city’s population. There were no black doctors, lawyers, postal workers, police officers, firefighters, bank tellers, sales people, machine operators, et cetera. Those who did go off to college returned as public school teachers to segregated schools. Everyone else faced making a living, and no matter the skills, the work involved perpetual hard labor.

As a matter of fact, a metaphor for the daily realities of life in Bogalusa was manifested in the graveyards of the black and white inhabitants. Whites lavished monuments of granite and marble on their dead over acres of plush, green cemeteries. The graveyard for African Americans, half-hidden near the city dump, was visited by vultures and scavengers that used to linger between the smoldering hills of garbage and the graves, whose keepers fought off the constant encroachment of saw vines and scrub oak.

This hellish symbol was analogous to the town’s psyche. It reflected an attitude that had been cultivated over many decades. It was the law—social and legal—a way of thinking that ran so deep that it went unquestioned each generation. Bogalusa was frozen in time.

The same attitude that allowed settlers to produce smallpox-infected blankets for Native Americans seemed alive in the psyche of our city. One could almost hear Sweet Medicine of the Cheyenne lamenting: “Some day you will meet a people who are white. They will try always to give you things, but do not take them. At last I think you will take these things that they offer you, and this will bring sickness to you. . . .”

The first known settlers in the area were Scottish and Irish pioneers from the British colonies of Georgia and Virginia, as well as North and South Carolina. The Treaty of Paris, which briefly created British West Florida in 1763, also attracted Loyalists fleeing the American Revolution. By 1906, when the Great Southern Lumber Company was established—and before it was to grow into what was boasted to be the world’s largest sawmill, the Native Americans had been suppressed to near extinction.

Their ghosts remained evident in some faces as my poem “Looking for Choctaw” suggests:
we dared him to fight,
But he only left his breath
On windshields, as if nothing
Could hold him in this world.

I grew up with the feeling that the Choctaw lived in our presence, in a half glimpse, somewhere among the trees as elusive, nocturnal souls.

Many Bogalusa blacks believed that “a good education” would lift them out of poverty and make their lives more equal to those of whites. They saluted the flag and trusted the Bill of Rights. Some had returned from World War I, World War II, and the Korean Conflict, but they were still waiting for things to change. Some were counting the decades and years, making promises on their deathbeds, getting restless. A few were dreaming aloud.

In January 1964 the KKK burned crosses throughout Louisiana. Also, fifteen black people registered to vote in Tensas Parish, the last parish to enforce total disenfranchisement of blacks. In November the Deacons for Defense and Justice was founded in Jonesboro, Louisiana. The group advocated armed self-defense against the Klan. In December KKK members from around Natchez, Mississippi, burned a shoe-repair shop in Ferriday, Louisiana, owned by fifty-one-year-old Frank Morris. He died in the blaze. In January 1965 black protesters picketed Columbia Street stores in Bogalusa, a Klan stronghold. In May the Klan held a large rally in the Magic City, their Green Empire. On June 2, O’Neal Moore, African-American and a sheriff’s deputy in Washington Parish, was murdered by a white man who drove by in a pickup truck near Bogalusa. Ernest Ray McElveen, a forty-one-year-old Crown Zellerbach lab technician and member of the Citizen’s Council of Greater New Orleans and the National States’ Rights Party, was arrested not far from the murder scene. In July protests by the Voters League and the Deacons for Defense implored the Justice Department to enforce the Civil Rights Act through suits against city officials and the Klan. In 1966 Clarence Triggs, a bricklayer, was found dead after he left a civil rights meeting sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality.

I have a love-hate complex with Bogalusa. The place still affects how I live and think. Its beauty and horror shaped the intensity of my observations, prompting my father to say, “Boy, you have a mind like a steel trap.” Now, years after my book Magic City, I realize that I had attempted to present how toxicity taints the social and natural landscape. For me, the millpond—a hundred or so yards from our house—was always a place of ritual. We fished there. And sometimes we even swam in the dark water. But in the back of my mind, I was always suspect of this slow-running pond. I think the poem “The Millpond” attempts to focus on my apprehensions:

Gods lived under that mud
When I was young & sublimely
Blind. Each bloom a shudder
Of uneasiness, no sound
Except the whippoorwill.
They conspired to become twilight
& metaphysics, as five-eyed
Fish with milky bones
Flip-flopped in oily grass.

I was aware of the hard splendor of this small, semirural city. I knew about cutting and hauling pulpwood because I had done it, as I attempt to describe in “Poetics of Paperwood”:

We pulled the crosscut
Through the pine like a seesaw
Of light across a map
Of green fungus.
We knew work
Was rhythm,
& so was love.
Well, at least, I knew I loved nature—I sought so many hours in its solitude. It was the engine of my imagination. Maybe this is what Sophie Cabot Black projects in “Nature, Who Misundersstands” when she writes, “Nature loves and makes you love.” Perhaps we haven’t learned nature’s greatest instruction: we are connected. Everything’s connected.

When it comes to wishing a “divine paradise” or an earthly Eden into existence, human history and imaginative literature are a web of contradictions and bloated wishful thinking, as when St. John of Damascus says, “In truth, it was a divine place and a worthy habitation for God in His image. And in it no brute beasts dwelt, but only man, the handiwork of God.” Following this line of thinking—Does God invent God’s own death through humans? Is commerce the death of God, since humans seem more deadly than so-called brute beasts?—a deacon might ask, “Doesn’t God give people dominion over everything?”

Everything adds up to capital. Living from birth to death involves commerce. The poor, disenfranchised people I grew up with couldn’t afford fancy tombstones and divine-looking burial plots for their loved ones. Some seemed born diminished—cogwheels of flesh in a monumental system that stole and sold even the airspace overhead as if they were part of an experiment that had gone wrong.

Or, as I listen to Don Byron, an experimental jazz clarinetist, I read again from the notes that introduce his CD:

And the album title “Tuskegee Experiments” refers to two experiments conducted on Black American men at the Tuskegee Institute.

In 1932, the U.S. Public Health Service, with generous assistance from local Black medical professionals, initiated the longest human medical experiment in American history. More than half of the four hundred men chosen had syphilis, while the rest formed a non-syphilitic control group. None were informed of their condition, and they were observed for over 40 years, but NOT treated, just to document the physical effects of syphilis left unchecked. In the Tuskegee Aviation experiment, over-qualified and under-compensated Black men endured unnecessary indignities simply to “prove” they could be trusted to fly military aircraft.

To me, these two experiments are metaphors for African-American life. In one, we see once again that black life is cheap, and that a person of color can be enlisted to work against the best interests of his group, for nothing more than a brief “vacation” from the pain of invisibility or the pressure of being seen as part of an “inferior” group.

In essence, Byron points out that it takes a cultivated, sanctioned attitude to design a project that dehumanizes and kills people. It is the same attitude that prompted certain settlers to distribute smallpox-infected blankets to Native Americans. It is an attitude of war. A few decades ago, the same kind of stance advocated that the U.S. should bomb the Vietnamese into the Stone Age. A similar attitude drives the marketplace: the so-called Third World countries often function as a dumping ground for numerous products that are harmful or banned in the U.S. and Europe. Some of the brainiest among us serve as reckless juggernauts geared up for another margin of profit, as if a capitalist must always sell his or her soul, that he or she isn’t capable of compassion and morality. After all, by using simple deductive logic, since the Civil Rights Movement occurred less than four decades ago, with institutionalized injustices as a way of life, as law and custom, it should be no surprise that there are people in positions to whom minorities cannot entrust their lives and well-being. Hate mongers are still among us; some wield power and make decisions as to where harmful chemicals are stored and toxins dumped. All of this may be done with an almost unintentional malice—a way of thinking linked to the imperatives of an unjust history—without second thought.

We don’t have to think of Nazi Germany to know that some humans have experimented on others for insane reasons. In my mind,
all this connects. What about South Africa’s Dr. Death: Dr. Wouter Basson? As I read “The Poison Keeper,” this exposé grew even more frightening:

We nonetheless know that, at Roodeplaat, Basson’s scientists were working with anthrax, cholera, salmonella, botulinum, thallium, E. coli, ricin, organophosphates, necrotizing fasciitis, hepatitis A, and H.I.V., as well as nerve gases (Sarin, VX) and the Ebola, Marburg, and Rift Valley hemorrhagic-fever viruses. 8

Chet Raymo says in Skeptics and True Believers that:

Some of the new criticism of science has come from inside the scientific community and is informed by a thorough understanding of scientific process. As such, it is especially welcome and useful. For example, Dai Rees, secretary and chief executive of Britain’s Medical Research Council, writing in Nature, makes a startling claim: Science has “contributed massively to human misery” by undermining traditional stable societies without offering any compensating vision of what human life might be. It is time for scientists to pay their dues, he insists. . . . Scientists must accept responsibility for the application of their discoveries—for good or ill. 9

Like a true American pragmatist, Raymo attempts to chastize Rees, and goes on to conclude that,

[The conflict is not between science and society, as such, but between the two segments of society which I have labeled Skeptics and True Believers. . . .

Certainly, it is not the sole responsibility of scientists to show the way to accommodation of empirical knowing and spiritual longing. This is a task that must occupy scientists, philosophers, theologians, poets, and artists. 10

We must pay dues to ourselves and each other. Perhaps this is why Robert Oppenheimer questioned his heart and mind in the creation of the atomic bomb. I agree with Raymo’s insistence that the larger intellectual community should pose questions and create a dialogue about ethics and technology.

It is scandalous, but often citizens have to create organizations to protect themselves from vicious practices by businesses going beyond the bounds of free enterprise. When we look at the preamble established by the delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held October 24–27, 1991, in Washington, D.C., the gravity of the problem is telescoped:

We, the People of Color, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to insure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice. . . . 11

For me, the first and last of the seventeen principles underline the overall importance of the summit:

1. Environmental Justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction. . .

17. Environmental Justice requires that we, as individuals, make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth’s resources and to produce as little waste as
possible; and make the conscious decision to challenge and reprioritize our lifestyles to insure the health of the natural world for present and future generations.¹²

When I was growing up in Bogalusa I could taste the chemicals in the air. It was something we accepted as a way of life, but it is also something one never forgets. I have tried to recapture an image of my hometown in “Fog Galleon”:

Horse-headed clouds, flags & pennants tied to black Smokestacks in swamp mist. From the quick green calm Some nocturnal bird calls Ship ahoi, ship ahoi! I press against the taxicab Window. I’m back here, interaired With a dead phosphorescence; The whole town smells Like the world’s oldest anger. Scabrous residue hunkers down under Sulfur & dioxide, waiting For sunrise, like cargo On a phantom ship outside Gaul. Cool glass against my cheek Pulls me from the black schooner On a timeless sea—everything Dwarfed beneath the papermill Lights blinking behind the cloudy Commerce of wheels, of chemicals That turn workers into pulp When they fall into vats Of steamy serenity.¹³

One cannot miss Bogalusa’s acid smell, but Louisiana State University Medical Center’s Bogalusa Heart Study seems to suggest that overall health concerns are limited in a town that has been, for the most part, silent in its demands for industry to clean up toxic sites. Here are two troubling items in the Bogalusa Heart Study:

- Autopsy studies show lesions in the aorta, coronary vessels, and kidney relate strongly to clinical cardiovascular risk factors, clearly indicating atherosclerosis and hypertension begin in early life.
- Environmental factors are significant and influence dyslipidemia, hypertension, and obesity.¹⁴

The disparity in economics is at the center of the racial and cultural divide that influences environmental politics. Unfortunately, this is doubly true in places such as Magic City where the economic distance between black and white citizens is immense, and this chasm encapsulates and underscores history’s imperative. For instance, present-day statistics (1990 census) verify the situation: the highest percentage of African-American residents lives in north central and south east Bogalusa, with an annual income of $5,000 to $17,000; north east Bogalusa has the highest white population, boasting an annual income of $40,000 to $51,000.

Even food products can be measured with dollar signs: poor communities usually pay more for their inferior food products. Also, it is more likely that chemical- and pesticide-free products are sold in high-income areas. An attitude permeates the relationships between merchants and certain communities, as is the case of American companies marketing questionable products in parts of the so-called Third World (tobacco products distributed in Asian countries and the former Soviet Union). Or, we only have to look at the proliferation of billboards and other advertisements in minority communities for alcohol products—with the help of celebrity endorsements. Such things aren’t accidental; everything is planned and perfected with the same attention as is given to any weapon. An argument can be made, as many have done previously, that the availability of drugs in certain communities is no accident; to the

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degree that it is planned, this offers yet another example of how communities are violated.

Our fears become our worst enemies. We need to trust each other. Otherwise, the mental health of the society wears to a fragile state. Distrust diminishes our emotional lives on a personal level and further deepens the chasm of misunderstandings among our communities.

I grew up in a climate of distrust. Blacks didn’t trust whites, and it was sometimes difficult to disentangle truth from myth and folklore. For example, no black person could sell illegal, homemade liquor, but there was a white man who sold his brew to blacks. Not only did he sell “stoopdown” under the nose of the law, but it was rumored that he doctored his corn whiskey with pinches of Red Devil lye. We believed that some among us were slowly being poisoned. This is the kind of thing that fosters mistrust, when one doesn’t know where the truth begins, similar to a Sixty Minutes scenario. Since many of the white citizens of Bogalusa have kept blacks economically disadvantaged for generations, during the 1970s and 1980s, some blacks believed that well-off white families were redeeming food stamps at the local supermarkets, that some even paid their black domestics with government food stamps. “There’s nothing a white man won’t do to keep a black man down,” they’d say. “If he can’t legally keep you in chains, he’ll connive some way to keep his foot on your neck.”

This was the folk wisdom from my community. So, when it came to the politics of pollution and dumping of hazardous waste in the black community, many of us understood it was business as usual—a reflection of the national psyche. When we learned that white families were draining their toilets into Mitch Creek, we assumed that it was done only because blacks swam downstream on Sunday afternoons; we weren’t allowed to swim at the Y.

“Bogalusa? It seems familiar. Where have I heard that name? It’s on the tip of my tongue.”

Oftentimes, that’s the reaction I’ll hear to the word “Bogalusa.” Sometimes I’ll add, “The nineteen sixties?”

“Yeah, that’s right. The Civil Rights Movement.”

Most times, I’d leave those words hanging in the air.

Louisiana has a bad record when it comes to Civil Rights and protection of the environment. But Jim Motavalli’s article, “Toxic Targets,” in E: The Environmental Magazine suggests that there’s a deeper problem. He writes:

On September 10, 1997, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) head Carol Browner issued a simple but unprecedented order: She disallowed the state of Louisiana’s approval of an enormous polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plant in Convent, a small, mostly African-American community already inundated with toxic waste producers.

One can see that a pattern had been already established, that the Japanese-owned Shintech plant must have been surprised by the federal government’s directive. Motavalli states:

The term “environmental racism” wasn’t in the vernacular until it appeared in a 1987 study by the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice entitled Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States. Ben Chavis, the commission’s director, stated simply that “race is a major factor related to the presence of hazardous wastes in residential communities throughout the United States,” and a new field of study was born.

The pillars that allow pervasive environmental racism are beginning to crumble. In April, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission denied a license to a uranium enrichment plant impacting the African-American communities of Forest Grove and Center Springs, Louisiana.

I cannot stop thinking of these two lines from Antonio Machado’s “He andado muchos caminos”: “Mala gente que camina y va
"Apestando la tierra . . ." ("Evil men who walk around / polluting the
earth . . .") Sooner or later, our cultivated attitudes force all of us
to pay our dues. Agriculture Street Superfund site, where houses
sit atop a polluted landfill. South Memphis's highly toxic Defense
Depot, suspected of causing a cancer cluster among the African-
American residents. But there are stories that garner even more
news coverage, because the dream isn't half buried, a slow kill.

In Dispatch, Shirley Ayers writes:

When a city's fire chief is the very first casualty of a hazard-
ous materials explosion, you can be pretty sure that it is
going to be a bad day. Such was the scenario in Bogalusa,
Louisiana, last fall when a railroad tank car holding nitrogen
tetroxide (rocket fuel) exploded at the Gaylord chemical
plant, releasing a mushroom cloud of poisonous gas that
sent thousands of people, including the Bogalusa Fire Chief,
to an area hospital.18

When people from across the country called me and asked, "How's
your family down in Bogalusa?" I said that I had my fingers crossed.
I didn't say that my fingers have been crossed since the late 1960s,
since the Civil Rights Movement, and since the 1970s, when I be-
came aware that I had grown up across from a millpond filled with
chemicals that "seasoned" logs.

I have never been sentimental about nature. I have accepted it in
the same way as these lines by Emily Dickinson:

A Bird came down the Walk—
He did not know I saw—
He bit an Angleworm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,
And then he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass—
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass.19

Nature teaches us how to see ourselves within its greater do-
main. We see our own reflections in every ritual, and we cannot
wound Mother Nature without wounding ourselves. She isn't a
pushover.

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Yusef Komunyakaa won the Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems*, one of his eleven books of poetry. His most recent works are *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems*, *Talking Dirty to the Gods*, and *Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews and Commentaries*. He coedited with Sascha Feinstein *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* and *The Second Set: The Jazz Poetry Anthology, volume 2*. Komunyakaa's lyrics have been featured on several CDs, including Pamela Knowles's *Thirteen Kinds of Desire*. He was awarded the Bronze Star for service in Vietnam. Elected a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 1999, Komunyakaa is a professor in the Council of Humanities and Creative Writing Program at Princeton University.

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