Oral History with Adam Dickinson

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Interview of Adam Dickinson

SESSION ONE (7/29/2020)

[00:00:03]

YIU: Great. This is July 29, 2020. It's Nic Yiu, interviewing Adam Dickinson. Adam, can I ask you when and where you were born?

DICKINSON: I was born in Bracebridge, Ontario, which is a small town on the Canadian Shield, just west of Algonquin Park. And on May 17, 1974.

YIU: And how do you identify gender-wise?

DICKINSON: Male.

YIU: Okay, and how do you identify racially?

DICKINSON: White.

YIU: Okay. What was your class background growing up?

DICKINSON: My parents were both high school teachers at the local high school.

YIU: Did you have any siblings?

DICKINSON: Yeah, I have one younger sister.

YIU: And what's her name?

DICKINSON: Her name is Kim.

YIU: Kim. What are your relationships with your parents and siblings now?

DICKINSON: They are good. We actually just got back from a camping trip and I'm going to see them again in a couple weeks on a camping trip.

YIU: That's amazing. Okay. I wanted to talk to you a little bit about your childhood home. Do you remember what it was like?

DICKINSON: I do.

YIU: Can you give us some description, please?

DICKINSON: Sure. The house was built by my father, and it's a little bit out of town. It's not exactly in the country. You might think of it as a sort of suburban street now, but it wasn't really planned that way. It sits near a river and beside quite expansive woodlands, forests with rocky hills. I spent a lot of time outside, a lot of time – more time than my kids spend outside. I feel in many ways, it was a childhood that was not offered to people who live in the city for sure. I really spent huge chunks of my childhood either in the woods, playing with friends or by myself, or other places, both in the winter and in the summer skiing and skating and building forts and

making maps. It was wonderful space to grow up in. The house was very nice because it wasn't expensive to live in that place. My parents built a nice house; they had a very nice life in that town. They still live there. What I think of now, I mean, it was the 1970's, it seems to me that—I don't really remember the 70s, I remember the 80s, but they had a very wonderful community of friends there. It seemed to me that there was much more of communal sense than I have in my life now and that I see around me. I'm sure some people have that, but I think my parents had an exceptionally wonderful experience in that town.

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YIU: Yes. Intimacy, play space as well. Do you remember any distinct smells from your childhood?

DICKINSON: Oh, yes. Smells and tastes; do you want both of those?

YIU: Yeah, I would love some of both.

DICKINSON: Well, definitely the taste of icicles off the roof. I can taste that sometimes.

YIU: What did it taste like?

DICKINSON: Well, it's going to sound like a strange comparison but it kind of tastes like a single malt whiskey.

YIU: Oh, wow.

DICKINSON: But it's different. It's not the exact—it's not going to taste like whiskey, but there's something in the whiskey that reminds me of the icicle whenever I drink the whiskey.

YIU: Well, there are icicles in the whiskey I guess sometimes.

DICKINSON: Can be.

YIU: Yes. And what are some of the smells?

DICKINSON: Definitely the smell of leaves, rotting leaves, a very sweet smell in the fall. I remember certainly the smell of the forest. The smell of the lake. I remember the smell of my house, of course. It has a smell when I go back to it.

YIU: What is that smell?

DICKINSON: Well, that is a really hard one to pinpoint because it just smells like the house. I guess it would be a bit of wood mixed with—I don't know, it's just a house smell. It really defies description so I wouldn't compare it to anything else.

YIU: Yes. And do you associate that smell with your current home?

DICKINSON: It's a different smell which I also associate with home. Currently it has a little bit of skunk in it because the dogs ran into a skunk the other day and brought the smell into the house.

YIU: Oh no.

DICKINSON: We've been living with the skunk smell actually for a couple weeks now. I'm used to it but now when I leave and then I come back I smell the skunk.

YIU: Oh, wow. It probably is in the air.

DICKINSON: But I've been reminded actually about how the smell of skunk is actually a part of different kinds of foods, like foods that I like. Like we had Thai food—I love Thai food, but there was something in the smell that was sort of, it must be related. I mean, it sounds disgusting, but it's not. I mean, you can smell the skunk smell for sure. But that's sort of a long-standing smell association. Anyway, it's interesting to encounter dissociated skunk. But there it is, sort of all around you. I think that's the case for many smells: smells that in one context are off-putting, but in other contexts are delicious.

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YIU: Most definitely. It's almost a sense of perception, as you said. So where do you currently live? You mentioned you have kids – do you live with them? Or do they live with you?

DICKINSON: Yes. They're young. They're nine and currently five but about to be six.

YIU: They must be intrigued by the smell.

DICKINSON: Oh, yes, they're interested in skunk.

YIU: Growing up, did your parents use a specific cleaning regimen that you continue to use now? Or what would the cleaning routine look like?

DICKINSON: Well, my mother used what I now call the 'blue cloth of death.'

YIU: What is the 'blue cloth of death?'

DICKINSON: It's a J Cloth (brand name) that she would reuse over and over again and would come at me to wipe my face when I was a child. I have distinct horrified memories of that. The smell of the J Cloth. Yes, that's another smell.

YIU: They have a smell?

DICKINSON: Well, they have a smell after they've been reused many times.

YIU: Right, I see. And I'm guessing you no longer use the 'blue cloth of death?'

DICKINSON: I don't. My wife likes to, or we use cloths, of course we use cloths, but I am reminded every time I wipe my kids' faces of how much I did not like having my face wiped.

[00:08:13]

YIU: Yes. So we were talking about food a little earlier. What did you grow up eating?

DICKINSON: You learn later about your diets and foods when you're able to contextualize them. I think it was pretty healthy food. It was pretty standard kind of French-inspired cuisine, I

suppose. Some meats, some vegetables, some starch. My parents grew food in the garden. So we often had garden produce – carrots and zucchini and brussels sprouts and broccoli and things like this.

YIU: It really sounds like you had a really wide space growing up.

DICKINSON: Oh yes, I roamed. I was like a dog off the leash. There was lots of space.

YIU: Yes. You mentioned you are from Ontario, Canada, near Algonquin Park. So did you grow up interacting with Indigenous (First Nations) folks in that area? Or would you say that your neighborhood was a specific group of folks?

DICKINSON: Bracebridge is a small town. It would be predominantly white for sure. I did meet and grow up a little bit with some Indigenous people, but the Indigenous community was not very large. My understanding historically is that it was somewhat transient. It was sort of a hunting area; there weren't permanent settlements in the area. There is a reserve, but I think that was something organized much later. But there is a reserve about an hour, maybe an hour and a half, from where I grew up. But in Parry Sound as well, I think there were settlements there for sure.

But yes, I worked in high school; I worked at a lumber mill. And I worked with an Indigenous woman. She was a little bit older than me at the time, but we were pretty good friends. And I grew up also with a South Asian person, either from India or Pakistan. Rasheed, I remember her name. I was very young; I would have been sort of kindergarten. But there was not a lot of minority representation and non-white representation in Bracebridge. My neighborhood, for example, there would have been probably a dozen houses on the street, maybe less than that, built some over time. So probably between, when I was growing up, between six and a dozen, but everyone to my recollection would have been white.

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YIU: How would you describe your health growing up?

DICKINSON: Fine. I was fairly healthy. I don't recall any health problems. I did have to have surgery once for – I mean how detailed are we going to get here?

YIU: I'm moving into asking you about your experience of why you would look into the chemicals and microbial testing.

DICKINSON: Oh okay.

YIU: That was more of a basic introduction since this is framed as oral history, so we just wanted background information.

DICKINSON: Right. Well, I will say one thing about myself. I do remember growing up being a bit of a germaphobe actually. That’s kind of stuck with me a little bit. I think that I sort of had latent obsessive-compulsive qualities that I didn't really understand as a child. But I do a little bit more now. So I think that the germ issues were related to that. But it wasn't debilitating. I developed eczema also, atopic dermatitis as a child, and I’ve had that forever. I remember that

being a source of some stress and discomfort when I would have to deal with hands that would have cuts on them and things.

YIU: Yes. You have never experienced any symptoms after chemical exposure or anything like that?

DICKINSON: No, I don't think so.

[00:13:15]

YIU: Okay. And so what pushed you into conducting this chemical and microbial testing?

DICKINSON: Well, art and curiosity. I wrote a book on plastics. I was researching endocrine-disrupting chemicals that are related to plasticizers, and I started to think about the role of these chemicals on the endocrine system and also on metabolism more generally. And I got really interested in thinking about this as a kind of writing and what might it look like to respond to these kinds of biological and chemical processes through writing. I guess I'm just really interested in thinking more expansively about how writing might respond to our contemporary historical moment. And the more I think about it, the more I'm intrigued by the way that I can read, in my own body, the global metabolism of energy and capital, the circulation of these things as they relate to chemical pollution and also as they relate to questions around privilege and class as well. How I can eat these things, that global metabolism in the local metabolism of my body and certainly other bodies, too. What might it mean to sort of respond to that writing? We are changing the planet; we are changing our world through anthropogenic pollution. In a sense, we're rewriting the world around us, and in doing so, we're also rewriting our own bodies. To me, it raises all kinds of interesting questions about what constitutes a natural state. Purity versus pollution. Because both of those terms are problematic. Purity itself is a questionable desire in certain circumstances. We talk about pure water, clean water, but when we start talking about pure and clean ideas or population, that's a problem, right? And so I'm interested in the slippage between those words and those ideas and how my body bears the traces of my historical moment, whether I like it or not. And so I got very intellectually interested in this.

I decided to do these tests, and to be perfectly honest, I thought I could kind of bracket my own psychological investment and treat myself as a specimen. I was quite intrigued by that possibility. But I was very wrong. I could not do that. I mean, it might sound naive to you or to others, but I thought I could do that. I thought that I could separate my emotional engagement from my own artistic practice. But I couldn't. I got all bound up in this and the ideas, and I was greatly affected by the results of these tests for sure. While I don't identify as someone who has chemical sensitivity, I do identify (as) someone who has been very psychologically affected by what I have learned about the chemicals in my body, writing this book and thinking about these things.

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YIU: Yes. So you wrote both (*The*) *Polymers* and *Anatomic*. And in (*The*) *Polymers*, you really challenged this idea of polymers as a form of writing. And I really want to get into that. But before we move towards that, how did you even hear about chemical and microbial testing? Is it

just because of your background, that you heard of it from a friend, or how did you come about it?

DICKINSON: Well, at the very beginning, I had the idea that I wanted to conduct these tests and that I wanted to do the chemicals and the microbes because I wanted to hold in intention the necessary ways in which the body is overwritten by its environment in the context of evolutionary history and the microbes that play necessary roles in our physiology and our immune system, etc. I wanted to hold that intention with the toxic ways in which the outside writes the inside, or the environment writes our bodies in the context of chemical pollution. So I wanted to have these things in intention. And I knew that I wanted to do them together. But I started this in 2011, and at that time, there really was not the kind of citizen science projects that have since developed like American Gut and uBiome. But I didn't know about them and also some of them didn't exist.

So basically what I did was, in the case of the microbiome testing, I just went to conferences, literary conferences, ecopoetic environmental conferences, and met people, and asked them. I tried to meet microbiologists. And over time I made contact with some people, first at Berkeley, and later at the University of Colorado. And from there, I sort of made my way into some of these studies and then into the larger citizen science projects that developed after that. Chemical testing was much more difficult in a way; however, I did have some guidance in the form of tests that had been previously conducted as political activist strategies by an environmental organization in Toronto called Environmental Defense. They had tested three politicians at the time, this is back in 2007 or 2008, for a whole suite of chemicals. They made this public and it was a way of talking about body burden and biomonitoring and the chemicals that are in these politicians. And so I had that suite of tests as a guide, so I knew what I wanted to test myself for: I was going to use the Environmental Defense project as a map, as a model. But I didn't know how to do this. And so I went to my doctor first, but it wasn't possible to do this. First of all, because of public health care in Canada—I didn't want to abuse the health care because I didn't have any reason to be tested. And as you probably know, you can't just go to your doctor and ask for a test. Usually your doctor sends you for a reason. I did convince my doctor to sort of do a couple tests for me or to request a couple tests, but I wanted to pay for them. And I couldn't do that. It was too complicated, and it was also too limited. I ended up—I went to Environmental Defense, and I asked them, and they told me to go talk to a few private labs that they had used in Quebec City and on Vancouver Island. I approached those labs, and it took a long time because, as one artist, this was an unusual request. Normally, these laboratories deal with large samples. My understanding is they would test people in a mine or test a large suite of workers. And so I had to kind of piggyback onto these other tests. But I did manage to do it through these private laboratories. And it was affordable in the end. I had a research grant to do this; I couldn't have done it by myself,

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YIU: Right.

DICKINSON: But that's how I did it. It took some time and I worked in the laboratory with the generous assistance of some of my colleagues in Health Sciences at the university that I work at. But that in itself is kind of interesting because we drew blood and I was dealing with a centrifuge that was far too small. So I spent a day drawing, I guess what turned out to be a unit of blood, but we had to use more than seventy vials to get it out because they were so small. And so I really kind of did a number on the veins of my arms.

YIU: Right.

DICKINSON: But it ended up being an issue because I wanted to pay the student and so I issued an expense claim and the university suddenly realized that they had no policy around the drawing (of the blood)--we don't have a medical school.

YIU: You're at Brock (University), right?

DICKINSON: 22:54

Yes. So I ended up causing this huge administrative problem that took a year to resolve. They had to come up with guidelines for when blood can be drawn and who could do it. And I think—I'm sure some of my colleagues in Health Sciences were not happy with me as a result of that because they were flying under the radar for a long time. But I did manage to get the test done. I froze my urine; I separated the serum and sent all that off. It was a very involved process. But it was very exciting and interesting to me. That part of the process was very intriguing. I liked it quite a bit.

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YIU: You like the process of trying to find out how to get your testing done, or?

DICKINSON: I liked actually doing it. I felt a great sense of accomplishment sending off my frozen stool sample or doing the swabs – it was difficult. They required—I suppose it was anxiety producing in itself, especially drawing all that blood, but I felt like I was doing really interesting work.

YIU: And you are. I mean, your chemical microbial autobiography is, as you would term it, is kind of this plea for us to reconsider what we're doing to our world and our bodies. So the process of this involving your physical body, that must have been quite the experience.

DICKINSON: Yes, you're right. It really did. I was excited and intrigued by that.

YIU: Right. I wanted to talk more about—you touched on something while you were talking about how even within this process of procuring knowledge about how to get this testing done, where and how much, you mentioned one thing which was you couldn't have done this all on your own and you, in fact, received grants. So do you think that, because earlier you also mentioned capitalism, how does capitalism and class and economy function into health testing in your opinion?

[00:25:14]

DICKINSON: I think it really does. I think that in this neoliberal era of smaller governments and looser regulations that the diminishment of the role of public health and the role of governments in keeping data and monitoring their populations when it comes to these kinds of things, or the downloading of that onto citizens or other jurisdictions, I think runs the risk of allowing this kind of information only to be available to people who have the money to get it. And I don't think that's right. I think the United States actually does a much better job, in my mind, of monitoring its population. A lot of the data from the Centers for Disease Control that I used was very good.

YIU: Interesting.

DICKINSON: In Canada, the data wasn't quite as good, or it wasn't quite as consistent from what I can tell. I'm not an expert in this field. But that was my sense from talking to the toxicologists and the people that I was working with. But I do think it's an issue. Absolutely. Who can afford to have this kind of information? And if it's not in the public domain, and we don't know about this information, look how easily these sorts of things are manipulated, even right now in the United States with the shifting of the coronavirus cases from the Centers for Disease Control to some other agencies. And how the data—is it reliable anymore? I mean, these sorts of questions come up when data collection is privatized or decentralized. So I do think it's an issue. I mention it to people when I talk about the book, about how the testing costs a lot of money and who can afford to have this information. I do think that that is an issue. Absolutely.

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YIU: Yes. It's interesting that you raised the difference between the perception in Canada or even just the procedures of Canada and the United States. And I had a question about – and if you don't know, but I'm guessing you have conversed with Americans – do you think that the topic of chemical pollution is treated differently?

DICKINSON: No, I don't. I think that I see the same kinds of influences and agendas at work. I got all kinds of examples of chemical pollution in the United States where industry has covered up their tracks: Parkersville, West Virginia, all kinds of examples through chemical alley in Texas and Louisiana. But they exist in Canada, too. And when I found mercury in my blood and I wanted to think about mercury – which we've known is a neurotoxin for hundreds of years, if not longer. We've lived with mercury for a very long time. We know what it does. And yet I couldn't help but think about the role of mercury poisoning in Indigenous communities in Ontario, which is ongoing as the result again of industrial negligence on the part of a company but also the government failing to respond. You know, it's an example of racism in the context of environmental issues. I don't think Canada's any different from the United States when I think about that. When I think of these issues, there are still the same kinds of pressures to sweep these questions under the rug. They're difficult, especially chemical pollution in Nova Scotia. There was the Sydney Tar Ponds, which again, you had poor and marginalized people who were—this was an example once again of just wanting to ignore people. Because it was expeditious; it was difficult to deal with that pollution. In my town in St. Catharines, I just read yesterday that we used to have a GM (General Motors) plant in the city that is closed. And now they found PCB's

(polychlorinated biphenyl) in some of the runoff into a creek. So these things are everywhere, and what's going happen to this? I'm waiting to see. Who's going to pay for this cleanup? The companies once again will very likely not have to do it. Or the Alberta tar sands, right? The oil wells and the amount of pollution out there and the way in which there's very little accountability when it comes to taking responsibility for pollution. So I don't see a lot of difference, to be honest. I don't even know where else you might look in the world right now for that. It's just all of this and it does come back, I think, to economics and capitalism and the values we have – the things that we choose to value and privilege over others.

[00:30:55]

YIU: Yes. I'm really interested. So the poem that you're talking, is it "The People of the Grassy Don't Have a Mercury Problem, They Have a Drinking Problem?"

DICKINSON: That's right.

YIU: Okay, so folks can find this poem in your collection, but also it's, I believe, published in the Canadian Literature journal? I wanted to ask you a little bit about that, because you've mentioned race and talking about how the indigenous community of Grassy Narrows in Northwestern Ontario is experiencing mercury pollution in that sense. So can you talk more about your awareness of chemical pollution in relation to race?

DICKINSON: From what I've read, my understanding, of course, is that those who are most likely to live near polluted landscapes, polluted areas, tend to be people of color, people of lesser means, without as much money, marginalized people of various sorts. The more money you have, the easier it is for you to afford to live away from pollution. To some degree. I think part of what my book explores is that chemical pollution is omnipresent and really doesn't matter who you are, there's a chemical signature in your body. So rich people cannot avoid pollution either. But they can certainly afford to buy more organic food; they can live in nicer parts of cities that are farther away from toxic waste or disposal sites of various sorts. Absolutely race, class – these play a role when it comes to chemical exposure.

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YIU: Yes. I wanted to loop back to *Anatomic* which explored the results of these various tests that you did on your body. Can you tell us more about the process of writing that?

DICKINSON: It was really challenging to figure out what form to give to this work. I thought about many different ways of writing this book. I also struggled with the issue that I had a lot of information that I wanted to convey, and how best to convey that; what kind of a form to use. I could have chosen a more asemic writing form which would have been something less immediately comprehensible, something more experimental in terms of text. In the end, I decided to go with what seemed to me to be a kind of analog to the behavior of hormones in the body themselves, which is the sentence, the simple sentence, the prose poem. There are a lot of prose poems in the book. I think of the sentence itself is the sort of unit of composition of this book. The reason I like it and chose it in the end was because a sentence is itself a small little grammatical unit: there's a subject object verb, there's a kind of dramatic arc to sentence –

something happens in a sentence. And I felt that at a very subtle level, this was not unlike the behavior of a hormone where there's a stimulus and then there's a response. And hormones can be as innocuous and unflashy as serviceable sentences.

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YIU: I've never thought about it like that.

DICKINSON: Yes. So the sentence itself then is a small—it struck me as being a kind of analog, a sort of cascade of anatomical stories that hormones constitute inside the body. But the book is—there's a long poem in sections called "Hormone" that runs through it. And I imagine the book really as this hormonal flow, and floating among these hormone poems are the chemical and microbial poems in that endocrine system. I guess I sort of think of the book loosely as a kind of poetics of the endocrine system. But the other reason I like the sentence is because it's not really flashy. The prose poem is sort of a weird genre in writing which is, what is a prose poem? No one really knows. I mean, people write about it, but is it a story? Is it a poem?

The sentence itself and the prose poem as functioning in a sort of invisible or innocuous way inside the literary world itself – I felt the sentence did this the way that hormones do this too in the body. Hormones, especially endocrine disruptors, function really by ultimately not being noticed. They're able to displace or alter what would otherwise be 'natural' levels of hormones in the body by mimicking the presence of hormones. So they work because the body doesn't really recognize that they're not part of the body. And I felt that a sentence functions in a similar way in its subtlety.

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YIU: Yes. And I really loved how you described long sentences as a way to convey a sense of urgency in your writing as well. Other than writing about your results of the test, did you discuss this with your friends, your family or doctors?

DICKINSON: I did, yes. Certainly friends and family. My family and close friends thought this was a bad idea. I ended up seeing a therapist for a while. I spent a lot of time talking about it with the therapist because I had to sort of understand—I was scrutinizing my body in a way that I never had before. And so I was developing some anxieties around this. I lost a lot of weight, actually, around eighteen kilograms of weight.

YIU: Oh, that is a lot.

DICKINSON: Yes. I couldn't stop eating. I started to exercise excessively as a way to kind of—I was just anxious about the pollution. I felt I needed to be healthy. And what I understood as health was movement and diet. I had to keep a food diary when I was doing the microbial tests. And so I tracked everything I ate for, I don't know, two years, and I suddenly, I'd never done this before. And I realized just what I was eating. And I was able to discover some wonderful things about foods that I didn't know about before, so that was a benefit of project. I've learned how incredible sweet potato is, or even a carrot. I wish I'd sort of—I didn't pay much attention but carrots are actually really good for you. All kinds of other foods too that I hadn't really paid

much attention to, so that was good. But the negative side was the obsessiveness that I developed. So I definitely talked to the therapist a lot about the project. After a while I decided to incorporate my emotional psychological feelings about the project into the book itself. I had no intention of doing that originally, but I couldn't avoid it, because I really felt that it had become a really embodied project after a while – all its various facets.

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YIU: It's interesting that you mention that because I was wondering to myself: what would the almost burdensome knowledge of what the world is experiencing and what your body is experiencing have done to you? Do you think that knowledge was something you were acquiring? And how has it helped you? And how did it change your perception of chemicals?

DICKINSON: Well, yes, it definitely changed my sense of chemicals. I am very aware of—I try to be aware of my exposure to chemicals, especially surfaces and environments that I can control. So I don't like spending a lot of time inside poorly ventilated spaces with lots of carpeting and synthetic materials off gassing which I can often smell.

YIU: Is this something that you have always done? Or do you mean after learning more about chemicals?

DICKINSON: I think that it's become more pronounced since I learned for sure. I don't know if I enjoyed those spaces to begin with, but I didn't think much about them. And now I do. And I will not eat heated foods, especially liquids in plastic. I cringe to get take-out food and it comes with plastic containers. I mean, we had some the other day because everything's takeout now with COVID. I didn't like it. I had to immediately empty it into a glass bowl. My wife rolls her eyes, but I just can't take it.

YIU: Right. I'm intrigued at that because after your testing and your writing and it's been years as you described you started this in 2011, has your partner changed in any way? You mentioned you have a wife; has she been affected because of your knowledge?

DICKINSON: She was definitely affected by it because I was affected. But I don't know. Now she will occasionally ask me if I'm comfortable about certain things. And certainly I guess even with COVID now, we have to make decisions about where the kids go and the kinds of things that they do. I think we would probably have these discussions anyway, but I do feel that she is aware how I am bothered by these kinds of things, by contamination, as it were. We talked about that.

I just want to jump back to one thing you asked me before, just sort of thinking about the responses to chemicals. Like I thought the one thing, the one chemical that I thought I would be low in, was phthalates. Because that was the one chemical that I had a certain amount of awareness from writing about plastics and polymers, and it was the one that I started to consciously avoid. So as I was studying plastics and working with it I really tried to reduce my exposure to plastics and various synthetic fragrances and things that I hadn't really thought of. I stopped using shampoo for example, which has been great. I really enjoyed not using shampoo.

YIU: Yes.

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DICKINSON: So I actually thought I would have low levels of phthalates, but I didn't. I had, in some cases, high levels of some of the phthalates. And I know that we metabolize those really quickly. So it sort of underscored, for me, the degree to which I'm really bathing (in) these things; we all are, constantly. Because they're sort of in and out of your body in twenty-four hours and there they were. So whatever I had done that morning before I did my urine test, I had been exposed to the phthalates. I didn't know how but it's just around us.

YIU: Yes. Which goes back to your earlier point about how omnipresent chemicals are.

DICKINSON: Exactly. And the other thing (I) learned is that the PCBs in my body really are the result of, or were produced, I should say, by one particular company – in this case, Monsanto.

YIU: Oh.

DICKINSON: That was kind of striking because I can't—I don't think with the other substances I can trace them back to a producer in that way.

YIU: Right.

DICKINSON: I could with PCBs because of where I grew up. Pretty much one hundred percent, maybe ninety-nine percent, of all the PCBs produced in North America prior to the banning of PCBs in the 1970s were produced by Monsanto. And so there's Monsanto inside me, right? There's the signature of that company. And so that was sort of a shocking thing to think. But then also, if the book can sort of participate in larger conversations, I would have hoped that it would be this kind of thing because I feel like we haven't had a larger social cultural discussion about what it means to find these chemicals inside our bodies when no one has given consent. I mean, this is a sort of a liberal subject and the kinds of rights that we've developed around this subject through the twentieth century to say, "Well, wait a second, you know, I did not consent to having that chemical inside me. And there it is. There's that company." We haven't had that conversation.

YIU: Yes.

DICKINSON: And I'm hoping we will.

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YIU: Yes. That would be very helpful if we could. I think in some ways, you describe your poetry and scholarship as metabolic poetics as well. And your exploration of how these chemicals affect our world and our bodies seems to initiate that discussion. So do you see your writing as a form of activism? Or how would you describe your writing?

DICKINSON: I do see it as a form of activism. Absolutely. And I think it's applicable to ongoing, larger questions about how we transition away from fossil fuels. Because I think it's instructive to learn that whatever energy source we choose to surround ourselves with, it will

make its way into our bodies. And we need to think about that because we can find the products of petrochemicals in us. I can also find the products of simple combustion cooking inside me. The cave people sit around a campfire at night. Our ancestors from millennia ago would have also worn the hydrocarbons and polyaromatic hydrocarbons from the burning of wood and meat and whatever they would have been cooking, vegetables, in their bodies as well, as a result of burning that fuel. I don't think we think about this. I don't think we think about the connection between energy, energy sources, and our bodies – the permeability of our bodies to those energies. And so I do think that the work that I'm trying to do is one way of exposing how it happens. Shifting the frames and focusing the frames of signification to make legible what is otherwise illegible. Shifting scales, frames of perception. This is what art does generally is that it allows us to look at things a different way. It renders that which is otherwise invisible, visible. So I do see my work as contributing to this larger activism when it comes to thinking about or raising questions that I think we should think about as we transition away from fossil fuels. And as we continue to live in the world of multinational capitalism that we live in right now, we need to understand the way in which that world, those circulations of capital and energy, the way they are circulating inside us, too.

[00:48:50]

YIU: Yes, I think it's really beautiful to hear how you talk about the necessity of these knowledges, right, that you're also offering in a very personal point of view. Given what you have learned about your body, what was most interesting for you to explore? And why is that?

DICKINSON: From this particular project?

YIU: Or if you have a new project. I know you're working on something else as well, if you want to talk about that.

DICKINSON: Sure, I can. To me, it seems like really fertile ground to think about. I'm excited about the possibilities. I do think it's very challenging for me also. And I'm excited by the challenge, daunted by it too. As I wrestle with this work, I am conscious, of course, that I am a white man of privilege. I am in a university; I have access to research funds to do this kind of work, and I'm exploring a body. It's my body. And I can't explore other bodies. Given the nature of this work, it sort of has to be me. But I do think that it's instructive and useful to think about what's inside a body. But it is also a struggle for me to sort of think about how I can position myself and be aware of my own position and my own privilege in relation to some of these questions. So that's kind of ongoing for me as I figure this out. But I am excited by the work for sure. I'm doing some work now where I'm trying to work with heat. And so I did some lab work where I exposed myself to some very high temperatures. I raised my internal body temperature by one point five degrees Celsius through active and passive heating. And I took all kinds of measurements, measured heart rate, and I did cognitive tests at various points. I was sort of piggybacking on some research that some of my colleagues were doing in ergonomics and human kinetics. But I wanted to try to think about heat differently in the context of composition and what might it mean to sort of write through and with heat in a warming world. So I've been working with that. I have been working with some nonhumans as well, with cockroaches.

YIU: Oh, really?

DICKINSON: Yes. I exposed them to some heat. They actually did really well.

YIU: Oh, they did well.

[00:51:43]

DICKINSON: Yes. Well, cockroaches are fascinating because they also fit into the global metabolism of trade and commerce. Wherever humans have gone, cockroaches have gone. The most common cockroaches in the United States now came over on slave ships. Transportation and the origins really of capitalism, colonialism – the cockroaches are there. And they're all around the planet. And also, of course, cockroaches are held in a certain amount of both horror and esteem, I think when it comes to thinking about the apocalypse and the future. Who will inherit the earth? We can be somewhat confident there will be some cockroaches around.

YIU: That's true.

DICKINSON: And so I put them and compared them in a control group and a heated group and it was a science experiment, but I had them living on top of the first two pages of (Franz) Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. I don't know if you know that story.

YIU: That's poetic.

DICKINSON: Right? It's about a man turning into a cockroach. Or it was taken to be a cockroach. Of course, Kafka claims it was not a cockroach. Culturally, it's commonly accepted, I should say, as a cockroach. I worked with the defiled texts that the cockroaches left me and worked some poems out of that.

YIU: Oh, wow, that's fascinating.

[00:53:20]

DICKINSON: I think that what interested me about the heat also is the way in which—I was intrigued by the cognitive tests that I undertook as I was exposed to the heat and the shifts involved with that. And as the world gets hotter, people will—it's not that we're all going to be walking around with elevated internal temperatures; it doesn't work that way. I wasn't trying to experience someone else's subject position. No one lives at elevated temperature of one point five degrees Celsius. You will on your way to heatstroke or on your way to perhaps death. But no one lives consistently at that temperature. But I was interested in thinking about the effects of heat on thinking and on writing. And certainly, the analogue to the fever and the feverish thinking and the role of conspiracy theories and the ways in which, as the earth gets hotter, people will be pressured in various ways. Populations will be again marginalized. People will be affected more so than people of wealth who are able to insulate themselves to some degree. But this will happen; this pressure will happen. And what kind of thinking, what kind of feverish thinking, will emerge from this? I've sort of been thinking about conspiracy theories and working with conspiracy theories and letting the cockroaches play around with those as well. That's some sort of future research.

But I've got-- this is other work that I'm doing. It's actually quite scientific. I'm going to work in a laboratory with a microbiologist. And she's giving me access to her robotic stomachs so I can put my own microbes in them and then I can perform experiments on me without actually having to take the drugs or take whatever it is I'm going to take. I can have a little proxy atom gut and work with it. So I'm going to put some worm intestines into my stomach from a species of worm that is demonstrated in some cases to decompose and biodegrade plastic. And then I'm going to put in microplastics hopefully that I actually harvest from my own body. We excrete about five grams of microplastics per week generally. Or I should say we ingest five grams. And so I want to try to harvest some of my own microplastics and then feed them back to myself in a more concentrated form and see if these worms digest them as part of the bioaugmented gut. Kind of Cyborgy. And then I'm hoping to develop some writing out of this thinking.

[00:56:19]

YIU: That's amazing. I can't wait to read it. You seem to have such an innovative understanding of writing and form and it even permeates to how you begin your writing. So it's fascinating to get a glimpse into your process.

DICKINSON: Well, thanks. It is also anxiety provoking to some degree because I don't know where I'm going. But on the other hand, that's part of the fun. The project will develop as it develops.

YIU: Yes. Adam, we're almost at an hour. I just wanted to make sure that you're doing okay. I just have a couple of questions left.

DICKINSON: We can carry on. That's fine.

YIU: Okay, perfect. Your poem titled "Office Waiting Room Aquarium" – did you write that poem in relation to a doctor's diagnosis or waiting for a doctor's diagnosis? What was the context of that poem?

DICKINSON: I'm just going to remind myself. That's from (*The*) *Polymers*, right?

YIU: Yes, I think it's on page twenty-one.

DICKINSON: Okay. No, it wasn't actually a diagnosis or an office visit involving a diagnosis for me. This was language that I encountered in a waiting room. I was thinking about polymers and social polymers and lineups. Some of this book deals with lineups. That one (is one poem); "Catacombs" is one. These are from me standing in line. I spent the day standing in lines recording what people said because the line to me was an example of a polymer, a human social polymer, a chain. And so how does the chain interact? What does the chain talk about? And so there's a few poems from there. One is from Niagara Falls, "Credit Card" I think, no. Anyway.

YIU: Yes.

DICKINSON: I can't find them right now. But there's a few of them in here. So "Office Waiting Room (Aquarium)" is another example of a kind of polymeric chain, I suppose. The idea of

waiting in a lineup to see a doctor. It's not specifically about a medical procedure that I had per se. It was more about the social arrangement of waiting in that space in the lineup.

YIU: I see. Wow. So you also wrote several poems that talk about hormone-disrupting chemicals in relation to masculinity. And some things that you've mentioned—in Anatomic you have a poem that begins with, “The young men are laughing as they enjoy having the bodies of men.” And it goes on. So I wanted to ask you, can you talk a little bit more about your experience of chemicals and how that's related to masculinity?

[00:59:50]

DICKINSON: Yes. This is a really interesting issue to me. I've read different critical takes on it. I'm intrigued by them. But phthalates as endocrine disruptors are estrogenic. And they are associated with phthalate syndrome, which is a syndrome that affects the reproductive tract, the development of reproductive tract, especially in young boys and developing children, and lowered sperm counts as well. I realize there's some controversy around some of these things. But nonetheless, phthalate syndrome is a documented syndrome from what I can tell. And this idea of a kind of assault on masculinity through chemicals or the feminizing effects of chemicals. While this is very much a real issue, I'm also aware of the anxiety around masculinity that is associated with these sorts of things and Giovanni Di Chiro has written about this. But the sort of eco-heteronormativity of the discourse around phthalates and endocrine-disrupting chemicals. It's sort of an urgent rush to protect masculinity. And this is the source, in some ways, of the anxiety rather than other questions about health. It’s protecting the traditional normative sense of masculinity rather than understanding that there are various forms of sexuality and identity and genetics, etc. that would contribute to a more fluid sense of gender identity. It gets associated with a kind of policing, I suppose, gender. And so I'm interested in this tension. Of course, it is real in its way, right? I mean, it is possible to point to data and information that suggests that there are very real health problems associated with phthalates when it comes to young males especially. So that particular poem addresses this and that larger section on phthalates. A whole lot. It's a long poem. “Disruptors,” I believe?

That's right, that whole section. There's a long poem, they're called “Disruptors.” Each of the epigraphs for the poems is the level of a phthalate and I talk a little bit here about the male brain sweating in a jar. “The young man laughing,” etc. So it's this display of—I mean, it's meant to satirize, of course, that sort of masculinity that is associated with these kinds of things. But also, I'm exploring the various kinds of tensions and questions that emerge from phthalates and thinking through phthalates and masculinity. I’m also thinking about the anxiety around the assault on masculinity that some of these chemicals represent. And the way in which that is handled socially.

[01:03:37]

YIU: It's great to get clarification on that too. I love learning the thinking behind your writing. So to wrap up, can I ask you a little bit about how this knowledge of chemical pollution has it affected your life the most?

DICKINSON: Yes. It's made me understand my porosity, I suppose. A very real and novel sense for me; I don't think I understood before how much I carry around. I guess not just my own past exposure history but also my historical situatedness as a child of the Cold War. And I have chemicals in me that were banned before I was born, like PCB, like DDT (Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane). But there they are. Did I get them from my mother's breast milk? I explore that in the book a little bit too. And I'm conscious of the fact that we like to blame mothers for a lot of our problem. Mothers are often blamed for things and I was very conscious of not wanting to blame mothers yet again. But I did want to think about the way in which breast milk—and certainly I would have been exposed to some of those things through my mother's breast milk as everyone who breastfeeds would. And so thinking about that chain that even comes through the Industrial Revolution all the way through modernism and mass production and through plastics in the 1960s, etc. And the way in which that chain—which is itself I suppose a kind of long polymeric chain – the world that we have developed as a result of modernity. It's inside me in ways that I had never realized before. I think sometimes about how I will feel if I get cancer or something. How will I handle that? Will I think about the chemicals? I wrote about it in the book: one of the surgeries that I had when I was a kid was for a retractile testicle, so a testicle that went up inside my body and had to be drawn down surgically. And I do know that there is some relationship between phthalate exposure and that kind of thing. It's also not necessarily uncommon. It's a relatively common thing to have happen. And so no one could say to me that a chemical exposure caused that. Sure, I'm going to think about it sometimes. I thought about it writing this book; I think I mention in one of the little what I call 'status reports' that are filtered throughout the book.

YIU: Yeah, it seems like—sorry, go ahead.

[01:07:05]

DICKINSON: I was just going to say, yes, I think that doing this book has also changed me in ways that I'm still understanding. I have shifted how I think and look at things like health. I definitely take health so much more seriously now than I did. And health for me and feeling healthy is really important. I exercise a lot. Sometimes maybe obsessively. I feel really healthy when I exercise. And that means a great deal to me. Much more than it used to. Yeah, that's been a real change in my life after this book, just the amount of physical activity that I do.

YIU: Yes. And do you think it has changed the way you raise your kids?

DICKINSON: Oh yes. Even if I could teach outside, walking around, I would do that. I would love to do that.

YIU: That's beautiful. Wait, you do that already?

DICKINSON: To some degree. I try to get the students outside, but it's not always possible. But I'm just even thinking in the context of COVID right now. I would love to have an outdoor class. I mean, it's not possible in Canada for half the year. Can't do it. I would love to do something like that. I would love to have my class meet outside and do that. But yes, definitely with my kids. And that's something my wife shares—my wife is also very interested in physical activity and

exercise and was even much more so than I was before. Prior to me writing the book she already had regiments and routines. She was a fitness instructor at the YMCA before that closed in the pandemic.

YIU: Right.

DICKINSON: So she's missing that. And she works in a restaurant and she loves to walk around and serve. That's starting to get back to normal. But in any case, movement is a big deal.

YIU: So it seems like, as you have described in our interview, that your views towards chemical pollution have changed a lot. What would you say the thing that you learned the most is about how folks experience chemical exposures?

[01:10:02]

DICKINSON: What have I learned about how people experience chemical exposures?

YIU: Yes. You mentioned a little bit about race, economics. I just wanted an overview of how your views on chemical pollution have changed after exploring your test results.

DICKINSON: Well, I am intrigued by the interesting tension between the role of race and class for sure when it comes to exposure. I mentioned the indigenous communities in Ontario and also access to testing and such that is prohibitively expensive. But I'm also interested in the tension between that and the fact that even if you're a rich person, you've got these chemicals inside you. No one can escape that. The signatures might be different for different communities of people, but it's in us all. And we've never really had a larger cultural discussion about that.

YIU: Yes.

DICKINSON: I've learned, I think, that you can't really avoid it. But of course, I'm appalled and shocked to learn about the ways in which we ignore the effects of chemicals when it's convenient to do so for economic reasons and reasons of racism as well. The thing in Northern Ontario, in Grassy Narrows, is actually still ongoing. It's unbelievable. It's been fifty years, and the community is still dealing with the effects of mercury contamination. It really is a great shame. A black eye for Canada for sure, among other issues.

YIU: As you write, it's a legacy, right? So my last question for you—you've talked a little bit about the importance of citizen science and even just access to health care. And I wanted to talk to you a little bit about what you think some steps might be that could change our contemporary relationship with chemicals and artificial tastes and smells and what we associate with these things.

[01:12:32]

DICKINSON: I think that we need to rethink our understanding of commercial products, especially when it comes to the mass production of plastic materials. You mentioned smell. I have been thinking a lot about scent environments and one of the projects I'm planning to do is to work with scent, especially artificial scents, in spaces, or the anthropogenic signatures of scents in large spaces like airports, for example. I discovered there's very little work done on that. We

don't really know the composition of these scent environments, and I want to do that and explore them and see if I can develop my own counter scents by creating some perfumes to eliminate perfumes if that makes sense.

YIU: That's amazing.

DICKINSON: I'm going to try to do that. I have a scientist here who says that we can do this. We just have to try to figure out what's in the environment.

YIU: Oh.

DICKINSON: In terms of thinking about solutions, that might be the sort of equivalent of noise cancelling headphones but in the context of scent. But that's an art project; it's not a practical solution to neutralizing scents in destructive—or toxic scents in an environment. But I think we need, in a larger cultural sense, to get past and around some of these obsessions we have with what we think of as cleanliness. I'm not just thinking about cleaning surfaces and cleaning things in relation to some of the hygiene hypothesis, which is the argument that we live in an overly sanitized world which is why people are developing things like allergies and autoimmune response. But not just that. If you go to a hotel, they brand their own scents so you can go into a Western in Boston, it'll smell the exact same as a Western in Toronto, because they use the same filtering scents. I think this idea on the one hand it's building a brand but it's also this idea of you're in a "clean" or safe environment if it smells this way. These sorts of things, the manipulation of scent environments, I think those chemicals that are used to make those scents are undoubtedly filled with phthalates and other things. And I think this extends also to packaging, which is also associated with cleanliness. You want your sealed container. Of course, there are necessities and reasons for these things. But often, there aren't. We need to rethink how we want to use synthetic materials, what role we want them to play in our society. Because right now we just use them and throw them away. I suppose it sounds obvious to say that, but I feel like we haven't really reckoned with the larger cultural role of disposability. Both in terms of consumer products and also in terms of people by extension.

YIU: Wow, thank you so much—

[01:16:30]

DICKINSON: But I don't have any easy answers for this. I don't know necessarily what we need to do, apart from the fact that I think we need to start asking questions we haven't been asking and paying attention to the role of energy systems and the kinds of petrochemical products that have been produced as a result of that. And the way in which those things are inside us whether we like it or not. And we need to think about that.

YIU: Most definitely. Adam, thank you so much for offering this encouragement for us to be curious instead of ignoring these various things that are happening. I'm really appreciative of the time that you offered me today. Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to put on the record?

DICKINSON: No, I don't think so. I appreciate that you see it as a kind of encouragement to be curious. I think it's true. I think that's how I survive my own depression when it comes to this. By trying to make art within it and to be curious and creative in artistic ways as a way of dealing with whatever kind of crushing depression. But I also think that the only way out of our predicament is to look at things differently. To ask questions we haven't asked. And art can allow us to do that, provoke us to do that. So I see my work as activist in that capacity.

YIU: Thank you so much, Adam. I know that Rachel would want to speak with you about your poetry more at length. But I'm really thankful for what you offered me today. I will be sending you a physical legal agreement and it should arrive in the mail within two weeks. But given USPS and Canada Post, we might expect a delay.

[01:18:32]

DICKINSON: Right. And so, what are you going to do with this interview? You're going to post it somewhere?

YIU: Yes. What we do with this interview is transcribe it and then we'll offer the full-length audio, as the interview start and when it ends, so it might not be the entire clip of this recording. And if you wish to exclude any parts of the interview—two weeks ago down the line, you're like, "Oh, I don't really want to include that." That's completely fine. You can let us know. And we post it as a part of our Chemical Entanglements Oral History Project at the Oral History Center (sic; Center for Oral History Research) at UCLA.

DICKINSON: And who do you imagine is the audience for these kinds of recordings?

YIU: A lot of what we envision is that we are building an archive of stories that includes different perspectives on chemical pollution, chemical illnesses, and things like that. So we're thinking that there'll be researchers that will access this, public health organizations, and hopefully, governmental organizations that can look into this and see the various intersections of folks that deal with this reality. And in fact everyone, as you said.

DICKINSON: Okay.

YIU: I think that would be our ambition, but in reality, it's whomever that would just access our project. We hope they will read your transcript.

DICKINSON: And it'll be publicly available on the website, right?

YIU: Yes. So this is something you can choose. So Adam, if you're uncomfortable with it being available on the website, we can mark it as only accessible within the physical archive. And you also have a choice. If you'd like to not include your audio tape and would just like to include the transcript, or the other way around, that's fine as well. So what do you think? Do you think that you're okay with having web permission?

DICKINSON: Yes, I think so. I'm assuming I can change my mind if I want to.

YIU: Yes, of course, you're not tied down.

DICKINSON: I think that what I've talked about is fine. Yeah. I don't think that—if someone wants to listen to is, that's fine.

YIU: Yes. I think what you told me, at least—I've learned so much, and it just offers me a different perspective. Because while you don't identify as someone who has a chemical sensitivity, you talked about it so eloquently from how what you've learned is mediated by knowledge on these chemicals.

[01:21:20]

DICKINSON: Right? Well, thank you. But I do see how it would be relevant to have somebody like me—to have that voice included with some of the others just because there are different ways to imagine responses to chemical pollution and our exposure to it. I didn't necessarily have a medical condition, but it's still very much affected me. I suppose it fills out in some ways, or has the potential to offer, maybe a little bit more of a complex encounter with this issue. So I'm happy to contribute. That's fine.

YIU: I am thrilled. I think that this adds a nuance to our project. And I'm really going to look into the person you mentioned that writes about eco-heteronormativity. Fascinating.

DICKINSON: I think I cited her work in the notes, actually. *Atomic*. So you can find that.

YIU: Okay. Great. Thank you so much.

[01:22:18] (End of July 29, 2020 interview)