

INTRODUCTION

Elsa del Campo & Sara Villamarín-Freire
Universidad Nebrija & Universidade de Santiago de Compostela

Waste has become an increasingly central concern in the Global North during the late twentieth century and beyond. The landfill epitomizes everything that is wrong in our late capitalist regimes: it represents the tangible byproduct of rampant consumerism, often being shipped overseas to even bigger dumping grounds where the purportedly expendable communities of the Global South can process what we refuse (to handle). Yet waste and toxicity have become ubiquitous to the point that they overflow the physical boundaries of the landfill, independently of its location, and make themselves an inescapable presence in our daily lives. Like the unnamed town in Rachel Carson's "A Fable for Tomorrow" (1962), we have awakened to a reality where disruption and contamination are no longer looming threats but the reality with which we ought to grapple—the sooner, the better.

In this special issue of the *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* we have shone a light on the manifold "narratives of waste" that have proliferated in recent years in North America, responding to the urgent need to explore stories dealing with waste in its myriad incarnations. Capturing waste and its consequences in literature can be quite challenging, as the effects of toxicity are not always apparent, and may take years to manifest. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English* defines toxicity as "the quality, state, or relative degree of being poisonous," a condition that has the power to weaken, damage, or even kill any living organism. This premise prompted Lawrence Buell in 2003 to define the 'toxic discourse' as a mode of writing that expresses "anxiety arising from a perceived threat of environmental hazard" (31). Yet, when analyzed from an anthropocentric perspective, several links can be established between toxicity and the notion of (human) waste as presented by Zygmunt Bauman, since the idea of toxicity could be extended to social relations, economic patterns, and political strategies that define that which is considered wasteful in a community—be it an object, a residue, or a person—from that which is useful and productive. The "toxic tales" presented in this issue will hopefully exemplify the multiple forms through which this wastification process is achieved.

The ecological and political concern over the pollution of the land and the subsequent toxicity rhetoric serve to problematize the preserving of a global neoliberal status quo that is now known to have devastating climatological outcomes. Additionally, the toxic discourse, understood in a broader sense, brings to light contemporary social policies and economic arrangements that impoverish certain communities, up to the point of rendering them wasteful. Transferred to the literary dimension, these concerns inform a plethora of creations. There are texts which



focus on the environmental degradation that follows from the presence of waste in natural environments, as in the classic *Silent Spring* (Rachel Carson, 1962). Others seek to expose the presence of toxic elements in the (hu)man-made milieu, thus revealing how waste, toxicity, and humanness intertwine—a topic explored by authors like J.G. Ballard, Cathy Park Hong, Cormac McCarthy, Merlinda Bobis, Richard Powers, Barbara Kingsolver, or Don DeLillo, among many others. We can also find examples where actual waste (or garbage, or trash, or refused matter) plays a central role in the story being told, as seen in Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997). In other instances, individual or communal tales put emphasis on the human dimension of being, or becoming, waste(d), such as Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (2009). Each genre—be it prose or poetry, fiction as well as non-fiction—possesses its own unique ways to tackle the phenomenon of waste and wasting, which is why we have sought to critically address a wide array of texts in the present volume.

Regarding the study of those and other similar writings, the theoretical approaches illustrated in this issue showcase the entwinement between literary production dealing with waste and the emerging field known as “Waste Studies” or, alternatively, “Waste Theory.” Research on discarded matter and discarding practices has existed for a long time, although it seems to have been relegated to fields such as those of anthropology, sociology, geography, urbanism, architecture, or environmental sciences. The intersection between Waste Studies and the Humanities has prompted the (re)examination of discarding practices in relation to power structures, colonialism, imperialism, and environmental racism, to name a few. With the advent of globalization, the fluxes undergirding the production and location of wasted matter became even more apparent. This overlapping is traceable through the myriad concepts that have been hitherto incorporated into the lexicon of Waste Studies, such as “risk society” (Ulrich Beck 1992), “riskycape” (Cynthia Deitering 1996), “toxic discourse” (Lawrence Buell 1998), and “slow violence” (Rob Nixon 2011), among others. These and other scholars (including Mary Douglas, Joan Martínez Alier, Joni Adamson, Giorgio Agamben, or Zygmunt Bauman) do not specifically focus on waste; and yet, their work is generally regarded as highly influential, even seminal, to the development of this burgeoning area of knowledge. Interdisciplinarity thus features heavily in studies dealing with discarded matter and, as such, it yields complex and fruitful analyses.

The relation of Waste Studies and literature is perhaps clearer in the field of ecocriticism, given that the threat of toxicity represents a major concern with far-reaching implications for human and nonhuman entities. Nevertheless, the intertwining themes of toxicity and waste transcend environmental discourses. Ever since the publication of Bauman's *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (2004), an ever-increasing amount of scholarship on waste has been devoted to so-called “human waste,” individuals and/or entire communities treated as disposable within the grand scheme of modernity. Martha Nussbaum highlights the human tendency to not only discriminate individuals on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, class, or religion, but also to consider them ‘unclean’ and ‘polluting,’ hence dangerous to the wellbeing of the community. Consequently, some subjects, particularly those belonging to marginalized groups, can be deemed expendable—or worse, targeted



as threatening to the existing social order and therefore deserving of punishment, even extermination.

The causes behind the wastification of entire communities are manifold. If waste is always “contextual, place-based, situated, and historically specific” (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 149), then the systems sustained by certain discarding practices will likewise reproduce the specificities of the system trying to be preserved. In most cases, though, several systems overlap. This is particularly conspicuous in the case of globalization, ultimately a matrix of networks and relations that has contributed to normalizing certain patterns of wasting on a planetary scale.

This monographic issue agglutinates the conjoined efforts of a diverse group of scholars exploring the relation between literature, globalization, and so-called “communities of waste.”¹ Likewise, it seeks to showcase the numerous ways in which waste intersects, and interacts, with literature. In order to capture the multifaceted relation between wasting, toxicity, and literature, the present volume tackles the phenomenon of waste from different perspectives. Starting with a section of research articles, we have gathered a selection of pieces discussing waste and toxicity from a wide range of theoretical frameworks, including ecocriticism, New Materialism, the ecoGothic, environmental justice, sociology and globalization studies, narratology, gender studies, and postcolonial theory, among others. Next, the issue features an interview with Professor Marco Armiero, environmental historian and Director of the Environmental Humanities Laboratory, KTH Royal Institute of Technology (Sweden). The following section, “Creation,” comprises the work of seven North America-based poets whose work confronts us with the ubiquity and pervasiveness of waste and toxicity. The volume ends with a “Reviews” section.

“Toxic Tales: Narratives of Waste in Postindustrial North America” features an assortment of scholarly papers that shed light on the multiple meanings and connotations of the terms ‘toxicity’ and ‘waste,’ as well as the different spheres in which they manifest—ranging from severely polluted ecosystems and the environmental catastrophes brought upon by poisonous residues, to a more nuanced and racially conscious approach that observes how toxic discourse is (ab)used to keep some minority and racialized communities ignored and dispossessed.

The section opens with Begoña Simal-González’s “The Unsung Heroes of Holy Garbage: An Analysis of Waste in A.R. Ammons’s *Garbage*,” which delves into the polysemy of the notion of ‘waste’ and how both its symbolic and material inferences intermingle in A.R. Ammons’s 1993 long poem *Garbage*. Published in a decade when concepts such as ‘garbage,’ ‘dirt,’ and ‘waste’ were slowly entering the realm of American poetry, Simal-González shows how the scatological and the eschatological are placed next to each other in this work, in which the garbage collector becomes a neglected heroic figure in this hymn to the modern landfill. Continuing with poetry, Martín Praga’s “And This is What I Saw’: (Un)Natural

¹ See <https://www.udc.gal/grupos/cleu/lyg2EN.html>.



Waste in Cathy Park Hong's "The Fable of the Last Untouched Town" analyzes how experimental poetry can be used as an ideological tool to condemn social and ecological injustice. Set in a futuristic background, Hong's poem addresses the possible implications and environmental unrest presented by e-waste. Yet, the perception of 'waste' is re-evaluated by Praga, who shows how Hong's poetics can challenge the conception of nature as held by contemporary object-oriented and materialistic theories. The ultramodern reimagining of the landscape thus serves the author to reflect on the tools necessary to better understand humanity's place in the world.

Pedro Miguel Carmona Rodríguez's "'Gardening in Eden': Wasted Lives, or Detoxic Identities in Gail Anderson-Dargatz's *Turtle Valley* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*" focuses, on the one hand, on the outcomes of colonial agricultural practices and how in these works the self is resituated in a new environmental paradigm that calls for more sustainable practices that grant the characters a more balanced coexistence with nature. Carmona Rodríguez's analysis thus revolves around the revisionist approach shown in these novels, in which humanity is presented as a wasting and wasted force that has resulted in the toxification of the habitat in which the necessity to reconsider our stance in nature is called upon. Following up, Catalina Bonati's "Out of Space and Into the Ground: Chemical and Water Pollution in H.P. Lovecraft's New England" studies the imprint of the literary Gothic tradition on Lovecraft's work and how the author uses it to reflect on wealth disparity and class distinctions using nature as a symbol for the decadence of his beloved New England. Through a study of the imagery in both "The Colour Out of Space" (1927) and "The Shunned House" (1937), Bonati explores the damaging consequences of polluted landscapes and immigration policies for the environment.

Next, José Liste's "Waste and Textual Expenditure in William T. Vollmann's *Imperial*" ponders over the seemingly paradoxical strategy followed by this author in which textual excess is put at the service of denouncing the empire of waste—toxic waste and residues, wasted bodies, wasted communities. Following this premise, Liste investigates the historical, cultural, geographical and even literary experiences of the inhabitants of the US-Mexico border focusing on the Imperial County, as described by Vollmann in his always personal, eclectic style. By delving into the stylistic and structural features with which Vollmann describes the porosity of an otherwise strongly demarcated frontier, Liste conveys the exploitation and wasting of ostracized communities that are disposed of the same way that toxic materials are.

Moving from more ecocritical-centered approaches to studies on what Zygmunt Bauman (2004) calls "wasted lives," we encounter Susana Jiménez Placer's "Legacies of Slavery: Black Domestic Workers, Waste, and the Body." This article analyzes how, motivated by the prevailing white supremacist ideology during the Jim Crow era, black women have historically been relegated to the verges of the established order. To do so, Jiménez Placer focuses on a specific figure that clearly exemplifies the several ways in which the black woman's presence in the White South has been constricted: the domestic worker. Starting with the remnants of slavery in the dominant Southern ideology and strengthened with black women's exclusive association to a body that is ultimately confined to its physiological functions,



the author dissects the eventual justification of these deprecating practices which established that those who worked handling filth were condemned to end up, by extension, becoming part of it.

Finally, Martín Urdiales-Shaw's "'Welcome to America 2.0:' Reading Waste in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*" renders a reading of this 2010 dystopian novel from the perspective of Waste Studies, unveiling the ways in which human beings are shaped, pressured, and endangered by extrinsic forces in a globalized present. Building upon sociology and cultural theory, Urdiales-Shaw offers an analysis of how satire is used to illustrate multiple and interconnected forms of waste that permeate not only contemporary politics and economy, but also culture, language, and society at large.

The following section, "Notes," includes two short articles dealing with some of the theoretical underpinnings of waste studies. In "A Necropolitical Approach to Waste Theory," Martín Fernández Fernández reflects on the commonalities between Zygmunt Bauman's "wasted lives" and Achille Mbembe's "necropolitics," and makes the case that the former could be fruitfully complemented by the latter. Next, Sara Villamarín-Freire's "On the Uses of Waste" questions the existence of a cohesive theory of waste and contends that displacing our focus from "waste" to "wasting" could contribute to reformulate our understanding of this phenomenon by putting the emphasis on the specific material, spatiotemporal, socioeconomic, ethical, and ecological contexts surrounding it.

Moving to the "Interviews" section, we find the transcription of a conversation held between Professor Marco Armiero, author of the recently published *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump* (Cambridge Elements, 2021), and Begoña Simal-González, full professor at the Universidade da Coruña and PI of the research project "Literature and Globalization 2: Communities of Waste." Armiero and Simal-González discuss the origins of the label *Wasteocene*, its similarities and divergences with other terms such as Anthropocene or Capitalocene, dystopias, *commoning*, and hope. Next, the issue features a section entitled "Creation," curated and prefaced by Martín Praga, that brings together seven outstanding poets based in the US and Canada: D.A. Powell, Laura-Gray Street, Craig Santos Perez, Evelyn Reilly, Adam Dickinson, Rita Wong, and Martín Espada. The thorough line of this section is, once again, the presence of waste and toxicity in our environment. This common theme expands kaleidoscopically to reach different manifestations, from the pernicious effects of pollution on the countryside, water flows, and seas; the impact of global warming; the ubiquity of plastics that will survive us; the tragedies of economic violence; and the effect of slow violence on humans and nonhuman entities alike.

Finally, the issue features book reviews on the titles *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* (Julie Sze, 2020), *Possessed: A Cultural History of Hoarding*, (Rebecca R. Falkoff, 2021), and *The Death of Things: Ephemera and the American Novel* (Sarah Wasserman, 2020).

As editors of this special issue, we would like to thank both the *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* for the opportunity given and the trust placed on us, as well as all the scholars, poets, writers, and collaborators who have kindly



contributed to engrossing this volume with their inventiveness, their committed research and their outstanding ideas and analyses. We would also like to acknowledge the support provided by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and the National Research Agency (AEI) through their generous funding of the project “Literature and Globalization 2: Communities of Waste” (PID2019-106798GB-I00/AEI/10.13039/501100011033). Our special thanks go to poets D.A. Powell, Adam Dickinson, Craig Santos Pérez, Laura-Gray Street, Evelyn Reilly, Rita Wong, and Martín Espada for their kindness and generosity in allowing us to include some of their pieces for the creative section of this issue, as well as for their always gentlest disposition.



WORKS CITED

- BAUMAN, Zygmunt. 2004. *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- BECK, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Translated by Mark Ritter. London: Sage Publications
- BUELL, Lawrence. 1998. "Toxic Discourse." *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (Spring): 639-665. DOI: 10.1086/448889.
- BUELL, Lawrence. 2003. *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- DEITERING, Cynthia. 1996. "The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in the Fictions of the 1980s." In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, 196-203. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- LIBOIRON, Max, and Josh Lepawsky. 2022. *Discard Studies. Wasting, Systems, and Power*. Cambridge, MA | London, England: The MIT Press.
- NIXON, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA | London, England: Harvard University Press.
- NUSSBAUM, Martha. 2010. *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation & Constitutional Law*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- "TOXICITY." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English*. Accessed 22 January 2023. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/toxicity>.



