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CONTENTS

SPECIAL ISSUE

Toxic Tales: Narratives of Waste in Postindustrial North America /
Relatos tóxicos: Narrativas de *Waste* en la Norteamérica posindustrial

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

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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), "riskscape" (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.

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"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).

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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.

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ARTICLES

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF HOLY GARBAGE: AN ANALYSIS OF WASTE IN A.R. AMMONS'S *GARBAGE**

Begoña Simal-González
Universidade da Coruña

Abstract

This essay analyzes A.R. Ammons *Garbage* (1993) through the lens of Waste Studies by focusing on the interactions between the material and metaphorical uses of waste, scrutinizing the complex trope of the dump-ziggurat, and paying special attention to the neglected figure of the waste collector or garbage worker. In the 1990s, when Ammons published his long poem, waste and garbage were becoming pivotal tropes in American poetry. While Ammons deals with the inescapable presence of garbage in his homonymous poem, he also goes beyond the materiality of waste in order to incorporate more metaphorical resonances. Arguably, the most valuable insights that *Garbage* has to offer derive precisely from its striking juxtaposition of the material and the immaterial, the scatological and the eschatological. Most importantly, Ammons not only sings a hymn to the huge garbage dump and its implications, but also to the "unsung heroes" of modernity (Bauman 2004): the anonymous workers who collect the garbage and maintain the landfill.

Keywords: A.R. Ammons, *Garbage*, Waste Theory, Waste Studies, garbage dump, waste collectors, "Garbage Poetry."

LOS HÉROES OLVIDADOS DE LA "BASURA SAGRADA": UN ANÁLISIS DE *GARBAGE*, DE A.R. AMMONS, DESDE LOS *WASTE STUDIES*

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el poema de A.R. Ammons *Garbage* (1993) desde la perspectiva de los Waste Studies, prestando especial atención a la interacción entre los usos literales y metafóricos de la basura, escudriñando el tropo del vertedero-zigurat y deteniéndose en la figura olvidada del trabajador de la basura. En la década de los noventa, cuando Ammons publicó su libro, la basura y los desechos se estaban convirtiendo en imágenes recurrentes en la poesía estadounidense. Si bien Ammons se ocupa de la presencia ineludible de la basura en su poema homónimo, también sabe ir más allá de la materialidad del residuo para incorporar resonancias metafóricas. Podría decirse que las ideas más valiosas que *Garbage* tiene que ofrecer derivan precisamente de su sorprendente yuxtaposición de lo material y lo inmaterial, combinando los dos sentidos del término escatológico. Lo que es más importante, Ammons no sólo canta un himno al enorme vertedero de basura y sus implicaciones, sino también a los "héroes anónimos" de la modernidad (Bauman 2004): los trabajadores que recogen la basura y mantienen el vertedero.

Palabras clave: A.R. Ammons, *Garbage*, *Waste Theory*, *Waste Studies*, vertedero, trabajadores de la basura, "Garbage Poetry."

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"Garbage," A.R. Ammons announces in his homonymous book, "has to be the poem of our time" (18). By 1993, when *Garbage* was published, waste and garbage were indeed becoming pivotal tropes in American poetry. In his excellent survey of what he calls "garbage poetry," Christopher Todd Anderson notes that by the end of the twentieth century the productive and liminal nature of garbage had turned it into a recurrent image in American poetry, where it worked "as a mirror of culture" (2010, 37). Although at first sight *garbage, trash, rubbish* and *waste*[1] conjure up a certain type of residual matter and its environmental effects, they also emerge as protean, multifaceted tropes. To start with, the concept of waste is rather relative and, as we shall later discuss, it is mediated by both time and space. "Nothing is inherently trash," Susan Strasser reminds us in *Waste and Want* (1999, 5; see Bauman 2004, 22). Similarly, Greg Kennedy remarks that, despite its "proximity and familiarity," we cannot reach a "clear understanding of what trash truly is" (2007, ix). In his recent analysis of ecopoetry, Simon Estok also emphasizes the slippery nature of waste, which he sees as "both productive and dangerous, spent but agential, rejected but inescapable" (2017, 123). Beyond its material aspects, the presence of waste can also raise more abstract or philosophical questions, like the ones Kennedy addresses in *Ontology of Trash* (2007). This is why literary authors are especially prone to complement their interest in the "materiality of waste," as Susan Signe Morrison puts it (2015, 11), with more conceptual and metaphorical approaches to the matter.[2] In *Garbage,* Ammons deals with both aspects: he addresses the presence of waste in postindustrial America and, at the same time, he goes beyond the materiality of waste in order to incorporate more metaphorical resonances. In fact, as I will try to show in my analysis, the most interesting insights that the poem has to offer derive precisely from its striking juxtaposition of the material and the spiritual, the scatological and the eschatological. The poet not only sings a hymn to the rubbish dump, but also to the anonymous workers who collect the garbage and tend the tip. As we shall see, the critical reception of the poem focused on the powerful image of the garbage mound, which partially eclipsed these "unsung heroes" (Bauman 2004, 28), even though they are central figures in the first cantos of the book.

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[1] For the purposes of my analysis, I will be using these words as equivalent, even though they are not exactly coterminous: "Trash refers specifically to discards that are at least theoretically dry –newspapers, boxes, cans and so on. Garbage technically refers to 'wet' discards– food remains, yard waste, and offal. Refuse is a more inclusive term for both the wet discards and the dry. Rubbish is even more inclusive: It refers to all refuse plus construction and demolition debris" (Rathje and Murphy 2001, 9). Kennedy (2007) distinguishes waste from trash, the latter being the result of technological processes. For Anderson, garbage is a human category, in contrast to waste, which is found in nonhuman nature (2010, 35).

[2] See Morrison's *The Literature of Waste* (2015) for a comprehensive study of the different literary uses that waste has been put to.

SITUATING AND CURATING AMMONS'S *GARBAGE*

Arguably, one of the reasons why *Garbage* was a poem of its time was the inescapable presence of waste–as both the rationale behind and the byproduct of consumerism–by the end of the last century: Ammons wrote after the advent of the "Empire of the Ephemeral," when the new "ethos of disposability," to use Strasser's apt phrases (1999, 187, 173), had already set in. At the turn of the twenty-first century, scholars working in Social History and Cultural Studies, like Susan Strasser (1999) or Heather Rogers (2005), examined the emergence of consumer culture–synonymous with American culture since at least the 1950s–and concluded that, in its most rampant form, consumerism had become the source of this unmanageable production of waste.[3] By the end of the twentieth century, the logic of waste, rather than necessity, seemed to shape our lives in a society that, as Zygmunt Bauman rightly notes (2004, 39), interpellates us as consumers, not as citizens.

Garbage has become the most visible reminder of the way we structure our lives: we consume not merely because we need to, but because we can. Our desires must be satisfied, because it is in this (preferably instant) gratification that we find fulfillment as consumers-citizens. Even those commodities that were perceived as permanent and used to be cherished have now become disposable. "Our trash," as Bill Rathje eloquently put it, "is the unvarnished imprint of our lifestyles" (quoted in Voros 2000, 161)[4] and the current economy of waste is sadly reflected in our rubbish dumps. It comes as no surprise, then, to learn that it was precisely an epiphanic encounter with a huge garbage dump that inspired Ammons to write his book.[5] While modernist poets like T.S. Eliot favored "images of physical and spiritual barrenness," Ammons, writing in a postmodern world, "depicts a world cluttered with mounds of garbage" and imagines "the poet as archeological garbologist" (DiCicco 1996, 166). If Eliot's "waste land" and his "heap of broken images" (1922, I.22) have been read as a summation of modernity and the pinnacle of modernism, Ammons's heap of trash can be read as a summation–and "consummation" (Ammons 1993, 28)–of postmodern consumerism.

Ammons may be writing in specific historical circumstances that he does not fail to address in *Garbage*, but he also takes part in a centuries-old tradition of Anglo-American poetry that cannot be ignored. There is critical consensus on

[3] If not before, the crisis of waste management in late twentieth century America, painstakingly described by Rogers in *Gone Tomorrow* (2005), had laid bare the impending dangers of the economy of waste, sparking both pragmatic concerns and environmental awareness.

[4] "Archeologists study ancient garbage to learn about past civilizations," Rathje explains, "We look at our own refuse to learn about our own civilization, in terms of behaviors that produce the things we throw away. Our trash is the unvarnished imprint of our lifestyles" (quoted in Voros 2000, 161).

[5] As Ammons himself acknowledges in an interview, it was the sight of an enormous garbage tip that became the seed for the entire poem: "I had this basic image of the garbage mound, which looked like a ziggurat for me and became the controlling symbol" (Schneider 1999, 325).

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the fact that his work was influenced by nineteenth century writers, among them American Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau, filtered through Whitman's expansive, democratic vistas.[6] Ammons's poetry has also been compared to that of high modernists like the aforementioned Eliot (DiCicco 1996; Vendler 1999), Williams Carlos Williams (Schneider 1995; Stefans 2014) and, more specifically, Wallace Stevens and his poem "The Man on the Dump" (Vendler 1999; Voros 2000; Anderson 2010). While scholars like Wilkinson argue that "it is difficult to conceive any attitude to the relation between language and reality more inimical than [Ammons's] to Modernist aesthetics" (2012, 38), other critics claim that Ammons's poetry serves as a bridge between "high modernism from the first part of the century and the more personal, confessional verse that developed at an accelerating rate after the War" (Ward 2002, 67).

More recently, Anderson has placed Ammons among the group of ecopoets whose "garbage poetry" keeps "certain attitudes associated with Romanticism, pastoralism, and the sublime," while also "depart[ing] from these traditions in ways that reflect the particular significance of garbage in contemporary culture" (2010, 38). Although Ammons does play with certain pastoral conventions, he does so only to show they are no longer viable. The pastoral mode is no longer useful for Ammons because "nature," as Wilkinson cogently argues, is now "thoroughly penetrated" and contaminated by human activity, and because "everything is thoroughly used, and no amount of sentimentalizing can reverse that process" (2012, 47). In fact, if we had to find one single label for *Garbage*, that would be "post-pastoral"–in Clifford's sense of the term–, for in this poem the "postmodern detritus" has replaced nature as the new form of the sublime (Yaeger 2008, 327).[7]

To the list of movements and writers that I have just sketched out I would add a less obvious antecedent for *Garbage*: the old school of "graveyard poetry." As contemporary as Ammons's diction may be, in its juxtaposition of the philosophical, the coarse, and the banal, I would proclaim that his junkyard poetry is a direct heir to the graveyard poets of the late eighteenth century. While their setting and central images may differ, both the graveyard and the garbage dump function as sites for contemplation and as stark reminders of ephemerality and death. At the same time, though, Ammons's chosen symbol reformulates the topos, and garbage becomes a different type of *memento mori* (Vendler 1999, 23). It may be true that, as Kennedy claims, "the *memento mori* of the Middle Ages, that skeletal guest at every banquet, can never appear on the shelves of consumer society" (2007, 140),

[6] See Spiegelman 1999; Voros 2000; Killingsworth 2004, 19-24; Anderson 2010, 38-39. In turn, Ammons has become a notorious influence among contemporary poets focusing on garbage, junk and waste. Even Tommy Pico, who addresses different issues in *Junk*, pays homage to *Garbage* by deliberately echoing Ammons's key line: "Junk has to be the /poem of our time" (2017).

[7] In 2008, Patricia Yaeger announced that the "postmodern detritus" had already and "unexpectedly taken on the sublimity that was once associated with nature" (327). Bauman also describes waste as the new "sublime": "a unique blend of attraction and repulsion arousing an equally unique mixture of awe and fear" (2004, 22).

but the dumpsite and its (decomposing) garbage can rear their heads just as we, like Ammons, drive on a highway. If the graveyard poetry of yore revisited the classical topos of death as a leveler,[8] Ammons's junkyard poetry raises trash to the status of the great leveler in consumerist capitalism: everyone's detritus ends up there, even though not everyone is equally affected by garbage disposal.[9]

Having placed Ammons's *Garbage* both in its sociohistorical context and within the larger Anglo-American literary tradition, we can now ponder what new ingredients recent scholarship on waste may add to the (already full) pot of critical studies on his 1993 poem. Although I have already discussed the main interests and concerns of waste scholars like Morrison or Kennedy, in what follows I will attempt to outline the genealogy of and main trends within the large field of Waste Studies.

WASTE, SPACE, AND TIME

In 2004 Zygmunt Bauman published *Wasted Lives*, an essay describing the process whereby certain human beings have become residual in contemporary societies–or, in his preferred phrase, in "liquid modernity." What is more relevant for Waste Studies, Bauman links the phenomenon of (post)modern consumerist waste with the process of human wastification.[10] These "wasted" human beings, he asserted, are not only figuratively but also literally associated with garbage and waste, so that we come to witness "the meeting of human rejects with the rejects of consumer feasts" (2004, 59). Although Bauman's book is probably the best-known example of Waste Studies scholarship, this field has a longer history, which I will try and summarize in just a few paragraphs.

The concept of waste has been explored in terms of both space and time. Early contributions to Waste Studies emphasized the spatial approach, invoking Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, where she posited that "dirt" was "matter out of place" (quoted in Strasser 1999, 5). Less attention was paid to another pioneer of sorts, Michael Thompson, for whom "Rubbish" was nothing but matter out of time. In *Rubbish Theory*, first published in 1979, and reprinted, with a new preface, in 2017, Thompson starts by establishing two main categories of objects, those that he calls "Transient" and whose value decreases over time, and those "Durable" items whose value increases with time:

[8] Note that Ammons also resorts to the *ubi sunt* topos in *Garbage* (see pp. 22-23).

[9] See Rogers 165-66. This "garbage inequality" was already denounced by the NIMBY and the environmental justice movements in the twentieth century. On the specific relationship between waste and class, see Strasser 1999, 136-40. For a global approach to environmental injustice, as developed in Waste Theory, see Bell 2019, Simal 2019.

[10] Bauman's social-ecological approach both harked back to the environmental justice movement of the late twentieth century and heralded recent developments like Waste Theory.

> the two cultural categories–the Transient and the Durable–are "socially imposed" on the world of objects. If these two categories exhausted the material world then the transfer of an object from one to the other would not be possible because of the mutual contradiction of the categories' defining criteria: those in the Transient category have decreasing value and finite expected lifespans; those in the Durable category have increasing value and infinite expected lifespans. But of course they are not exhaustive, they encompass only those objects that have value, leaving a vast and disregarded realm–Rubbish–that, it turns out, provides the one-way route from Transient to Durable. (10)

Here, contrary to Douglas's theory, it is time, not (dis)order, that turns objects and matter into rubbish, and allows them to be rescued at a later point. While Thompson was the first scholar to focus on the temporal dimensions of waste, he was certainly not the last one. In the particular context of the US, social historians like Strasser (1999) or Rogers (2005) explored the changing perceptions as regards garbage–what constituted useless trash and what was valuable and could be recycled–and the behavioral patterns associated with those perceptions. According to Rogers, historians find in waste the privileged site to "read the logic of industrial society's relationship to nature and human labor," including both "the past and the future" (2005, 3). Thus, the emphasis on change over time is conspicuous both in the broad historical development of societies and within the intrahistory of each object. After all, the very term "was-te," I would argue, conjures up temporality, since it necessarily points at a moment in the past where the object/thing was (used, visible, valuable) even if it is no longer so.

A similarly time-focused approach can be found in *Waste: A Philosophy of Things,* published by William Viney in 2014. Viney understands waste as moving in a temporal axis, adopting a position that echoes Thompson's Rubbish Theory: those things we consider "waste" are just "matter for whom time has run out or has become precluded" (2014, 2). In his own words, waste is not just "matter out of place," but "matter out of time," so scholars should bring the temporal dimension into our examinations of waste.

How do the different theories I have just outlined impinge on Ammons's *Garbage*? In what follows I will try and read the poem through the lens of Waste Studies, focusing on the interactions between the material and metaphorical uses of waste, using (and adapting) Thompson's Rubbish Theory, scrutinizing the complex trope of the dump-ziggurat, and paying special attention to the neglected figure of the garbage worker.

GARBAGE: FROM SCATOLOGY TO ESCATHOLOGY

Garbage has been fittingly described as "logorrheic" (Unger 2019, 135): the poem is structured around eighteen cantos, each made up of a river of free-verse couplets that flow, unimpeded, for more than 100 pages. Ammons opens the piece by presenting the poetic voice–his alter ego–in a self-deprecatory manner: he is allegedly "wasting" his time teaching poetry and composing "sober little organic,

meaningful pictures," shunning the great work of recovering "values thought lost," now in ruins, "demolished," and lying at his feet (1993, 13). Just a few lines into the poem, however, the dump materializes and looms as a powerful image.[11]

In its inevitability, material waste confronts us sensorially, "offending" our senses (both smell and sight) and shocking us out of stupor and into reflection. Just as American consumers saw themselves reflected in the garbage trucks that the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles named *The Social Mirror* (see Freilich 2020), visible landfills and dumping grounds, like the one that sparked the poem, tell on us and our actions.[12] Ammons concludes that garbage is the "poem of our time" because, in his words, it is

> [...] believable enough
>
> to get our attention, *getting in the way*, piling
> up, stinking, turning brooks brownish and
>
> creamy white: what else deflects us from the
> errors of our illusionary ways... (1993, 18; my italics)

At first, the poet's insistence that omnipresent garbage is now able "to get our attention" because it takes up space–"getting in the way" (18)–seems to contradict Thompson's thesis: Rubbish is an invisible category, outside space and time. I tend to agree with Thompson in that the standard attitude towards rubbish or garbage in consumerist societies is "out of sight, out of mind"–we might even add, out of smell, out of mind (see Rogers 2005, 1). In fact, it is only through long-lasting strikes in garbage collecting or artistic interventions like the aforementioned *Social Mirror,* by Ukeles, that rubbish is rendered visible again. Paradoxically, then, waste is at the same time "a most harrowing problem and a most closely guarded secret of our times," since contemporary societies–at least in the Global North–have managed to "dispose of leftovers in the most radical and effective way: we make them invisible by not looking and unthinkable by not thinking" (Bauman 2004, 27).

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[11] The prominence of the dump fades away as the poem progresses, a fact that, for Ammons, this is by no means a flaw, but a feature that he intended for his poem. The dump works as an initial "anchor" that allows for freedom of movement later: "With that anchor as the central concern in the first part of the poem, presenting it in the first part of the poem and watching it go away in the rest, you couldn't get lost so you feel free. You just keep on writing because the poem has centered" (Schneider 1999, 325).

[12] For Ammons the materiality of waste prompts metaphysical ruminations, but it also has a practical impact on our social attitudes and political decisions, as hinted in *Garbage*. The third canto, which opens with the phrase "toxic waste," suggests that the global crisis may be a blessing in disguise: the accumulation of garbage and the degradation of the environment at a planetary level will finally compel the different countries to act together in order to find a solution: "toxic waste, poison air, beach goo, eroded / roads *draw nations together*..." (24; my italics).

We may wonder whether Thompson's theory can even be applied to Ammons's *Garbage*. As summarized above, Thompson (1979, 10) claims that the only possible way in which a Transient object can become Durable is by going through the limbo stage, Rubbish, outside time and value. This often takes the form of discarded objects that may be later rescued and endowed with an economic value, either as revamped useful objects or as status symbols. Although garbage is not explicitly recovered for further specific use in Ammons's poem, it does become a different, higher form of Durable, the energy of composting and re-generation. One could argue that he articulates what Estok describes as "a semiotics of hope, of re-making" (2017, 122). To bring home that sense of remaking and recombination, Ammons goes back to the composting metaphor that Whitman had already used in his "Compost" poem: "anything / thrown out to the chickens will be ground fine // in gizzards or taken under-ground by beetles and / ants: this will be transmuted into the filigree // of ant feelers' energy vaporizations" (1993, 85).

Even the cover of the book emphasizes this composting, this transformation of matter into matter. The power of waste lies precisely in this capacity for transmutation, although not necessarily–as Bauman would have it–an alchemy-like transformation "of base, paltry and menial stuff into a noble, beautiful and precious object" (2004, 22). The flowers on the front cover of Ammons's book (mis)lead us to contemplate beauty, however ephemeral–and the *carpe diem* associated with such ephemerality, as in *collige, virgo, rosas*. And yet, if we follow the orchid's stem, it will literally lead us to the back cover; there, we shall discover its origin (its roots) in a flower pot that has been discarded as trash, but which also insinuates the perennial composting process that keeps life alive and permits "our ongoing" (Ammons 1993, 26).[13] This would explain why the voice in *Garbage* announces the visualization of that Durable "spindle of energy" (24) as the main purpose of the text:

> this is just a poem with a job to do: and that
>
> is to declare, however roundabout, sideways,
> or meanderingly (or in those ways) the perfect
>
> scientific and *materialistic* notion of the
> spindle of energy... (24-25; my italics)

More often than not, this effortless transition from the material to the immaterial–in an avowedly "materialistic" poem–takes the specific rhetorical form of

[13] This is reminiscent of the example that the monk Thich Nhat Hanh gives to underscore the Buddhist continuity of matter, as related by Anderson: the monk "has noted the continuity between the pure beauty of a rose and the rot of garbage... The rose and the garbage are equal. The garbage is just as precious as the rose" (2010, 36).

a sacralization of waste.[14] In fact, I would argue that Ammons is at his most effective when he chooses to juxtapose matter (waste) and spirit (energy) in a poem ostensibly about garbage. It is in this context that the apparently jarring, incongruous statement that "garbage has to be the poem of our time because // garbage is spiritual" (18) loses its rough edges and becomes acceptable.

The use of garbage and scatological language side by side with religious discourse is by no means an isolated incident in Ammons's long poem but permeates the entire text. *Garbage* moves swiftly from scatology to eschatology, so much so that "birdshit" [*sic*] becomes the "gateway" to an eternal cycle of renewal: "the portal / of renewing change," "a loam for the roots / of placenta" (28). As stinking garbage and objects that have become useless junk converge in the dumpsite, they become sacralized and, fittingly enough, the rubbish dump itself becomes a temple:

> [...] down by I-95 in
>
> Florida where flatland's ocean- and gulf-flat,
> mounds of disposal rise ...
>
> the garbage trucks crawl as if in *obeisance*,
> as if up *ziggurats* toward the high places gulls
>
> and garbage keep alive, *offerings to the gods*
> of garbage, of retribution ... (18; my italics)

It is no wonder, therefore, that the first critical studies on *Garbage* focused on the ziggurat metaphor as a key to deciphering the poem. Already in 1996, Lorraine DiCicco stressed the awe-inducing monumentality of garbage dumps, which literally turned them into one of America's largest Monstrous Visual Symbols.[15] In 1998, Leonard Scigaj described *Garbage* as an "ecopoem" inspired by "the huge I-95 landfill outside Miami, which Ammons presents as a ziggurat, a religious edifice of American culture" (249). In his more recent survey of garbage poetry, Anderson contends that Ammons uses this "huge mound of rubbish as a late-twentieth-century American equivalent to premodern temples" like the Babylonian ziggurats (2010, 39).[16] Important as this trope may be, it is now high time that the critical focus shifted from the ziggurat-like dump to the humans that tend it.

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[14] As Voros had already remarked in his comparative study of Stevens' "The Man on the Dump" and Ammons's *Garbage*, both poems opt "for resacrilizing trash as the necessary prelude to rebirth and regeneration" (2000, 174).

[15] She relates the dump-ziggurat to the Monstrous Visual Symbols, as do Rathje and Murphy, who maintain that "the largest MVSes in American society today are its garbage repositories" (1996, 82). See also Tobin 1999, DiCicco 2005.

[16] Anderson (2010) reminds us that Wilbur also refers to premodern religious metaphors, this time "Anglo-Saxon religious and cultural rites" (41).

GARBAGE WORKERS: "THE UNSUNG HEROES OF MODERNITY"

While most scholars in Waste Studies have focused on the liminal position of the category of garbage and/or the social-environmental consequences of our economy of waste, until the advent of Waste Theory very few had paid attention to the scavengers and the garbage workers, the people that collect our rubbish, take it to the dumping ground and maintain that dumpsite.[17] As Bauman cogently argues, these workers play an essential role in our economy of consumption and waste:

> Consumers in a consumer society need rubbish collectors, and many of them, and of the sort who will not shun touching and handling what has already been confined to the rubbish heap–but the consumers are not willing to do the rubbish collectors' jobs themselves. After all, they have been groomed to enjoy things, not to suffer them. (2004, 59)

Despite the relevance of their work, however, they are not just socially ostracized but also culturally neglected. Bauman goes as far as to claim that the "rubbish collectors" are "the unsung heroes of modernity" (2004, 28). I would argue that Ammons's book is an exception to this rule, for the garbage-truck driver emerges as the most significant human figure in the first cantos of the poem. And yet only a few critics (Voros 2000, 174; Morrison 2015, 197) have paid attention to this character. Most have ignored this figure or they have read it in a parodic or mock-heroic way (Wilkinson 2012, 42), with the drivers comically metamorphosing into some sort of "new Charon" (Vendler 1999, 27) or becoming "high priests" (Scigaj 1998, 249; Buell 1999, 226) on their way up the pyramid-ziggurat.

Even in a quick perusal of the poem, readers can see explicit references to the clerical-priestly duties of both ancient and modern religions. Garbage trucks–personified but also metonymically pointing at their drivers–are depicted as "crawling" up the temple-mound, bringing "offerings" such as "a crippled plastic chair" or "a played-out sports outfit" (Ammons 1993, 18-19). Presiding over this "sacrificial bounty" (19) is the "priestly director," in his "black-chuffing dozer," trying to "read" and decipher the birds (20), much like the artists of divination in premodern times.

The religious allegory is not restricted to the initial presentation of the dump or the truck drivers reproduced in previous pages, but reappears in subsequent sections of the poem, especially those dealing with the landfill and with garbage itself. The "small smoke" that wafts from the waste dump in the second canto, suggesting a ritual "everlasting flame" (19), reappears in the fourth section as a

[17] These workers not only drive garbage-trucks but also garbage spreaders, like the bulldozer mentioned later in the poem. Morrison is an exception, as she devotes a section in her 2015 book to these figures and she does in fact mention the driver in Ammons's *Garbage* (197), albeit briefly.

"priestly plume" that "rises" from the mound as a "signal" (30). In the third canto, we once more see the dump:

> with a high whine the garbage trucks slowly
> circling the pyramid rising *intone* the morning
>
> and atop the mound's plateau birds circling
> [...]
>
> denser than windy forest shelves: and meanwhile
> a truck already arrived spills its goods from
>
> the back hatch and the birds as in a single computer-
> formed net plunge in *celebration, hallelujahs*
>
> of rejoicing (27-28; my italics)[18]

Here, it is not just the garbage trucks that sing their matins, but the carrion birds themselves join in with their "hallelujahs" (28), in one more prosopopoeia. Just as the dump becomes a temple, the garbage birds and trucks break out in unexpected hymns, and the smoke created by the combustion of organic refuse/ rubbish signals at something ethereal emerging from solid matter, we become more ready to encounter the truck driver under a different light:

> the driver gets out of his truck
> and wanders over to the cliff on the spill and
>
> looks off from the high point into the rosy-fine
> rising of day, the air pure, the wings of the
>
> birds white and clean as angel-food cake: *holy, holy,*
> *holy, the driver cries* and flicks his cigarette
>
> in a *spiritual* swoop that floats and floats before
> it touches ground (28; my italics)

A mock-epic atmosphere seems to envelop the scene and the driver. However, I claim that this mock-heroic, mock-religious reading does not exhaust the interpretative possibilities of this scene.[19] The garbage man embodies this contradiction: he apparently waxes eschatological in his shouting "holy, holy, holy,"

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[18] Notice the striking (because unnecessary) use of a colon, a choice that is far from exceptional in *Garbage*. As befits a waste-excremental poem, the colon is the most pervasive punctuation sign.

[19] Anderson is one of the few critics to acknowledge the fact that not all these spiritual metaphors are to be dismissed as parodic in nature: "Heavy doses of humor and postmodern irony

an exclamation which is also reminiscent of a common scatological idiom. Even trivial actions like flicking a cigarette from the edge of the dump-cliff seem to acquire transcendental qualities, as the arc the butt traces is described as a "spiritual swoop" (28). Though the aforementioned "spiritual swoop," or references to the angelic white purity of the garbage gulls or the "pure," clean air around the landfill cannot but elicit a smirk, I would argue that the garbage man himself ultimately emerges as a grave, if not heroic figure. In fact, his apparently humble métier acquires a more serious import, as he presides not only over the rubbish dump, but also over its ethical implications. By the end of this third canto, the driver's role has become that of a garbage-philosopher: he both intuits the generative powers of waste and becomes aware of the impossibility of getting away from the consequences of our "toxic past," from the numerous ecological "sins" that we have accumulated and take material form here, in the dump, "heaped" (29) in visible mounds. If only he could imagine a less toxic, "fusion-lit" future:

> [...] here, the driver knows,
>
> where the consummations gather, where the disposal
> flows out of form, where the last translations
>
> cast away their immutable bits and scraps,
> flits of steel, shivers of bottle and tumbler,
>
> here is the gateway to beginning, here the portal
> of renewing change, the birdshit, even, melding
>
> enrichingly in with debris, a loam for the roots
> of placenta: oh, nature, the man on the edge
>
> of the cardboard-laced cliff exclaims, that there
> could be a straightaway from the toxic past into
>
> the fusion-lit reaches of a coming time! [...] (28-29)

I want to conclude my analysis by paying attention to one last scene, narrated in the fourth canto, where the "garbage spreader gets off his bulldozer and / approaches the fire" (Ammons 1993, 32) created by the waste combustion–a flame that Wilkinson dismisses as "the debased kin to Promethean fire" (2012, 43). Once the driver reaches the summit of the garbage mound, he "survey[s] a kingdom awash in transcendence" (Voros 2000, 174):

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flavor Ammons's depiction of the landfill as a symbol of the nation and as a spiritual icon, but the admiration for ecological processes is genuine" (2010, 39).

[...] he stares into
it as into eternity, the burning edge of beginning and

ending, the catalyst of going and becoming,
and all thoughts of his paycheck and beerbelly,

..., fall away, and he stands in the presence
of the *momentarily everlasting*, the air about

him *sacrosanct* [...] (Ammons 1993, 32-33; my italics)

For Frederik Buell, these lines enact a humorous transformation of "the dozer man from redneck to high priest of the Delphic oracle of the landfill (at the landfill's peak, a transfiguring fire burns) and a hero of Homeric ancestry"[20] (1999, 226). Some class bias may be at work in these dismissals of the driver as a merely parodic character. Interestingly, the few critics that 'rescue' the garbage worker as a relevant figure do so by likening him to the poet (Voros 2000, 174; Morrison 2015, 197).

Contrary to what Buell argues, however, I would claim that no trace of mockery is left at this point in the poem. Even though, initially, it was hard to imagine how the putrid air emanating from the garbage dump could be perceived as "sacrosanct," nothing remains now of the mock-heroic tone that seemed to herald the presence of the truck drivers. The garbage worker, very much "like the poet," Morrison contends, has become a visionary who "sees the truth and has a deep insight into human nature" (2015, 197). If the graveyard poets looked for a deserted or secluded churchyard, and the religious contemplatives needed a cave or a barren wasteland, the truck driver finds that waste-land in a garbage dump. The grave-digger turned philosopher is here replaced by the "bulldozer man," and the following bottle scene seems to confirm this impression:

the bulldozer man picks up a red bottle that
turns purple and green in the light and pours

out a few drops of stale wine, and yellowjackets
burr in the bottle, sung drunk, the singing

note even puzzled when he tosses the bottle way
down the slopes, the still air being flown in

in the bottle even as the bottle dives through
the air! the bulldozer man thinks about that

[20] Buell interprets Ammons's move as an attempt to criticize "the pieties of the day" by opting for an "antithetical figure (Southern, white, male, beerbelly) as a representative icon for the contemporary age" (1999, 226).

and concludes that everything is marvelous, what
he should conclude and what everything is: on

the deepdown slopes, he realizes, the light
inside the bottle will, over the weeks, change

the yellowjackets, unharmed, having left lost,
not an aromatic vapor of wine left, the air

percolating into and out of the neck as the sun's
heat rises and falls: *all is one, one all*:

hallelujah: he gets back up on his bulldozer
and shaking his locks backs the bulldozer up
(32-33; my italics)

The last couplet seems to highlight the apparent incongruity of juxtaposing a metaphysical, almost religious, epiphany with the matter-of-fact driving of the garbage bulldozer. Although incongruity generally causes a comic effect, this is not the case here: those conversant with Ammons's work know that "all is one, one all" is a direct reference to the one-many paradox that has been one of the poet's philosophical concerns throughout his career.[21] Seen in this light, the juxtaposition of the garbage-scatological smells with the metaphysical-eschatological incense becomes much more than an occasion for humor. Ammons's predilection for the coarse and the "quotidian" banal, as Francisco Unger maintains, "does not altogether banish [...] the heights of grace or the passions of conversion" from his poetry, partly a result from his hymn-suffused youth (2019, 138). "Beneath the pragmatist in him," Unger continues, you can sometimes make out the figure of a redirected divine" (2019, 138). It is no coincidence that Bauman (2004, 22) also resorts to a religious lexicon when he describes the ambivalence of waste as both generative and destructive, "simultaneously divine and satanic."

CONCLUSIONS

In *Garbage*, as I have tried to demonstrate in the preceding pages, the rubbish dump emerges as the site for the convergence of the scatological and the eschatological. Similarly, the garbage man in Ammons's poem, both coarse and priestly, interbreeds eschatological and scatological senses (and scents). If eschatology

[21] On the influence of philosophy and science on Ammons's work, see Tobin 1999, Anderson 2010, Massengill 2011, and Unger 2019. As Wilkinson (2012, 38) notes, there are echoes of Anaximenes's "doctrine of material monism" in *Garbage*. In the poem itself, Ammons acknowledges that his book revolves around "the pre-socratic idea of the // dispositional axis from stone to wind, wind / to stone" (1993, 25).

tends to focus on the afterlife of humans, the "garbology" of this unconventional priest focuses on the afterlife of things, when Transient objects enter the category of Rubbish. However, things and objects being part (and parcel) of our planet, their afterlife impinges on our very life, and their often unbiodegradable excess conditions our earthly survival. Anderson is right when he argues that the dump, the central image in contemporary garbage poetry, functions in those poems as "a quasi-mystical territory in which the poet can enact a fantasy of regeneration, expressing hope that nature's sacred processes of ecological renewal can overcome the physical reality of the garbage that is a fact of life in modern culture: a hope that nature has the power to redeem even our grossest examples of wastefulness and neglect" (2010, 54). This is the same hopeful approach that Kennedy takes in his philosophical exploration of trash: "the mirror in which we perceive our own sickly aspect," which "can help us resolve ourselves to better living" (2007, 182). Likewise, DiCicco sees *Garbage* as an optimistic poem, since Ammons had at the time been confident "that, standing before the 'ziggurat' of our waste," we would acquire an "ecological awareness" that would demand reparation and would impel us to mend our ways (2005, 192).

At the same time, however, the fact that Ammons couches our wastefulness in theological terms as "sins" "heaped" in the garbage dump (1993, 29) may point at a less optimistic conclusion. Not only that but his "genial skepticism," which became all the more visible in his last years, led him to mistrust the actual impact of poetry (Schneider 1999). It must be admitted that there remains an inescapable ambiguity regarding the ultimate object of the driver's contemplation, or the nature of his epiphany, described via the oxymoron "*momentarily / everlasting*" (Ammons 1993, 32).[22] And yet, despite the horror resulting from the realization that we are trashing our planet, I would argue that the driver's trance-like invocation of the "holy" waste has a hopeful undercurrent. Like the eighteenth and nineteenth century poets who visited tombstones and ruins, and pondered on the ephemerality of life and objects, *Garbage* sings to the end of things, but does so from a position of serenity. If nothing else, we all take part in a process of never-ending composting, the everlasting "spindle of energy" (1993, 24) that Ammons spoke of. After all, as the poem reminds us, it is only "in the very asshole of comedown" that we may finally find "redemption" (21).

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[22] Arguably, the circularity of energy can be read as purely physical, immanent in its materiality, or as suggesting some form of metaphysical transcendence. According to Kennedy, trash apparently allows us to dispense with the transcendental premise of classical metaphysics: "The old metaphysical quest for transcendence, when technologically pursued, descends into trash" (2007, xviii). However, the opposite may be true; one "can see hope and beauty in waste," although this requires embracing "faith and careful thought" (2007, 184).

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"AND THIS IS WHAT I SAW": (UN)NATURAL WASTE IN CATHY PARK HONG'S "FABLE OF THE LAST UNTOUCHED TOWN"*

Martín Praga
Universidade da Coruña

Abstract

At its most philosophical, poetry can help us imagine alternative realities. In "Fable of the Last Untouched Town," Cathy Park Hong manages to complicate current notions of nature by way of an unusual form of futuristic waste. Through the analysis of the poem, this article aims, on the one hand, to show how works of poetry can reflect and denounce some of the many ugly aspects of reality. Particularly, Hong can be said to draw in her poem an allegory of the pressing issue of e-waste. On the other, I intend to highlight how poetic imaginations can shake certain assumptions regarding those contemporary conceptions of nature and problematize the humanistic tendency in new materialisms and object-oriented theories. Indeed, an understanding of waste as the threshold which separates us from Nature might better equip us when facing the imminent change of paradigm that looms over our understanding of our place in the world.

Keywords: e-waste, ecopoetics, strange strangers, Cathy Park Hong, Timothy Morton.

"Y ESTO ES LO QUE VI": DESECHOS (IN)NATURALES EN "FABLE OF THE LAST UNTOUCHED TOWN" DE CATHY PARK HONG

Resumen

En su aspecto más filosófico, la poesía puede ayudarnos a imaginar realidades alternativas. Con "Fábula del último pueblo intacto," Cathy Park Hong consigue problematizar las nociones contemporáneas de naturaleza a través de una forma inusual de desechos futuristas. Por medio de su análisis, en este ensayo me propongo, primero, mostrar cómo la poesía puede reflejar y denunciar algunos de los desagradables aspectos de la realidad. En este caso, el poema de Hong puede ser visto como una alegoría del acuciante problema de los residuos electrónicos. Por otra, mostrar cómo los imaginarios poéticos pueden sacudir ciertos supuestos respecto de esas concepciones actuales de la naturaleza; así como cuestionar una tendencia humanista en los nuevos materialismos y las teorías orientadas a objetos. Una reconsideración de los desechos, entendidos como el umbral que nos separa de la Naturaleza, puede equiparnos mejor para enfrentar el cambio de paradigma que amenaza el entendimiento de nuestro lugar en el mundo.

Palabras clave: residuos electrónicos, ecopoesía, extraños forasteros, Cathy Park Hong, Timothy Morton.

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As Begoña Simal has noted, the "aporetic situation" where "human artifacts and anthropogenic ecosystems should be considered as much 'natural' as 'unnatural'" (2010, 4) has a long history. In its latest episode, the turn to new materialisms has brought about several Bruno Latour-inspired conceptions that claim to disrupt the anthropocentric relationship between human and nonhuman actants by blurring the contours of nature and yielding in turn posthumanist ethical alternatives. While Greg Kennedy has warned of the danger of a conception of "Nature's universality" where "we would seem to lose the distinguishing marks of judgment in the vastness of cosmic indiscrimination" (2007, 2), on the opposite end, theorists like Timothy Morton maintain that "thinking big doesn't prevent us from caring for the environment" (2010, 23). Following Susan S. Morrison's call to "utilize not just presentist theory, but also a *futurist* theory, for our own and our society's well-being" (2015, 3; emphasis in original), I will explore here the limits of nature through the image of the "data glacier," an unusual form of waste that merges the human with the digital in Cathy Park Hong's futuristic epilogue to her 2012 *Engine Empire*, "Fable of the Last Untouched Town."

As if analyzing a poem in an issue devoted to fiction was not enough, I shall further tweak the matter and instead of offering a narrative of waste, I will propose waste itself as a disruptive element in another narrative, to wit, contemporary positions regarding the nature/culture divide. To this end, throughout this paper I will succinctly review the relation between ecocriticism and poetry to place Hong's work in the unlikely genre of ecological poetry and, eventually, in a variant of what Sarah Nolan has dubbed "unnatural ecopoetics" (2017) that favors imagery over formal experimentation. After locating the poem within the wider frame of the triptych, I will show how the image of the glacier elicits conversations regarding two challenges that have a bearing on contemporary ecocriticism: transnationality and transnaturality (Simal 2010). As an allegory, responding to more traditional ecocritical approaches, the glacier stands in for e-waste and its multiple and pernicious consequences for both marginalized communities and the environment. Speculatively, through a conversation with new materialisms and object-oriented theories, represented here by Timothy Morton, I will finally show how the image of the glacier allows for futurist speculations that complicate contemporary notions of nature.

Although her work has only recently become more overtly committed to a particular social cause, namely her advocacy of Asian American identity in her bestselling experimental autobiography of 2020 *Minor Feelings*, Hong's oeuvre has been typically regarded as socially engaged.[1] In her first two books, *Translating*

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[1] Claudia Rankine and Michael Dowdy's anthology of contemporary political poetry, *21st Century Poetics of Engagement* (2017), which popularized the term "social engagement" to refer to contemporary works that deal with social, racial, and gender inequality, actually borrows the term from Hong's article "There's a New Movement in American Poetry and It's Not Kenneth Goldsmith" (2015).

Mo'Um (2002) and *Dance Dance Revolution* (2006), Hong bends and blends languages to foreground the complexity of hybrid cultures and identities. Her third and greatly lauded book, *Engine Empire*, expands the experimentation with the boundaries of space and time already present in Hong's early work. Indeed, *Engine Empire* is shot through with spatiotemporal uncanniness: the different images that populate the book evoke familiar historical periods and locations, but almost no place or time find their exact counterpart in our reality. This temporal displacement has caused *Engine Empire* to be labeled under the tag of speculative poetry, an umbrella term coined by poet Suzette Haden Elgin which serves to encompass the poetic sisters of narrative forms from fantasy to dystopia, from space opera to steam punk, from sword and sorcery to urban fantasy, among many more.[2] Consequently, some authors like Robert Grotjohn (2015), Tana Jean Welch (2017), or Danielle Pafunda (2019) have read Hong's work as a speculative exploration of the consequences of grinding late capitalism. The ecological concerns found in the book, however, seem to have been unattended until now.

This lapse may be due to the subtle presence of the matter in the book. However, together with rebellious characters, every section in *Engine Empire* features some relevant ecocritical image. While a band of desperados in the first part who cannot abide by the emerging postbellum modern states' laws represent the death throes of an illusion of pure freedom, the prospectors' greed in it foreshadows today's overexploitation of the lands. The nameless factotums of an imaginary megalopolis in current day industrial China stand in for the victims of the unstoppable expansion of the tech industry in a second part that addresses displacement and economic violence. There, the poem "A Little Tête-a-Tête" revisits Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," offering an image of the ecological consequences of relentless industrial growth in the form of polluted rivers. The third part, which unfolds in a future where life as we know it has transmigrated into a plane of indolent virtuality, features a dissident woman who is left behind after being made redundant amidst the maelstrom of digitalization. It is in this third section where the stakes are risen. The poem titled "Year of the Amateur" offers a picture of a decaying world which is being turned into "pulp" as we, distracted by idle online videos, "laugh softly" (Hong 2012, 67). The joint appearance of melting icecaps and digital media announces the disruptive element that threatens the gap between nature and culture, the image that drives the epilogue and places *Engine Empire* in the realm of (unnatural) ecopoetics: the data glacier.

[2] The label inevitably harks back to that of speculative fiction popularized by Margaret Atwood as a genre about "things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books"–as opposed to "things that could not possibly happen" (2011, 14), which would pertain to the realm of science fiction proper.

"Fable of the Last Untouched Town"[3] (from here on, "Fable") begins with the narrator describing her town as "the only hole in a world of light" (Hong 2012, 89),[4] thus placing it outside the advanced civilization introduced in *Engine Empire*'s third part. To complete the renegade circle, the protagonist of the epilogue is also a rebel. Initially, she proudly describes the ways of her kin: living under ferocious climatic conditions, the townspeople are "impervious to discomfort [...] strong" and "not afraid to betray" (Hong 2012, 90). As an example of their cruelty, the woman admits they "rush [their] old" (90), i.e., they abandon the elderly to freeze in the wild. In *Civilization and its Discontents* ([1930] 1962), Sigmund Freud claims that although technological advances cannot provide eternal bliss, they help people to cope with the miseries of everyday life. Hong's luddite civilization seems to prove Freud's point: in the town, "no lamps grid [the] streets, no cars flash their headlights" (2012, 89); the low temperatures "crackle [the] blankets" and congeal "the monthly bloody rags women dry for the night" (90). When "the shrieking wind and dark / cut the wilted day at noon" they have "no choice / but resign [themselves]" (90). These daily routines dictated by the hours of sunlight, attuned to the times prior to the industrial revolution, if not directly to feudal times, create a picture of the sort of life led by the inhabitants of the town.

Cut off from the hyperconnected world where hearts are grown "from cells" and people "live to 150" (Hong 2012, 89), the Last Untouched Town's dearth harks back to Aldous Huxley's Malpais, the savage lands in *Brave New World* ([1932] 2004). The inhabitants' despair upon the arrival of dusk, however, stems not from a fear of prowling predators or the freezing temperatures but due to sheer "boredom" (Hong 2012, 89). The tedious hours "during the long winter months" (89) kindle the narrator's imagination and she dreams of murder, of "a blade cold / as ice-nettled milk steaming into a neck" (91). Fearing her own fantasies, she decides to volunteer "to collect night soil" (91). Hong's choice of words here is relevant: "night soil" was the euphemism used by nineteenth century farmers for human feces, which were collected from cities and eventually used to fertilize the fields (Rogers 2006, 35). Later in the poem, this soil will be explicitly referred to as "mountains of frozen shit," a description that could well fit the data glacier itself, as we shall see. Indeed, this is the first instance where the image of waste hints to a blurring of the boundaries of nature: for the townspeople, out of excrement, "out of waste, / comes food for the only God / we know" (Hong 2012, 91). If manure is understood as that which is being fed to that "god," then the inhabitants of the Last Untouched Town must

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[3] Hong's choice of genre for the title of the poem shares a family resemblance with the first chapter of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), "A Fable for Tomorrow," which further support an ecocritical reading of the piece.

[4] Grotjohn (2015) has confirmed that although the North Korean regime inspired the imagery of "Fable," Hong did not intend it to be any place in particular.

concur with Baruch Spinoza's notion of *deus sive natura*, i.e., their "only God" is nature itself.

There are no signs of animism in the poem and an afterlife is explicitly denied. When denizens die, the townspeople tell "No fairy stories to ease the children's ears [...] no / he's gone away to somewhere magical" (Hong 2012, 91). After the woman's partner goes missing–that is, he is executed on account of being one of the "Enemies of the state" (2012, 91)–their only ritual involves dancing "a ring around the tower" (91). Pantheism is here suggested again when the woman adds "and he is the tower. He is the tree" (91). The first sentence in the line is a Biblical reference: "He is the tower of salvation to His king, and shows mercy to His anointed, to David and his descendants forevermore" (2 Samuel 22:51). The tower, however, acquires in the next sentence the form of a tree, a crucial symbol of the split between (or the fusion of) the godly and the telluric. This ambiguity presents the townspeople's relation to this god or nature as that of a deist who conceives of a transcendental being that is blind and dumb to its creation's prayers. Void of a relatable God, nature becomes pure materiality.

Reviewing the concept of nature, Raymond Williams highlights the importance of laying bare the "history and complexity of meanings" (1980, 67). According to Williams, the figure of Mother Nature was demoted to a deputy of a monotheistic god only to resurface after the Enlightenment as the "inherent and essential quality of any particular thing" (68). This was the sense inherited by first wave ecocritics and, consequently, ecopoets. A heightened environmental awareness fostered a poetics that reached back to the conceptions of nineteenth century American Transcendentalists, reproducing the split the circle had opened between an industrialized humanity and the sublime natural world. In "Fable," however, this separation is cancelled by precisely the unyielding forces of nature. After a terrible storm, the "town was erased / by hills of snow" (Hong 2012, 91). While this could initially be chalked up to the effects of climate change, it acquires a more intriguing character since "after the storm, a gigantic glacier appeared" (91). The most fascinating–yet the eeriest–aspect of Hong's imagined future is the "snow like pale cephalopods" that connects everyone "into a shared dream" (65), making everybody's musings and memories easily accessible in real time. Arguably, the glacier is an enormous block of "neuronic snow" that permits this hyperconnectivity. The unusual material it is made of invites us to revisit the frontiers of the natural. Indeed, in the storm episode the narrator suggests another blurring of its limits claiming that "It's easy for snow to swallow us" (91). In her ultimate rebellious act, the one that tears through the fabric of the symbolic, it is her who will swallow the snow. If Hong's allegory of the internet can be seen as the very plausible commodification of the unconscious in a near future, in "Fable," it is precisely the surplus of this wondrous technology which ignites theorization twofold: on the one hand, responding to more traditional ecocritical concerns and modes of representation, the Last Untouched Town can be seen as standing in for the peripheric territories of transnational capitalist cartographies that fall victim of environmental injustice, trapped under the double logic of exploitation and pollution. On the other, speculatively, the glacier appears as the disruptive element that complicates contemporary notions of nature.

In his study of the environmental consequences of digital technology, Sean Cubitt calls attention to the slippery etymology of the word "wilderness," which can refer to the private hunting grounds that were saved for nobility. While peasants were excluded from these territories, such was not the case with scientists and artists who helped to create an image of nature "associated with the most dangerous places, and the ones most inimical to human habitation" (Cubitt 2017, 117). Thus, the old commons became either someone else's property or a source of peril, which prevented the peasants from gathering their own sources of energy. Other than leading to a vision of the latter as unruly–a feature Morrison claims it shares with waste since both, given their "uncanny powers, need to be put in their place" (2015, 25)–Cubitt links this early distribution of the land to current day energy monopolies, which are responsible for "the reduction of superfluous populations to externalities condemned [...] to bear the brunt of the waste inherent in resolving crises of overproduction" (2017, 118). In this respect, the townspeople can be seen as a particular case of what Zygmunt Bauman has called "human waste," i.e., "the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay" (2004, 5) once they have become "redundant," that is, unprofitable, for the capitalist machine. Specifically, Bauman highlights the "former peasants who have fallen (or been thrown) overboard from the vehicle of economic progress" (60) and now populate technological dumpsites in the Global South like Agbogbloshie in Ghana, Guiyu in China, or the Payatas landfill in Quezon City in the Philippines.

According to some estimates, between 50% and 80% of American e-waste, "a virulent new category of refuse that includes trashed televisions, computers, cell phones and other electronics," is offshored (Rogers 2006, 15). Indeed, when a team of scientists and artists working for SENSEable City Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology investigated the meanderings of national refuse with electronic trackers, they discovered that "[m]any electronic items went to ports where they were loaded aboard ships, then left cell coverage and were never heard from again" (Humes 2012, 116). This "prime example of market anarchy leading to deep social and environmental harm" (Cubitt 2017, 127) is represented in "Fable" by the glacier. Once the mountain of "imperialist-plotted ice" (Hong 2012, 92) appears, i.e., it is illegally dumped in the Last Untouched Town, the king forces people to join the workforce to destroy it. The fact that the accidental ingestion of the tiniest chip causes one worker to "hallucinate, blither in another language" (Hong 2012, 92) points to the fact that "components of electronic products contain toxic substances, which can generate a threat [...] to human health" (Bhutta et al. 2011, 1). The improper dismantling of electronic equipment, an "illegal, typically unrestricted, environmentally nefarious endeavor" (Rogers 2006, 169), releases POPs (Persistent Organic Polluters), and exposes people to heavy metal poisoning due to the presence of substances like lead, zinc, and mercury. Lead alone, for example, "can damage the central and peripheral nervous systems, the blood system, and kidneys

in humans [...] and has highly acute and chronic toxic effects on plants, animals, and microorganism" (Pellow 2006, 187).

As Matthew Zanting suggests in his analysis of Rita Wong's "sort by day, burn by night," where the Canadian author denounces the dumping of e-waste in Guiyu, literature elicits "hard questions" (2013, 623) that may lead to a reconsideration of individual and collective habits. Hence, as an allegory, the glacier effectively responds to the needs of an ecocriticism that acknowledges transnational urges. However, beyond this allegorizing the pervasive electronic detritus, with the image of the "offensive glacier" (Hong 2012, 92) made of data exhaust, Hong does nothing short of creating the ultimate hybrid behemoth, the relentless spawn of unbridled technology and climate change. The implications of this theoretical entity transcend the ecological to reach the realm of ontology. Morton (2010) has coined the notion of hyperobject to refer to human creations that will outlive humanity. Plutonium, or Styrofoam are two of the examples he offers. Hong's congealing of residual digital data could be added to the list. The glacier made of futuristic waste, representing a looming yet amorphous threat, works as theoretical reference against which to question the notion and limits of nature.

THE OFFENSIVE GLACIER | WASTE AS A DISRUPTIVE (UN)NATURAL ELEMENT

In *The Ecological Thought*, Morton introduces the notion of "mesh" to describe the cluster of objects that populate the universe and their inexhaustible relations. The mesh, however, is not the holistic version of Nature that understands that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Morton's ecological thought proposes an interconnectedness without a center, driven by pleasure, that holds no difference between inside and outside, here and there, or any kind of boundary whatsoever. Among the things that relate in the mesh, the ones "whose existence we cannot anticipate" (2010, 42) receive the title of "strange strangers." Ungraspable and mutable, the unexpected appearance of strange strangers should break the "cycle of sameness" (59), allowing for new forms of relations and theorizations.

EXCURSUS ON THE POETIC IMAGE

Acknowledging Lynn Keller's denunciation of "an insufficient poetic response to the radical instabilities of the environmental mess in which we find ourselves" (2007, 33), Sarah Nolan ventures in *Unnatural Ecopoetics* (2017) an application of new materialist theories in poetry. There, she shares Morton's concern with respect to certain "environmental responsibilities that are overlooked when nature is viewed as something 'over there'" (140). Interested in forms of bridging the gap between nature and culture, Nolan borrows Donna Haraway's notion of "natureculture" and claims that her unnatural ecopoetics operates beyond traditional understandings which "do not sufficiently account for technological or social shifts toward fewer physical and natural spaces and to more digital and built sites" (14). Focusing heavily

on formal aspects, Nolan advocates for textual spaces where, following Buell's notion of environment, material elements coalesce with nonmaterial ones. Her claim that a change in ecopoetry can take place "only by employing nontraditional forms and self-reflexive language" (26), however, unnecessarily limits the scope of what may count as unnatural ecopoetic work.

While Nolan is initially explicit regarding her intention to leave the kind of images found in traditional nature poetry behind, which would include a glacier, the first poem analyzed in the book is A.R. Ammons's classic *Garbage*, where she claims that "The garbage heap appears to be the perfect site for naturecultures because it is perceived as a place where the by-products of culture are disposed and decomposed by and into the natural" (2020, 37). While this resembles my claim about the glacier, on the one hand, suggesting that cultural products go "into" the natural actually reproduces the divide instead of bridging it; on the other, Nolan stresses the contextual elements that drove Ammons to relinquish his original devotion to nature poetry in favor of a formal experimentation that permits the creation of textual spaces where natureculture's productions emerge. In other words, Nolan understands that the tearing down of the nature/culture divide must happen formally in the textual space opened by the poems.

I hold certain qualms regarding what Joan Retallack has contended about experimental poetry, that is, that every formal experiment "is a move away from the state of things" (2007, paragraph 25), and prefer to side, minus the sarcasm, with Ben Lerner's remark regarding Language poetry when he wonders "who among us still believes, if any of us ever really did, that writing disjunctive prose poems counts as a legitimately subversive political practice?" (2018, 136). Granted, *Engine Empire* has been regarded not only as a politically engaged work, but also as experimental and, indeed, Hong's tryptic features a wide array of formal resources mixed in verses and prose poems, fragmentation, pastiche, plurilingualism, hidden and explicit references, among others.[5] Leaving aside the prickly matter of whether any of the mentioned resources can consistently be conceived of as "untraditional" nowadays,[6] the poem's strength lies elsewhere.[7]

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle famously poses poetry as akin to philosophy on account of the discipline's dealing with what might happen.[8] Depicting facts, on the other hand, is the duty of historians. Coincidentally, a common feature of twenty-first century political poetry is "an orientation toward the past in particular as it relates to literary traditions, cultural archives, and official histories" (Rankine and Dowdy 2018, 7). Rarer and more troublesome are the instances where the poem deals with

[5] Ultimately, I coincide with Joel Bettridge (2020), who has claimed that the experimental in today's poetic avant-garde lies not so much in its formal aspects as in their demand for an ethic-political commitment.

[6] Some examples Nolan gives in the epilogue of the book–Christian Bök's injection of poetry in DNA comes to mind–definitely present some form of innovation.

[7] By no means does this imply that formal analyses of experimental works cannot yield thought-provoking results. Lynn Keller's study (2015) of Evelyn Reilly's *Styrofoam* (2009) is a perfect example of this.

[8] A more contemporary version of this is found in Danielle Pafunda's contention, precisely discussing Hong's poetry, that "The lyric's main function is to express that for which we haven't yet a working language" (2018, 195).

the future, which is the case with Hong's "Fable." Here, Ezra Pound's understanding of the poetic image as *phanopoeia*, that is, the "use of a word to throw a visual image on to the reader's imagination" (1991, 37) may better equip poetry in its philosophical endeavors since, as picture theorist W.J.T. Mitchell suggests, images "introduce new forms of value into the world, contesting our criteria, forcing us to change our minds" (2002, 9). Thus, while I borrow from Nolan the notion of unnatural as it applies to "poems where naturecultures are made tangible through overtly textual spaces" (2017, 20), I do not restrict the generative power of these spaces to their formal aspects.

With the image of the glacier, a full-blown strange stranger, Hong's poem elicits theorizations like those of Morton's, which stir comfortable assumptions and signal a need to revisit the new realities of humans and nature. That the latter is represented by garbage as an "endless process of generation and decay," argues John Scanlan, "is only exaggerated by the fact that knowledge and reason involve a separation of the human from the natural" (2005, 36). If this split began with the development of techne to exert control over the disorderly outside reality,[9] made of a blend of technological and mental refuse, Hong's data glacier cuts right through the binary. The hybrid glacier, in other words, should be regarded *not* as hybrid at all, but as pure nature proper.

Through this prism, human trash is not different from abandoned dams, nests, burrows, and hives; the corpses predators discard, the trail of devastation plagues or hurricanes leave behind. When the protagonist of the epilogue and her brother are carrying their mother to her snowy grave "up the mountain of junipers," she admits "I dread we will see other kin abandoned there" (Hong 2012, 90). At play here is Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, the human reaction before the threat of loss of meaning triggered by particular images such as feces, open wounds or, exemplarily, dead bodies: "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (1982, 4). By keeping the remembrance of our animality at bay, abjection operates on the threshold of the symbolic, separating nature and culture. In fact, Kristeva relates the abject to the irruption of the Real. Interestingly, Slavoj Žižek has equated the current ecological crisis to "the ultimate form of the answer of the real" (1992, 31). Hong's glacier, initially appearing as the upshot of a climatological phenomenon, carries within something more destructive.

When, after being drafted to pick away the block of ice, the protagonist sees the glacier, she admits that:

> When I arrived, I was awed, so awed, I began to cry [...]

[9] Significantly, the king's first measure against the glacier is to "launch a campaign" where "defunct factories suddenly produced lamps" which were hung over the block of ice, "but the glacier only glistened" (Hong 2012, 92).

The sheer sapphire cliffstone towered so high,
the whole ocean seemed frozen in it.
Under its shellacked panes of ice were marblings of color
I'd long forgotten: tangerine, topaz,
canary and rose.

Like fluorescing cuttlefish,
the colors pulsed, swirled and bloomed
into contracting rings. The ice breathed. (Hong 2012, 92)

By ascribing to the woman this feeling of awe–a sentiment originally reserved only to the vision of God–before the pile of (e-)waste, an object that would typically not be considered natural, let alone beautiful, Hong once again toys with the godly character of the (un)natural. With her detailed description of the colors that make the woman experience the sublimity that Romantics saved for nature at its wildest, Hong harnesses the other end of the binary and foreshadows an aesthetic breaking of the divide: this sublime piece of waste is a product of the human mind.

By introducing the Id, Freud claimed to decenter the individual self, just as Copernicus and Charles Darwin had flattened humanity's ego by decentering it from the universe and the planet, respectively. In *The Fourth Discontinuity* (1995), Bruce Mazlish adds a fourth decentering: eventually, he claims, it will be impossible to tell apart human from machine. As long as motherboards and circuits come from the dismantling of laptops and speed traps, solar panels and Tamagotchis, e-waste will remain, in Morton's famous wording, something "over yonder" (2010, 12). Old dentures, eyeglasses and glass eyes may still belong to the realm of the uncanny owing to their eerie familiarity with authentic human appendices. But what about used-up pacemakers, or worn-out bionic prosthetics? Even beyond that, beyond the circuits and silicon transistors, the glacier is made of memories and fantasies. It does not get any more human than that. This naturalization of human beings heralded by new materialisms and posthumanisms, this falling from the pedestal of more-than-nature implies granting equal dignity to all human organs. Earlier I suggested that the "mountain of frozen shit" that was the night soil collected by the protagonist could well be used to describe the neuronic glacier. In this 'pannaturalistic' framework, memories and musings should not be considered different from excrement: they are both the end product of bodily organs. Hence, the block of frozen dreams and fears is one more kind of (un)natural bodily refuse.[10]

The implications of this begin to take form in the event involving one of the workers drafted to destroy the glacier. One day, while they are chipping it away, "the wind burst and scattered the powdery snow far / into the air like spores" (Hong

[10] For sure, thinking of bombastic verses, inspiring speeches, or pure love confessions as one form of waste may be challenging. But what about words that come out wrong? Slips, unheard callings, regrettable accusations thrown in the heat of the moment? Idiomatic expressions such as "to talk trash," "to talk shit," "to talk out of your ass" further buttress this point.

2012, 92). A man accidentally swallows some spores and goes into a hallucinogenic shock, speaking in tongues. He is "immediately exterminated" and the rest of the crew are forced to wear masks. This is nothing more than the symbolic protecting itself. After witnessing this episode, the woman does something remarkable:

> One day, I decided to steal some.
> I pocketed one grain.
>
> The snow glowed bluely in my hovel.
> My little lamp.
> Then one night I don't know why I swallowed it. (Hong 2012, 93)

If the neuronic snow is understood as a form of bodily refuse, and hence an agent of abjection, by voluntarily swallowing some snow the woman becomes the ultimate rebel, tearing through the fabric of the symbolic, enacting the smashing of the illusion of meaning that is necessary to, in Morton's own words, hold "our mind open for the absolutely unknown that is to come" (2009, 204).

This feat, however, is anything but easy. In *Ecology without Nature* (2009), Morton claims that the embrace of our ecological position "must be more excessive, exuberant, and risky than a bland extension of humanitarianism to the environment. Humanitarianism would leave the environment just as it is, as an Other 'over there', a victim" (188). Indeed, earlier he states that "we can't mourn for the environment because we are so deeply attached to it – we *are* it" (186). Yet in *The Ecological Thought*, Morton eventually folds back into neohumanist mores: the ecological thought, he claims, "has to do with warmth and tenderness; hospitality, wonder, and love; vulnerability and responsibility" (2010, 77). "The ecological thought," he concludes "is about people–it is people" (77). The paradox within these theories[11] lies in the fact that when they equalize all existing beings, these are always granted human(istic) dignity. Sarah Wasserman has already advised against "the fantasy that we might selectively attribute human values to objects and find in them better, more enduring visions of ourselves" (2020, 230). One could ask Morton who said viruses are solidary. Why assume boulders are not purposefully crushing hikers when freak accidents occur?

These uncomfortable questions can only be pondered in the arts. What interests me about Hong's poem is that it does not claim to know the answers and it saves the reader the preaching: the Last Untouched Town, its inhabitants, the glacier itself offer no moral compass. Hong's visions reach past our near future and bring back just a glimpse and then silence. The protagonist's last words after swallowing the ice, which coincide with the last lines of the poem and give this article its title, "And

[11] I am here focusing my attention on Morton, but also thinking of Jane Bennett's vibrant matter, Rosi Braidotti's posthumanism, Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality, Karen Barad's ethico-onto-epistem-ology, the Latour of the modes of existence, and any other theorist who has taken a materialist detour to end up back on the doorstep of humanist ethics.

this is what I saw" (Hong 2012, 93), are followed by a full stop that leaves looking into the unknown as the only plausible reference for the deictic "this." The vantage point of a fictional future–what Morton would call the "'impossible' viewpoint [...] of the ecological thought" (2010, 23)–provides the poem with a theoretical thrust that carries along the unnegotiable vertigo concomitant to standing on the verge of that unknown.

"Reading poetry won't save the planet," (2010, 72) teases Morton. To some extent, however, art "can allow us to glimpse beings that exist beyond or between our normal categories" (60). While through metaphors and allegories art can denounce present ailments, the changing notions of nature, ecology, or the environment provided by theoretical foraging can also be put to a special type of trial by literature, films, or the plastic arts. Indeed, the aesthetic renditions of looming threats that lack a reference in space and time become theoretical entities that generate disruptions, demanding attention and enticing us to imagine possibilities beyond current limits. Thus, the (un)natural form of waste in Hong's "Fable," while not providing answers–or perhaps precisely because of this–unveils uncharted territories that shall stage the near and inevitable encounter with strange strangers yet to come.

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'GARDENING IN EDEN': WASTED LIVES, OR DETOXIC IDENTITIES IN GAIL ANDERSON-DARGATZ'S *TURTLE VALLEY* AND BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S *PRODIGAL SUMMER**

Pedro Miguel Carmona Rodríguez
Universidad de La Laguna

Abstract

This paper analyzes the inflection of a border-crossing ecological concern on the regional cultures of settlement through Gail Anderson-Dargatz's *Turtle Valley* (2007) and Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000). Their engagement with the contingent position of the farmers in the British Columbia Shuswap region, and the southern Appalachian Zebulon County resituates the self. The struggle for production is substituted by a revisionist attitude that relocates (wo)men and nature in a sustainable coexistence that approaches the human species and others. The ecological awareness of these novels uses a postindustrial landscape where human bodies and lives exhibit the malaise inflicted on the environment; they increasingly become waste(d) and toxic, and their habitat becomes a threat, also materialized in (post)natural catastrophes impelling the relocation of human communities, or business reinvention. The human wastification of Eden is instrumental to launch a revision that detoxifies identity thanks to a remodeled bond with nature.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Gail Anderson-Dargatz, *Turtle Valley*, Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*.

'AJARDINANDO EL EDÉN': VIDAS MALGASTADAS, O IDENTIDADES DESINTOXICADAS EN *TURTLE VALLEY,* DE GAIL ANDERSON-DARGATZ, Y *PRODIGAL SUMMER,* DE BARBARA KINGSOLVER

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la inflexión de una preocupación ecológica transfronteriza entre las culturas regionales de asentamiento a través de *Turtle Valley* (2007), de Gail Anderson-Dargatz, y *Prodigal Summer* (2000), de Barbara Kingsolver. En ellas, su compromiso con la posición contingente de los agricultores en la región de Shuswap, en la Columbia Británica, y el condado de Zebulon, al sur de los Apalaches, resitúa al sujeto. El compromiso con la producción deja paso a una actitud revisionista que posiciona a hombres, mujeres y naturaleza en una convivencia sostenible donde se aproximan la especie humana y otras. La conciencia ecológica de estas novelas surge de un paisaje postindustrial donde los cuerpos y las vidas humanas exhiben el malestar infligido al medio ambiente; se transforman crecientemente en desechos/desechados materiales y tóxicos, y su hábitat en una amenaza evidente en catástrofes (pos)naturales que fuerzan la reubicación de comunidades humanas, o la reinvención empresarial. La devastación humana del Edén es fundamental para lanzar una revisión que desintoxique la identidad, gracias a un vínculo transformado con la naturaleza.

Palabras clave: ecocrítica, Gail Anderson-Dargatz, *Turtle Valley*, Barbara Kingsolver, *Prodigal Summer*.

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> Jane began to notice news items of the kind she'd once skimmed over. Maple groves dying of acid rain, hormones in the beef, mercury in the fish, pesticides in the vegetables, poison sprayed on the fruit, God knows what in the drinking water. She subscribed to a bottled spring-water service and felt better for a few weeks, then read in the paper that it wouldn't do her much good, because whatever it was had been seeping into everything. Each time you took a breath, you breathed some of it in. She thought about moving out of the city, then read about toxic dumps, radioactive waste, concealed here and there in the countryside and masked by the lush, deceitful green of waving trees.
>
> Margaret Atwood, "The Age of Lead"

INTRODUCTION

Filtered through the voice of the omniscient narrator, the excerpt above reveals the growing ecological awareness developed by Jane, the protagonist of Margaret Atwood's "The Age of Lead" ([1991] 1998). The story is one of the ten short narratives in the acclaimed *Wilderness Tips*. Atwood collects under that title the snapshots that, in mosaic form, photograph the iconic symbol once able to stabilize the tottering national imaginary of fraying identities. In this sense, "The Age of Lead" juxtaposes the late twentieth century, a time of ecocide and personal disorientation for Jane, to a time of direct strife with natural forces, the time of the Franklyn Expedition, which, in 1845, purported to find a northwest passage through arctic Canada to reach the Pacific, and open new trade routes to India. Its unhappy outcomes, a conjunction of adverse climatic hazards, and the lead poisoning of the sailors produced by the newly implemented technology of food durability, unveil an inhospitable wild nature, which also cemented a truly Canadian collective experience. Significantly, the lead of the story is a primeval antecedent of the postindustrial landscape of "toxic dumps" and "radioactive waste" (Atwood 1998, 172), which Jane detects as dangerously conspicuous, an inheritance of the juncture of colonialism and ecological disrespect that the story spreads on both sides of the US-Canadian border. In contrast to the seemingly pristine arctic nature of Franklyn's time, and her ecological interest notwithstanding, Jane's visibly polluted version is incapable of endowing her with the image of personal and national homogeneity that she desperately hankers after, while it also launches the need for an ethical relocation in relation to nature.

This paper moors the present-day production of (human) waste (Bauman 2004), the contemporary toxification of the environment (Deitering 1996), and the ethical reformulation of rural identities *vis-à-vis* ecological concerns (Guattari [1989] 2000; Campbell 2018), north and south of the US-Canadian frontier. The regional atmosphere of Canadian Gail Anderson-Dargatz's novel *Turtle Valley* ([2007] 2008)

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and American Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* ([2000] 2013) reflect an ethical stance of nonbinary, sustainable coexistence: it approaches the farmland and the woodlands, the human species and others. While both novels emphasize the effects of wastification, and the tangible connection between such a factor and communal spirit, they insist on detoxifying identity thanks to a remodeled bond with nature. As the result of their inescapable path to economic progress, their settings like "all localities [...] have to bear the consequences of modernity's global triumph," which makes them participants in what Zygmunt Bauman calls the "third, most prolific [...] 'production line' of human waste or wasted humans" (2004, 6). Significantly, those wasted humans are "the 'excessive' and 'redundant,'" or "the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay" (2004, 5). According to Bauman, the production of wasted humans needs to be read as "an inevitable outcome of modernization," and also "an inseparable outcome of modernity" (5). In the project of establishing and solidly rooting social order, Bauman affirms, "each order casts some parts of the extant population as 'out of place,' 'unfit' or 'undesirable'" (5).

In *Prodigal Summer* and *Turtle Valley*, Bauman's unfit are the flagbearers of a detoxification process articulated via what Félix Guattari terms dissent ([1989] 2000; Pindar and Sutton 2000, 11); namely, a process of activation of social singularity and construction of subjectivity by restoring a mutually nurturing nexus with their natural and cultural habitats. Unlike the economic path promoted by globalization, that bond of interdependency dismisses "degrading and devaluing the previously effective modes of 'making a living'" (Bauman 2004, 5). Instead of participating in and upholding the ancestral dualities that have institutionalized anthropocentric human rights of unlimited exploitation, both novels are nourished by a transversal type of ecology, since "nature cannot be separated from culture, in order to comprehend the interactions between ecosystems," as Félix Guattari states (2000, 28). Accordingly, he continues, understanding how the social and the universal realms function demands a type of reciprocity with the natural that disregards the clear-cut ideological scaffolds legitimating the narratives of capitalism and imperialism (28).

In "The Three Ecologies," Guattari blends philosophy and ecology to coin the portmanteau *ecosophy*. The term assembles the environment, human subjectivity and the social relations given among individuals, and it is governed by a balanced interaction among the intersecting ecologies, to eventually detect and fully exploit alliances among diverse regimes, like animal-non animal, natural-cultural, or signifying-non-signifying (Campbell 2018, 73). At first sight, the ecosophical principles are indebted to the deep ecology branded by Arne Naes in the early 1970s, especially concerning the value of all living beings, be they of practical use or not for humans, and their capitalist designs (Witoszek and Lee Mueller 2017). The matrix of dissensus is, therefore, easily visible to suture the traditional schism between the natural and the social. In turn, the former greatly determines the latter, and the reconceptualization of the exploitative reliance on nature will open an avenue for a reconfigured realm of individual subjectivity and social interactions of unitary solidarity. In light of the pressing ecological crisis, there is need of a response that, in Guattari's opinion, must be of "global scale, provided

that it brings about an authentic political, social and cultural revolution" (2000, 18). According to him, the ultimate aim will then be "reshaping the objectives of the production of both material and immaterial assets" (2000, 18). The global response, however, can hardly conceal its effects on minor spatial scales of locality or regionality, on the one hand, and, on the other, on "molecular domains of sensibility, intelligence and desire" (Guattari 2000, 18). Both scenes have been filtered in different forms by the imbrication of colonialist and capitalist narratives, and their destructive effects on the environment, subjectivity and social relations. Detoxifying the identities of postindustrial landscapes through ecosophy is consequently an insurgent response that, in different forms, Anderson-Dargatz's and Kingsolver's novels implement. While the former sides with a reconfiguration of Canadian settler subjectivity in terms of new attitudes to the damaged environment, the latter implements a personal and collective reinvention, much of which is also nurtured on sustainable relations with the natural habitat. These relations part ways with massive production and deprecation. In both, as Guattari holds in his theoretical explanation, there reigns the principle that "ecology questions the whole of subjectivity and capitalistic power formations" (2000, 35). Additionally, I would argue that the power asymmetry of colonialist ideology is also exposed, and, as happens with capitalistic structures, unveiled in its "sedative limitation" (Campbell 2018, 73).

GARDENING IN EDEN VS. ECOLOGIES OF RESINGULARIZATION

The role of modern mass media in that sedative homogenization of the human collective, involved in its struggle to tame the natural environment, comes to the fore in Kingsolver's fiction shortly after its start. In *Prodigal Summer*, "Gardening in Eden" is the title of a weekly column in the Egg Fork town gazette, which offers practical advice for farmers (Kingsolver 2013, 35).[1] The title resounds with biblical echoes on the preservation of paradise (Gen 2, 3; Eze 28, 31; Gen 2, 8), which needs to be further embellished, once given to its dwellers (Gen 2, 15).[2] Like *Turtle Valley*, *Prodigal Summer* is nurtured by a sense of community stitched by the mastery of the natural habitat, and the maximization of its production, which is partially fostered

[1] Turner (1996) evocatively uses the myth of the American garden to suggest that it is construed on dualities like culture/nature or human/nature, and proposes a revision based on ecological lenses. His analysis uses the biblical gift to humans as the "lords of creation" to eventually suggest that it is imbued with responsibility for nature, and proposes going beyond its vernacular meaning of "patch" and "yard" to incorporate the interdependency between the poles, and introduce the role of humans as mediators. Accordingly, the American garden will use constructively the power to transform nature, evolve, and encompass death and change (Turner 1996, 51).

[2] Given the Christian background of most immigrants to North America, the right to natural resources was legitimated early. This anthropocentric right is established on the premise that "nature has no reason for existence save to serve man" (White 1996, 14).

from the pages of the newspaper. In this sense, most of the Shuswap Thompson area of the Canadian British Columbia, Turtle Valley in Anderson-Dargatz's narrative, and the fictional Zebulon County, US southern Appalachia in Kingsolver's, have turned at the end of the twentieth century into what Cynthia Deitering calls "riskscapes" (1996, 200), that is, spaces whose resources have been "used up" to no longer be "useful," but "harmful" for humans.[3] Deitering's study of the 1980s novel concludes that, in being a reflection of a society self-blamed for having produced postindustrial landscapes, these novels raise environmental consciousness (1996, 202), as Anderson-Dargatz's and Kingsolver's also do.

Both novels set in conversation two opposite impulses: first, one inspired on biblical genesis, which endows humans with free access to the environment, while the struggle with nature reinforces community building; and, second, the ecosophical response to such an unquestioned right in the form of an ecology of resingularization (Guattari 2000, 44), which can only be articulated on personal dissent as a primary step to a reorganization of subjectivity and social structures, and reliant on a nonbinary conceptualization of the relation between culture and nature. Anderson-Dargatz's region of Turtle Valley is a geography of toxic colonialist impulses, since for most of the twentieth century, John Weeks's homestead gradually expanded onto native lands to be a part of a riskscape of forest felling, plagued with farms of fast animal breeding, and exhaustion of productive fields, dependent, in turn, on native low-waged labor.[4] An extenuation of resources advances the contemporary abandonment of the fields inherited by John's daughter, Beth, and her husband Gus Svenson. The low prices of the early twenty-first century global recession are the last straw, which adumbrates the porosity of regional structures to global pressures, be they economic or ecological.

In such a state of affairs, the settler society of the novel and its appropriation of the land and resources have reached a dead end, broadly speaking, and apparent in an all-subsuming malaise. On the verge of the mandatory evacuation required by the proximity of an unstoppable wildfire, Katrine Weeks returns home to help her elderly parents (Goldman 2008): Beth, affected by dementia, and Gus, in the last stage of a terminal prostate cancer. In the company of her nurse sister, Valerie, Katrine triggers a frenzied collection of family possessions to be salvaged from destruction. Such an endeavor will bring about a fertile ground to read back and forth the stories that the

[3] Buell's "betrayed Edens" (1998, 647) reminds of Deitering's "riskscapes" in being part and parcel of an extreme deprecation of resources that has led to postindustrial landscapes of waste, but also to the collective consciousness of having started a major process of (self)destruction, as a first step to environmental consciousness.

[4] *Turtle Valley* is the second of the novels in the trilogy started by *The Cure for Death by Lightning* (1996), and closed by *The Spawning Grounds* (2016), all set in the Shuswap area, Anderson-Dargatz's birthplace. As Kingsolver has done with her Appalachia homeland, Anderson-Dargatz has found there the adequate setting to foster ecological pressures and critically approach the destructive zeal of settler policies, epitome of a slow, steady, but "quiet violence" (Pindar and Sutton 2000, 4; Nixon 2011), against the environment and its first human and animal dwellers.

(mostly) wasteful objects embody (Sugars 2014): the accounts of her grandfather's obsession with expanding the homestead in the midst of a struggle to master the land; his ill treatment of his family and workers, in parallel to a disproportionate zeal to maximize production, exhausting crop fields and farm animals in the process. The final destruction of the Weeks' home will sever the family's bonds to such a place, a meaningless space, once memories vanish. "All of us gave up possession [...] with the loss of my parents' home," Kat tells. "Nothing but the foundation was left, and it was [...] falling away to expose the stones John Weeks had unwisely mixed in the concrete" (Anderson-Dargatz 2008, 285).

The *unwise* foundations of the family's home transcend the literal batch of concrete and stones to mirror the bases of settler identity. Its theoretical analyses in the 1990s insisted on its ambivalent ontology on a precarious binary of self/other, as held then by Slemon (2004, 145). In a wider context, he stated that "ambivalence of emplacement is the condition of [its] possibility" (148), and indeed the supporting demarcation of locality lying underneath is now the target of international pressures that bring ecological causes to attention (Lawson 2004, 151). Settler identity, as Battell Lowman and Barker affirm, is "situated and process-based" (2015, 16), or established on very specific relationships with the environment (Laforge and McLachlan 2018; Stevenson 2016). These relationships, in turn, imply that ecological premises will directly sustain or shake the foundational pillars of that identity, and foster the changes apparent in ecofictions like Anderson-Dargatz's. Preservationist attitudes, or explicit denunciations of ecological disasters rework the settler's bond with the land, beyond that menacing presence that contributed to a primary sense of community in early settling. Kat's research in the family's archive sheds light onto her family's ecocide transversally, hand-in-hand with the testimonies on the regime of domestic terror imposed by her grandfather, and her grandmother's muteness when faced with his molestation of Beth, first, and Valerie, later. Her voicing of the silenced episodes buried within the home's partitions in the form of letters and diaries that escaped John's surveillance attests to that archaeological miniaturist labor: "layer after layer of my mother's renovations hid the home my grandmother knew," Kat explains. "Yet there were vestiges of that past here" (Anderson-Dargatz 2008, 17).

As a paradigmatic ecosophical dissenter, Kat delves into the local and familial history to assemble a renewed subjectivity, uprooted from a collective, traumatic past. Through her research on the rarely engaged disappearance of John Weeks, Kat gathers fragmented "components of subjectification" (Guattari 2000, 23), those minute elements of residual resistance to a dominant narrative of domesticity, public collectivity enforcement, and natural mastery: from her grandmother Maud's creativity in crafting a telling, alternative version in her codified scrapbooks (Tamas 2014), to her affair with the neighbor Valentine Svenson, the most (in)visible effort to contravene John's authority and his implementation of settler-capitalist designs at microcosmic levels. As a narrative of dissent, it is no less relevant the agreed weaving of a story that has disguised for forty years Beth's self-defense murder of her father, considered, in the public eye, an unresolved disappearance in the hills. All of these facts are situated under the spotlight in a present-day quest for historical and contemporary meaning, beyond the model of private domestic subjugation

and public effort to tame nature: "I thought I knew my family, and here were all these stories I had never heard before. Hearing them now [...] left me feeling like an outsider, uncertain of my place within my family" (Anderson-Dargatz 2008, 212).

The self-questioning, transformational process of the Canadian settler, in general–as well as in *Turtle Valley*, in particular–results from conceiving that identity as "interrogative, non-derogatory and disjunctive" (Battell Lowman and Barker 2015, 19), in an attempt at precluding the reproduction of colonialist forms of belonging, to disclose a future beyond exploitative behaviors. As a result, settling is likely to be seen as a process still open to (re)construction in which a direct confrontation with the communal past is required. As such, it demands a renewed interpretation of the liaison with nature: individual resingularization and dissent void the terror to be rootless and the fear to be ostracized by the collective. In literal and metaphorical terms, Anderson-Dargatz's fiction incorporates that panic in its decolonial depopulation forced by the wildfire that consumes the valley. Yet it also reflects that "settler people [...] relate to the land as the site on which their society is built," whereas "indigenous people relate to land as part of an integrated network of personalities" (Battell Lowman and Barker 2015, 53), thus producing an evident ideological clash. The Shuswap natives that resisted the early Weeks' settlement, however, are missing in the contemporary Turtle Valley, after being confined to a reservation. Incompatible with the Weeks' expansionist will, the reservation turns into a space in which alcoholism and unemployment are agents for the manufacture of toxic bodies, a further contribution to a landscape of metaphorical pollution. Significantly, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is the white settlers that are expelled from *their* place, as the local natives were. The acceptance of the white settlers' responsibility in the colonialist endeavor that displaced overpowered indigenes and took up their territory and natural resources situates them in a more sustainable coexistence with a fiercely intervened environment. This does not veil, nevertheless, the existence of "structural and systemic continuities" between "the historical experience of colonialism and the intellectual and cultural situation of Canada today" (Hutcheon 1993-94, 149).

As in *Turtle Valley*, the global impact of economic pressures is a catalyst of ecological uncertainties in *Prodigal Summer*, where the exhaustion of *Eden* looms large over farming and harvesting: animal production is insufficient to pay for its costs, and tobacco crops provide meager incomes for dwellers (Jones 2006), now "piling up their belongings and racing for Knoxville like it was the California gold rush, since [...] they put in that Toyota plant" (Kingsolver 2013, 401; Jones 2006). As Bauman affirms, "[t]he global spread of the modern form of life set loose and put in motion enormous and constantly rising quantities of human beings bereaved of their heretofore adequate ways and means of survival in both the biological and social/cultural sense of that notion" (2004, 7). As a region of farmers, Zebulon is far from immune to the locals' migratory displacement to other areas based on industry, or to the immigration of temporary fruit pickers, whose presence is at times resented by the most hermetic dwellers: they were "young Mexican banditos who came up here for the tobacco cutting and hanging and stayed on until stripping time" (Kingsolver 2013, 398), the local teacher Garnett Walker explains about his neighbor's temporary hired hands. For him, the seasonal presence of these workers was "a sure sign of things

gone out of whack," since now "farmers had so little family to count on anymore that they had to turn to a foreign land to get help with their tobacco cutting and stripping time. You could hear those boys in town, summer or fall, making themselves right at home and speaking in tongues" (398). Although the dualities of first and third world that have historically delineated world cartography are over, as Guattari states, there is also a permanence of the old conflicts now engaged from a multipolar scale: a "Third-Worldization" of massive production coexists in northern countries with an increase of attitudes of racism (2000, 20-21), for example. As a whole, Egg Fork town is a community in which "social ecology will have to work towards rebuilding human relations at every level of the socius. It should never lose sight of the fact that capitalist power has become delocalized and deterritorialized" (Guattari 2000, 33).

Prodigal Summer presents readers with a threefold perspective of its female protagonists, forest ranger, coyote-expert Deanna Wolfe, entomologist Lusa Maluf Landowski Wadener, and organic apple producer Nannie Rawley, in parallel to the views of her antithetical neighbor, and former teacher, Garnett Walker (Hongekar 2018). In the microcosmic community of Egg Fork, the implementation of a social ecosophy will be based on "developing specific practices that will modify and reinvent the ways in which [they] live as couples, or in the family, in an urban context or at work" (Guattari 2000, 22). In different forms, the three women will reinvent their lives and interaction with their social environment, thus "reconstructing the modalities of 'group-being' [...] not only through communicational interventions but through existential mutations driven by the motor of subjectivity" (22). The three of them, as Guattari says, unfold a personal reinvention stemming from "implementing effective practices of experimentation" (22).

For their town folks, Deanna, Lusa and Nannie transit between "attraction and repulsion" to border that assigned category of human waste (Bauman 2004, 22), as their resistant and dissident modes of being and acting implement an unpopular "mental ecology" of socio-cultural causes and consequences. Drawing on Guattari, Neil Campbell uses that term to refer to a body of ideological premises immune to capitalist trends of consumerism, and production, averted by dissent, responsibility and mutuality (2018, 73). As such, it draws on a sustainable bond with human and non-human nature, and is the cornerstone of a reconfigured regionality, "a complex assemblage of human and non-human relations, intersections and 'bloom spaces'" (2018, 79). In different ways, the three female protagonists contribute to that reconfiguration of identity, from the self to the surrounding social sphere in concentric circles. Thus, discontented with her production-based university research and pointless teaching, Deanna abandons faculty life to live alone in Zebulon Mountain, "keeping an eye on Paradise" (Kingsolver 2013, 13), since "people act so hateful to every kind but their own" (177).[5] Lusa, in turn, leaves

[5] The image of a pure, pristine nature diametrically opposite to the human sphere that "green thinking" has created seems to reinforce a binary of human versus nature, which Dirt Theory and its material approach invalidate. Instead, some of its advocates underline that we dwell on earth,

Indiana University lab research to marry Cole Wadener, and is forced to reinvent the Wadeners' ransacked farm when Cole's part-time driving, to make up for the farm expenses, fatally ends in a motorway crash. Shortly before that, his wife "knew this outside job shamed him as a farmer, even though there was hardly a family in the whole valley that got by solely on farm profits" (50). Likewise, the death of her daughter Rachel, shortly after that of her late-life partner, Ray Dean Wolfe (Deanna's father), leaves Nannie aimless, were it not for her decision "to grow apples with no chemicals [...] in flat defiance of the laws of nature" (138), in the opinion of her neighbor Walker.

The three women devise forms to interact communally more effectively, suggested by their anti-anthropocentric position. Watching the natural spectacle outside her hut, Deanna notices that "[a] bird never doubts its place at the center of the universe" (Kingsolver 2013, 55). However, she does question her central position, like her fellow protagonists: Nannie is usually confronted by her neighbor Garnett on such premises: "are we humans to think of ourselves as one species among many", he wonders, unable to understand her denial of the biblical "to subdue the earth (Gen 1, 27-30)" (187), which she implements with her anti-pesticide activism. Together with their labeling as "unfit" (Bauman 2004, 5), they are also resilient. Despite her in-laws' opposition to stop tobacco harvesting, Lusa devises a different social interaction with her habitat, and reformulates strategies of socio-economic survival: "We're sitting on some of the richest dirt on this planet, and I'm going to grow *drugs* instead of food?" (Kingsolver 2013, 124; italics in original), she says to cloak her responsible plans. She reinvents the farm as an ecological goat meat production of timely breeding: kids will be ready for the Arab festivities of Id-al-Fitr, when the meat low season will boost prices, thanks to a New York market that offers local ecological produce. In addition, her business recycles Project H, a failed diversification of county animal production, which flooded local farms with goats. "You'd think I was hauling toxic waste off their land" (238), she concludes, while valuing her neighbors' willingness to hand her their animals, which will clean her meadows naturally, without herbicides. Usually othered for her Arab Palestinian-Polish Jewishness, Lusa's business reorientation partially draws on her transcultural filiations, and socially integrates her, while countering the town's self-centered views. As an in/outsider in the closed circles of family and community, Lusa's doubleness shatters some of the binary oppositions that have legitimated the ethnocentric stances of her fellows and in-laws, and adds up to her attempt at singularization. "Mom said you were... something," her nephew Rickie asserts. "She thinks I'm something, does

rely on it for survival and our interactions are surrounded by dust, resulting from air pollution, or, as Sullivan observes, "the desiccated landscapes of a warming world" (2012, 515). In her view, "[d]irty nature is always with us as part of ongoing interactions among all kinds of material agents (2012, 515). In her obsession with erasing her own imprint from Zebulon Mountain, Deanna seems to ignore such a premise based on the interaction and interrelation that she herself needs to survive, as the end of the novel clarifies.

she?", Lusa answers back. "No, I mean some nationality," he retorts. Although for Lusa "[e]verybody's some nationality," Rickie believes that he is "just American" (152).

Powerfully imbricated in that ethnocentric position, a nationalist discourse counters all these views of singularization, mainly when yoked to a no less powerful rightful exploitation of nature of Biblical foundations. Garnett sustains that Zebulon stands for a promised land for God's elected people, and his own family had a remarkable place among them. Thus, "[i]t was lumber sales from Walker's Mill that had purchased the land and earned his grandfather the right to name Zebulon Mountain" (Kingsolver 2013, 131). According to his personal history of their settling in the area, "[s]tarting with nothing but their wits and strong hands, the Walkers had lived well under the sheltering arms of the American chestnut until the slow devastation began to unfold in 1904, the year that brought down the chestnut blight. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh" (131), he concludes. However, that divine design is far from terminated, as Garnet is convinced that "to restore the chestnut tree to the American landscape was also a part of God's plan" (131). Such is his personal mission, too, and hence his crusade to crossbreed the few surviving trees in the county with a Chinese species, featured by its resistance to the harmful fungus. This literal and metaphorical grafting of the foreign presence in the body of the American icon is all the most symbolic of the instability of the binaries that support ethnocentrism, and tangentially, the anthropocentric interventions that have transformed Zebulon into a postindustrial riskscape.

Consequently, the human and physical landscape of *Prodigal Summer* is prey to the overexploitation to which Deitering alludes, as also is that of *Turtle Valley*. It is significant then that a postnatural catastrophe, be that a summer wildfire in Anderson-Dargatz's novel ("Canada" 2016), or an epic storm in Kingsolver's, announces the end of human deprecation, the erasure of their imprint and their systemic violence, but also a plausible ethical rebirth (Wenz 2003; V. S. and Selvaraj 2020).[6] Accordingly, as Guattari sentences, "[p]erhaps this paroxysmal era of the erosion of subjectivity assets and environments is destined to enter into a phase of decline" (2000, 20). The process of resingularization that Guattari finds feasible in a new approach to nature, and its nonbinary relation with its traditional cultural counterpart also enlightens a route that, in the two novels, conceives of dissenters' transformative identity as detoxic.

[6] For Susie O'Brien (2013), the lack of a tradition of apocalyptic narratives in Canada is due to a different history of settlement, if compared to that of the United States. Thus, while the expectation of economic thrift motivated immigration to both North American territories, those thinking of Canada as destination wanted to "enhance, not to transcend, their position within a pre-existing cultural structure" (180). Unlike their American counterparts, Canadian settlers had no images of an Edenic virgin land to be conquered, as their movement already counted on legal and economic infrastructures, which were perfectly imbricated in the imperial machinery. In the United States, on the contrary, the movement westward was fairly boosted by the premise of a national definition, and very indebted to "claiming a prelapsarian connection to [settlers'] environment, sanctified by natural law" (181).

When the Weeks' impoverished farm of recent times is eventually turned to ashes, roughly coinciding in time with Kat's discovery of a dark side to her family, the ecological disaster pairs the paving of a road for new detoxic identities. Once the place-based signifiers no longer exist, there blooms a nonbinary, ecosophical subjectivity beyond the easy culture/nature divide, one which also endows humans with responsibility, and identity provisionality (Campbell 2018, 83). Just as Kat's (re)search comes across a modified archive of unstable significations, in which so-far unquestioned stories are now unreliable, the settlement/forest duality loses ground. While John's medical files report persecutory ideas strongly motivated by the need for his wife "to stay out of the bush" (Anderson-Dargatz 2008, 106), Kat finds safety in her memories of a natural scene that does not exist anymore. "When I longed for home, it wasn't my parents' dark farm-house that I missed," she remembers, destabilizing the association between safety and the household, "but those trees and bushes: the poplar, spruce, and cottonwood, pin cherry, and Saskatoon that lined the driveway and hemmed the homesite, protecting it from the devilish winds of the valley" (Anderson-Dargatz 2008, 35). However, most of them, the former refuge from John's tyranny, end their unhealthy present when cauterized by fire, like that plum tree that Kat's husband, Ezra, tries to prune. Its trunk "was deeply scarred from disease, so like the photos I'd seen of the brains of Alzheimer's patients" (Anderson-Dargatz 2008, 37), Kat notices.

In consonance with this antibinary design of opposites, the destructive fire of the Ptarmigan Hills, which ends the place-based identities of settlers, has its counterpart in the tamed fire that Jude Garibaldi, Kat's former fiancé and neighbor, uses at work. It is the productive agent of art pottery, as he has reflected in his business card that Kat fingers: "The Jude Garibaldi Pottery. High-fired functional pottery and raku. Distinctive masks, lamps, vases and wall pieces" (Anderson-Dargatz 2008, 25). Similarly, Kat has been able to find in destruction a springboard to tackle a future that prominently parts ways with the wasted lives of her ancestors. In contrast, from her "out of place" stance (Bauman 2004, 5), she makes use of an ecology of resilience to come to terms with a past of ecological abuse in parallel to the toxicity of secrets that hinder her future (see Pedersen 2007). "Why hadn't my parents ever told me the story of how my grandfather was lost?" (Anderson-Dargatz 2008, 7), Kat wonders from a soon to be devastated riskscape of long, quiet interventions. "For centuries the settler society thought it could dominate the non-human world," Laurie Ricou says, because "industrial and post-industrial societies thought it possible to destroy others' habitat and still go on living" (2013, 62). Looking at the family's old flour sifter as one of these relics worth to be preserved from the fire (Sugars 2014), Beth recalls: "you sift flour not only to get rid of lumps and impurities [...] but to aerate the flour [...]. My mother used to say that time works like that: it [...] takes the sting out of events that seemed so painful at the time" (Anderson-Dargatz 2008, 87). In a process of renewal inside out, from her genealogical tree to the environment, Kat's mental ecology of assimilation supplements the lack of ethical liability of her ancestors and present-

day neighbors, those "sitting out on lawn chairs, drinking beer and watching the fire creep over the hills above" (Anderson-Dargatz 2008, 4).

The same lack of ecological respect has accounted for a fast-path production, which has altered the ecosystem's equilibrium and the cultural sense of place, thus breaking once again the binary nature/settlement. Looking at the blackened space that used to host her parents' home, now a space of sorrow and loss (Buell 2005, 62-96), Kat remembers Beth's explanation of the local toponymy: "When I was a girl, the turtles crossed that road to lay their eggs in such numbers you couldn't drive without running over them, [...] this was how Blood Road got its name. Now there are so few turtles" (Anderson-Dargatz 2008, 55). As Kat watches in her driver's rear-view mirror when definitely leaving the few surviving ones still cross, but their announced extinction will soon leave the place meaningless, too, as well as the whole of Turtle Valley, since when nature is deprecated, the signification of settler toponymy fades out. In a similar form, close to the Shuswap Lake, "the town of Salmon Arm was named for the fish that were so abundant that farmers pitchforked them from the lake, and the river that fed into it, to slash into the land for fertilizer" (81). Nowadays, however, "the highway cut the city lengthwise drawing curve-nervous Albertans down to Shuswap Lake and into houseboats. A tourist town" (81).

Like the human diversion of creeks that has disrupted the habitat of turtles in Anderson-Dargatz's fiction, most of that loss of equilibrium is also man-made in *Prodigal Summer*: from the formerly abundant American chestnut tree, felled for its wood quality, to the red wolf, now extinct for threatening cattle, which has produced an unfilled slot in the local chain of species. As farms increased in number, and so did the size of herds, coyotes also became a menacing presence to be controlled, and were eventually wiped out from the mountains of Zebulon. In this sense, "Deanna knew enough to realize that she lived among ghosts" (Kingsolver 2013, 62). Her labor as park ranger has contributed to a partial restoration of the previous balance, and thus, "two years after her arrival, one of the most heavily poached ranges of southern Appalachia was becoming an intact ecosystem again" (61). She acknowledges also that the return of a particular species to this habitat involves the rearrangement of all others, preys and predators. And, in this context, the return of coyotes to Zebulon that she has recently noticed fills the slot vacated by the disappearance of red wolves. "There were hundreds of reasons for each death – pesticide runoff, silt from tilling, cattle in the creek – but for Deanna each one was also a piece in the puzzle she'd spent years working out" (65). Human interventions partially led to the almost extinction of the local chestnuts, filled the valley with goats in a futile attempt at diversifying farm production, and introduced nonautochthonous fodder varieties for their rapid growth. As Garnett Walker states, "whatever happened to the bobwhite? You never heard him anymore" (140). The answer seems to lie with the imported fescue, which grows too thick for the quails to stroll through and feed.

As Nannie does with her ecological antipest strategies, Deanna defends an evenness of opposites, of preys and predators, which self-regulates the working of the system. Her affair with the maverick hunter Eddie Bondo may be read in the light of this *natural* equilibrium of social implementation, based on the premise that "ecologic dialectics no longer imposes a resolution of opposites" (Guattari 2000,

34). Zebulon Mountain brings together the fierce protector of coyotes, able to live "capably on junk [...] useless to humans" (Kingsolver 2013, 63) and breed more under pressure (329), and the furtive poacher who personifies the motto "hating coyotes is my religion" (326). For the socially disgruntled Deanna, many of the redneck premises that Bondo represents are incompatible with her life options: to begin with, his unclear participation in the "bounty hunt" (177), an interstate massive killing of coyotes, which might explain Bondo's sudden (dis)appearance in Deanna's territory. Approaching opposites sustainably seems as effective as adopting ethically the natural patterns for social relations: after Bondo's departure, a pregnant Deanna realizes that their child needs a social environment, and inspired by coyote all-female groups, plans to return to the valley and Nannie's home (Jaggi 2000), leaving aside her period of isolation for a more social enclave.

Likewise, such a symbiosis of otherness and selfhood in blooming spaces of mental ecosophy is also apparent between Nannie, defined by Garnet Walker as "one of these Unitarian witches, whizzing around Egg Fork on a broomstick" (Kingsolver 2013, 145), and Garnett himself, a member of "the Masters and keepers of Eden" (141), in Nannie's view. Their antagonistic ideological stances as regards agricultural methods, religion, morality, and the wellbeing of the Egg Fork community are far apart. Their irreconcilable positions notwithstanding, they are eventually able to find common ground, and cooperate in a mutually supportive effort: while Garnett provides the antique hand-made shingles that Nannie needs to amend her roof, she is happy to grant him the permit to enter her property and help himself to the pollen of the American chestnut trees that still survive in Nannie's side of the fence (376). As Deanna has done, they have been able to appreciate how the self-reliance of opposites in the natural realm leads to an unfailing functioning of the social system, which, in that form, ensures its survival. Their diametrically opposite ecological views do not avert their shared concerns, while they are able to find as well a space for a dialectic struggle that does not aim at any final space of resolution, or the annulment of the second element of the opposition. Their vicinity is at the end of the novel a tangible evidence of how the natural order infiltrates the social when the ecological is given a primordial role, resulting from the blooming sites of intersection. As such, these enclaves feature the irresolution of binaries as a ground of productive coexistence, which permits to think transversally, and reinvent social and economic practices.

While capitalist and consumerist trends have demanded an acceleration of production, which in turn has viciously damaged the landscape of Zebulon, they have also deteriorated the cultural liaisons that individuals used to entail with their habitat and its localized knowledge. With minimal crops produced by depleted fields, and the consequent scarcity of incomes, many Egg Fork inhabitants need to root their subsistence somewhere else, which brings about a palpable disconnection from the land: "everyone around here used to grow their own wheat and corn for bread, plus what they needed for their animals," Lusa explains to her twelve-year-old niece Crystal Wadener. "Now they buy food at Southern states and go to Kroger's for a loaf of god-awful bread that was baked in another state" (Kingsolver 2013, 294). The delocalization of subjectivity that Crys and her generational fellows show is the outcome of the absence of a first-hand contact with farm life, which makes

her unaware of the source of corn or honey, for example. In contrast, the global trends of consumerism that the girl finds quotidian pauperize locals, thus making visible, on the one hand, the wasted, unproductive land that Zebulon has turned into, and, on the other, its role in the production line of wasted humans, as Bauman states. The toxic identity of Lusa's niece, ignorant of the potentiality of her habitat, is common to the younger generations, and not unfamiliar either to some of Lusa's sisters-in-law: Louis, for example, "would tear [the old family's] house down and build something brick with plastic ducks in the yard and a three-car garage" (309). Conversely, Lusa's affective ecology that unmarks the boundary between the farm and the forest, human and nonhuman animals, restores the land a social constituent that further breaks the natural/cultural split.

As part of their detoxifying ecosophy of mutual nurturance, the fictions by Kingsolver and Anderson-Dargatz present readers with human bodies, victims and victimizers, that mirror the toxicity of their riskscapes. *Turtle Valley* pairs the decline of their homestead to that of the owners, with Gus's mortal cancer, and Beth in the midst of her increasing, chronical forgetfulness; Kat's husband, Ezra, still recovering from a recent ictus, is unable to accomplish the most basic chores, is linguistically affected, and identifies himself with one of the few remaining animals in the farm, a lame calf in need of being butchered. Ezra takes upon himself the sacrifice of the ailing calf before concluding that, he, like the calf, is also "a gimp" (Anderson-Dargatz 2008, 219). Kingsolver's novel, in turn, epitomizes that malaise in the cancer that one of Lusa's sisters-in-law suffers. Aware of her impending end, Jewel asks Lusa to adopt her kids, to shortly afterwards exhibit the side effects of an aggressive chemotherapy, which, for her daughter Crys, "makes mama poison" (Kingsolver 2013, 292). While the same illness killed Garnett's wife, Rachel Carson, Nannie's daughter, struggled for life with a neurological and motor disorder of unclear causes: "For a long time," Nannie explains, "I blamed the world, the chemicals and stuff in our food" (Kingsolver 2013, 391), and Garnett confesses that Nannie's dread of pesticides is indebted to the illness of her child. Not in vain, she "named [her] after that lady scientist who cried wolf about DDT" (Kingsolver 2013, 138).[7] The lack of pesticide smell is precisely what the coyote that guides readers in the epilogue of the novel notices while crossing Nannie's solitary orchard, a postcatastrophe landscape as devoid of any human presence as the burned soil of the former Weeks' farm. Both novels, therefore, head to the same ecological path of consciousness rising by intending to resituate humans more ethically in a riskscape of improbable reversibility.

[7] Developed in the 1940s, DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane) was effectively used against malaria, typhus, and diseases transmitted by insects to humans. As well, it was used to control bug populations in crop and livestock productions. Its widespread recurrence as a broad pesticide in the United States resulted in the development of resistance and immunity by a wide range of pests (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of Anderson-Dargatz's and Kingsolver's fictions and their border-crossing impetus presented here abounds into a refashioned conceptualization of nature that transcends dualistic designs to pose a renewed referential axis for the self.[8] From the Biblical interpretation of Eden as a gift given to man, which justifies anthropocentric rights of unlimited exploitation and stitches community consciousness, the emphasis has been placed on the ecological crisis that produces landscapes of waste and the necessity to refashion the position of the subject. The conjunction of the resistance to dominant modes of being and acting associated to Bauman's wasted humans, and the proposal of premises enclosed in ecosophical ethical postulates by Guattari pave the ground for alternative codifications of the natural/social divide, which aim at a more sustainable coexistence of species.

The process of detoxification via mental ecosophy is in both novels also a form to reflect on the wastification of the environment, which additionally opens social interrelations of natural inspiration, contributing to an image of mutual nurturance between the traditionally separated social and natural realms. Capitalist trends of consumerism and colonialist designs of settler ideology are revised while the disruption of the binary dialectics underneath natural overexploitation, in turn, opens a new territory away from present and past toxic attempts at gardening in Eden.

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[8] I am indebted to an anonymous referee for reminding me of how the dismantling of the classical dualities, like nature/culture, has been omnipresent in any ecocritical agenda. The relevance of such an aim is indeed a foundational principle in this paper, in need of being further nuanced for a more strategically effective use.

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OUT OF SPACE AND INTO THE GROUND: CHEMICAL AND WATER POLLUTION IN H.P. LOVECRAFT'S NEW ENGLAND

Catalina Bonati
Independent scholar

Abstract

This paper discusses the influence of interwar environmental practices regarding chemical and water pollution in New England on H. P. Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space" (1927) and "The Shunned House" (1937). It is argued that the literary Gothic tradition which Lovecraft builds upon is influenced by Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and remodeled by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* (1962) as ecoGothic realism. It is discussed that "The Colour Out of Space" extends Lovecraft's personal writings regarding the gap between class and politics in the face of growing wealth disparity. It is commented how in "The Shunned House," Lovecraft presents anti-immigration sentiment while also advocating for integrated and preserved cities free of pollution, and the paper concludes that for Lovecraft, changes in landscape and ecology reflect fundamental changes in New England society that are evidenced by commercialism and lack of proper waste management policies.

Keywords: ecoGothic, H.P. Lovecraft, pesticides, water pollution, wealth gap, Rachel Carson.

DEL ESPACIO AL SUELO: CONTAMINACIÓN QUÍMICA E HÍDRICA EN LA NUEVA INGLATERRA DE H.P. LOVECRAFT

Resumen

En este artículo se trata la influencia que ejercieron las prácticas medioambientales del periodo de entreguerras en Nueva Inglaterra–tanto químicas como de polución de las aguas–en los relatos de H.P. Lovecraft "The Colour Out of Space" (1927) y "The Shunned House" (1937). Se argumenta que la tradición literaria Gótica sobre la que Lovecraft construye su obra está influenciada por *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) de Nathaniel Hawthorne, y es remodelada por Rachel Carson en *Silent Spring* (1962) como una forma de realismo ecoGótico. Se discute que "The Colour Out of Space" es una extensión de los escritos personales de Lovecraft en lo relacionado a la brecha generada entre clase y política al ampliarse la disparidad económica. Se comenta como en "The Shunned House" Lovecraft presenta sentimientos xenofóbicos junto a la idea de tener ciudades integradas y preservadas libres de polución. El articulo concluye que para Lovecraft los cambios en el paisaje y la ecología se equiparan a cambios fundamentales en la sociedad de Nueva Inglaterra, que se ponen en evidencia por la comercialización y la falta de políticas en el manejo apropiado de los residuos urbanos.

Palabras clave: ecoGótico, H.P. Lovecraft, pesticidas, contaminación del agua, brecha de ingresos, Rachel Carson.

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INTRODUCTION

H.P. Lovecraft's work has been a longstanding emblem in the world of cult horror literature and weird fiction, a debated yet undefined literary genre or horror subgenre which tends to evoke "encounters with, and subsequent escapes from, inconceivable monsters whose mere existence drives people mad" (Ulstein 2017, 75). Lovecraft distinctly shaped his own style within the genre, called cosmic horror, which fuels from "an unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces" (Lovecraft and Bleiler 1973, chap. I), and results in the fear of contemplating mankind's place in the vastness of the universe. Lovecraft was inspired by New England's history and its role in shaping the regional lore. The New England folklore of witchcraft, ghost ships, sea serpents, specters, a Portsmouth stone-throwing devil, pirates, and a headless horseman go hand in hand with Puritan figures which have stood over time as representations of religious contention and anticolonial sentiment, such as Anne Hutchinson, Paul Revere, John Winthrop, and the infamous Cotton Mather (Drake 1993). According to Timothy H. Evans, Lovecraft's strong awareness of the New England folklore that can be read in his stories grew from his fear of the destruction of traditional American culture on account of its adapting to new national ideologies. Evans claims that "throughout his adult life [Lovecraft] sought out survivals of colonial European cultures" (2005, 100) and refers to a letter written by Lovecraft in 1928 in which he writes that he has "no respect whatever for the hectic mechanical world which is supplanting the simpler, tradition-anchored world into which I was born" (Lovecraft 1968, 228). Lovecraft romanticized ideas of "preindustrial folklife" in New England, and particularly of its inhabitants of "pure Yankee stock" (108). For Lovecraft, New England's historic Protestant character was linked with the percentage of the population that was "pure American" (109) and he believed that the preservation of history and folklore was threatened by urban decay, development, immigration, and commercialism (110). The result was blatant xenophobia and racism that underlie most of his fiction and nonfiction. The folklore by which Lovecraft was so heavily inspired was, to his mind, susceptible to the social and political context of the time, and although he invented his own lore, this was connected to materials that were already out there, so he built on existing tradition (119).

The main argument of this paper is that Lovecraft embeds social ecological concern and acknowledgment of changing urban and rural policies into the landscape of "The Colour Out of Space" ([1927] 2011),[1] allowing for an exploration of the chemical pesticide industry and the New England environmental policies of the time, and situating it within the fear towards the unknown that is pervasive in the story. The cosmic unknown takes the form of the yet uncharted consequences of chemically polluting nature as well as the industrializing of New England, which for Lovecraft was synonymous with breaking away from traditional colonial lifestyle. As Lovecraft's cosmology was reliant on the intrusion of urban worldviews into

[1] Lovecraft used the British spelling for color (colour) rather than the American spelling.

traditional rural spaces which was a lasting effect of World War I and the onset of World War II, his fictional work was affected in more regards than a purely social or political one. He centers his stories on little known villages, far-flung country farms, or run-down ports or cities that have long since reached their commercial peak and are now in disrepair and have declining populations. Considering the context of war and the ensuing death, pollution, experimentation with mass weaponry and biological warfare that was taking place regionally in the early twentieth century, it seems highly likely that Lovecraft would draw upon these problems when addressing his concern for the welfare of his region. For example, in "The Colour Out of Space," the nature of the effects of the strange meteor are akin to the chemical pollution through pesticides that was just becoming a known issue affecting water and crops in negative ways, and this is further explored in the urban landscape of "The Shunned House" (1937). Adam W. Rome in "Coming to Terms with Pollution: The Language of Environmental Reform, 1865-1915" (1996) describes the awareness of pollution in the late nineteenth century as arising firstly in central urban areas, and then progressively turning to suburban parts. Rome mentions that as early as the 1850s, the problem of pollution became evident through the water contamination of rivers and streams through waste from factories and tanneries (9), prompting studies of sanitation and waste in working-class areas and reviews of public policies of water pollution. The results of these studies and the growing environmental consciousness were then framed as an argument against the benefits of industry (10).

It is important to note that Lovecraft's attention to the environmental policies that surround urban and rural life find basis in the political and Puritan backdrop of Lovecraft's New England upbringing, and his subsequent cosmicist imagination inherently evokes the Puritan Gothic idea of New England as an unbridled wilderness with which society must contend. Tom J. Hillard writes that for Puritans like Cotton Mather the earthly world and the Bible were texts, "one filled with God's created wonders, and the other with the literal word of God–available and open to interpretation" (2013, 107), and consequently was able to call the world a "Publick Library" (Mather and Solberg 1994, 18). The important framework of a fallen and cursed world born of original sin shaped the Puritan view when first encountering the American wilderness that seemed to them to be untamed and unsettled, and Hillard argues that this anticipates the settings for the Gothic literary mode a century later. The Gothic is about "the return of the past, of the repressed and denied, the *buried secret* that subverts and corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit, will not or dare not tell itself" (Lloyd-Smith 2004, 1; quoted in Hillard 2013, 111-12, italics in original). To Puritans, every encounter with nature provoked fear and served as a reminder of a shameful and guilty heritage (112). The Lovecraftian theme of the cosmic unknown lurking in the wilderness of dark forests, farmland, or an abandoned house is embodied in the Puritan typology used to find allegorical connections in the traditional dichotomy of human vs. nature. Ultimately, Lovecraft portrays humans as inseparable from nature through the process of change. Lovecraft's prevailing theme of knowledge hidden away in forbidden places for the sake of humanity also carries distinct traces of the Puritan fear of nature present in the Gothic tradition.

Lovecraft's place in the American Gothic and his distinct social discourse on nature and conservation positions his literature squarely in the lens of the American ecoGothic, which is the study of Gothic literature through an ecocritical lens. According to Andrew Smith and William Hughes:

> debates about climate change and environmental damage have been key issues on most industrialized countries' political agendas for some time. The Gothic seems to be the form which is well placed to capture these anxieties and provides a culturally significant point of contact between literary criticism, ecocritical theory and political process. (2013, 5)

It is slightly different from its European counterpart as "America was already a haunted land: the ghosts born of colonialism and its attendant environmental perversity grew entrenched in the very soil of North America's contested ground" (Keetley and Sivils 2018, 1). The fear of nature and ambivalence towards human authority in the natural world is deeply embedded in New England Puritanism, which in turn influences the American Gothic and ecoGothic studies. The ecoGothic has experienced a recent surge in literary studies within the past ten years, and one prevalent focus of discussion in this research area is centered in the intersection between ecoGothic and ecophobia.[2] This refers to the fear of natural environments which is studied through the role of human agency in the natural world, which is a form of storytelling that is discussed in Lovecraft's nonfiction as well as in his stories. Lovecraft himself has featured in some ecoGothic studies (see, for example, Alcalá González and Sederholm 2022; Evans 2005).

An environmental reading of H.P. Lovecraft's stories alongside some of his letters and essays provides valuable insight into the progress and development of American regional policies in allowing/restricting pollution and how this connects with a regionalist sentiment which Lovecraft permeated with xenophobia. Rural spaces and natural landscapes in Lovecraft's fiction are described in a way that inspires uncertainty and are inextricably tied in with social and environmental politics of the time. He addresses different anxieties regarding these politics; chemical pollution is a featured concern in "The Colour Out of Space" (1927) while "The Shunned House" (1937) speaks on the perceived dangers of urbanization and immigration. The fantasy and science fiction of these stories offer a valuable approach to the struggles of early twentieth century interwar environmental politics and the social attitudes towards the foreign "other" inculcated in Lovecraft's regard to the environment, and serve to strongly criticize a particular ecosocial aspect of the politics of Lovecraft's time. As Alcalá González and Sederholm relate in *Lovecraft in the 21st Century: Dead, But Still Dreaming* (2022), a late increased interest in Lovecraft's works is

[2] The largest studies in the area come mainly from Andrew Smith and William Hughes' 2013 anthology *Ecogothic*, a 2014 issue of *Gothic Studies* edited by Emily Alder, and Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils' 2018 *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, as well as upcoming collections from the International Gothic Association.

associated to the desire to understand the process of how the Anthropocene has come to be and "to what extent we are both responsible for it and directly affected by it" (2) and they remind us that "adaptations of the writer's thought and monsters in our *Anthropocenic* times can make us remember that we are not alone on this planet, but surrounded by countless life forms who are affected by our actions and whose existence is directly related to ours" (3; italics in original). In general, the contemporary approach to Lovecraft has shifted from the aesthetic appreciation of cosmic monsters and shared universes to the anthropocentric approach to ecology. The ecoGothic view leads us to question the apparent duality between human/earth and natural/cosmic forces, and to regard the purpose of fear not only as an element in the cosmicist horror genre but also as a tool with which to approach politically charged environmentalist discourse.

"THE COLOUR OUT OF SPACE"

Marine biologist Rachel Carson begins *Silent Spring* (1962) with "A Fable for Tomorrow," a small passage that is heavy with foreboding and draws upon fantasy-like horror elements (Lovecraftian, even) which drive home the point of how idyllic pastoral suburban Midwest America is affected by the silent effects of the current state of environmental policies. She uses wording like "a strange blight," an "evil spell," and "mysterious maladies" that bring forth the "shadow of death" (2). Keetley and Sivils place *Silent Spring* as a book that is "squarely under the domain of the Gothic" (2018, 2). Through her subtly disturbing prose, Carson pursues a literary mode which can be read as ecoGothic realism.[3] She addresses at length the indiscriminate use of pesticides in crops and how this disrupts the natural life of soil, its metabolic activity, and its productivity; stressing how "potentially harmful organisms, formerly held in check, could escape from their natural controls and rise to pest status" ([1962] 2002, 57). She predicts that in the future even unsprayed crops will absorb enough insecticide "merely from the soil to make them unfit for the market" (59). Carson also insisted that nature was fluid and in a constant state of adjustment, and since humans are also part of this balance, it is inevitable that all too often human-provoked activities shift the scales to our disadvantage (245).

It is possible to regard Carson and Lovecraft as belonging to a similar econarrative tradition. Carson's writings appeal to the rational mind of her readers through her explanations of chemical processes behind toxicity; she also relies on the reader's capacity for empathy towards the landscape in its process of disrepair.

[3] At the end of "A Fable for Tomorrow" Carson goes on to say that "no witchcraft, no enemy action" had silenced nature, but that "the people had done it themselves" ([1962] 2002, 3). She denies the supernatural gothic overture of the passage (as well as the Cold War paranoia that put the blame on communism) yet goes on to point to human action as the perpetrator of an uncontrollable ecological evil, which connects the passage to the idea of human lack of control which is so essential to ecophobia and the Gothic.

An important resource of *Silent Spring* lies in its imagery of ecohorror realism that is shown as the inevitable path if no steps are taken towards rectifying the already existing devastation and industrial farming policies. For instance, Carson begins her conclusion by writing:

> the road we have been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road–the one 'less traveled by'–offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of our earth. (276)

Carson also says that our current stance on the idea of nature was conceived during "the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man" (297). She adds that "it is our alarming misfortune that so primitive a science has armed itself with the most modern and terrible weapons, and that in turning them against the insects it has also turned them against the earth" (297). There is a quasi-apocalyptic vein underlying her writing that relies on the reader's familiarity with ecohorror aesthetics and knowledge of haunted landscapes and so builds on the Gothic tradition that was already known to the reader through fictions that include Lovecraft's. Carson places the focus on the uncertainty of changing environments and in this she resembles Lovecraft's storytelling. In the same way that Lovecraft depends on a shared dread of immigration and industrialism to portray a supposed loss of tradition, Carson anticipates that changes to known natural landscapes will induce an anger and thus an activism aimed at changing current industrial practices. This depiction of uncontrolled change portrayed by both writers intensely criticizes rapid modernization and the ruling government that allows it. Lovecraft's work precedes Carson's fictionalized nonfiction by at least a decade, and parallels between the two can most importantly be traced in different veins of the Gothic tradition that use similar language and techniques to convey apprehension and unease via pre-established horror imagery.

Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space" uses the Gothic language that is also common to *Silent Spring*. The story focuses on a traveler passing the "blasted heath," which stands out for its lack of vegetation and "fine grey dust or ash which no wind seemed ever to blow about" ([1927] 2011, 4). The narrator is told about how the blasted heath used to be a wooded farmland community until a meteorite crashed into the farmed lands of Nahum Gardner in June 1882, and it is described as never cooling down, constantly shrinking, of an ultraviolet color of no previously known spectrum, and unable to be thoroughly examined by the scientists at Miskatonic University. The meteor is soon destroyed by bolts of lightning but leaves behind a residue that seeps into the soil and causes the crops and surrounding woodlands to obtain the unknown stellar color, move of their own accord, and grow luminous and abundant. Animals also begin to behave strangely and become deformed; namely, cows decaying while still alive, rabbits leaping unusually long and high, and a woodchuck with proportions "slightly altered in a queer way impossible to describe, while its face has taken on an expression which no one ever saw in a woodchuck before" (15). Vegetables and meat possess an "unwonted gloss"–luscious but inedible–and the water from the well becomes poisonous (13). A year later this

environment begins to decay, and the animals start to decompose while standing. The Gardner family are also affected, starting with the insanity of Mrs. Gardner, who is locked up in the attic by Nahum; the subsequent madness of Thaddeus, who is also put away and dies in the attic; the disappearance of Merwin and Zenas; and the inevitable collapse of the home after Nahum's demise. Miskatonic professors discover children's bones in the property and witness the unknown color infiltrate luminously through the land before it collects itself and flees into space, but one orb of color is seen to fall back into the ground, settling into the well.

This is the basic plot of the story, and it is interesting to note that "The Colour Out of Space" immediately resonates with Rachel Carson's warnings of contemporary pollution in "A Fable for Tomorrow" through elements such as Lovecraft's use of Gothic prose, the reference to mysteriously sourced pollution, its concern for small-town and rural life, and the overarching ecoGothic vision. For Lovecraft, the use of haunting imagery is a portrayal of the unnaturalness of pesticides and other chemicals used in New England agriculture which inflicts a lastingly fatal effect on the natural environment and human life, with particular emphasis on water. There is an assurance in the story that it is the farmers in the countryside who know well what has happened to the earth, but scientists and researchers are disdainful and oblivious. This creates a gap in the information that is presented to the reader concerning whom and what to believe, and it is over this breach that the sense of the unknown is played upon. For Carson, this same struggle is between nature and factories, and in the form of scientific research and environmental legislation both local and national, and in this gap is where bad policy of overproduction and over-farming would arise. Although the origin of the toxicity in "The Colour Out of Space" comes from a spatial residue which is studied by scientists at Arkham, the phenomenon is explained by the Arkham researchers alongside the folklore and witch legends which are recounted by the farmers. The local farmers and witnesses of the meteor impact are ridiculed in the narrative by police and professors but are ultimately more accurate in their description of the event as otherworldly. There is a love/hate relationship with scientific explanation, but it is popular hearsay that conveys the cosmic horror which carries forward the story and conveys the sense of the unknown.

The gap in knowledge between witch tales and research, or between farmers and authoritative voices regarding harmful substances dumped in the environment, is referenced in Lovecraft's personal writings. His letter to the *Providence Journal* on Roosevelt's *New Deal* in 1934 reveals his dislike of the wealthy chemical industry moguls which made up the extreme right of the American Liberty League in the 1930s.[4] This was an organization of business elites which prospered during World War I with the making of explosives, toxic gas, coal tar, plastic and artificial fibers, dyes,

[4] The American Liberty League included John F. Queeny, founder of Monsanto, and firms such as DuPont, American Cyanamid, Hooker Electrochemical, among many other mostly chemical manufacturers; see Ross and Amter 2012, 18.

and a variety of solvents and industrial chemicals (25) and who were strongly against government interference in the economy and pursued a monopoly of economic power (22). Lovecraft condemned these opponents of Roosevelt's *New Deal* as representatives of the least admirable qualities of "the American way" (Lovecraft and Joshi 2006, 115), who were "getting ahead" (115) through their greed, ruthlessness, and duplicity; he further argued that their "distance covering organizations" (115) had concentrated all markets within a few potent hands, which are:

> the real governing forces of the 'free' republic so hypocritically lauded by their possessors. We know that this centralisation of wealth and power has resulted in the unspeakable oppression and starvation of millions of the unfortunate–and this in the most prosperous times. It is not merely the depression which has proved the dying order unworkable. And we know that the private holders of the needlessly concentrated wealth and power will never voluntarily rectify the conditions which their restricted greed for profit creates. They have had their chance and failed. So the only thing left to do is to regulate them through the pressure of the whole social order. What society has supinely allowed them to [do] in the past, society must control and modify in the future. (115)

Lovecraft calls for rectification of the unchecked wealth gap, increasing day by day in the interwar period of 1930s America. The effects of the production of chemical warfare did not go unnoticed either economically or ecologically by New England society but were ignored by the existing authorities. The widening gap in class wealth and politics is echoed by the Lovecraftian breach between what is whispered among the farms and what is thought to be true by academics. The effect of industrial chemical production and rapidly increasing production plants (over seventeen electrochemical plants in the New York tri-state area by 1918)[5] and the wide-ranging use of pesticides throughout the 1920s and 1930s is incorporated as tragic lore. Water pollution is a common theme in Lovecraft's fictions (which can be exemplified in parts of this story as well as in "The Shunned House"), which incorporate criticism on the synthetic chemical processes concomitantly affecting urban and rural spaces as a byproduct of increasing industry. The following quote suggests that the chemical pollution which governs the ground is also incorporated into the Lovecraftian aesthetics of madness through the consumption of water:

> But it was Ammi, on one of his rare visits, who first realized that the well water was no longer good. It had an evil taste that was not exactly [*fetid*] nor exactly salty, and Ammi advised his friend to dig another well on higher ground to use till the soil was good again. Nahum, however, ignored the warning, for he had by that time become calloused to strange and unpleasant things. [...] Thaddeus went mad in September after a visit to the well. He had gone with a pail and had come back

[5] The New York tri-state area consists of the states of New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey.

> empty-handed, shrieking and waving his arms, and sometimes lapsing into an inane titter or a whisper about 'the moving colours down there.' ([1927] 2011, 22-23)

Lovecraft's perception of modernized New England is a driving force behind his environmental horror. The story plays alongside similar chemical incidents also observed by Rachel Carson, for instance in the case of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal. A chemical manufacturing company in the Rocky Mountain Arsenal leased its facilities to a private oil company for production of insecticides, and then "farmers several miles from the plant began to report unexplained sickness among livestock; they complained of extensive crop damage. Foliage turned yellow, plants failed to mature, and many crops were killed outright. There were reports of human illness, thought by some to be related" (Carson [1962] 2002, 43). In the farms described by Carson, shallow wells were the source of irrigation, as it also is in the Gardner farm. The Denver farm wells were found to contain "an assortment of chemicals" (43), as "the groundwater between the arsenal and the farms had become contaminated and it had taken seven to eight years for the wastes to travel underground a distance of about three miles" (43). Organic yet synthetic substances can be harbored and nurtured in the arms of a natural environment and turned into a cosmic terror that encompasses a local ecological problem such as the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, or Lovecraft's Gardner farm. This is an indicator of how quickly the conceptualization of nature can mutate from a source of tradition and sameness into a form of strangeness simply from local chemical and political action. It is an idea that can be likened to Leo Marx's concept of a machine in the garden;[6] in this case, a mysterious chemical mutator works as an intrusive machine of industry working against Lovecraft's idea of a traditional and pastoral New England, and this creates a new landscape in which the unknown is expressed. Lovecraft's cosmic horror is based on a broadening of the local conception of the world through the destructive intrusion of the cosmic into the regional. This exposes the dangers of which humans are ignorant via highlighting the interrelatedness between the local and the global (cosmic) and the idea that what humans do to their environment is an irrevocable change at global scale. Lovecraft's idea of New England's unique dark folklore has a basis in the expansive cosmic backdrop of the unknown from which Cthulhu and the Elder Ones have come.[7] Yet, he presents the idea that the cosmic unknown starts at rural and local levels, even individual.

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[6] Marx's idea of a machine in the garden (published in 1964 in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*) expresses that the American pastoral ideal, what he calls the American Garden, has never been an unbridled wilderness, but neat cultivated fields and calmly grazing herds of domesticated animals. And yet, industrialization byproducts such as trains, roads, and boats affront the Garden for the sake of scientific progress to a point in which the machine overpowers the Garden. The pastoral ideal remains a "mythical goal" amidst "rampant industrialization" (Woodman 1965, 662) and it is this contradiction which provides the setting and dynamics of American life.

[7] Cthulhu and the Elder Ones are the basis of Lovecraftian folklore, although they are not explored in "The Colour Out of Space." The Elder Ones, of which Cthulhu is presumably part

"The Colour Out of Space" presents continuous commentary on the water problem in relation to the soil and the animal and human inhabitants who drink and eat from it. In particular, the problem of the well and its toxicity is amplified when it is made bottomless because of an unfamiliar and poisonous substance that affects organic matter, either living or dead, highlighting the connectivity of underground water throughout the area:

> The wood of the well-sweep was shining now, and presently a policeman dumbly pointed to some wooden sheds and bee-hives near the stone wall on the west. They were commencing to shine, too, though the tethered vehicles of the visitors seemed so far unaffected. [...] 'It spreads on everything organic that's been around here,' muttered the medical examiner. No one replied, but the man who had been in the well gave a hint that his long pole must have stirred up something intangible. 'It was awful,' he added. 'There was no bottom at all. Just ooze and bubbles and the feeling of something lurking under there.' (Lovecraft [1927] 2011, 42-43)

The manifestation of the residue that has spread from the immediate locality to the further reaches of New England speaks to the uncertain process of continuous change of nature, which is presented through growing limitations of local authorities on problems experienced by the rural community. Water pollution in rural areas carries an inherent separation between farmers and scholars that puts into question the validity of science when pitted against lived experience, and in this argument the Gothic overtures of facing the unknown within the wilderness arise. Lovecraft underlines the disparity between ideology and reality. As climate scholar Robert D. Bullard states, historically, "if you are poor, working class or a community of color, [...] you get less enforcement of pollution laws" (Bullard 2018). Bullard also points out that toxic dumping has followed the path of "'least resistance,' meaning black and poor communities have been disproportionately burdened" (2000, 3).[8]

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of, are sets of monsters/aliens which arrived in Earth long before the existence of humankind and have kept physically to the unexplored places of the world (such as Yog-Sothoth in Antarctica in *At the Mountains of Madness*; originally published in 1936). They can be summoned through invented occult magic which characters often practice in their search for cosmic knowledge.

[8] As a Black scholar, Robert D. Bullard's work carries a particular significance when discussed in relation to H.P. Lovecraft. For Lovecraft, representations of minority communities were done through a "monstrous embodiment" of a "swarming, undisciplined, racially diverse body" (Hudson 2022, 187). Anthony Camara posits that an efficient way in which to approach Lovecraft's racism is by exploring how "writing within the mythos itself can be deployed as a subversive strategy of rewriting" (2017, 24) and that to write within Lovecraft's universe constitutes "an act of 'repetition with difference' that evolves the mythos by exposing it to racial heterogeneity and techno-scientific change" (25). By introducing Bullard's perspective, we can argue, against Lovecraft's belief, that racial or class differences are monstrous and that there is but a single white-dominated narration of the world, and instead argue for a more nuanced vision by which "shifting focus from fears of difference (whether racial, gendered, or otherwise) to the conditions that foster those fears, omnipresent anxiety and danger are relocated to every level of life, not only the universal" (Barbour 2022, 203). As such, we can draw a similarity between current/historical problems faced by Black and poor communities (such as the path of least resistance) and Lovecraft's own perception of eco-classism through disparity

He emphasizes that poor communities as well as communities of color receive inequitable relief funds which are all too often incentivized away from vulnerable areas who are the most affected by pollution and climate change (Buckley 2022). Lovecraft recognized the vulnerabilities of ineffective legislation, and although his racism did not waver, over time his own views on class distinctions became less traditionally conservative. In 1936, he wrote to a friend:

> the more I observe the abysmal, inspissated ignorance of the bulk of allegedly cultivated people–folks who think a lot of themselves and their position [...] the more I believe that something is radically wrong with conventional education and tradition. [...] They have never been taught how to get the full benefit of what they have. (Joshi 2013, chap. 23)

That same year, he also wrote:

> I agree that most of the motive force behind any contemplated change in the economic order will necessarily come from the persons who have benefited least by the existing order; but I do not see why that fact makes it necessary to wage the struggle otherwise than as a fight to guarantee a place for everybody in the social fabric. The just demand of the citizen is that society assign him a place in its complex mechanism whereby he will have equal chances for education at the start, and a guarantee of just rewards for such services as he is able to render (or a proper pension if his services cannot be used) later on. (Joshi 2013, chap. 23)

Although these letters occurred several years after the publication of "The Colour Out of Space," Lovecraft demonstrated an awareness of social inequalities, and whether he thought they came from racial inequalities, from unjust legislation or both, he saw a need for social and economic reform. In the case of the Gardners, Lovecraft ingrained the problem of poisoned water into the class struggle for political agency and access to knowledge between the local farmers and the scholars at Miskatonic. The family has adapted to the toxicity of their farm and over time the changes caused by this problem become less meaningful, as indicated by Nahum's refusal to relocate the well. This relates directly to the path of least resistance in poor and Black communities referred to in contemporary urban planning literatures.[9] Blame is frequently placed on the inhabitants of an area and their supposed choice to live in a space of pollution and discrimination instead of focusing it on government agency or corporate action/inaction. The amount of health problems that occur

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of opinions between Miskatonic authority and poor farmers in "The Colour Out Of Space," which can help in a small way to "contest the fallacious interpretations [...] of theory with which Lovecraft sought to buttress his racial beliefs" (25) by helping to evolve Lovecraftian mythos beyond Lovecraft himself.

[9] Such as *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots* (edited by Bullard 1993), *A Terrible Thing to Waste: Environmental Racism and its Assault on the American Mind* (Harriet A. Washington 2019), and *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (Dorceta E. Taylor 2014).

from this form of urban planning is also disproportionate in poor communities in relation to richer areas (Washington 2019, chap. 2). The inability of the Gardner family to leave, even when warned that the slow toxification is killing them and they should search for groundwater elsewhere, resonates with contemporary problems endured by poor communities. As early as 1927 Lovecraft had written that "the future civilisation of mechanical invention, urban concentration, and scientific [standardization] of life and thought is a monstrous and artificial thing which can never find embodiment either in art or in religion" (Joshi 2013, chap. 23). Though he refers to art and religion, he finds it hard to unite the concept of industrialization with a good quality of life. In this story, the idea of water pollution is linked to the concept of irresponsible scientific activity. The first description of the meteor is given when the Gardners visit the landing site alongside three professors who initially assure the Gardners that their perception of the shrinking, glowing meteorite is not possible. They probe it and take samples to the university, where they subject the samples to various chemical tests which produce unprecedented results, which are described at length. (Lovecraft [1927] 2011, 8-12). From the start Lovecraft wishes the reader to perceive the meteorite as a scientific marvel which is approached with uncertain methods by both scholars and the local inhabitants. The scientific advancement that is represented by the meteorite does not work towards the benefit of the working class due to lack of any regulations. Neighbors of the Gardners know that there is a problem and call the Miskatonic University for help (which is the highest authority in this story). The inaction of both the Gardners and the scientists results in the abandonment of the area at large and its turn from woodland into heathland–specifically, a "blasted heath" (Lovecraft 2011, 2)–which is now planned to become a reservoir for the community. A sense of foreboding is placed on the fact that water pollution, regardless of its origin, dispels the familiarity of the environment and local events–in this case, the conversion of the bottomless well and surrounding farmland into a communal reservoir. This will ultimately result in the poisoning of the much larger New England area, something which can also be evidenced in the pollution by urban growth depicted in "The Shunned House," a story that can be read as an extension of Lovecraft's concerns regarding Rhode Island industrialization.

"THE SHUNNED HOUSE"

Lovecraft wrote to the *Providence Sunday Journal* in 1926: "any mushroom oil centre can have bright lights, skyscrapers and apartments blocks, but only a well-loved seat of centuries of pure taste and gracious living can have the urn-topped, ivied walls, the gabled and steepled vistas [*of Providence*]" (Lovecraft 1968, 74). Timothy H. Evans notes that Lovecraft saw towns and cities as "organic growths" (2005, 107). "Habitations of men should never be *made*–they should be sown, water'd, weeded, tended, and allowed to *grow*," he once wrote (Lovecraft 1965, 287-88; italics in original). Evans remarks that Lovecraft's reputed advocacy for the preservation of historic sites in Providence came from his "lifelong emphasis

on landscapes rather than isolated buildings, which in turn led him to emphasize historic character of neighborhoods and communities, including streets, gardens, hedges, fences, and so on" (2005, 112). Lovecraft's advocacy for a historic and integrated city is not removed from his time; there was a ubiquitous water problem in New England at the time which brought forth the problems of urban planning in the rapidly growing commercial centers in economically depressed areas. There is a strong activism and socially pressured enforcement practices towards the rapidly polluting waters of the Narragansett Bay and the Providence River in the demand for antipollution legislation (Shea and Wright 1937, 493). Oily waste from cotton cloth dyeing, often chemical in origin, was one of the principal polluters of public waters which, together with the pressure of shellfish farmers, caused the doubling of the number of tidal waters closed to fishing.

In "The Shunned House," first published posthumously in 1937, an old house of historical significance in Providence is avoided by the neighborhood residents because of its history of deaths, the "general sickish smell [...], the quality of the well and pump water" (Lovecraft 1937, 420), and more significantly, the "white [*fungus*] growths [...] which [...] rotted quickly, and at one stage became slightly phosphorescent; so that nocturnal passers-by sometimes spoke of witch-fires glowing behind the broken panes of the foetor-spreading windows" (421). The narrator, a friend of the owner fascinated by the house, spends a night there with his uncle, Dr. Elihu Whipple (likely based on Lovecraft's Whipple family) after noticing a human-shaped yellow mold growing in the basement. While sleeping, Dr. Whipple begins to speak in French and sees the faces of the people who had died in the house. As the narrator falls asleep himself, he is awakened by a scream, and he sees a shapeless form of many eyes that emanates yellow light turning to smoke and vanishing up the chimney. His uncle has begun to decay while alive and is turned into a monster-like appearance which then dissolves into the faces of the previous tenants. The narrator runs away and returns the next day to excavate the cellar floor, armed with a gas mask and sulfuric acid. He discovers a strange substance with a very large shape which he believes to be the elbow joints of a monster. He empties the sulfuric acid into the excavated hole which brings up a "blinding maelstrom of greenish-yellow vapour" (436) and turns the fungi to ash, calming the stench of the house yet causing "virulent and horrible fumes" (436) to seep into the Providence River.

The house in appearance (and supernatural tendencies) resonates with Nathaniel Hawthorne's Gothic classic *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) through a number of elements; namely, its allusion to a dark atmosphere that is supernatural in essence, a past that is inextricable from witchcraft and persecution, the fact that it stands alone as a historic building in a town that has moved on with the times, and its integration into a natural landscape rather than an urban one despite being close to the town center. Hawthorne's Gothic timeless house, however, is presented with nostalgia rather than with upfront horror. As Lovecraft said of Hawthorne in "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (originally published in 1927), "supernatural horror [...] is never a primarily object with Hawthorne; though its impulses were so deeply woven into his personality that he cannot help suggesting it with the force of genius when he calls upon the unreal world to illustrate the pensive sermon he wishes

to preach" (Lovecraft and Bleiler 1973, chap. 7). For Lovecraft, Hawthorne was "a gentle soul cramped by the Puritanism of early New England" (chap. 7) who would present fantasy as inextricable from realism. Lovecraft's favorite work by Hawthorne was *The House of the Seven Gables*, and his own architectural inspirations found resonance in Hawthorne's New England house, which was in turn described as:

> One of those peaked Gothic affairs which formed the first regular building-up of our New England coast towns [...]. Of these old gabled Gothic houses scarcely a dozen are to be seen today in their original condition throughout the United States, but one well known to Hawthorne still stands in Turner Street, Salem, and is pointed out with doubtful authority as the scene and inspiration of the romance. Such an edifice, with its spectral peaks, its clustered chimneys, its overhanging second story, its grotesque corner-brackets, and its diamond-paned lattice windows, is indeed an object well calculated to evoke sombre reflections; typifying as it does the dark Puritan age of concealed horror and witch-whispers which preceded the beauty, rationality, and spaciousness of the eighteenth century. (chap. 7)

Hawthorne's appreciation of pre-Georgian homes found an audience in Lovecraft, who identified with the weird atmosphere and historical meaning of these homes that he would also encounter upon his walks through Providence and the country. Lovecraft's fear of eventual industrialization and loss of architectural identity would build upon his horror founded on pre-established New England folklore, and would add another layer of anxiety based on modern urbanity to his literary horror.

In his own fictional building in "The Shunned House," the home used to be a farmhouse that followed the "average New England colonial lines of the middle eighteenth century" (Lovecraft 1937, 418). The urbanization of the area led the farmhouse or semi-farm building to be incorporated into a lane "winding amongst the graveyards of the first settlers" (419) and eventually into Providence itself above "crowded Cheapside" (422). Although this house is within the town center, it is the only one to suffer from toxicity. Its past of French inhabitants whose unpopularity in the town transcended "mere racial and national prejudice" (427) and built upon their "ardent Protestantism" (427) directly underpins the house's physical downfall into an unsanitary residence. Lovecraft lamented the "decline of New England at the hands of foreigners" and would often express in both poetry and prose a "naive glorification of the past, [and] the attribution of all evils to 'strangers' (who seem to have ousted those hardy Anglo-Saxons with surprising ease)" (Joshi 2013, chap. 11). In this story, the main character digs a hole by the hearth and by filling it with sulfuric acid he causes a "vapor which surged tempestuously up from that hole as the floods of acid descended" (Lovecraft 1937, 436), admitting that this is what causes the "yellow day" (436) as it is later called in Providence. Despite public perception, the "yellow day" did not just come from fumes caused by factory waste dumped in the Providence River and/or from a "disordered water-pipe or gas main underground" (436), but from the narrator's action of clearing the house of an ambiguous monster and purging the earth of any traces of its immigrant inhabitants. Lovecraft's aggressive antipathy for other races that were not Anglo-Saxon is well

documented in his essays and personal correspondence. Anthony Camara refers to a letter written in 1924 in which he refers to the immigrant residents of New York City as "vaguely molded from some stinking vicious slime" (2017, 30), as one among many examples. He extended his personal feelings onto his concern for national welfare, saying: "the policy of inviting 'oppressed' races is fatal to national welfare, since these elements are almost always biologically inferior [and] therefore unfit to uphold the institutions established by elements of greater stamina" (Lovecraft 1976, 20). The fact that the main character is Lovecraft's fictional relative (due to his connection to the Whipple family), or perhaps even Lovecraft himself, further underlines the story's idealization of racial erasure in favor of the supposed Anglo-Saxon history of Providence with which Lovecraft identified himself. In this story, the main character does not just expel the immigrant past of a traditional house, but also cleanses the toxic waste dumping in the city waters by factories. It also happens that by the end of the story the house is exorcized and released from its ghosts now that it is owned by a family with the very Anglian name of Harris. Lovecraft reflects almost explicitly his belief that urban development, commerce, and immigration are the ruin of tradition, and at the same time displays the classist view that pollution is a product of the people who live there while also recognizing loose pollution policies in Providence. Unlike "The Colour Out of Space," toxicity is built on the idea of tearing down old New England tradition for the sake of urbanization rather than on the devastation of natural landscape through chemical byproducts of industry (reaffirmed by the implicit references to Hawthorne and Puritanism throughout). Lovecraft explicitly references his personal perception of immigration as detrimental to society, and places it as a factor of water pollution in Providence to illustrate how growing commercialism provokes deficient urban planning and policymaking which not only tear down traditional buildings but also play a hand in uncontrolled factory waste dumping (Shea and Wright 1937, 493). For him, problems of water pollution and urban planning within a city are inextricable from the problems of pesticides in farmlands as they work in equal measure to modernize New England and introduce the region to new forms of social and ecological politics.

Much as in "The Colour Out of Space," "The Shunned House" presents a pessimistic commentary on the unintended environmental consequences of human actions that are allowed by local policies and underlines the important role that society has in advocating for more conscious approaches to city planning, social securities, use of pesticides in rural areas and water planning and protection. Lovecraft admits that even though lore and tradition are important tools with which to abstractly prevent an industrialization of thought, there is an environmental crisis constitutive of a significant problem which humanity must confront. Lovecraft reminds his readers that the interconnections of the elements composing the environment do not care for the natural or unnatural origins of toxicity and that the pollution resulting from human activity has become inseparable from natural processes.

CONCLUSIONS

The unknown in the stories of H.P. Lovecraft, such as a color out of space or the supernatural haunting of an old house, is often a scientific or political event that is expressed as dangerous to the environment and is also a commentary on local waste policies. The degree of extermination reached by pesticides and pollution is labeled by Lovecraft as unprecedented and detrimental not just to the environment, but also to society at large, and is associated with a lapse in wealth distribution and increase of immigration. In "The Colour Out of Space," the orb of color that does not return to space but instead remains in the locality suggests that what results from the interaction between a synthetic compound and organic nature is something new that produces unpredictable consequences from which there is no likely return. This idea is reminiscent of Leo Marx's machine in the garden. In this case, the interaction between a looming cosmicist machine–or an urban machine of synthetics–and the pastoral garden results in the creation of an unbridled wilderness in which the unknown lurks.

The Gothic and ecoGothic literary traditions are unique markers of human relationships with the environment and through their longevity as artistic genres they can portray specific evolutions of ecological thought. For example, Rachel Carson writes about the effects of DDT on rural farmland, which came to popular use through heightened scientific research for the military during the World Wars, in particular World War II (Lear 2009, chap. 8). The changes in ecology produced by pesticides extend a criticism towards sociopolitical attitudes towards allowing unregulated federal enforcement of spraying practices. Inter-war environmental policies provide the circumstance in which to examine the state of the American chemical and agricultural research, and this can be studied alongside its influences into the horror genre and environmental humanities research fields. Lovecraft and Carson rely on inter-war and post-war periods to pinpoint a source for a kind of literary horror which emerges from technophilic practices that mirror the influence of embedded social ecophobia in policy making. Hawthorne, too, would manifest the social anxieties of the antebellum period before the American Civil War at the time of publishing *The House of the Seven Gables*, in which the secession of Southern States worked as the immediate sociopolitical tensor, reflected in the novel in terms of confusing social relations, uncertain authorities, and disputed land seizing.[10] Like his literary successors, Hawthorne placed importance on awareness of societal change by contrasting the changes in known landscapes to shifting social relations in his Gothic fiction.

"The Colour Out of Space" and "The Shunned House" are auguries of environmental problems that are relevant to this day. The health-threatening toxic residue that arises in shunned spaces in the community due to negligence–the

[10] Some of his thoughts are penned in his 1862 essay "Chiefly About War Matters by a Peaceable Man" published in the *Atlantic Monthly* (Miller 1991, 471).

Gardner farm or the old, shunned house–resonates in present-day environmental policies, and an environmental reading of these stories can provide a step towards tracking the progress of American regional politics and social attitudes of rural ecological concerns through literature. Lovecraftian horror allows the contemplation of whether the outcome of pesticides and pollution and their effects on society are avoidable. Arguably, Lovecraft was rather pessimistic about the future of New England when considering stories of hazard such as "The Colour Out of Space" and "The Shunned House," but he was insistent on the power of change through social pressure and mass awareness of the political context, as is evidenced in his own personal writings to journals and published essays. "The Colour Out of Space" serves as a severe warning against spreading manufactured chemical substances in nature and proposes that their effects on Earth's systems cannot be measured. Lovecraft's cosmic horror depicts how the scientific involvement of humanity in the balance of our planet almost certainly results in disaster, whereas the cosmic unknown can be seen as an invitation to show humanity its powerlessness in the process of tampering with the Earth, and by extension, showcase the meaninglessness of our existence and our science in the face of the cosmos.

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WASTE AND TEXTUAL EXPENDITURE IN WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN'S *IMPERIAL**

José Liste
Universidade da Coruña

Abstract

As a consciously transgeneric text, William T. Vollmann's *Imperial* explores the delineated realities of the US-Mexico border region by zeroing in geographically, culturally, historically, even literarily via his own self-reflexive writing on the border county named Imperial. Vollmann's intense focus on one specific area produces a sort of Pynchonian excess, melded with minimally precise "delineations," that seeks a never quite settled ethical and aesthetic resolution of a reality where the border region is both literally divisive and ceaselessly porous. Such literal and literary 'mapping' articulates ambivalent strategies of material and textual wastefulness, it tracks toxic waste disposal and reckless waste abandonment, and it brings to light the conscious, exploitative wasting of human bodies and marginalized communities. But can a literary work of nonfiction invert the very wastefulness of waste through its own textual excesses? How does one confront an empire of waste through the very strategies of wastefulness?

Keywords: William T. Vollmann, waste, textuality, imperialism, border.

DESHECHOS Y DERROCHE TEXTUAL EN *IMPERIAL* DE WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN

Resumen

Un texto conscientemente trans-genérico, *Imperial* de William T. Vollmann traza las realidades delineadas de la región fronteriza entre los EE. UU. y México, centrándose en el condado de Imperial. Lo hace tanto geográfica como cultural, histórica y también literariamente a través de su escritura autorreflexiva, elaborando una especie de exceso pynchoniano en la que convergen sus 'delineaciones' a la busca de una resolución ética y estética de una realidad cuya frontera es literalmente una divisoria y, a la vez, transgredida incesantemente. Su cartografía literal y literaria se fundamenta en estrategias ambivalentes de desperdicio material y textual; su texto persigue la gestión e irresponsable abandono de desechos tóxicos; pero también esclarece el intencionado y explotador desgaste de cuerpos humanos y comunidades marginales. ¿Puede una obra literaria de no-ficción, como es el caso, invertir el proceso de desperdicio de lo residual por medio de su textualidad excesiva y desperdiciadora? ¿Cómo se enfrenta uno a un imperio de deshechos, el deshecho de lo imperial, a través de las mismas estrategias de desperdicio?

Palabras clave: William T. Vollmann, deshechos, textualidad, imperialismo, frontera.

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William T. Vollmann was once touted as the continuer of the Pynchonian line of postmodern rhetorical excess and thematic exuberance. Now, after nearly forty years of textual expenditure sans editorial concessions and a plethora of strikingly transgeneric offerings, he has acquired his own independent mantle of literary maverick and quite literal risk-taker. Famous for placing himself in the very positions, physical and existential, of those he goes on to depict through his fusion of the literary and the journalistic–whether smoking crack with prostitutes in San Francisco's Tenderloin district, haplessly aiding the mujahideen against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, barely avoiding sniper fire in besieged Sarajevo, or nearly freezing to death in the Arctic in order to identify bodily with the fateful experience undergone by the Franklin expedition–Vollmann, through his poetics of empathy and his stress on the empirical and archival research that might give it some sort of historical and experiential grounding, has also built up a reputation of ethical commitment within and to the stories he tells.[1] These stories are, recurrently, tales of the other, the marginalized and wasted other, the others consigned to the literally waste territories of both historical and contemporary human existence.

Appropriately, in charting the terrains of the discarded and the refused, Vollmann also formally mimes the explosively burgeoning waste of the way we live now through a prolific and, some would say, profligate textual productiveness that seems to seek redemption from waste in waste, through the apparently wasteful textuality of his work itself. In the words of one commentator, "their excess is central to their essence" (Rhodes, ed. 2015, 345). Seen in another way, to borrow the words of a preeminent 'rubbish' theorist, "the best books about waste are actually about everything else" (Thompson 2017, 13), a statement that Vollmann's work applies to the letter. Waste is always excessive to the categories that strive to capture or exclude it. This is true because, as has been repeatedly asserted, "anything and everything can become waste" (Kennedy 2007, 1) given that "all wastes result from the inveterate human habit of evaluation" (2). Waste and its cognates, as Mary Douglas famously averred, are a human creation, one consequent upon our ingrained ritualization and rationalization of the real: "Dirt was created by the differentiating activity of mind, it was a by-product of the creation of order" (Douglas 1984, 159). Thus, if "dirt is not outside of order but what makes systems of order visible," then "[w]aste becomes a social text that discloses the logic or illogic of a culture" (Hawkins

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[1] Though no guarantee of literary value, of course, fellow writer Madison Smartt Bell has remarked that Vollmann "has turned his presence within his work into a declaration of engagement. Instead of entering the work to declare that it is a trick, he stands inside it as a witness–vouching for its authenticity. With all his open manipulations, Vollmann never tries to show you that he is a clever imagination who is inventing something. He always tries to show that he is a witness who has seen something" (Bell 1993, 44). As Sam Anderson notes in a review of *Imperial*, "I write my heart out on everything I do," Vollmann has written. It's a very rare quality, and it should be subsidized, whatever waste might come along with it" (Anderson 2009, 3). 'Whatever waste might come along,' both thematic and formal, is precisely the point as Vollmann's unselfconscious irony suggests.

2006, 12).[2] From this vantage, waste is "about everything else" and a literature of waste–not one just about waste, but one which is ostensibly and intentionally 'wasteful' in its very textuality–must always be excessive in the hope of harnessing the discarded and derided potential of much that has been labelled waste. Such a literature proposes a critical revelation and revaluation of the usually hidden wastes of our contemporary capitalist culture, one whose commodity production is predicated upon the invisible trashing of vast extensions of territory, raw materials and human lives.[3] As Michael Thompson presciently foresaw, waste, rubbish, trash or garbage are "value forms," not inherent characteristics of things or living beings, and hence are "not only representations of social relations but help maintain systems of power and hierarchy" (2017, 8). If "diving into rubbish is essential if we are to understand who we are, how we relate to one another, and what we are really capable of" (Thompson 2017, 13), then Vollmann's literal submersions into the landscapes, diminishing waterscapes and human and historical geographies of the Coachella, Imperial and Mexicali valleys–accidents of historical and political nomenclature that together constitute the "entity which I call Imperial" (Vollmann 2009, 628)–are an engaged recognition that "the advent of waste is rich with revelation, a thing of pedagogical potential that allows the everyday, the hidden or the unexpected to be suddenly unveiled" (Viney 2014, 30).

Such an 'unveiling,' sometimes only intuited, often frustrated in contrast to the arrogant and violent "delineations" that make up the self-evident real, becomes Vollmann's ultimate purpose in his exploration of marginality and waste, whether material, human or literary. The case of literary waste, for example, is explored through the recurrent textual moments in which the work lays itself bare self-consciously to reflect on its ultimate utility and/or terminal wastefulness. Two examples may suffice here to illustrate Vollmann's arguably post-postmodern textual self-consciousness, a doubling of self-consciousness that pits textual representation against itself in an attempt to breach its referential dead-ends. Vollmann opts for an asymptotic approach to an "unknown" but not necessarily "unknowable" Imperial County, mimicking the very abstractions or "delineations" that have brought it into empirical existence (for the empiricist ideal, he realizes, is itself an imperial notion in its reductive totalizations):

> This book also forms itself as it goes. Fields, hay-walls, towns and fences comprise my thoroughfare; I have no sites to visit in Imperial County or out of it; I'm

[2] Gay Hawkins usefully spells out the ethical and political consequences of seeing waste in this way: "The shifting and contingent meanings for waste, the innumerable ways in which it can be produced, reveal it not as essentially bad but as subject to relations. What is rubbish in one context is perfectly useful in another. Different classifications, valuing regimes, practices, and uses, enhance or elaborate different material qualities in things and persons–actively producing the distinctions between what will count as natural or cultural, a wasted thing or a valued object" (2006, 20).

[3] "Materially, [including the materiality of human bodies and selves,] garbage represents the shadow object world, the leftover of a life, a world, or a dream, created by the voracious speculations of commodity production and consumption" (Scanlan 2005, 164).

> free to chase after white birds in green alfalfa fields as long as the heat fails to discourage me; I don't care that I'll never finish anything; my delineations and subdelineations resemble those severed palm-fronds bleaching in the white sand at the border wall. (162)

Openness and endlessness mark both Imperial's geography and Imperial's textual depictions but what frustrates representational closure may forward ethical responsiveness:

> a purely statistical, objectively truer approach, by occluding the humanity of dispossession, and thereby obstructing our grieving, partakes of the worm-ball character of a fallen palm tree's inner flesh; we can touch its complex deadness, know it in a way that a living thing, for instance a woman in a serape, can never be known; the only way to approach knowing that woman in a serape, unless you live with her, is to invent her; but can knowing the dead palm tree profit us as much? I've written that Imperial widens itself almost into boundlessness, and so does my task. (175)

Vollmann's *Imperial*, a decade in the making and labelled by Vollmann as his own Moby Dick, a rambling, multifaceted and generically diverse exploration of the Imperial Valley in California straddling the Mexican-American border, seems a shining or blinding example, given the region's searing desert sunlight, of this prototypically American literary urge to "recreate in language the unresolved nature of the place" (Rhodes, ed. 2015, 196).[4] Any place would probably do for such a purpose, but Vollmann's "Imperial,", as its name rather brashly proclaims in its naïve unselfconsciousness, stands in for America itself, specifically for the favored materialization of the American dream as the "triumphalist saga of the Ministry of Capital" (Vollmann 2009, 422).[5] In arid America, however, such a materialization

[4] "Vollmann has reportedly called the book his Moby-Dick and, like the white whale to Ahab, the region practically throbs with monomaniacal meaning. It's an object lesson in American greed, a parable of the arbitrariness of borders, a contact zone between radically different cultures, and a symbol of just about everything" (Anderson, 2). Throughout my text, "Imperial" refers to the Californian county and geographical entity that Vollmann describes; when in italics, "*Imperial*" refers to his published text.

[5] Vollmann's "Seven Dreams" series, awaiting publication of its final volume, novelizes in semi-mythical but also in an encyclopedically, if idiosyncratically, documented fashion the historical and oneiric self-fashioning and simultaneous othering of the North American continent. A revisioning of American dreams, the dream of America, from the perspective of those consigned to history's waste bin, it bears out the overhauling of the history of 'imperial' America by recent historians. In parallel with *Imperial*'s ambivalently resigned meditations on the ravages of American dreamings, the novel cycle thus concords with the views of the likes of Adam Burns who, alluding to Thomas Jefferson's own dream of an "Empire for Liberty", asserts that the "idea of the United States as an 'empire' was there from the very beginning" (2017, 9); indeed, the "very founders of the United States had made clear their vision for this new nation. It was to be a transcontinental empire" (25). Similarly, Richard H. Immerman bluntly states that "America is and always has been an empire" (2010, 4), built as such "through either direct conquest or informal control" (6) as he shows in a review of American statesmen

has inevitably become a betrayal of such hopes for if "Imperial is a map of the way to wealth" (422)–and it was a map-making gesture, the fictional tracing of the border after the Mexican-American War that led to the factual divergences on either side of that real fantasy of division–then the "delineations" and "subdelineations" intrinsic to that charting and which Vollmann formally parodies in his own idiosyncratic textual divisions have become the cynically still authoritative yet fading traces of that misguided desire: "the map has sun-bleached back to blankness" (422). Vollmann is fully aware of the power of abstractions, including the abstraction that is his own text given its unavoidable distance from the reality it strives to bring into view. But this textual self-awareness provides him with a sometimes-despairing disengagement from his own text that may open it out to that which it seeks engagement with. In the process, by in some way sabotaging his own representational objectives, his textual 'wastes' may enable the confrontation with the wasting of the real that official, unseen abstractions perform: "People say it was miraculous that Christ walked across the water, and yet they don't think twice when the same is performed by this entity invisible everywhere except in its representations, whose substance is comprised of equal parts imagination, measurement, memory, authority and jurisdiction! Delineation is the merest, absurdest fiction, yet delineation engenders control" (44). As desert territory forcefully irrigated into Edenic abundance, Imperial harbors within it the taint of imminent, if not immanent, paradisaical expulsion in its reckless ransacking of water resources and ongoing depletion of the land's salubrity. It has become a virtual parody of this particular American dream, this taming of the desert by an imperial self, the hollowness of which it ironically projects into its expanse of waste: "'that vast feeling,' that dream of emptiness as wholeness" (1181).[6] The inevitable corollary of this imperial notion of divine omnipotence, to make something out of nothing, is the inevitable conversion of something into a no longer utilisable 'nothing'; that is, into waste.

Just as Vollmann at times envisages his book as a textual analogy of Imperial–"The book's a little like the Imperial Valley itself: pathless, fascinating, exhausting"

involved in this quite conscious policy of continental expansion and later overseas influence. Julian Go, in a comparative analysis of British and American imperialisms that questions and ultimately discounts the notion of American exceptionalism, makes the point that "[d]enying empire is simply part of the unique modus operandi of American empire itself" (2011, 2).

[6] Adam Burns stresses the inherent expansionism necessary for the ongoing construction of America and intrinsic to any imperial project. Already present in the Founding Fathers' dreams of an agrarian republic, such territorial depredations really take off with the Mexican-American War of the 1840s, the war that set the current position of the southwestern frontier. It was also the moment that the ideological doctrine of Manifest Destiny comes into its own as a naturalization of territorial greed (Burns 2017, 25). Richard H. Immerman points out that early proponents of this expansionism such as John Quincy Adams already foresaw its dangers, particularly its undermining of that key ideologeme substantiating such territorial claims, 'liberty': "Adams foresaw that expansion, the putative savior of the American empire, would become its greatest enemy" (2010, 87). Vollmann's *Imperial* traces this hollowing-out of the myth and its consequent emptying of the territorial ideal itself within the confines of the aptly named Imperial Valley.

(Rhodes, ed. 2015, 176)–the valley, in turn, seems a geographical condensation of the varied and ambivalent meanings and etymologies of the term "waste" itself. Derived originally from the Latin *vāstus*, the word applied to land that was considered "waste, desert, unoccupied" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). While initially referring to areas that were uncultivated and uninhabited, it gradually took on more negative overtones implying the impossibility of cultivation and habitation, the impression of devastation and ruin and, hence, the worthlessness and profitlessness of investment in such sites. Such connotations were also applied to persons and things, leading to modern conceptions of waste as discarded matter or refuse, including human "dregs." But the term also refers as a noun to what are considered forms of "useless expenditure or consumption, squandering," a moralizing acceptation that responds to the dogma of efficiency and the profit motive of a modern, capitalist culture. In this case, waste alludes to a "profusion, lavish abundance of something" (*Oxford English Dictionary*) that remains useless and unexploited in the eyes of instrumental modes of thought. Throughout *Imperial* and through his textual convergences of literary self-consciousness, empirical documentation and empathic projection, Vollmann constantly blends the notions of waste, vastness and the west (America and Imperial as epitome of its self-betraying imperial dreams) into an amalgam that refuses full delineation. Or, rather, it subverts it through its harboring of secrets, the 'other' side of what is or can be represented and charted. The ostensible subject of his fluid text, for all its Melvillean aspiration to exhaustiveness, becomes for Vollmann the "center of all secrets and therefore center of the world" (2009, 628). Imperial's imperviousness to full disclosure is the source of secrecy or, rather, is the secret itself, the secret of the wastes that reality refuses so as to constitute itself in nonsecretive transparency. The waste of the real, real waste, secretly yet openly permeates the delineated grids of what we call reality. There is then a secret to waste or, we might say, waste partakes of the ambivalence of secrecy; like what is secret, it is often an 'open secret,' unadmitted and inadmissible public knowledge, apparently fully revealed once acknowledged, yet always retaining a secretiveness in its stubborn yet mute obstruction to representational containment and disclosure. Waste is just waste, that which lies beyond the bounds of any further classification, but, as such, it clogs up classification and representation in its own waste. Perhaps we should see it as a shapeless embodiment of representation's other, the real itself that cannot be fully enclosed within the conventional bounds of what we call reality.

That ambivalence contained within the term 'waste' is what Georges Bataille latched onto in his writings on sacrifice and expenditure as rebukes to staid bourgeois culture. Without reaching the extremes of the Bataillean diatribe against the ends-oriented, dehumanizing economy that exalts productivity over pleasure–"humanity recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally, but it excludes in principle nonproductive expenditure" (Bataille 1985, 120)[7]–Vollmann does seem

[7] Fittingly, as one of the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s acceptations of the term shows, "waste" is now seen as the unavoidable product of our ironically productive economy, an economy whose

to participate in the Bataillean attraction to the excessive and the eccentric, to the hidden pleasures of waste, in other words. Like Bataille, his empathetic reflections on desert wastes and the wasted humanity that toils there proclaim that "human life cannot in any way be limited to the closed systems assigned to it by reasonable conceptions" (Bataille 1985, 131). One such "closed system" is found in the grid-like delineations of the deceptive agrarian dream that crisscross Imperial, an enclosure undermined by such real-world phenomena as water seepage, Chinese tunnels and illegal border crossings. Such undermining is what draws Vollmann's interest, for it evinces the unfathomable nature of the real/Imperial that counters its instrumentalizing wastage: "Imperial is a place I'll never know, a place of other souls than mine; and how can anyone know otherness?" (Vollmann 2009, 114).

Imperial County, for all its corporate wealth–more cynically and realistically, because of its corporate wealth and corporate banishment of the individualist agrarian dream–is now the poorest county in California, still bettering in this its Mexican sister-region across the border that remains the source of its necessary surplus of recurrently unemployed, illegal immigrant labor. In this system, of course, human destitution, waste, and prosperity are not opposites but complementary aspects of the same thing. Indeed, in such a system, prosperity or just plain survival is only possible via what Vollmann provokingly describes as "prostitution," a phenomenon about which, in its literally sexual version, he proves to be quite knowledgeable. The border itself, he muses, far from being the policed margins of the system, is actually its very center and, in human terms, is embodied for him in the figure of the prostitute: "Capitalist Axiom Number 807: Call girls set the fashion" (2009, 857). The prostitute becomes for him a sacrificial trafficker in waste humanity, a trashing of human agency and possibility but also a redemptive figure in her embodiment of waste, a figure that he mythicizes in troubling fashion.[8] We live, he says, in a "culture of prostitutes" (143) for such is the state of things where "we all do things we would not otherwise do just to survive" (106-107). This is not

main 'product' is waste: "Refuse matter; unserviceable material remaining over from any process of manufacture; the useless by-products of any industrial process; material or manufactured articles so damaged as to be useless or unsaleable." This trash economy, of course, as Greg Kennedy suggests, relies on an often-planned devaluation of objects that is ultimately also a dehumanization: "the neglect of our worldly needy nature brought about by our carelessness toward things as ultimately the waste of our own complex human being" (2007, 9). The production of waste also produces a wasted humanity. This is precisely Zygmunt Bauman's point in his explorations of modernity's, that is, contemporary capitalism's human costs: "The production of 'human waste', or more correctly wasted humans (the 'excessive' and 'redundant', that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay), is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity" (2004, 5).

[8] "The ancient Aztec divinity Tlazoltéotl, Goddess of Filth, could cleanse Her worshippers of coition's sins, but only by means of such rigorous penances as passing a twig through a hole in the tongue twice a day. I worshipped a Tlazoltéotl Who was filth Herself, a Tlazoltéotl of acceptance, not penance, a living blend, as are all of us, of excrement, sunlight, blood and watermelons. That was one of the reasons that I have loved street prostitutes ever since I was young. And what was the border but another incarnation of Her?" (Vollmann 2009, 1080).

necessarily to belittle through idealization the victimized status of the prostitute by abstracting prostitution into a common human state. Rather, Vollmann strives to exalt the prostitute's agency and responsibility, her very human status, through her conscious complicity with such a system, a complicity shared usually unwittingly and unquestioningly by all he suggests:

> The existence of the sad, sad Mexican whore (sadder than I think she would have been in Mexico) in the median strip of Imperial Avenue proves nothing for or against the ejidos or the American family farm or silver dimes exploding from the water farmers' sprinklers. She waits for cars and trucks, hoping to be saved by the ministry of capital. (821)

But it is precisely in the "destitution" of "prostitution" that he will see signs of both the tragedy and the potential of waste and the wasted: as he says of a Mexican prostitute, "she became emblematic to me of Imperial's troubled not to say polluted fertility" (1110).

Imperial traces this "polluted fertility" of waste in its multiple modes, literal, human and literary. We do literally find on the Mexican side of the border what we expect to find, the "no make-believe" of "shanties and shacks" (697), the waste populations that fertilize the empty, anonymously productive fields of the other side and that receive on home soil the polluting effluents of this imperial enterprise: "*We're the garbage can of the United States*" (1079, italics in original). This is the border system that passes off environmental ravaging as economic advance for all. As Sarah Hill succinctly summarizes it in a study of its environmental impact, in 1966 "the Border Industrialization Program opened the border region as a free trade zone where U.S. firms were welcomed to build export-processing factories (maquiladoras), pay minimal taxes and export their finished goods and profits" (2001, 162), in the process consciously creating "this contrast (between the gleaming 'First World' domain of production and the squalid, 'Third World' domain of social reproduction built up around the toxic by-products of industry)" (64). Navigating the New River that meanders sluggishly back and forth across the border, Vollmann personally experiences through exposure to its pollutants and rank sewage the environmental racism of such a "system of delineation" (2009, 998). Admitting the unavoidable but asymmetrical complicities in the border economy's systemic production of waste, human and environmental, he also reveals the essential porousness of this border division:

> Maybe the New River wasn't anybody's fault, either. People need to defecate, and if they are poor, they cannot afford to process their sewage. People need to eat, and so they work in the maquiladoras–factories owned by foreign polluters. The polluters pollute to save money; then we buy their inexpensive and perhaps well-made tractor parts, fertilizers, pesticides. It is doubly difficult to get out. And it's all ghastly. (89)

The economies of waste and productivity the border inaugurates rely on the very fact of division and the asymmetrical exchanges that separation promotes. Yet,

despite such divisions, the border inevitably both "borders"–limits, confines and adjoins–and "borders on"–figuratively, as the *OED* attests, it approaches closely in character, resembles closely, verges on. In this light, discontinuity contains a barely suppressed continuity: "Imperial is the continuum between Mexico and America" (50). Unwittingly perhaps, Vollmann broaches border realities and representational oppositions in a near-deconstructionist vein. Thus, what limits and excludes is necessarily also what opens and liberates, even if in secretive, marginal and socially-castigated modes. In this light, waste, in whatever form, is in essence a 'border' reality in its insistent and resistant presence: it is the other side of what excludes and produces it and, as such, in true deconstructionist fashion, is actually what can invert the relation in the hopes of acquiring a nondichotomous view of the real. Rather than saying that current industrial and social practice produces waste, one could assert that, rightly viewed from below, waste produces and characterizes our current social and economic structures. The true product and object of our 'imperial' ambitions is waste. To transcend the dichotomy would be to envisage the truly productive uses of waste, not just the now stereotyped visions of environmental caretaking through recycling and so on, but the possibilities within the currently discarded refuse of humanity and its embodiment of other, less wasteful ways of living. A recycling that does not break the cycle that produces such humanly and socially lethal structures would be and is truly useless. The self-enclosed, ultimately entropic cycle must become a spiral opening onto other realities. This is what Vollmann seems to project onto Tijuana, San Diego's Mexican alter-ego, for example, in certain passages. He blends textually both the literal border city and the science-fictional version imagined by Philip K. Dick, both of them burgeoning with a possibility that stops at and is conditioned by the border wall: "Imperial is constraint indeed. Therefore, Imperial is possibility, and within Imperial it is Tijuana where possibility gets reified above all. You could obtain anything, do anything, you wanted" (698). Vollmann will end his "investigation" of the "maquiladoras" with a reminiscence from Tijuana:

> I just heard...
> Why not end here, with one more instance of disputed fact? We'll each believe what we wish. This almost perfectly incomplete portrait of the maquiladoras ends, as every honest investigation should, in midair. (Let's face it, Bill. Investigative reporting is not really your strong suit.) It is ever so difficult to begin to comprehend maquiladoras as they are, with their chemicals, fences and secrets; as for the future, well, from Tijuana I remember a tiny square of mostly unbuilt freeway, high in the air, souvenir of a broken bridge; and at the very end of it, lording it over empty space, a huge handmade cross with scraps of white plastic bag fluttering in the brown wind. (922)

The directionless impulse of capitalist exploitation appropriately ends in this religiously charged emblem of waste, sign both of unsubstantiated hope and desire, and of the "broken bridge" of the profit-driven future. The "secrets" harbored here are actually out in the open, literally "in midair," strewn throughout the "empty space" of this contemporary wasteland. Vollmann's "investigative reporting" ironically succeeds in its failed inefficiency, its empirical wastefulness, by foregrounding the

"disputed fact" of reality itself. What counts here is not so much the fact, only ever an interpretive invention, something made like the commodities put out by the maquiladoras, as the ideological dispute over the very factuality of that "fact" and its costs. Waste imposes a different recounting of the "disputed fact."

It works both ways, of course, for the border is a bridge, not "broken" but dotted with fissures, a bridge whose separations and divisions are also internal to either side. Both the famed "Chinese tunnels" built by illegal Chinese immigrants on the Mexican side as a refuge from the oppressive prejudice of the Mexicans themselves and the example of the "maquiladoras," with their secretive environmental impacts and their relatively less exploited Mexican workforces by comparison to life in the campo, make this clear, again in asymmetrical fashion. The tunnels explicitly and the "maquiladoras" implicitly are both refuges for refuse and the refused, the immigrant populations they shelter and exploit as well as the refuse their labor produces as a matter of course, the waste that underlies that labor and that cynically enables it. Both become examples for the complicities and submerged possibilities of (human) waste. The "maquiladoras" enact the dehumanizing consequences of the profit motif. As producers of undead waste, a terminal waste that negates the "polluted fertility" (1110) Vollmann associates with the discards and discarded of an instrumentalizing mindset, the maquiladoras project a human and material landscape of potential annihilation. The best and eeriest example, couched in imagery of the infernal, is the abandoned "Metales and Derivados" factory, "this monument to human selfishness" (872) that sinisterly presages the holocaust of the human itself, not just the gutting of an industrial site:

> Inside the great shed, which felt like the focal point just as the restored gas chamber feels like the focal point of Auschwitz (and isn't this simile overwrought, even unfair? But I have visited Auschwitz, and I remember the heavy darkness of the gas chamber, much heavier than here, to be sure; but that memory visited me unbidden as I stood there feeling sickish in several ways, wondering how many children down there in Chilpancingo were enjoying the benefits of lead poisoning; Metales y Derivados felt like a wicked, dangerous place, I can tell you; by comparison, those barracks for the campesinos in Ejido Tabasco began to seem attractive), several huge rusty drumlike apparati were trained like cannons at the barrio below. What were they, those red-crusted hulks? They had wheel-gears on them. I stared at them with my burning eyes; I smelled the sour-metal smell. And those square pits in the concrete floor, those pipes going down, down into the reddish earth, what did they signify? (873)

But if "maquiladoras" such as this abandoned, wasted one are an epitome of the "sickness of capitalism, the American sickness" (875), they are also an example of "the Mexican sickness which allows them to flourish" (875), a national flaw defined somewhat lamely by Vollmann as the tendency to "cut corners and do what's easiest even when it's not what's best" (875). This might seem a withdrawal from engaging in serious political and ideological analysis, a failing common not only to Vollmann but many other American writers who find refuge from such quandaries in generalizations over human nature that are only ever universalizing abstractions

that fly in the face of their own expressed objectives in paying empathic attention to the real. As Vollmann has said in an interview, "[t]he longer I live, the more I like individual people, and the more pessimistic I become about groups and institutions and humanity in general" (Rhodes, ed. 2015, 305), an attitude more attuned to American conceptions of the absolute value of individualism rather than a nuanced view of the social context within which individualism of any kind is constituted. This leads sometimes to an ingenuously and even shockingly naïve view of labor conditions and the workers' own consciousness of them:

> I do think that the *maquiladoras* sometimes show a shocking disregard for people's health; the subtle effects of chemical exposure over time and the generally low level of education among *maquiladora* laborers conspire together to be accomplices in the endangerment of human beings for the sake of a few extra pesos.
> The *maquiladoras* are a necessary evil, and perhaps not even as evil as I believe. But if their windows were less dark and their gates guarded less unilaterally, if button cameras became unnecessary as a means of verification, they would definitely be better places. (Vollmann 2009, 915)

Vollmann, however, who is not writing as a social or political analyst, though that does not necessarily excuse political naïvety, but as an avowedly "hack journalist" (88)–"Let's face it, Bill. Investigative reporting is not really your strong suit" (922)–is savingly contradicted, of course, by his inclusion of the workers' actual preconceptions and unstated views as elicited through the gaps and absences in his own interviews. Remaining true to his ethically grounded belief in personal agency and responsibility, a belief that exalts the inherent dignity of the wasted human subjects he is attracted to, this perhaps naïve belief in the powers of self-awareness and the ambiguities of active complicity is untainted by the traces of a self-undermining resignation on the part of those forced to participate in such conditions of environmentally-poisoned exploitation. This seems to be a case where empathy has become self-deceptive in its denial here not of the other but of the self's critical view of the other as a self that intentionally can blind itself ideologically. One can recall here Slavoj Žižek's view of postmodern cynical ideology where the ideological victim is fully aware of the false consciousness he or she willingly espouses,[9] something revealed in these interviews in the reiterated ambivalence of the responses to the human and economic value of the "maquiladoras":

> Are *maquiladoras* good or bad for Mexicans?
> For work they're good, because we need work.
> Translation: *Here there's life*. [...] exploitation in the *campo* may be worse than exploitation in the *maquiladora*. (867)

[9] Žižek's vision of ideology is detailed in his first English-language book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (2008). See also his introductory essay to his edited collection, *Mapping Ideology* (1994).

> Are the *maquiladoras* good or bad for Mexico?
> Well, said Lourdes, more or less, the thing is–we have to work.
> So they're good?
> More or less, she said in what I believe to have been quiet fury. (910)

The "Chinese tunnels," on the other hand, illustrate the potential of a living, rather than undead waste, even if they contain remnants of a now absent past of racial oppression.[10] Much like the omnipresence of waste, the tunnels do not officially exist yet underlie official reality itself. As paths that literally undermine surface appearances, possibly even traversing the border in their underground invisibility, they are a waste reality that is emblematic of the other side of official, ideal reality. Division's exclusions, its waste, is especially exemplified in the urban legend of Mexicali's "Chinese tunnels," supposedly built by its now reduced Chinese immigrant community in response to its own internal exclusion within Mexican society. Reputedly extending underground as far as Mexicali's American sister city, its anagrammatic partner, Calexico, the "tunnels don't exist" yet Vollmann "kept going into tunnels" (465). The tunnels are a submerged and, now, a literally waste-filled deconstruction of the border itself, both a miming and an undermining of its very function, a separation which secretly connects. Tunnels and border are both fact and fiction. Indeed, the tunnels arose as a hidden contestation of that official abstraction, their very hiddenness leading to the proliferation of tales and fictions that almost smothers their actual existence: "I was beginning to see that the tale of the tunnels was not only the tale of myths and dreams, but it was also the story of how and why one world, which was dominant, hot and bright, forced the creation of another, which was subterranean and secret" (453). Their very resistance to revelation, to proper "delineation," maintains a fertile secretiveness and imperviousness to representation that characterizes such "waste" realities:

> But then she said something which revealed the extent of that vanished universe for me, revealed it in the same eerie, half-illusory sense as a flashlight-gleam upon black water in a Chinese tunnel shows something; what has been shown? It's opaque; its feculence hinders us; we know neither its depth nor its extent, but the yellow play of light on that black water brings us into the recognition of a previously unknown realm–about which we still know nothing. (433)

[10] This ambivalence in the conception of waste is echoed in Kennedy's distinction between 'trash' and 'waste.' By 'trash' Kennedy refers not just to material refuse but to an attitude of refusal, to "a manner of physically relating to other beings," "a mode of comportment, treating things without care, negatively, and destructively" in a "throwaway society" that "violently negates beings rather than takes care of them" (2007, xvii). This attitude is directly the product of the instrumentalized notion of technology that permeates our culture, producing 'waste' as an absolute devaluation of beings, material and human: technology "dissolves the problem of waste by fixating and absolutizing its inherent ambiguity. Technology replaces waste, a creature of value, with trash. Whereas waste results from a relative, subjective devaluation, technological objectification, that is, unconditional, absolute devaluation, engenders trash" (10). To borrow from Vollmann, for Kennedy waste is feculent and fertile, trash is privation and death.

In this, the tunnels approach figuratively the "secret" nature of Imperial itself and, by implication, the creative, openly fictionalizing realism of Vollmann's text. Practicing his own textual version of 'tunnelling,' the myth-making Vollmann encounters in his search for the tunnels is akin to the myth-making that made Imperial and which is debunked by the waste realities intrinsic to the same enterprise. But it is only through his own inventive textual quest that he can approach this stubbornly inapprehensible reality and acknowledge the "something beautiful, stinking, empty and infinitely rich" (481) contained in its wastes. In this light, Imperial becomes a sort of ambivalently heterotopian site, replete with potential and catastrophe in almost equal amounts, a site of liminality that both excludes and includes, that is both resistantly real and devastatingly fictional. Even the children's games on the Mexican side of the border, a telling example of the child's unconscious awareness of the fictiveness of the real and of the dogmatic imposition of reality's 'fantasy,' echo the border subject's knowledge of the divisive yet revelatory potential of life in liminality. Vollmann converts the scene into an ambivalent ethical lesson for the reader or, rather, an experience of the ethics of ambivalence:

> Their entire hillside was dirt of a parchment color resembling old map-flesh, and when the children scratched game-lines into it with dead sticks, that place became a map of itself, its delineation as real and eternal as any other even if it got scuffed out a minute later; and if you consider me frivolous, please tell me what and why a boundary is, or tell me how illegality is. Why must they live here, and not in your house? (52)

Delineation is both exclusion and the hoarding of privilege, the creation of subaltern communities and their ravaging by economies of waste. Like any limit applied to human realities, the border is both a not so subtly dehumanizing delimitation and a hint of the secretive resistance of border or waste communities to that very delimitation. In his privileged crisscrossing of the border, Vollmann ruefully acknowledges the true, if not politically 'real,' deconstruction of the exclusionary dream intrinsic to any such, perhaps administratively necessary, separation. The utopia of unacknowledged privilege borders on the heterotopia of waste. Such a heterotopia of waste–and aren't all heterotopian landscapes also landscapes of waste in the sense that they are chaos-strewn sites that sabotage the possibilities of univocal categorization?–such a landscape can perhaps only be presented, liberated rather than captured, through a mode of representation that resists delimiting delineation, even the flexible delineations of conventional literary forms. The representation or textualization of waste requires a waste textuality. Imperial, seen through such a necessarily self-conscious literary mode, becomes the inarticulate Real itself that, in our current projections, we wastefully delineate into a productive 'reality,' a reality of waste conjured up by these very fantasies of delineation, whether they be literary tracings or the irrigation ditches that initially brought fertility but ultimately will bring a saline death to the Imperial Valley: "We irrigate our mental fields with the liquid of our choice. And the reclamation of 'reality' is the largest irrigation enterprise in the nation!" (153).

Vollmann evinces a self-critical but saving awareness of his own failed delineations. He counters the imperialist dream of control through a sort of questioning self-consciousness (postmodernism) and the meandering narrative of his actual, non-textual experience (post-postmodernism). In breaking the bounds of the conventionally 'delineated' text, he both courts failure and embraces ethically the 'value' of waste:

> Now in the year 2007 as I finish this chapter, my dinghy-ride down the New River with the first Jose Lopez haunts me sweetly. I had expected nothing but filthiness and frightfulness; I'd wanted to "expose," to "investigate," to sound the alarm, in other words, to wallow self-righteously in the excrement of what was supposed to be the most polluted waterway in North America. And I had gotten my fill of that, the bad taste that would not leave my mouth; but I had also, as had this fine Jose Lopez, played at the game of Lewis-and-Clark; and I remember sunlight, tamarisks, spewing pipes, silence, and befouled but un-destroyed wildness. And when Zulema said of Mexicali, the city that I cannot stop loving, that it is filthy like something being abused, when Yolanda said, we're the garbage can of the United States, when Calexicans who smelled the New River complained that they were the toilet of Mexico, I became all the more faithful to Mexicali, third-largest of the border cities, after Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana, to Mexicali, home of maquiladoras and ejidos alike, Mexicali the hot, slow, sunny, spicy, stinking place, whose most precious jewel is her tranquillity. (1080)

Like an inversion of Emily Dickinson's rueful allegory of failure–"success is counted sweetest / By those who ne'er succeed" (1975, poem 67)–Vollmann traces, arguably successfully, the success of failure and the failed, the melancholy 'success,' to turn to the etymology of the term, of that which 'suc-ceeds,' that which goes on below, under the surface, that which just happens. What has failed is an idea, an idea of empire, an imperial, reality-denying idea. It has been overwhelmed by the literal 'vastness' of waste itself, the inhuman outrunning of whatever reality is humanly constituted. Imperial thus becomes an ultimate denial of empire itself, empire understood in almost transcendent fashion as the 'delineated realities' with which we believe we have tamed the real itself. This idea of empire, an idea that in American history has consistently denied its imperial connotations, could be aligned with Richard Slotkin's analysis of the mythology of the frontier as that

> complex of traditional ideas that had accumulated around the idea of the "Frontier" since colonial times, including the concept of pioneering as a defining national mission, a "Manifest Destiny," and the vision of the westward settlements as a refuge from tyranny and corruption, a safety valve for metropolitan discontents, a land of golden opportunity for enterprising individualists, and an inexhaustible reservoir of natural wealth on which a future of limitless prosperity could be based. (1998, 38)

What Vollmann reveals through his own 'delineations' is how the official implementations of that ideal make of the open frontier a closed 'border,' a rationalizing delineation that both undermines the frontier ideal and uncovers its exclusionary violence. Yet, ironically, the border 'borders' and, thus, its porous

adjoining of supposedly opposed realities subverts the frontier's false embrace of openness for all. This is empire "imperiled," as Vollmann goes on to put it, by its own imperial dreams (2009, 1121). But the real of Imperial itself, unearthed by Vollmann's haphazard, rambling research, cannot fail. The 'American idea' fails, has failed, will fail; the American 'reality,' encompassing what contradicts the ideal, cannot:

> Nothing can touch this marriage of land and sky, of heat and salt, this hammer and anvil, this procreating couple whose only child is a plain which unlike a rainforest, an empire or a work of art can outlast anything the planet itself can, anything, even human beings, even water or waterlessness; and if, God forbid, Imperial does someday get riddled with cities, its character will remain almost unaffected; it will go on and on, true to itself, long after such temporary superficialities as "the U.S.A." and "Mexico" have become as washed out as old neon hotel signs in the searing daylight of Indio. (1120)

As a melancholy acknowledgement that the true victim of environmental violence will be man himself, the ecology of the human, the true 'waste' here is not the arid desert, the 'vast' wasteland of useless, uncultivated, nonurbanized territory, but the supposedly improved, salvaged "human artifact" of "verdancy" brought into existence through the exploitative and ultimately destructive harnessing of water resources elsewhere. The "concretions of humanity" will become so many future fossilizations of embodied greed. Yet, Vollmann's accompanying acknowledgement that "like most human records, this account essentially recounts failure" (905), ambivalently manifests representational skepticism while at the same time proffering his own counter-delineations. Paradoxically, this is what ensures the ultimate success of this literary 'recounting' of failure and/or waste. This account's–or literature's in general–failure to fully account for the reality it strives to depict is not a representational failure at all but a textual indictment of the functionalist, instrumentalizing and totalizing mentality behind efficient, productive categorical representation. As Susan Morrison has argued, literature and waste are intimately related in that the non-transparent figurations of the literary are both a rebuke to the "futile codification" (2015, 33) that sets out to differentiate and categorize the real, and a reaffirmation of what such codification must discard to exist as such: "waste is always material (first) and figurative and metaphoric (second). Without the material that is discarded, we cannot enter the realm of the metaphoric, of literature, and of the imagination. Waste is literal and literary" (23). Countering such an implicitly essentialist ranking, however, what this implies is that it is only through entering the "realm of the metaphoric" that we can begin to perceive and be aware of the literal; literality is nothing but reality to the letter, to the '*littera*.' Or perhaps we should say there is no humanly inhabited and humanly evaluated reality *avant la lettre*. Lacking any conventionally validated notions of efficiency, instrumentality and functionality (what is the use of such a text?), literature's wastefulness reveals itself to be an ideal, perhaps the only means of not discounting the human value of waste, even if it be the value of the discarded and discounted. Practical failure

becomes literary success as literature's wastefulness encounters the human vastness of waste, good or bad.

There is, then, an explicit paradox within Vollmann's representational proposal as the inevitable 'failure' of what he nevertheless goes on to do intentionally manifests the ambivalence of the literary effort itself. Literature here becomes the intentionally wasteful endeavour to give presence to what cannot be re-presented successfully, waste itself, human and material. But in a sort of self-mirroring spiral, the waste which is literary representation, given its inevitable shortcomings, becomes the best way of acknowledging and even empathizing with that which echoes back literature's own wastefulness, the waste of the world, the world's wastes. What results is an unruly 'catalogue,' now ethically rather than empirically grounded in any arrogantly totalizing manner, of what is usually lumped together namelessly and silently outside the bounds of any conventional catalogue.[11] Vollmann even mocks his own cataloguing with his "Imperial Reprise" chapter sections and their mock index of noteworthy sayings and slogans that have dotted the Imperial(ist) enterprise. They provide a formal analogy for the text's conscious literary 'wastefulness,' its intertextual shuttling between myriad perspectives and registers in its attempt to capture the 'secret' of Imperial itself. Through a conglomeration of quotations from earlier passages, the very juxtaposition of which establishes surprising, sometimes comic and always sardonically critical *aperçus* onto the anarchic yet hierarchically contained realities of the "imaginary entity" called Imperial, Vollmann strives to textually transcend the representational limitations imposed by a 'waste(d)' real, the real that stubbornly refuses complete delineation and improvement. This implies both acknowledging the terminal waste of such a regimentation of reality and the proliferating, "feculent" yet fertile wastes of what it discards or banishes as a matter of course, the commercial course of a capitalist empire. To recapitulate through such textual 'reprises' becomes a textual and typographically varied exercise mocking the endless, empty cycle of wasteful recapitalization and recirculation, whether of money or of water, both irrigating the increasingly fallow fields of the Imperial Valley.

Failure might not be waste, then, in such an ethically charged literary endeavour, but a revelation of waste's riches. The resistant real, Imperial's secret nothingness that wavers into perception like a desert mirage, can only be apprehended through the 'waste' textuality of something like literature, the literature of the factual that Vollmann has forged here and elsewhere in his voluminous oeuvre. For in literature as in nature, as Vollmann's closing transhuman reflections suggest, 'nothing is wasted,' in the literal and metaphorical senses of this assertion. The wasted nothingness of Imperial's environmental and human landscape, the obverse of the American idea, contains, to use a Pynchonian term, the 'preterite' realities of what

[11] The etymology of the term reminds us of the implicit ethical choice, rather than impersonal scientific necessity, involved in the making of a catalogue: < French catalogue, and < late Latin catalogus, < Greek κατάλογος register, list, catalogue, < καταλέγειν to choose, pick out, enlist, enroll, reckon in a list, etc., < κατά down + λέγειν to pick, choose, reckon up, etc.

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the idea, the ideal, must discard and deny. Waste not, want not. But if one truly wants, if one lacks and desires at once, then look at, look in, look for the waste. There, as Vollmann shows us in despairing equanimity, nothing is ever truly wasted.

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LEGACIES OF SLAVERY: BLACK DOMESTIC WORKERS, WASTE, AND THE BODY*

Susana María Jiménez Placer
Universidade de Santiago de Compostela

Abstract

One of the legacies of slavery which helped shape the ideology of the Jim Crow South concerned the perpetuation of black women's exclusion to the margins of the established order through their exclusive association with the body and its functions. This association was used to justify black women's destiny as domestic workers in the Jim Crow South, which meant that they were doomed to handle filth, and thus to become tainted with it according to the official discourse. This article explores first the deprecating connotations of the association of black women with the body established by the dominant southern ideology as a relic of the slave period, and then focuses on black domestics' involvement in the management of bodily fluids and waste as part of their professional tasks in the Jim Crow South.

Keywords: black women, black domestics, waste, body, excrement, segregation, US South.

LEGADOS DE LA ESCLAVITUD:
LAS TRABAJADORAS DOMÉSTICAS NEGRAS, LA BASURA Y EL CUERPO

Resumen

Uno de los legados del período esclavista que mantuvo su vigencia en la ideología segregacionista del Sur se refería a la exclusión de las mujeres negras a los márgenes del orden establecido a causa de su asociación única y exclusiva con el cuerpo y sus funciones. Esta asociación se utilizó para justificar el hecho de que estas mujeres se vieran obligadas a trabajar sólo en empleos domésticos a lo largo del período de Jim Crow en el Sur, empleos que requerían su contacto directo con la suciedad, lo que originó en el discurso supremacista blanco dominante la tendencia a identificarlas con la basura que manejaban. Este artículo explora primero las connotaciones denigrantes de la asociación de las mujeres negras con el cuerpo tal y como fue establecida por la ideología dominante como reliquia del período esclavista, para centrarse después en el estudio del papel de las empleadas domésticas negras en la manipulación de fluidos y residuos corporales como parte de su actividad profesional.

Palabras clave: mujeres negras, criadas negras, basura, cuerpo, excremento, segregación, Sur de EE. UU.

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Starting on the basis that in the Jim Crow South the only jobs available for black women in urban environments were those related to domestic service, which often meant that they were doomed to handle filth, this article explores the association of black domestics with waste focusing on their management of corporeal filth in their professional experience.[1] As Susan Signe Morrison (2019) has pointed out,

> As the cultural model of waste is mapped onto humans, ethical dangers loom. Those who handle filth become tainted with it. Whole classes of human beings become equivalencies for trash, and, as such, worthy of disposal. Those who become contaminated socially as waste are "thrown out"–geographically, economically, and morally. We physically assign them to the proximity of waste dumps.

In the Jim Crow South black domestics figured prominently among the classes of human beings who became "equivalencies for trash" due to their professional role as handlers of their white employers' filth. In the case of black southern women, this condition was also a belated consequence of the ideology which had characterized the antebellum South, since as a legacy of slavery, they were almost exclusively associated with the bodily stratum, deprecated by the dominant discourse as impure and dirty (White [1985] 1999, 29-34). This association justified their exclusion to the margins of the system, but at the same time made their role in the "mapping of the self's clean and proper body" essential (Kristeva 1982, 72). As guardians of the bodily stratum, black domestics took care of the corporeal functions which the dominant ideology despised as polluting and thus threatening for the purity of the white body, from food ingestion to defecation. Their role as handlers of corporeal defilements was especially relevant in their relationship with their white charges, who significantly learnt to feel disgust for the corporeal polluting objects at the same time as they learnt the meaning of race. Since as an effect of the development of Waste Studies "characters associated with waste" in literature have become an object of special literary interest (Morrison 2019), references to fictional characters and episodes will help illustrate this discussion at specific points.

Susan Signe Morrison's words above suggest the association of waste with that which is "thrown out," somehow recalling "the logic of exclusion" that, according to Julia Kristeva (1982), "causes the abject to exist" (65). This same logic lies at the heart of Judith Butler's ([1993] 2011) premise that "regulatory power [...]

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[1] Domestic work was almost the only possible alternative to sharecropping that black women could find in the Jim Crow South (Van Wormer, Jackson and Sudduth 2012, 32-34). Jacqueline Jones ([1985] 1995) explains that in the southern towns and cities, black women could find "relatively steady employment as domestic servants and laundresses" (111), because domestic service was so cheap that only very poor white families could not afford it (129). Trudier Harris (1982) remarks that even black college women were often forced to work as domestics at least temporarily (4-6).

works through the foreclosure of effects, the production of an 'outside,' a domain of unlivability and unintelligibility that bounds the domain of intelligible facts" (xxix-xxx). Thus, like the abject, waste originates as the effect of an act of exclusion necessary for the protection of the established order, which ultimately entails the wasted object's exile to the margins of the system. In *Purity and Danger,* Mary Douglas ([1966] 2002) had already reflected on this topic and had concluded that "Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (44). Inspired by Douglas's arguments, Kristeva (1982) observes that "filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a boundary and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin"; concluding that "[t]he potency of pollution is therefore, not an inherent one; it is proportional to the potency of the prohibition that founds it" (69). Similarly, Gay Hawkins (2006) observes that waste "isn't a fixed category of things; it is an effect of classification and relations" (2). Concepts such as "prohibition" and "classification" also reverberate in what Morrison (2015) calls "the compulsion to codify and order," which functions as a manifestation of the human need to separate clean and dirty, and "facilitates the establishment of culture and civilization" as separated from nature (17-18). Therefore, waste is always the consequence of the implementation of a system, which requires the marginalization of all those categories that do not fit into the established order. Accordingly, the meaning of waste depends on the system that originates it as an undesirable by-product, something to be despised, hidden, and expelled to protect the dominant ideology. Throughout history, the systematic ordering of the human experience has tended to extoll culture and civilization at the expense of nature, which has often been interpreted as a carrier of the threat of filth and pollution.

The "logic of exclusion" behind the "regulatory power" which gave shape to the ideology of the Jim Crow South was very similar to that which was operative in the slave period: its final aim was the justification of the inferiority of black people on the basis of their allegedly reduced human status through their concomitant association with animality and instincts "as a stratagem adopted to cordon off the dominant group more securely from its own feared animality" (Nussbaum 2010, 16). This "logic of exclusion" can be interpreted as an ultimate consequence of the historical and sociological process which Bakhtin ([1982] 1984b) described in the following terms:

> As class society develops further and as ideological spheres are increasingly differentiated, the internal disintegration (bifurcation) of each element of the matrix becomes more and more intense: food, drink, the sexual act in their real aspect enter personal everyday life, they become predominantly a personal and everyday affair, they acquire a specific narrowly quotidian coloration, they become the petty and humdrum "coarse" realities of life. On the other hand, all these members are to an extreme degree sublimated in the religious cult. (213)

As a consequence of this bifurcation, "the petty and humdrum 'coarse' realities of life," namely what Bakhtin ([1982] 1984b) elsewhere called "the healthy 'natural' functions of human nature" (162), became deprecated by the official discourse in

favor of their ritualized and sublimated versions. Hence, the body as the site of these "healthy 'natural' functions," was turned into an object, "the Other," "a threatening container of one's own denied desires" in Linda Holler's (2002) terms, and bodily issues were ultimately deemed unclean and shameful (90; quoted in Morrison 2015, 30). A series of societal and cultural norms were devised to control basic bodily needs and instincts–especially those connected to fluids, exuding and excreta–with the purpose of distancing human beings from them, therefore causing humans' final alienation from their bodies (Morrison 2015, 45-46). As a result, in the early modern period what Bakhtin had defined as the grotesque body,[2] characterized by "its porous skin full of holes and orifices [...] is denied in the interests of a second, non-porous skin that neither exudes nor excretes [...] above all without orifices" (Baudrillard 1994, 105; quoted in Morrison 2015, 33).

One of the early manifestations of the effects of the sublimating process which gave origin to this interpretation of the human body as ideally pure and devoid of orifices was the extreme idealization and glorification at work in the epic and chivalric traditions (Bakhtin [1982] 1984b, 153). As Anne Firor Scott ([1970] 1995) has argued, these traditions constituted one of the main sources of inspiration for the delineation of the myth of the southern lady (15). Imitating other patriarchal regimes, the regulatory power represented by the old southern order took the process of idealization of white women to extremes, to the detriment–and ultimate alienation–of the material bodily stratum. In such a context, the white body became ideally deprived of orifices (see the reference to Baudrillard above), and as distanced as possible from the "healthy 'natural' functions" associated to them. To minimize the role of white women's bodily "holes" and the potential threat which these represented for their purity, all the bodily functions were tainted with a polluting quality and accordingly excluded from the white plantation mistress's ideal contour. Thus, the myth of the southern lady as a paragon of beauty, virtue, purity, and moral perfection was born. For this purpose, the corporeal dimension of activities such as eating, drinking, defecating, sex, and even procreation was concealed,[3] since as bodily functions, they were considered coarse and lacking refinement and were ideally expelled from the spectrum of what was desirable from white ladies. Such activities were located outside or at the margins of white women's experience in a most unnatural way, and white southern ladies were thus drastically separated from those corporeal "polluting objects" which, according to Kristeva (1982), "stem

[2] In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin ([1968] 1984a) describes the grotesque body as one with exaggerated protuberances and orifices to facilitate its contact with the world: bodily orifices like the mouth, the nose, and the anus are especially prominent in the grotesque body as contact zones within which "the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome" (317).

[3] In the Old South, motherhood figured prominently among the duties of plantation women, but again this experience was idealized, sublimated, and eventually spiritualized to the extent that it was officially devoid of all its bodily and natural implications: the established southern order transformed motherhood into a perfect example of what Adrienne Rich defines as an institution rather than a natural experience (Rich [1986] 1995, 13).

from the *maternal* and/or the feminine" (71; italics in original). In a convoluted, self-destructive, and mutilating fashion, the same (hetero)sexual regulatory ideal which forced southern white women to be perfect wives and mothers required their repudiation of the bodily attributes necessary to perform these roles. In fact, in contrast with their artificial official idealization, the real-life experience of southern plantation women was drastically determined by the reiterated interference of the material bodily lower stratum and its "polluting objects" in it, as research on this field has proved: "A proper diet was also emphasized [...] Just as important was a woman's duty to clear her digestive track. Antebellum society had a fixation upon bowel regularity, and at no time, it judged, was attention more critical than during pregnancy" (McMillen 1994, 37-38). Paradoxically, although taking proper care of their bodily reality was known to be essential for white women's survival, fixations like this were still compulsorily concealed and erased from the official discourse and the regulatory ideal designed for southern plantation women, which often had devastating effects on their health (see McMillen 1994).

In what is probably the most popular literary rendering of the Old South, *Gone with the Wind,* Margaret Mitchell ([1936] 1993) addresses this topic with a relative touch of humor and irony when she depicts Scarlett's vain struggles to comply with the stipulated restraints on her bodily vigor and Mammy's concomitant efforts to keep her white mistress's behavior within the precincts of her prescribed role as a plantation lady. The enforced official deprecation of the bodily functions explains why at the beginning of the novel Mammy tries to persuade Scarlett to eat breakfast at home to avoid eating too much in public later at the barbeque in Twelve Oaks: as she says, "You kin sho tell a lady by what she *doan* eat" (80; italics in original); or why she gets scandalized by Scarlett's easy labor when her first child is born: "I was out in the yard and I didn't hardly have time to get into the house. Mammy said it was scandalous–just like one of the darkies" (348). In Mitchell's novel, Mammy's voice stands for the official standard discourse and her verdict is clear: Scarlett's bodily vigor disqualifies her as a lady by making her too comfortable within the sphere of the body and its functions, which sets her away from the desirable physical fragility which inevitably accompanied the process of idealization and glorification of the southern lady. Even as a baby, Scarlett is said to have been "more healthy and vigorous than a girl baby had any right to be, in Mammy's opinion" (59).

This deprecation of the body and its functions was not at all exclusive of the US South, but it could be taken to extremes there because of the prevalence of the slave system. In her discussion of the politics of disgust, Martha Nussbaum (2010) affirms that, "The discomfort people feel about their smelly, decaying, and all-too-mortal bodies has ubiquitously and monotonously been projected outward onto groups who can serve as, so to speak, the surrogate dirt of a community, enabling the dominant group to feel clean and heavenly" (7). The projection of this generalized human discomfort about the body and its functions onto vulnerable minorities to subordinate them is an example of what Nussbaum (2010) calls "*projective disgust*" (15; italics in original). She uses this term to refer to those situations in which disgust "is extended from object to object in ways that could hardly bear rational scrutiny" (15). According to her, this often involves "projection of disgust properties

onto a group or individual" (16). Women have figured prominently among those groups who have suffered the effects of such a projection (Nussbaum 2010, 17-18; Morrison 2015, 38), hence the special insistence of the official southern discourse on the idealization and sublimation of white plantation women to protect their purity, and the urgency to find another group on whom to project this disgust. The southern slave system made black slaves an easy target for this projective disgust to the extent that black people were eventually reduced to the status of mere providers of bodily needs and containers of the instinctual animality deprecated–because feared–by the dominant planter class. Thus, in contrast with white plantation women, whose purity was defined in terms of the distance separating them from animality and the dirt of the body, black women slaves were exclusively regarded as bodies dispossessed of intellectual skills, moral values, and true human feelings. In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby (1987) discusses the existence of two different but interdependent codes for black and for white women in the slave period, which led to the establishment of two different definitions of the experience of womanhood: while purity and fragility were the ideal virtues of white women, physical vigor and resilience were the qualities demanded of black slave women (20). Accordingly, the two stereotypes designed for black women by the official discourse corroborated their association with the body: the Jezebel stereotype emphasized their link with promiscuous sexuality, while the mammy stereotype transformed them into devoted caretakers of what Bakhtin ([1982] 1984b) called the "healthy 'natural' functions" (162) of the white families they served (White [1985] 1999, 27-61; Harris-Perry 2011, 51-97). Mammy's deprecating comment on Scarlett's easy labor above–"just like one of the darkies"–confirms her unproblematic assumption of the association of black women with the same polluting bodily functions which were discarded for white women by the established ideology. Thus, Mitchell's Mammy fits to perfection into the group of domestics who according to Harris (1982) "[lose] all sense of a black self and [adopt] the culture into which [they move], the [ones] that [conclude] that white is indeed right and that it is correct to oppress Blacks" (17). In contrast, Sethe's thoughts in Toni Morrison's ([1987] 1988) *Beloved* illustrate the actual devastating effects of such an association, which often served to justify the most execrable crimes against black women. Sethe's conclusion that anybody white could "dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore" (251) evinces the dramatic success of a system designed to dirty black people, or black women more specifically, by imagining them "as tainted by the dirt of the body" (Morrison 2015, 98) to the extent that they were utterly deprived of self-love. In this sense, the words of Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, in the Clearing offer an alternative interpretation of the black body:

> "Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people, they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch other

> with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You* got to love it, *you*!" (Morrison [1987] 1988, 88; italics in original)

Here Baby Suggs persuades her listeners to love their black bodies and insists that every single bodily part deserves to be loved. Far from the connotations of dirt and pollution conditioning the interpretation of the body by the dominant ideology, Baby Suggs's speech dignifies the role of the different bodily parts as such, respecting their materiality as flesh and disregarding the official need to sublimate or spiritualize them. Her words show that the black body is impure and dirty only when interpreted according to the official discourse as a projection of the disgust for the flesh shared by those who considered themselves civilized and racially superior.

Still, Baby Suggs does not have enough time to inspire Sethe with her empowering words before the horror of slavery reappears in their lives. Morrison's choice of terms to depict Sethe's feelings above proves that she cannot fulfill Baby Suggs's command to love herself and her flesh because of her traumatic awareness of the polluting effects resulting from black women's association with the body as reductively interpreted by the dominant ideology. The official discourse in the Old South radically alienated slave women's bodies from what Kristeva (1982) calls the "mapping of the self's clean and proper body" (72): in contrast with what happens in the early stages of development of human beings–a definition which in the Old South would apply only to the members of the white race–black slave women's bodies could not be regularly shaped "into a territory [...] where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted" (72). In other words, slave women's bodies were deprived of this differentiation, this distinction of clean and dirty, proper and improper, which condemned them to a perpetual lack of order turning their bodies into a "'waste space,' a liminal site of ambiguity that vibrates threateningly" (Morrison 2015, 19). In her analysis of the role of codification in the human configuration of waste, Morrison (2015) observes that, "[c]odification suggests that what is pure and what is dirty can be readily perceived" (25) and that "that which cannot be codified threatens with filth" (24). From this perspective, the lack of differentiation or codification allegedly affecting black women's bodies could only corroborate their association with dirt and pollution: "Tainted by the dirt of the body," for the official southern ideology they were wasted beings, "carriers of filth and dirt," "unclean and inhuman" (Morrison 2015, 98). In turn, this justified their destiny as handlers of filth, since in contrast with their white mistresses, this configuration located their status close to that of those "polluting objects" which, according to Kristeva (1982), "always relate to corporeal orifices" and "fall, schematically, into two types: excremental and menstrual" (71).[4]

[4] Mary Douglas ([1966] 2002) identifies the orifices of the body as "especially vulnerable points" and affirms that "[m]atter issuing from them is marginal stuff," and for this reason it is considered dangerous (150).

In her analysis of Laporte's *History of Shit*, Gay Hawkins (2006) observes that throughout history human excrement has gradually undergone a "process of making it an individual or private responsibility" (52) for political reasons; but in her discussion of the role of plumbing in human sanitation practices she acknowledges the constant human attempt to distance ourselves "from any direct role in managing our own waste. While the rich may have always been able to outsource management of their shit, the poor had to deal with their own portable containers" (57). Thus, socioeconomic parameters have historically determined the distance separating individuals from (the management of) their excrements. Often, the establishment of this distance has required the involvement of other individuals as mediators in the process of filth disposal by the most affluent. In the context of the antebellum South, the management of filth, usually involving corporeal waste, corresponded mainly to black slave women, who were thus "required to perform social functions equivalent to the excretory functions of the body" (Douglas 1975, 102; quoted in Morrison 2015, 98). According to Kristeva (1982), the strict regulation of bodily defilements "through frustrations and prohibitions" is essential for "the mapping of [the] self's clean and proper body" to be effective (71). In the context of the southern discourse, this led to one of the many paradoxes at the heart of the dominant ideology: black women, whose bodies were excluded from this mapping and thus doomed to remain forever undifferentiated and dirty, were for this same reason in charge of the management of bodily defilements, which ironically turned them into "the trustees of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body" (72). In other words, by virtue of their association with bodily waste, they had a central role in the shaping of the clean and proper body, which in the South was white by definition.

The slave system came to an end with the defeat of the Confederacy in the Civil War and the passing of the 13th Amendment in 1865, but the ideology behind it persisted in the mind of most white southerners not only as a nostalgic memory of the past, but also as an anachronistic ideal in the present. Therefore, the old southern values constituted an essential source of inspiration for the ideology of the new southern society in the segregation period, when the members of the new southern middle-class in their new southern homes saw themselves as the true descendants of the old planter class in their old plantation households.[5] As Grace Elizabeth Hale ([1998] 1999) has thoroughly analyzed, in the Jim Crow South due to the pervading practice of racial segregation in the public sphere, the only possible context for the staging of this "fiction of continuity" between the Old and the New South was the white middle-class home (87). There, white women could still imagine themselves as a modern version of the idealized plantation lady thanks to the presence of black women working for them as domestics. In the new white middle-class homes of the

[5] Both Fox-Genovese (1988) and Hale ([1998] 1999) offer an accurate explanation of this transition from the traditional antebellum plantation household as an almost self-sufficient site where consumption and production went hand in hand, to the middle-class home of the segregation period as a site of consumption removed from the professional and public sphere of production (Fox-Genovese 1988, 60-82; Hale [1998] 1999, 88-94).

South, like in the old plantation households, black domestic employees–formerly slaves–conveniently disguised as mammy,[6] were expected "to perform the grubby, tedious domestic chores" (McMillen 2002, 168). This ultimately implied their handling of filth, so that their white employers could aspire to emulate the purity and refinement of the old plantation mistresses. Therefore, as a legacy of slavery, black domestics were expected to reenact–and thus keep alive–the illusion of racial harmony which had supposedly characterized race relationships in the old plantation households. To a large extent this illusion had depended on the exclusion of black women to a marginalized position, that of the material bodily lower stratum, by virtue of their race and gender.

In the Jim Crow South different strategies were devised to perpetuate this exclusion, which was usually disguised under layers of paternalism and fake affection. One of these strategies was the combined popularization of the mammy stereotype and of the trope that black women were endowed with innate natural skills and instincts for the performance of all the domestic tasks related to the different bodily functions.[7] Among other chores, they were involved in the management of the workings of digestive substances and fluids through their work as cooks. According to Rebecca Sharpless (2010), "cooking in the home traditionally has been an occupation of low status" (2) precisely because it implies the handling of dirt. Quoting Michael Symons (2004), she observes that "cooking is 'messy, dirty work,' involving 'bare hands, sticky fingers, licks of this and that, whacks on fleshy lumps, hissing lids and miscellaneous smells'" (4; quoted in Sharpless 2010, 2). Significantly Sharpless (2010) infers that in this way "the elite remain pure and above the mess, delegating the work to those under them" (2). She finds corroboration for this idea in Leonore Davidoff's reflections (1974, 412-13), and concludes that "[b]y delegating to servants handling dead animals, dirt from the garden, and fire, an employer can then stay clean and 'more ladylike,' keeping her hands 'free from dirt, burns [,] or callouses'" (Sharpless 2010, 3). From this perspective, in the Jim Crow South black cooks were essential to protect their white employers' illusion of cleanliness, purity and civilization through their handling of "dead animals [and] dirt from the garden," which significantly contributed to disguise the origin of food in nature. Morrison (2015) observes that, traditionally, "[b]ecoming civilized necessitates negating nature" (45), and for this reason throughout history the elites

[6] The mammy stereotype was born in the slave period, but it became especially popular in the segregation period as a means to emulate the alleged racial harmony of the Old South through the idealization of the black domestics' relationship with their white employers and the concomitant obliteration of their real conditions of life and work. For more information on this topic see Harris (1982, 12, 16-18, 23-34), White ([1985] 1999, 46-61), Manring (1998), Hale ([1998] 1999, 85-119), McElya (2007), Wallace-Sanders (2008), Sharpless (2010, xxviii-xxix), Harris-Perry (2011, 69-86).

[7] In *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, Rebecca Sharpless (2010) discusses the common trope that African American women were endowed with innate, natural, or instinctive cooking abilities, and argues that in white women's case these same skills were interpreted from a more intellectual or rational perspective: "the supposedly exotic, 'other' African American woman cooked by innate ability and the supposedly more intelligent, rational white woman empiricized her work" (xxiii).

have tried to distance themselves from the natural origin of their food in order to identify "themselves with a higher order of culture" (25). Inspired by Norbert Elias's (2000) reflections in *The Civilizing Process*, she explains that,

> [t]he animal origins [of food] became disguised through the cutting up of the animal before bringing it to the table slathered in piquant sauces. By concealing the animal origin of what we consume, we attempt to camouflage our own animal origin [...]. Alienation from the origin of where food comes from slowly evolved. As the sign of high class embraced the ability to control a fork, one became estranged from eating with the hands. Alienation through technology (the fork) mirrors alienation from the ultimate outcome of what one eats (excrement). (Morrison 2015, 48-49)

The physiological connection between food and excrement, as well as the association of the human feeling of alienation from one and the other at the end of this passage, has probably contributed to the low status assigned to cooks working in private homes, and more specifically to black cooks in the homes of the southern white middle-class.

In the Jim Crow South not only the management of food, but also that of excrements fell into the hands of black domestics, since the perpetuation of black women's 'exile' in the marginalized bodily stratum still served to justify their role as handlers of the polluting bodily functions. Thus, like in the slave period, black women kept being the ultimate guardians or "trustee[s] of [the] mapping of the self's clean and proper body" even if–or rather because–they were expelled to the margins of such a mapping due to their race. Hilly Holbrook's words in *The Help* seem to confirm this expulsion: "You can't even *teach* these people how to be clean" (Stockett 2009, 428; italics in original). Kristeva (1982) explicitly associates this guardian task with maternal authority (71-72), and so it was in their role as caretakers–or surrogate mothers–of their white charges that black domestics exerted this aspect of their job with more intensity.[8] Therefore, black domestics' contribution to the health care of their white charges went beyond their role as food providers to include their involvement in the delineation of the "clean and proper body" through their management of corporeal defilements: they were expected to take care of all those moments in the digestive process in which the bodily orifices become a contact zone allowing the trespassing of the bodily boundaries, from food ingestion to defecation. Although references to black domestics' handling of excrement in literature and in real-life testimonies are not so usual or so evident as those linking them to food, their work as caretakers of white children included tasks such as bathing them, changing their diapers, and in general taking care of their bodily fluids.

[8] Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (2008) accurately analyzes black domestics' "dual role as surrogate and biological mothers" (7) to highlight the artificiality of the mammy stereotype, which required that black domestics loved their white charges better than their own children (5-8). Since this essay focuses on the professional role of black women as domestics, it concentrates on their relationship with their white charges.

In Katherine Stockett's *The Help* (2009), Aibileen is almost fully in charge of all these tasks since her employer, Elizabeth Leefolt, shows aversion to the handling of excrements: she avoids changing her baby's diapers and refuses to collaborate in her daughter's toilet training because "she won't let that girl come near her when she going" (93), which suggests an extreme attempt to hide the reality of her own defecating body. Elizabeth's attitude is a clear manifestation of the "horror of *excreta*, which is a uniquely human trait" according to Bataille (1993, 53; quoted in Morrison 2015, 45; italics in original). Deprived of the economic affluence of her friend Hilly Holbrook, Elizabeth probably feels especially compelled to "dissociate [herself] from excrement, filth and waste" (Morrison 2015, 47) to protect her social and racial status as a civilized white middle-class woman by keeping herself utterly distanced from these polluting objects. Her disgust for excrement becomes an expression of the human "horror of that which is only natural [...] our horror of the life of the flesh, of life naked, undisguised, a horror without which we would resemble the animals" (Bataille 1993, 63; quoted in Morrison 2015, 46). This may help explain her unnatural relationship with Mae Mobley: as a baby girl, her life is still too dependent on digestive fluids, defecation, and exuding not yet regulated by societal norms, which causes a reaction of revulsion in her mother, who consequently avoids contact with the girl and leaves her completely in her black domestic's care.

Early in the novel, Aibileen does not hesitate to affirm proudly that she is the one who has taught her white charges "*how to go in the pot*" (Stockett 2009, 92; italics in original), even in those cases when, as she herself acknowledges, she could count on the white parents' help in this task. Stockett's novel suggests that apart from changing diapers and washing them–that is, apart from disposing of excremental defilement–in the Jim Crow South "sphincteral training" was primarily black women's job. In light of the psychoanalytical premise that "maternal authority is experienced first and above all [...] as sphincteral training" (Kristeva 1982, 71), this fact seems to confirm the proximity of black caretakers to the maternal role through their handling of excrements. To sum up, the prescribed idealization of southern white women and motherhood complemented by the systematic deprecation, denial and exclusion of the body and its functions, ultimately implied a relocation of the source of this "maternal authority" in the configuration of the southern order: "maternal authority" and with it the role of trustee of the configuration of the "clean and proper body" was more in the hands of black women than in those of white mothers, since the former were deemed more apt to handle the dirt of the body.

The process of "sphincteral training" and "the mapping of the self's clean and proper body" are not complete until children are also trained to feel disgust for excrements. Morrison (2015) explains that "[o]nce children are of a certain age, when we assume that rationality can prevail over instinct, we shame them to find excretions disgusting" (46). She finds confirmation for this conclusion in Bataille's (1993) reflection about how "we busy ourselves in terrifying [children] as soon as they are old enough to take part (little by little) in our disgust for excrement, from everything that emanates from warm and living flesh" (63; quoted in Morrison 2015, 46). Nussbaum (2010) confirms this perception when she observes that "children do not exhibit disgust until the ages of two or three years old, during the time of

toilet training. This means that society has room to interpret and shape the emotion [disgust], directing it to some objects rather than others" (15). In the context of the Jim Crow South, the instillation of this feeling of disgust and fear–with the ultimate purpose of pursuing a supposedly purifying alienation from the body–was inextricably linked to the process of learning the meaning of race. Hale ([1998] 1999) observes that white southern children gradually learnt racial difference and the culture of segregation at home, where the presence of black domestics proved determinant for the development of this learning process: according to her, "the figure of the mammy haunted these scenes of racial learning" (97). She further explains that in contrast with the childhood state of racial innocence, when the establishment of close relationships between white children and their black caretakers was taken for granted, "[w]ith the end of childhood, whites learnt the meaning of segregation. African Americans could not really be loved. Integrated feelings, integrated living, then, must be packed up with the baby clothes, pulled out and nostalgically caressed perhaps but never taken seriously, not incorporated into adult white ways of being" (117-18). For whites, adulthood meant the assumption of white supremacy, which rendered blacks different and inferior to them, members of a lower race "closer to the ground with its dirt they wallow in" (Morrison 2015, 47). In other words, white children had to learn to identify blacks as "other than themselves," and, as Morrison (2015) explains, "[o]nce that othering is recognized, we set ourselves up as better than them" and them as "unclean or inhuman" (98). In the Jim Crow South this process of racial learning was juxtaposed to that by which children grow up to feel disgust and shame for the body and its excretions. Consequently, both processes got intertwined in such a way that at the end of the childhood period southern whites had learnt to project their disgust for the body onto the black race as a differentiated group "by reference to whom privileged [whites sought] to define their superior status" (98). Significantly, in *Killers of the Dream* Lillian Smith ([1949] 1994) puts the process of racial learning at the same level as that of learning "toilet habits"–among other things–when she describes how children learnt the culture of segregation in the South: "We were given no formal instruction in these difficult matters but we learned our lessons well. We learned the intricate systems of taboos, of renunciations and compensations, of manners, voice modulations, words, feelings, along with our prayers, our toilet habits, and our games" (27-28).

"Sphincteral training" and racial learning also go hand in hand in *The Help*, where the process of teaching toilet habits to Mae Mobley eventually turns into an opportunity for her mother to dirty the black race. Initially, Elizabeth refuses to participate in her daughter's toilet training, but her attitude changes when she realizes that her lack of involvement in this process threatens her daughter's racial learning: it is Mae Mobley's identification of Aibileen's toilet as hers, literally and symbolically violating the segregation laws, that prompts Elizabeth's response. First, she is scandalized and tries to instill fear in Mae Mobley by identifying the black race with dirt and disease: "This is dirty out here, Mae Mobley. You'll catch diseases. No, no, no!" (Stockett 2009, 95). Then, she adopts a more active role in Mae Mobley's toilet training, but the goal she pursues is her daughter's racial learning rather than her "sphincteral training": she just tries to make certain that Mae Mobley learns that

"her place" is different from Aibileen's and is not tainted with dirt and disease like hers. Elizabeth's words above cause Aibileen's indignant determination to change things by dissociating the black race from dirt and disease. Her main purpose is to prevent Mae Mobley's racial learning and her assumption of white supremacist views: "I want to yell so loud that Baby Girl can hear me that dirty ain't a color, disease ain't the Negro side of town. I want to stop that moment from coming–and it come in ever white child's life–when they start to think that colored folks ain't as good as whites" (Stockett 2009, 96). Aibileen accurately associates Elizabeth's identification of the black race with dirt to the process of growing up through racial learning. Moreover, since all this happens within the context of Mae Mobley's toilet training, the connection between learning the meaning of race in the Jim Crow South and learning the feeling of disgust for excrements does not seem to be farfetched.

Stockett's novel gives special prominence to the role of polluting bodily fluids in the relationship between white families and their black maids. Elizabeth's words above suggest that the disgust that white employers feel for dirt and disease is intimately connected to their perception of their black maids, and Hilly's Home Health Sanitation Initiative represents the main materialization of this situation in the novel.[9] This Initiative can be understood as a manifestation of the possible interpretation of the human body as "the prototype of that translucid being constituted by society as symbolic system" (Kristeva 1982, 66), since as Mary Douglas ([1966] 2002) observes, "[t]o understand bodily pollution we should try to argue back from the known dangers of society to the known selection of bodily themes and try to recognize what appositeness is there" (150). On a social level, Hilly's Initiative is primarily an attempt to promote segregation in the domestic sphere by placing black maids literally at the margins of the white home and the white space. Moreover, since the Initiative is publicized as "[a] disease preventive measure" (Stockett 2009, 158), that is, as an attempt to prevent the infection of the white body by the pollution allegedly generated by black maids as carriers of excremental filth, it can be read in bodily terms as an expression of the southern obsession with the purity of the white body: the Initiative is a literal–not just metaphorical–attempt to protect the purity of the white body by keeping it distanced from the pollution which black domestics allegedly represented.[10] The episode of the pots in Hilly's yard, as well as that of Minny's chocolate pie constitute grotesque events designed to challenge the main purpose of Hilly's Initiative–the establishment of a

[9] Some of the real-life testimonies collected by Van Wormer, Jackson and Sudduth (2012) depict the difficulties black maids had to face on a daily basis because they were not allowed to use the toilets of their white employers (85-86, 105).

[10] The Initiative takes advantage of what Hawkins considers "an irrational fear of diseases and contamination" that most of us share: she observes that everyday rituals of cleanliness and purification "are linked more to ethical and visceral anxiety than to real biological danger" (58). Similarly, Douglas ([1966] 2002) observes that "[o]ur idea of dirt is compounded of two things, care for hygiene and respect for conventions" (8), and in fact, "[d]irt does not look nice, but it is not necessarily dangerous" (xi).

distance to protect the white society and the white body from the polluting threat represented by black domestics–by reversing it. The pots literally transform Hilly's yard into an open-air defecation space, evoking the human "horror at the very idea of defecating on the street" (Hawkins 2006, 48). Similarly, Minny's chocolate pie ironically realizes the excremental threat which black domestics represented for the pure white body according to Hilly's Initiative by literally putting the black maid's excrements in the white woman's body. To take revenge on Miss Hilly's mistreatment, Minny bakes a chocolate pie for the white woman using a secret ingredient: her own feces. Significantly Minny's action shakes the established order by displacing excrements, that is, by removing them from their prescribed (marginal) position, and so it implies a reversal of the logic of exclusion in which waste originates. By using her excrements as an ingredient, Minny destroys "the *distance* from the basest of human products," the "literal and metaphoric separation from the base" which according to Hawkins (2006) "is one of the defining markers of modernity's classificatory regimes" (56; italics in original), in two different senses: on the one hand, she violates the racial distance at the heart of the segregation system and of Hilly's Initiative by undermining black and white distinctions; and on the other hand, she brings food and excrement together, the mouth and the anus, eating and defecating, inviting reflection on the interdependence of these terms, as well as on the paradoxes of a system which reduced the guardians of the "healthy 'natural' functions" of the white body, the "trustees of the self's clean and proper body" to the same status as the filth they handled. A real-life testimony reported by Harris (1982) states this paradox most clearly: "If these [black] women are so filthy, why you want them to clean for you?" (21).

As a legacy of slavery, black domestics in the segregation period were doomed to handle filth due to their race and gender, since they were the targets of one of the most common manifestations of Nussbaum's (2010) *projective disgust*: the projection of the human disgust for the body and its excretions on unprivileged groups, in this case black women. Through this projection, the regulatory regime in the Jim Crow South–based on that of the antebellum period–removed black women to the margins of the system by assigning them exclusively to the bodily realm, and at the same time depriving them of a "clean and proper body," which in the South was always white, pure, and ideally devoid of orifices. Paradoxically, this *projective disgust* justified black women's innate suitability to handle the same polluting bodily functions whose regulation determines "the mapping of the self's clean and proper body," according to Kristeva (1982). From her perspective, this regulation is associated with the "maternal authority," so it was in their role as caretakers of white children that black domestic workers were especially involved in the handling of bodily pollution: apart from cooking for their white families, which implied their contact with dirt mainly in the shape of dead animals, they were also expected to manage their white charges' bodily fluids, mainly their excrements. In this sense, I have suggested here the possibility of establishing a parallelism between the development of white children's disgust for excrements and the process of learning the meaning of race in the Jim Crow South. From this perspective, race learning culminated when white children were able to project their disgust for the body and

its dirt on the black race, turning even their otherwise beloved black caretakers–usually disguised as mammy–into polluting elements to be kept at a distance. Research on black women's professional role as domestic workers in the segregation period has often focused precisely on the analysis of the distance separating their real life and work conditions from the idealized mammy image. This article has rather explored the role of black domestic workers from the perspective of Waste Studies by focusing on their task as handlers of corporeal filth–mainly excrements, since their connection with menstrual defilement would require another study. Since, as stated at the beginning of this essay, "anyone who touches the waste becomes, in turn, contaminated as refuse, to be thrown out socially, geographically, and morally" (Morrison 2015, 99), black women performing domestic tasks in the South were usually equated with waste. There were other equally spurious reasons conspiring with the official discourse to justify their classification as "wasted humans"–to use Bauman's (2004) term. Among others, the fact that since they were not among those rich enough to waste, they were among the wasted ones: "The rich waste, the poor get wasted" (Morrison 2015, 69). Thus, although they were not unemployed and they were not at all redundant or unnecessary–three of the terms Morrison (2015) takes from Bauman to define wasted humans (102)–their equation with filth and waste by the established ideology in the Jim Crow South was undeniable, which makes the vindication of their role especially urgent.

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"WELCOME TO AMERICA 2.0": READING WASTE IN GARY SHTEYNGART'S *SUPER SAD TRUE LOVE STORY**

Martín Urdiales-Shaw
Universidade de Vigo

Abstract

This article proposes a reading of Gary Shteyngart's celebrated novel *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), a text that straddles the dystopian and the satiric in its depiction of a quasi-contemporary America, from the perspective of Waste Studies. Through the problematic relationship between its two main characters, Shteyngart's novel articulates the wide-ranging effects of globalization on a generationally-ruptured American society, that in many ways stands also for the First World at large. Drawing from sociologists, cultural critics, and philosophers like Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Byung-Chul Han, John Scanlan and Susan Sontag, who have theorized how individuals today are molded, challenged and threatened by powerful extrinsic forces in the era of globalization, this article aims to explore how *Super Sad True Love Story* showcases a range of mutually interrelated "modes of waste," resulting from the writer's pushing to a satiric/dystopic extreme contemporary American practices in politics and finance, citizenship and social ethics, culture and language, and even biological research.

Keywords: waste, globalization, citizenship, social ethics, cultural practices, dystopia, satire.

«BIENVENID@ A AMERICA 2.0»: UNA LECTURA DE LO RESIDUAL EN *SUPER SAD TRUE LOVE STORY* DE GARY SHTEYNGART

Resumen

Este artículo propone una lectura de la aclamada novela de Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), un texto que bascula entre la distopía y la sátira en su retrato de una América cuasi-contemporánea, desde la perspectiva de los *Waste Studies*. A través de la complicada relación entre sus personajes principales, esta novela de Shteyngart articula las diversas consecuencias de la globalización sobre una sociedad norteamericana caracterizada por una ruptura generacional, que es representativa del primer mundo en general. Partiendo de sociólogos, críticos culturales, y filósofos como Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Byung-Chul Han, John Scanlan y Susan Sontag, que han teorizado sobre cómo el individuo contemporáneo se ve moldeado, intimidado y amenazado por poderosas fuerzas extrínsecas en la era de la globalización, este artículo examina los diversos ámbitos en los que *Super Sad True Love Story* manifiesta lo "residual", a partir de una visión en la que se llevan a un límite satírico y distópico las prácticas políticas y económicas, de ciudadanía y ética social, culturales y lingüísticas, e incluso biológicas, que definen a la América contemporánea.

Palabras clave: *waste*, globalización, ciudadanía, ética social, prácticas culturales, distopía, sátira.

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American literature and American popular culture witnessed a suggestive shift around the 1980s and 1990s, as new critical practices toward US hegemony and cultural values began to find expression in novel ways. While, within the broad template of realism, towering male literary figures of the postwar era interrogated the state of the nation, and American women writers started to voice their American experience from the 1960s onwards, in the late twentieth century and into the new millennium, partly sustained by the postmodernist turn, an increasing number of narratives began to express diverse anxieties about "what may have happened" or "what can happen," gradually pushing center-stage the genres that we familiarly label today speculative fiction, alternate history, and dystopian narrative. In Hollywood cinema, the surge of global or American disaster movies ("blockbusters") in the nineties is patent, while in narrative this tendency underwent more diverse manifestations, including alternate histories (Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*), dystopian futures (Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*) or encyclopedic novels (David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*).

Francis Fukuyama's 1989 often-discussed prediction of the "end of history" whereby Western liberal democracies would become the "final form of human government" (Hochuli 2021, 21) has proven largely inaccurate, although a significant premise of his argument, the replacement of "political idealism" by an international "common marketization" was absolutely sound and is now obvious, third world excepted. What Fukuyama, or anyone, was unable to predict, is that in year one of the twenty-first century, the attacks on New York's World Trade Center would radically alter the "tranquil" evolution of Western liberal democracies, sparking anew fervent radical nationalisms and populist outlooks. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 finally materialized and embodied a dystopian event, which as Slavoj Žižek, Susan Sontag, and other philosophers and cultural critics promptly noted, had only been envisioned within the "safe" framing distance of Hollywood apocalyptic cinema.[1] The World Trade Center towers, materially erected in New York but "dealing" in world trade (*first* world trade, that is) did in fact symbolize an inextricable alignment between a specific nation and a global economic system, just like the Pentagon, another target, symbolized American 'intelligence interests' throughout the world, serving a US foreign policy that has often been dictated by both political and by corporate strategies.

The epiphanic moment of 9/11, which Sontag labelled "the monstrous dose of reality" (2001, n.p.), literally brought home and realized the consequences of what was obvious for decades: the US is a highly interventionist country whose political agenda, corporate lobbies, military power and intelligence agencies have often worked in conjunction. This 'operative framework' has shaped or conditioned the fate of

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[1] See Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (Verso, 2013) and Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Penguin Books, 2004).

many countries and peoples, including Vietnam and Cuba, governments and puppet regimes in Central and Latin America, and the Middle East region, where American involvement (military, strategic, or economic) has played a part in Kuwait, Syria, Israel/Palestine, Iran and Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen and Turkey.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 affected American society and American literature and culture significantly, not just across the many memoirs, fictions, poetry and graphic novels thematizing the events themselves, but also by familiarizing readerships with the reality of the unimaginable: a dystopian turn in the collective American experience had taken place, however much the Bush administration tried to infantilize the public, sanitize the TV footage, and engage in the partisan, simplistic discourse of 'democracy against terror.'

In the twenty years elapsed since 2001, the sense of living in an ongoing dystopian era has escalated for both the United States and the world at large, not least as the perversely interconnected pattern on which neoliberalism is based– the exploitation of third world countries, the rapid depletion of (their) natural resources, the unsustainable exchanges of merchandise across great distances, and the supremacy of corporate capital–has been severely affected by the awareness of a climate crisis without precedent, followed by the global sanitary crisis. As with Covid-19, more recent events, such as the war in Ukraine, have only corroborated how, within our economic superstructure and "connectedness," any regional, localized crisis has global repercussions, effectively generating a "world risk" society, where "we are all trapped in a shared global space of threats – without exit" (Beck 2009, 56).

Within the generation of contemporary American writers of Jewish descent and Russian origins who successfully emerged into US the literary canon in the first decade of the new millennium,[2] proudly self-proclaimed New Yorker[3] Gary Shteyngart is, I believe, one of the novelists today most attuned to the dangers and excesses of the contending forces that shape contemporary America as a prominent, but already gradually declining, world player in global economy. Like the early Philip Roth, Shteyngart's narrative approach has been mostly satiric, often combining Swiftian technique with a trenchant political incorrectness. In his first two novels, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002) and *Absurdistan* (2006), Shteyngart mobilizes Jewish religion and heritage, Russian and Soviet history, American culture(s) and globalism as integral elements of his satire. These works parody the prestige, home and abroad, of American consumerism and cultural values, and the economic influence of the US in an Eastern Europe which, in the wake of post-Soviet disintegration, has been overrun by shameless materialism, governmental corruption and self-serving oligarchs. In Shteyngart's finest novel so far, *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), the writer turns to America, focusing centrally on the challenging relationship between Lenny Abramov, age 39, son of a Russian Jewish immigrant, who "owns a wall of

[2] See Adrian Wanner's excellent overview.
[3] See Grinberg.

books," and the twenty-four-year-old Korean Eunice Park, a graduate in "Images," against the backdrop of "an all-too-plausible digitized dystopia" (Goldbach 2010, n.p.). One of the novel's greater strengths is Shteyngart's ability to draw comedy from a love story conditioned by the bleak disintegration of America, as it affects–and is affected by–its two central characters.

Writing about the 9/11 terrorist attacks twenty years ago, in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek reflected, in line with Sontag's analysis above, on how the broadcasting of TV footage of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center should not so much be read as "the intrusion of the real which shattered our illusory sphere [...] quite the reverse [...] the question [...] is: *Where have we already seen the same thing over and over again*?" (Žižek 2013, 16-17, italics in original). *Super Sad True Love Story* lies very much in this juncture between the dystopian/speculative and what is already uncannily real and familiar in contemporary American society, especially in relation to its youth. In a broad-ranging chapter dedicated to this work within Shteyngart's fiction, Geoff Hamilton has perceptively listed the wide range of critical responses to this text across fields as diverse as Economics, Media Studies, Biology and Aging Studies, Dystopian studies, and even Psychiatry, a diversity he reads as attesting "to [the novel's] broad cultural relevance" (2017, 61). Indeed, a Google Scholar search reveals close to forty published essays or book chapters which tackle the novel from frameworks as varied as Posthumanism, Print and Cyber-cultures, Medical Humanities, Transnationalism and Ethnic studies, or Surveillance Studies, among others. This is a substantial amount of criticism for a novel published a little over a decade ago.

The ways in which Shteyngart's dystopian novel foregrounds a number of interrelated and reciprocally causal *dis*integrations–of the nation and welfare state; of language and a relevant cultural heritage; of meaningful emotional relationships and ethics; even of the very biology of the human body–has led me to reflect on a further, and, to my knowledge, unexplored approach to this text. Whether at literal or metaphorical levels, disintegration involves the breakdown of a structure, body, machine or construct into its constituent parts, which, being no longer "integral" (whole) or "integrated" (working together) engenders waste. The symbolic notion of waste as a concept relevant to literature and culture is intriguingly complex and long-standing, dating back a hundred years, in the Anglophone literary tradition, to T.S. Eliot's narrative poem invoking cultural, historical, and personal breakdowns after World War I. But since Eliot's influential *The Waste Land*, the concept of waste has broadened in the wake of late twentieth century globalization and capitalism, and its mounting production of multiple forms of "refuse," "excess," "by-products," "toxic residue," and the like, that have come to conform the current age of the Anthropocene, the first era in the history of humanity where this species' impact on the planet has far-reaching, maybe irreversible, consequences. While the material production of 'world waste' has planetary effects, affecting humanity's fate globally, the economic system itself has also perversely contributed to broaden the social and economic divide between the Third World, exploited for resources, and the First World (and developing nations), whose industrial and technological capacities allow for the transformation and production of finished products from those resources.

The cycle is completed by the ultimate dumping of the waste products generated by these transformations back into the third world, as documented, for example, in the chilling World Health Organization report on *Children and Digital Dumpsites: E-Waste Exposure and Child Health* (WHO 2021). Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, among others, has perceptively traced how this economic cycle creates its own parallel in the value scale of humanity's distribution worldwide, contributing to continually broaden the socioeconomic divide between first world, "functional" citizens (i.e., the smartphone users), and the "wasted lives" that inhabit the third world (i.e., the children salvaging smartphone components at toxic dumpsites): "in the 'wasting' of whole classes of human beings, they become nonentities, equivalencies for trash, garbage and filth [...]. As Serres points out, 'the rich readily discharge waste [...] where the poorest live'" (Morrison 2013, 467).

In *On Garbage*, John Scanlan provides an insightful discussion of "garbage metaphorics" and the ways in which waste has, in the Western cultural tradition, always been inextricably bound to "an economy of human values" (2005, 23) within which it is constructed as an "Other," or as a product of an "imbalance" across both material and abstract domains: nature and civilization, information and knowledge, art and aesthetics, social order and ethics, biology, etc. (22-55). Scanlan notes how in Calvinist doctrine and John Locke's related political philosophy, "waste" denoted the "ungoverned" condition of nature in the absence of mankind's (God-willed) intervention. Yet, as far back as the thirteenth century, centuries before global capitalism, "waste" as verb functions also with opposite connotations, where its human agency is semantically linked to destructive action or excessive consumption: "c. 1200, 'devastate, ravage, ruin,' from Anglo-French and Old North French *waster* 'to waste, squander, spoil, ruin' (*Online Etymology Dictionary*).

Drawing from the lexical field of the term 'waste' as a verb–to consume, to use up, to damage, to become barren, to ruin, to weaken–and as noun, along with its derived terms, wasteland and devastation, in the following pages I will be approaching *Super Sad True Love Story* by shedding light on a variety of mutually related *modes of waste*, representing the "imbalance" and "othering" noted by Scanlan in his overview of the ramifications of the term, which I argue this novel showcases in relation to contemporary American neoliberal standards of politics and nationhood, citizenship and social ethics, cultural and linguistic practices, and even biological relevance. Although Scanlan's study is useful as a primary epistemological framework, the discussion will draw from sociologists, philosophers and cultural critics–Susan Sontag, Emmanuel Levinas, Zygmunt Bauman, Byung-Chul Han, and Ulrich Beck–whose ideas are particularly compelling in discussing more specific approaches to several expressions of waste in this novel.

POLITICAL WASTELANDS: THE END OF THE NATION

Overtly invoking the excesses of free market economy, the dominance of transglobal corporations, and the subservience of digital network technologies to both, resulting in the irrelevance of the nation-state (let alone the welfare state), Lenny

and Eunice live in a United States governed by the ARA or 'American Restoration Authority.' The ARA ranks citizens and controls immigrants on the basis of their "Credit," with a capital C. The country is beyond financial collapse, and uses a form of investment currency, the "Yuan-pegged dollar," after China has become its main creditor and large corporations have become capitalized by the powerful Chinese economy, fostering companies with hyphenated names, like Staatling-Wapachung. As it awaits the intervention of the Chinese Central Banker,[4] who will eventually purchase the country as a commodity-state at the novel's conclusion, the United States has gone beyond Zygmunt Bauman's notion of the "weak, quasi-state [...] reduced to the (useful) role of local police precinct[s], securing a modicum of order required for [conducting] business but not to be feared as effective brake[s]on the global companies' freedom" (1998, 68).

Conveniently for the control of citizens' wealth, a plausible technology has developed the 'äppärät,' a ubiquitous gadget that far exceeds the functions of an iPhone, as it streams figures continuously onto "Credit Poles" on the sidewalks and connects to other äpärätti users, publicly reporting each individual's "worth" or credit ranking. Lenny works as a high-profile salesman for a division of Staatling-Wapachung, providing Indefinite Life Extension through bio-engineering, a service accessible only to HNWI or 'High Net Worth Individuals,' as they are labeled in this American dystopia. As Simon Willmetts has observed, Shteyngart's novel originates in the tradition of twentieth century dystopian fiction (George Orwell's *1984* or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*) but also departs from it in a significant way, since "rather than solidify[ing] class distinction and identity, surveillance [here] is fundamentally destabilizing, subjecting the individual to continuous transformation [where s/he] is in a permanent state of becoming" (2018, 272). Throughout the novel, Lenny is recurrently concerned with his credit rating and rankings, and the incessant economic "alerts" from *CrisisNet* that beep on his äppärät, thus illustrating the uncertainty, instability and fluidity of American citizenship under the American Restoration Authority, and the ever-present fear of falling towards the ranks of LNWI, or Low Net Worth Individuals. His concerns, shared by other characters, essentially embody Zygmunt Bauman's notion of fear in contemporary "liquid modern life," where "power and politics drift ever further in opposite directions [...] [and] Society is no longer protected by the state, [...] [but] exposed to the rapacity of forces it does not control" (2007, 25).

In political terms, Shteyngart's ironies extend into the actual language used to portray his conception of the ARA interim government. "Restoration Authority" is a frequent label used in the US to identify institutions or administrations committed to funding or aiding damaged ecosystems, housing, or urban districts. In the novel, the American Restoration Authority is an obscure organization, in some ways reminiscent of Orwell's vigilant Big Brother in *1984*, awakening Lenny's

[4] While still unfamiliar to the US, the threat of foreign economic intervention, also as an effect of global capitalism, has become a real experience for several EU countries since the 2008 crisis.

suspicions about a workmate's covert involvement and responsible for issuing warning messages which twist and distort language in order to elude its accountability as a real governing body. One of its public street signs notifies "By reading this message you are denying its existence and implying consent" (Shteyngart 2010, 239).

In the American context, further satires emerge from the ARA's being provisionally managed by a Jew: "Defence Secretary Rubinstein [also known as] 'shifty Rubinstein'" (11), while articulating a public discourse that foregrounds a racialized perversion of nationalism, correlated with economic wealth: "America Celebrates its Spenders! [...] The Boat is Full / Avoid Deportation / Latinos Save / Chinese Spend / ALWAYS Keep Your Credit Ranking Within Limits" (54). In a number of interrelated ways, the conceptualization of the ARA in the novel–a puppet administration that restores nothing and is terminated by China's eventual takeover of the US–brings to an undisguised completion Bauman's notions of "the new expropriation, this time, of the state" (1998, 65-69), ultimately officialized by the visit of the Chinese delegation, greeted by banners that read "Welcome to America 2.0: A GLOBAL Partnership. THIS is New York: Lifestyle Hub, Trophy City" (Shteyngart 2010, 322).

WASTED INDIVIDUALS: *BE*-ING HUMAN BEINGS?

In "Only Disconnect," a brief essay published in *The New York Times* in July 2010, Shteyngart acknowledged, in a self-critical tone, his enduring addiction to his (sic) "iTelephone," propelling him into a state of "techno-fugue" in which the streets and people of New York receded from sight, as he became increasingly engrossed in posting on Facebook, following online maps to stores and eateries, then rating the eateries, reading emergent news headlines from the screen, and so on. In August, *The Atlantic* quoted *Village Voice* reviewer Rob Harvilla as branding *Super Sad True Love Story* "the finest piece of anti-iPhone propaganda ever written, a cautionary tale full of distracted drones unwilling to tear themselves away from their little glowing screens long enough to make eye contact" (Madrigal 2010, n.p.). Indeed, the novel is inextricable from Shteyngart's visceral addiction with and later, reaction to digital technologies, which for many US citizens under forty is tantamount to an iPhone, in one of its successive versions. In several interviews, Shteyngart reflects on how younger generations of Americans, specifically those who fall under the (arguable) label "digital natives,"[5] can actually be controlled and manipulated within the very framework of neoliberal, democratic, "free" societies, because these digital natives use modern technologies to freely(?) divulge their personal data, opinions and preferences via the continuous upload and streaming of content, subsequently processed by algorithms.

[5] For an engaging discussion on this label's validity, see Helsper and Eynon.

In his postscript to the "Society of Control," argued as a response to Foucault's notion of "environments of enclosure" (panopticons, prisons, factories) Gilles Deleuze noted that "[w]e no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become *dividuals*, and masses, samples, data, markets, or *banks*" (1992, 5). Contemporary Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han has added to the discussion by perceptively reconceptualizing the notion of the physical "panopticon" as it shifts into a new virtual realm:

> Digital control society makes intensive use of freedom. This can only occur thanks to voluntary self-illumination and self-exposure (*Selbsausleuchtung und Selbstentblößung*). Digital Big Brother *outsources* operations to inmates, as it were. Accordingly, data is not surrendered under duress so much as offered out of an inner need. That is why the digital panopticon proves so efficient. (2017, 9)

Han's reflections here closely reflect Shteyngart's informally worded insights into the contemporary loss of individual freedom within neoliberal, western and apparently free democratic societies. Indeed, these concerns inform much of the background to *Super Sad True Love Story,* written between 2008 and the publication of "Only Disconnect" in 2010. A number of critical approaches over the past decade have identified the work's relevance to the digital era, whether in relation to the dystopian or to posthumanism.[6] The novel abounds in numerous instances of the subservience of human volition to the dictates of technology, illustrating the Deleuzian transformation of a free-thinking individual into a *dividual* or, in Han's terms, technology's capacity to "ensure that individuals act on themselves so that power relations are interiorized, and then interpreted as freedom" (2017, 28) but I will be limiting my discussion here to three episodes that illustrate, in various ways, how relationships among individuals, conditioned, as they are, by the mediating effects of digital technology, ultimately derive in a dissolution of individual transcendence and the breakdown of a sense of self.

In a chapter with the ominous title "The Fallacy of Merely Existing" (Shteyngart 2010, 50-71), Lenny's anxiety over not locating a woman, contracted by the State Department, who has tried to help him with a malfunction in the automated immigration procedure, resonates with the younger generations' contemporary anxieties over privacy, anonymity, publicity, and exposure in social networks. Shteyngart takes this to a limit where not even a residual sense of individual agency remains:

> I sent a GlobalTeens message to Nettie Fine, but got a chilling "RECIPIENT DELETED" in response. What could that mean? No one *ever* gets deleted

[6] Among the most extensive studies are Simon Willmetts's "Digital Dystopia: Surveillance, Autonomy, and Social Justice in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*" and Raymond Malewitz's "Some New Dimension Devoid of Hip and Bone": Remediated Bodies and Digital Posthumanism in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story.*"

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> from GlobalTeens. I tried to GlobalTrace her but got an even more frightening "RECIPIENT UNTRACEABLE / INACTIVE." What kind of person couldn't be found on this earth? (55)

The app's very language and Lenny's reaction to it ("chilling;" "no one ever;" "RECIPIENT DELETED") reveal how nonexistence in the digital world is tantamount, if not to physical death, at least, to some severe form of repression or confinement. His suspicions will be confirmed at the novel's ending. A more radical example of the power of disciplinary technologies and their actual control over individuals is provided by the episode that takes place early in the story, when Lenny, waiting to board his flight to the US at a first-class lounge in an Italian airport, is astonished to come across a "fat man" who

> registered nothing. I mean he wasn't there. He didn't have an äppärät, or it wasn't set to social mode [or had been hacked to block transmission] And he looked like a nothing [...]. No one would look at him except me (and only for a minute), because he was on the margins of society, because he was without rank, because he was ITP or Impossible to Preserve, because he had no business [mixing] with real HNWIs in a first class lounge. (35)

Warranting Lenny's fears, the "fat man" episode predictably closes with the plane's landing at New York, surrounded by tanks and mercenary-like forces who board the plane fiercely and scan all passengers' äppärätti signals until they identify and arrest the proscribed nonuser. The scene grimly reverberates the homeland security polices during the Bush mandate, but to a more radical degree, in which nonpossession of the streaming gadget is equivalent to nonexistence or an irrelevant existence. In an illuminating discussion of digital posthumanism in the novel, Raymond Malewitz has discussed this episode drawing from Kristeva's notion of the abject:

> In a manner akin to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, if citizenship in a social world is governed by the ability to represent oneself and to be represented by others, Lenny's inability to describe the man suggests that digital technologies not only clarify the nature of citizenship in a posthuman world but also constitute the grounds on which the fantastical universalist category of 'human' is established [...]. Kristeva argues that the abject is less a thing than a process that results from a breakdown in the human structuration of the self. (2015, 114)

Lenny's reflection–"he wasn't there" (Shteyngart 2010, 35)–explicitly emphasizes how the fat man's existence cannot be grounded only in the perceived reality of his physical *be-ing*. In the particular "structuration of the self" imposed by digital surveillance societies, he remains abject because his refusal to share his identity through an äppärät removes him beyond the margins of citizenship in the terms that this citizenship has been constructed and conceived.

The ways in which the American Restoration Authority and its digital controls assess citizenship is at the core of Shteyngart's dystopia, sometimes in

episodes which combine outright comedy with ominous forces at play. In the first world, we are all familiar with the frustration of using automated voice recognition systems that supposedly guide us through options and services, yet finally require human assistance. In the opening scene of the novel, a hilarious exchange takes place between the protagonist and the GIF-like, automated "Jeffrey Otter" who addresses him as "Leonard or Lenny" (8, 9, 10) and interrogates him on occupation, reasons for travel, Credit ranking, and foreign acquaintances. This is the ARA's automated immigration procedure, an app that suddenly freezes seconds after the voice recognition system confuses Lenny's reply "some Italians" with "Somalians" (9):

> "De Salva, Fabrizia," I whispered.
> "You said 'De Salva–'" But just then the otter froze in mid-name, and my äppärät began to produce its "heavy thinking" noises, a wheel desperately spinning inside its hard plastic shell, its ancient circuitry completely overtaxed by the otter and his antics. The words ERROR CODE IT / FC-GS / FLAG appeared on the screen. (10)

Hereafter, a red asterisk flashes next to Lenny's Credit scores, who later discovers through a supervisor at Life Extension, Howard Shu, that his record has been "flagged" by the ARA as "malicious provision of incomplete data" (69). Shu promptly attributes the error to Lenny's obsolete gadget, but his diagnosis may be staged to assuage Lenny's fears. As Gregory Rutledge notes in his discussion of the implied intertextual allusions of the term 'äppärät,' "Shteyngart's novel can be re-read as a deadly-serious spy novel and commentary on the dangers of combining surveillance culture (fascism) with a false sense of individual empowerment" (2020, 387). The äppärät leaves "a clear trail of destruction" (388) as High Net Worth Individuals may mask under assumed digital identities and possibly control, from the beginning, the outcome of Lenny's relationship with Eunice. In spite all its surface comedy, *Super Sad True Love Story* disturbingly reveals the ways in which individual lives are conditioned by the projection of such lives into a digital unknown, controlled and exploited by neoliberal elites, whose "technology of power takes on subtle, supple and smart forms, [escaping] all visibility. Now, the subjugated subject is not even aware of his subjugation [,] the whole context of domination [...] remain[ing] entirely hidden" (Han 2017, 14).

WASTED WOR(L)DS: THE RUINS OF CULTURE

The automated immigration software, under the ludicrous designation "Welcome back, pad'ner!" voiced by the digital otter "speaking" clichéd American slang provides a fitting opening into the ways in which *Super Sad True Love Story* foregrounds the disintegration of language and culture in the US. As several commentators have observed, here the writer draws from several strands, some disturbingly real in today's First World: the demise of books and print culture, including professional journalism, replaced by a solipsistic streaming of one's own "media"; the proliferation of social media jargon centered exclusively on *datafication*,

brand-quoting and sexualization (online women's fashion adopts sexist and fetishist labels like Onionskin, TotalSurrender, AssLuxury); the shrinking of language into a Newspeak which coins terms and acronyms guided to represent such a reality.[7] Shteyngart conveys these breakdowns of language and culture by composing chapters using diverse textual registers: Lenny's written diaries and Eunice Park's GlobalTeens account–set in a different typeface–which include her messages to Lenny and friends, but also long, pathetic, admonitions by her Korean mother in a broken and comical English. The following is a representative sample:

> *GLOBALTEENS SUPER HINT: Switch to Images today! Less words= more fun!!!*
> EUNI-TARD ABROAD TO GRILLBITCH:
> Hi, Precious Pony!
> What's up, twat? Missing your 'tard? Wanna dump a little sugar on me? JBF. I am so sick of making out with girls. BTW, I saw the pictures on the Elderbird alum board with your tongue in Bryana's, um, ear. I hope you're not trying to get Gopher jealous? He's had way too many three-somes. Respect yourself, hoo-kah! (Shteyngart 2010, 27)
>
> CHUNG.WON.PARK TO EUNI-TARD ABROAD:
> Eunhee,
> Today I wake up sad. But no problem! It will be OK! Only your father is very mad at you. He say you bohemia. What is this? He say you go to rome and you do not protect the mystery. He call you bad word in korean. [...] He say only bohemia people go to Europe and bohemia people is bad people. (72)
>
> *RATE ME PLUS: FROM THE DIARIES OF LENNY ABRAMOV*
> Dear Diary,
> God, I miss her. No messages from my Euny yet, no reply to my entreaty to move here and let me take care of her with garlicky carcasses of eggplant, with my grown man's practiced affections, with what's left of my bank account... (76)

These discourses, and the respective worldviews they evoke, are illustrative markers of three generations of Americans whose relation to culture can be read as 'wasteful' or 'wasted' in several ways. Chung Won Park struggles to communicate with her daughter Eunice, but her broken syntax and limited vocabulary, regardless of her attempts at American idiom, are unsuited to her conservative religious Korean values, and her reprimands (here referring to premarital sex) consistently appear both pathetic and hilarious. Eunice's message to a friend is characteristic of current trends in the teen language of social media, in its bluntness, immediacy, use of slang and acronyms, while revealing a graphic and superficial attitude to sexual intimacy. Eunice is a graduate in "Images" in a society where the younger generations connect

[7] The shrinking of language partly evokes George Orwell's classic dystopia *1984*, while acronymic usage also resonates with the discursive practices of Nazism: see also footnote 10.

through a social network that publicizes "*Less words=more fun!!!*" (27).[8] In a later social message to Grillbitch, she reports with awe how Lenny is capable of reading "for like HALF AN HOUR [...] that Russian guy Tolstoy [which] was a thousand pages long BOOK, not a stream" (144). The language of Lenny's diary, very authorial, modeled on Shteyngart himself, stands in opposition to both discourses, as a register that is literary, intense and sophisticated. But Lenny's cultural outlook is itself also essentially "wasted" in this contemporary dystopian US. When younger workmates, men of Eunice's generation, initiate Lenny into the 'FAC-ing' app ('Form a Community' although Lenny mishears "fuck"; 88) which will "rate" his "male hotness" in relation to the surrounding women at a bar, he ranks last. Part of the data computed in the algorithmic computations involve his recent purchases, identified as "bound, printed, nonstreaming Media artifact[s]" to the younger men's amusement: "You've got to stop buying books. [...] Where the fuck do you even find those things? [...] Lenny Abramov, last reader on earth!" (90).[9] To a lesser degree than the ITP-Impossible to Preserve fat man arrested earlier, at 39, the well-read Jewish Lenny, who owns "a wall of books" which he actively cherishes (Hamilton 2017, 69), embodies what has become a vestigial, wasted, form of culture. Drawing from Marshall McLuhan, Raymond Malewitz perceptively reads the educational rift between Lenny and Eunice's generation:

> Lenny is a bumbling outsider whose quaint liberal humanism is still structured by what Marshall McLuhan calls "the Gutenberg galaxy"–a print culture that generates and sustains the solitary, introspective "individual ego" (52). [...] In contrast, Eunice constitutes the tribal citizen of McLuhan's electronic "global village," who lives pluralistically in many worlds and cultures simultaneously [...] embody[ing] the "new electronic interdependence" of a world returning to a "non-literate" status (31, 30). (2015, 110)

The bar scene pushes electronic interdependence to the very limits of ethics and civility. Everyone is looking into the data streams of their äppäräti, but nobody exchanges looks in the Levinasian sense.[10] When detailed data from a FAC stream labeled 'Child Abuse Multimedia' inputs Lenny's gadget from one Annie, he tries to catch Annie's eye in a gesture of sympathy, "but the words 'Look away quickly, dork,'" appear on his äppärät (Shteyngart 2010, 92). This scene fully epitomizes Han's conceptualization of dysfunctional "digital tribes" and the advent of a "communication without community" where there are no listeners, and the "other is

[8] Instagram was released only months after the publication of *Super Sad True Love Story* in 2010, although other image-sharing apps had been developed earlier.

[9] This comment evokes Walter Tevis' science fiction dystopia *Mockingbird* (1980), which envisions a robot-managed distant future where books and reading skills have long been forgotten by a lethargic human population.

[10] In "Ethics and the Face," Emmanuel Levinas foregrounds the significance of the exchange of the human gaze for the simultaneous recognition of our individual uniqueness and shared humanity (1991, 213).

in the process of disappearing" (Han 2022, 51-55; my translation), as communication becomes fully conditioned by a solipsistic datafication of the self.

A further issue worth examining, in connection to the novel's darkly ironic approach to the reduction of "words" and their "wastefulness," is the cultural shift towards an acronymic communication, which identifies Eunice's and her peers' social media, and to some degree, Lenny's discourse as well. Acronyms in the novel essentially encapsulate terms belonging to three semantic fields: the state's commodified language of financial taxonomies (the above quoted ARA, ITP, HNWI, LNWI); biological terms related to human chemistry; and sexual acts and the expression of human emotions. The first field clearly functions as a representation of the political dystopia envisioned by Shteyngart, and can be read in analogy to historical totalitarian regimes, such as Nazism, which distorted and encoded the German language with nouns and acronyms that "rationalized" its perverse world-view.[11] As noted in section one, the ARA actually establishes a "financial racialization" of citizens–Chinese vs. Latinos–and uses repressive methods against those residents it considers 'ITP: Impossible to Preserve,' a euphemistic language which carries echoes of Nazi-Deutsch *Endlosüng*, "Final Solution" (namely, the extermination of Jews). In the third lexical field, however, Shteyngart is tapping the most disturbing, fully contemporary, form of epistemological waste. One of the very first dialogues between Lenny and Eunice provides this exchange:

> "LPT," she said. "TIMATOV. ROFLAARP. PRGV. Totally PRGV."
> The youth and their abbreviations. I pretended like I knew what she was talking about. "Right," I said. "IMF. PLO. ESL."
> She looked at me like I was insane. "JBF," she said.
> "Who's that?" I pictured a tall Protestant man.
> "It means I'm 'just butt-fucking' with you. Just kidding, you know."
> "Duh," I said. I knew that. Seriously. [So] what makes me a nerd in your estimation?"
> "'In your estimation,' she mimicked. "Who says things like that? And who wears those shoes? You look like a bookkeeper."
> "I'm sensing a bit of anger here," I said. (Shteyngart 2010, 22)

The ironies implicit in Eunice's condescending to Lenny's superior linguistic and cultural competence, when he "struggles to accommodate himself to the truncated, vulgarized expression of social networking" (Hamilton 2017, 69) are revealing. They bear out that such "web-speak" conventions actually blunt the younger generation's skills at social and emotional interaction: "while digital acronyms radically attenuate the verbal expression of possible emotional and cognitive states, the novel's equivalent of emoticons–pantomime images–converts Shteyngart's

[11] A number of survivors and commentators of the Holocaust, from Victor Klemperer's early *The Language of the Third Reich* to Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* and George Steiner's essays on "Language and Silence" have foregrounded the relevance of acronyms to the transformation of German into Nazi-Deutsch in the 1930s.

characters into empty emoticon like signs of desire and anger" (Malewitz 2015, 119), although, under his influence, Eunice later begins to defer to Lenny's broader humanistic worldview. This simultaneous dwelling and communicating both in the physical and the digital worlds brings about "the [...] exaggeration of bodily behaviors [which] is remediated back into the material world, simultaneously amplifying and coarsening interpersonal relationships by treating real-world encounters as disembodied data transfers" (Malewitz 2015, 119).

Ultimately, from Lenny's–and Shteyngart's–perspective the novel passes judgement on the contemporary ruins of a culture which has enabled digital and social media to lay waste to the potential of language beyond the narrow limits of a truncated, acronymic, emoticon-based, articulation of human emotions and physical desires. Only the nonusers of social media, children and the elderly, are still capable of such a potential, as Lenny nostalgically reflects twice in the novel: "I relished hearing language actually being spoken by children. Overblown verbs, explosive nouns, beautifully bungled prepositions. [...] How long would it be before these kids retreated into the dense clickety-clack äppärät world?" (Shteyngart 2010, 53); "A co-op woman, old, tired,' [...] looked up at the pending wind and said [...] 'Blustery.' Just one word, [...] but it caught me unaware, it reminded me of how language was once used, its precision and simplicity, its capacity for recall" (304).

DEVASTATION, DEPARTURE, DEATH

The last third of the novel deals with events following the "Rupture" as China abandons its financial support of the US, and the "restoring" nation begins to collapse instead, a process broadcast in real time by increasingly alarming messages on CrisisNet. Displaced and evicted 'Low Net Worth Individuals' take to the streets of Manhattan and burn Credit Poles while the National Guard is mobilized to subdue the demonstrators,[12] although, ironically, there is no nation left. But in such a densely interweaved fiction, "rupture" goes beyond the sociopolitical, into the existential and the personal. The GlobalTeens network starts reporting "connectivity issues" in error messages with ludicrous language and spelling errors–"We are SO TOTTALY sorry for the inconvenience"; Shteyngart 2010, 262-263–and soon all äppärätti stop connecting, leading to the first suicides of young people, as they are unable, without the gadget, to "reach out to life [consisting of] only walls and thoughts and faces" (270). As in the earlier bar scene, this inability to *face* other "faces" again deserves reading with Levinas' reflections on intersubjective relations.[13] As chaos unfolds, Lenny's boss Joshie Goldman at Post-Human Services takes advantage of his "insider information" and uses the firm's restricted network to seduce Eunice away

[12] In a violent version, this episode foretells the *Occupy Wall Street* peaceful protests that developed in September 2011, a year after the novel's first publication.

[13] See "The Other and the Others" in *Totality and Infinity*, 212-15.

from Lenny, hastening the "rupture" to their (super sad) love story. The passionate, intense, ever-youthful Joshie Goldman, the embodiment of Shteyngart's biting critique of the American success ethos, ultimately reveals himself to be the ultimate agent, and eventually victim, of waste and devastation in the novel. Enacting Ulrich Beck's claims regarding the "power differential" in the "distinction and distribution of knowledge and non-knowledge" between "individuals, groups, authorities, monopolies and resources [versus] those who challenge them" (Beck 2009, 125), Goldman advocates before Lenny the transition into a "*better* America," one held by foreign investors who will "clear out our trophy cities of all the riffraff with no Credit and make them real lifestyle hubs...[to the profit] of Staatling-Wapachung" (Shteyngart 2010, 257). Soon after, Lenny finds his own block about to be forcibly evicted, and then demolished, by 'Staatling Property Relocation Services.' In anguish, he confronts a site worker, unfamiliar with the word 'books,' who shrugs off his plea not to relocate elderly neighbors:

> "They're being moved into abandoned housing in New Rochelle."
> "New Rochelle? Abandoned housing? Why not just take them straight to the abattoir? You know these old people can't make it outside New York." (310)

While Staatling is executing such "relocations" of these "wasted lives" (now in New York, a first world city), an episode that once again recalls the ghettoization practiced by Nazism in the early 1930s, Goldman actually commodifies the "Rupture," of which he is an active agent, in his own personal interests, as a way to access and seduce Eunice, offering accommodation for her family in New York, and "fixing" all the resident permits.

But not even Goldman's knowledge, power, influence, and wealth can make him omnipotent. In the novel's epilogue, further projected into the future, Lenny has self-exiled in the Tuscan Free State, in the now administratively fractured Italian peninsula, suggesting a symbolic reversal of the twentieth-century immigrant Atlantic crossing. He sees his ex-boss one last time, as "whatever was left of Joshie" (328) is flown over by the medical school to lecture on Post-Human Services. Twitching from "the recently discovered Kapasian tremors associated to the reversal of dechronification," Goldman admits, "we were wrong. The antioxidants were a dead end [...]. Our genocidal war on free radicals proved more damaging than helpful, hurting cellular metabolism, robbing the body of control" (328-329). In a language in which human biology reverberates with historical, social and political implications ("*our genocidal war on free radicals*," 329, my italics) a wasted, dying, Joshie admits defeat before the course of nature. In his analysis of the ending of a modern Hungarian novel,[14] John Scanlan discusses "the brilliant [...] analogy of the human body as the site of order that by extension reveals how the civic body, too, functions" (2005, 53). After having explored the political wasting of

[14] László Krasznahorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1989).

American democracy, the wasting away of individual freedom and ethics, and the ruins of humanism, language and culture, *Super Sad True Love Story* also reaches its dystopian biological climax in the cruel deaths, from multiple organ failure, of the youthful, super-rich Indefinite Life Extension clients, ultimately materializing Scanlan's notion of the "garbaged self" (2005, 53). There is some poetic justice in this rewriting of the Faustian bargain, in the final defeat of advanced bioscience allied to unjustified privilege in this age of the Anthropocene. "NATURE HAS A LOT TO LEARN FROM US," boasts a framed marketing print at Indefinite Life Extension headquarters early in the novel (60). Yet it is Lenny's final survival in Tuscany, close to the origins of human civilization in Mesopotamia, that best expresses the cautionary tale that we need to learn if we hope to avert Shteyngart's bleak vision.

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NOTES

A NECROPOLITICAL APPROACH TO WASTE THEORY*

Martín Fernández Fernández
Universidade da Coruña

Abstract

Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* (2019) provides an innovative approach to dissect human relations in a contemporary world where an increasing number of people are deemed superfluous and disposable under late capitalist logic. His book offers a genealogy of the current state of affairs from a post-Foucauldian perspective that centers on the notion of race and the conception of sovereignty in Western liberal democracies. Rarely associated with Waste Theory, Mbembe articulates a necropolitical approach that complements Zygmunt Bauman's conception of "human waste" and Giorgio Agamben's theorizations on the figure of the *homo sacer*. This article thus argues that Mbembe's *Necropolitics* stands as a major contribution to the field of Waste Studies, in that it encloses a reflection on the racial Other as human waste from a perspective that has not been sufficiently studied.

Keywords: Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, human waste, *homo sacer*, *nanoracism*, Waste Theory.

UNA APROXIMACIÓN NECROPOLÍTICA A LA WASTE THEORY

Resumen

Necropolitics (2019), de Achille Mbembe, aporta una aproximación innovadora para analizar las relaciones humanas en un mundo contemporáneo en el que un creciente número de personas es considerado superfluo o desechable bajo la lógica tardocapitalista. El libro ofrece una genealogía del actual estado de la cuestión desde una perspectiva post-foucauldiana que se centra en la noción de raza y en la concepción de soberanía en las democracias liberales occidentales. Raramente asociado con la Waste Theory, Mbembe articula una aproximación necropolítica que complementa la concepción de "residuos humanos" de Zygmunt Bauman y las teorizaciones sobre la figura del *homo sacer* de Giorgio Agamben. Este artículo, por tanto, sostiene que *Necropolitics*, de Mbembe, se erige como una importante contribución al campo de los *Waste Studies*, ya que encierra una reflexión del Otro racializado como residuo humano desde una perspectiva que no ha sido suficientemente estudiada.

Palabras clave: Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, residuos humanos, *homo sacer*, *nanoracismo*, Waste Theory.

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INTRODUCTION

In an era faced by unprecedented challenges, the global response has been characterized by a reinforcement of borders, a usual practice in Western democracies, that has increased inequality worldwide. This has come alongside a resurgence of the drives that characterized the first half of the twentieth century, as the ghosts of racism and fascism have been feeding on the latest global crises. In *Necropolitics* (2019), Achille Mbembe ponders on these pressing issues through the Other to deconstruct today's relation of enmity against this figure in a genealogic trip from colonial times, through slavery in the US, Nazism in Germany, apartheid in South Africa, and the occupation of Palestine, among others, to the refugee crisis of the mid-2010s in Europe. The Cameroonian author puts a varied array of thinkers in conversation, merging the francophone and anglophone critical traditions to paint his portrait of the contemporary world. Yet Mbembe's major influence is the political and psychiatric work of Frantz Fanon, who becomes a guide of sorts throughout the book. Drawing from all these sources, *Necropolitics* analyzes a current situation where inequality, racism, violence, and terror are rampant on a global scale, while also offering a glimpse of hope from an Africanist perspective in the construction of, using Édouard Glissant's terminology, an "All-world" (Mbembe 2019, 9) for all humanity.

This article argues that Mbembe's *Necropolitics* stands as a major contribution to the field of Waste Studies, in that it encloses a reflection on the racial Other as "human waste" (Bauman [2004] 2021) from a perspective that has not been sufficiently studied. To do so, the article first offers an overview of the notion of necropolitics as fully conceptualized by Mbembe in his 2019 book, while also pointing out its direct relation to Zygmunt Bauman's conceptualization of human waste; and, second, it introduces Giorgio Agamben's notion of *homo sacer* to discuss its connection to the necropolitical wasted human, linking the latter to the processes of wastification and Mbembe's conceptualization of *nanoracism*. The canonical theorizations on human waste, mainly based on Bauman's *Wasted Lives* (2004), did not dwell enough on the materiality of racialized bodies, leaving a gap open for other scholars to explore further. While Mbembe is rarely associated with Waste Theory,[1] his scholarly work does contribute to filling this space, and shares a vast amount of common ground with this theory. In 2003, Mbembe publishes his article

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[1] The upcoming scholarly production on Waste Theory may change this trend in the near future, as several presenters at the 34th European Association for American Studies Conference – Wastelands held in Madrid (2022) hinted at the applicability of necropolitics to Waste Studies.

"Necropolitics" in *Public Culture*, where the concept is deeply explored for the first time in English, and where Bauman and Agamben are not just clear influences, but referenced frequently throughout the discussion. Mbembe's article wound up becoming the third chapter of his 2019 book, acting as a conceptual core that tied together the rest of the monograph, where the presence of Waste Theory permeates his necropolitical approach to the contemporary world.

THE NECROPOLITICAL EXCLUDED BEING

In *Necropolitics*, Mbembe conceptualizes the Other through different but synonymous terms resulting from colonial and late capitalist logic to refer to the same category of excluded being. He focuses on the histories of the so-called "disposable," "superfluous," "redundant," "useless," or "excessive" to dissect the system of subjugation that has been putting these labels on individuals and communities in contemporary times. This approach to the Other reminisces of, and coalesces with, Bauman's theorizations on "human waste." In the introduction to *Wasted Lives*, the Polish sociologist defines "human waste" or "wasted humans" as "the 'excessive' and 'redundant', that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay" ([2004] 2021, 5). Expelled from society, these subjects experience a process of "slow death" (Berlant 2007) spurred by what Bauman calls "forces of globalization" ([2004] 2021, 128).[2] While Bauman explores their effect on the excluded being to articulate his Waste Theory, Mbembe's theorizations complete it by interconnecting this set of forces and conceptualizing them under the notion of *necropolitics*.

Departing from the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics, Mbembe puts forward the concept of necropolitics as a system of domination that thrives on the production and consumption of human waste. This perspective incorporates the traditional accounts of sovereignty, which Michel Foucault summarizes as "the right to *take* life or *let* live" (1978, 136; italics in original), and a reflection on the evolution of war against the othered communities. For Mbembe, necropolitics, or necropower,

> account[s] for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating *death-worlds*, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*. (2019, 92; italics in original)

[2] In an article for *Critical Inquiry*, Lauren Berlant posits that "[t]he phrase *slow death* refers to the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence" (2007, 754; italics in original).

This variety of human waste, the "living dead," resulting from necropolitics operates in a globalized context where contemporary states exist in a constant state of warfare against an alleged enemy. This antagonistic entity is usually reified into the figure of the Other, whether the threat is unfounded or not, intranational or international. For Mbembe, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories stands as "[t]he most accomplished form of necropower" (2019, 80). The apartheid regime in South Africa had already tested various techniques to transform natives into "living dead," but the Israeli state has perfected their subjugation and destruction through its state-of-the-art weaponry and militarization. Necropolitical power thus produces, is inflicted on, and thrives on wasted humans, all at the same time.

The obsession of Western states with the biophysical elimination of the Other, perceived as superfluous and disposable, stems from a relation of enmity that presents an intricate connection to reason and terror. The histories of the brutalization of slaves in the US or the Nazi genocide in the concentration camps reveal a bureaucratization of terror in the subjugation and disposability of the excluded being that is deeply related to the advances in technology over time. Through the production of terror, whose efficacy was first tested in the European colonies, necropolitical power maintains its sovereignty over the othered communities. According to Mbembe, the origins of this procedure illuminate a history of modern democracy in the West that "is, at bottom, a history with two faces, and even two bodies–the solar body, on the one hand, and *the nocturnal body*, on the other" (2019, 22; italics in original). While the former relates to the expansion and advances of Western democracy, the "nocturnal body" is responsible for the early modern systems of subjugation that fueled the "solar body" from the shadows. Nowadays, the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, or the advent of the so-called war machines deployed in the Gulf War and the Kosovo campaign, instantiate the level of destruction carried out by the nocturnal body in the battle for power. In this light, Mbembe incorporates a necropolitical vision to the canonical notion of sovereignty, conceptualizing it as "the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not" (2019, 80; italics in original).

Like his perspective on sovereignty, Mbembe's theorizations on necropolitics center on the notion of race, as he posits that, "[t]o a large extent, racism is the driver of the necropolitical principle" (2019, 38). Since early European colonialism, the Western conceptualization of race has shaped human relations on a planetary scale. Using US slavery as an example, Mbembe argues that the colonialist method, which "thrived by excreting those who were, in several regards, deemed superfluous, a surfeit within the colonizing nations" (2019, 10), later defined the pro-slavery democracy of the US. The division between free and enslaved gave rise to an invisible border that used extreme violence as a mechanism of social control. This dual conception of humanity permeated the history of modern democracies in the West, for they capitalized on the exploitation and disposability of the colonized and enslaved to progress. On this pretext, modern democracies exteriorized violence in isolated places like colonies or plantations, while fearing that this same violence resurfaced in the metropolis (Mbembe 2019, 27). This fixation with retaliation would lead them to increase the brutal violence inflicted on the colonized peoples. Over time,

the perfection of this globalized system of domination originated the contemporary necropolitical power, a power that is mainly driven by racism and the production of human waste.

The combination of these two elements results in a by-product of necropolitics that triggers *racist wastification*; that is, the production of wasted lives out of racial relations. Both the natives in the colonies and the racialized minorities in the West are turned into human waste in the organization of colonial and Western societies, following the principle that, as Bauman remarks, "[w]hen it comes to designing the forms of human togetherness, the waste is human beings" ([2004] 2021, 30). Racism, more than any other factor, plays a pivotal role in this process, as it stands as the central mechanism in the production of human waste worldwide. Comparing race with class, another hegemonic operator in the organization of human relations, Mbembe emphasizes the centrality of racism in his critique of biopower. For him, "racial thinking more than class thinking [...] has been the ever-present shadow hovering over Western political thought and practice, especially when the point was to contrive the humanity of foreign peoples and the sort of domination to be exercised over them" (Mbembe 2019, 71). The resulting subjugation transforms the racial Other into human waste through a process of racist wastification that is fueled by necropolitical power in a world where, as Bauman contends, "[t]he 'problems of (human) waste and (human) waste disposal' weigh ever more heavily on the liquid modern, consumerist culture of individualization" ([2004] 2021, 5).

The rapid technological advance of our age has raised an ontological dilemma for the human species. Drawing from Martin Heidegger's *The Question concerning Technology and Other Essays* (1977) and Margarida Mendes's "Molecular Colonialism" (2017), Mbembe discusses the technological challenge of algorithmic forms of intelligence to human exceptionalism, which has so far produced "a *matrix of rules* mostly designed for those human bodies deemed either in excess, unwanted, illegal, dispensable, or superfluous" (2019, 96; italics in original). Once again, the Gaza Strip stands as a paradigmatic case in the treatment of the Other, in that the Israeli forces have turned the Strip into a carceral state for wasted humans. Its gigantic walls bear witness to a process of borderization that fosters the use of violence and the proliferation of impassable places where, as Bauman points out, "[i]mmigration officers and quality controllers [...] are to stand guard on the line separating order from chaos (a battle line or armistice line, but always suspected of inviting trespassers and being ready for conflagration" ([2004] 2021, 28). This is also happening at the very heart of Europe, where necropolitics and global conflicts have triggered the return of what Mbembe describes as "camps for foreigners" (2019, 102). Samos, Lesbos, and Lampedusa are just various examples of how racism and the fear of the Other have led to a prioritization of an alleged sense of security over freedom in contemporary democracies.

The necropolitical wasted human maintains an intricate relation to the notion of "bare life" that Giorgio Agamben develops in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). Agamben's detailed exploration of the juridico-political category of *homo sacer* originating in ancient Roman law unveils a still extant subject in Western politics, whom he characterizes as "the body of the sacred man with his double sovereign, his life that cannot be sacrificed yet may, nevertheless, be killed" (1998, 10). Since the *homo sacer* cannot be offered to God in a ritual, being thus barred from divine law, and is liable to be killed in the community without legal consequences, being thus barred from human jurisdiction, this subject suffers a double exclusion that results in a life devoid of value. As such, his bare life takes place in a wasteland plagued by the constant threat of violence. Agamben argues that "[t]his violence–the unsanctionable killing that, in his case, anyone may commit–is classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide, neither as the execution of a condemnation to death nor as sacrilege" (1998, 82). This renders *homo sacer* the epitome of the prototypical excluded being, which leads Bauman to define him as "the principle category of human waste laid out in the course of the modern production of orderly (law abiding, rule governed) sovereign realms" ([2004] 2021, 32).

The etymology of *homo sacer* sheds further light on his major role in the conceptualization of human waste. Agamben's exploration of the ambiguous meaning of the term *sacer* over history identifies a revealing entry in Alfred Ernout's and Antoine Meillet's *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine* (1932). As Agamben documents, "[*s*]*acer* designates the person or the thing that one cannot touch without dirtying oneself or without dirtying; hence the double meaning of 'sacred' or 'accursed' (approximately)" (1998, 79; italics in original). This definition buttresses the foundational relevance of the *homo sacer* in the notion of human waste, as it is attributing the possibility to dirty, or the possession of a filthy nature, to the category of wasted human, thus equating him/her to material waste itself. This becomes central in the configuration of Waste Theory, especially in works such as Susan Signe Morrison's *The Literature of Waste*. In her book, Morrison points out that "[t]he equating of humans with waste allows for the disposal of such members of humanity via ostracism, defamation, exclusion, and even death" (2015, 10). Once transformed into wasted humans, their disposal may take place through any of the preceding mechanisms, in that their intrinsic condition of *homo sacer* originates a bare life whose brutalization and destruction means nothing to sovereign power.

This perspective on sovereignty aligns with Mbembe's necropolitical approach. In his discussion on the notion of *homo sacer*, Agamben contends that "the production of bare life is the originary activity of sovereignty" (1998, 83).[3]

[3] For an insightful reevaluation of the concept of bare life through the lens of Black studies, see Alexander Weheliye's *Habeas Corpus* (2014), especially chap. 2, "Bare Life: The Flesh." Here, Weheliye incorporates Hortense Spillers's (1987) vision of "body" and "flesh" to Agamben's

Following this rationale, the processes of wastification are thus directed by sovereign power, which operates through necropolitics in contemporary times. Resistance to these processes has become increasingly difficult to articulate with the passage of time, while the history of the last three centuries demonstrates that it still is a feasible practice even under the most extreme systems of subjugation. As Mbembe remarks, "[s]ince modernity, every project of genuine human emancipation has aimed at preventing the human from being treated as an object and ultimately from being turned into waste" (2019, 114). The particularities of slavery in the New World within the early modern resistance to capitalist commodification set a clear framework to instantiate the resistance to wastification. In a 2018 interview published in *Theory, Culture & Society*, Mbembe discusses this phenomenon with David Theo Goldberg, arguing that what differentiated African slaves was that they continued to "produce symbols and rituals, language, memory and meaning" despite the brutalizing conditions of enslavement. For Mbembe, "[t]his Sisyphus-like effort to resist being turned into waste partly explains why plantation slavery differs from other forms of genocidal colonialism" (Goldberg 2018, 212).

The contemporary period presents a different paradigm considering the global proliferation of necropolitical sovereignty, for it has further triggered the transformation of larger communities of people into human waste. In a similar light, Agamben contends that "today's democratico-capitalist project of eliminating the poor classes through development not only reproduces within itself the people that is excluded but also transforms the entire population of the Third World into bare life" (1998, 180). Yet the processes of wastification take place within the West at the same time. Prior to the advent of modernity, the bare life of *homo sacer*, the wasted human, might have an escape from the physical boundaries of the sovereign state. As Agamben remarks, "his entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land" (1998, 183). Nowadays, there seems to be no escape, the threat of violence is ubiquitous, in that globalization has teared down almost every refuge from wastification.

Globalization has also further fueled the racist affects of necropolitical power in a digital era where *nanoracism* pervades the global sociocultural fabric. Mbembe conceptualizes the notion of nanoracism as a "narcotic brand of prejudice based on skin color that gets expressed in seemingly everyday anodyne gestures, [...] but also, it must be added, consciously spiteful remarks" (2019, 58). Their hidden purpose is to taint, humiliate, and injure individuals and communities to ultimately leave them "with no choice but to self-deport" (58). Excluded from society, the racialized

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theorization on bare life, providing an approach that broadens the former conceptualization of the latter notion through a racially-conscious perspective. Additionally, like Mbembe, Weheliye criticizes Foucault's biopolitical theory, which Agamben follows to articulate his conception of *homo sacer*, for "in both cases theories of racism and/or race appear almost exclusively in conjunction with the extremity of Nazism" (2014, 64); a stance that overlooks the historical relevance of plantation slavery, among other cases.

subject undergoes a process of wastification where nanoracism plays a major role, as it acts as a constant reminder of his/her condition of waste, reinforcing his/her subjectivation as *homo sacer*–whose intrinsic qualities may explain why this type of racism is usually overlooked. Despite its apparent banality, especially when compared to physical violence, nanoracism articulates a dangerous discourse that underpins wastification. As Morrison points out, "[w]e perceive waste in a chain of composted linguistic nonhuman actors" (2015, 6); while the language of waste is suffered by human subjects. The injuries of nanoracism do not directly materialize on the physical body, but they still wear out racialized people, slowly and silently. Its invisibility ultimately stands as one of its most pernicious qualities. As Mbembe contends, "[n]anoracism, in its banality and capacity to infiltrate into the pores and veins of society, is racism turned culture and into the air one breathes" (2019, 59).

This virulent form of racism combines with a more tangible type to complete human wastification. For Mbembe, "[n]anoracism has become the obligatory complement to hydraulic racism–that of juridicobureaucratic and institutional micro- and macro- measures, of the state machine" (2019, 59). Racial profiling, mass incarceration, barbed wire fences, militarized frontiers, clandestine deportations, or the so-called refugee camps are just some examples of the materialization of hydraulic racism. These techniques respond to a primitive fear that lies behind Western societies in which, as Mbembe describes, "Negroes, Arabs, Muslims–and [...] Jews–take the place of their masters and transform the nation into an immense dump, Muhammad's dump" (2019, 59-60). The phobic fixation with the dump, paradoxically conceived of within the very Western mind itself, experiences a process of inversion that results in the wastification of the racialized subject, who becomes the target of a spiral of violence that, being inflicted on a *homo sacer*, is intrinsically neglected. Drawing from Saskia Sassen (2014), Mbembe therefore concludes that "[t]oday's Negro is a 'depth Negro,' a subaltern category of humanity, a *genus of subaltern humanity*, which, as a superfluous and almost excessive part for which capital has no use, seems destined for zoning and expulsion" (2019, 178; italics in original).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the last chapter of *Necropolitics*, Mbembe encourages the formation of a properly human world, while further exploring Anti-Negro racism from an Africanist viewpoint. He first posits the history of Negroes, not as an exogenous narrative, but as an integral part of Western history. Providing the colonized subjects with historical agency fosters an alternate perspective to understand the context of Black life. Instead of departing from "what some have called 'social death' as this matter of waste," Mbembe proposes "to retrieve the human from a history of waste or, to put it differently, a history of desiccation" (2019, 158). This understanding of the past seeks to propel the creation of the new humanity, along with another form of sovereignty and the disarmament of necropolitics. For Mbembe, the critique of Western humanism must thus "shift because it must confront something not

so much unique as soiled, wasted lives it must attempt to retrieve from a broken existence" (2019, 161). This reconstruction from scratch, from what is left after the desiccation of history and the retrieval of waste, must decidedly lean on Afrocentrism to bring about the All-World of the new humanity. At times when democracy is in crisis and neoliberal ideology is striving to liquidate the subject with agency, the current planetarization of inequality expands a subaltern category of humanity, the necropolitical wasted human, that anticipates a bleak future if, as Mbembe exhorts us at the conclusion, the All-World project is not undertaken with decision, once and for all.

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ON THE USES OF WASTE*

Sara Villamarín-Freire
Universidade de Santiago de Compostela

Abstract

For the past few years, waste has become an increasingly popular topic among literary scholars. The sheer volume of areas of knowledge involved in this highly interdisciplinary field has been somehow blurred as the labels "Waste Studies" and "Waste Theory" gained traction. Nevertheless, upon closer inspection those terms crumble easily. What is "Waste Theory"? What attempts, if any, have been made to agglutinate these disparage fields and their corresponding contributions into a cohesive discipline of its own? This paper aims to shed light on these questions by reviewing some of the most referenced works and authors within the burgeoning waste scholarship. Likewise, it seeks to critically examine whether it would be possible–and productive–to elaborate a general theory of waste.

Keywords: waste, Waste Theory, Waste Studies, trash, dirt, garbage.

SOBRE LOS USOS DE *WASTE*

Resumen

Durante los últimos años, el tema de *waste* se ha vuelto cada vez más popular entre los académicos del ámbito literario. El enorme volumen de áreas de conocimiento implicadas en este campo altamente interdisciplinario se ha visto desdibujado a medida que las etiquetas «Waste Studies» o «Waste Theory» han ido ganando terreno. Sin embargo, un examen más detallado revela que se trata de denominaciones que se desmoronan fácilmente. ¿Qué es la «Waste Theory»? ¿Qué intentos, si los hubiere, se han llevado a cabo para aglutinar estos diversos campos y sus correspondientes contribuciones en una disciplina cohesionada? Este artículo trata de arrojar luz sobre estas cuestiones a través de una revisión de algunos de las obras y autores más referenciados dentro del pujante ámbito de los estudios académicos sobre *waste*. Asimismo, se busca examinar de manera crítica si sería posible (y productivo) desarrollar una teoría general en torno al concepto de *waste*.

Palabras clave: *waste*, «Waste Theory», «Waste Studies», basura, suciedad, porquería.

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For the past few years, the topic of waste (or dirt, or garbage, or trash) has been gaining traction among literary scholars, most notably among those with an interest in ecocriticism. From an outsider's perspective, it is often taken for granted that the study of waste is backed by its very own area of knowledge, a correspondence sometimes expressed through the label "Waste Studies" or "Waste Theory." Nevertheless, upon closer inspection that label crumbles easily. So-called waste scholars have been drawing from a plethora of fields and areas of knowledge, ranging from cultural studies to urban planning, anthropology, and critical theory, to name a few. What, then, is "Waste Theory"? Is it a unified set of tenets? What attempts, if any, have been made to turn it into a cohesive field of its own? This paper aims to shed light on these questions by taking a closer look at some of the most referenced works and authors within the burgeoning waste scholarship. This is by no means an exhaustive list; most of the scholars referenced here draw from such a wide variety of sources that a truly comprehensive overview would exceed the goal of this paper. On the other hand, it seems oddly appropriate that a purported discipline called Waste Theory shall be composed of bits and scraps.

To begin with, it would be convenient to tackle the abundant terminology related to wasted matter. I will address some of these disparate labels, including dirt, garbage, trash, and rubbish, in an attempt to elucidate the reason behind their use. This preliminary mapping will provide us with some general ideas about the kind and orientation of research within Waste Studies. In terms of the concepts and works I address in the present review, I have sought to include authors whose contributions have resonated with my own work in the area of literary studies. I am aware that the resulting selection is highly subjective and not necessarily representative of the current state of the field, but I hope it can be useful as a gateway into Waste Studies for other scholars in my field who may feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of works and disciplines involved. Thus, I will offer a succinct overview of some key concepts and theorizations within Waste Studies, paying special attention to the definition of waste itself, as well as the consequences of its (sometimes indiscriminate) application.

Next, I will survey the uses of waste as a metaphorical approach to individuals and/or entire communities that are deemed "disposable" due to its peripheral position within diverse systems. Due to my own personal interest, but also due to space restrictions, I will privilege the revision of authors who engage with the entwinement of discarding practices and social order, and thus will not delve into the more physical aspects of waste (e.g., in relation to dirt theory or New Materialism, but also in relation to the parallel evolution of garbage and consumerism). Instead, I will examine how to approach questions involving human groups through the lens of waste, paying close attention to aspects such as race, class, or gender. The examples I have featured to illustrate my arguments are representative of the kind of analysis

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that a purported Waste Theory might enable. Their inclusion is motivated by my background in American Studies, and hopefully will showcase the possibilities of conceiving waste as a conceptual toolshed with myriad applications. Finally, I will address some of the theoretical shortcomings of the uses of waste, and how this may affect the potential development of an overarching "Waste Theory."

Let us address the proliferation of labels found among scholarly theorizations of discarded matter. Even though these terms are often believed to be synonyms, there are some crucial divergences in their use that are worth exploring. But first, I would like to consider some of their similarities. I think it is safe to say most scholars share a common conception of wasted matter being a porous, malleable category, socially determined and thereby subject to temporal and spatial variation, and whose function is primarily related to processes of ordering and classification. This is, in my view, the thorough line connecting terms such as "trash," "garbage," "dirt," or "waste"; this conceptual connection would explain why they are often thought of as exchangeable. My own preference for "waste" stems from its semantic versatility; whereas "trash" or "garbage" suggest disposable, man-made items, and "dirt" evokes a connection to earth and soil, "waste" strikes a balance between all kinds of refuse, regardless of its origin–and this includes the human dimension of so-called "wasted lives" (see Bauman).[1]

Waste is defined by lack: that which is no longer useful, nor organized, nor clean, nor pure. In the path-breaking *Purity and Danger* ([1966] 2001), anthropologist Mary Douglas establishes that dirt ought to be understood as a relational concept, a classificatory system that may be used in social contexts to uphold power hierarchies.[2] In her view, "dirt is essentially disorder" ([1966] 2001, 2) or "matter out of place" (36). However, this assessment "implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order," which entails, as Douglas astutely observes, that "[w] here there is dirt there is system" (36). Waste, or dirt, is never ontologically positive: it only exists as "the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (36). It follows that objects do not possess inherent properties that make them wasteful; on the contrary, it all depends on the inner workings of the system in which they are embedded.

[1] My views on the terminology of waste align with those of Simal-González (2019).

[2] Douglas does not feature an explanation as to why she chooses the word "dirt" over "waste," "garbage" or "trash." It might have something to do with the fact that "dirt" seems to imply a more natural origin (excremental matter, but also soil) as opposed to the man-made associations of the terms above. Nevertheless, the role of Douglas as a pioneer of waste scholarship has undoubtedly contributed to blurring whatever crucial differences may have existed between "waste" and "dirt," as many authors use these terms as fairly synonyms nowadays. Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky draw attention to how the mindless use of cognates as exchangeable synonyms displaces, or straightforwardly erases, the specificities of "cultural, material, political, and regional differences in what constitutes waste" (Fardon 1999; quoted in Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 79). As for "garbage," John Scanlan provides the following definition: "In an unproblematic sense garbage is leftover matter. It is what remains when the good, fruitful, valuable, nourishing and useful has been taken" (2005, 13).

This tenet is maintained and further developed by Michael Thompson in *Rubbish Theory* ([1979] 2017), where he contends that value forms are not intrinsic properties of things, but instead stem from the network of relations that is established among them. Thompson posits the existence of two cultural categories defined by the axes of value (increasing/decreasing) and lifespans (infinite/finite): Transient objects, whose defining features are decreasing value and finite expected lifespans, and Durable objects, which possess increasing value and infinite expected lifespans ([1979] 2017, 10). In between both, he places the mediating category of "Rubbish," or objects characterized by their worthlessness. However, Thompson argues, the existence of Rubbish is precisely what allows transfers from one category to the other. Value decreases over time until it reaches zero. Once it is stripped of its value, the object "lingers on" in the "valueless and timeless limbo" that is Rubbish "until perhaps it is discovered by some creative and upwardly-mobile individual and transferred across into the Durable category" (10). Thompson is adamant that this sort of transformation can only follow the one-way path from Transient to Rubbish then Durable. Even though this theory presents apparent limitations in its purported universality, it has been highly influential in its exploration of waste as a relational category of value that cannot be understood without the human dimensions of worth and time.

Another distinctive feature of waste is its conceptual malleability. Waste "isn't a fixed category of things; it is an effect of classification and relations" (Hawkins 2006, 2) and therefore constitutes "a dynamic category" (Strasser [1999] 2014, 6). In the words of Greg Kennedy, "[a]nything and everything can become waste" (2007, 1) after a process of "evaluation" (2) that is inherently human. Overall, waste results from a process of "separation – of the desirable from the unwanted; the valuable from the worthless, and indeed, the worthy or cultured from the cheap or meaningless" (Scanlan 2005, 15). Being based on negation–always the opposite, or absence, of something else–waste emerges as a purely relational category dependent on its context, space, and time. Therefore, "[t]here is no universal waste or discard" (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 55; see also Scanlan 2005, 14); on the contrary, waste is always "contextual, place-based, situated, and historically specific" (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 149). Pretending otherwise could lead to ignoring the diverse systems at play that regulate discarding practices, as well as those situated at the far end of (and affected by) those practices.

Any system presupposes excess and/or unwanted elements: systems "discard to maintain their order" (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 65). "Nothing is inherently trash," Susan Strasser observes: it is "created by sorting" ([1999] 2014, 7-8). The inner workings of systems require the presence of wasted, surplus elements so that *something* can be expelled. In other words, waste is a prerequisite of hierarchies, and not merely its byproduct. By definition, a system is upheld by discarding that which does not belong to it–and that can go from disposable plastic cups, fecal matter, or municipal solid waste to entire human communities. Using the label "waste" to refer to surplus matter, regardless of its origin, typology, or status, is convenient because it invokes a series of "anthropogenic connotations" (Simal-González 2019, 210) that foreground the human origin of systems of power and oppression. In turn,

this awareness can contribute to fostering denaturalizing and decentering strategies that help us gain a better understanding of how discarding works, and especially why it works like it does (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 15; 19).

Last, but not least, waste is also characterized by ambiguity. This poses a threat to the integrity of the self, as Julia Kristeva (1982) has demonstrated through her theorizations on abjection. Classifying something as waste entails that "beyond biological necessity we expel and discard in the interest of *ordering* the self, in the interest of maintaining a boundary between what is connected to the self and what isn't" (Hawkins 2006, 24; italics in original). In the words of Susan Signe Morrison, "[w]e feel the compulsion to separate ourselves from that which we consider filthy in order to reassure ourselves that we *are not* that filth" (2015, 31; italics in original). This compulsion operates at the level of the individual body, but can also be metaphorically transferred into the social body, where the "cultural model of waste is mapped onto humans," that is, "whole classes of human beings" (Morrison 2013, 467). The language of waste is incorporated into the "rhetoric of othering" (2015, 98) that presents entire groups as contaminated, and thereby disposable, invisible, nonexistent. I will come back to this.

It must be noted that the ambiguity of waste has the potential to jeopardize entire systems and power hierarchies. As Douglas has it, "[d]anger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable" ([1966] 2001, 97). This perspective ties in with John Scanlan's observation that "garbage is unmistakably recognizable as forever *foreign*" (2005, 108; italics in original). Consequently, any attempts at classifying wasted matter indicate the existence of "a dominant system of order and threats against that order" (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 150). However, not all that is disposable or gets discarded shares the same potential to disrupt. In their commentary on Douglas's analysis of purity and pollution, Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky call attention to the conceptual gap between "sorting and purifying," and argue that, due to its purported similarities, "the latter is often used as a metaphor for the former":

> Genocide and sorting recycling not only are different in terms of social, economic, material, spiritual, and political systems but also they are different in terms of power, oppression, and justice. [...] In short, cleaning up and purification are not the same thing. Our theories of waste and wasting should not fail to distinguish between blue bins and concentration camps. [...] Because discard studies is inherently normative–making arguments and frameworks for examining, understanding, and practicing what is good and right–it is crucial to differentiate between the ethics of cleanup, which are based in separation, and those of purity, which are based in annihilation. (2022, 26)

In order to keep clear boundaries between I and not-I, us and them, here and there, diverse mechanisms of discarding can be enforced that contribute to making that distance explicit. Discarding "involves rejecting, wasting, annihilating, destroying, prioritizing, or externalizing some things in favor of others. [...] Discarding isn't inherently bad [...] but it does produce unevenessess that have different effects for different systems, environments, people, and ways of life,

especially if those systems become dominant" (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 62). Given that the very notion of waste is rooted in specific contexts, time, and place, the strategies used to separate it from that which is clean and pure will vary accordingly. Sometimes, naming waste is enough to introduce order and direction: "the utterance into discourse creates codification, enabling us to distinguish between what is clean and what is dirty" (Morrison 2015, 24). Another way of getting rid of ambiguity is to redefine matter itself so that its disruptive potential is neutralized. For instance, Kennedy posits that this can be done by turning "waste" into "trash," or "a being wholly denuded of nature" that erases all traces of finitude and hence humanness (2007, 91; 149). Whilst waste is fundamentally ambiguous and a reminder of our mortality, the passage from waste to trash erases "its central problem of intrinsic ambiguity" (1): "Trash flatters our delusive fantasy of omnipotence. Waste, on the other hand, affronts reason with the unhappy recognition of its own ultimate impotence in the face of physicality" (23).

So far, I have only referred to the commonalities shared by the terminology of waste. Let us now consider some of the main discrepancies among scholars, in particular with regard to the aspects deemed seminal to understand the phenomenon of discarded matter. Some theorists, including Douglas and Gay Hawkins, bring attention to the spatial dimension of waste. Douglas famously claimed that dirt is "matter out of place" ([1966] 2001, 36). Likewise, Strasser identifies a spatial dimension in "[s]orting and classification": "this goes here, that goes there" ([1999] 2014, 9). Meanwhile, Hawkins reflects on the impact that contact (or coexistence) with waste has on human groups, directly influencing the creation of a distinct ethos of disposability (2006, 30). Other authors speak of waste as a haunting presence that lingers on (Viney 2014) and makes itself known in its materiality–especially in the shared spaces of the city (Scanlan 2005, 164). In particular, the space occupied by waste is relevant in any discussions concerned with what Scanlan calls "those shadow cities of the dead – the garbage dumps, sewage plants, and landfills" (157). Likewise, this spatial dimension is central to discussions on the proliferation of garbage in the age of consumerism.[3]

By contrast, many authors maintain that waste as a category is necessarily projected onto a temporal dimension. As stated above, Michael Thompson sees rubbish as a classificatory system that helps organizing and/or maintaining social hierarchies, and sees value as the main vector governing the shifting state of objects; in turn, value fluctuates throughout time ([1979] 2017). We can find echoes of Thompson's understanding of rubbish in the works of Scanlan (2005) and especially William Viney (2014), among others. Viney understands waste in relation to utility, and argues that our experience with wasted matter is conditioned by the temporality that rules functionality: "Waste is also (and in both senses of the phrase) matter out of time" (2014, 2). He divides the life of objects into "use-time" and "waste-

[3] See, for instance, Strasser ([1999] 2014), Rathje and Murphy (2001), Royte (2005), and Humes (2013).

time" (2014, 7; 10). On a similar note, Rachele Dini locates the difference between dirt and waste in the latter's incorporation of a temporal dimension: "waste is the product of a process: it signals the aftermath of an occurrence [...]. This temporal dimension endows waste with narrative qualities: with its very presence a waste object signals that something has come before" (2016, 5). For both Viney (2014, 2) and Dini (2016, 5), waste is matter out of time.

Yet, independently of which dimension–spatial or temporal–is privileged in the conceptualization of discarded matter, it is impossible to conceive waste "outside of an economy of human values" (Scanlan 2005, 23). The implications of such a close entwinement make waste a privileged vehicle to understand, and perhaps help us rethink, our relation to nature and the natural-human continuum–a realization that seems all the more poignant considering the current climate crisis. In "Dirt Theory and Material Ecocriticism" (2012), Heather Sullivan chooses to use the term "dirt" to convey the fact that there is no such thing as a "far-away" and "clean" nature, but an all-encompassing mesh in which we all take part (515). She argues that rethinking nature in terms of dirt implies accepting our dependence "on earth and soil for most of our sustenance" (515), but also the possibility that dirt might be toxic and hence possessive of destructive agency (516), hence broadening the term to encompass "not only nurturing 'soil,' but also depleted soil, dust, the toxic grime on the ground of industrial sites" (517). Dirt theory puts emphasis on the porosity of the "boundaries we declare between clean and unclean, sanitary and unsanitary, or the pure and the dirty," hence foregrounding the constant reshaping of matter that is seminal to biospheric processes (528). In striving to articulate a theory that regards nature as neither intrinsically good nor pristine, Sullivan contributes to broaden our understanding of the environment to include man-made landscapes or barren grounds, which had been often overlooked in favor of a typically conservationist ideal of unspoiled earth.

On a similar note, Hawkins claims that the sacralization of nature as a site of ontological purity thwarts the development of alternative configurations. In her view, waste stands in between the ontological divide between human action and nonhuman nature, contaminating both; it signals the all-too-human destructive impulse that taints nature and reveals a deep contempt for it, whereas the idea of contaminated nature fosters preconceptions of nature as a passive dumping ground: "Dumping waste is an expression of contempt for nature. Humans establish their sense of mastery over and separation from a passive desacralized nature by fouling it" (2006, 8). However, despite waste being "so bad," Hawkins reflects on its potential to make us cognizant of ontological difference: "Denying the possibility of separation in favor of connection does not allow for the possibility of having different relations with things that we frame as ontologically other" (11). Nevertheless, the ontological difference codified and maintained through discarding practices often gets reified and even transferred into the social body, as we will see next.

Far from being confined to the realm of objects, the rhetoric of waste and wasting has permeated the discourses on human communities occupying a peripheral role in diverse hegemonic systems. According to Douglas, "some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order" ([1966] 2001, 3). This

metaphorical mapping governs what she calls "our pollution behaviour," which is "the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications" (37). As Morrison aptly summarizes, the direct consequence of mapping the cultural model of waste onto human groups results in their being perceived "as trash due to their status" (2013, 467): "One way that we make wasted humans invisible is to make them cognate to waste; waste is something we take all means to avoid. Wasted humans–disdained, ignored, and made invisible–are ontologically non-existent" (Morrison 2015, 97). The marginal status of these people is often constructed as the negation, or lack, of the core values of the system from which they are expelled. Sometimes the physical location of a group in a marginal space is enough to become akin to waste, and hence invisible, to the ruling center. This is especially obvious in the case of communities living in the Global South that are deemed "collateral casualties" of the Global North's "economic progress" (Bauman 2004, 39).[4] After all, "waste is made through relations between centers and peripheries" (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 21). Shipping garbage and e-waste overseas has become a widespread practice that demonstrates how creating an "away" is necessary in order to keep the center "clean"; however, "there are always people who live and work in those peripheries" that become "disposable" as a result (21).[5] My own use of the labels "Global North" and "Global South" above is indicative of how we delineate this "away" nowadays–a division that was first enforced with the advent of modernity.[6]

Some examples of systems and hierarchies who produce "wasted" humans include modernity and (racial) capitalism, class/caste divisions, and white supremacy, to name a few representative cases. Namely, in the US racial superiority is deeply entwined with notions of hygiene and dirt. In *Clean and White* (2015) Carl Zimring analyzes the evolution of racial constructions of waste in America and detects a "growing conflation of race and cleanliness" (46) in the antebellum period, in parallel to the "insecurities about slavery and racial hierarchy" that the abolitionist movement had stirred. This, alongside "the benefits and damage of industrial capitalism," reconfigured the "language of dominance" thus far based on the realm of religious identification (Christian/savage) (54). During the postbellum period, "[f]ears of emancipated African Americans, fears of waves of new migrants, and fears of contagion [...] shaped new forms of racial inequalities" (71). The association between blackness and filth became slowly reified in discourses that pursued the goal

[4] The concepts "slow violence" and "unimagined communities" (in a reversal of Benedict Anderson's famous formulation) coined by Rob Nixon (2011) are of particular importance to this discussion.

[5] "'Away' is not so much a physical place (though it often involves one) as a designation of a devalued periphery created in the interests of the more powerful center" (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 71).

[6] My idea of modernity here aligns with Cedric Robinson's description of the material and socioeconomic conditions, as well as the ideological constructions, that made racial capitalism to emerge and thrive. For further reading, see Robinson.

of maintaining the status quo, thwarting any attempts of real social integration.[7] Overall, the convulsive social and political atmosphere of nineteenth-century America was produced by deep structural changes in the social order; and, as Douglas observes, "wherever the [social] lines are precarious we find pollution ideas come to their support" ([1966] 2001, 140). According to Zimring, "the rhetoric and imagery of hygiene became conflated with a racial order that made white people pure and anyone who was not white, dirty" (2015, 89). An illustrative example of this rhetoric is the "fear of sexual pollution, or miscegenation" that "pointed to the idea of blacks as pollutants potentially staining white purity" (73). In sum, the language of pollution applied to African Americans thus marks them as disposable to the hegemonic white supremacist system.

This rhetoric of disposability is likewise present in the epithet "white trash" that is used to designate the white American working class and lumpenproletariat. For Matt Wray, this label "names a kind of disturbing liminality: [...] a dangerous threshold state of being neither one nor the other" (2006, 2). Like the discarded stuff they are associated with, their status is ambiguous and hence threatening to the social order. They are white in a society that values whiteness and yet have failed to obtain economic success (perhaps the only thing that is as valued as whiteness in the US, if not more so); yet the presence of "trash" in combination with a racial marker threatens "to remove the power and privileges of whiteness" (Zimring 2015, 80-81). Rationalizing economic inequality, Nancy Isenberg explains, is a necessary measure to accommodate the existence of poor whites into the rhetoric of upward mobility (2016, xxvii-xxviii). Since their very existence counters the infallibility of the American socioeconomic system, they must be somehow at fault: "'white trash' is an image of abject poverty, where the obviousness of a body's decay or lack of decorum and comportment 'explains' the economic condition, overwhelming any suggestion that systematic market forces might produce such conditions" (Hartigan 1992, 2). Poor whites are thus marked by their "socially unacceptable behaviour" and thereby reduced to "a position of social lowness" (Scanlan 2005, 45). If the language of waste marked African Americans as disposable on the grounds of the association between skin color and filth, poor whites are marked as disposable by their abject poverty, which pushes them to the fringes of the respectable (white) social order.

Now that I have provided some examples of how it can be applied, I would like to address some of the theoretical shortcomings and possible dangers of a potential theory of waste. Whilst analyzing the mechanisms of oppression through the lens of waste might prove fruitful, as the examples above showcase, "using damage-centered narratives to talk about groups is another form of essentializing that

[7] Arguably, practices such as redlining, zoning, and other forms of environmental racism reflect this same logic of maintaining refused matter out of reach and out of sight, lest cross-contamination may occur. BIPOC population is kept out of sight in spaces conveniently demarcated by local authorities, often in the vicinity of industrial facilities and dumping grounds. For further reading on environmental racism, see Bullard. For a succinct overview on the origins of redlining and zoning, see Zimring, chap. 6 (pp. 137-65).

does not address the systems of power that create stereotypes in the first place, even if they provide strong arguments for justice" (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 112). Put differently, we should be careful with the terms we use to describe phenomena affecting communities who are already suffering the stigma of their association (literal or metaphorical) with filth and pollution. As scholars, we ought to be aware of the fact that the language we use contributes to construct realities–and although we may seek to expose and dismantle the dynamics of wasting as an instrument of oppression, we might as well be contributing to the contrary by acritically repeating the labels that perpetuate that same oppression.

Likewise–and, perhaps, at the opposite side of the spectrum–there is an inherent risk in attempting to formulate an overarching theory of waste that overlooks or downplays difference as a central vector of discarding practices and ideas on pollution. As explained before, waste is a malleable, context-dependent concept that responds to particular systems within particular settings and contexts. Materiality and embodiment are seminal to any formulation of waste we might conjure, and likewise determine the conditions of exploitation, disposability, and oblivion that so-called "wasted lives" endure. Forgetting the specific conditions in which these wasting relationships unravel may imply the erasure of those realities. For instance, Zygmunt Bauman models his notion of "wasted lives" partly after Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*, described as "the principal category of human waste laid out in the course of the modern production of orderly (law abiding, rule governed) sovereign realms" (Bauman 2004, 32). Yet Agamben has been criticized for his use of the Holocaust–in particular, the concentration camp as "the site of production of the Muselmann, the final biopolitical substance" (quoted in Weheliye 2014, 55)–as the paradigm of the biopolitical *nomos* of modernity that manufactures bare life, a choice that downplays the historical significance of racialization in the production of bare life.[8] The same kind of criticism may be extensible to Bauman, who declares that the production of 'human waste' "is an inescapable side-effect of *order-building* [...] and of *economic progress*" (2004, 5; italics in original), further stating that "no one plans collateral casualties of economic progress, let alone draws in advance the line separating the damned from the saved" (40). In my view, Bauman fails to account for the role of racial capitalism in the production and maintenance of networks encompassing

[8] Following Hortense Spillers, Alexander Weheliye suggests that the middle passage and plantation slavery in America represent "the biopolitical nomos of modernity, particularly given its historically antecedent status vis-à-vis the Holocaust and the many different ways it highlights the continuous and nonexceptional modes of physiological and psychic violence exerted upon black subjects since the dawn of modernity" (2014, 38). The normalization of all forms of violence against the racialized body prevents us from seeing slavery as we see the Shoah: "Because black suffering figures in the domain of the mundane, *it refuses the idiom of exception*" (11; my italics). Weheliye thus questions the Eurocentric bias in the formulation of biopower: "How would Foucault's and Agamben's theories of modern violence differ if they took the Middle Passage as their point of departure rather than remaining entrapped within the historiographical cum philosophical precincts of fortress Europe?" (38). For further reading on the critique to Agamben, see Weheliye, especially chap. 2 (pp. 33-45) and chap. 4 (pp. 53-73).

"socio-ecological relations creating wasted people and wasted places" (Armiero 2021, 10). Therefore, he does not delve into how these casualties of "order-building" and "economic progress" are in fact the direct consequence of a system that generates centers and peripheries on a global scale.

More specifically, Bauman does address the fact that human waste is a byproduct of modernity, but then overlooks the implications of his own affirmation–namely, the entwinement of racism, capitalism, and colonialism that is central to modernity.[9] This is by no means an attempt to undermine the relevance of Bauman's contribution to the field of Waste Studies. Nonetheless, his approach to the (re) production of "human waste" is proof of what happens when we focus on waste instead of "wasting": "Wasting is a social process through which class, race, and gender injustices become embedded into the socio-ecological metabolism producing both gardens and dumps, healthy and sick bodies, pure and contaminated places" (Armiero 2021, 10). In other words, studying waste without taking the whole system behind it into account is pointless. This need is underscored in Marco Armiero's *Wasteocene* (2021) through the eponymous concept, which captures the "wasting relationships [...] planetary in their scope, which produce wasted people and places" (2). The Wasteocene operates as a complement to the Anthropocene, foregrounding "humans' ability to affect the environment" (9), as well as "the contaminated nature of capitalism and its endurance within the texture of life" (10). In my view, the theoretical underpinnings of this concept–and especially its emphasis on the system(s) that undergirds waste–provide a noteworthy example of how to theorize waste without falling into ahistorical abstractions.

If the production of dirt, garbage, or trash is a necessary occurrence in any system (for systems, by definition, are created and maintained by expelling some elements while keeping others), then social systems will necessarily require marking certain (human) elements as disposable so that clear boundaries can be maintained. As long as there is system, there will be waste. Nevertheless, it is possible to become aware of what is wasted, and why, and display some degree of accountability towards the elements (human or otherwise) getting discarded (see Liboiron and Lepawsky). The study of waste allows us to chart the "unevenessess" produced by discarding and their different "effects for different systems, environments, people, and ways of life, especially if those systems become dominant" (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 62). In other words, it might not be possible to dismantle the existing wasting systems, but at least we can gain insight into how they operate. In turn, being aware of their inner dynamics could help us mitigate the inequality that is embedded in their current incarnation.

To conclude, I would like to go back to my preliminary question about the possibility of formulating a unifying "Waste Theory." I believe that the present review has showcased the impossibility of proposing one such theory that is at the

[9] Notions like Capitalocene, racial capitalism, or Plantationocene do tackle this entwinement, and insist on its relevance and repercussions nowadays in the environment. See Armiero.

same time relevant and fair towards the subjects it studies. Its development would require reaching a certain degree of abstraction and generalization (that's the very essence of theory!) which would necessarily fail to account for the specific material, spatio-temporal, socioeconomic, ethical, and ecological contexts that surround and condition the phenomenon of waste. Being aware of the complex and changeable nature of wasting and discard practices should be the first step if we choose to use waste as a conceptual tool for analysis. It is, after all, a versatile concept full of potential that allows us to shed light on the matrix of social and power relations governing the systems in which we live and thrive.

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INTERVIEW

FROM WASTE TO HOPE: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARCO ARMIERO

Begoña Simal-González
Universidade da Coruña

In 2015 a group of researchers from different Spanish universities got together and decided to engage in an academic study of the impact of globalization on US literature, and the LYG research project was born. In 2019 we embarked upon the second part of our project and decided to widen the scope to include both Canadian and US literature.[1] Just as we were concluding the first LYG project, we realized that many of our research lines converged upon one single corridor with one door at the end. We timidly opened that door when we explored the discontents triggered by globalization and encountered many "residual" communities. Having glimpsed what lay behind the door, we found the key to unlock it in what we had also considered residual until then: "waste." However, instead of focusing only on the materiality conjured up by the term, we also decided to explore the human communities that have become residual or waste(d). In our endeavor, Waste Studies and Waste Theory have proved especially useful, for they allow scholars to grapple with the appalling consequences that our globalized economy of waste has for both human beings and the entire planet.[2] Therefore, in "LYG2: Communities of Waste," we tried to tease out the different ways in which North American authors dissect the globalized economy of waste and its impact on residual communities, despite the representational challenges posed by social and environmental "slow violence," to use Rob Nixon's famous phrase. When Marco Armiero's *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump*[3] came out, we were thrilled by the felicitous coincidence, and even more so when Prof. Armiero agreed to grant us the following interview.

Begoña Simal González (BSG): First of all, thank you very much, Prof. Armiero, for granting us this interview. Last year, in 2021, you published *Wasteocene,* a timely and highly readable book where you argue that "waste" is "the planetary mark of our new epoch" not only "because of its ubiquitous presence" but because of what you call the "wasting relationships" that "produce wasted people and places" (2). This is an excellent summary of what environmental humanities scholarship, from Slow Violence to Waste Theory, has been discussing in the last decade or so, so my first question addresses this shared interest: what is it in the current climate that has fostered this proliferation of waste-centered scholarship? And, in your particular case,

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was there an "epiphany" or any personal experience that led you to coining the term "Wasteocene"?

Marco Armiero (MA): First of all, thank you very much. I am extremely grateful that you have been taking my work so seriously and really engaging with it. I would like to answer this question by explaining the Wasteocene is part and parcel of a growing reaction to the Anthropocene narrative. I have often said that the Wasteocene is one of these counternarratives that are born within and against the Anthropocene. In this sense I am not alone; many other scholars, better than me, have been rather uncomfortable with the Anthropocene narrative. Now, the "we" of the Anthropocene is very questionable. Who is that "we"? We may mean the human species, responsible for the global mess in which we are now, but we do not talk about the global "we" when we need to share the vaccines against COVID-19 or when we need to share the result of our research and our technologies–so that "we" is a bit questionable. Another problem with the global narrative of the Anthropocene is that it's so planetary that it's a bit disembodied. In a sense you learn about the Anthropocene reading papers, magazines, maybe journals–if you're an academic–but you don't experience the Anthropocene, whereas you do experience the Wasteocene. As much as the Anthropocene is disembodied and global, the Wasteocene is very place-based and embodied. You experience the Wasteocene through your own body, through the body of your dears, through the place where you live. Please, allow me to clarify that I do not believe that scholars using the Anthropocene label are racist or they are completely blind towards race, class and gender. I think this would be unfair, like building my own strawman just for the sake of being a little bit radical. I know a lot of them are actually well aware of these issues. In the book I mention a couple of examples like Laura Pulido, a well-known geographer, or Will Steffen, an Earth sciences scholar, very influential in the whole Anthropocene debate.

So, again, it's not a matter of blaming someone, of building your own strawman. When I stress the limitations of the Anthropocene it is because the words that we use can be important to deliver a message. This is why I believe that Capitalocene is also a powerful concept, because it was able to

[1] The members of the LYG2 research team are José Liste (UDC), Pedro Carmona (ULL), Martín Urdiales (U. Vigo), and Begoña Simal (UDC), who is the coordinator (IP) of the research project. The "equipo de trabajo" ("work team") was initially comprised by doctoral students and early-career scholars: Elsa del Campo (U. Nebrija), Sara Villamarín-Freire (UDC), and Martín Praga (UDC).

[2] Simal-González, Begoña. 2019. "The waste of the empire": Neocolonialism and environmental justice in Merlinda Bobis's 'The Long Siesta as a Language Primer.'" *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 55, no. 2: 209-22. DOI: 10.1080/17449855.2019.1590633.

[3] Armiero, Marco. *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021 (ISBN: 9781108826747).

point at something that the Anthropocene was hiding. This does not mean that no one was thinking about this, but at least as a global narrative it was not put forward with so much power. I mentioned Capitalocene, but we could also mention the Plantationcene, the age of plantation. These narratives are born within and against the Anthropocene. When I say "within," I'm not just playing with words; what I try to say with "within and against" is that, without the Anthropocene, most likely we wouldn't have come up with Capitalocene or Plantationcene. I don't know how to put it, but I'm grateful to the Anthropocene, because it has been able to unleash creativity, to ignite a lively debate. Let me be clear: I'm not really proposing the Wasteocene as a geological age, I'm not excavating in the geosphere to look for the golden spike of the Wasteocene. I'm contributing to an intellectual debate about the sociological crisis, rather than looking for a precise golden spike in geosphere.

BSG: As to the second part of the question, which was more personal level, was there any specific experience that led you to choose the term "Wasteocene" in order to capture the convergence of social and ecological concerns?

MA: The autobiographical inspiration is very important in my book, actually in all my work. I come from a country and, more specifically, from a city/region which has been affected very deeply by waste, in many different ways: by a waste crisis between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, but also by a *longue durée* socio-ecological crisis. I'm talking about Naples, in southern Italy, a city that is often considered a border city between the global North and the global South. I cherish this biographical inspiration, so present in the book, because I think it's part of a different way of thinking about academic and intellectual work. We have been told so many times–as PhD students, as early-career researchers–that we should not be biased, that we need to separate our personal life from the academic life. However, feminist scholars taught us that the personal is always political. And I'm wondering, can we say that the personal is political and also academic? Somebody would say that this is bad scholarship, and I would say, well, "it's revolution, baby."

BSG: Although you're not really against the term Anthropocene per se, as you have just explained, in your book you emphasize the need to make more visible the waste and wasting aspects of the current regime, and that is why you put forward the concept of the Wasteocene as an alternative. I agree with you when you claim that, in contrast to the Anthropocene, "the Wasteocene repoliticizes the socio-ecological crisis" (11). Do you think the Wasteocene will supersede the Anthropocene as the most popular or widespread concept?

MA: I believe there is no chance. In the academic arena and scientific debates, power matters. This is not just something that I write in a paper. I do believe that power matters. And I do believe I am on the wrong side, perhaps, we could say, I'm on the left side... Anyway, what I mean to say is that I am on the weak side of this debate, no discussion. There are powerful forces out there that actually make things go in a certain direction. A radical–we might even say revolutionary–point of view cannot easily become mainstream in the

academic debate. However, please allow me to go back to the conclusions of my book, where I tried to overcome the usual intellectual competition, claiming another way to be in academia.

As academics, I think that we now live in some kind of "publish-or-perish winter" in which we need to be popular, we need to tweet, we need to increase our h-index bibliometrics, and we compete with our colleagues in the department and elsewhere. I understand all this. Having said that, I truly believe in the need for a collective effort to dismantle the power relationships in academia, and in the world as a whole. What I mean is that I believe that Capitalocene is a very powerful concept that several scholars are using: Jason Moore, Andreas Malm, Michael Parenti, and more. Thus, if the point is that the term Wasteocene should win the competition against the Capitalocene or other radical critiques of the Anthropocene narrative, I am not playing this game. I am part of the same family, or, rather, I'm part of the same gang: we are all trying to sabotage, to dismantle the current regime and trying to provide a different approach to understand our sociological crisis. I am not hypocritical: I am happy that Jason Moore has been using the term Wasteocene himself; I am happy that you are interviewing me; I am really happy that the book has been translated into many languages [among them Spanish]. At the end of November, we will celebrate a symposium in China launching the Chinese edition of the book. I am happy and proud about the success of the book.

On the other hand, I don't want to play by the rules of the game and declare that Wasteocene is better than Capitalocene or that if you use the Anthropocene, you are bad. Laura Pulido has used the Anthropocene, so what? She's one of my main sources of inspiration. I am not playing this game. I hope that the Wasteocene can become part of the debate, of that "community." I believe that we need to act as if the revolution is already here; we cannot just wait for something to happen. I want a better world to exist now, not in the future, because, after all, I have been waiting for this better world for all my life and it never comes. I believe that the better world is now, and my very small, you might say humble, contribution to building a better world is to stop playing by the rules of this game. The Wasteocene is there for whoever is interested in using it, but it's not in competition with others; it's not better than others. I am not trying to supersede other kinds of labels, also because the Wasteocene couldn't have been born without the work of Jason Moore, Laura Pulido, Cedric Robinson, Ashley Dawson, and we can go on and on. I acknowledge these intellectual debts in my concluding chapter not because I want to be humble, but because I want to be strong. I want allies; I don't want competitors. It's a matter of being smart; and I believe that humility is a crucial exercise because it teaches you that you are better only when acknowledging your limits and your debts. It's not a matter of being humble. Humility is not precisely a set of rules but an ontological posture: it's asking yourself how you can be a better person before being a better scholar. And you know that being humble means that

people will always see you as being better than you actually are, and this is a fantastic gift. It's not hypocrisy, it's more the gift of being seen with eyes that can change you. It cannot be a mirror; it must be another human being.

BSG: At one point in your book (pp. 7-8), you discuss the chronology of the Anthropocene and the different theories regarding its origins. In your opinion, when did the Wasteocene emerge? Does its emergence coincide with that of the Anthropocene? Would you trace it back to European colonialism, or maybe to the advent of globalization or the Great Acceleration?

MA: It is a relief that I am not really putting out the Wasteocene as a geologic epoch, because I don't need to submit an application to the International Commission on Stratigraphy, which looks for the origins and the golden spike of the Anthropocene. I feel relieved that the Wasteocene can be first and foremost a narrative tool, and I hope that storytelling can be seen as a methodology. I think of storytelling not only as a device to tell what we have discovered with other methods, but I actually want to employ storytelling as our method to understand, to make sense of the world, so I am using the Wasteocene in this sense.

But I don't want to dodge your question. First of all, I believe that the Wasteocene is there for people to use. Just to be clear, the Wasteocene is a narrative dispositive there to be used. Somebody working on the Roman Empire might find the Wasteocene a useful tool to understand something in the Roman Empire, or people can think of the Wasteocene as something that can help to understand something in the Middle Ages. In this sense, it's a tool there for people to explore, and exploring would also imply adjusting the concept. It's not precisely a very rigid tool: it's not like tools in a lab, which can be a little bit difficult to use because they are less flexible. The concept of the Wasteocene can be flexible. I have already seen people wrestling with it in a very creative way.

However, if I were forced to pinpoint the specific origins of the Wasteocene, I would say that colonial times were a key moment. Why? Because I believe that it really produced the ultimate "othering," the idea of a place where something can happen that is not something that we will allow to happen in this part of the world, whatever "this part" is. I am a big "fan" of the Orbis spike hypothesis put forward by Lewis and Maslin.[4] I should also say that, in terms of waste, there's no discussion that the Great Acceleration is probably the epitome of the wasting, consumerist society. In early modern times, the production of waste was less massive and people were more

[4] In brief, Lewis and Maslin propose the European invasion of the Americas as the starting point for the Anthropocene. They argue that the colonization of the New World not only had the characteristics of a planetary change but it also left a clear mark in the geosphere in the form of a significant decline in atmospheric CO2 (circa 7–10 p.p.m). According to Lewis and Maslin, the causes of this remarkable decrease in atmospheric CO2 lie in the combined mass-destruction of Indigenous people and the following reduction of agricultural practices and (re)expansion of forests.

careful with the remains of their production and consumption. I have read somewhere that in the global North, we trash what we buy an average of six months after we've bought it. It seems amazing, doesn't it? I guess this obsolescence is intended.

BSG: As in "planned obsolescence"?

MA: Right. But I also want to make sure that, with the Wasteocene, we do not focus on material trash, merely saying: "Oh, my God! How much trash we see in the city these days! It's terrible! Once upon a time when I was a kid, the city was so clean..." This can be a very regressive approach. What I want to focus on are the wasting relationships producing this, and the wasting relationships were not created by the Great Acceleration, they were already there, in place. The Great Acceleration probably had the power to increase waste production, and especially to detach us from the waste that we were producing. In this sense, recycling is a crucial practice. And yet, as I have tried to explain in other talks, I don't think that recycling is the antidote to wasting relationships: the antidote is commoning, not recycling. I recycle myself, as much as I can, and I believe that recycling is powerful because it reconnects the consumer with what has been consumed. And this is an important step: at least you understand that there is not a magic dump where everything can disappear. Nonetheless, since my main concern is not waste as "a thing" but waste as "wasting relationships," I do maintain that communing, not recycling, is the path for dismantling them.

BSG: I want to go back to the alternative that you give, commoning–rather than recycling–as the antidote to the Wasteocene. In the last chapter in your book, you explain how, in contrast to wasting relationships, "based on consuming and othering [...], commoning practices aim to reproduce resources and communities" (46-47). The focus here seems to be on community-building, a project that seems to go against the current individualist logic. I think this is a long fight that requires intergenerational cooperation, since it will be our children who will "inherit" the legacy of the Wasteocene. In your opinion, are the younger generations really aware of the impact of the Wasteocene and, if so, are they taking an active role in "sabotaging" it through commoning?

MA: This is a challenging question. Wasting relationships produce profits for a few through othering and extraction. In contrast, commoning is reproducing communities through sharing and caring. In this sense, recycling can eventually work within the logic of the Wasteocene. In the book, I mention the case of an abandoned factory, which some developers proposed to recycle into a shopping mall. Basically, you have a "waste," the abandoned factory building, and you do something with it. Well, this *does not* change the wasting relationships. It is radically different if the building is "recycled" or repurposed as a social center and the area around it transformed in a natural park for the people in a poor neighborhood. This *does* change and dismantle the wasting relationships.

As to whether the young generations are aware of the wasting relationships, I would say that Fridays for Future is a huge movement that started in a

very peculiar way. As you know, I live and work in Stockholm, so when Greta Thunberg started her Fridays for Future strike, alone in front of the Swedish Parliament, somebody like me from southern Italy and with my kind of political background–which, in case you are wondering, is a Marxist ecosocialist background–I was a bit skeptical. You know, it's very individualistic. She's one person. It's so Scandinavian. We need a larger movement. I liked my guys, my gals, back in Naples getting organized. There you don't do anything if you are not at least 100 people, right? This time, however, I can say I was happily wrong. Greta started something which went beyond individual action. She was teaching me a lesson: sometimes you also need an individual action, as long as the individual action is not an obstacle to building a collective, but it's just one step towards the collective. I see a lot of interesting things happening with Fridays for Future. I believe that Greta has now taken a much more radical position than at the beginning–at least as I understood her at the beginning. I think that her meeting with Indigenous people in the US and around the world, her meeting with Naomi Klein, with Ocasio-Cortez, I believe all of that changed her. She is now openly anti-capitalist. And I completely agree with her. I am very hopeful about this. In Italy there is something happening right now which I believe is amazing, something called the "convergence." The convergence is an experience which started from a workers' collective in a squatted factory in Tuscany. The factory had been shut down by the owners, and these workers started thinking about the possibility of changing what they were producing. Now they are producing, and asking for, a convergence of all the social-environmental struggles happening in Italy. There have been two big marches so far–one in Bologna, another one in Tuscany–and now there will be one in Naples, in my own town. Why is it so powerful? Because it brings together workers, Fridays for Future, and people fighting for the right to housing. They are now building a wide social platform. On the other hand, Italy now has a right-wing government and proud of being so. In other words, we can be optimistic, but we can also be very, very pessimistic about what's going on in Italy.

Commoning can also be fruitful because it can change our idea of what being politicized means. Politicization does not happen only when you march with the flag, it does not happen only in a political meeting. Politicization can happen when you help your neighborhood; when you meet somebody in the hospital because your kids are both sick with the same disease; when you understand that, if the place where you live is a dump, it's not because you are uncivilized and not taking care of it, but because you are poor, because somebody is using you as a dump. So maybe what is missing here is trying to build communities, rebellious communities, everywhere we are.

BSG: Speaking as a teacher now, are there ways in which we can get our university students involved in this commoning project?

MA: When people tell me that our students are not involved, I wonder if we really know what they are doing. I wonder if students are sabotaging our academic

system, piece by piece, or doing something to help each other or support each other, or changing the language, or changing gender relationships. Maybe we don't even know them, so I am optimistic, which makes sense in somebody who believes that revolution is not only possible but is happening now. But I need to change my idea of revolution. Revolution will not be an army marching on the Winter Palace, but it will be somebody yelling "Fuck you, people in the Winter Palace." In fact, revolution may be happening in the margins, very far away from the Winter Palace.

BSG: As you know, we are also Humanities scholars, although, in our case, we come from the field of English Studies, more specifically North American literature and film. Since this is a transdisciplinary conversation, let me ask you about the literary and cinematic references you use in your book. When you discuss the perils of the Wasteocene and the need for commoning practices, you offer both data and stories because, as you aptly put it, "[d]ata is powerful, but [...] stories even more so" (28). You give some examples from literary and cinematic narratives, mostly speculative fiction, because, in your own words, "more than scientists, writers and filmmakers have remarkably influenced our collective imaginaries about the future, and waste, in its manifold forms, has often been a key feature of those imagined futures" (13). The literary and filmic examples you provide, from *The Road* to *Elysium*–to mention the US American ones–envision dystopian futures where the consequences of the Wasteocene become sadly visible. However, very few of these narratives seem to offer alternative, viable futures. I think that, while dystopias and post-apocalyptic narratives can work as a wake-up call and shake us into action, they can also be paralyzing. It might be even more interesting to analyze hopeful rather than defeatist narratives. Can you think of specific literary texts or films that provide alternatives to the current regime? If so, in which way do they disrupt the Wasteocene and (re)imagine "the commons"?

MA: You are absolutely right that dystopia is the key genre, the cipher, in a sense, when we try to imagine the future. I believe that it's easier to imagine the dystopia, because the utopia can sometimes be a little too naïve, or it can be a dystopia under a different guise. At the Environmental Humanities Laboratory in Stockholm, we have a project called the "Atlas of the other worlds," which is available at our website.[5] There, you can find a section called "Occupy stories": we asked people, mostly students, from all over the world to imagine their own cities or towns 200 years from now. And what happened is precisely what you said: more than 90% were dystopias. I was one of the very few who imagined a utopian revolution. Even in my case, though, I left the door open to a possible dystopian future. At the end of my short story–I'm not a writer, so the story sucks, of course–I explain that

[5] https://occupyclimatechange.net.

I am writing a letter to the people in the future, adding that you–the reader–are now wondering if the future I describe is possible, how we did all this, what happened with capitalism, and so on and so forth. And why are you asking all these questions? Because if I told you that everything is a mess, that I live in a favela without water, if I had described the usual dystopia, you would not ask any question because that's the normal. Therefore, I hint at the possibility that maybe I am indeed writing from a favela, just dreaming about a utopian future.

Utopias can be also a problematic. I am not a literature or a film studies scholar, but I'll try. Let's talk about *Elysium*, for instance, which is a Hollywood kind of movie that I have been studying, especially because it intertwines two themes that I'm really working on: the environmental crisis, but also migration. Well, you can say that it is a utopia, in a sense, because... Can I insert a spoiler?

BSG: Yes, I think so.

MA: In the end, the migrants are able to break into this Elysium, some sort of satellite where the rich people live. It will become flooded by illegal spaceships arriving and bringing migrants. That's a utopia. It's the kind of revolutionary move that I would like to see. However, it's also a movie with this white male hero, played by Matt Damon, who saves the girl. Can I say it's my ideal kind of narrative? No. Can we say that ideal narratives don't exist? Yes. Maybe we just need to deal with what we have. And I do believe that *Elysium* is better than other terrible movies, even though it's still problematic.

BSG: I thought of a couple of films, also from Hollywood, where, as you say, you often find the "white savior" kind of narrative. Still, there are a few interesting Hollywood movies dealing with wasting relationships, like *Michael Clayton* or *Dark Waters*.

MA: I watched that film, yes.

BSG: I think *Dark Waters* is both realistic and hopeful. In fact, the protagonist, Robert Bilott (Mark Ruffalo), seems to be a low-key, normal guy.

MA: I met the actual guy, Rob Bilott. He was the keynote speaker at the World Environmental History conference in Florianopolis before the pandemic. I liked the idea of a keynote speech that was not the usual boring stuff...

Let me give you another example, a TV series that is not American but Brazilian: *3%*. In the series there is some sort of island called Offshore where the rich people live. Again, both in *Elysium* and in *3%* you have this perfect world in which even diseases have been cured, magically cured, and then you have the global dump at the heart of the earth. However, in *3%* some kind of utopia is described. They build something called the "Shell," if I'm not mistaken, a community in the middle of the desert with some technology thanks to which they are able to survive. It's very communitarian; in fact, it looks a bit like commoning. And yet, *3%* is also problematic because it's a neoliberal narrative. I actually stopped watching the series because I got very angry and I started talking back to the TV set, and then I realized that it was a bad sign–for my health, my mental health–that I had started to

interact with the characters on the screen. Anyway, my point is that, in *3%*, you have the bad guys–no discussion–and then you have the revolutionary army, called "a causa"–"the cause"–who are bad as well. And I really don't like this. It looks like the political correctness of our times: "Sure, those people are terrible, but people fighting back are terrible too." Why? I am a very simple guy, you know. I am the kind of person that says that there were the Nazi fascists and there were the partisans, and the partisans were right and the Nazi fascists were wrong. The rich are bad because they are eating up all the resources in the planet. I am not very sophisticated. You might say I see things in black and white, and I agree. Another example is Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, where the socialist planet doesn't look precisely like the place where you would like to move tomorrow. However, the main point with an ecosocialist horizon is that it's a horizon. It's not that you get there and you build your social utopia; it's more that there is a place over there that you try to reach, and what matters is the path going there.
Speaking of positive, hopeful narratives, I believe that there are some examples in my book, but, it's true, they're not coming from literature or movies. For instance, isn't it a hopeful story the one about the "resisting lake" in Rome where a working-class community builds a multispecies alliance? Or isn't it a hopeful story to learn about the Worker's University in Tuzla, where students are thinking about a different future? Or you can think of Can Sant Joan in Barcelona, isn't it hopeful? Can Sant Joan is an especially interesting case, because in the end the community won. Although the factory is still there, they won because it's not a wasted community anymore. For instance, in that community there is now a theater, where they create films, and a poetry festival. You can say, "Marco, I don't see the connection between the pollution from the factory and the poetry." Well, you are wrong: the main point is that you are sabotaging the logic which claims that you are getting polluted because you deserve to be. You are saying "We are not a dump." This is a place where beauty is strong. Beauty is poetry, film, an art exhibition... The power and the beauty lie in the fact that, when the factory tries to buy you out saying "Ok, we can sponsor your soccer team," you tell them: "Not interested. Our uniform is terrible, we don't have money, but we are not out for sale. You cannot buy us." Isn't that a powerful story? Is it a story in which you win or lose? Maybe the whole point of winning and losing is another neoliberal trick, to make us feel that we are never modern or victorious enough. Maybe the main victory is to escape that very logic.
Still, you are right: I couldn't come up with very positive, optimistic stories coming from literature. In the book I mention McCarthy's *The Road*. What do you think? Does the novel have a positive ending?

BSG: Well, there are many theories regarding that ending.

MA: (*whispering*) I think they are going to eat the boy.

BSG: I may be naïve, but I'm optimistic about the ending. I think there's room for hope there.

MA: By the way, I have a dog and my dog's name is Hope. This is because we thought that we needed to raise Hope, that hope is not something that will be given to you, but it requires a lot of hard work, of caring and love.

BSG: So, now, every time you call Hope the word is there, in the flesh, so to speak. That's a great idea.

MA: Sometimes we become a bit upset with Hope, but still we love him.

BSG: He probably doesn't live up to your expectations, but he's still there, right?

MA: Yes. I can also discover that my expectations were wrong, and it can be beautiful that he (Hope) is going wild in all sorts of directions.

This interview was conducted on November 4, 2022.

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CREATION

INTRODUCTION: AZALEAS AND SO ON

Martín Praga
Universidade da Coruña

Wallace Stevens famously placed flowers amongst the "things that are in the dump [...] and the things that will be," hoping to find a "purifying change" between "that disgust and this." In the late twentieth century, we have witnessed a "shift from a culture defined by its production to a culture defined by its waste," as Cythia Deitering puts it. As garbage and toxicity have become more and more pervasive, the "slow violence" of the environmental degradation has remained strangely slippery, difficult to grasp and reflect in artistic representations. It has thus become an urgent need to explore those narratives that not only attempt to capture the degradation of the environment, but also focus on those human communities that have become residual or waste(d). The poets in this section keenly bring these ubiquitous and polymorphous materializations of waste to the fore, challenging askew narratives of progress fueled by the global capitalist paradigm of growth. In "republic," D.A. Powell unveils the pernicious consequences of the progressive automation of the countryside. The refuse hidden in our pipelines overflows in Laura-Gray Street's revision of Darwin's optimism in "An Entangled Bank." Craig Santos Perez's playful "One fish, Two fish, Plastics, Dead fish" addresses the pollution of water and the depletion of the marine wildlife that are consequence of capitalist driven overfishing and global warming. Evelyn Reilly's "Hence Mystical Cosmetic Over Sunset Landfill" reminds us of the omnipresence of plastic, that hyper-object silently taking over the earth. In "Agents Orange, Yellow, and Red," Adam Dickinson responds to the results of chemical tests on his blood, while mocking the polarizing politicization of ecological matters. Finally, the violence exerted at the margins of the empire is denounced in Rita Wong's "sort by day, burn by night," which exposes the heinous side of technological commodities; and through the lives tragically lost but not forgotten in Martín Espada's "Floaters."

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D.A. Powell,[1] *republic*

soon, industry and agriculture converged
and the combustion engine
sowed the dirtclod truck farms green
with onion tops and chicory

mowed the hay, fed the swine and mutton
through belts and chutes

cleared the blue oak and the chaparral
chipping the wood for mulch

back-filled the marshes
replacing buckbean with dent corn

removed the unsavory foliage of quag
made the land into a production
made it *produce*, pistoned and oiled
and forged against its own nature

and–with enterprise–built silos
stockyards, warehouses, processing plants
abattoirs, walk-in refrigerators, canneries, mills
& centers of distribution

it meant something–in spite of machinery–
to say *the country*, to say *apple season*
though what it meant was a kind of nose-thumbing
and a kind of sweetness
as when one says *how quaint*
knowing that a refined listener understands the doubleness

and the leveling of the land, enduing it in sameness, cured malaria
as the standing water in low glades disappeared,
as the muskegs drained
typhoid and yellow fever decreased
even milksickness abated
thanks to the rise of the feeding pen
cattle no longer grazing on white snakeroot

[1] D.A. Powell's most recent collection is *Low Hanging Fruit* from Foundlings Press. He is the recipient of the 2019 John Updike Award from the American Academy of Arts & Letters, as well as awards from the Academy of American Poets and the National Book Critics Circle. He makes his home in San Francisco, California, where he teaches at the University of San Francisco.

vanquished: the germs that bedeviled the rural areas
the rural areas also

vanquished: made monochromatic and mechanized, made suburban
now,
the illnesses we contract are chronic illnesses: dyspepsia, arthritis
heart disease, kidney disease, high blood pressure, asthma
chronic pain, allergies, anxiety, emphysema
diabetes, cirrhosis, lyme disease, aids
chronic fatigue syndrome, malnutrition, morbid obesity
hypertension, cancers of the various kinds: bladder bone eye lymph
mouth ovary thyroid liver colon bileduct lung
breast throat & sundry areas of the brain

we are no better in accounting for death, and no worse: we still die
we carry our uninhabited mortal frames back to the land
cover them in sod, we take the land to the brink
of our dying: it stands watch, dutifully, artfully
enriched with sewer sludge and urea
to green against eternity of green

hocus-pocus: here is a pig in a farrowing crate
eating its own feces
human in its ability to litter inside a cage
to nest, to grow gravid and to throw its young

I know I should be mindful of dangerous analogy:
the pig is only the pig
and we aren't merely the wide-open field
flattened to a space resembling nothing

you want me to tell you the marvels of invention? that we persevere
that the time of flourishing is at hand? I should like to think it

meanwhile, where have I put the notebook on which I was scribbling

it began like:

"the smell of droppings and that narrow country road..."

– with Darwin and Thoreau

An entangled bank. It is interesting to contemplate
humid June on the skin like wet feathers
in Saran Wrap. Picking the sticky fabric (cotton
blends, polyester, vinyl) from my sweaty legs,
I have to strip myself like a quick jerk
of Band Aid or masking tape from the car seat.
Sun block, lotions, creams stew into an oil
slicking down arms and chest and forehead.
Innumerable little streams overlap and interlace,
one with another, exhibiting a sort of hybrid-, shall we say,
product. Few phenomena give me more delight
than that kind of money in the bank. You and I
are clothed with many kinds of trafficking.
And the world, oh, the world is rank
with early-bird specials twittering amongst
the tax cuts; insect repellents of all varieties
tizzying up the place, and erratic earthworms
thrashing like heavy-metal bangers at
the street curbs. It is interesting to contemplate
the way sand pours off our eroded slopes like lava,
pulled down over the headwaters like balaclavas.
Everyone stays focused on the cash flow, which takes
the forms of the laciniated and imbricated phalluses
of bureaucratic henchmen. Just think of brain coral,
of lung fish, of bowels and all kinds of excrements.
We contrive a system to transport all our runoff
to the treatment plant, where it is treated, well, like shit
and excreted. Piped through entangled banks and spit
back into the watershed. In heavy rains, volume exceeds
capacity and overflows, by design – so interesting
to contemplate – into your neighborhood streams, rivers,
lakes, aquifers, wells. And not only stormwater but also
untreated human and industrial waste and debris,
all running blissfully together as one intoxicated
toxic stream, transformed, converted, wholly
baptized and foaming at the mouth,

[2] Laura-Gray Street (www.lauragraystreet.com) is author of *Pigment and Fume* and *Shift Work*, and co-editor of *The Ecopoetry Anthology* and *A Literary Field Guide to Southern Appalachia*. A 2022–2025 fellow with the Black Earth Institute, Street is a professor of English, directs the Creative Writing and Visiting Writers Series Program, and edits *Revolute*, the MFA's literary journal, at Randolph College in Lynchburg, Virginia.

like the born again in the parking lot yesterday,
who, bless his heart, collared me when afternoon
had hit its steamiest, when I was unsticking myself
from the car seat. Few phenomena give more delight.
But it's important to stay calm and enjoy the amenities.
There is no end to the heaps of liver, lights, and bowels.
True, what I say is somewhat excrementitious in character,
but isn't it interesting to contemplate the plain liquid idioms
undulating along the ripple marks on the river bottom,
age after age, stratum upon stratum. Even the godless,
and accountants, must recognize the stubborn beauty
of such waves, and how from so simple, so rudimentary
a beginning such hopelessly entangled forms
have been, and are being, brewed.

Craig Santos Perez,[3] *One fish, Two fish, Plastics, Dead fish*

recycling Dr. Seuss

Some fish are sold for sashimi,
some are sold to canneries,
and some are caught by hungry slaves
to feed what wealthy tourists crave!

Farmed fish, Fish sticks, Frankenfish, Collapse

From the Pacific to the Atlantic,
from the Indian to the Arctic,
from here to there,
dead zones are everywhere!

Overfishing, Purse seine, Ghost fishing, Bycatch

This one has a little radiation.
This one has a little mercury.
0 me! 0 my! What schools
of bloated fish float by!

Here are fish that used to spawn, but now the water is too warm

Some are predators and some are prey,
Who will survive? I can't say.
Say! Look at its tumors! One, two, three...
How many tumors do *you* see?

Two fish, One fish, Filet-o-Fish, No fish

[3] Craig Santos Perez is an indigenous Pacific Islander from Guam. He is the co-editor of six anthologies and the author of six books of poetry. He is a professor in the English department at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, where he teaches creative writing, eco-poetry, and Pacific literature.

Answer: Styrofoam deathlessness
Question: How long does it take?

& all the time singing in my throat
little dead Greek lady
in your eternity.saddle
[hat: 59% Acrylic 41% Modacrylic]
[ornamental trim: 24% Polyvinyl 76% Polyamide]

holding a vial
enwrapped

Enter: 8,9,13,14,17-ethynyl-13-methyl-
7,8,9,11,12,14,15,16-octahydro-cyclopenta-diol
(aka environmental sources of hormonal activity
(side effects include tenderness, dizziness

and aberrations of the vision

(*please just pass the passout juice now!*)

Answer: It is a misconception that materials
biodegrade in a meaningful timeframe

Answer: Thought to be composters landfills
are actually vast mummifiers

of waste
and waste's companions
still stunning all-color

heap-like & manifold.of

foam 1 : a mass of fine bubbles on the surface of a liquid
2 : a light cellular material resulting from the introduction
of gas during manufacture 3 : frothy saliva 4 : the SEA
(lit.)
which can be molded into almost anything
& cousin to.thingsartistic:

[4] Evelyn Reilly is a New York-based poet, scholar, and environmentalist. Her books include *Styrofoam*, *Apocalypso* and *Echolocation*, all published by Roof Books. Her poetry has appeared in many anthologies and was recently included in the *Feral Atlas: The More-than-Human Anthropocene*, a multimedia compendium of work by scientists, thinkers, poets and artists. She is a member of the Steering Committee of the climate activist group 350NYC.

Kristen J
A low oven and a watchful eye turns bits
of used plastic meat trays into keychain ornaments.
Monica T
Soft and satisfying for infant teething if you first freeze.
posted 10/11/2007 at thriftyfun.com
hosted by FPPG the Foodservice Plastic Packaging Group

All this.formation
Anddeformation

& barely able to see sea

beyond the dense congregation of species successful in environments
where the diversity of plants and animals has been radically diminished

(for all averred, we had killed the bird [enter albatross
stand-in of choice
hence this mood of moods

this.fucked.flux.lux.crux
(broken piece of lamp garbage)

sunset 400 lux
LCD computer screen 300 lux

full moon .25 lux
starlight .0005 lux

that which fallsoutside.thespectrum
antarctic fowl.cherubim
& dearest docent

holding hands for the briefest moment of shared materiality
among lontermheritage styrene

Gee, this.stationaryparticulatecloud actually improves the sunset.

What the sea brought: poly.flotsam.faux.foam

&Floam®

a kind of slime with polystyrene beads in it
that can be used to transform almost any object
into a unique work of art

Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love.
Herman Melville, Moby Dick, XLII, "The Whiteness of the Whale"

Adam Dickinson,[5] *AGENTS ORANGE, YELLOW AND RED*

2,3,7,8-Tetrachlorodibenzodioxin (serum): 1.304348 pg/g lipid[6]

You are either for chlorine
or for the plague.
Right now is the cleanest
we have ever been, and for this
you must love aerial defoliants
or you love communism.
Under the bandage of this one-industry
town closing ranks around staples
of forestry and fish, the wound
is wide-eyed and headstrong.
Through the clearing, freshwater carp
blink past the graves of missionaries
who introduced them to the New World.
Northern rivers are warmed
by the paper mill's piss, which,
like making the world safe for democracy,
slowly leaked into my childhood, yellowing
the lipophilic paperbacks of my
adipose fat. You are for pulp
or for poverty. You respect
the Constitution or you stare
at the ground lost in bankruptcies
for herring gull beaks or blurred
embryos in cormorant colonies.
Every erected media platform reduces
the problem of war to a problem
of tint. During the Orange Revolution,
Viktor Yushchenko was poisoned
by government agents who haywired
his food with dioxin. His face flared
into pages of acne. You are either

[5] Adam Dickinson is the author of four books of poetry. His latest book, *Anatomic* (Coach House Books), which won the Alanna Bondar Memorial Book Prize from the Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada, involves the results of chemical and microbial testing on his body. His work has been nominated for major literary prizes in Canada including the Governor General's Award for Poetry and the Trillium Book Award for Poetry, and has been translated into Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Norwegian, and Polish. He teaches English and Creative Writing at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada.

[6] Dickinson wrote "Agents Orange, Yellow, and Red" in response to discovering the dioxin 2,3,7,8-Tetrachlorodibenzodioxin in his blood. The poem reflects on the complex history of the chemical as well as his own potential exposure history.

for the red or the white blood cells,
for the tops of trees, or the bottoms.

I filled seventy-six vials of blood. The centrifuge I used would take only small tubes, which is why I needed so many. My veins were a mess. I took short breaks to walk around the room swinging my hands. By the end of it, I was drawing from both arms and yanking on the tourniquet with my teeth.

My generous assistant was not a trained phlebotomist. We did it during his free time at the university. The university eventually found out what we had done. New policies were put in place.

circuit boards
most profitable & most dangerous
if you live in guiyu village,
one of the hundred thousand people who
"liberate recyclable metals"
into canals & rivers,
turning them into acid sludge,
swollen with lead,
barium leachate, mercury bromide.
o keyboard irony: the shiny laptop
a compilation of lead, aluminum, iron,
plastics, orchestrated mercury, arsenic, antinomy...
sing me the toxic ditty of silica:
"*Yet utter the word Democractic, the word En-masse.*"*
where do metals come from?
where do they return?
bony bodies inhale carcinogenic toner dust,
burn copper-laden wires,
peer at old cathay, cathode ray tubes.
what if your pentium got dumped in guiyu village?
your garbage, some else's cancer?
economy of scale
shrinks us all
global whether
here or there
collapses cancer
consumes en-masse

** Walt Whitman, "One's Self I Sing"*
Upon watching the video Exporting Harm, http://www.ban.org/

[7] Rita Wong is the author of four books of poetry: *monkeypuzzle* (Press Gang, 1998), *forage* (Nightwood Editions, 2007), *sybil unrest* (Line Books, 2008, with Larissa Lai) and *undercurrent* (Nightwood Editions, 2015). *forage* was the winner of the 2008 Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize and Canada Reads Poetry 2011. Wong is an associate professor in the Critical and Cultural Studies department at the Emily Carr University of Art and Design on the unceded Coast Salish territories also known as Vancouver.

Martín Espada,[8] *Floaters*

Ok, I'm gonna go ahead and ask…have ya'll ever seen floaters this clean. I'm not trying to be an a$$ but I HAVE NEVER SEEN FLOATERS LIKE THIS, could this be another edited photo. We've all seen the dems and liberal parties do some pretty sick things. –Anonymous post, "I'm 10-15" Border Patrol Facebook group

Like a beer bottle thrown into the river by a boy too drunk to cry,
like the shard of a Styrofoam cup drained of coffee brown as the river,
like the plank of a fishing boat broken in half by the river, the dead float.
And the dead have a name: *floaters,* say the men of the Border Patrol,
keeping watch all night by the river, hearts pumping coffee as they say
the word *floaters,* soft as a bubble, hard as a shoe as it nudges the body,
to see if it breathes, to see if it moans, to see if it sits up and speaks.

And the dead have names, a feast day parade of names, names that
dress all in red, names that twirl skirts, names that blow whistles,
names that shake rattles, names that sing in praise of the saints:
Say *Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez*. Say *Angie Valeria Martínez Ávalos.*
See how they rise off the tongue, the calling of bird to bird somewhere
in the trees above our heads, trilling in the dark heart of the leaves.

Say what we know of them now they are dead: Óscar slapped dough
for pizza with oven-blistered fingers. Daughter Valeria sang, banging
a toy guitar. He slipped free of the apron he wore in the blast of the oven,
sold the motorcycle he would kick till it sputtered to life, counted off
pesos for the journey across the river, and the last of his twenty-five
years, and the last of her twenty-three months. There is another name
that beats its wings in the heart of the trees: Say *Tania Vanessa Ávalos*,
Óscar's wife and Valeria's mother, the witness stumbling along the river.

Now their names rise off her tongue: Say *Óscar* y *Valeria*. He swam
from Matamoros across to Brownsville, the girl slung around his neck,
stood her in the weeds on the Texas side of the river, swore to return
with her mother in hand, turning his back as fathers do who later say:
I turned around and she was gone. In the time it takes for a bird to hop
from branch to branch, Valeria jumped in the river after her father.
Maybe he called out her name as he swept her up from the river;
maybe the river drowned out his voice as the water swept them away.

[8] Martín Espada's latest book of poems is called *Floaters* (2021), winner of the National Book Award and a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. Other collections of poems include *Vivas to Those Who Have Failed* (2016), *The Trouble Ball* (2011), and *Alabanza* (2003). He is the editor of *What Saves Us: Poems of Empathy and Outrage in the Age of Trump* (2019). He has received the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the Shelley Memorial Award, the Robert Creeley Award, an Academy of American Poets Fellowship, a Letras Boricuas Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He teaches at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

Tania called out the names of the saints, but the saints drowsed
in the stupor of birds in the dark, their cages covered with blankets.
The men on patrol would never hear their pleas for asylum, watching
for *floaters,* hearts pumping coffee all night on the Texas side of the river.

No one, they say, had ever seen *floaters this clean:* Óscar's black shirt
yanked up to the armpits, Valeria's arm slung around her father's
neck even after the light left her eyes, both face down in the weeds,
back on the Mexican side of the river. *Another edited photo*: See how
her head disappears in his shirt, the waterlogged diaper bunched
in her pants, the blue of the blue cans. The radio warned us about
the *crisis actors* we see at one school shooting after another; the man
called *Óscar* will breathe, sit up, speak, tug the black shirt over
his head, shower off the mud and shake hands with the photographer.

Yet, the floaters did not float down the Río Grande like Olympians
showing off the backstroke, nor did their souls float up to Dallas,
land of rumored jobs and a president shot in the head as he waved
from his motorcade. No bubbles rose from their breath in the mud,
light as the iridescent circles of soap that would fascinate a two-year old.

And the dead still have names, names that sing in praise of the saints,
names that flower in blossoms of white, a cortege of names dressed
all in black, trailing the coffins to the cemetery. Carve their names
in headlines and gravestones they would never know in the kitchens
of this cacophonous world. Enter their names in the book of names.
Say *Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez*; say *Angie Valeria Martínez Ávalos.*
Bury them in a corner of the cemetery named for the sainted archbishop
of the poor, shot in the heart saying mass, bullets bought by the taxes
I paid when I worked as a bouncer and fractured my hand forty years
ago, and bumper stickers read: *El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam.*

When the last bubble of breath escapes the body, may the men
who speak of floaters, who have never seen floaters this clean,
float through the clouds to the heavens, where they paddle the air
as they wait for the saint who flips through the keys on his ring
like a drowsy janitor, till he fingers the key that turns the lock and shuts
the gate on their babble-tongued faces, and they plunge back to earth,
a shower of hailstones pelting the river, the Mexican side of the river.

Review of Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger by Julie Sze. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020, 144 pp. ISBN: 978-0-520-30074-3).

The accelerating manner in which the planet's natural resources are being plundered, depleted and compromised is nothing new. Throughout the years, the climate justice movement has repeatedly demonstrated the entwinement of environmental destruction and climate change with economic and sociopolitical structures of oppression. From Robert D. Bullard's groundbreaking *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (1990) to more contemporary writings such as Dorceta Taylor's *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (2014) and Harriet A. Washington's *A Terrible Thing to Waste: Environmental Racism and Its Assault on the American Mind* (2019), environmental justice scholars have explored this interconnection by focusing on the ramifications of environmental racism and systemic prejudice. Extractive capitalism, privatization, neocolonial politics and neoliberalism seem to be the four horsemen of environmental apocalypse, turning humans into disposable beings and treating nature as an expendable, never-ending source of income: "If we are to save life on Earth, neoliberalised global accumulation and the current policies of globally competitive capitalist development have to be abandoned" (Satgar 2018, 6). Furthermore, opting for a holistic approach to climate violence and environmental racism can lead to question human and more-than-human hierarchies. Problematizing this relationship, as well as centering the discussion on natural resources, is the result of incorporating the Indigenous notion that justice is a concept that all beings deserve, whether animate or not (McGregor 2018, 12). These and other issues are explored in Julie Sze's *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* (2020), where she invites her readers to reflect upon the impact of government policies in relation to land, water, pollution and the position in which sidelined and minoritized communities are being put in because of the greed of corporations and corrupt nations.

In the introduction, Sze manages to dissect the history of climate and environmental justice in the United States by focusing not only on the natural and economic aspects of the matter, but also on the human side of the fight for a better, equal and fair world. In relation to this, she asserts that a fundamental part of the climate justice movement relies on the conceptualization of climate and social struggles by centering the experiences and histories of environmental justice activists/advocates/scholars (Sze 2020, 8). Moreover, the author criticizes hegemonic power, corporal capitalism, neoliberal politics and environmental racism by discussing how low-income, marginalized and silenced communities are the ones who suffer the most at the hands of government-approved industrial pollution. As the introduction moves on, the importance of different environmental art forms in the climate justice movement is highlighted, as "cultural production, creativity and beauty," Sze states, "are necessary to get through the moments of danger we inhabit, the wars without end, the nihilism and violence, and the end of the planet as we know it" (19). The writer explores these "moments of danger" by doing an in-depth analysis of the intersectional

nature of oppression and climate violence in the three chapters that comprise the book. While the first one deals with the Standing Rock Sioux fight to shut down the Dakota Access Pipeline, the second tackles the contamination of water and other natural resources in Flint and Central Valley; finally, the third has to do with the reconstruction politics after Hurricanes Katrina and Maria, as well as the ongoing efforts to relocate Kivalina, a village in the Arctic. Throughout her analysis, Sze uses these case studies to examine the many faces of environmental, climate and social justice.

The first chapter examines the Standing Rock Sioux/Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) conflict from an anticolonial, anticapitalist, and environmental point of view, delving into the importance of Indigenous sovereignty and land rights. Concepts such as dispossession, violence and production/extraction are central to the chapter (34) as they are used to explain the impact of settler colonial practices in the United States regarding climate justice and Indigenous struggles. In particular, the notion of dispossession–especially Indigenous dispossession–is drawn from the #StandingRockSyllabus, a project carefully compiled by the many contributors of the NYU Stands with Standing Rock Collective. Sze lays out the Standing Rock Sioux opposition to the creation of the Dakota Access Pipeline, contextualizing it by explaining how racism and both climate and social justice are inherently intertwined; moreover, she brings into light how the authoritative presence of the police combined with the lack of action from the administration has further damaged the already fragile relationship between the United States government and Indigenous communities. The chapter also explores the #NoDAPL movement–and how it was supported both online and in multicultural, multinational protests–emphasizing the role of Indigenous resistance, as it is "fundamental to environmental justice, particularly in Indigenous conceptions of nature and of human and more-than-human life based on interconnection" (27-28). Indigenous activism rests on the belief that all human and non-human entities are interwoven, a perspective that shapes and informs their approach to environmental justice and climate action. In addition, the author underlines the role and efforts of women and youth in the #NoDAPL campaign. In the analysis that follows, Sze discusses the significance of environmental justice and art, highlighting how fundamental it was during the height of the conflict between protestors and the police, as art is an "indispensable feature of creative sustenance and renewal" (47), and, more often than not, encourages solidarity amongst different marginalized communities.

The second chapter focuses on the contamination of two very different areas in the United States: the city of Flint, in Michigan, and the Central Valley of California. Water rights and the fight for universal access to clean water are the nexus between these case studies, as Sze demonstrates by dissecting the government-approved policies that resulted in water pollution in both regions. What led to the mishandling of this resource is intrinsically linked with environmental racism, privatization, and neoliberal politics of predation and privation that favored the interests of a few (53). After the discovery that Flint's water had a dangerously high amount of lead in it, nationwide news outlets reported that the government was not only involved in a cover-up, but also systematically silencing the residents of the city. In the case of the Central Valley, agricultural waste, air pollution, toxic pesticide overexposure and, most importantly, water contamination is–even nowadays–the main reason unincorporated and farmworker communities are incapable of sustaining proper living conditions. In regard to this, Sze asserts that "deregulation/privatization, disposability, and invisibility work together for environmental racism to thrive" (54). The key to understanding this state of affairs is acknowledging the impact of environmental racism, as most of the communities affected by industry-induced hazards are located in low-income, 'racialized' neighborhoods. Although this chapter is informative, there could have been a more 'equal' exploration of the case studies: both the causes and the repercussions of Flint's water crisis are thoroughly analyzed, whilst the situation in the Central Valley is not reviewed in as much depth as its counterpart. The author ends this section

with another reflection on art and environmental activism, focusing this time on the importance of storytelling and performance in relation to making excluded voices and polluted bodies the center in their fight for climate and social justice.

The third and last chapter explores restorative environmental justice, which Sze describes as "an analytic based on environmental justice practices, principles, and worldviews" that is influenced by "restorative justice (criminal justice) and restoration ecology" (78). She illustrates this by examining the response of the environmental justice movement to Hurricanes Katrina (New Orleans) and Maria (Puerto Rico), as well as by raising consciousness about the case of Kivalina, an Indigenous village in Alaska that is at risk of sinking due to the decade-long effects of climate change, mainly involving the rapid melting of ice. After Hurricane Katrina, matters such as class, race and privilege were taken into consideration by environmentalists when dissecting the government's actions–or rather, the lack thereof–regarding disaster planning and evacuation. Similarly, the aftermath of Hurricane Maria pushed people to demand 'just' recovery policies (95); in the case of Kivalina, activists all around the world are still fighting for the relocation of the Arctic city. Moreover, Sze criticizes the role of capitalism, neoliberalism and neocolonial politics in maintaining the status quo, as they promote "systemic dispossession, production, extraction, and disposability" (81). Even though she mentions that those who suffer the most in the face of climate change are the ones with the least culpability (82), Sze fails to address the power dynamics between the global North and South, especially considering the impact of US foreign policies. The chapter also deals with radical hope and solidarity between communities, and to illustrate her point, Sze examines the role of culture and cultural projects–such as documentaries, movies, websites and music–that fight hyperconsumerism, gas and oil extraction, and environmental racism. She pays special attention to Boots Riley's 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You*, as it condemns individualism, market-oriented policies and capitalist values.

In the conclusion, the author stresses the intersectional nature of oppression and its role in climate and social justice. The core of the environmental justice movement relies on imagining a post-capitalist world as well as "challenging the authorities of whiteness, extraction, and violence" (100). Moving past colonial economic and political systems is crucial to understanding the ongoing fight against the systemic–and highly normalized–impact of corporate capitalism, which profits from promoting the despoliation of the Earth's natural resources, harming both people and the planet. Additionally, Sze underlines how essential it is to uplift the voices of the marginalized through the many expressions of environmental art, as it comprises a fundamental part of the movement by focusing on equality, integrity and the construction of a better future. The chapter ends with a reflection on the environmental justice movement as a way of bringing solidarity between communities and searching for radical hope, environmental optimism and empathy towards more-than-human elements.

Sze's *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* is a concise and practical introductory piece for anyone who wants to explore the world of the environmental and climate justice movement in the United States. The author manages to convey the many efforts of environmental justice activists and advocates at the frontlines of what she calls 'moments of danger,' and she does so by examining–and criticizing–the roots of the problem: extractive capitalism, environmental racism and neoliberal politics. The case studies analyzed throughout the book–Standing Rock, Flint, Central Valley, Hurricanes Katrina and Maria, and the relocation of Kivalina–are fundamental to understanding that, in order to dismantle systems of oppression, the history and lived experiences of those involved in the fight must be centered. Even though the first two chapters seem to be somewhat stronger than the third one, Sze achieves a proper contextualization of the social, political and economic situation of the cases in a thought-provoking manner. Moreover, the concept of restorative environmental justice is particularly interesting, as the author expresses the importance of radical hope, solidarity and freedom in the movement. All in all,

Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger urges its readers to face the reality of the politics of the United States in relation to climate and social justice, activism, art, and inclusivity.

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Valentina Corbalán-Labora
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Review of Possessed: *A Cultural History of Hoarding* by Rebecca R. Falkoff. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2021, 264 pp. ISBN 1501752804).

The idea that waste is a social construct was already suggested by Zygmunt Bauman in his 2004 *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* when he declared that the distinction between order and disorder is determined by human design, reason why items and waste can switch positions easily. In this essay, the sociologist discussed several ways in which, since modernity, and due in part to globalization and economic progress, several human groups have been declared redundant, becoming a category of 'human waste,' which includes surplus population–those who have no money to participate in the market–, demonized immigration–whether for economic or refuge-seeking purposes–, and minority populations. To these collectives seen as unfit, disposable, and obstructive, Rebecca Falkoff, in *Possessed: A Cultural History of Hoarding* (2021) adds the figure of the hoarder.

First included as a category in the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association (2013), hoarding is defined as a disorder characterized by an enduring difficulty to dispose of personal possessions, irrespective of what their real value may be. Given that hoarding necessarily entails the accumulation (and, therefore, existence) of objects external to the patient, for Falkoff the hoard is an aesthetic artifact "produced by a clash in perspectives about the meaning or value of objects" (6). The book opens with an introduction of what the author names *hoardiculture*, a term that imperils idealizing a pathological condition that all too often entails loneliness and sheer incomprehension for those who suffer it. Yet, by transforming a disorder into a *modus vivendi*, she heads towards the similarities between unhealthy patterns of accumulation versus culturally accepted forms of enthusiastic collection. What these resemblances outline is that, as happens with the distinction between things and objects, the dividing line between insanity and health also depends, conceivably, on socially determined and economic factors. Nevertheless, in respect of the ways economy fragments society, producing wasted communities, it might have been illustrative to present hoarders as evidence of the structural problem of classism that all too often goes unacknowledged in the US and elsewhere. Falkoff analyzes economic and psychological constituents that engender hoarders but does not delve so much into the category of class, which might prove a fruitful field of study, especially when linked with practices such as that of *necrocapitalism*.

Moving around sites where value is unsteady –and, therefore, where the line separating harmless collection from hoarding is blurred–the author outlines a panoramic overview that shows the evolution of this notion from a model of economic efficiency during the late eighteenth century up to a criterium determinant of mental illness in the early twenty-first century. Throughout four chapters, she shows how the dematerialization and deregulation of the market have resulted in the contemporary omnipresence of hoarding, describing a society where not only are personal possessions 'wastified,' but also their possessors. Those who refuse or simply cannot adhere to socially–and economically–acceptable trends in collection are deemed unhealthy and end up ostracized and ultimately disposed of. Thus, building on Walter Benjamin's philosophy of the historical leftover, Falkoff seemingly aims at a philosophy of the social leftover.

Operating on the premise that, in exercising control over objects, we are similarly possessed by them, the library is the site chosen in chapter one to analyze the concept of ownership and its relationship to fears of powerlessness. Bibliomania reveals how the obsession with compulsively stockpiling possessions reflects a haunting anxiety towards agency emerging from the subject-object dualism and the power one exerts over the other, which already became evident in modern society. Falkoff suggests that the flimsy distinction between a fervent collector and an obsessive hoarder depends on who controls which: whereas it is the subject who dominates the object in the former, the latter is conversely subdued by an overwhelming lack of agency when facing the material world

represented by the objects amassed, due to an incapacity to distinguish between use and order. Given its direct influence on some current forms of assembling, perhaps the emotional factor could have been further emphasized, as it helps explain the emergence of figures such as Marie Kondo, who recently became popular for her patented KonMari Method: a system to order one's home and, by extension, one's life, based on an interpretation of waste as that which no longer "speak[s] to the heart" or "spark[s] joy" (KonMari, n.d.). Falkoff affirms that the problem lies not in value itself, but on the categorization of different degrees of value where obsessives find it difficult to define boundaries, given that every possession is exclusive and irreplaceable. Since the value of objects, particularly those being compulsively accumulated, is often the result of personal perspective rather than of quantifiable features, Kondo's parameter becomes particularly thorny in the case of hoarders, reason why the emotional attachment to objects might deserve further attention.

As illustrated in chapter two, subjective theories of value and its effects on the market emerged, in part, thanks to the act of recovery of waste objects by ragpickers. The marginality of these items, removed from their original histories of production, made their price switch according to how desirable they became for potential customers looking for oddities. Consequently, the (flea) market demonstrates not only that the capacity of goods to generate desire equals their ability to create value, but also that value is a factor that changes over time. As Falkoff declares, scavenge articles at sale in flea markets are characterized by their uniqueness and their transience, which define modernity and challenge the myth of progress and the imperative of functionality which typifies it. Yet, scavengers' drive to gather trash answers to an aspiration to obtain benefit from it, as there can be no market without buyers. The difference between a street vendor and a hoarder thus depends on how well their products sell. It therefore follows that it is the act of selling which brings value to the goods being purchased. Building on Thompson's Rubbish Theory, for Falkoff the economic exchange is what provides a path towards value, which transforms items into either junk or commodities. Taken to the extreme, one could deduce that, the same way that at the beginning of the twentieth century in the field of psychoanalysis female hysteria was accounted for by sexual repression, the characteristics of third wave capitalism may be providing the seed for hoarding, as "the reality of value is produced somewhere in between [vendor and shopper]" (Falkoff 2021, 105). The flea market is the landscape selected by Falkoff to claim that, whereas economic theories of hoarding before the twenty-first century were based on the accumulation of necessity goods, this era has witnessed the pathologizing of forms of amassment that have no direct impact on the general economy.

If the power that personal objects exercise over their owners is what helps us distinguish collectors from hoarders, in chapter three Falkoff uses the figure of the detective to discuss the functional value that can be imbued to collected objects. The investigator and the hoarder are presented as the two end poles of a continuum where the hoarder refuses to disregard any slightest aspect of an object as irrelevant, whereas the detective can find a deeper layer of meaning in an apparently useless element. Falkoff thus uses the site of the crime scene to demonstrate how both the detective and the hoarder are notable for their acute eye for detail, being the main difference between them that the former can find utility and/or purpose in such detail.

Finally, Falkoff concludes in chapter four that, though hoarding is portrayed as narratives of personal failure, it involves a rejection towards accepting the obsolescence of objects, a refusal to dump goods or, rather: make waste. Hoarders thus stand as both a result of and at the same time a reaction against capitalist economies of planned obsolescence and pollutant traits, and their activity is often sustained by personal but also imaginably environmental arguments: the refusal to dump something which might be useful for someone else. The author uses two documentaries, *Waste Not* (Song 2005) and *The Collector* (Hampton 2009), to exemplify how waste can be avoided, not by making use of things, which is not always possible, but simply

by transferring them to the limbo of potentiality. That is achieved, for instance, turning waste into the contents of artistic exhibitions, which makes rubbish 'useful' up to some extent. However, as Falkoff remarks, even if hoarders are labeled owners of a rubbish ecology, their possessions are still garbage until they can be transformed by art, occupying a capricious liminality that does not completely eradicate their transience.

The same way that value depends on temporal fluctuations dictated by the market, in the conclusion of her book, Falkoff considers the effects of digital archives on abnormalizing views on hoarding which might find an answer in the spatial sphere. The author draws attention to the irony of considering the stockpiling of newspapers a mental disorder while acknowledging the value of information stored in digital archives, a point she uses to evidence how value is also space reliant. This idea traces back to Mary Douglas's definition of 'dirt' as "matter out of place"–this author being conspicuously absent in this work–but it also implies that if something presumably valuable occupies more space than the conventionally accepted, the place immediately becomes a landfill, even if it is constricted to the privacy of the home setting.

In conclusion, drawing on the line already delineated by Bauman, Falkoff presents a valuable and thought-provoking study that opens a new line of research where mental health–embodied in the figure of the hoarder–becomes an additional category that reinforces and challenges the scope of communities of waste. The creativity permeating her approach is remarkable and the thesis is coherent and well-articulated, thanks in part to the author's capacity to link seemingly disparate ideas. Hence, the different landscapes chosen in this work are rendered undesirably toxic for the economic and, in a lower degree, ecological epistemologies that have controlled the Eurocentric, western paradigm since modernity. These locations of surplus exemplify how product excess becomes constraining for the individual. Without romanticizing what otherwise is a disruptive and dangerously isolating condition, the act of hoarding also unveils the individuals' increasing powerlessness in a disease-mongering system where not simply object, but human value is subjective, transient, unstable and spatially confined, while epitomizing how those who deviate from the socio-economic patterns dictating compilation, exchange and function of possessions in a neoliberal society are pathologized, their agency becoming upsettingly compromised. Nonetheless, the analysis might have been further reinforced by a deeper connection to the field of dirt theory and studies on stigma. This is a promising area of inquiry which revolves predominantly on economic and psychological–and, to a lesser extent, cultural–parameters, though it could be productively driven towards anthropological aspects, too, linking hoarding and similar disorders to specific notions such as Agamben's *homo sacer* or Girard's 'scapegoat,' this being a connection which is never established, but succinctly evoked in the book.

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Elsa del Campo Ramírez
Universidad Nebrija
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Review of *The Death of Things: Ephemera and the American Novel* by Sarah Wasserman. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020, 272 pp. ISBN 978-1517909789).

Joining the growing milieu of Benjaminian rag-and-bone men and women, Sarah Wasserman explores in *The Death of Things. Ephemera and the American Novel* the role of ephemera or "disappearing objects" in American postwar fiction. An initial temptation to theoretically align Wasserman's work with new materialisms and object-oriented philosophies is curbed by the author's heralding the inevitable demise of thing theory on account of a tendency to "overcorrect," i.e., to give objects pride of place, risking a humanist lacuna in this objectual fervor. Instead, equipped with the tools of cultural studies, Wasserman rummages in the satchel of psychoanalysis to trace relations between fading objects and grieving subjects. Building on a lesser-known short essay by Sigmund Freud titled "On Transience," the author claims that ephemerality in fact reinforces the position and relevance of the subject, since "transience [...] is the thing that links human and nonhuman material, not the thing that separates subject and object" (53). Wasserman scrutinizes these fleeting objects to make salient a tendency to focus attention either on their death or on what befalls thereupon, leaving the process of passing unheeded. Itself an allegedly dying genre, the novel, contends Wasserman, is the perfect medium to preserve and portray ephemera and their particularities.

The Death of Things is divided into six chapters that address different forms of embodied transience: from a collection of stamps to a bale of cotton, from housekeeping magazines to urban infrastructure like signs or storefronts. The unusual comparative method employed by Wasserman–in some chapters she collates works by two authors, in others varied novels by the same author are contrasted, and in another a work of fiction is studied against a real-life event–compensates an otherwise monotonous driving argument. Indeed, the book's leitmotif, what Wasserman calls Freud's transient logic, is solidly made clear in the first chapter, becoming inevitably redundant as the book unfolds. The smooth transitions with which Wasserman connects the chapters off set an apparent loose connection between the works selected. Furthermore, the author displays an impressive awareness of the relevant theoretical frameworks that best match the novels studied. Thus, Wasserman dexterously moves from Fredric Jameson to discuss utopias, to David Harvey, Mark Davies, and Saskia Sassen when addressing gentrification, or the works of Julia Kristeva and Eve Kosofky Sedgwick to propose a queer approach to domestic fiction, only to name some of the most popular scholars referenced.

Within the field of object or thing theory, however, it may be argued that Wasserman's recorrecting previous scholars' overcorrection misconstrues the goal of object-oriented theories. In fact, the author acknowledges that the role of objects in the building of more ethical subjects is already present in the works of new materialists and object-oriented theorists when she admits they "do not neglect the subject" (15). Similarly, her claim that these theories leave "little room to the death of things" (8) is not completely accurate. Graham Harman (2018), for one, has elaborated on the emergence, transience, and disappearance (or "death") of objects. Finally, so far as Wasserman deals with the literary representation of material objects proper, save for a brief mention of Susan Strasser, the book misses the opportunity to engage with Waste Studies (especially in the section dedicated to Don DeLillo's *Underworld*), arguably the most appropriate field to analyze "an object's final chapter" (18) as Wasserman puts it, when pointing out that renowned object scholars, from Pierre Bourdieu to Arjun Appadurai, have left said chapter unexplored. Other than this noticeable absence, the book's introduction offers a succinct but rich overview of both object theory and its application to literary criticism.

Introducing early her expanded notion of ephemera, Wasserman devotes the first chapter to an unexpected object: the world's fairs present in E.L. Doctorow's *World's Fair* (1985) and Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000). Discussing previous scholarship on national identities, Wasserman

remarks how "the ephemerality of fairs and their object complicate their implied political allegories" (31). Indeed, fairs expose the paradoxical character of time by offering their downfall as an allegory of the past's futuristic fantasies being born already dead. Wasserman further derives from the image of the world's fair a conclusion pertaining to a literary field eager to find the next post-ism when she reminds us that "a fascination with the future often obscures the forms of history and nostalgia that inhere in the new" (65). Consequently, she argues that Doctorow's and Chabon's novels promote neither nostalgic longings nor false promises but rather offer an opportunity to better appreciate our already fading present.

Chapter two explores the historical in-betweens opened by counterfactual narratives in the works of Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), and Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (2004). The inclusion of real objects in these novels that imagine alternative aftermaths to WWII does more than infuse the text with historical veracity, as the collectibles in Dick's novel, i.e., counterfeit Americana, help to "expose the fragility of our institutions, our susceptibility to counterfeit and transient object worlds" (76); and some of the pieces in the book of stamps in Roth's book, for example, symbolize how "white supremacy was (and is) a pervasive ideology in the United States" (99). Whereas the previous chapter evidenced the different scales that ephemera can reach, here the author stresses their temporality, stating that "while the speed of disappearance may produce different affective responses, it does not change the fact that vanished things leave traces, transmit pain, and make meaning" (111). The chapter ends with the insightful suggestion that the novel's multiple genres might allow for the recording of alternate realities, which is explored in the following chapter.

Wasserman's claim that "infrastructural change is made visible through discrete objects" (114) is developed in novel readings about Harlem's gentrification in Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952) and Chester Himes's *Harlem Cycle* (1957-69). Interestingly, Wasserman claims that the polarization of opinions regarding gentrification impedes an understanding of infrastructure as standing in between rigid and abstract structures and subjective agency. The author introduces the notion of "infrastructural racism" to signal how "the built environment [is] disproportionately hostile to non-white subjects" (117) and by choosing to study "discrete objects" over "hard infrastructure" Wasserman manages to cast a light on the middle space between total renewal and total loss that better represent the contradictions of black life in the postwar period. Hence, for example, discarded blueprints and random objects strewn on the floor after an eviction "mediate between abstract, external forces [...] and the subject's interior life" (130), but also register the inherent racism that gentrification aims to conceal.

The fourth chapter begins with a revision of an essay by Thomas Pynchon in response to the Watt riots of 1966. Pynchon, claims Wasserman, uses the debris ensuing the revolt as another symbol of what America's imperialism cannot efface without leaving a trace. The author is here at her most innovative, vindicating a new reading of Pynchon with less emphasis on the chaotic and ironic character of his early novels *V.* (1963) and *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), suggesting an underlying ethical-political motif hidden in its treatment of history, which Wasserman understands as problematizing Jameson's contention that the past has disappeared in postmodern times. Against the grain of Pynchon scholarship, which sees the novelist as the quintessential detached postmodern author and a posthumanist *avant la lettre*, Wasserman highlights the fact that "no matter how object-oriented Pynchon's fictions are, they ultimately tell human-oriented stories [...] about the subjects we have been and can become amidst so many objects" (172).

Wasserman offers another original interpretation in chapter five, where she ventures an effective rereading of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980) beyond traditional ones that tend to reduce the novel "to an oppositional text whose only goal is to trouble conservative notions of women's roles and women's fiction" (179). Focusing on ephemera over the character's nonconformism, the author highlights how "women themselves seem to become tran-

sient" (33). Furthermore, Wasserman convincingly illuminates a connection between the ephemerality in Emily Dickinson's poetry and Robinson's novel. The author claims that via the inclusion of "I Hear a Fly Buzz" in *Housekeeping*, Robinson manages to "rework and regender the Romantic tradition" (197), offering a subject that, counterpointing the "industrious male autonomy lauded by Thoreau or Emerson" (196), acknowledges a shared transience with vanishing objects.

In the last chapter, the author offers a comparative reading of the final part of Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) against a similar event in real life, namely a Marian appearance that occurred in 2005 in Chicago, to show how "literature dramatizes the social energies consolidated by ephemera both in their sudden appearances and in their perpetual disappearance" (201). To delineate the way DeLillo's "language of loss [...] represents his attempt to express private grief while simultaneously joining in a shared call for political visibility and agency" (203), Wasserman turns to Walter Benjamin's notion of *Wunschbild* or "wish image," the present materialization of collective past utopias. The apparition of an image of the Virgin in a tunnel in Chicago, which DeLillo's literary version would have proleptically portrayed, claims Wasserman, is an example of "perceptual faith," a "prereflective belief in the perceived world as real and shared" (210) that permits communities to exist, however fleetingly.

Finally, a brief coda addresses the issue of the fate of printed literature, latent throughout the book, and the prospective exchanges between media and literary studies. While this addendum initially reads like an elegy for an object that is actually missing, Wasserman's goal is to draw attention to the fragile and ephemeral character of the digital media itself. Beyond that, the author offers the case of a *faux* vintage rendition of *The Great Gatsby* in the form of a videogame as an example of how objects, digital or material, "elicit the same sorts of competing desires" (242). These changes of media, claims Wasserman convincingly, do not diminish or transform those desires, but adapt them to new contexts.

A plea to grant postmodern fiction a second life, Sarah Wasserman's ambitious study successfully manages to posit the novel as the repository of fading objects that symbolize that human urge to blindly hold on to fantasies past and future, while inviting readers to accept and embrace the transience inherent to these reveries so, when the times comes, it will not hurt to let them go.

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Martín Praga
Universidade da Coruña
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Review of *El patrimonio documental en las relaciones entre Gran Bretaña e Irlanda y la Península Ibérica a lo largo de los siglos*. Edited by Mónica Amenedo-Costa. (Peter Lang, 2022, 268 pp. ISBN 978-1-80079-611-9).

This volume is a welcome addition to academic study of the relationships between European nations. It promotes awareness of Europe's cultural diversity and identity by offering in-depth reflections on transnational interactions that are a window into socio-political and cultural phenomena that have shaped its history. Relying predominantly on a variety of historical source materials, such as state papers, legal documents, census records, parish registers and periodical publications, it is devoted to furthering the study of the relations between Great Britain and Ireland and the Iberian Peninsula from the late Medieval period to the twentieth century. This is significant as it demonstrates how the past is used to make sense of the present and define the future, especially the challenges in international affairs, which underlines the need to intensify the cooperation between countries. In the introductory chapter, "Patrimonio documental, testimonio de la interacción transnacional," Amenedo-Costa and Mendo-Carmona point out that the study of these documentary texts prove a vital source of information for the interpretation and re(construction) of the past and for the understanding of the present: "brinda una oportunidad para afrontar los retos futuros en el ámbito de las relaciones internacionales y, de manera específica, de las relaciones entre Gran Bretaña e Irlanda y la Península Ibérica" (2022, 8).

Thematically arranged, the book is divided into two parts, entitled "Interacción política" and "Interacción cultural," in order to reconsider the links between societies and the enriching experience of otherness in culture. Both parts bring together pertinent essays from leading scholars in the field. They cover important topics that are placed in their political and cultural context from the Medieval to the Contemporary period. Through this chronological approach, the contributors provide valuable insights on these nations influencing each other over the course of several centuries. In the first part it is emphasized that the political and economic domains are inextricably intertwined. It starts with the chapter by Flávio Miranda, "*Dissensions & Alligantia*. Diplomacia económica y comercio entre Inglaterra y los reinos ibéricos en los siglos XIV y XV," which adds a new and different dimension to the analysis of Anglo-Iberian commercial relations during the Middle Ages. Applying an economic diplomacy methodology to the examination of three treaties (two Anglo-Castilian of 1351 and 1466 and one Anglo-Portuguese of 1353), this study shows that non-state agents were the first to use politics for economic purposes. Fernández Nadal reflects on the Anglo-Spanish relations during the Regency of Mariana de Austria and the reign of Charles II in the second chapter. The perspective of Spanish diplomats on these relations can be appreciated thanks to the written testimony in the Council of State and to personal correspondence. These private and official records revealed that there was a dichotomy of opinion between diplomats and the council members regarding trade issues. In *Trade and Peace with Old Spain 1667-1750* (1940), Jean O. McLachlan establishes that the complex interrelationship between politics and economics was a central element of the relations between Great Britain and Spain. In the next chapter by Amenedo-Costa, it is also recognized that trade is influenced by international politics and transnational interactions. Her examination of eighteenth-century state papers has shed light on the diplomacy of wartime years and on its role in promoting strategies for protecting British maritime commerce from the threat of Spanish naval action. In addition, the role of periodical publications in disseminating information about Spanish military activities also contributed to the development of policy responses to address the economic impact of war on the country's stability and prosperity. The first part concludes with a chapter on the Spanish government financial support for the Comité Hispano-Inglés during the period of the Military Directorate. Its authors, Mendo-Carmona and Torreblanca-López, state that the public funding directed to this Anglo-Spanish society, which aimed to

disseminate and promote British culture and thought in Spain, is a clear indication that Spain considered that the bilateral relations with the United Kingdom at that time were of special importance.

The second part of the book explores the dynamics of intercultural encounters and interactions between Spain and Great Britain and Ireland, and explains their nature and influences. It begins with Sáez-Hidalgo's chapter "Extravagancias culturales anglo-hispanas," which addresses the afterlives of English material objects in Spanish libraries, archives and churches which signal culture change. The author establishes that the tangible items from the early modern period, such as documents, books and portraits, underwent a process of acculturation when moving to Spain in a complex framework of cross-cultural perceptions. This material heritage is now a testimony of the Anglo-Spanish cultural relations and a symbol of distinct cultural heritage and identity.

Culture change and contact between two distinct cultural groups is also considered in Lario de Oñate's contribution. In this chapter, readers are taken to the city of Cadiz, which developed as a flourishing centre of trade and commerce in the eighteenth century, with diverse immigrant communities. Among them were the Irish, who had the custom of expanding their commercial relationships through their daughters' marriages (Fannin 2003, 350). In order to provide a more detailed look at these families and the implications of marriage to develop and expand their business, the study contributes to the cultural process of increasing recognition of women's role in trade agreements and Irish economic development in that Southern port city. In the next chapter, "Más allá del tópico: política y literatura en los hispanistas e hispanófilos del Romanticismo británico," Laspra Rodríguez examines the relationship between British literature and Spanish culture. Spain, with its rich cultural legacy, was used as poetic material in the writings of major British poets of the Romantic era such as Lord Byron, the Shelleys, William Wordsworth, Robert Southey and S.T Coleridge. This, therefore, illustrates that Britain's most renowned literary figures were deeply interested in Spain and its history, and implies that cultures influence and enrich each other. The presence of Spanish history and culture in Britain is again visible in "Edgar Allison Peers: un hispanista británico y la guerra civil Española," the title of the next contribution written by Nadal Farreras. This chapter is focused on the British Hispanist, founder of the *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, who contributed to the emergence of Hispanism and to the consolidation of Spanish Studies in British Universities (Frost 2019). Professor Peers' fascination with Spain is displayed throughout his writing, particularly in his depictions and perception of the Spanish Civil War which are compared to those of Ferrán Soldevila and George Orwell, especially with regard to Catalonia's political situation. The volume closes with Lorenzo Modia's analysis of the Galician press reception of images of Ireland during the 20th century. Irish culture had a great impact on Galicia, especially on a group of intellectuals (*Irmandades da Fala* and *Xeración Nós*) who followed the path of Irish writers and politicians. There are two types of newspapers in Galicia. Some, such as *La Voz de Galicia* or *El Faro de Vigo*, had a general perception of Ireland and its nationalist situation. Others, such as *A Nosa Terra* and *Nós*, were in favour of Irish nationalism and supported its attempt to separate from the British crown.

By examining a range of archival and documentary source materials, *El patrimonio documental en las relaciones entre Gran Bretaña e Irlanda y la Península Ibérica a lo largo de los siglos* expands our understanding of cross-border ties and interconnections as well as of reciprocal influences that are directly related to the contemporary relationships between cultures. Both in the political and cultural spheres, the structure of this book reflects the exchange of ideas and knowledge throughout the centuries that raises awareness of the cultural wealth of Europe. It not only contributes to generate insight of our contemporary world, but also to promote mutual understanding, embracing a diversity of views and experiences needed for influencing policy-making and shaping the future.

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Lucía Gago Gude
Universidade da Coruña
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