ON THE USES OF WASTE*

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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.

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

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.

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[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-

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[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

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[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

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[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

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[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

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[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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