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The Affect of Waste and the Project of Value: The Rejected, The Dross, The Chucked, and/or The Useless

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Introduction

The Affect of Waste and the Project of Value: The Rejected, The Dross, The Chucked, and/or The Useless

David Lee Carlson, Nicole Bowers, & Kenneth J. Varner

The late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2004) asserts in his quite prophetic work, “Waste is the dark, shameful secret of all production. Preferably, it would remain a secret. Captains of industry would rather not mention it at all—they need to be pressed hard to admit it. And yet the strategy of excess, unavoidable in a life lived-towards-a design, the strategy that prods, invigorates and whips up productive efforts and so also the output of waste, makes the cover-up a tall order” (p. 27). The paradox that Bauman highlights here is rather astute remains clear: progress and capital seem to produce waste to the extent that it (waste) becomes a necessity of capital, yet simultaneously demand overproduction, and excess remains the rule rather than the exception, while the colossal efforts to cover-up of the waste persists with significant human and environmental costs. Production instigates waste, yet the cost for that waste seems to be rising. Furthermore, Bauman argues in his book, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (2004) that due to globalization, neoliberal economic policies and climate change, dispossession is occurring throughout the world with the West bearing its share of the responsibility. Bauman’s not alone as others (see, and Butler...) alerts scholars to the sociological effects of socio-political impact of exploitation of bodies (Butler, 2013; Tsing, 2017). Despite the insane drive to produce and consume at great human and environmental costs, we continue to see waste everywhere.

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Waste is the absolute by-product of production of every sort. As writers, for example, we chuck words, throw them aside and replace them with more efficient or effective ones. Many of us “waste time” when we’re not producing, and yet generate waste as we produce. We dump emails into trash, take old, useless objects to the local thrift store, we dispose of food, unfriend people on Facebook, block people on Instagram, ad infinitum. The grinding machine of parsing out value and rejecting things and people seems to be a vital part of life of in the contemporary life moment. From displaced populations to over consumption to getting rid of things, engaging with waste seems to be an important aspect of contemporary life. What happens to all that waste? What does waste tell us about value in the contemporary moment? What might waste teach us about ourselves? Thus, instead of covering it up, what happens if we do a dumpster dive into it? These are some of the questions we posed to the larger academic community for this special issue.

The response to this special issue was light but strong. We begin with 12 proposals and nine made it into the final special issue. One article was slotted for another forthcoming special issue. One article was rejected and another was rejected after the author revision stage. Each of the proposals and articles went through editorial review and were reviewed by at least one and in most cases two review board blind peer-review. We are very pleased with the articles in this special issue. Some surprises are important to note. We did not receive any proposals that examined value on its own. All of the articles discussed at great length and rightfully so the issue of waste and dross with many articles paying very little attention to value. While it would have been nice to read articles on value as it relates to or is informed by waste, or things that are wasteful, we believe that issues related to value can be the topic of another special issue. We do think the issue of value is a rather complex one, and one that involves political theory, economics, history, and philosophy. Such interdisciplinary scholarship is quite rare in the current landscape of academia. Second, there were several articles about academic waste. As it relates to writing, time, and other issues related to being an academic. This approach by the various authors makes sense. Many of us writing for special issues are academics, and many of us have heard colleagues or have lamented ourselves about the various ways in which our positions can seem wasteful or produce waste. Third, we think it is important to note that we received no papers about such politically charged topics such as migration, immigration, neo-liberalism, and Trumpian wall politics. We think this omission is an important one. It appears that scholars in the academy are less willing to publish in this area for various reasons. But, to be honest, the editors of this issue wanted to read more papers about these vital political topics. Finally, we also received a couple of papers that employed contemporary theories to think about waste. The editors think that new theories can help us rethink waste and value. These papers in this issue help us to do that. Finally, we want to thank all of the anonymous reviewers for their detailed comments on each of the papers. We are so grateful for the attention they paid to this important issue. We know that

for some of you, the manuscripts evoked deep and personal emotional responses. We believe that excellent scholarship moves the reader—and many in this special issue did just that. We hope that the readers will be moved by it as well.

We begin this special issue with a matter that remains vital to everyone. That is the issue of time. Time, in fact, structures waste and establishes value. Roger Saul and Casey Burkholder give us a brilliant reflective and conceptual essay about time and they wonder about what it means to waste it. They challenge dominant relations of time and put forth the possibility of temporal waste as a practice of freedom, however noting that rigid structures of time and thus wasting time means resistance, privilege and responsibility. This highly philosophical piece is complex, but worth the read.

Timothy C. Wells, Lauren Mark, and Jorge Sandoval focus their paper on the ways in which waste, defined as static and disregarded matter, operate as space in academia. They rely on non-representational theory to illustrate the affective movements and processes in order to describe wasteful moments in everyday academic life. This highly conceptualized and beautifully written essay illustrates so well how non-representational theory can be used in reengage with wasted materials. Of note, the narratives are brilliant exemplars of how to apply Nigel Thrift's non-representational theory.

Benjamin Arnberg, Hannah Carson Baggett, and Carey E. Andrzejewski define waste, similarly to Wells, Mark, and Sandoval, as static and compose a rather compelling piece problematizing the value of data in the data analysis process. They wonder about the axiological choices of the researcher as she approaches the data analysis process—and whether what's valued is wasteful and to what extent the wasted data is indeed valuable. Dead data needs to be, they argued, placed in the hands of new “curators” and not necessarily forced to fit a predetermine or already-determined modality of data analysis. Their work forces scholars to consider how and to what extent data analysis shapes or molds participants, and more importantly, how a social justice orientation in data analysis of wasted data offers scholars a more nuanced approach to qualitative inquiry.

Mel Kutner and Elliot Keucker do an intense analysis of the terms affect and affective to understand issues of waste and value. They rely on theory from affect theory, Nigel Thrift, and Gilles Deleuze to think through their childhoods as waste. The theoretical applications produce rather startling and nuanced narratives. They weave so beautifully the affect and affective with the personal histories. This paper is a must read for scholars interested in gender studies in education.

Susan Nordstrom and Margaret Somerville provide our readers with a much desired detour. They offer a post-humanist reading of waste through multi-modal perspective. They use email exchanges between human and non-human entities to tell stories of waste and its disgusting and artful excesses. They transform our understanding of waste as a static entity, but one that is historical, flowing, and in motion. Their thought-experiment keeps the reader's focus on movement and how things dissipate as well as transform. It is the chaos of the world, they argue, where

waste and art meet. Those readers interested in post-humanism will find this article to be quite useful. As a special note, this essay offers readers a really great way to think about how to articulate post-humanist scholarship beyond the typical rational, argumentative, and propositional modalities. A super generative paper.

Susan Ophelia Cannon and Stephanie Behm Cross focus on the notion of excess to discuss the perils and responsibilities of writing collaboratively in academic spaces. They wondered why collaboration often slowed down the writing process rather than offered scholars an opportunity to be more productive. Being productive in the academy remains a super important aspect for promotion and tenure. They illustrate how theory, or in this case, one quote from a theoretical text can mangle an entire paper. They return to two bits of data that refused to go away to show the messiness of writing and research production. This post-qualitative paper captures how writing up data across time can problematize the collaborative writing process.

Mirka Koro, Adam T. Clark, and Mariia Vitrukh tie together vital threads of waste and matter in academic spaces. They argue that waste is generative and is specific to certain localities and geographies. They focus exclusively on waste as matter as generative. They show in their paper how academic waste is ordered and reordered to reveal how waste is moved about in academia. Their goal, like Cannon and Cross, is to think about new ways to produce scholarship. Similar to other scholars in this special issue, they rely on post-humanism to help readers reconsider capital-value in academic production.

Ryan Evelyn Gildersleeves relies on Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) to examine the wastefulness of data in higher education. He looks at different types of data production, including “wild data,” used in various locations in universities to examine the affective intensities of the excesses of data. Focusing on the Campus Climate Survey, Gildersleeve’s essay shows how “knowledge comes from the wasteland.” A thought provoking essay that reminds scholars that cutting is both an intentional and productive aspect of research endeavors.

Mark Helming and Catheryn Van Kessel wonder about what curriculum studies might learn from death and dead bodies. They offer very detailed descriptions of corpses to think differently about the affects of waste and to confront humanist notions of learning. They examine what corpses do in order to examine the various assemblages of living and non-living entities. This fascinating look at death and corpses compels the reader to reconsider the concept of life in motion and the “vibrant matter” of death.

The special issue concludes with an insightful book review of *The Complete Home: An Encyclopedia of Domestic Life and Affairs* (1879) by Lucy E. Bailey. This brilliant book review shows how manuals helped to produce white, middle-class women’s ideals of domesticity and to serve larger nationalist project in the United States. The book review discusses how and why women functioned as waste managers as a way to justify women’s competencies and their abilities as ordering agents in the national interest. It is important to note that this book review was peer-reviewed.