

<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13839>

## Waste

2017-10-23 16:06:33

By Jennifer Wenzel

*Waste* is a tricky word. In our meditations in *Somatosphere*, *waste* hews toward its concrete sense as discard: material byproducts of some transformative process, metabolic or mechanical; things past the end of their wanted, wanted life. Quite literally, waste isn't what it used to be. It hangs around when and (as Mary Douglas says of dirt) where it isn't wanted. If we (and it) are lucky, some *bricoleur* arrives to breathe new life into it.

But waste isn't what it used to be in quite another sense; within this linguistic tangle lurk confusions and implied narratives underwriting a more fundamental problem with waste. In the beginning, John Locke declares in "Of Property," all the world was waste: empty, as-yet unproductive land given by the Creator to men in common. Their duty was to be makers, of a particular sort: to enclose some parcel of it by right of their labor, to keep it from merely lying waste. The only limit to this process that Locke could imagine involved yet another kind of waste: nobody should enclose more land than they could use the produce from before it spoiled. Money – "a little piece of yellow metal, which would keep without wasting or decay" (Locke, 1986: V.37) – cheated the time of nature by enabling accumulation without spoilage, the industrious improvement of waste land without the sin of wasted produce. Money is the magic bean that resolves the contradiction between "*letting waste* and *making waste*" (Ince, 2001: 43).

We know how this story ends. The enclosure of the commons and the exclusion of communities from sites of livelihood. The Industrial Revolution and European colonialism as a global delivery device for private property regimes. Waste lands "improved" into wasted lands and wasted lives: places and people *laid waste*. And burgeoning piles of waste in that concrete sense with which I began, which turns out be *secondary* in the process of enclosing waste in the primary (but largely forgotten) sense of the word.

An indispensable account of the aesthetics and politics of waste in these myriad senses appears in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), Ayi Kwei Armah's classic novel of postcolonial disillusionment in Ghana. Throughout the novel recur references to a peculiar bird, whose habitat and behaviors offer suggestive resonances with the predicaments of

postcoloniality (figured in the novel as immersion in excreta): “Ah, you know, the chichidodo is a bird. The chichidodo hates excrement with all its soul. But the chichidodo only feeds on maggots, and you know that maggots grow best inside the lavatory. This is the chichidodo” (1968: 45). The novel theorizes the *chichidodo* as a particular kind of disavowal – to hate the thing that sustains what sustains you – figured in the metabolic terms of intersecting cycles of ingestion and excretion. *Chichidodo* is hurled as an epithet against the fastidious hypocrisy of the novel’s protagonist, the only man in mid-1960s Accra unwilling to play the national game: *corruption*. Armah mines the resonances between organic and political corruption; he cultivates a latrine baroque of overflowing trashcans, rotting bannisters, mucky drains, smelly banknotes, and shit-stained public lavatories. Readers might find in these disgusting details (I implore my students) faintly hopeful images of solidarity and conviviality: residue as a form of inscription and communication, and thus of community, or at least desire for it.

\*\*\*

A few years ago, some of my fellow residents in Ypsilanti, Michigan had a brilliant idea, borne of a similar desire for community forged amidst waste and wasting. They decided to stop waiting for the city government to find a buyer to redevelop Water Street – a 38-acre parcel of riverfront property on a former industrial site that threatened Ypsilanti’s fiscal future (risking takeover by a state-appointed Emergency Manager) – and to make something of it themselves.

After obtaining permission from the city, Ypsi community blogger Mark Maynard organized a May Day 2013 “seed-bombing” on one acre of this vacant lot, hoping to make the troubled brownfield bloom back into native prairie (Maynard, 2013). He chose wildflowers that would help neutralize whatever heavy metals and toxic chemicals lurked in the ground, although previous soil assessments, conducted for a failed redevelopment plan, indicated that this area was safe.

Thus was born the Water Street Commons. Behind the budding prairie grew up an outdoor library and sculpture park. Some pieces of the old wooden dock that my partner’s grandparents had built for their cinderblock lake cottage were incorporated into the roofed hut that anchored social gatherings at the Commons. My friend Jason Wright tended bar with an electric drill in one hand. He rode his bike to the Commons towing his daughter’s old bike trailer, converted into a mobile sound system. For several years he had traveled out to the Nevada desert for Burning Man, where he’d make gigantic 3-D versions of collages he assembled from cut-up fragments of his old paintings. (When his daughter was born, he found it easier to recycle pieces from his *oeuvre* than to steal

time waiting for paint to dry.) In Ypsi, he was helping to create something you might call Building Man: a site of community-building in a town whose affordable rents (compared with neighboring Ann Arbor) attracted artists and other maker types.



Image courtesy of art-hut.org and the people of Ypsilanti

A dip in the terrain meant that all this making wasn't visible while driving by on Michigan Avenue. For a while, the Commons was marked by a handsome roadside sign, intended to welcome potential buyers who could save the city from its albatross of crushing debt from having bought the Water Street parcel for redevelopment a decade and a half earlier. A strange commons, one of whose guiding dreams was to be bought up and built over. Come repave our paradise, these commoners hoped.

Waste isn't what it used to be. Waste is Alpha and Omega: the beckoning origin of development and its troublesome end product. For example, hazardous industrial waste, rotting wood, outgrown bike trailers, paintings taking up space in the basement. Thus the genius of *creating* the Water

Street Commons from a brownfield – wasted, polluted land. Waste is Omega and Alpha. Come repave our upcycled paradise.

\*\*\*

Another recent image from southeastern Michigan offers a suggestive emblem of these cycles of waste. In early 2014, I was riveted to local TV news coverage of a row of abandoned houses on Detroit's northeast side that were crammed full of old tires. From basement to attic and floor to ceiling, in house after house and the driveways between, tires were dumped in the dead of night. Someone – or lots of people, given the estimated 10,000 tires at this site, and perhaps a million across Detroit – was pocketing the per-tire disposal fee and turning Detroit's abandoned houses into DIY landfill. Beyond concerns about rodents and mosquitoes, neighbors worried about the risk of fire.



Source: WXYZ/NY Dailey News

Meditating upon Detroit and detritus, particularly from a distance, is risky business of another sort. Perhaps my fascination with these houses full of tires smacks of ruins porn, but what interests me are the several dynamics of waste at work. Rather than the spectrality of buildings utterly abandoned, given over to disrepair, decay, and reclamation by nature (or metal scavengers), with interior floors covered in snow or trees sprouting through the roof, there is in these images an *earnestness* and solidity, as well as a trace of recent human presence. “Dumping” doesn’t capture the careful effort of lugging tires up stairs and stacking them to maximize space. For anthropologist Gastón Gordillo, rubble offers a “lens through which to examine space negatively: by way of the places that were negated to create the geographies of the present” (2014: 11). Gordillo’s insight can shed light on the geographies of abandonment and negation

that shape places like Detroit. In photos of the tire-filled houses, black circles fill up square white rooms: in terms of visual composition, the negativity of waste becomes a strange kind of negative space, strange because the negative space occupies the center of the image, full of obdurate matter rather than empty void. This positive negativity, produced by considerable human effort, offers a different kind of prompt than the haunting emptiness of ruins porn to imagine these rooms as they were when they were full of life.

The abandoned houses and worn-out tires are two forms of detritus, oscillating between figure and ground in this composite image of waste. They represent multiple processes of wasting brought together (hacked?) by enterprising types we might call *bricoleurs*, gleaners, or lemonade-makers. Waste is Alpha and Omega, Omega and Alpha. Is a house still abandoned when used in this way, *occupied* by the type of consumer waste entailed in the Motor City having driven the American economy in Detroit's golden age? Henry Ford's American dream was not just everyone owning a home, but a car in every driveway. Factories shuttered and dreams tattered, the 2008 mortgage crisis blown through Detroit like a tornado on the Midwestern plain, what's left are these nightmare shards.

Metaphors mislead. Tornadoes wreck blindly and unpredictably, turning houses inside out and scattering debris. These houses are intact, full of tires carefully stacked, many of their former owners targeted by unscrupulous lenders. Their fullness inverts the emptying-out of value, wealth, and residents Detroit has suffered more intensely than anywhere in the U.S. – it's an upside-down image of the financial predicament of being "upside-down," owing more on your mortgage than your home is worth; or, in the current moment of oil-glut, a barrel of oil that costs less than the barrel. Rather than breathing new life into dead things, those who pack tires into houses in the dark of night are vampires, their breath reeking of blight.

Consider the sardonic parable offered by John Maynard Keynes about public works and economic stimulus in hard times:

If the Treasury were to fill old bottles with banknotes, bury them at suitable depths in disused coalmines which are then filled up to the surface with town rubbish, and leave it to private enterprise on well-tried principles of *laissez-faire* to dig the notes up again ... there need be no more unemployment and ... the real income of the community . . . would probably become a good deal greater than it actually is. It would, indeed, be more sensible to build houses and the like; but if there are political and practical difficulties in the way of this, the above would be better than nothing (Keynes, 1936).

Keynes imagines converting myriad forms of waste into economic value. How perversely adaptable his 1936 provocation is for Detroit in the Great Recession—except the part about building houses. Fill abandoned houses full of old tires; pay men to roll them out again. There need be no more unemployment. Better than nothing.

Political and practical difficulties (including the fact that old tires are less valuable than banknotes) meant that an army of volunteers, not a newly-employed workforce, stacked 4,000 tires at the street when news coverage jolted the bankrupt city into hiring trucks to haul them away for proper disposal. What had been stimulated was the capacity of the community – perceived by others as a dumping-ground – to clean up the mess others had made of it. Before the cameras arrived, neighbors could only dispose of four dumped tires (i.e., one car’s worth, a “normal” increment of household waste) in the weekly trash pickup. A drop in the bucket, and the river of tires hasn’t stopped flowing in.

\*\*\*

The chichidodo is not only a bird. It’s also a state of mind.

In Michigan, it’s the cop-out reflex of castigating (generally black and Democratic) cities like Detroit, Flint, and Ypsilanti for chronic “mismanagement” while ignoring their predicament of a shrinking tax base caused by white flight, a global labor market and automation processes that decimated auto industry jobs, and a property tax system stacked against the de-industrializing cities that built the state’s economy. More broadly, it’s a structure of feeling at work in a market logic and regulatory regime that incentivize consumption without adequately disincentivizing pollution. But the call of the chichidodo might also be an invitation to reckon with the smelly externalities and excreta involved in sustaining bodies and communities, the troublesome byproducts of the lives we inhabit and aspire to. What if we rewired the chichidodo’s complex of hatred and love, to find the alpha in the inevitable omega of waste, without dumping on those around us?

\*\*\*

And the Water Street Commons? Its dream was dashed in April 2016, when the city announced that contamination of the site was more pervasive than previously known, sent Maynard an eviction notice, and erected a fence around the native prairie coming into the first bloom of spring. After the recent debacle of contemptuous denial and depraved indifference that exposed thousands of people to lead-tainted water in Flint, the city of Ypsilanti was playing it safe. Its fiscal future seems more

dire than ever, but one upside of Flint's moment in the international spotlight is that Ypsilanti may be a little less likely to be placed under state emergency management, a practice so toxic to democracy.

[Jennifer Wenzel](#) is a scholar of postcolonial studies and environmental and energy humanities at Columbia University, where she is an Associate Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature and the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies. She taught at the University of Michigan from 2003-14. She is the author of *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond* (Chicago and KwaZulu-Natal, 2009) and co-editor (with Imre Szeman and Patricia Yaeger) of *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment* (Fordham, 2017). She has recently completed a book manuscript entitled *Reading for the Planet: World Literature and Environmental Crisis* and has begun a new project on "The Fossil-Fueled Imagination: How to Read for Energy."

## Works Cited

Armah, Ayi Kwei. 1968. *The Beautiful Ones Are not yet Born*. African Writers Series. Oxford: Heinemann, 1988.

Gordillo, R. Gastón. 2014. *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction*. Duke University Press.

Ince, Onur Ulas. 2001. "Enclosing in God's Name, Accumulating for Mankind: Money, Morality, and Accumulation in John Locke's Theory of Property." *The Review of Politics* 73: pp. 29-54.  
doi:10.1017/S0034670510000859

Keynes, John Maynard. 1936. [The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money](#).

Locke, John. 1986. *The Second Treatise on Civil Government*. Prometheus Books.

Maynard, Mark. 2013. "[The Seed Bombing of Water Street Will Happen on May 1.](#)"

Opening image courtesy of [art-hut.org](http://art-hut.org) and the people of Ypsilanti

**AMA citation**

Wenzel J. Waste. *Somatosphere*. 2017. Available at:  
<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13839>. Accessed October 23, 2017.

**APA citation**

Wenzel, Jennifer. (2017). *Waste*. Retrieved October 23, 2017, from  
Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=13839>

**Chicago citation**

Wenzel, Jennifer. 2017. *Waste*. Somatosphere.  
<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13839> (accessed October 23, 2017).

**Harvard citation**

Wenzel, J 2017, *Waste*, Somatosphere. Retrieved October 23, 2017, from  
<<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13839>>

**MLA citation**

Wenzel, Jennifer. "Waste." 23 Oct. 2017. Somatosphere. Accessed 23  
Oct. 2017.<<http://somatosphere.net/?p=13839>>