

4

There's No Such Thing as We

A Theory of Difference

Nain is the most northern settled Inuit community in Nunatsiavut and was one of the first municipalities in Canada to ban plastic bags in 2009. As I (Liboiron) walked along the shoreline in Nain in 2018, nearly a decade after the ban went into effect, I counted well over 100 washed-up plastic bags, roughly 8 percent of all shoreline plastics. The provincial average is 2 percent. Even more confounding, a community called Fogo Island further to the south that also has a bag ban had less than 1 percent plastic bag waste (Liboiron et al. 2020). There's something different about Nain.

In this chapter we talk about difference and the way it matters to discard studies. Differences between things might seem obvious, but there are various theories of difference, including what difference is, how it works, and what makes processes of differentiation good or bad, beneficial or harmful (and to whom). Classifying, defining, sorting, ranking things by value, and other forms of differentiation—creating and acting on difference—are central to discarding. These activities

are not good or bad in themselves, nor are they merely technical. Defining things by one set of characteristics means other characteristics are not accounted for and become unimportant; ranking some things as valuable often devalues others. This means differentiation is almost always related to power structures.

Nain, for instance, is a unique place when it comes to trash. There are two grocery stores that carry one option for most food items. There is no “fill” readily available to cover the surface of the local dump. Instead, the smelly portions of household and commercial waste are burned to keep polar bears and other animals away. Both burned and unburned waste can blow into the Labrador Sea, where locals fish. Like many other Northern communities, the waste infrastructures that most urban southerners (as those who live near the forty-ninth parallel are often referred) take for granted are absent, are restricted, do not work, are underfunded, or are prohibitively expensive. The well-greased small-step approaches of popular environmentalism—buy green, recycle—don’t work well in Nain. Even the bag ban, which scales up efforts from the individual to the entire community, didn’t work in a way that eliminated the problem. Yet I’ve seen countless reports about plastics in the North authored by nonresident researchers that latently (or explicitly) blame locals for waste practices imported and installed from the south, or that frame the waste practices as problems that only technical fixes from the south can solve (e.g., Eriksen et al. 2020;

Liubarskaia, Tsurkan, and Artemiev 2019; Eisted and Christensen 2011). These reports recognize important differences (there are unique waste problems in the far North) and maintain a dynamic where the south always knows best, even across those differences (the North isn't really all that different after all and is just sort of failing all the time). This dissonance is a way to simultaneously recognize and dismiss difference.

This knife edge is central to our discussion of difference in this chapter: “the rhetoric of difference is a double-edged sword: a claim to difference can lead to (a degree of) empowerment at the same time that it creates and sustains images of the radical other, who is always subordinate” (Dennis 1997, 83). In this chapter we develop a theory of difference that is not just about paying attention to differences as they exist but also about how differences are built, maintained, and contribute to uneven power relations. Is difference good? Is it bad? Does it exist before we make the categories that articulate differences? What does difference *do*?

First, we argue that without paying attention to differences (as in, specificity), identifying waste and discard problems properly and aligning solutions for them won't succeed. Telling people not to buy food in plastic packaging in Nain won't work if there's only one source of store-bought food. Second, drawing on chapter 3, we argue that difference (as in, categorization and hierarchy) is a main tool of power and oppression that maintains insides and outsides, fixing what is in and what is

out. Used in this way, the tool of difference can make it seem as if the properties of the entity being evaluated originate from that entity, rather than from the system doing the evaluation. For instance, the idea that the North is “inherently” bad at the southern-style waste management of southern-style waste is not a property of the North but instead of southern evaluators and norms.

We look at these issues of power through two techniques of differentiation: universalism and stereotypes. Universalism purports a radical form of inclusiveness wherein humanity shares characteristics irrespective of context. Stereotypes are premised on the idea that there are fundamental differences between different types of people. We show how both universalism and stereotypes are two sides of the same coin. Each eliminates and controls crucial aspects of difference, and both are techniques of discarding through differentiation in a way that upholds dominant power dynamics. This chapter provides examples and arguments for why difference matters in discard studies research as well as practices of discarding. We go so far as to say it’s a matter of life and death, not just good research.

There’s No Such Thing as We

The media serves up universalizing headlines about environmental waste and pollution daily: “Massive

New Report Proves That Humans Are the Worst Species” (Breyer 2020) and “Your Meat Addiction Is Destroying the Planet (But We Can Fix It)” (June 2013). A *BioScience* article with 15,364 scientist signatories agrees that “humanity has failed to make sufficient progress in generally solving these foreseen environmental challenges” and that “we are jeopardizing our future by not reining in our intense but geographically and demographically uneven material consumption” (Ripple et al. 2017). In these examples, we humans are a trashy and greedy species perhaps better labeled *Homodiscardus*.

The universal “we” is supposed to be a radically inclusive frame that argues that humans share certain fundamental and invariable characteristics even though there might be differences between us. But those differences are a matter of detail, not of essential concern. The totalizing inclusiveness in the examples above frames global problems as coming from a global source and rallies the global troops to collectively be accountable and reverse planetary environmental degradation.

But let’s get empirical for a moment. In Nain, who is the “we” trashing the planet? Most local meat consumption is based on local hunting and fishing, in much the same fashion that Inuit have been hunting and fishing since time immemorial. The mass environmental destruction noted in the headlines is more recent. Moreover, terms like “meat addiction” are inappropriate in Inuit contexts, given the term’s roots in industrial factory farming rather than sustenance hunting. Are

Nain locals failing to “make sufficient progress in generally solving these foreseen environmental challenges” even though they’ve collectively organized a plastic bag ban and hunting and fishing doesn’t tend to produce packaging? Where do plastics come from in Nain? Who is the “we” in the creation of plastics that end up there? It’s not folks in Nain.

There are a few big plastic “we’s” in the world that extract oil and natural gas, the raw feedstock for plastics: Gazprom, Exxon Mobil, and Royal Dutch Shell, among others. Next there are the primary manufacturers who make plastic packaging from the raw feedstock: Reynolds Group (which makes Hefty garbage bags among other products), Amcor (which creates food, beverage, pharmaceutical, and personal-care packaging), and Sealed Air (which specializes in food and medical packaging) (CROW n.d.). The primary consumers of these plastics are brand manufacturers whose names readers may be more familiar with: Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Nestlé, and Danone, for instance, are the company names on most of the washed-up plastic items documented by Break Free from Plastic in the Philippines (#breakfreefromplastic 2018). Each of these plastic production groups—extractors, primary manufacturers, and primary consumers—are their own system with interlocking parts that create plastic packaging and other plastic items, and all of this occurs long before consumers get to the grocery store (figure 4.1).

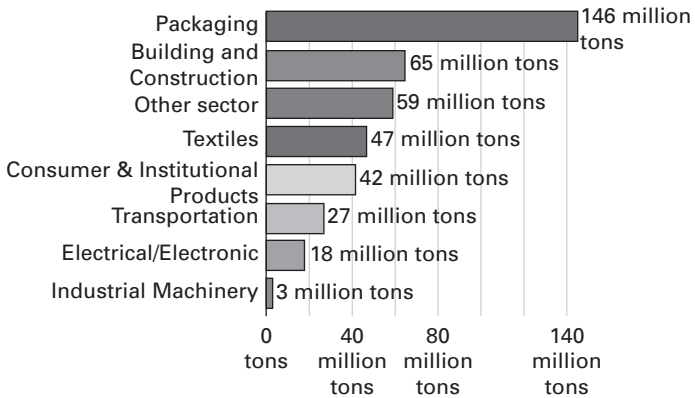


Figure 4.1

Primary global plastic production (in tons per year) by the industrial sector allocation in 2015.

Source: Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser 2018.

The “we” in media headlines that make up “the worst species” usually refers only to end consumers and rarely includes extraction industries, primary manufacturers, and primary consumers or their systems. Considerable research has shown that the top ten carbon emitters account for nearly three-quarters of global emissions, and these are corporations, not citizen consumers with first names and “meat addictions” (Friedrich, Ge, and Pickens 2020; Griffin 2017; Parker and Blodgett 2008). The same type of discrepancy exists for plastics—a small number of companies are responsible for the creation of plastic feedstock and primary production of disposables. Climate change and plastic pollution are not being compared by accident here; they share oil and

natural gas as feedstocks. As such, they also share systems of extraction, financing, political lobbying, and supply chains. Their infrastructures, political economies, special interest groups, and material flows dovetail, overlap, and reinforce one another. Indeed, recent journalism shows that money that used to be invested in oil and gas is instead being directed into plastics (Sullivan 2020). These systems work closely together and even benefit each other.

There is no universal “we” when it comes to waste and discarding, plastics or otherwise. But constantly evoking a global “we” that implicitly refers to consumers and not producers is a way to shift blame, action, and accountability and let those systems continue (Dunaway 2015). This is one reason specificity and difference matter in discard studies—they act simultaneously as research ethics and methodological frameworks (Liboiron 2021).

A Universal We Erases and Maintains Difference

Descriptions of “humanity’s” effect on the planet *erase* differences between core emitters and consumers, affluent consumers and nonconsumers, groups invested in pollution and groups invested in environmental conservation. At the same time, a universal “we” *reinforces* difference and injustices by making one group the dominant global group: the norm that can stand in for

everyone, casting those that deviate from the “we” as outliers, outsiders, and deviants. Simone de Beauvoir calls this type of positionality, where one specific group stands in for all groups in general, both “the positive and the neutral [position], as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general” (Beauvoir 1989, xxi; emphasis in original). “Woman” becomes more specific, limited, and marked, a deviation from “mankind.” Universalism of this sort creates a paradox where “mankind” is supposed to stand in for the entirety of humanity, but it simultaneously marks some humans as less archetypal. This is why the term “male firewoman” is funny, but “female fireman” is not: the “neutral” position doesn’t go both ways.

One example of a “humanity” that erases difference even as it supposedly includes everything can be found in the concept of the Anthropocene. Coined by Nobel Prize-winning male chemist Paul Crutzen, “the Anthropocene” describes the current geological age, characterized by the “central role of mankind” (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000, 17) in creating ecological changes on a planetary scale:

Human activities are exerting increasing impacts on the environment on all scales, in many ways outcompeting natural processes. This includes the manufacturing of hazardous chemical compounds which are not produced by nature, such as for instance the chlorofluorocarbon gases which are responsible for the “ozone hole.” Because human activities have also grown to become significant geological forces,

for instance through land use changes, deforestation and fossil fuel burning, it is justified to assign the term “anthropocene” to the current geological epoch. This epoch may be defined to have started about two centuries ago, coinciding with James Watt’s design of the steam engine in 1784. (Crutzen 2006, 13)

This statement contains a lot of universalism. When it argues that “we” are destroying the planet, it conflates industrial processes with human processes. After all, there have been humans and human processes long before the Anthropocene. Industrial and economic processes premised on constant growth and the dispossession of land, however, are relatively new and come from specific cultures. Critics of the term have pointed out that “the Anthropocene is a universalizing project, [and] it serves to re-invisibilize the power of Eurocentric narratives, again re-placing them as the neutral and global perspective” (Davis and Todd 2017, 762). The steam engine, the invention of chlorofluorocarbon gases, deforestation, and other sources of large-scale environmental change did not come from humans generally but from specific cultures, systems, and times. As Kyle Whyte argues, “colonialism and capitalism laid key parts of the groundwork for industrialization and militarization—or carbon-intensive economics—which produce the drivers of anthropogenic climate change . . . ‘Anthropogenic climate change’ or ‘the Anthropocene,’ then, are not precise enough terms for many Indigenous peoples, because they sound like

all humans are implicated in and affected by colonialism, capitalism and industrialization in the same ways" (2017, 154, 159; see also Simangan 2019; Simpson 2020; Whyte 2016a; Whyte 2016b). These differences matter.

"We" won't save the planet. Ananya Roy calls "bullshit on the popular Covid-19 line, 'We're all in this together.' Used to bestow naive comfort or solicit sacrifice, this slogan obfuscates the structural inequalities of racial capitalism that are being exposed & deepened by this crisis" (@ananyaUCLA, April 11, 2020). Arguments that "we" are destroying the planet or "we" must all band together as one miss the role of forces like colonialism and racism in how pollution, discarding, and extraction have continually benefited some types and groups of people and burdened others (Agard-Jones 2013; Akese 2019; Arefin 2019; Bullard 2000; Davies 2019; Dillon and Sze 2016; Hecht 2018; Hoover 2017; Lerner 2012; Solomon 2019; Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2020 among many others). This is how universalism, designed to unite "everyone," often simultaneously erases groups, people, histories and, most important, certain targets and scales of intervention. Put another way, universalism is one method that discards the differences that matter and maintains business as usual.

This isn't just an abstract academic theory; many people know that universalism discards difference and actively use it as a strategy. It's not a coincidence that the antislogan to Black Lives Matter is "All Lives Matter." On the surface, maybe it sounds nice that all lives

matter—your life, my life, queer lives, women’s lives, Elder’s lives, Indigenous lives, as well as Black Lives—but the reason white supremacist groups and sympathizers have adopted All Lives Matter is to make the case that Black lives are not special and are not differently and uniquely oppressed and in mortal danger. It is an aggressive and frankly deadly equalization. Black people are disproportionately killed by police. *Black* lives matter.

Erasure of differences that matter also happens through well-intentioned universalizing politics. “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement” by Alicia Garza (2014), one of Black Lives Matter’s cofounders, tells a story about the appropriation of the Black Lives Matter slogan by artists who transformed it into “Our Lives Matter”:

I was surprised when a community institution wrote asking us to provide materials and action steps for an art show they were curating, entitled “Our Lives Matter.” When questioned about who was involved and why they felt the need to change the very specific call and demand around Black lives to “our lives,” I was told the artists decided it needed to be more inclusive of all people of color. I was even more surprised when, in the promotion of their event, one of the artists conducted an interview that completely erased the origins of their work—rooted in the labor and love of queer Black women. (Garza 2014)

Even when organizers provided parameters around ways to reuse or adapt the Black Lives Matters slogan so that its original values were maintained, groups often

failed to do this, instead opting to extract value from it on their own terms. Regardless of the politics or the good will or intentions of those who promote universalism, phrases and slogans such as All Lives Matter, Our Lives Matter and “we’re all in this together” as well as claims about the character of “the human species” are strategies of erasure, externalization, and discard and thus strategies of maintaining power imbalances that move along lines of difference.

Difference as Discarding

Is focusing on difference inherently good? Unfortunately, no. Difference is used to sort and rank different kinds of people. Racism, sexism, transphobia, ableism, ageism, and all the other “isms” describe how some types of people are essentialized—understood as a certain kind of thing that makes them all essentially the same in some way. In this section we discuss the nuances between difference as a form of categorization that erases and devalues and difference as a way to talk about relations that matter for justice. Terms like “Black people,” “Indigenous people,” “queers,” “disability,” and so on are used in both ways—to essentialize and devalue as well as to name relations that matter. We’ll start by talking about essentialism, specifically stereotyping, as a form of harm that lays waste, and then we’ll talk about relations that matter.

Essentialism posits that a set of things have a certain invariable characteristic that makes them what they are and, as such, knowable in advance. One manifestation of essentialism is stereotyping. Stereotypes are “a form of knowledge and identification” that fixes “a social reality [to be] at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (Bhabha 2004, 94, 101). Perhaps you don’t know any Inuit, or pedophiles, or rock stars, but stereotypes provide a form of “knowledge” about them anyhow. Think about it: Do you have ideas about Inuit, pedophiles, or rock stars even if you don’t know of any, or if you know only one or two? How do you know what you know? How did that group become defined and knowable in the first place? Who did the defining and the knowing, and what is their relationship to the known Other? What do you think was foregrounded and valued in that knowledge, and what aspects were discarded or erased as unessential?

Stereotypes work by stabilizing knowledge about groups that are considered to be beyond the edges of “normal” by the dominant group. You can see this at play when stereotypes contradict one another but that contradiction is not an issue to “knowing” the group. For example, in the United States, Mexicans are stereotyped as being both lazy and taking all the jobs; Native Americans are stereotyped as both uncivilized yet more noble than whites; women are stereotyped as both unintelligent and able to manipulate men with their minds. For a stereotype to hold, outsiders must be more

lazy or more industrious, more or less prone to addiction, less intelligent or more brilliant than whatever is considered “normal.” It is not the content of the stereotype that makes them work (although that content causes a lot of harm!) but their deviance from “normal,” which defines both the Other *and* normal at the same time (Bhabha 2004; Kristeva 1992).

Thus, stereotyping is a system that categorizes and creates systems of value and worthlessness simultaneously—the domain of discard studies. Most often, stereotyping maintains the status quo of dominant groups by casting Others as deviant. First and perhaps most obvious, one of the core characteristics of stereotypes as they pertain to racism, sexism, ableism, and other “isms” is that they essentialize groups of people as lesser than the norm, allowing the Othered to be less worthy of human rights, less human, more disposable (see the work of writer, critic, and philosopher Sylvia Wynter [2003]; for helpful contextualization and commentary on the significance of Wynter’s ideas, see, for example, Erasmus 2020; McKittrick 2015). As such, stereotyping is a foundation of annihilation.

Disposability is one effect of the essentializing power of stereotyping. Resistance to annihilation is at the core of Black Lives Matters: though the movement fights against a range of sources and effects of racism, one organizing premise is that Black people are disproportionately killed by police—three times more likely than whites in the United States (Buehler 2017; DeGue, Fowler, and

Calkins 2016). In another vein, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we can see the “killableness” of people with disabilities and seniors when “quality of life” discussions are used to withhold medical aid from these groups through rationing or outright refusal (Abrams and Abbott 2020; Andrews et al. 2020; Lund and Ayers 2020; Savin and Guidry-Grimes 2020). Likewise, since “no one knows an exact number of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA people in Canada,” it is difficult to quantify the disposability of Indigenous women and girls, but Canada’s National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls states “while Canadian genocide targets all Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA people are particularly targeted” (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls n.d., 3). These are all statistics and statements of disposability. Essentialism paves the way.

The paragraph above exhibits something I (Liboiron) don’t normally do: use narratives about damage and death to make a case about why something matters. I usually avoid this type of evidentiary thinking for two reasons. First, it sucks to read if you’re Black, Indigenous, disabled, and/or 2SLGBTQIA+. I am sorry. Second, using damage-centered narratives to talk about groups is *another form of essentializing* that does not address the systems of power that create stereotypes in the first place, even if they provide strong arguments for justice. Even when “oppressed voices” are invited to speak, to be

part of knowledge production, or to testify on their own terms, bell hooks writes, the invitation is to “only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain” (hooks, 2014, 152; see also Simpson 2007). In “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” Eve Tuck writes about the “hidden costs of a research strategy that frames entire communities as depleted” or disposable (2009, 409) including that over time, “oppression singularly defines a community” (413). These (our) communities become defined by these deficit figures used to make the case for justice, and they (we) begin to internalize them. We start to think of ourselves as broken and in deficit. We take up our essentialization in our pursuit of justice (Yazzie 2021).

Damage-centered knowledge production “operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to receive reparation” (412). That is, sometimes essentialism and stereotypes are leveraged for justice, for good, but this still doesn’t address the system of oppression (see Spivak 1988 on “strategic essentialism” as a technique wherein different minority groups present themselves as stereotypes to make the case for justice). Communities still must prove their deficit, harm, or disposability in ways that are legible to dominant powers to get that justice. We highlight this to show that essentialism isn’t just the domain of “bad politics” and racists. Essentialism and its modes of discard are also core to certain models of justice.

In chapter 1 we talked about how waste is infrastructure rather than behavior: sorting recyclables in your home is one tiny moment in an overarching recycling system that includes federal regulations and laws, industry lobbies, international markets, and physical infrastructure, among others. So too with essentialism. While there are certainly individuals advancing racism, sexism, ableism and other forms of essentialism through their actions, there is also an infrastructure that makes it so that the same type of people, over and over, are hired less often, are paid less money, are more likely to be murdered by police or domestic partners, are more likely to face violence, homelessness, and poverty. Racism, sexism, ableism, and other essentializations are structural and systematic, not just crappy events.

The Native Youth Sexual Health Network and their allies have been using and developing the term “environmental violence” to talk about structural problems for nearly a decade. Why would a sexual health advocacy group care so much about the environment? According to them, sexual violence and environmental degradation are part of the same structure. They define environmental violence as

the disproportionate and often devastating impacts that the conscious and deliberate proliferation of environmental toxins and industrial development (including extraction, production, export and release) have on Indigenous women, children and future generations, without regard from States or corporations

for their severe and ongoing harm. Furthermore, since 2010, NYSHN's work around the term has fostered recognition of the ways it has evolved to not only include the biological reproductive impacts of industry [such as on reproductive health], but also the social impacts. This work has been critical in recent years, as attention paid to the threats of industry in Indigenous communities has tended to focus entirely on the biological health impacts of fracking and mining, or entirely on the sexual violence acts stemming from the male population booms of industry workers' camps. Rarely is attention paid to both types of impacts, with recognition of their intimate connection to the land. (2016)

They argue that violence against women and violence against the environment have the same route: a culture that sees women and land as resources ripe for value extraction. Environmental violence, from pollution to "man camps" (temporary housing for workers, almost exclusively men, typical of extractive industries such as oil and gas [*Oil & Gas Journal* 2013]), is about which forms of life are valued and which are not.

Reproductive Justice

Historian M. Murphy writes that reproductive justice is about "what forms of life are supported to persist, thrive, and alter, and what forms of life are destroyed, injured, and constrained" (2017a, 141–142; see also

Agard-Jones's [2013] work on body burdens). "Reproduction itself is not a good; rather, it is a process of supporting some things and not others" (Murphy 2017a, 142), and as such it is important to "rework reproduction to conceptualize how collectivities persist and redistribute into the future and to query what gets reproduced" (141). Reproductive justice thus fits within a discard studies approach to analyzing how power holds by reproducing some lives and ways of life while others are discarded.

Take for example fish consumption advisories, where people are advised not to eat fish from a certain area because of contamination. Fish advisories are designed to keep people physically healthy by reducing an individual's "body burden" of specific chemicals. But not everyone's forms of life thrive if they don't fish. As environmental health scholar Elizabeth Hoover has shown,

Indigenous people are concerned about how environmental contamination impacts the reproduction of cultural knowledge. . . . At Akwesasne, community members report a loss of language and culture around subsistence activities like fishing, which have been largely abandoned because of fears of exposure to contaminants. The generational reproduction of culturally informed interpersonal relationships has been affected as much as physical reproduction. . . . For many indigenous communities, to reproduce culturally informed citizens requires a clean environment. (2013, 1648)

Not eating locally caught fish reduces or eliminates certain aspects of language, skills, intergenerational relations, local knowledge, and other elements of ways of life even if it secures individual health. Put another way,

toxicity is produced by and reproductive of different orders of life. Here, we articulate harm as that which disrupts order and existing relations, while also showing that toxic harm also maintains systems, including those that produce inequity and sacrifice. Then, we turn to toxic politics—struggles pertaining to power focused on which forms of life are strained or extinguished while other forms reproduce and flourish. . . . More than just the contravention of an established order within a system, toxic harm can be understood *as the contravention of order at one scale and the reproduction of order at another*. [For example,] chronic low levels of arsenic in water interrupt the reproduction of fish but maintain the ability of mining companies to store mining tailings in open air mounds. (Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo 2018, 335; emphasis in original)

Likewise, fish advisories reproduce health and life at one scale but destroy life and wellness at another. As such, reproductive justice is about *systems* of discarding rather than merely instances—the solution here is not to tweak advisories to allow a little fishing. Government scientists who recommend fish consumption advisories likely don't realize that they are discarding ways of life *in addition* to protecting individual health. The fact that this way of life isn't something they consider or even

know about is also part of reproductive justice. There are many ways to know fish; Western science is only one. Its dominance to the exclusion of all others is a case of reproductive justice, “a process of supporting some things and not others” (Murphy 2017a, 142). The key phrase here is “not others.” Western science isn’t inherently bad (in fact, the person writing this sentence [Liboiron] is a scientist in the Western tradition!) but it is partial. When one way of knowing becomes so dominant that other ways of knowing fail to make sense or even be considered, you’re well into systems of power via discard.

What to Do about Difference?

Systems of power are never complete. Their structures, their universals, their essentialism, their techniques to make some things in place and normal while devaluating and debilitating others are always *working*. They have to constantly maintain and reproduce themselves. Using the term “discard” in discard studies instead of “waste” is meant to help orient the field toward looking carefully at the processes that make waste seem established or categorized.

In this section, we argue that that scholars of discards must cultivate an ethics of attention, appropriateness, and nuance in our theories. For that, we researchers need to pay attention to differences—how they are

created, how they are maintained, and how they matter. At the same time, we must be aware of how using categories of difference often reproduce the powerful systems we are seeking to describe and even change.

Recognizing difference is not enough, though it is the first step. Christina Sharpe contends that recognition can actually serve to recenter power (Sharpe 2016; Coulthard 2014). About the Black Lives Matter protests, she wrote,

[I'm] seeing the protests recede on the [Twitter] timeline even as thousands of people remain in the streets and subject to all forms of violence. The protests that center Black life are being replaced on the timeline by antiracism. But antiracism is a euphemism here. What is antiracist about recentering whiteness? About shifting the address to white people? Protests are being replaced on the timeline by antiracism and inclusion—both of which are projects of reform [of the dominant system]. (Sharpe 2020)

On the same day Ayana Elizabeth Johnson tweeted,

I'm getting some truly wild emails. "I am not a black person, but . . ." followed by what they think black people should do. And SO MANY strangers fully expect me to hop on the phone and give FREE advice on how to fix race problems in their orgs. That is not how this works. I am getting so many of these notes, almost entirely from white women ("Saw your article [Johnson 2020] and I would love to hear more on your take on how racial equality ties with our climate crisis :)"). (Johnson, June 11, 2020; tweet since deleted)

Johnson is experiencing what Sharpe is critiquing: the recentering of white people and their needs as a reaction to a movement working to center Black people's lives. Recognizing difference *and* wanting to do better reinscribed the dominant system; recognition and intent are necessary but grossly insufficient for changing systems of discard, or even to study them ethically.

When we first introduced these methodological and ethical issues of discard studies in chapter 1, it was in the context of understanding trash and its systems. Now we can look at these methodologies with expansive examples, more nuance, and a clearer sense of the stakes of discard studies.

Defamiliarization is about interrupting the researcher, and later the reader, from using normalized and taken-for-granted modes of perception, reading, or experience. It interrogates “common sense” and everydayness as products of power. This can entail questioning premises and what seems natural, looking at the history of how something became normal, tracking down the origins of truisms or famous quantitative figures, and “zooming out” to consider the wider social, political, and economic systems in a “technical” issue. In the previous chapter, we defamiliarized the academic truism that trash is “matter out of place” by digging into its history, uses, and original text. In this chapter, defamiliarization has involved looking at stereotypes and categories to see the work that they're doing, which models of justice are being used, which lives are being reproduced,

and which are being “fixed” and made to heel. Defamiliarization is a way to interrogate systems for how they make some things seem normal, natural, and banal.

Decentering the coherence or “centeredness” of systems is core to analysis and intervention. Discarding practices are about allowing certain centers to remain dominant in what, how, and where they discard, which makes other systems peripheral. Discard studies can ask decentering questions about dominant systems: What kind of power is at work? Who is benefiting and who is not, and how does that get reproduced over and over? What are “the uneven relations and infrastructure that shape what forms of life are supported to persist, thrive, and alter, and what forms of life are destroyed, injured, and constrained” (Murphy 2017a, 142)? One simple technique for decentering is to listen to the experts and organizations that are being decentered. The white women filling up Ayana Elizabeth Johnson’s inbox requesting her to spend time with them show how the dominant system is constantly shuffling things to keep the dominant order, even while people seek to change it. Another technique is to look at examples that are not at the center to see how the center fails at the perimeter, like using the mainstream concept of “consumer choice” and sustainable shopping in Nain. It simply won’t work.

Depurifying is an approach that analyzes the discourses, logics, and other techniques that aim to essentialize and control difference. We have shown how

purity is more aggressive than merely maintaining social norms and boundaries. Purity is about eradicating, striking down, destroying, assimilating, and abolishing differences that might threaten the core of the social order: “Purity,” writes Mary Douglas, “is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise” (1966, 163). For example, understanding all single-use plastics as one type of thing—they should all be banned!—erases single-use medical waste that we probably don’t want to replace with reusables. Or it makes plastic straws into one kind of (evil, useless) object that misses how people with disabilities use them to live and flourish (Wong 2019; Jenks and Obrigner 2020).

These practices are all based in *reflexivity*, the critical examination of usually unexamined and taken-for-granted beliefs, judgments, and practices. Reflexivity is difficult. It’s like trying to see the ground you stand on—even if you lift up one foot, the other is still on some ground you can’t see. Listening to others, working with others, and ensuring those others include people with expertise and experience outside your own is crucial to reflexivity. In other words, difference matters to reflexivity and good research, including techniques of defamiliarization, decentering, and depurification.

The theory of difference we outlined in this chapter is not just a theory but also a method and an ethic. Difference is both a way to discard and a way to attend to discarding reflexively. It is neither inherently good nor bad, but that doesn’t mean difference is neutral: it

always has relationships to dominant systems and thus to power.

In the next chapter we build on this theory, method, and ethic of difference by looking at how to discard *well*. Like difference, discarding is not fundamentally bad or neutral but must always be understood and practiced in relation to power relations and systems. So, there must be ways to discard well that account for and deal with power and thus difference. We invite you to think of some examples *before* you turn the page and then apply techniques of defamiliarization, decentering, and depurification to those ideas. How do those examples not only recognize difference and power but also de- or recenter what is normal, good, or powerful? We offer this challenge because even as experts in the field, we found it exceedingly difficult to think of examples of wasting well; all of our early ideas did not tend to deal with difference well, were part of keeping matter in place, failed to address scale (though they do not have to be “large scale”), and did not always address power relations.

This is a portion of the eBook [doi:10.7551/mitpress/12442.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12442.001.0001)
at

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/12442.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12442.001.0001)

Discard Studies

Wasting, Systems, and Power

By: Max Liboiron, Josh Lepawsky

Citation:

Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power

By: Max Liboiron, Josh Lepawsky

DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/12442.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262369503

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2022

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

© 2022 Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND license.
Subject to such license, all rights are reserved.



The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Stone Sans and Stone Serif by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Liboiron, Max, 1980– author. | Lepawsky, Josh, 1972– author.
Title: Discard studies : wasting, systems, and power / Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2022] |
Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021038762 | ISBN 9780262543651 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Waste products—Philosophy. | Waste products—
Social aspects. | Refuse and refuse disposal—Philosophy. | Refuse
and refuse disposal—Social aspects. | Waste (Economics) | Power
(Social sciences) | Marginality, Social.

Classification: LCC HD9975.A2 L53 2022 | DDC 363.72/801—
dc23/eng/20211227

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021038762>