

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*

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DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/12442.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262369503

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2022

### OA Funding Provided By:

OA Funding from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

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# Discarding Well

*A Theory of Change*

There is no waiting for a better condition.

—M. Murphy, “Alterlife and Decolonial  
Chemical Relations” (2017)

Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins’s book *Waste Siege* (2019), an ethnography of waste and wasting in occupied Palestine, is also a comprehensive text on the complex, interconnected, and multiscalar relationships in waste systems. Stamatopoulou-Robbins interviews waste managers, residents, environmentalists, activists, and waste scavengers about landfills, sewage, second-hand goods, donated food, burning waste, and roadside trash. Despite Palestine being besieged by trash, sewage, and disposable goods that are not and cannot be managed by modern means, she finds that

the people most affected by waste do not always articulate their dissatisfaction with the impact of waste in environmentalist terms, in contrast to the way other contemporary communities articulate waste-related

suffering. Nor, more surprisingly still, do the Palestinians featured in this ethnography always orient their energies towards those with the greatest capacity to change their conditions. The premise of this book is that that matters. (2019, 216)

As such, the book highlights how theories of change and constraints of agency are neither straightforward nor agreed upon.

Indeed, *Waste Siege* consistently ties conditions of waste back to colonialism and settler occupation to argue that these forces are the linchpins that come to fundamentally shape waste and wasting practices (see also Akese 2019; Arefin 2019; Hoover 2017; Liboiron 2021). This certainly does not mean that ending occupation in Palestine would inevitably result in modern waste management and clear skies, but would *fundamentally* and dramatically reshape what waste is and how it works in the region. As such, Stamatopoulou-Robbins writes that waste itself is “an environment rather than . . . a foreign object whose salient characteristic is that it has been forcibly and determinately inserted into ‘the environment.’ . . . [It is] neither a backdrop nor an acute, toxic *cause* of politics. Rather, waste convenes a set of interconnected dilemmas” (2019, 216; emphasis in original). In this spirit, we draw on the insights and theories from previous chapters to think about how to identify potential linchpins and maneuver these interconnected dilemmas.

Neither Stamatopoulou-Robbins nor the other discard studies scholars we’ve covered in this text appeal to

theories of change like awareness (if only people knew more about waste problems, there would be change) or solutionism (if only we had better, cleaner technologies or management systems there would be change). Instead, we offer a theory of change that attempts to grapple with complex systems characterized by inextricable difference, power dynamics, and complex scales.

In previous chapters we argued that for systems to hold together, to subsist and to persist, they *must* discard. This means that the annihilation of waste is not a theory of change we support. We argue that wasting isn't inherently good or bad, but it *is* related to power, including the ability to classify and eradicate. This chapter builds on earlier conceptualized theories of epistemology and the partiality with which things are known (chapter 1); scale as the relationships that matter (chapter 2); power and how things become normal or abnormal as well as the techniques that maintain them (chapter 3); and difference and how it is a central technique both in discarding and in challenging power structures (chapter 4). We now consider a theory of change pertinent to the field of discard studies that brings all these ideas together into action. If discarding is necessary for all systems to hold together, to subsist and to persist, then differently organized systems are needed to fundamentally alter discarding and their power relations. To organize systems differently means not just critiquing them or tweaking some of their components but also fundamentally changing relationships that matter (relationships of scale).

Our theory of change based in discard studies includes the following characteristics:

1. While systemic change requires the analysis and critique of systems, it doesn't stop with critique. Change is *normative*. It is practiced with the intention of moving from an *is* to an *ought* in the material world.
2. Both the theory of change and the analysis of the systems it rests upon are *specific* to the time, place, infrastructure, and power differentials in a given case. This specificity is about the relationships that matter to a case, or what we call scale (see chapters 1 and 2), as well as difference. Relations are not universal (see chapter 4).
3. It deals with *systems*, not *symptoms*. Two key aspects of systems are the infrastructures and norms that support those systems and make them dominant. Plastic bag litter on a street is a symptom of a system of disposability that produces plastic packaging but also supports recycling that cleans it up: both modern litter and recycling are symptoms of disposability (see chapter 3).
4. It must be *accountable to what is discarded* in the system, including what is necessarily discarded from a reworked or changed system. All systems discard, even "good" ones. Accountability in this sense means recognizing and acknowledging what is discarded as well as holding an obligation or responsibility to that

which has *been* discarded. Another way to think of this is that power relations never go away, even in better versions of the world (see chapter 3).

5. As such, theories of change must learn to practice an *ethic of incommensurability*. As we discuss later in this chapter, an ethic of incommensurability recognizes that there may be no single “good” that can or ought to be achieved through change. It also recognizes that some goods may clash with one another (this is the focus of chapter 5). When such clashes happen (a normal and frequent experience), additional iterations of change need to be pursued.

In thinking through a theory of change premised on discard, we are not talking about eradicating discards altogether (we believe that’s impossible). Fundamentally changing discarding means posing the question: “How can we discard *well*?” And what does “well” mean, and to whom?

When we authors have asked this question—how to discard well—of various audiences (including ourselves during brainstorming), composting food waste always comes up. Let’s work through this example. First, a theory of change that would support compost as a way of wasting well would need to be normative—move from an *is* to an *ought*. That seems in order. Most advocates for composting are trying to do something good in the face of something that is not being done well or at all, given that organic waste consistently accounts for the

largest share of municipal solid waste and this waste is often incinerated or landfilled (MacBride 2020).

Second, a theory of change must be specific. From our view, composting is usually understood as something to be done to municipal solid waste (MSW) in urban centers. Often, organic waste accounts for the largest share of MSW by weight, so specificity seems to work in our favor. But we also must acknowledge that the organic waste segment of MSW does not scale to the organic waste of industrial systems such as agricultural waste, of which MSW would be a tiny fraction—less than 3 percent (see chapter 1). Our analysis so far has also assumed a MSW system in mostly urban global north contexts. Things would look very different in rural Namibia or western Greenland, where composting might already be the norm, never articulated as a problem to begin with, or have fundamentally different scales and materiality.

Third, a theory of change must deal with systems rather than symptoms. We need to consider how MSW composting might allow agricultural waste to continue unremarked upon and unabated. We need to question what relationships MSW composting does affect. Perhaps municipal landfill fees and volume are reduced in a way that mattered to municipal and NGO accounting. Perhaps the main outcome is that people feel better about waste and their municipality. Maybe composting significantly reduces methane emissions from landfills enough that the scale matters to local climate change emissions. Nonetheless, urban composting from

MSW would likely not impact “food waste” in general, which originates mainly in industrial agricultural spaces. For example, a study in California, where a significant amount of produce is grown for global markets, showed that a third of all food produced was either not harvested or wasted through other means (Baker et al. 2019). Researchers reported that “food loss rates are highly variable and dependent on crop, prices, consumer and buyer preferences, and labor availability” among other systemic issues (2019, 541). The study argues that these are the relationships that matter to the greatest quantities of food waste in supply chains. Much like personal or household recycling, composting does not reduce waste arising upstream in resource extraction or manufacturing. But it might matter in other ways—this is a research question.

Last, points four and five of our theory of change are about recognizing and accounting for what is discarded when systems change. What is wasted when municipalities compost? Perhaps there are job losses from where that waste may have been going. Maybe communities that become the sources for large-scale composting will suffer from health or sensorial effects of the new waste management regime. What about all the plastics in the compost, an inevitable effect of the process, that are spread into soil when the compost is distributed (Cattle, Robinson, and Whatmuff 2020)? Perhaps, as we’ve indicated, industrial-scale food waste is erased as a significant source of food waste in the public and political



imagination. How will the theory of change account for this and the fact that no type of change will be able to “fix everything”? How are choices of what to fix and not fix ethical, as opposed to merely an issue of feasibility? How are they, in other words, “good” choices and changes? Asking such questions doesn’t mean that there isn’t a robust theory of change for how composting will change systems rather than address symptoms, but it does mean that what composting looks like would have to be *significantly* different than how it is usually evoked for it to impact waste *systems* and their *power relations*. We fully agree that treating symptoms is often needed and has an effect. But here, we are looking for a theory of change for *systems*, the interlocking infrastructures, norms, and power relations that allow some forms of life to flourish and others to be challenged or erased.

In our theory of change via discard, researchers can work to describe the systems of waste and wasting at work, particularly via techniques of partiality, defamiliarization, denaturalization, decentering, and depurification. Researchers can also pay close attention to issues of scale, difference, and power. This type of research can help define where interventions might have the most impact. Indeed, research “does not inherently lead to sustainable or unsustainable (or equitable or unequitable) outcomes—the outcomes will depend on how, where, when, and by whom the [research] is designed, funded, conducted, and used” (Singh et al. 2021, 2) and simply doing “more research” does not mean issues of power are addressed. Without a theory of

power, research often accidentally reproduces the harms it sets out to address (Singh et al. 2021; Liboiron 2021). As such, a key role for research is to evaluate whether interventions are effective in their goals: research “can better serve policy [and other mechanisms for change] when used to evaluate policy [and other] actions already undertaken rather than when used predictively for policy making” (Singh et al. 2021, 4; see also Herrick and Sarewitz 2000). The following case studies both consider the content of how wasting differently might address power dynamics as well as highlight the role of research in this work.

## Learning to Discard Well

On September 28, 2020, the city council of St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador—where we authors live—voted not to increase funding for snow clearing for the coming winter. The city had experienced a massive snowfall event in January 2020, dubbed “Snowmageddon,” leading to a declaration of a state of emergency that lasted eight days. That winter season was also marked by at least one death of a pedestrian who had been forced to walk in the street because of impassible sidewalks. But snow-filled sidewalks were not unique to that year; for years, walking in the winter in St. John’s has been perilous and often results in injuries and deaths. But catalyzed by Snowmageddon and the clear and consistent neglect of sidewalk users, people

organized under the banner of the Sidewalk Coalition and marched in protest of inequitable mobility in the city for those who do not drive cars (CBC News 2020). Despite the protests and resident surveys that showed a clear majority of respondents in favor of the city spending money on sidewalk snow clearing, the city councilors voted 7 to 2 against a proposal to increase the budget for snow clearing (Eaton 2020). The city's snow-clearing protocol still evaluates sidewalks in terms of their capacity to store snow discarded by plows rather than as places people use for transportation (see figure 5.1).

How is this story about snow clearing in St. John's a discard studies story? Snow is a form of material waste in the context of snow clearing. Indeed, in St. John's snow is dumped on sidewalks and when there's too much snow, it's gathered in dump trucks and deposited in an urban lake. But the question of how to get rid of snow isn't merely a technical problem or a monetary one. It's also bound up in systems that order relationships between urban infrastructure and urban citizens. Focusing on how snow is being discarded offers us, discard studies analysts, a way to investigate how intersecting systems work, what effects those interactions can have, and how differential power relations are in play. It is also an opportunity to posit a way to discard snow *well*. Sidewalk advocates have critiqued the problem and their critique is specific to St. John's, but they have been unable to affect either systems or symptoms.

In another case study of snow clearing almost a decade earlier, officials in the Swedish municipality of Karlskoga

were required to subject city policies to gender analyses. The requirement to use gender to analyze city services signals that there has already been a shift from symptoms to systems, as a new set of norms and set of operations had come into effect, aiming to change relations around gender. The manager in charge of snow clearing on city property even remembered how staff joked about the (supposed) absurdity that snow clearing had anything to do with gender (Include Gender 2014; Perez 2019). Yet when city staff reviewed data available from Swedish hospitals they found that most injuries suffered by pedestrians happened in the winter months and occurred as a consequence of slips on icy surfaces—and that 69 percent of those injured were women (Perez 2019, 31). Snow clearing in Karlskoga had prioritized automobile traffic at destinations that, historically and presently, are male-majority places of work, such as offices and construction sites.

Without intending to do so, Karlskoga city administrators had been managing snow in highly gendered ways. They had fallen into the trap of a particular way of thinking about and managing the urban landscape around them, what feminist writer and activist Caroline Criado Perez (2019) calls “the default male.” In this trap, what were actually a highly situated and particular set of experiences—those of traditionally employed, able-bodied, automobile-equipped men—instead became axiomatically synonymous with a universal “people” (see chapter 4). The results, with or without intent, on average made for a physically safer environment for men and a more dangerous one for women.

Based on this gender analysis, Karlskoga's city managers changed how snow was cleared in the municipality. They learned that the city's sidewalks could be made substantially safer merely by changing the order of which parts of the city were cleared first. Instead of beginning the snow clearing at motorways and then moving to sidewalks, the snow-removal schedule was reversed: sidewalks were cleared first, then roads. The change cost nothing yet substantially reduced pedestrian injury rates, which had the additional effect of reducing some health-care costs related to hospital visits from pedestrian slips and falls. What is discarded in this change is not just snow but also the privilege of automobiles and the people (mostly men) that used to experience priority clearing. The city decided this was an acceptable loss (incommensurability) because it aligned with gender equity. They were now discarding well according to their new mandate to take gender differences and power differentials seriously.

Karlskoga's approach is an example of why analysis of systems of difference matters for discard studies (see chapter 4). Analyses that take difference into account are needed to make change happen in a way that can more clearly see what—or whom—is being discarded or externalized and what (or whom) is held as the valued norm. In the case of St. John's, the system of managing snowfall in the city has yet to account for difference (see figure 5.1), or perhaps accounts for it but chooses to privilege automobiles, able-bodied pedestrians, and



**Figure 5.1**

Snow management planning in St. John's. The sign (*top*) is for snowplows, indicating that they should not push snow beyond the sign. These signs are placed behind sidewalks (*bottom left*), resulting in snow being specifically stored on sidewalks, which make them impassible in both the winter and spring (*bottom right*).

*Source:* Photos by Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky.

likely men. As we write this, winter approaches and the municipality of St. John's has erected snow clearing directions for plows on signs that read, "do not push snow beyond this point," into the grassy parklet behind the sign. The sign marks the main sidewalk as the proper place to deposit snow cleared from the street behind the photographer.

Learning to discard well can be assisted by asking a set of questions: in a particular situation or case, what goods are sought and what bads are fought? And how are "good" and "bad" set up as such? Where is the unevenness in the system? Who do they benefit, and who do they burden? What or whom are these values accountable to, and how? Thinking about discarding well results in a range of possibilities, not necessarily completely knowable in advance, which can be arrayed toward more just and equitable ends than whatever the current arrangement may be.

## **Incommensurability**

The final consideration in our framework to support discarding well is an ethic of incommensurability: there may be no single and universal "good" that can or ought to be achieved through change, no totally completed and finished project that addresses everything (Tuck and Yang 2012; see also chapter 4). It also recognizes that some goods may clash with one another (Mol

2002, 46). When such clashes happen (a normal and frequent experience), additional iterations of change need to be pursued.

If politics refers to struggles pertaining to power and power is about the creation and maintenance of unevennesses of various kinds, then arranging elements of a structure one way rather than another involves struggles over how unevennesses of various kinds will be built into systems. Some of that unevenness will be deliberate and some won't; some of the unevenness may be acceptable to some but not to others. In the case of Karlskoga reevaluating snow-clearing practices, power relations that previously upheld the dominance of able-bodied, car-equipped men were reordered such that the power to move about the city was enhanced for different people. But did these changes lead to universally good outcomes? You probably won't be shocked to learn that the short answer is "no."

Able-bodied women experienced the enhanced safety benefits in Karlskoga more than others in different circumstances. People who ride wheelchairs may not be as well accommodated as foot-powered pedestrians by these snow-clearing practices, for instance. The different snow-clearing practices also didn't do anything to change systems of gender roles that still have women doing most of the unpaid care work (e.g., childcare, eldercare, grocery shopping) and doing a lot of that work on foot. Changing snow-clearing practices doesn't operate at those scales (see chapter 2).



Other harmful relations in snow clearing also remain unaddressed, such as plastic pollution that becomes concentrated in snow cleared from roads, which also has a gender component. When tires abrade against the road, little bits of tire come off, called “tire dust,” which constitutes a significant source of microplastics in the environment. One recent study in Germany calculated that tire wear added between 67,000 and 88,000 tons of microplastics per year to roadway surface water and to roadside soils with another 4,000–5,000 tons of microplastics to the air (Baensch-Baltruschat et al. 2021). Moreover, “Tire wear particles may present a significant risk to organisms, since they contain potentially ecotoxic chemical components such as mineral oils, plasticizers, softeners, [and other industrial chemicals] that may leach out” (Parker et al. 2020, 9). Many of these “ecotoxic chemical components” are endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs) akin to the BPA on receipts mentioned in chapter 1, which disproportionately affect the health of women and the very young (WHO 2013). We’re back to a gendered analysis of the harms of snow clearing.

Plastic monitoring in St. John’s has shown that tire dust is a major component of urban waterway systems and that these microplastics tend to accumulate in snow, which is often dumped in Quidi Vidi Lake; this in turn drains to the ocean where many locals catch fish for food (CLEAR n.d.). Regardless of whether sidewalks are cleared first (or not at all in the case of St. John’s),

snow-clearing practices add to the ways in which tire-derived microplastics move into and through environments and how those burdens are unevenly distributed.

You may be thinking, “But we can’t address everything!” That is our point. When you aim to change a system to waste better, some parts of that system will still be reproduced (Hale 2006). Systems never operate in isolation and are always intersecting, bringing gender relations, plastic pollution, and snow clearing together. Even though all things cannot be “fixed” does not mean that changemakers are not accountable to them. One of our guidelines for wasting well is to be *accountable to what is discarded* in the system, including what is necessarily discarded from a reworked or changed system. You can’t fix everything, but you still need to be accountable to those things. Accountability in this sense means recognizing and acknowledging what is discarded and then holding an obligation or responsibility to that which has been discarded.

Incommensurability is not only a way to talk about competing goods and unanticipated bads. It is also a way to identify and make changes in relation to power dynamics (see chapter 3). The Karlskoga snow clearing example was an example of a systematic change toward gender equity that resulted in wasting well. But tire dust presents a reverse case, where wasting well may not result in systems change. Most solutions that attempt to deal with tire dust tend to involve capturing microplastics (e.g., the Tyre Collective, a device that “dusts

off” tires as they’re used). That version of wasting differently does not meet any of our criteria for wasting well because it leaves existing systems untouched and deals with the issue as a technical problem (symptoms rather than systems). The emerging problem of tire dust is bringing attention to wider systems that tire dust is just exacerbating, such as unchecked highway pollution (WWT 2017), the toxicity of everyday materials such as the carbon black in tires (a suspected human carcinogen [Kuempel and Sorahan 2010]), and the power of the fossil fuel and petrochemical industries in transportation planning, urban design, and the political economy more generally. A significant change in tire dust, or wasting well when it comes to tire microplastics, would require a significant change in these systems. In short, wasting well changes systems, and changing systems can result in wasting well. The theory of change works in both directions.

In chapter 3, we introduced a theory of power drawing on Mary Douglas’s concept of “matter out of place” as that which threatens dominant systems. Tire dust has the potential to cause this kind of threat. In 2020, as tire dust emerges as a new type of pollution, “Cardno ChemRisk, a U.S.-based consultancy that has worked with companies facing chemical exposure litigation . . . is spearheading the tyre industry’s response to the microplastics threat” (Brock and Geddie 2020), including coauthoring research that counters academic publications showing tire dust as a significant form of microplastic

pollution and environmental harm. This type of coordinated denial indicates that tire dust represents a threat to the tire industry and its partners. To paraphrase Douglas (1966), where there is dirt, there is a challenge to the system.

How might we use tire dust as an opportunity to waste well, to move from the current state of tire dust and its systems to a better system that scales to the systems that matter in the production of these microplastics rather than symptoms? How would interventions be accountable to existing and new power relations as well as uneven burdens using an ethic of incommensurability? This is not a rhetorical question. We'd like you to take a moment to think about it. If you were part of a team dedicated to wasting well in transportation systems and given the problem of tire dust, what might you need to consider? What scales would you work at? What systems would that include (e.g., Quinn 2018)? One of the analytical commitments of discard studies, in our view, is to analyze what seem like impossible-to-overcome problems. Rather than starting with the idea of feasibility based on existing systems and power structures, we can instead ask, "What *specifically* makes this problem seem impossible to solve, and how do we change *that* so the problem is no longer impossible?" (See chapter 1 for some techniques for thinking about naturalized phenomena and how those phenomena might be made otherwise.) Consider for a moment what that might look like.

## Making New Worlds by Discarding

Changing systems to discard well will not only put an end to certain materials, flows, practices, and structures but also make new ones. We planned for the final case of this chapter to be about mushroom harvesting in T̓silhqot'in Territory. The T̓silhqot'in National Government created a new policy based on difference that changed which groups are burdened with environmental extraction and which benefit; more important this change in unevenness was done according to the value of Indigenous sovereignty, the right of Indigenous people to govern Indigenous territory. But before we examined that case study in depth, we had to follow our own guidelines for wasting well by being accountable to discard and power in our own research. We found an immediate clash of "goods." We wanted to tell a story of sovereignty over land, but the entitlement of outside researchers (us) to tell that story on our own terms for our own goals is counter to Indigenous sovereignty.

Both of us authors work at Memorial University, where a new policy called Research Impacting Indigenous Groups (RIIG), spearheaded by one of the authors (Liboiron), seeks to scale relations of discard and power in research to the level of the entire university. Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes that "the word 'research' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. . . . The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains

a powerful remembered history of many of the world's colonized peoples" and continues today (Smith 2012, 1). Tuck and Yang write that "one major colonial task of social science research that has emerged is to pose as voicebox, ventriloquist, interpreter of subaltern [Indigenous] voice" or story, but only in terms of Indigenous pain or deficit rather than knowledge on Indigenous terms (2014, 225). Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes, "Research [in Indigenous conversations] was talked about both in terms of its absolute worthlessness to us, the indigenous world, and its absolute usefulness to those who wielded it as an instrument, it told us things already known, suggested things that would not work, and made careers for people who already had jobs" (Smith 2012, 3). In discard studies terms, research is a form of reproductive injustice, where academic ways of living, knowing, and doing flourish and are rewarded while Indigenous ways of living, knowing, and doing are valued only as fodder for that academic flourishing (see chapter 4). The RIIG policy was a response to these ongoing relationships in and around Memorial University, which is not a unique case in academia.

Liboiron drew on discard studies theory to collaboratively build the policy. In simple terms, RIIG is a consent policy, where research can only move forward once the Indigenous group the research affects has given collective consent to proceed (Memorial University, 2020). This consent must occur at the beginning of a research project's planning phase, before the research questions,

design, and methods are solidified so that Indigenous groups can affect the project through alteration or outright refusal. Discard studies scholar Grace Akese has encountered this phenomenon of creating harm by attempting to do good research in her fieldwork on electronic waste in Agbogbloshie, Ghana. Even though she is from Ghana, when she approached people working with scraps, they told her,

“This is a place of business. You people think we are here for you, eh? You come here all the time taking pictures. Every single day, someone wants to know something. Let me tell you; we are tired.”

“We see you people [researchers] all the time. You come here and then write bad things about us. You bring your white people to come and see us. You take pictures of the boys there. Who permitted you to come here?” (2019, 95)

Akese and the RIIG policy make the case for refusal, the ability of overresearched groups to discard some research and support other research on their own terms. Refusal disenfranchises academic entitlement to Indigenous and other people’s lands, cultures, knowledge, labor, stories, and lifeworlds. Following Tuck and Yang, we understand that “refusal, and stances of refusal in research, are attempts to place limits on conquest and the colonization of knowledge by marking what is off limits, what is not up for grabs or discussion, what is sacred, and what can’t be known” (2014, 225)—that is, discarding well.

There are two further ways the RIIG policy draws on discard studies. First, rather than choosing awareness as an intervention into extractive research norms, which may have addressed symptoms, RIIG is a policy—infrastructure. It is an intervention that better (though not perfectly) scales to the relationships that matter, tying the policy to formal ethics, funding, promotion, and compliance systems. Indeed, the acronym “RIIG” was chosen because it evoked infrastructure, the ropes, pulleys, and hooks that direct a ship’s sails and allow it to speed along or stop dead in the water. Second, following Akese (2019) and others (Tuck and Yang 2014; Simpson 2007, 2016; Zahara 2016), the RIIG policy understands refusal as an *affirmation* as much as a loss—the affirmation of Indigenous sovereignty. As Mary Douglas has pointed out, condemning one set of things affirms others (1966).

Additionally, the policy implementation process considered ways to be *accountable* to what was being discarded. Memorial University’s Office of Research created infrastructural support such as funded opportunities for researchers to build the relationships with Indigenous groups that consent requires, templates for what written consent and refusal might look like, and a peer advisory group made up of researchers who had good relationships with Indigenous groups through their research who could help others achieve the same type of relationship or redirect them if they weren’t on a good path.



For this book, we sought to take up the spirit of RIIG's regime of discarding well by requesting permission to write about the T̄silhqot'in National Government's policy. At the time of this writing, we have almost but not quite obtained permission, as it requires many conversations and getting to know one another before consent is truly informed. While consent might be obtained by the time we revise this chapter, we have instead not assumed that we will get what we want and have discarded that case study. Instead, we wrote about RIIG (see Akese 2019 for how she also did this with her fieldwork).

We hope that ending on this example highlights how discarding well and other normative strands of discard studies is equally about the content of research and the methodologies and ways research itself is always already part of systems of discard. Defamiliarization, denaturalization, decentering, and depurifying should be brought to bear on approaches to research in addition to our objects of study (Akese 2019; Liboiron 2021; Zahara 2016). Turning our analytical tools of scale, relationality, power, and difference onto research practices themselves is likewise crucial for a type of research that not only seeks to identify and critique systems of waste and wasting but also enacts them in our research activities. We authors believe that discard studies methodologies are well placed to discard well—we have the tools!—and we look forward to learning more about the research wastes of fellow discard studies scholars.

## Some Moves for Discard Studies

This is not *the* rubric for discard studies (see chapter 4 on universalism and its ethical problems), but *a* rubric forwarded by us, the authors. We believe that it describes some key parts of the interdisciplinary field of discard studies (though it certainly does not describe all parts) and hope it is useful to researchers in the area.

### Techniques of Discard Studies (Chapter 1)

1. Defamiliarization: Methods that interrupt the reader and researcher from using normalized and taken-for-granted modes of perception, reading, knowing, or experience, interrupting popular, intuitive, expected, and common narratives about waste and wasting by using empirical research and cases from a range of disciplines.
2. Denaturalization: Because waste practices are specific to a time, place, culture, and system rather than an inherent “natural” characteristic of humans, when cultural or political specificity is universalized or naturalized, it must be shown to be contextual, place-based, situated, and historically specific.
3. Decentering: Because waste and wasting practices maintain centers and their dominance in what, how, and where peripheries are externalized and discarded, discard studies is dedicated to decentering dominant systems to see how they become

powerful and what peripheries they depend on for that dominance.

4. **Depurifying:** In its use here, purification refers to an aggressive and even violent technique of power where a dominant order is maintained to the exclusion (or annihilation) of others. Difference is a key concept within purification and thus of its opposite, depurification.

### **Key Theories for Discard Studies (Chapters 2–5)**

1. **Scale:** A theory of relationality. Scale is about the relationships that matter within a phenomenon. In waste and discard studies, theorizing scale as *relationships that matter* within a situated context has ramifications for action—from policy to management to activism—and research so that relationships and forces in a system that cause discarding can be accurately recognized, described, and addressed.
2. **Matter out of place:** A theory of power. Dirt, or matter out of place, rarely describes waste or pollution. Instead, dirt describes a dominant system of order and threats against that order and discarding as a technique to maintain that power. Dirt or matter out of place is that which threatens the dominant order and so must be devalued, controlled, or annihilated.
3. **Reproductive justice:** A theory of difference. Classifying, defining, sorting, and ranking things by

value and other forms of differentiation are key to discarding *as well as* resisting against dominant systems of discard. When difference meets power, discarding is about “what forms of life are supported to persist, thrive, and alter, and what forms of life are destroyed, injured, and constrained” (Murphy 2017a, 141–142). Wasting life and discarding well both use these concepts to support or reduce different forms of life.

4. **Incommensurability:** A theory of uneven ethics. In complex systems, no measure of “good” or “bad” will be universal. Since all systems discard, forms of good will also have their externalities, their “bads.” An ethic of incommensurability recognizes these differences without conflating them, smoothing them over, or abandoning them (Tuck and Yang 2012). Instead, we discard studies researchers are accountable to what is externalized.

### **Characteristics of a Theory of Change via Discard, or Wasting Well (Chapter 5)**

1. Normativity, or the intention of moving from an *is* to an *ought*, and identifying the good sought and the bads fought.
2. Specificity to the time, place, infrastructure, power differentials, and other relations in a given case, including an attention to scale and difference.
3. Dealing with systems, not symptoms.

4. Accountability to what is discarded in the system, including what is necessarily discarded from a reworked or changed system.
5. An ethic of incommensurability and the recognition that there may be no single “good” that can or ought to be achieved.

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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>