

## Creativity and Resistance in the Age of Waste

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Marco Armiero. *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 75 pp.

Samuel Amago. *Basura: Cultures of Waste in Contemporary Spain* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2021), x + 239 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2023.14.1.4922>



Waste is one of the world's most critical challenges. It is a truly global one as the waste footprint formed by hazardous and non-hazardous, electronic, solid, plastic, and toxic detritus, to name a few, affects the human and non-human communities across the planet. Waste is also complex, as political, economic, environmental, technological, and social factors combine to make it an interdisciplinary issue. Alongside efforts to manage waste and design cleaner production policies, the scholarly field of Waste Studies has launched a line of inquiry that is rapidly and intensely interrogating waste's history and its role in our interaction with the environment. The meaning of waste, what it is, and who decides what is waste are politically charged questions that have become particularly pressing in recent years. Waste Studies marks the culmination of Ecocriticism: if the latter's starting point was the appreciation of the natural world as an object of admiration, Waste Studies makes apparent the human capacity to poison and erase that very natural world. Marco Armiero's *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump* and Samuel Amago's *Basura: Cultures of Waste in Contemporary Spain* enrich this fertile intellectual current and resonate with our current time through their advancement of insightful and valuable statements about waste, its relationship to cultural production, and its entanglement with socioeconomic issues shaping the space where waste appears.

Published in print format in May and August 2021, respectively, *Wasteocene* and *Basura* complement each other with their persuasive contributions to the common threads that structure Waste Studies. While neither mentions the other in their comprehensive bibliographies, these projects coincide in their movement beyond the rhetoric that reduces waste to discarded material and its disposal to privilege wasting, an active process that offers a powerful tool to analyze the social and political relationships that structure contemporary society. Armiero approaches this topic through the

formulation of the theory of the Wasteocene, the Age of Waste. Amago's monograph is a rereading of the Spanish transition to democracy through the lens of waste and trash. The place-based perspective informing Waste Studies organizes Armiero and Amago's research. Armiero defends his theory of the Wasteocene through case studies that cover a wide geographical scope, moving from Naples, the United States, Brazil to Ghana. In contrast, *Basura* scours waste in Madrid with some reference to Barcelona, thereby laying the groundwork for future scholarship to assess the wasting process in other parts of Spain. Both volumes assemble an assortment of compelling examples, ranging from artistic productions and social predicaments, that make and keep visible waste and trash in response to the official—governmental—narrative to erase or remove it to designated areas. This method of analysis gives substance to Armiero's affirmation that the "Wasteocene has not received much attention from scientists; nonetheless, it has indeed become an important trope in the narratives about our collective futures" (13).

Environmental historian Marco Armiero's *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump* forms part of the Cambridge University Press *Elements in Environmental Humanities*, a series that examines principal aspects of the convergence of human and planetary life. *Elements* generate research and dialogue through short expositions that present up-to-date arguments (3). In keeping with this objective, *Wasteocene* presents "theoretical arguments and empirical cases" (58) to instruct the reader to recognize the wasting crisis, train its eye to identify wasting people and places, and design strategies based on the principles of commoning. Armiero's project builds from a proposal laid out in a frequently cited article he published with Massimo De Angelis in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* in 2017. "Anthropocene: Victims, Narrators, and Revolutionaries" asserts that the narrative of the Anthropocene is a universal one and as such it downplays differences in agency or consequence wrapped up in the current global climate crisis. The "Age of Humans" does not account for social variability and projects blindness toward the political and economic factors that affect life and space. This critique insists on acknowledging social and economic inequalities and injustices and identifying efficient solutions. Following the lead of scholars who point to capitalism as the primary force transforming the planet, Armiero and De Angelis coin the term Wasteocene with which to think about the present epoch. Their contention that waste and wasting relationships confirm the contaminating nature of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene becomes the central argument that Armiero develops in more detail in *Wasteocene*.

After a brief introduction that outlines *Wasteocene's* contents and method as established by the *Elements* series, Armiero dedicates chapter two to the history and definition of the Wasteocene and an analysis of the inscription of the waste apocalypse in science-fiction narratives. Here the author unpacks his theory that waste or, more precisely, wasting is a core element of the Anthropocene. Human activity in the Capitalocene produces waste in multiple forms and its disposal or removal generates a political and hygienic issue that reinforces the "us/them" social organization. Armiero conceptualizes this relationship as "wasting", or the socio-ecological relations that create wasted places and people who exist in and suffer from power inequalities linked to that space. Viewing the Wasteocene from this perspective makes apparent two simultaneous

operations that secure the intersection of capitalism and colonialism, namely, “the production of wasted people and places goes hand in hand with the construction of gated communities” (16). This statement enables Armiero to locate the human body “at the center of the Wasteocene” (12). Importantly, the individual examples cited in *Wasteocene* all converge on the body as the primary space where the consequences of waste unfold and as the starting point of a social response. At work in science fiction, for example, as the author explains in chapter two’s conclusion, is an effective projection of key tropes of the Wasteocene, including images of ruins, wasted landscapes, and dehumanized bodies, all juxtaposed with clean spaces.

The four chapters that follow detail the wasting process in different geographies and through distinct mediums to illuminate the interconnections between waste, capitalism, and colonialism. Chapter three studies memory, toxic narratives, and wasted stories as creative vehicles that secure and confirm the Wasteocene. The dam disasters in Vajont, Italy in 1963, and Rio Doce in Brazil in 2015, daily life in Louisiana’s Cancer Alley, and the electronic waste dump of Agbogbloshie, Ghana, are tragic and discriminatory real spaces and events whose memory and existence is “domesticated” so that suffering, loss, and grief do not disturb the social and economic factors underlying the injustices. In response to the toxic narrative’s concealment of injustices, guerrilla narratives emerge as a literary form of resistance that can be grouped with the commoning practices the author details later in his study. Armiero references his own project *ToxicBios. A Guerrilla Narrative Project* as an example of an archive of toxic autobiographies, wasted stories that prioritize the centrality of the body, race, and gender in the Wasteocene and confirm its place-based and very personal nature: “One must recognize to have been wasted, to live in the Wasteocene, in order to fight against it” (25).

The city of Naples offers several real-life examples of the Wasteocene that Armiero reads through this critical lens in chapter 4. The previous section’s presentation of toxic narratives prepares Armiero to argue that the city’s cholera epidemics of 1884 and 1973 and the waste emergencies of the 1990s–2000 demonstrate the official strategy of prioritizing a solution to the immediate problem that perpetuates the wasting process jeopardizing daily life. What makes this analysis so attractive is its pertinence: Amago joins the dialogue with his study of the November 2013 Madrid sanitation workers’ strike and the reader is prompted to make connections with other recent instances, including lead exposure in Detroit, Edinburgh’s 2022 sanitation strike, or the 2005 catastrophic waste avalanche in Indonesia, to name a few.

The accumulation of evidence documenting the wasting relationship raises the question of how to react, which Armiero narrows down to resilience or resistance. As his argument gravitates towards the latter, he wraps up his *Element* in chapter 5 with examples of international commoning practices proven effective to counter the wasting process and restructure human relationships. The People’s Solidarity Brigades mobilized to support victims of COVID-19, the 2010 *Waste Land* documentary on the waste pickers association in Brazil’s Jardim Gramacho, and the local movements that have responded to the toxic aftermath of the Balkan war in Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the industrial

pollution affecting the Spanish city of Can Sant Joan exemplify life within the Wasteocene and the collective efforts to resist its advance and revert the damage.

In the brief coda, Armiero draws on the coincidence of the finalization of his manuscript and his personal experience with COVID-19 to show that standing out among the side effects of this global health crisis is the visible manifestation of the unequal socioeconomic structure underpinning the Wasteocene and the intensification of the wasting process. He references the previously documented commoning initiatives to confirm the effectiveness of this strategy to resist the normalizing dynamic of the Wasteocene.

Just as Armiero maintains that the Wasteocene is grounded in waste relationships in which the disposal of “our” waste creates the “other”, Samuel Amago proposes that the Spanish transition to democracy required that the legacy of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the Franco dictatorship (1939–1975) be erased, or trashed, to make space for a new Spain whose modernity and progress depended on (at least) the projection of cleanliness in myriad aspects. This agenda thus singles out waste as an undeniable object and motor shaping contemporary Spain. *Basura*, however, is not about the contents of trash. Drawing on Alfredo González-Ruiz’s invitation to study art and archaeology together, Amago labels *Basura* an archaeological project that delves into contemporary Spanish waste to lay bare the context that produced it, namely “the country’s uneven process of political, social, and cultural modernization” (26). *Basura* convincingly brings contemporary Spain into the Waste Studies conversation. The topic is not new to Hispanic Studies as the path was lit by *Teoría general de la Basura (cultura, apropiación, complejidad)* [Galaxia Gutenberg, 2018], by Agustín Fernández Mallo, and *Talking Trash: Cultural Uses of Waste* (Vanderbilt UP, 2019), by Maite Zubiaurre, among others. Through its effective narrowing of the gap between Hispanic Studies and Waste Studies, *Basura* renovates the bookshelf of surveys of Spanish culture, offering an innovative reassessment that validates the discourse of waste’s capacity to generate a creative counternarrative.

Similarly, what makes this book valuable for those interested in bringing together Waste Studies and the Humanities is its examination of trash’s role in culture and art and the role that creativity plays in how we understand and care for the environment. In his introduction Amago inserts his study in the context of the Spanish transition to democracy and explicates how Waste Studies offers a critical approach flexible enough to navigate the distinct cultural practices selected to illuminate trash’s presence and significance. The six chapters that follow are divided equally into two parts that reveal different manifestations of waste in contemporary Spanish culture. The first part, entitled “Waste Matters”, finds in Pedro Almodóvar’s 1980s film oeuvre (chapter 1), the 2013 Madrid sanitation workers’ strike (chapter 2), and the photography portfolio of Óscar Carrasco and Jordi Bernadó (chapter 3) evidence of “waste” that “matters” and whose erasure was required to modernize the Spanish urban space, thereby converting this “matter” into the depository of that space’s history.

A chief insight running through Part One is that the discourse of cleanliness oversees the transformation of Spanish urban space. The garbage trucks, sanitation

workers, and rubbish, especially plastics, that abound in Almodóvar's *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (1980) and *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (1984) construct a cinematic presentation of waste's agency in the design of a new and clean urban space. Amago observes that waste imagery disappears from Almodóvar's twenty-first century oeuvre, a sign of Spain's achievement of urban modernity (57). Waste is inevitable, however, and contemporary social and economic structures rely on its invisibility to secure the seamless functioning of capitalism and a pristine national image. Notwithstanding that effort, the accumulation of trash on the capital city streets came to a head in the November 2013 week-long sanitation workers' strike. The ensuing point of contention between workers and the local political administration brings to light the intersection and interconnection between economic and political power, waste disposal, and urban development. In an analysis that aligns *Basura* with *Wasteocene*, Amago studies the strike through the media attention received in Twitter and the daily newspaper *El País*. Amago does not justify his selection of print media and it is possible that a reader may be left wondering if and how the other national newspapers and digital press outlets treated the strike, or if they trashed it altogether. Irregardless, the inclusion of the strike in *Basura* is fitting because it expands the scope of spaces and creative mediums where waste and wasting works itself out. Amago's discussion of trash's political power also tightens the points where *Basura* and *Wasteocene* intersect. Finally, the photographic engagement of wasted spaces in Madrid and Barcelona is an example of waste's generative capacity, another key thread running throughout *Basura*. In chapter 3 Amago turns to this idea through the study of Jordi Bernadó's *Welcome to España* (2010) and Óscar Carrasco's 2014 exhibition at Madrid's Fragua de Tabacalera, showing how the photography of modern urban ruins creates a visual archive of spaces and practices deemed useless or disposable for the nation's democratic future.

In the second part, "Waste Humanism", the author changes gears to focus on instances and consequences of waste's interaction with the human body, a line of inquiry aligned with Armiero's spotlighting of the wasted body. Amago studies this image and reality in different literary genres, thus revealing waste's appeal and attraction to contemporary Spanish literature. The section begins with a reading of Benjamín Prado's 2006 *Mala gente que camina*, a historical novel that epitomizes contemporary Spanish fiction's inquiry into the national past. The subject of the stolen babies during the Franco dictatorship, historical memory, and the ethics of discarding and saving that memory construct the narrative scaffolding of *Mala gente que camina*. This chapter delivers a precise close reading of how the novel—Prado's and the genre in general—excavates and recovers the historical memory Spain's rapid modernization erased. Chapter 5 addresses the effective role of comic books in bringing to the fore the human consequences of the economic crisis. *Aquí vivo: Historia de un desahucio* (2016), written by Isaac Rosa and illustrated by Cristina Bueno, and *Barcelona; Los vagabundos de la chitarra* (2015), by Sagar Forniés and Jorge Carrión, make visible trash's bearing on the politics of space. Here Amago scrutinizes how these graphic narratives bring to the center evictions and the exclusion of wasted communities composed of immigrants and victims of the housing crisis in Madrid and Barcelona. The final chapter of *Basura* extends the scope of waste



from the material sphere to the constitution of selfhood. In this turn, Amago examines human materiality and deterioration, or its junking, in Rosa Montero's *La hija del caníbal* (1997) and *La carne* (2016). His analysis highlights how the strategies of metafiction facilitate the characters' self-awareness of their relationship to waste.

*Basura* is an ambitious project that—to borrow from the waste glossary—rummages through an eclectic cultural archive: film, photography, print and digital media, novels, and comic books. Its theoretical framework is equally eclectic, drawing on critical waste scholarship by Thierry Bardini, Maurizia Boscagli, Neil Brenner, Mary Douglas, Jennifer Gabrys, Gay Hawkins, Rem Koolhaas, John Scanlan, Maite Zubiaurre, as well as Spanish Cultural Studies bibliography by Malcolm Compitello, Susan Larson, Matthew Feinberg, among others. The author justifies his method as consistent with waste's own diversity, and he handles the eclecticism with skill by cross-referencing between chapters and constantly referencing them back to his central argument, thereby reminding the reader of the bigger picture that frames his subject. Finally, the color plates that handsomely illustrate *Basura* reinforce the book's mission to keep waste visible.

The ideal reader of these volumes is not just a scholar of Environmental or Hispanic Studies but also a general reader, specifically, a concerned citizen, or an individual interested in becoming one, committed to creating and maintaining a clean and salubrious environment for all. The success of *Wasteocene* and *Basura*, for this reader, lies in the valuable lessons these books offer specialists and the non-academic audience alike about how society wastes and thinks about waste. Armiero and Amago's publications will surely enrich and renovate research and teaching and will be consulted as Waste Studies continues to evolve and grow.