

Book Review | *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power*, by Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky (MIT Press, 2022)

Natalia Espinel-Quintero
Concordia University
nespinelquin@gmail.com

Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky start their latest book, *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power* (2022), with an ordinary object that, though seemingly familiar, carries with it a web of invisible and unspoken relations. By exploring the toxic entanglements behind a discarded cash register receipt, Liboiron and Lepawsky take an unexpected path to ask how objects, people, communities, materials, and practices become valued or disposable. Throughout the book, the authors show how wasting is a technique of power and address the role of discarding in the construction and preservation of dominant structures.

Discard studies emerged in 2010 as an interdisciplinary field of research initiated by Robin Nagle, founder of the Discard Studies online hub. Scholars in this field look at the why, what, where, and how of waste, and ask questions about the systems that shape and render things disposable. Even though Liboiron and Lepawsky state that they do not seek to provide an overview of the field, those unfamiliar with the discipline might find that the book offers a good introduction to it. In fact, through the introductory chapter the authors discuss some key discard studies concepts and present four methods used by discard studies scholars to debunk common myths about waste—namely, defamiliarization, denaturalization, decentering, and depurifying. Although these methods are often used to think about waste and trash, the authors show, through the theories expounded in subsequent chapters, that it is possible to use these approaches to think more widely about power, inequality, and justice.

In chapter two, the authors lay out a theory of scale, discussing the unevenness in relationships within systems and defining scale as “*relationships that matter*” (45). Using a situated perspective to think about these relationships might help us

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avoid what Liboiron and Lepawsky call *scalar mismatches*: problems that arise with reductionist or monolithic approaches to knowledge in which only one perspective is understood as valid (40). This concept of scalar mismatches, which becomes central to the chapter, highlights the importance of situated thinking, and acts as an invitation to avoid solutionism and consider system interventions instead (41). The methods of defamiliarization and denaturalization are used through the different examples presented in the chapter to question how and why certain perspectives and notions of waste become dominant. For instance, the authors show how individualism is often “naturalized through per-capita waste statistics” (48). This, they argue, makes it seem as if individuals were the main generators of waste, when in fact consumers are “only a waypoint for objects that have been designed to be wasted” (48). Thus, though initiatives such as recycling might give us the idea that we are working towards waste reduction—what Samantha MacBride (2011) calls “busy-ness”—scalar thinking shows that recycling, rather than helping save raw materials, continues to promote plastic production.

Through the theory of power presented in chapter three, Liboiron and Lepawsky show how discarding is used to get rid of undesired others to maintain order. Power is discussed not necessarily as coercion or a relation of force, but as a form of selection that enables to keep things in and/or out of place. Using commercial content moderation (CCM) and recycling as examples, the authors invite readers to think about the ways in which discarding is used within systems to avoid change at a level that actually matters. In both cases, discarding serves to maintain disposability. Recycling does this by making “disposables appear sustainable [,]” making pollution an invisible part of the recycling equation (70). With CCM, not only is content discarded, but also the workers who are hired to do the sorting job. Social media platforms ensure that their audiences are kept “safe” and their feeds “clean” by outsourcing the labor of content moderators to contractors that make these workers sign non-disclosure agreements. The workers are exposed to the images that threaten the “cleanliness” of these platforms, but since they cannot talk about the burdens of these jobs once they have left them the “stream of worker disposability” is maintained (74). The case of CCM illustrates “that the principles, practices, and politics of discard are a regular part of broader systems” (66). It also shows how those systems create sacrifice zones to pass the burden of waste, pollution, or the undesirable onto disposable others, keeping the center(s) of those systems clean. In this case, decentering is used to uncover those sacrifice zones and render visible the systems behind them.

In chapter four, the authors develop a theory of difference. This theory is about paying attention to the many ways that difference is related to dominant systems, but also to the need of using difference as a form of reflexivity. Difference, they assert, “is both key to maintaining order and disrupting power” (96). Through sorting, classification, or discarding, differences “are built, maintained, and

contribute to uneven power relations” (99). Several methods are used throughout the chapter, but two of them stand out: denaturalization and depurifying. Denaturalization is used to show how difference is discarded to maintain business as usual and avoid accountability. For instance, in the totalizing “we” often evoked in scientific, environmental, and political discourses, or in the assertion that “humans” are trashing the planet, not only is an exclusionary notion of humanity naturalized—as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) and Sylvia Wynter (2003) have shown—but the social, economic, and political systems that mandate and promote disposability are also erased. But difference is not always ignored. In fact, as Liboiron and Lepawsky assert, “classifying, defining, sorting, ranking things by value, and other forms of differentiation—creating and acting on difference—are central to discarding” (97). When difference is used to support racist, sexist, transphobic, or ableist claims, depurifying is needed to analyze “the discourses, logics, and other techniques that aim to essentialize and control difference” (121).

Finally, building on all these theories and methods, chapter five introduces a theory of change and uneven ethics. This final theory makes it possible to see discarding not just as technique of power but also as a technique of change. Change here is understood as something normative and specific that deals with systems instead of symptoms (for instance, dealing with the current system of disposability instead of dealing with plastics through recycling), and that is accountable to discard as a practice and to what is discarded (128–29). Most importantly, the authors argue that all theories of change must observe an ethic of incommensurability by recognizing that there is no single universal good. Liboiron and Lepawsky close the chapter by talking about the importance of discarding well to change systems. In fact, they explain how in the writing of the book they were confronted with an ethical problem that forced them to discard a case study to keep themselves accountable (144). Initially, they wanted to present a case study about mushroom harvesting in T̓silhqot’in Territory but, given that they did not have the consent of the community at the time they were writing, they decided to discard the case study to emphasize the importance of discarding well and to bring the discussion to the academic ground. Discarding that case study sets an example of how scalar, situated, and relational thinking can disrupt the system and its logics. While this is not a new argument for feminist STS scholars, Liboiron and Lepawsky’s discussion about this ethical problem and their talk about Memorial University’s Research Impacting Indigenous Groups policy can serve as a guide for feminist STS researchers who are looking for ways to develop accountable and anti-colonial methodologies. In addition, the book offers useful tools and methods for interdisciplinary researchers to go beyond the identification of systemic issues and define where and how interventions are more likely to have an impact (132).

Unlike most books, *Discard Studies* does not end with its last theoretical chapter. In the reference section, the authors include a short section in which they hold themselves accountable for their citational practices and bring up the ways in which discarding is often at work when it comes to citing Black women and women of color. Though the paragraph acts as an invitation for readers to review their own citational practices, as a Global South researcher who lives and works in the Global North and often encounters this form of discarding, I would have liked to see a more in-depth discussion of this issue. When it comes to citing, academic discarding works in favor of what Aymara/Bolivian feminist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui calls the “political economy of knowledge” (2012, 102). Rivera Cusicanqui refers to the hierarchies of knowledge that are formed through citational practices when prominent Global North authors are cited over emergent Global South scholars—who are addressing the same issues but do not have the same platforms as the former, or who encounter barriers to publish their work in English because it fails to cite known authors. As a technique of power, discarding is used to ensure these hierarchies are kept in place. In this case, how can discarding well help build relationships that matter with thinkers, artists, and writers who are on the margins of the system? Though there is no direct answer to this question in the book, readers are equipped with the tools needed to address this gap.

Timely, inspiring, and insightful, *Discard Studies* offers a generative critique at the same time as it develops a conversation with readers. In an accessible language, the authors establish a relationship of care with us and ask us to be reciprocal in our reading, be it by thinking along with them or by bringing all these questions and theories to our disciplines of study.

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Author Bio

Natalia Espinel-Quintero is an MA student in Media Studies at Concordia University in Tiohtia:ke/Montreal. She also holds a master's degree in Latin American Cultural Studies from Universidad Javeriana (Colombia).