

Traces “We” Leave Behind: Toward the Feminist Practice of Stig(e)merging

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Abstract

As Serpil Oppermann has stated, “the Anthropocene has come to signify a discourse embedded in the *global scale* vision of the sedimentary traces of the anthropos” (“The Scale of the Anthropocene” 2). In the following article we wish to revisit the practice of leaving traces through thinking with wastes as traces human beings leave behind and lands of waste that co-compose today’s naturecultures (Haraway, *Companion Species*). Situating our research in the context of Polish ecocriticism, we would like to think-with an art project by Diana Lelonek entitled *Center for the Living Things*, in which the artist gathers and exhibits waste that “have become the natural environment for many living organisms” (Lelonek). Following the ambivalent and chaotic traces of wastes, we offer a concept of stig(e)merging to rethink the “unruly edges” (Tsing 141-54) of capitalist wastelands. We fathom stig(e)merging as a feminist methodology that relies on reacting to changes and alterations in the milieu, as well as the actions and needs of others, and on participating in the common work of reshaping the un/wasted world together with them.

Keywords: environmental humanities, waste, feminism, multispecies communities, Anthropocene.

Resumen

Tal y como afirma Serpil Oppermann, “el Antropoceno ha llegado a significar un discurso grabado en la visión de *escala global* de las huellas sedimentarias del antropos” (“The Scale of the Anthropocene” 2). En el siguiente artículo revisamos la práctica de ‘dejar huellas’ centrándonos en los residuos, pues estos son los signos que la humanidad deja atrás y los territorios desechados que co-componen el mundo cultural-natural *contemporáneo* (Haraway, *Companion Species*). Situando nuestra investigación en el contexto de la ecocrítica polaca, nos gustaría reflexionar sobre el proyecto artístico de Diana Lelonek titulado *Centro para los seres vivos*. En él, la artista recoge y exhibe materias residuales que “se han convertido en el ambiente natural para muchos organismos vivos” (Lelonek). Siguiendo las huellas ambivalentes y caóticas dejadas por los desechos, ofrecemos un concepto de “estig(e)mergia” como un instrumento para pensar de nuevo los “bordes rebeldes” (*unruly edges*) (Tsing 141-54) de las tierras baldías capitalistas. Proponemos que estig(e)mergia funcione como una metodología feminista capaz de reaccionar sensitivamente a los cambios y alteraciones en el ambiente, a las acciones y necesidades de los otros y otras, así como a participar en el trabajo común de remodelar del mundo desaprovechado.

Palabras clave: humanidades ambientales, residuos, feminismo, comunidades multispecies, Antropoceno.

Addressing the problem of anthropogenic climate change, Serpil Oppermann has suggested that “the Anthropocene has come to signify a discourse embedded in the *global scale* vision of the sedimentary traces of the anthropos” (“The Scale of the Anthropocene” 2). At the same time however, she points out that adopting such a global scale vision “does not adequately situate the complexities and stories of the Anthropocene when considered from close-up perspectives” (7). It is therefore important not to allow the global scale approach to dominate discussions on the Anthropocene in order not to lose sight of the situated material, social, and political factors at play. In what follows, we wish to take up a cross-scale perspective: zooming into the material traces of the anthropos and stories emerging from them. Our matter of concern and care in this text is waste: as just one of many Anthropocene stories but also a storyteller in its own right. We revisit the practice of leaving traces through thinking with wastes as traces human beings leave behind and lands of waste as composites of today’s naturecultures (Haraway, *Companion Species*).

Enormous masses of plastic float on the Pacific Ocean, creating a great Pacific trash vortex; toxic pollutants are found in food and drinking water; plastics fill the stomachs of the Midway Island birds, camels in the Arabian Desert, and polar bears in the Arctic; waste, often following old colonial routes, travels from richer to poorer countries. In our native Poland more trash was brought to the country in 2018 than ever before, despite environmentalists’ outcry and warnings, and that includes also highly dangerous waste like asbestos and mercury (Gurgul and Łazarczyk). The emerging landscape of the Anthropocene seems to be a wasted one. In the epoch of unhinged environmental crisis, how do we adjust our critical lenses to focus on such contaminated and problematic traces “we” leave behind? And which routes and trajectories can lead us to address this mess?

The noun *waste* stems from the Old French *westen*, meaning “uninhabited (or sparsely inhabited) and uncultivated country; a wild and desolate region, a desert, wilderness” (OED). Toward the 17th century, waste started to denote a part of a mine from which the coal had been extracted, replacing its older sense as common land. In the word “waste” the transformations of English economy can be traced, from enclosures to industrialization, as well as their impact, as toward the 16th century “waste’s” usage in a sense of “worthless people” is first mentioned (OED). In the 19th century, waste came to imply “refuse matter; unserviceable material remaining over from any process of manufacture; the useless by-products of any industrial process; material or manufactured articles so damaged as to be useless or unsaleable” (OED). Some of these etymological traces accumulated in the word “waste” meet in Polish forests. Forests are considered as places of recreation and regeneration, where one can breathe deeper, walk freer, and where older rules of economy still are at place: one can pick berries and mushrooms, cherish the views, and find peace of mind for free. Moreover, the forests are dubbed “the lungs of Poland” to underline their role in sustaining liveable, or breathable, living conditions for human and more-than-human life forms. And yet, at the same time, forests are sites of illegal and uncontrollable dumping of trash. Thus, there is an ambiguity attached to forests as sites of wilderness and of dump. They are—what we name—un/wasted lands: lands imagined as immune to disastrous impacts of Western industrialized civilization and simultaneously lands covered with layers and layers of stuff

that post-industrial societies no longer need or desire (being at the same time commodified in timber economy). By adding a slash in “un/wasted” we indicate this ambiguity, which attests to the still unexhausted possibilities these sites may generate for thinking and living in the Anthropocene, as we refuse to discard their existence.

Philosopher Michael Marder goes as far as to diagnose that “ours is the age of global dump” (180), as “we live and die on a dump of ideas, bodies, dreams, materials, snippets of relations, sound bites and memes, decontextualized and dehistoricized, produced as waste” (180). The Polish context of waste politics allows us to understand Marder’s words literally. Poland became an important player in a global waste management in recent years, accepting thousands of tons of trash yearly—some of which is utilized and recycled—some of which ends up in landfills. And then came the fires; in the summer of 2019, garbage heaps went up in smoke in dozens of Polish towns and villages, shooting up hazardous substances like benzopyrenes, VOCs, furan, and dioxins in coarse and fine particulate matter, that can penetrate the deepest part of the lungs such as the bronchioles or alveoli.

Waste is deeply entangled with issues of social and environmental justice, as it trashes some communities and tarnishes the health of individuals, affecting disproportionately those who are already marginalized in manifold ways that follow along the lines of race, gender, socio-economic or legal status, and so forth. For this reason, it is hardly a surprise that waste-related matters attracted the attention of feminist and other critical thinkers. Waste opens questions of how different lives are valued—apparent in metaphoric expressions such as “white trash” or Zygmunt Bauman’s “wasted lives.” Waste intersects with questions of reproductive justice and choice—from questions of how much waste production is involved in child-rearing, to how contraceptives and hormonal replacement therapy pollute waters. Following the oft-quoted definition, offered by Mary Douglas, of “dirt as matter out of place” (44), waste can be seen as a disruptive agent in relation to the existing orders of things, as a yet different example of “unruly edges” (Tsing 141-54), that which, staying on the margins, proves to be generative and nonconforming to the status quo.

In this respect, waste is a feminist issue in which the question of agency of matter meets issues of social justice and toxic legacies of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. In this vein, Diana Coole (2015) analyses the flows of matter and dirt. Myra J. Hird’s broad approach to waste includes research undertaken in collaboration with Alexander Zahara, where they think “waste sites [as] colonial in and of themselves” (“Arctic Wastes” 122). Françoise Vergès (2019) parses out the connections between waste, colonial pasts, and gendered violence of racism and capitalism, and asks a key question concerning who ends up cleaning it up. And Joanna Żylińska (2018) when thinking about the Anthropocene stories of damage, apocalyptic affects, and inventing ways to act against harms, stresses the need for feminist activism, ethics, and politics in order not to let—paraphrasing the famous title of a book by Rebecca Solnit *Men Explain Things to Me* (2014)—“men repair the world for me” (Żylińska). From a yet different perspective, the practice of composting has become a generative feminist metaphor—indicating a possibility of rethinking relations between—among other things—human and nonhuman agents in search for

lively and hopeful future (Haraway 2016; Oppermann 2017; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Neimanis and Hamilton 2018).

Jennifer Mae Hamilton and Astrida Neimanis open their reflection on composting with a note on the practice of waste management: “Atop a kitchen bench rest three containers labeled ‘chickens,’ ‘worms,’ and ‘compost.’ Those who live in this house learn how to cook and clean up in relation to these bins. [...] each bin participates in a domestic methodology for material repurposing—composting” (502). Such a careful waste management matters, but, in this article, we would like to turn our attention to another bin: the one which collects the kind of waste that cannot be composted, recycled, upcycled, or reused. It collects the waste that cannot be redeemed; unlike a compost pile it cannot be tasked with bringing hope for creative, nutritive transformation of matter. It is an embarrassing kind of waste that “we do not want to remember, or be remembered for” (Zahara and Hird, “Raven, Dog, Human” 178).

Directing our attention to non-compostable waste, we wish to point to precisely this matter as matter of care (Puig de la Bellacasa) and at the same time indicate a possible direction for ecocritical research. We wish to think more just, attentive, caring, and kinder worlds, and we think of these theoretical efforts as part and parcel of feminist agenda. María Puig de la Bellacasa wrote: “care is omnipresent, even through the effects of its absence” (1). Wasted landscapes are indeed neglected landscapes, written by the absence of care for the place, the humans, and the nonhumans who inhabit it. Directing our affectionate attention to waste is a way to attend to the questions of how care is distributed in the late capitalism and what power relations are maintained by this particular distribution of care. Evoking Rebecca Scott’s question: “Who will love the postmining landscape?” (381), we ask: Who will love wasted landscapes? Who will love an old shoe, a discarded TV set, a landfill, a garbage pile? And when we say “love,” Scott’s articulation of loving reverberates through it: “Far past enjoyment and far short of ownership, loving happens in innumerable dependencies and reciprocities with creatures, entities, and landforms beyond our categories, control, or understanding” (387).

Here, at the intersection of un/wasted landscapes and matters of care, we have encountered the work by Polish visual artist Diana Lelonek. Like other Polish female artists, such as Teresa Murak, Cecylia Malik, Joanna Rajkowska, Karolina Grzywnowicz, among others, she picks up ecocritical and vegetal themes to explore the entanglement of questions of environmental change, materiality, history, and economy. In her project *The Center for Living Things* (2016-ongoing), an institution established “in order to examine, collect and popularize the knowledge concerning new humanotic nature forms,” she retrieves “abandoned objects, used and no longer needed commodities—wastes of human overproduction, which have become the natural environment for many living organisms” (*Center*). The exhibited specimens include an old shoe, a discarded purse, TV set pieces, electronic cables, plastic packagings and PCV bottles, and many more that serve as a new home for different plant and fungi species. Lelonek finds the specimens at illegal dumping sites where human-made objects meet plants, moss, or fungi. Together they create new non/living conditions and environments. In companionship of these organisms and

objects the artist explores the emergent “sphere of rejection and uselessness.” Such “hybrids of plants and artificial objects are difficult to classify, as they are contemporaneously animate and inanimate,” natural and cultural, use-ful and use-less (Lelonek). Although humans are absent from Lelonek’s archives, their presence is obvious: it is anthropogenic overproduction, consumerism, and reckless mismanagement of waste that are at the center of her project. The scavenged items are traces of what “we,” humans, leave behind, visible marks of the margins and sites of oblivion of global capitalism, but they are also traces of something new as they enter into intimate relationships with vegetal, fungal, and other becomings.



Fig. 1: Diana Lelonek, *Shoe environment II*, from the series *Center For Living Things*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist. All rights reserved for artist.

Some of the plant and fungi specimens collected by Lelonek were moved to the Botanical Garden in Poznan, Poland, together with their plastic or otherwise artificial companions, troubling the dominant hierarchy between exotic, rare, and valuable animate beings and those common, ruderal, weedy species, as well as interrogating the practices of caring, knowing, and exhibiting that come with such divisions. Similarly, the practice of displaying the specimens in the gallery spaces disrupts the oppositions between the undesired, trashy, useless, toxic, plastic, dead and the exhibit worth

presenting, life-giving, fruitful, and alive (the botanical and fungal companions in show are watered and thus kept alive).

The trace-like mode of existence of these rude/ral bodies—plastic and organic, man-made and botanical, dead and alive, as well as their coexistence with/in un/wasted landscapes, inspired us to revisit the concept of stigmergy we offered elsewhere (Cielemecka and Rogowska-Stangret). On the etymological plain, the word stigmergy derives from the Greek word *stigma* meaning sign, and *ergon* meaning work or action. It was coined to name a biological mechanism, described mostly in the context of insect life, which enables communication and self-organization of those nonhuman living organisms by means of changes that occur in their surrounding environment. Animals such as termites and ants can “talk to” each other and collaborate by leaving traces in their lived milieu and by reacting sensitively to these changes, creating—as a result—impressive architecture like termite mounds. For us stigmergy is a metaphor with which we fathom feminist collaborative work that is attentive, relational, situated, trans-corporeal (Alaimo), nonhierarchical, open to experiments and surprises. Such a model speaks to an urgent need for ongoing feminist territorial work, in which various agents are at play. This process happens on the ground, from the bottom up, while the openness to an encounter and difference, and the care work that it necessarily involves constitute the building blocks that make it a feminist project of relationality. Stigmergy emphasizes the agential nature of the more-than-human and leads to unthought-of results or ideas. It allows us to think knowledge production as a result of “a swarm of factors, of sudden attunement with something that caught our attention, resonated with us, affectively led our thoughts in a different direction” (Cielemecka and Rogowska-Stangret 55). And as such it makes space for feminist creativity, curiosity and wonder.

Thinking through and experimenting with possible ecological modes of leaving traces collectively, makes us think of a possible evolution of this concept into stig(e)merging. Here, the signs or traces (*stigma*) of human presence and plant resilience, of ecological disturbances and human and nonhuman responses to it, merge with each other and co-emerge: the artificial and natural traces cross-breed and the plant-rubbish hybrid grows out of these traces, preparing the ground for their unlikely—and unintended—coexistence.

Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola in their oft-quoted book *Brilliant Green* affirm that “every single plant is a swarm” (146). In a similar vein, we imagine the animate-inanimate hybrids as swarms: swarms of organic and inorganic particles and cells, of chemical substances and physiological processes, of modes of capitalist overproduction and floral abundance, of survival skills and endurance, of pasts, presents, and futures, of agentic capabilities at the peripheries of desires, lives, and economies, of creative and generative processes of mattering. As such the traces that merge and co-emerge with/in each other form stig(e)merging hybrids understood as dynamic and layered constellations (but also installations showcased in art spaces and specimens living in the botanical garden) of signs and responses, of ongoing dialoguing, story-telling, and story-making.



Fig. 2: Diana Lelonek, *The Habitat of Household Appliances I I / Post-household Habitat I*, from the series *Center For Living Things*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist. All rights reserved for artist.

It is thus a “storied matter” as conceptualized by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, who offer the concept of storied matter as “a material ‘mesh’ of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces” (1-2). The waste-organic hybrids tell the stories of humans and nonhumans, their global and intimate relationships, of the traces “we” leave behind in the Anthropocene, of life and death on Earth, of the hopes for the future conveyed through living things, living wastes, and living stories. Stig(e)merging hybrids give birth to un/wasted landscapes: both dead and alive, cultural and natural, human and nonhuman, trashy and artistic, and they continue telling stories about the stuff that kills and the stuff that gives life, about times of hopelessness and that which brings hope—while all these things are inseparable from one another.

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