8-23-2016

The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter by Susan Signe Morrison

Matthew Zantingh
Briercrest College

Part of the Critical and Cultural Studies Commons, Literature in English, North America Commons, Nature and Society Relations Commons, and the Place and Environment Commons

Follow this and additional works at / Suivez-nous ainsi que d’autres travaux et œuvres:
https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose

Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée
https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol15/iss1/13.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.
Cet article vous est accessible gratuitement et en libre accès grâce à Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Le texte a été approuvé pour faire partie intégrante de la revue The Goose par un rédacteur autorisé de Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Pour de plus amples informations, contactez scholarscommons@wlu.ca.
Trash, Garbage, Detritus and All Things Waste

The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter by SUSAN SIGNE MORRISON
Palgrave Macmillan, 2015 $90.00

Reviewed by MATTHEW ZANTINGH

In the process of writing this review, I surveyed my crowded office desk and noticed all kinds of waste on it including used scraps of paper, cardboard boxes waiting to be recycled, ripped Kleenexes which may or may not be used, and crumbs from my lunch among other things. In this moment of pause, I can see clearly how my understanding of waste has been greatly expanded by Susan Signe Morrison’s The Literature of Waste: Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter.

Morrison’s book builds on anthropological and sociological work on garbage and waste to think through what waste might mean in literary texts and how humans can begin to come to terms with “the repercussions from and interpretations and ethics of waste” (1). Her work is driven by a need to respond to not just material garbage but also to the ways that humans turn places and other humans into waste. As she provocatively states: “I hope my book will ‘mark’ my readers to attend to waste, to keep it ‘on our radar,’ both theoretically and practically. Literature and poetry, even—or especially—those animated by waste, are crucial for learning how to lead an ethical life” (14). She suggests throughout that it is only when we begin to think through garbage, degradation, fecal matter, and all things waste that we might begin to live ethical lives. I find these goals deeply admirable and I think her book can help bring readers to a better understanding of waste.

However, there are two criticisms I want to lay out before I address the strengths of the book. The first is that I did not find the overall structure of the book helpful. Ostensibly, the book is organized around the United States Environmental Protection Agency’s hierarchy for solid waste management with four options: treatment and disposal, energy recovery, recycling and composting, and source reduction and reuse (10). While this seems like an interesting strategy, I am not convinced it comes off, because I never quite felt like the connection between management method and the content and analysis she offered was especially clear or strong. Complicating matters more, she also self-consciously chooses to model her writing on modernist collage so that she moves freely across time and space in order to seek out waste. She aims to “seek out ‘unexpected’ affinities among works” (31), and the book does produce some striking affinities, particularly between readings of Hamlet, Icelandic sagas, and contemporary texts like A.R. Ammons’ Garbage or F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby. Even though she warns readers not look for sustained readings, I constantly felt like a sustained reading would have been quite helpful at various points.

Moreover, some of the jumps between texts were also jarring. Perhaps part of the problem is waste itself. Morrison writes that “though waste has been understood differently in various places over time, certain aspects remain constant: waste is always material (first) and figurative and metaphoric (second)” (8). Waste looked at broadly seems solid enough, but on closer inspection it is far more messy. In this sense, sustained analysis may in fact prove quite difficult or counter to Morrison’s purpose in trying to highlight its historical presence and continued environmental and ethical challenge.

The second criticism is much more mundane and is symptomatic, I think, of academia more generally. And this is that Morrison’s book is very citation heavy. She is working to establish interdisciplinary connections among philosophers like Emanuel Levinas or Michel Serres, sociologists like Zygmunt Bauman and John Scanlan, and cultural studies scholars like Gay Hawkins and others. I think she does good work here, but at
times, I kept wanting her to dig into the theoretical material she was citing in more depth rather than offering a single sentence or catch phrase from an author and a footnote signalling that source. Her work is clearly deeply researched but I found the seventy pages of footnotes daunting to say the least. Again, this criticism may be disqualified by her desire to use collage techniques rather than sustained analysis. She may also see herself as self-consciously following the speaker of T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* in shoring up fragments against ruin, but I am not certain whether this approach is effective in terms of leading readers to action.

And this may be precisely her point. She is not seeking to be programmatic or prescriptive about waste, but instead aims at making readers more aware of the many different kinds and qualities of waste that make up literature and culture. Her final two chapters on source reduction and reuse articulate a clear vision of how poetry might help humans to see waste in all its forms as ethical matter, calling for action. She picks up on the idea of the poet as *chiffonier* or rag-picker and suggests that through this garbage collecting, the poet “lets us feel viscerally the terror of waste, yet revel in the beauty of artifacts of loveliness—the word, the meter, the sound, the hush of decay” (199). Her work brings together Walt Whitman, Ammons, and Italo Calvino along with Chaucer and others in an exciting and awe-inspiring assemblage.

*The Literature of Waste* also offers valuable commentary in thinking about intertextuality as a kind of recycling, the dangers of seeing certain groups of humans as waste, the dependent relations a city has with rural landscapes concerning waste disposal, and the pressing problem of conspicuous consumption and the often hidden increase in waste it produces. As I was trying to dig through Morrison’s midden heap of literature, theory, and history, I found myself constantly struck by poignant insights and thoughtful articulations, especially her work on early modern and medieval texts.

In terms of ecocriticism, the book is a great example of interdisciplinary thought that seeks to address environmental crisis. She does not preach on a soapbox as she so easily could, but instead tries to cultivate an engaged thinking through of what waste is, how it is produced, and how we might address it as ethical matter. Scholars and readers interested in material culture or any of its various offshoots will find much of use here while those interested in garbage more generally will also find this book a useful introduction to thinking about waste.

**MATTHEW ZANTINGH** is an Assistant Professor of English at Briercrest College and Seminary in Caronport, Saskatchewan. His research focuses on the imprint and impact of nature on culture in Canadian literature. He is particularly interested in the ways it manifests itself in urban nature, imagined environmental futures, and wilderness narratives.