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Waste Literacies

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In this paper, we argue that we need to cultivate *waste literacies* – capacities to read and make meaning from signs and symbols relating to waste – if we are to navigate a path out of the current Waste Age.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to set out the value – and indeed necessity – of developing *waste literacies* in an attempt to highlight and thus potentially bring an end to what might justifiably be called the Waste Age.

We start by setting out a perspective on literacies that is informed by sociomaterial thinking and that focuses on the affective power of literacies: that is, on what literacies *do* and *enable*. We illustrate this approach using examples from conventional literacy.

We then explain why we believe new waste literacies are needed in what we call the Waste Age. We argue that waste has become particularly problematic not only because we produce it in huge volumes, but also because it has been so effectively hidden in the places where it is produced. We suggest that capacities to “read” waste in different ways are critical if we are to reconnect with questions of waste and value.

Finally, we give examples, drawn from the [Waste Stories](#) project, of three different ways that waste literacies might operate.

Some functions of sociomaterial literacies

There are many definitions of literacy – and when we expand out to the idea of literacies, the concept may be even harder to pin down. However, most perspectives on literacies include

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abilities or capacities to read systems of signs and symbols, assigning meaning to them according to culturally-constituted conventions or value systems. UNESCO (2024) defines literacy as follows:

Beyond its conventional concept as a set of reading, writing and counting skills, literacy is now understood as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world.

The *Waste Stories* project is grounded in a sociomaterial, radically ecological approach (Smith & Wilson, 2024). From this perspective, we understand knowing and meaning-making as both materially embodied and distributed; and literacies as part of material cultures. Meanings are read from and inscribed into material artefacts such as books, screens, objects and landscapes. Our position is thus informed by work on artefactual literacies (Pahl & Rowsell, 2013; Randall & Mercurio, 2015), place literacies (Nxumalo & Rubin, 2018; Somerville, 2007; Wilson, 2024; Wilson, Robertson & Dickie, 2024) and distributed literacies (Curtis, 2008). This recognition of and emphasis on the materialities of literacy systems and practices leads to a focus on what literacies *do* and *enable*, rather than what they *are*.

Of course, literacies do and enable many things. UNESCO (2024) describes the effects of literacy as follows:

Literacy empowers and liberates people. Beyond its importance as part of the right to education, literacy improves lives by expanding capabilities ...

Just as we are not going to offer a new or final definition of literacy, we do not claim that we are articulating everything that literacies do. Here, we simply suggest one way of considering what a literacy can do, in terms of the different realities that it can connect people with. Taking conventional literacy as our example, we suggest that the capacity to read the signs and symbols that make up our alphabets and punctuation marks enable us to acquire, create and share knowledges about *proximal realities*, *distal realities* and *fantastical imaginaries*.

Proximal realities are those that we are embedded in – the here and now, the things at our fingertips, the things close to our own bodies and attachments. Conventional literacy helps us navigate proximal realities in many ways. Street signs tell us where we are. Menus tell us what is available, and how much it will cost, to eat in a particular café or restaurant. Labels on medicines tell us the correct dose. Signs on doors tell us whether to push or pull. Similarly, we can write to inform or instruct others in our immediate environments: keep out, help yourself, back in 10 minutes.

Distal realities are those that we do not directly experience, perhaps because they are geographically or historically distant, or because they are culturally distant, or simply because of chance. Books and magazines allow us to read and learn about countries we have never been to; lives lived long before we were born; foods we have never eaten; faiths we have never followed; illnesses and losses we have never suffered; and victories we have never won.

Fantastical imaginaries are the realm of invention. Novels, stories, poetry and plays can engage us with fictional people, actions and worlds that do not exist, have never existed and may even be impossible.

Of course, literacy is also wrapped up with power and influence. We do not, here, address questions of who has the right to name the street, who/what controls the items and prices on the menu, who/what owns the land and decides who has access, who/what creates the account of the far-off land, the experiences of historical characters, or the rituals of a different religion. These are important – but do not detract from our position that reading and writing can connect us to the here and now, to a range of different elsewhere, and to elsewhere that exist purely in the imagination. In the following, we explain why we believe these are important functions for waste literacies.

Why we need waste literacies

There has been a proliferation of literacies in the 21st century, to the extent that some literacy scholars and practitioners have warned of the dangers of diluting the term to the point of meaninglessness (Brant and Clinton, 2002; Perry, 2024). So the reader might ask, do we really need to talk about waste literacies?

Waste literacies are needed because we live in an age which is characterised by waste, but in which we have also effectively separated waste from its sites of production. The constant production of waste is one of the defining features of contemporary life in the industrial and post-industrial Global North. According to website [statista.com](https://www.statista.com), more than 2 billion tonnes of waste are produced globally each year. The advent of cheap plastics, misrecognition of the finitude of natural resources and Westernised aspirations to lives of leisure and excess have resulted in entire economies based on constant acquisition and a concomitant habit of replacing and so discarding the “less-new”. For example, in many parts of the Global North, old habits of keeping clothing and household linens for years – and even passing them on to younger household members or adult relations setting up new homes – has been largely lost. The result is large volumes of textiles that are either thrown away and end up in landfill or incinerated, or kept but not used (another form of waste).

In the Global North, we have developed complex, large scale infrastructures to remove waste from its place of creation and dispose of it. The historical practices of dealing with our own waste – either by avoiding it in the first place, or by burying it, burning it, or throwing it into the sea ourselves, have been replaced by fleets of bin lorries, municipal collections, municipal landfills, and, increasingly, Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs) where waste is separated for recycling, incineration or landfill. Attempts to deal with the waste of the developed world have turned the Global North into a producer and exporter and the Global South and eastern Europe have become recipients of waste they did not create. Waste travels in ways we might previously never have imagined: container loads of it traverse our oceans and continents every day (EIA, 2021), further contributing to greenhouse gas emissions and climate breakdown (Hickel, 2020).

Even the notion of waste as an undifferentiated substance suggests that we need to learn (or perhaps re-learn) to read waste for what it is. Waste is precisely that: a waste of materials and objects that might have value, or that might have been a waste of value to create in the first

place. If we want to navigate a path that leads out of the Waste Age, we need waste literacies. In the Global North, we need them to reconnect us to our waste. Elsewhere, we need them to help us resist the logic of waste.

Waste literacies in practice

So what might waste literacies look like – and what might they do – in practice?

Reflecting on the notions of proximal, distal and fantastical knowings outlined above in relation to conventional literacies, we suggest the following.

The waste literacies that can develop proximal knowing include some that have already been proposed in relation to recycling and the circular economy: ‘separation’ or ‘sorting’ literacies (Chen et al., 2019; Hicks, 2022), ‘food packaging waste’ literacy (Purwanto et al., 2023) and so on. They include the ability to read the signs and symbols that tell us which bin to use for what material/object, or allow us to choose whether to buy something packaged in plastic or paper, or to choose re-usable cups or re-fillable containers. They may also include the ability to read an item of clothing or household linen and judge whether it is still wearable or reusable, or whether it is only fit for textile recycling (something that one third of UK consumers currently struggle to decide¹). They may extend beyond this, however, to include the ability to read accumulations of waste and think about what they say about society. A good example of this might be the following image, taken in Edinburgh during the waste collection strikes of September 2022.



Image provided by the Waste Stories project

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/apr/22/m-and-s-and-oxfam-trial-postal-donation-bags-for-unwearable-clothes>

A waste literacy that causes the reader of this image to see the rubbish as primarily resulting from single-use cups, food packaging and take-away food containers might help to change decisions about what to buy, whether to bring your own cup or even whether to wait to have a cup of coffee at home.

Waste literacies that develop distal knowledges include a capacity to see and read waste in and as landscape, and to understand waste journeys. For example, it is waste literacy that allows the visitor to the beach at Lossiemouth to see the tyre in the picture below and read them as evidence of a storm now past that ripped tyres-turned-to-fenders from the sides of ships or harbours.



Image provided by the Waste Stories project

A similar literacy might allow another visitor to the Dumfries and Galloway coast in southwest Scotland to read the goose-barnacle encrusted brush below and know that it must have travelled a long way, from warmer waters, perhaps as far as Florida².



Image provided by Nic Coombey/Solway Firth Partnership

Finally, waste literacies can also enable the creation of imaginaries – and particularly the creation of connections between proximal and distal waste knowledges, and imagined

² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/apr/20/florida-buoy-lands-scotland>

alternatives. The [Waste Stories](#) project has been encouraging people to do this through written stories, poems, animation and visual arts. For it is only imagination that offers a way out of the Waste Age.

Creating opportunities for waste literacies development

The questions then remain: where might such waste literacies be developed, and which organisations or people might take the lead in providing opportunities for their development?

It is important to recognise that different waste literacies are needed for different places and hence that responsibility for their development should be place-based. As described above, most waste is produced in the Global North. In urban areas, effective waste management infrastructures (both public and private) mean that waste is almost always immediately distanced from those who create it. In more remote and rural areas, residents are more likely to come face to face with their own waste on a regular basis. And outside the Global North, in places that are the destinations for significant amounts of imported waste, waste literacies development might need to emphasise the costs (and therefore value) of taking in the waste of others.

Thus the provision of waste literacy development opportunities will need to be determined and managed locally, in place-sensitive ways. They may form part of Learning City narratives, with responsibility distributed across local authorities, universities and colleges, and civil society organisations. Local authorities might explore more creative forms of communication about waste, working in partnership with civil society organisations. Importantly, universities and colleges could be tasked with embedding waste literacies into MBAs, management courses and entrepreneurship programmes, and degrees such as engineering, architecture and urban design. Eventually, they will need to be embedded in our cultures, but until then, action needs to be taken to create a widespread expectation of waste literacy across manufacturers, producers and commerce, as well as consumers.

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