

Getting Wasted

Going Beyond “Agrarian vs. Industrial” and Moving towards a New Food Ethics

Stephen Rachman
Robert Chiles
Gretel Van Wieren
Tiffany Tsantsoulas
Renee Wallace



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Abstract

For Walt Whitman, as for us today, food takes the side of life, nourishment, and nurture. As such, it opposes waste, which is associated with death, pollution, and poison. Yet Whitman connects food and waste, and our culture has scaled up these myriad connections to such an extent that we are paying increasing attention to macroscopic food-waste connections as part of a system. In this paper, we deconstruct commonsensical understandings about food waste from humanistic and experiential perspectives. We provide an overview of two contrasting paradigms of the concept of waste: the industrial and the agrarian. Waste, we propose, is best conceptualized in terms of binary tensions and opposites, as represented by nodes on Griemas's semiotic square: food/not-food/waste/not-waste. Opposition of the two paradigms, which differ with respect to where organic materials should be located in this typology, exacerbates the tensions between them. We conclude by reflecting upon the characteristics of an “ideal” food waste system.

O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken?

How can you be alive you growths of spring?

How can you furnish health you blood of herbs, roots, orchards, grain?

Are they not continually putting distemper'd corpses within you?

Is not every continent work'd over and over with sour dead?

Where have you disposed of their carcasses?

Those drunkards and gluttons of so many generations?

Where have you drawn off all the foul liquid and meat?

What chemistry!

That the winds are really not infectious,

....

That when I recline on the grass I do not catch any disease,

Though probably every spear of grass rises out of what was once a catching disease.

Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,

It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,

It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless successions of diseas'd corpses,

It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,

It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops,

It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last.

—Walt Whitman, “This Compost!”

1. The Chronotope of Waste

Walt Whitman's 1856 poem "This Compost!"¹ expresses waste as a problem of physical, even chemical, recycling and regeneration, the perpetual exchange of divine materials and such leavings as the corrupted human form becomes after death. Whitman's terms are organic, but we grasp in them our contemporary condition: a world populated with a history of Love Canals, unclaimed garbage barges floating forever off our coasts, CAFO farms spraying acres of manure, and the glowing specter of Yucca Mountains. Though the nature and scope of our waste may differ from those of Whitman's time, like Whitman, we live surrounded by waste. Our own wastes include metabolic waste, industrial waste, medical waste, nuclear waste, and food waste. Like Whitman, we are also compelled to wonder about the Earth's powers of "waste management" and of renewal, of the Earth's ability to convert waste into new life.

Indeed, the properties of waste are connected to space and time: what was once a mere waste of space or a waste of time has grown as waste has scaled up to unprecedented levels in a 24/7 culture of excess. Waste has come to shape our experience of space and time, but recognizing this state of affairs remains difficult thanks to our tendency to only see waste in one or the other of these dimensions. Waste appears most commonly as a contaminant of space or spaces, as in the examples of pollution listed above. Thought of this way, waste seems like a toxic thing in and of itself, a thing that must be contained, cleaned up, or eliminated. But when we think of waste in relation to time our conception of it changes, and we must alter the stories we tell about it accordingly.

The Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin used the term "chronotope" (literally "space-time") as an analytical tool for measuring how narratives represent space and time. Bakhtin's concept distinguished itself from other literary analyses that used space and time. By insisting that time and space are completely interdependent, neither category is given more emphasis, and texts analyzed via chronotopes might accurately reflect the cultural systems

in which they were produced.² Adapting Bakhtin's theory to understand waste in a framework that balances considerations of space *and* time together—as a chronotope—allows us to envision waste through new optics. As we begin to conceive of waste not merely spatially, as something to be removed or contained, but as part of the life cycle, we might just as easily re-conceive of waste cycles in which waste is perpetually on its way to new life and life is forever on its way to making new waste.

This is not easy, especially when contemplating forms of waste of long duration. For example, the half-lives of many radioactive elements are so far beyond human life-spans that it is difficult to grasp. For example, the uranium-235 isotope, the first atom used in fission reactions, has a half-life of 703,800,000 years. As vulnerable creatures with limited life spans, we are prone to sober contemplation of the longevity of waste—especially long-lived forms of waste that resist ready reconstitution or repurposing.

Whitman's poem resonates for the contemporary reader in the emotional logic of his wonderment and terror. "This Compost!" invokes a moment of paranoid terror of the Earth as an unfathomable repository of foul meat and putrescence. Whitman had been reading nineteenth-century chemist Justus von Liebig's *Animal Chemistry*, and as he embraces its miasmatic theories of contagion he wonders how the world brings about its own de-pathologization. Once we add the temporal dimension to this concept of waste, we recognize in it a form of decomposition that entails its own decomposition—it resonates with Georges Bataille's thoughts about the sacred and profane: "Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane."³

Waste is a complex conceptual node with origins in the ancient economic appraisal of the agricultural value of unused or unusable land, apparently chaotic or haphazard in its appearance. We continue to hear the voice of *homo oeconomicus* in the thrifty adage 'waste not, want not.' The wasted heath becomes a place of disorder and a space for the disordered mind,

1. Walt Whitman, "This Compost!" *Leaves of Grass* (New York: William E. Chapin, 1866), 306-07, 308.

2. See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michel Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981), 425-26.

3. Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 239.

as in the madness of King Lear; it is a place of inverted values in which “the art of our necessities is strange, / That can make vile things precious.”⁴ In the twentieth century, the no-man’s land of the Western Front of World War I came to represent a condition of utter barrenness, symbolizing both the scarred earth and a generation wasted in a global combat of unprecedented scale and futility. In the wake of World War I, waste was internalized as a metaphor for neuroses: “Where Id was, there ego shall be,” Freud famously asserted in his description of psychoanalysis, “It is a work of culture not unlike the draining of the Zuider Zee.”⁵ Even the hope for recovery of the modern mind is a reclamation project.

Waste can express a range of meanings from T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* to the adolescent sterility of The Who’s “Baba O’Reilly” and its teenage wasteland. By way of pathology and excretory function it comes to express a certain condition of chronic poisoning. William Empson’s villanelle “Missing Dates” expresses this bitter logic: “Slowly the blood stream the poison fills, / The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.”⁶ This concept abides in the perhaps unwitting youthful expression that equates being high or intoxicated with “being wasted.” The phrase seems to acknowledge, even as a declaration of pleasure or extremity, a form of toxicity.

For Whitman, as for us today, food is on the side of life, nourishment, and nurture. As such, it stands in opposition to waste, which is associated with death, pollution, and poison, and yet, as Whitman attempts to make a connection between nourishment and rot (“What Chemistry!”), from a contemporary point of view, we can see a number of ways in which our culture has scaled up the myriad range of connections between food and waste to such an extent that macroscopic attention is increasingly being paid to food-waste connections as part of a system. Also, in recent decades a dramatic shift in scale has taken place in the conversation

4. William Shakespeare et al., *The Tragedy of King Lear* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2009), 131.

5. Sigmund Freud, “The Dissection of the Psychical Personality,” in *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 82.

6. William Empson, “Missing Dates,” *The Australian Rationalist* 87 (2011): 18.

around food waste. “The world’s food waste mountain,” in Tristram Stuart’s phrase, more regularly comes into view so that we enter into a world much like Whitman’s, surrounded by the amazing, terrifying, and staggering waste in which the transformations of necessity and excess are fraught and frenzied.⁷ Although a mountain of waste conjures an image of alarm that can readily inspire concern, it is clearly more spatial than temporal or cyclic. The chronotopical perspective—with its more balanced awareness of time as well as space—helps to alter traditional perspectives on food and waste.

Attempts to alter traditional perspectives, however, must recognize how foundational these concepts are to cultures. Cultural anthropologists, such as Claude Levi-Strauss (*Raw and the Cooked*) and Mary Douglas (*Purity and Danger*), have shown how widespread and fundamental waste and rot and beliefs about them have been to human cultures. There are emotional components to these cultural rules, as well. Psychoanalytic perspectives explain that attitudes toward waste arise from the idea that an improper and unnecessary form of excess leads to a bodily feeling of abjection or degradation, as in this definition from Elizabeth Grosz:

Abjection is a sickness at one’s own body, at the body beyond that ‘clean and proper’ thing, the body of the subject. Abjection is the result of recognizing that the body is more than, in excess of, the ‘clean and proper.’⁸

When it comes to food, the repugnance these culturally-inscribed or perhaps idiosyncratic beliefs entail—because it is immediately felt and viscerally expressed—takes on a misleading, falsely universalizing cast. Even the observers supposed sophistication does not seem to matter. For example, the work of the philosopher/psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva describes waste as a form of abjection that compels one to recoil from the horror of dissolving boundaries and the disclosure of ambiguity, but the object of revulsion she has chosen—skin on milk—is by no means universally considered revolting. In fact, in many cultures skin on milk

7. Tristram Stuart, *Waste: Uncovering the Global Food Scandal* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 3.

8. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), 78.

is prized as a delicacy. “The skin of milk,” Kristeva writes,

for instance, puts one in mind of the thin skin membrane that defines the borders and the limits of the physical body; because human skin provides only a relatively flimsy and easily assaulted partition between the body's inside and the world outside, this milky reminder disturbs our distinctions between outside and inside, I and other, moving us to retch, and want to vomit in an acute attempt to expel the scum from our being.

...

Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver.⁹

For Kristeva, milk skin falls into the category of waste—associated with death and cadaverous skin—whereas it is a perfectly edible substance that inspires no such retching for many individuals in many cultures. Here Whitman's “This Compost!” may be instructive, as well.

In Kristeva, abjection stems from a revulsion at a food product conceived of as waste because it serves as a reminder of a bodily boundary—the skin. While Kristeva concerns herself with the ambiguity of that boundary, the way its liminal or permeable nature blurs the line between life and death, it emphasizes the spatial nature of that boundary. Milk skin and human skin are viewed as membranes between life and death. The finality of death from the point of view of the individual reinforces the body falling beyond the “cadaverous” limit.

In Whitman, the abjection and terror is also present—fear of putrefaction, sepsis, and alcoholism all express this, as does in subtler way the skin of his body as a barrier resting on the grass. However, the temporal dimension counterbalances the spatial fear of contamination with the awareness and recognition that the Earth itself possesses the redemptive function because it receives bodies and breaks down the barriers over time in a process of decomposition and re-composition. The boundary between life and death is not merely an am-

biguously permeable membrane. Instead, it is a series of interdependent systems that receive and convert disease into health and waste into new growth. In this way, adding the concept of time allows for the transformation of zones of waste into compost cycles.

Changing time-worn attitudes towards repugnance is just one part of the challenges of waste in general and food waste, in particular. Bataille understood waste as a fundamentally confusing and contradictory process, at once necessary, excessive, bodily, and economic. He emphasized the psychology of conspicuous non-consumption, that is, the prestige that attaches itself to being wasteful:

While the resources he controls are reducible to quantities of energy, man is not always able to set them aside for a growth that cannot be endless or, above all, continual. He must waste the excess, but he remains eager to acquire even when he does the opposite, and so he makes waste itself an object of acquisition. Once the resources are dissipated, there remains the prestige acquired by the one who wastes. The waste is an ostentatious squandering to this end, with a view to a superiority over others that he attributes to himself by this means.¹⁰

So deeply engrained in the modern sense of self-presentation, the “ostentatious squandering” of food is commonplace on all social scales, from the hospitality of a house party to the superabundant displays of the modern supermarket where excess (and therefore, waste) are the norm and to run out or even have just enough is virtually unthinkable.

This tension between conflicting values—between the abject and the prestigious, pollution and renewal, and the personal and systemic—has come to represent the scope of contemporary conceptions of waste. As we engage with these varied meanings of waste, we aim to expose a fundamental problem in the new ethics of food, namely, how do those committed to changing attitudes toward food, society, and culture engage, intervene, and persuade around the topic of food waste? We hope to

9. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 2–3.

10. Georges Bataille, “The Gift of Rivalry: ‘Potlatch,’” in *The Bataille Reader*, eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 205.

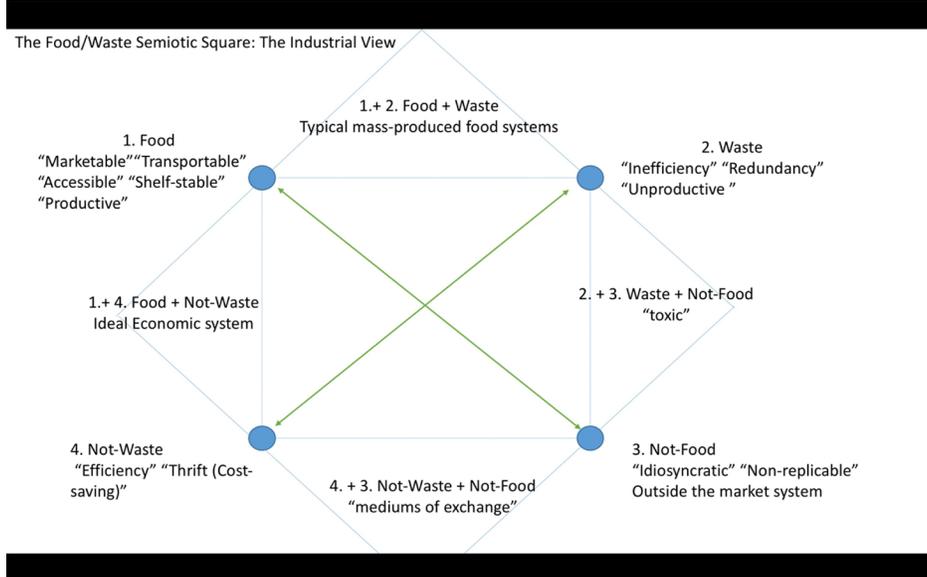


Figure 1: The Food/Waste Semiotic Square: The Industrial View

elucidate these connections by first providing an overview of two standard contrasting interpretations of the concept of waste, the agrarian and the industrial, and identifying the social, historical, and discursive forces that have shaped both popular and academic understandings of this concept beyond their scope.

2. Two Contrasting Interpretations of Waste: Agrarian vs. Industrial

In addition to the analytical lens of the chrontope, we propose that waste may be further conceptualized in terms of the relations between binary tensions and opposites, as represented by nodes on A. J. Greimas's semiotic square: food/waste/not-waste/not-food.¹¹ Different discourses, disciplines, and popular understandings will categorize organic materials at different nodes on the square. This has led to discipline-related limitations, each of which has its advantages and inconsistencies. Traditionally, economists have subscribed to the Industrial interpretation of food/waste (Figure 1) supported by the ideologies of productivism and technological progressivism, whereby failing to "improve" the land through direct cultivation and not using advanced agricultural technologies proves wasteful. Similarly, the ide-

ology of scientism asserts that modern science and technology can show us the best, most efficient paths toward reducing waste. Yet, this interpretation and its attendant discourses have shown minimal concern about "wasting" non-renewable natural resources or the commons. Moreover, critics like Michael Pollan call some of the food produced by Industry, such as Cheetos, "edible food-like substances," that is, something that is edible but nonetheless is "not food."¹² In terms of Industry food waste, Heather Rogers has argued that "increasingly, what gets thrown away is shaped by monopolistic corporate power: at one end manufacturers, marketers and admen, at the other giant corporations like Waste Management Inc."¹³ Thus, according to perspectives explicitly critical of the Industrial interpretation to food/waste, what we call Agrarian/Local (Figure 2), private sector waste reduction initiatives are neoliberal "false solutions" that are simultaneously uni-dimensional, undemocratic, end-of-pipe, band-aid, short-sighted, reductive, Boolean, colonial, and surface level.

Of course, there are important limitations to this critical discourse as well. For instance, Nicky Gregson and her colleagues argue that, "the throwaway society" thesis is something of

11. See Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1983).

12. Michael Pollan, *In Defence of Food: The Myth of Nutrition and the Pleasure of Eating* (London: Penguin UK, 2008), 1.

13. Heather Rogers, *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 9.

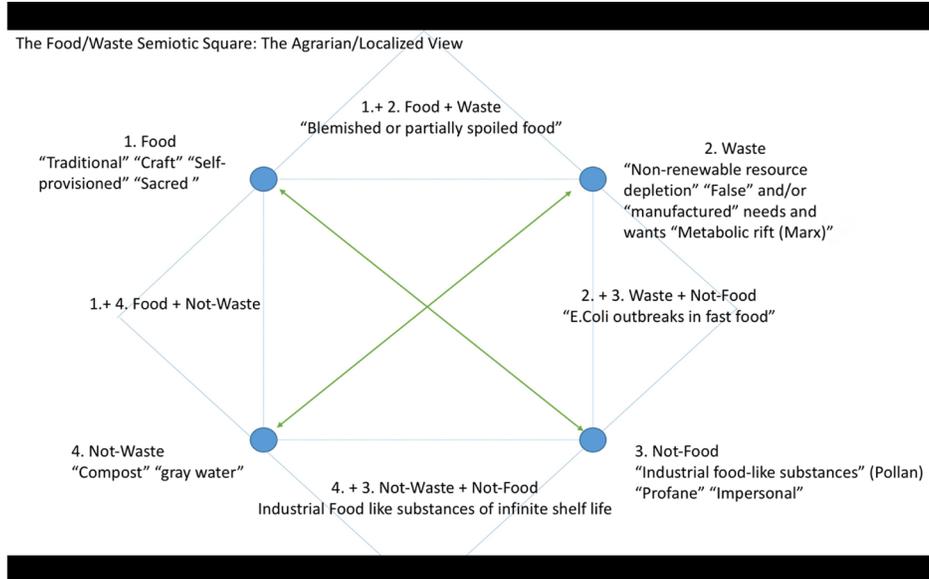


Figure 2: The Food/Waste Semiotic Square: The Agrarian/Localized View

a myth, as "all societies both throw things away and abandon them What is different about some, but not all, contemporary societies is the amount and volume of what is currently thrown away."¹⁴ By the same token, contemporary consumers often find ways to recycle, share, and reuse old items. They also argue that many people feel guilt and anxiety when throwing things away. Indeed, large-scale community-wide commitments to recycling, environmentalism, and sustainable food movements indicate that not all consumers unthinkingly embrace a maximally wasteful culture. In fact, possessions are often seen as part of one's "extended self,"¹⁵ and likewise, throwing things away can be part of identity work, as people seek to write their own life narratives.¹⁶ Furthermore, what is or is not considered "waste" within the household can be actively contested, making it more difficult to label households and communities as either decisively wasteful or conservation-minded. When we specifically consider the role food waste plays in our households, the tensions between the different nodes in the square are an increased source of guilt and anxiety among everyday consumers.

14. Nicky Gregson et al., "Identity, Mobility, and the Throw-away Society," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25, no. 4 (2007): 697.

15. Russell W. Belk, "Possession and the Extended Self," *Journal of Consumer Research* 15, no. 2 (1988): 139.

16. Nicky Gregson et al., "Identity, Mobility, and the Throw-away Society," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25, no. 4 (2007): 697.

Rogers, for example, notes that "garbage is the text in which abundance is overwritten by decay and filth ... and trash is the visible interface between everyday life and the deep, often abstract horrors of the ecological crisis."¹⁷ Food waste is moreover unique among wastes, as "food garbage smells, raising disposal and storage questions different from those generated by other trash."¹⁸

3. Conclusion: Towards a Reconceptualization of Food Waste

An integrated and holistic understanding of food waste must simultaneously resist the limitations of both neoliberal end-of-pipe solutions and the condescension that is unfortunately all too commonplace among many activist and critical circles. We reject the Boolean, determinist, and positivist logic that a certain type of organic material is or is not "food," "not food," "waste," or "not waste." These categories are socially constructed and inherently contestable. Instead, we are calling for a radically democratic interpretation of these concepts that is flexible, adaptable, and, above all, inclusive (see Figure 3). In our reinterpretation

17. Heather Rogers, *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 13.

18. Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Owl Books, 1999), 29.

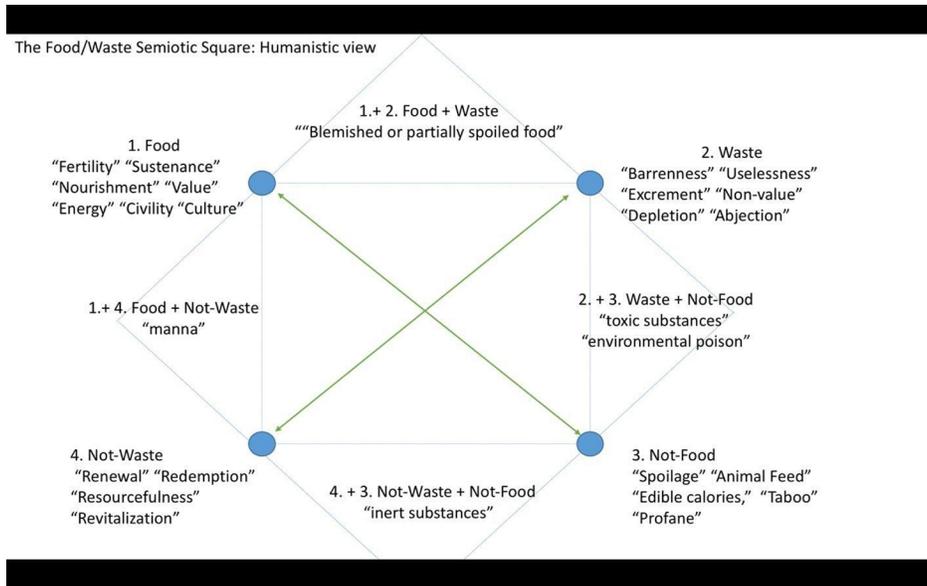


Figure 3: The Food/Waste Semiotic Square: Humanistic View View

of food waste, we reconceptualize these concepts to focus not on food and waste themselves, but rather how we think about and envision these phenomena in the first instance. In order to achieve this reconceptualization, we first insist on a concept of food waste in which the spaces of waste are balanced with issues of time. Indeed, even our Greimas squares, helpful as they are as first steps, present the issues in a visual pattern that is more spatial than temporal. Perhaps they need to be "animated" in some way to help visualize the cyclical flows that will assist with changes in attitude. Nonetheless, we have found that in discussing waste, the expansion of our conceptual vocabulary is crucial to the appreciation of the temporal dimensions of waste—the time element. Without an adequate appreciation of the time element, it follows that there can be no balance in our thinking and we might remain confined by entrenched attitudes, and our ability to "get" waste in its fullest senses and share these senses with wider communities, may remain beyond our grasp.

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- Stephen Rachman** is associate professor of nineteenth-century American literature, director of the American studies program, and co-director of the Digital Humanities and Literary Cognition Laboratory at Michigan State University.
- Robert Chiles** is a senior lecturer in American history at the University of Maryland. He has published on environmental history on the gilded age, including *The Revolution of '28: Al Smith, American Progressivism, and the Coming of the New Deal* (Cornell 2018).
- Gretel Van Wieren** is an associate professor of religious studies at Michigan State University. She is the author of *Restored to Earth: Christianity, Environmental Ethics, and Ecological Restoration* (Georgetown UP, 2013).
- Tiffany Tsantsoulas** is a PhD candidate in philosophy and women's, gender, and sexuality studies at Penn State University. Her dissertation develops a phenomenological concept of embodied resistance as a decolonial poets of the human. She is also a founding member of Penn State's Restorative Justice Initiative.

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