



## “Junk You Can’t Abandon”: Hoarding and Waste in Andrew Lam and Karen Tei Yamashita

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### ABSTRACT

In the last decades a concern with waste has started to “surface” not just in the economic and social sciences, but also in the humanities, where it has lately clustered around Waste Studies and Waste Theory. This critical approach allows us to grapple with the consequences of our globalized economy of waste for *both* the planet and human beings. Although Waste Theory can be applied to virtually any literary tradition, I would argue that Asian American literature, which has been read along the lines of the waste/no-waste dialectics since Sau-ling Wong developed her *Necessity/Extravagance* thesis in 1993, proves particularly amenable to this methodology. In order to illustrate the multiple ways in which Waste Theory can productively interbreed with Wong’s dichotomy, I will explore the dynamics of hoarding and waste in Andrew Lam’s *Perfume Dreams* and Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Sansei and Sensibility*.

### KEYWORDS

Karen Tei Yamashita; Andrew Lam; Waste Theory/Waste Studies; Rubbish Theory; Hoarding; Necessity/Extravagance.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

“Waste”, understood as both inefficiency and residuum, lies at the very ideological core of our current socioeconomic system. It is no wonder, then, that in the last decades waste has

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started to “surface” not just in disciplines like economy, ecology, or the social sciences, but also in the humanities, where it has clustered around what has been variously called Waste Studies and Waste Theory (Morrison, 2015; Dini, 2016; Simal, 2019). The potential of this new approach for cultural and literary critics lies in the fact that it allows us to grapple with the consequences of our globalized economy of waste for *both* the planet *and* human beings. Drawing on philosophical and sociological studies on the emergence of “residual” communities, “wasted lives” (Bauman, 2004), and the *homo sacer* paradigm (Agamben, 1998), as well as on scholarship in environmental justice and toxic discourse (Deitering, 1996; Buell, 1998; Nixon, 2011; Phillips & Sullivan, 2012; Wallace, 2016), waste critics argue for the need to discuss toxic environments and consumerism alongside the toxic configurations of power that transform human beings into waste. Waste Theory, as we shall see, can also throw light on the poetics and politics of hoarding, understood both as a “distortion” and as a confirmation of capitalist consumerism (Lepselter, 2011: 924).

Although the ecosocial concerns involved in Waste Studies impinge on every literary tradition, this is especially conspicuous in the case of Asian American literature, which has been read along the lines of the waste/no-waste dialectics ever since Sau-ling Wong developed her Necessity/Extravagance dichotomy in 1993. In what follows I will tease out the multiple ways in which the insights gained from Waste Studies can interbreed with Wong’s formulation of the Necessity/Extravagance thesis, by analyzing the uses of waste and hoarding in three texts: Andrew Lam’s “Trash”, and “Bombay Gin” and “KonMarimasu”, two stories by National-Book-Award winner Karen Tei Yamashita.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. NECESSITY, EXTRAVAGANCE, AND HOARDING

Hoarding reveals two of the basic instincts in human beings: survival and greed. From toilet paper to precious vaccines, the 2020 pandemic crisis offered numerous examples when accumulation of “stuff” became, if not pathological, at least problematic. While the panic-buying that emptied supermarkets of food supplies made some sense, the toilet paper scare verged on collective hysteria: unless there was a real water shortage –and even then, there would also be other ways to deal with human waste–, I could not fathom the reasons why stockpiling tons of toilet paper would save ourselves or our families. In other words, it became apparent how easy it was to slide from cautious preparedness to senseless hoarding.<sup>2</sup>

Arguably, then, the reason for hoarding wavers between our survival instincts and our penchant for excessive accumulation –pure greed, some would argue. However, such human drive to hoard is now readily fostered by an economic system predicated on unrestrained consumption, which inevitably leads to constant discarding, that is, to the never-ending production of trash. Hoarding and trash are two sides of the same coin, so intimately linked that there is even a name for their convergence: Diogenes syndrome.

Waste Theory can throw light on the poetics and politics of hoarding, itself a byproduct of the economy of waste. On the one hand, hoarding can be seen as a specifically contemporary phenomenon, especially after the Great Financial Crisis, a moment where "the secular jeremiads on consumer folly and greed" multiplied: "against years of confident neoliberalism and globalization, the hoarder's monstrous accumulations loom[ed] with an increasingly ambivalent fascination" (Lepselter, 2011: 920). On the other, one cannot forget that the hoarding that marginal(ized) communities and individuals have historically engaged in differs significantly from the consumerist hoarding so often found in affluent capitalist societies. More central to my argument, the tensions between the survival-driven stockpiling and greed-driven excess are reminiscent of an earlier dichotomy wielded by Sau-ling C. Wong in her analysis of Asian American literature: Necessity versus Extravagance.

In her foundational *Reading Asian American Literature*, published in 1993, Wong tried to build "a sense of an internally meaningful literary tradition" (11) that pivoted around two axes or, in her own words, walked along two "riverbanks": Necessity and Extravagance. These she defined as "two contrasting modes of existence and operation, one contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded, the other attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness, and autotelism" (13). While Necessity was usually associated with the frugal attitudes of first-generation immigrants, whose motto was "no waste", the members of subsequent generations, American-born and raised, were often tempted by the lures of Extravagance and, in the eyes of their parents or elders, squandered both money and energy. I want to argue that, seen in the new context of Waste Theory, the austerity/excess binary underpinning the Necessity/Extravagance dialectics acquires a socio-environmental interpretation that, while not cancelling its original ethno-cultural aspects, expands and enriches earlier readings of the dichotomy. If hoarding was initially paired with either survival or greed, Wong's dichotomy helps us see hoarding as mandated by two parallel worldviews, Necessity vs. Extravagance, thus giving birth to yet another binary: archival vs. consumerist hoarding.

Almost two years after the breakout of the COVID pandemic, we can say, with the benefit of hindsight, that this global crisis taught a lesson to those of us in the "Global North" who have not gone through a war, a famine, or similar life-threatening crises in our lifetime. In a matter of weeks, we, the privileged few, learned to do more with less, we became more resourceful. As we learned to improvise face masks out of bandannas and rags during lockdown, we started to feel the truthfulness of the saying: someone's trash is someone else's treasure. As we learned to make those masks last and avoid discarding them—makeshift as they often were—, we heard the echoes of older generations who admonished us: waste not, want not. For a while, it even seemed as if the "stewardship of objects" that Susan Strasser

saw as a sign of a “bygone culture” (1999: 293) could actually be revived. Such careful attention to (wasted) objects becomes pivotal in the first of the narratives we shall analyze.

### 3. LAM’S “TRASH”: “WE MARVELED AT THE WASTE”

In 2005 Andrew Lam published his first book, *Perfume Dreams*, a compilation of autobiographical essays and journalistic articles about the Vietnamese diaspora. One short autobiographical essay, “Trash”, is particularly amenable to a Waste Theory analysis. The narrative juxtaposes the author’s reminiscences from his childhood in Vietnam with later memories as a young Vietnamese refugee newly arrived in America and even more recent experiences as an “assimilated” Vietnamese American. All of these memories are triggered by an apparently insignificant incident, bumping into a rubbish bin:

Last week I took a distant relative, newly arrived from Vietnam, on a tour of the UC Berkeley campus, where I once studied. He had been in awe of San Francisco’s skyscrapers, and he stared with equal wonder at the stately halls and gates of my alma matter ... . But when we walked past a large *garbage* bin filled with papers and carton boxes, he *paused*. Pointing to the heap of *trash* next to the architecture building he exclaimed with a *shocked* look on his face, ‘Brother, in Vietnam this stuff is all money!’ (Lam, 2005: 109; emphasis added)

If we apply Wong’s classical dichotomy to this passage, we notice how the materiality of trash is immediately construed as a reminder of America’s wasteful ways, of Extravagance, to use Wong’s terms, in contrast to the Vietnamese immigrant’s attitude, “frugal and practical” (Lam, 2005: 109), born out of Necessity. The narrator’s own position seems ambiguous. On the one hand, he still remembers the times when he felt that same shock and surprise at Americans’ careless handling of objects and food that ended up in garbage bins: “we marveled at the waste” (110). On the other hand, after living in the US for some decades, he now includes himself in the American collective –“we Americans” (109)– and finds himself looking back with a rather “snobbish” arrogance to “the impoverished world ... left behind” (110). Therefore, the generation gap described by Wong in the 1990s could still be visible in this disparity of attitudes, this change of heart, even if this time it is the same character who experiences that generational rift within himself.

Reading Lam’s autobiographical narrative through Waste Theory highlights the insidious effects of the apparently inescapable system of consumer capitalism. “Trash” proceeds on the premise that both the discourse and the lifestyle of the global North normalize the unrestrained, often needless, consumption and discarding of “stuff” in such a way that even immigrants from the global South soon acquire a blindness to this economy of waste: in affluent America, as the narrator puts it, “how easy it is to forget. What I throw away today would have *astounded* me years ago” (Lam, 2005: 109; emphasis added).

Arguably, the whole point of “Trash” is to highlight this need to recover that initial shock, and thus de-normalize or de-familiarize capitalist consumerism, in an attempt to overcome the representational challenges that Rob Nixon theorized in *Slow Violence* (2011).<sup>3</sup> Lam’s autobiographical essay seems to do just that: verbs belonging to the semantic field of “surprise” pile up in the narrative, much like the “junk” in both the American streets and the narrator’s own home: *paused, shocked, marveled, astounded*.... And this semantic river reemerges in the last page of the essay, where it is the urgent need to “pause” and ponder the consequences of our actions that supplements the cultural interpretation of the Necessity/Extravagance dichotomy with an environmentalist script: “Sure, we recycle at our convenience these days but we don’t *pause* long enough to think about where anything comes from. We live in a fast-paced world. We have become consumers. We consume” (Lam, 2005: 111; emphasis added). Thus, “waste” appears as the inexorable byproduct of our current consumerist system, “an inevitable component of a society wedded to mass consumption” (Dini, 2016: 70), which makes it even more urgent to defamiliarize and question such inexorability.

On the other hand, the association of newly arrived immigrants –of poor “yokels”, to echo Lam’s words–, with material trash reinforces the social approach to “wasted lives” (Bauman, 2004). Those people who have recently immigrated from Vietnam, the narrator’s homeland, are still imagined as trash and metonymically associated with it:

I remember one night a few decades ago when these same relatives of mine [who now look down on Vietnam] took a carton full of expired food from a garbage bin by an empty supermarket. We had just arrived in America then. It was a day or so after Thanksgiving. We had been watching what the supermarket threw away each night and we *marveled* at the waste.

I was with them when we were stopped by two policemen. Indignant, my uncle-in-law, who was a former captain of the South Vietnamese Army, offered to return the food to its *trash bin*. But the officers, looking at our hungry faces, *our shoddy clothes*, shook their heads and demurred. “Help yourself”, one of them said and they walked way.

I look back now to my homeland, to my yokel self, and admit how much I and the others, who left Vietnam so long ago, have forgotten. (Lam, 2005: 110; emphasis added)<sup>4</sup>

In a Waste Theory interpretation, all those individuals who do not seem to contribute to capitalist consumerism, like these poor immigrants, become themselves redundant or residual for the system. In Zygmunt Bauman’s terminology, these “flawed consumers” (2004: 39) become “wasted lives” precisely because they are not perceived to be active contributors to this economy of waste. Arguably, in this case, they may still play a valuable role in consumer capitalism. While these “flawed consumers” do not buy products nor generate

waste, they seem to provide the last step in the economic-trophic chain: they become the scavengers that “feed” on waste. The young immigrant who is shocked by the waste, Lam reminds us, “is not an environmentalist” (Lam, 2005: 109), he is a scavenger; he comes from the global South, a society that needs to perform the recycling of the junk generated by the global North. It could be argued that, rather than condemning our Extravagance, he sees it as stupidity, because we are wasting precious resources (109).<sup>5</sup> In this aspect, at least, the scavenger differs from the hoarder, since the latter is both a victim of the current patterns of consumption and at the same time poses a threat to the logic of capitalist consumerism: as Susan Lepselter convincingly claims, in order to be healed, hoarders have to prove that they have “learn[t] to regard possessions as part of a rational system of accumulation and expulsion skills—a *quid pro quo* of purchasing and disposing that ... allows [them] to re-enter and circulate in the worlds of social and financial interaction” (2011: 927). Insights like this will be instrumental in examining the dynamics of hoarding in Yamashita’s recent work, where Waste Studies will both complement and complicate the classical dichotomy austerity vs. excess.

#### **4. YAMASHITA’S *SANSEI AND SENSIBILITY*: “JUNK YOU CAN’T ABANDON”**

“Bombay Gin” and “KonMarimasu”, two of the narratives collected in *Sansei and Sensibility* (2020),<sup>6</sup> Karen Tei Yamashita’s latest book, constitute a privileged site to explore the politics and poetics of hoarding. In both short stories, the classical Asian American model of Necessity vs. Extravagance acquires an archival tone: the sansei generation is torn between the need to keep accumulating – “hoarding” – mementos, be it archival materials or food, in an attempt to memorialize the past,<sup>7</sup> or else get rid of that archival burden by “discarding” stuff.

Material hoarding, the accumulation of “junk”, seems to fit the Extravagance pole in the classical binary model: it may not be literally wasteful –you do not throw away things–, but it is still perceived as excessive, because it is not selective or apparently mandated by Necessity. Seen in this way, putting an end to pathological hoarding requires reduction, trimming things down to the essentials; or, in other words, “decluttering”, which is the project that the narrator in Yamashita’s “KonMarimasu” tries to embark upon. The title of this story derives from the tidying system devised by Marie Kondo, the “KonMari method” publicized as “life-changing magic” (Yamashita, 2020: 88). The narrator is introduced to this particular method by her sister, who catches her red-handed, (unsuccessfully) trying to tidy up her study and throwing away the stuff she has been accumulating over the years: “boxes filled with letters, photographs, artifacts, and piles of supporting documentation –a massive dumping place of the thing called your family archive” (88). While the narrator, a thinly veiled alter-ego of Yamashita herself, had consciously accepted this “noble” project of

keeping alive the family history –most notably the mementoes from their incarceration in camps during WW2–, at the beginning of the story she seems to be eager to “declutter” her life and get rid of this archival burden. However, as we shall see, the road trip that she embarks upon will gradually cast doubts on her initial plan to “KonMari” her room and finally dispose of the family memorabilia, her “family junk” (91).

The apparent objective of the long road trip is for the narrator to accompany Lucy, her niece, as she moves back home to L.A., from Rhode Island. However, the fact that the narrator’s “sister has charted a course across the country through seven of the ten Japanese American internment camps” effectively turns the journey into an “incarceration road trip” (Yamashita, 2020: 89). In the different museums and interpretation centers that the narrator and her niece visit (such as Jerome-Rohwer, Amache, Heart Mountain, Minidoka or Topaz, among others), they meet enthusiastic curators who show them the physical remnants left behind by the camp internees, from tomb stones to all sorts of “Japanese American internment artifacts” (92). Their first stop, however, is not an old camp, but the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, in Washington. There, Lucy and her aunt observe the Japanese Incarceration exhibit curator as she gingerly manipulates the unassuming objects left behind in the concentration camps: “She pulls on black gloves and carefully caresses the pink crochet of a child’s dress, aged by wear and years. This dress was handmade by a mother in camp” (89). This and similar remnants from the past are “handled with gloved care and stored with protective cellophane in acid-free paper and boxes”, which reminds the narrator of “the ceremonial observance of Kondo’s method”, including “her practical advice for storing the stuff you don’t toss” (89-90). The exquisite care with which the museum curator treats these old objects contrasts with the narrator’s need to discard “the last effects of saved memorabilia” (88) in her house to “declutter” both her domestic and her mental space.

Further into the story, the narrator starts to explicitly juxtapose her fixation on family junk –which she has been archiving “with some idea that it might be useful research material for another book” (Yamashita, 2020: 91)– with the road trip, which becomes a memory trip of sorts, especially when she reaches Topaz, the camp site where her family had been incarcerated:

You want to find a piece of pottery or perhaps the rusty hardware of your family’s abandoned waffle iron, but even if you found it, you’d be prohibited from taking anything from the site. All that past broken and discarded stuff, every rock and stone, belongs to the place, to be left untouched, scorched by sun, weathered, and returned to the earth, an archeological site whose desolate surface memory is now a sacred memorial (93).

After completing her trip, the narrator becomes more and more aware that the curators’ compulsion to keep and archive every piece of junk, every found object,

insignificant as it may be, is also present in her. This archival impulse contrasts with Kondo's minimalist philosophy, according to which "clutter is the failure to return things to where they belong"; one has to learn to let go of the past and live instead in the present: "No matter how wonderful things used to be, we cannot live in the past" (Yamashita, 2020: 93).<sup>8</sup> The fundamental difference between Kondo's advice and the narrator's experience, however, lies in the fact that the latter dwells in a traumatic past, not in "wonderful" memories. In fact, the narrator remains skeptical about whether "the trauma of the hoarder" can "be undone with the methodic and ceremonial movement of clothing, books, paper, miscellany, and sentimental value rendered into honorary trash" (94). We could argue, following Svetlana Boym's taxonomy (2001: 41), that the nostalgia that the narrator engages in is reflective rather than restorative, focusing on the traumatic pain (*algia*) rather than the "lost home" (*nostos*). In other words, the narrator's need to collect and preserve mementoes from the past does not respond to either conservative nostalgia or to consumerist hoarding but to a different accumulative drive, which I have called "archival hoarding". While consumerist hoarding can be construed as Extravagance, due to its unequivocal link to excess and "commodity fetishism" (Lepselter, 2011: 921), the archival hoarding described in "KonMarimasu" is the direct outcome of Necessity. In fact, such archival hoarding commemorates Necessity at its most extreme: the few scraps and mementoes left behind by the Japanese Americans in their concentration camps, which constitute the residuum from the very few belongings they could carry to the camps in the first place.<sup>9</sup> Rather than a testimony to wasteful Extravagance, therefore, archival hoarding signifies testimonial Necessity. Archival hoarding has its origin in a traumatic past, not in an affluent present. Yamashita is very much aware of this, and she mentions it in her recent interview with Adrienne Westenfeld (2020):

A friend of mine had to deal with the belongings left behind by his father, who collected every Chinese newspaper beginning in the sixties. I don't know how many trips he made to recycle all of these newspapers. Obviously, there's some hoarding going on.

I thought about how Kondo was a remedy for that reaction, but then I also thought about the reaction and where it was coming from. I felt that Kondo didn't address the history of the post-war—or of any war. There are reasons people keep things; they are afraid of what might happen. I began with that premise, and I began to think about things that I myself have saved. I have an archival project for my own family, where I've become the receiver of all of this historic material that no one could bear to throw away. I have these boxes and boxes of photo albums, letters, and documents that they had kept during and after the war. We knew there was value there, and that it might tell the story of what had happened to their lives.

The interpretation outlined above, namely the contrast between archival and consumerist types of hoarding, is confirmed in the last section of "KonMarimasu", where the sansei narrator cannot help but describe Kondo's generation as being at loggerheads with



hers, in an echo of the generational conflict underlying the original formulation of the Necessity/Extravagance dichotomy. In contrast to the sansei narrator, who has gone through the internment experience herself, Kondo reminds her of her daughter, a fourth-generation Japanese American, "a yonsei raised in a capitalist consumer society with great privilege (no war, no refugee boat, no exile from genocide, no Trail of Tears, no Underground Railroad, no Great Depression, no eyes on the prize)"; therefore, even if she may have been shaped by "the long postwar" (Yamashita, 2020: 94), the generational difference is conspicuous. Having been deprived from a history of deprivation, Kondo lacks the motivation of sheer Necessity and instead seems more aware of the perils of excessive consumerism: Extravagance.

It goes without saying that the environmentalist critique that underlies Kondo's injunction to "declutter" and simplify your life, her minimalist version of the discourse of degrowth, is not applicable to archival hoarding. "Kondo might say that this stuff in our family archive and this stuff in all these internment museums were parted with to launch them on a new journey", but the narrator does not want to discard anything nor turn her family memorabilia into "honorary trash" (Yamashita, 2020: 94). Instead, upon returning from her incarceration road trip, she realizes that her home is "a landfilled space of junk you can't abandon" (95). This takes us back to what is probably the most obvious epiphanic moment in her memory/road trip. When she and Lucy reach the first internment camp site, Jerome-Rohwer, they are greeted by Susan, the museum's curator, whose words will haunt the narrator for the entire trip: "Lucy will probably remember the precise context of Susan's southern phrase 'God doesn't make junk', but you'll only remember the phrase that will follow you like a GPS satellite on that long road trip, the probing matter of human-made junk left behind in camp museum after camp museum" (90). This curator and the other "keeper[s] of history" that she meets on her trip ultimately inspire the narrator to keep hoarding junk; she comes to the conclusion that, against Kondo's minimalist advice, "keeping the stuff, saving it, might also be a way of transforming your life" (95).

The narrator in "Bombay Gin" seems to face a similar dilemma, that of preserving the past, or "letting go". Here, the tone is not so solemn as in "KonMarimasu", as the narrative displays traits from both food memoirs and absurd comedy. Interestingly, in this story the "memorabilia" are not only objects, junk, but also food.

In a visit to her deceased aunt's apartment, the narrator finds herself locked in:

My cousin locked me inside his mother's apartment. ... I was in a locked box. I guess that was the point. As locked boxes go, this was a pretty nice one. I mean, it had all the amenities... Well, it had more than amenities; it was a kind of museum and a box of memories. My cousin's mother had died five years before, but he hadn't removed or rearranged a single item in her apartment since. (Yamashita, 2020: 43)

The museums and interpretation centers in the incarceration road trip described in “KonMarimasu” are replaced here with a modest accumulation of old magazines, bibelots and frozen leftovers. Whereas in “KonMarimasu” the family archive was synecdochally employed to ponder the need for collective history preservation, in “Bombay Gin” family history becomes the protagonist onto itself. In contrast to the previous travelogue, the narrator in this story does not leave the restricted space of her aunt’s apartment. Although the mobility of the incarceration road trip is replaced by static domesticity, the incarceration motif continues to be present here, albeit in a lighter tone, as the narrator becomes a prisoner of sorts, “trapped” in her aunt’s apartment, which she gradually learns to see as a family “museum” (51).

Once her initial attempts to get out end up in failure, the narrator finds herself with plenty of time and nothing to do, so she uses this opportunity to explore the flat and reminisce about her dead aunt’s hard life, in sharp contrast to that of her cousin, an only child who has been pampered and spoiled, and whose life had been relatively easy. Here, the classic interpretation of the Necessity/Extravagance dichotomy still seems operative: while the first generation works hard and leads a rather austere life—even if she seems to be a compulsive collector/hoarder, as we shall see—the second generation, represented here by the spoiled, lazy cousin, swims in abundance and, I would add, in Extravagance.

The first object that the narrator turns her attention to, out of habit and for practical reasons, is the fridge: if her lockdown lasts for more than a few hours she may need to eat something. The refrigerator, another cold box within the locked box she finds herself in,<sup>10</sup> embodies both the past and the future: while the future takes the form of the children in the family, whose photos cram the fridge door, the past is to be found inside the refrigerator, in the form of forgotten food. She soon realizes that if, as she assumes, this foodstuff dates from the time when her aunt died, it may be dangerous to even taste it. Once she realizes this, she compulsively starts to throw away the old food:

I plunged into that cold box and began ransacking it for old food, checking the dates and tossing anything that looked familiar. Well, five-years-old familiar. Could you have a memory of food from five years ago? ... I grabbed bottles of pickled ginger, pasty seaweed concoctions, barbecue sauce, oyster sauce, kimchee, low-sodium shoyu, green pimento olives, and concentrated lemon juice. I hauled out the tubs of margarine, cans of Sapporo and Diet Coke, even the open box of baking soda. Then, I got into the freezer section and tossed all the cans of orange concentrate, orange juice, mai tai and margarita mix. I tossed aluminum-foil packages of what looked like wrapped leftovers. Imagine keeping this stuff! I tossed the ice cubes that looked near a state of dehydration, if that were possible. In the far corner of the freezer was a stack of natto... frozen for five years, it had to be gross. I threw it out. (Yamashita, 2020: 44)

In her cleaning frenzy, the narrator throws away the apparently expired food that she finds in both the refrigerator and the kitchen cupboards: "Pretty soon the trash can was piled high with jars, cans, and boxes" (Yamashita, 2020: 45). Her mounting anxiety, illustrated by the new strategies that she devises in order to get out of the apartment (45-46), starts to subside when she resigns herself to spending some days in her aunt's apartment. Once more she goes to the fridge: "[I] opened the door and closed it again. Right. I had tossed everything. I went to the trash and retrieved an old can of Sapporo. It was still cold enough" (47). This is where the comic Kafkaesque narrative interbreeds with the food memoir: as she turns the TV on, she sees two chefs preparing a salad, and she feels a sudden urge to rescue the Paul Newman vinaigrette from the trash can and place it in the refrigerator (47). The salad dressing is not the only item that the narrator retrieves from the waste bin. As the food channel moves on to the description of a Japanese recipe with natto, she starts "rummage[ing] again through the trash" and recovers "the Styrofoam boxes of natto", which she puts back into the freezer. Gradually but relentlessly, the narrator retrieves most of the items that she had tossed as "waste":

I ran back to the trash, retrieved the miso and the light shoyu. Hell, I got the pickled ginger, the barbecue sauce, the olives, and the lemon concentrate too. I sat down on the linoleum, surrounded by bottles and jars. I opened everything, smelled inside, examined the contents. It was all about salt, vinegar, preservatives, and vacuum-packing with a shelf-life of forever. Could this kill you? Could it kill you eventually? Could it kill my cousin? Did it kill my aunt? Pretty soon I got most of it back into the fridge and the cupboards. (48)

This compulsive re-cluttering mirrors the initial de-cluttering scene described above. The initial survival impulse to throw away what could be harmful because old and expired – representing the past – gives way to the contrary hoarding impulse, which is also a preservation instinct, albeit of a different nature: preserving the memories from the past, in the form of recipes. Such food-hoarding drive becomes a caricature when even the old frozen leftovers are retrieved from the waste bin: "I flew back into the trash and recovered them *for posterity*" (Yamashita, 2020: 49; emphasis added). Having recovered so many ingredients, the narrator decides to prepare an old recipe, the Bombay Gin raisin that her aunt used to make and gives the story its title. While she waits for the dish to be ready, she starts "curating" her aunt's personal museum, "opening boxes I found in the closets and investigating everything in the apartment" (52), including the old family letters she comes across. As days go by, she also gulps down the food that she had previously discarded until, at the end of the seven-day creation cycle, her memory dish is ready:

And by day seven, the Bombay Gin raisins were ready. I filched more than nine, of course cooing at the kids on the fridge. That's when I noticed my scribbled note with the number for the locksmith tacked between the five-year-old and six-year-old versions of my son. I gave the locksmith a ring, and he was here within the hour. It was that easy. I had him put in a new dead bolt and change the locks. "There it is", he said, handing me a new set of keys. "Shouldn't give you any more trouble". "Not at all", I said, and I closed the door. (Yamashita, 2020: 53)

The irony of this "closed" ending is rather obvious: the lockdown that had originally been involuntary is now willingly embraced. One can even argue that the narrator has chosen to become a new version of her aunt. The apartment in which she initially felt "trapped" has become a museum, a fascinating "box of memories" (Yamashita, 2020: 43) that she now wants to inhabit. The narrator is surrounded by all the personal and family memorabilia her aunt has collected over the years: old foodstuff, videotapes and magazines from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, relics and antiques, like the "ornate dolls in glass cages" (51), the "small cache of tansu and screens" (50) and the "bronze box" containing her uncle's ashes (50). By observing the "stuff" in plain sight that is "ensconced in wooden boxes with Japanese lettering", the narrator attempts "to see these artifacts and bibelots as [her aunt] did, to imagine their significance, to see what she had seen" (51). It is through this old stuff, which she no longer considers junk or trash, that she wants to recover her aunt's life. Something similar happens to the food she first finds in the fridge and in the cupboard, later tosses to the trash can, and finally retrieves from it. It is the food that most vividly brings back old memories and eventually prompts her to recover one of her aunt's favorite recipes, through which to reenact and re-taste the past.

Reading "Bombay Gin" as a skillful parody of a culinary memoir does not exhaust the story's interpretative possibilities. As Ariel Djanikian (2020) rightly points out, Yamashita being such "a highly versatile prose writer", she is able to devise "artful pivots from humor to tragedy", from apparently light-hearted comedy to more serious matters, such as the need to memorialize and pay homage to the past. In particular, I would argue that this story can be read as an illustration of Michael Thompson's theory of value by rendering visible the often-invisible category of "Rubbish".

In *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (1979/2017), arguably an example of Waste Studies *avant-la-lettre*, Thompson establishes two main categories of objects, those that he calls "Transient" and whose value decreases over time, and those "Durable" items whose value increases with time. The only possible way in which a transient object can become durable is by going through the limbo stage, outside time and with no value whatsoever: Rubbish. For Thompson, this "vast and disregarded realm" constitutes the only "one-way route from Transient to Durable" (2017: 10). Thompson's theory, I would argue, is rendered literally true in Yamashita's "Bombay Gin". In the story, food is initially

approached as perishable and Transient, as we would expect. According to Thompson, in order to become Durable and acquire value, first such (food)stuff would have to be literally tossed to the trash can, as Rubbish, to be retrieved later from that same trash can. That is what happens in the narrative, so much so that what is generally a hidden, almost invisible process, is described in painstaking detail, as we have just seen. In some sort of epiphany, the narrator realizes she is indeed wasting the food by turning it into waste, which can be retrieved and rescued "for posterity" (Yamashita, 2020: 49). Thus, in "Bombay Gin" valueless trash becomes a valuable treasure that can feed the protagonist in more ways than one: as real food and as a key to revisit the past via culinary memory.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Even though the world has gone through accelerated changes since Wong first put forward her Necessity/Extravagance thesis, I contend that the waste/no-waste dialectics underpinning Wong's dichotomy continues to reap unexpected insights. On the one hand, this binary, which, as Wong argued, erected and consolidated intergenerational walls in canonical Asian American writings, is still applicable to contemporary immigration literature, where it continues to signify the rift between immigrant characters and those who are "Americanized". In addition, as illustrated by Lam's "Trash", the Necessity/Extravagance dichotomy is also deployed to underscore the distance between diasporic subjects and those who stayed behind.

On the other hand, one can revisit Wong's classical dichotomy by interpreting it in terms of Waste Theory, as the contrast between austerity and excess. While the immigrants' admonition urging later generations not to waste did not respond to any ecological agenda in its original (con)texts, the Necessity/Extravagance dialectics does have an obvious environmental potential, especially as we try to tease out the different uses of waste and junk, most notably in relation to hoarding. In spite of what it may seem, contemporary forms of hoarding simply take consumerism to the limit: in that sense, hoarding may be regarded as "a distortion and intensification of, but not [as] a distinct aberration from, more typical practices of American consumption" (Lepselter, 2011: 924). In contrast to such consumerist hoarding, however, Yamashita's stories sing the virtues of what I have called "archival hoarding". If the museum curators in "KonMarimasu" had taught the protagonist a lesson in the "stewardship of objects" (Strasser, 1999), keeping old junk in order to preserve the memory, the narrator in "Bombay Gin" becomes herself a figurative curator, "investigating" every corner of her aunt's apartment (Yamashita, 2020: 52). Just like her aunt, who "had fallen in love with her collections and couldn't part with any of it" (51), she cannot part with the past inhabiting the old stuff. Although in both stories hoarding may initially be seen as senseless or pathological, it ultimately proves to be healthily archival. Resisting the normalizing impulse of bringing

order through the “ritual process of purging and sorting”, in order to be “redeemed back into sociability” (Lepselter, 2011: 927), the archival hoarder hangs on to what others see as “junk” because of the evocative power such objects have. Archival hoarding may be triggered by the intimation “that if we throw out this junk we are being disrespectful to the past it memorializes” (Culler, 1985: 5). Like the pathological hoarder, the archival hoarder “contaminates the boundaries between things and unmanaged sentiment” (Lepselter, 2011: 925); however, in the case of archival hoarding, such unpoliced sentiment is powered by (historical) Necessity and acquires a clear political import: preserving the old junk entails memorializing the past rather than whitewashing or forgetting it.<sup>12</sup>

This is what Lam’s and Yamashita’s narratives attempt to do: they do not just pay homage to a particular family history, but they also memorialize a collective past of systemic racism and global injustice. In all of these texts, waste —whether in the form of objects and/or food— becomes an open invitation to revisit the past. After all, the very term *waste* always already contains a reference to what *was*, what existed, but may no longer be what it was, or may no longer be perceived as useful, because it is broken, out of fashion, rotten, or simply old. As I have tried to demonstrate in the foregoing analysis, the trope of waste allows both Lam and Yamashita to conjure up the need for archival hoarding, for preserving the “old junk”. Each of these narratives —“KonMarimasu”, “Bombay Gin”, and “Trash”— includes an epiphanic moment when the narrators realize that, “along with the pile of papers and uneaten food [they] have carelessly tossed away [their] memories” (Lam, 2005: 110), so they decide to go to the waste bin and try to save that trashed past from oblivion, recovering the leftovers, the residuum, “for posterity”.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As I was writing this article, the National Book Foundation announced that the 2021 Award for Lifetime Achievement would go to Karen Tei Yamashita (Italie, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> What to make of the “junk” that most of us accumulate over the years and we don’t want to part with, the junk we just “can’t abandon”, to echo Yamashita’s phrase? Most of the stuff we hoard, as Jonathan Culler explains, is of this sort: “quite ordinary and inoffensive junk, ... stuff that is of no real value but that you are keeping around because, well, you never know...” (1985: 5). Sometimes, then, it is not so simple to elucidate the difference between pathological hoarding and mindless

accumulation of stuff, or, for that matter, between hoarding and collecting. Rachele Dini offers a reasonable explanation "Hoarding differs from collecting in its perceived lack of system—to the onlooker, it appears that the hoarder will keep anything and everything they find..." (2016: 158). Alternatively, one could answer that, as the joke goes, "If you're poor it's called hoarding, if you're rich it's called collecting" (Discard Studies, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> This violence is difficult to grasp and even harder to capture in a narrative because of its delayed effects and its often "imperceptible" nature, as Nixon himself explains: "To engage slow violence is to confront layered predicaments of apprehension: to apprehend—to arrest, or at least mitigate—often imperceptible threats requires rendering them apprehensible to the senses through the work of scientific and imaginative testimony" (2011: 14).

<sup>4</sup> Problematic though that is, the narrator still associates the lost homeland, post-war Vietnam, with the insalubrious and "stench" of trash (Lam, 2005: 110).

<sup>5</sup> "[H]e has a great respect for the materials we American discard as refuse, as waste. His family in Vietnam could live for a week recycling these papers, he tells me, and it pains him to see so much wasted" (Lam, 2005: 109).

<sup>6</sup> *Sansei and Sensibility* "intermingles memoir, fiction, travelogues, recipes, cultural criticism, letters, and a historical timeline" (You, 2020). The pun on Jane Austen's novel is not lost on the reader and it does reflect the contents of Yamashita's latest book: while the first part of the collection focuses on different generations of Japanese Americans (mostly the third-generation *sansei*, but also *issei*, *nisei* and *yonsei*), the second part revisits Austen's novels. "Just as *sansei* bridge two cultures", Westenfeld (2020) perceptively notes, Yamashita's "collection bridges two worlds: Japanese American life and the stories of Jane Austen." For an analysis of the Austen section of the book, see Yamashita's talk at the Jane Austen Society on March 27, 2021 ("*Sansei and Sensibility* Lecture"), as well as the book reviews by Anderson (2021), Blumberg-Kason (2020), Djanikian (2020), Staes (2021), Westenfeld (2020), and You (2020).

<sup>7</sup> It could be argued that the *sansei* narrators in these stories seem to confirm Hansen's famous dictum: "What the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember."

<sup>8</sup> While the paralyzing effects of looking back are as old as Orpheus or Lot's wife, we cannot discount the power of nostalgia; see, among others, Boym (2001); Ladino (2012).

<sup>9</sup> Some of the *issei* and older *nisei* may have fallen into actual hoarding as a way to compensate the scarcity and precarious nature of camp life, as Yamashita herself explains in a recent interview (Westenfeld, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> The box motif is not only present in this *mise-en-abyme*, but also in later references to the TV box which mirrors her face (Yamashita, 2020: 47), the box containing his uncle's ashes (50), the boxes where her aunt keeps all sorts of souvenirs and bibelots (51), and, most notably, the joke the narrator makes in the last pages of the story. When she finally receives a call from her son, telling her that his girlfriend is pregnant, he complains that he feels trapped: "I feel trapped, like I'm in a box. How did this happen to me?" (52). She, of course, sympathizes with him and feels the same sense of claustrophobia: "I feel the same way, although literally" (52).

<sup>11</sup> The fact that food becomes the privileged trope to explore the tensions between Necessity and Extravagance is not missed by Wong, who devotes an entire chapter of her book to this motif (1993: 18-76). According to the Necessity motto voiced by the older generations, "big eaters win", and none is so adventurous—food-wise—as Yamashita's narrator, who dares to consume the food that she had previously thrown away: "I started to use up the old rice, eat up the natto, stir up pots of miso soup. If there were an earthquake, I figured I could survive there for days, even if the provisions might eventually kill me" (Yamashita, 2020: 53).

Similarly, it's worth pointing out the metaphorical equation of rotting/spoiled food and rotten/spoiled cousin: "My cousin never cooked. I thought about him sleeping on the sofa in his sleeping bag with

all this *rotting food* in the kitchen... Camp and after was part two of my aunt's life, part one being her youth during the Depression. It was all about sacrifice and struggle, and here [in a photo] was her son in a little jacket with a tiny hanky spitting out of his breast pocket, looking like an angel. This was way before I was born, but every one said he was *spoiled rotten*" (Yamashita, 2020: 45; emphasis added).

<sup>12</sup> In fact, the narrator's archival impulse may be due to the fact that she does not trust subsequent generations to preserve the Japanese American legacy: "the kids on the fridge wouldn't remember, wouldn't continue, wouldn't respect, wouldn't really care about all our heartfelt or long-gone desires" (Yamashita, 2020: 53).

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