

## **Your Trash is Someone's Treasure: the Politics of Value at a Michigan Landfill**

[As appearing in Volume 14, Issue 1 of the Journal of Material Culture]

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses scavenging and dumping as alternative approaches to deriving value from rubbish at a large Michigan landfill. Both practices are attuned to the indeterminacy and power of abandoned things, but in different ways. Whereas scavenging relies on acquiring familiarity with an object by getting to know its particular qualities, landfilling and other forms of mass disposal make discards fungible and manipulable by stripping them of their former identities. By way of examining the different ways in which people become invested in the politics of value at the landfill, whether as part of expressions of gender and class or for personal enjoyment, different compartments toward materiality are revealed to have underlying social and moral implications. In particular, it is argued that different approaches to the evaluation of rubbish involve competing understandings of human and material potential.

[Keywords: rubbish, politics of value, scavenging, materiality, waste technologies]

### **Biographical Note**

Joshua Reno is a research fellow at University of London, Goldsmiths, where he is investigating emerging waste technologies and alternative energy sources in the UK as part of the Waste of the World Project. He received his doctorate in Socio-cultural Anthropology from the University of Michigan in 2008.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Fernando Coronil, Gillian Feeley-Harnik, Tom Fricke, Britt Halvorson, Karen Hebert, Richard Parmentier, Pete Richardson, and Jessica Smith for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Webb Keane deserves special acknowledgement for his encouragement and perceptive reading, as do the two anonymous reviewers for this journal. The research upon which this was based was generously funded by the Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life (CEEL) and the Alfred P. Sloan foundation.

One consequence of widespread interest in practices of 'consumption' in material culture studies has been disregard for the wide assortment of human activities devoted to things of no immediate use: the used-up, the rotten, the broken, or the unwanted. 'The social life of things (and their value)' writes Rudi Collaredo-Mansfeld, 'has long squeezed out consideration of their social death' (2003: 246). In some ways, this parallels a general tendency to focus on the meanings of objects and neglect the relevance of their physical qualities for social life (Dant, 2005). All material forms are fated to wear and break down eventually, after all, and some kind of intervention is required to slow this down or speed it up. Treasured objects like family heirlooms, museum artifacts, or kula valuables can only endure as condensed symbols of social history because of the reverence and care that have gone into preserving them; while things left to decay, like industrial ruins or abandoned homes, gradually lose the material traces of their former significance as they foster new arrangements of life and non-life (Edensor, 2005; DeSilvey, 2006).

But surplus material, or waste, is not only the result of things having been used up or allowed to deteriorate. Most things must be separated from a disposable husk at some point in their 'careers' as social objects for their values to be inscribed and realized. The superfluous packaging that encases purchased commodities provides one illustration, but material excess also occurs apart from industrial production (e.g., when fragments of shell are leftover from the creation of a mwali arm bracelet for kula). In this respect, waste appears dialectically opposed to value as 'its objective co-relative' (Alexander, 2005: 456). 'Waste,' John Frow writes, 'is the degree zero of value, or it is the opposite of value, or it is whatever stands in excess of value systems grounded in use' (2003: 25). If value derives from the action invested in something, relative to the actions that go into doing other things, then discard would seem the prototypical

objectification of negative value, things that are not worth (or 'waste') our time and creative capacities (Munn, 1986: 215-33; Graeber, 2001: 83-4).

Waste is not fixed in its value, however. Just as social objects undergo continual evaluation while circulating between different 'regimes of value' (Appadurai, 1986; Thomas, 1991; Myers, 2001), they may be reassessed after discard. From this perspective, waste matter is ambiguously located between categories, in a way similar to 'dirt' as described by Douglas (1984). One of the first analyses of waste along these lines was Michael Thompson's book Rubbish Theory (1979), which characterized the condition of 'worthlessness' as playing a dynamic role in the loss and regeneration of value. Only by first entering a state of indeterminacy as 'rubbish', Thompson argued, could something of declining worth (an old car or a broken pot) transition into something invaluable (a 'classic' or an archaeological artifact).

'Rubbish' is not static, in this view, but is part of an ongoing social process. On the one hand, this leads to a different conception of the domain of 'consumption'. Both Kevin Hetherington (2004) and Nicky Gregson et al. (2007) have drawn on Thompson's insights to analyze the different interpersonal routes that unwanted things follow as they travel within and between households, during which time their status remains open to reinterpretation. Beyond the realm of private disposal, in many parts of the world there exist 'waste regimes' (see Gille, 2007), complex social arrangements that enroll a broad range of institutions, regulations, and technologies in the circulation and transformation of wastes. This 'political economy of rubbish,' as Martin O'Brien (2007) calls it, is centrally concerned with addressing the indeterminacy of discard by fixing its identity and destiny.

In this article I examine the dynamic potential of wasted things as they are dumped or reclaimed by people who work at 'Four Corners', a large Michigan landfill. Following O'Brien, I

highlight the 'intersection of different interests' (2007: 108) associated with the social afterlife of things. While both the landfill company and its employees try to benefit from waste, they sometimes approach this in competing ways. Technologies of mass disposal deal with distinct kinds of waste, aggregated to facilitate pricing and technical operations, to lessen its potential dangers and to secure a profit (see O'Brien, 2007: 120-22). This also limits what can be done with waste, thereby forsaking the sociality of discarded objects in favor of their fungibility. In addition, many workers at Four Corners practice scavenging and reuse. As they do so, recovered things reflect back on them, in some cases serving as embodiments of their skill, masculinity, or defiance, in others placing them at risk of stigmatization and contamination. Consequently, what is at stake in the politics of rubbish value, whether people take it as disposable or worth scrounging, are competing conceptions about what people are 'worth', so to speak, and about what kinds of person-thing relations are thought possible.

### **SCAVENGING: NECESSITY AND POSSIBILITY**

Like many 'sanitary landfills' in the U.S., Four Corners serves a regional market, one that encompasses Detroit, Toronto, and Newark. In 2003 it accepted more waste per day than any other American landfill. Eventually, higher rates of recycling in Toronto lowered their weekly intake by twenty percent, but when I worked as a laborer there in 2005 and 2006 Four Corners still received approximately 10,000 tons of waste daily. Partly due to the sheer amount of incoming material one can find almost anything in the waste loads. Though scavenging is forbidden at most sanitary landfills, a wide assortment of objects routinely disappears.

Employees learn where expect certain loads that might offer particular 'findables' (Stewart, 2003): the dumpsters along the Citizen's Ramp, the place where local residents can periodically

unload their own waste free of charge, is likely to include bulk goods that are still intact; abandoned doublewide trailers are sometimes pushed into the sludge pit, often with many of the possessions of the former occupant still inside; the 'monofill' cells are littered with coins that have survived incineration and can be picked from the ash; finally, along the access roads that wind around the grassy slopes one can find spools of copper to take sell to a nearby scrap yard, provided they can be pried from the ground.

Not everyone scavenges regularly, but most working in close proximity to the waste take something now and then, even if only to use temporarily on site (e.g. an old football to toss around or a magazine to glance at). Three kinds of workers are employed at landfills and similar worksites: a handful of managers, sales people and technical specialists; small groups of mechanics, office staff and other internal service workers; and a few dozen operators and laborers who move, sort and transform waste. Because laborers, mechanics, and operators are in regular contact with waste loads, they have more opportunity to scavenge and will receive more consideration in this account. Laborers at Four Corners are typically male, low-skilled and paid only slightly better than minimum wage, so most work extra hours or earn supplemental income in the area's informal employment sector. By comparison, the operators and mechanics at Four Corners, who have always been male, more easily maintain middle class standards of living because they are paid several more dollars an hour, receive benefits and overtime, and typically have working spouses.

This difference in household assets has some bearing on the kinds of items usually scavenged for, however it does not directly determine individual rates of scavenging. Some laborers at Four Corners do not scavenge much at all and some operators scavenge frequently for items to sell on the Internet. It is true, however, that those workers sensitive about their class identity are far

more likely to express ambivalence about scavenging. When I first interviewed George, an older operator, he seemed somewhat anxious. After we'd finished, he said that it bothered him that I'd asked so much about scavenging and was worried about how I intended to portray him and his coworkers. George went on to tell me about his attempt to avoid the stigma of his job by cultivating a middle class lifestyle: 'People probably see my house and don't realize who lives there. That's why I like to have nice things, that's why my wife and I like to live next to upper class people: just 'cause I work at a dump doesn't mean I'm a dump!'

George's concerns about scavenging demonstrate that the politics of value are not just about competitions over the acquisition of things, but about the power to define what (and who) is worthwhile (see Graeber, 2001: 88). Like most of his coworkers, George retrieves things from the landfill on occasion, but he is also aware of the stigma this bears. The international news media, for example, often uses scavenging as an index of global inequality (see Mydans, 2006; Erlanger, 2007). Salvaging waste is portrayed as something done out of necessity and the people who do it (often women and children) as victims suffering from abject poverty and poor health. Such accounts are not wrong exactly, survival may very well be the motivating factor in many circumstances, but scavengers do provide alternative appraisals of their labor, which have more to do with the opportunities afforded by other people's wastes.

Scavenging makes up a significant portion of the world's growing informal economic sector (Medina, 2000). People still come from all over Southeast Asia to scavenge at Manila's largest dump, attracted by the prospect of earning three or more dollars per day, even though hundreds were buried alive in 2000 when it collapsed during a monsoon (Mydans, 2006). Similar accounts come from the Baixada-Santista region of Brazil, where Tupi-Guarani travel many miles to scavenge where 'the garbage is fat' with quality goods (Ferreira, 2002: 146), or from Rio de

Janeiro where catadores frequent the city's dump to assume alternative life styles away from public judgment, the drug trade and formal employment (Millar, 2007).

Marginalized people subsist in this way outside of the 'global south' as well (see Hill, 2003). The widespread assumption behind negative appraisals of scavenging, wherever it occurs, is that it is degrading and dirty, thus, people would not do it unless they had to satisfy basic needs. However, for scavengers discarded wastes are neither simple utilities nor necessarily polluting, but complex and potentially enriching materials. To say that scavenging waste is about possibility rather than necessity, about what people make of waste rather than what they must do with it, is not to deny the very real constraints and indignities often associated with the practice (see especially Auyero and Swistun, 2007). Rather, it is to recognize the agency and creativity of scavengers. As Martin Medina (2000) has argued, the sufferings endured by many scavengers are not inherent to the activity of recovering materials others have wasted; they are created by structural inequalities, the profiteering of middlemen in the recycling market, and governmental neglect, all of which tend to restrict access to the best waste, foster poor labor conditions, and diminish returns from the sale of recovered materials (Sicular, 1992; Hill, 2001).

Due to the disposal habits and greater wealth of the people they serve, Northern American landfills contain what is comparatively 'better' trash. Moreover, those who tend to scavenge in these sites are less likely to depend on the practice for their livelihoods. Yet scavenging remains a highly meaningful practice, not because of the necessities it fulfills but because of the wide assortment of opportunities, anxieties, and enjoyments that it makes possible.

## **INDIVIDUATION, MASCULINITY AND REUSE**

Because rubbish is underdetermined, separated from the social and material supports that would render it more readily interpretable (see Edensor, 2005), encounters with it are surrounded by a sense of open possibility, of chance and power (cf. Sansi-Roca, 2005: 143). When things are rejected, Douglas argues, they begin as 'recognizably out of place, a threat to good order,' because they retain the 'half-identity' of their former state (1984: 161). 'But a long process of pulverizing, dissolving and rotting awaits any physical things that have been recognized as dirt. In the end, all identity is gone. The origin of the various bits and pieces is lost' (1984: 161). Having been cast aside, tossed around, and mixed in with other discarded things, waste breaks down and becomes less predictable. At Four Corners, some go 'shopping' for particular items they are in need of, while others reclaim something simply because they think it is worth money or might accrue economic value as a collectible. To fulfill its desired purpose, however, a particular findable must first be distinguished as something worth the trouble of recovery from the 'mass of common rubbish' described by Douglas. I call this interpretive practice individuation, adapting a term from Gilles Deleuze (1994) and Gilbert Simondon (1992), because it involves assigning something indeterminate an identity that is not set in advance.

In certain cases, this determination is relatively straightforward. Things might be interesting only for brief amusement. One mechanic recovers golf balls on occasion, only to hit them back onto the landfill slope during his break; several employees stash pornographic magazines in their vehicles or workspaces; and many more decorate the site with things they recover: placing a toy lizard on a rock, tying underwear to the top of a gas pump like a flag. Here the contingency and ambiguity of rubbish encounters are brought to the fore in a playful manner; they are not intended to have enduring meaning or purpose. In many other circumstances, however, the process of individuation involves more enduring relations between person and thing, as the latter



is explored by and reflects back upon the former. It is not merely the process of assigning an item a categorical 'type' – a tire, a plastic bag, money – but discovering the unique characteristics it alone may possess, the traces of its singular biography (see Deleuze, 1994: 251-2). In addition to establishing what kind of thing it is, the individuation of rubbish thus involves determining what it might yet be.

This is most evident, for employees of Four Corners, in acts of reuse which demonstrate forms of 'know how' that resonate with figurations of masculine subjectivity, such as those practices Tim Dant labels 'car care' (2005: 108-35). These extend beyond scavenging from the trash, per se, to include other forms of reuse and recovery. As Susan Strasser writes, alluding to the domestic care with which objects were reused in turn of the century American households, 'Fixing and finding uses for worn and broken articles entail a consciousness about materials and objects' (1999: 10). It is not only that reuse relies on knowledge of the processes by which a thing is produced; in some cases it may involve 'even more creativity than original production' (Strasser, 1999: 10). As such, remade items serve as an embodiment of certain kinds of skill. This might be called a form of reciprocal individuation, whereby a person's worth is foregrounded through their ability to successfully realize or identify the qualities of objects (cf. Bourdieu, 1984; Munn, 1986; Silverstein, 2003).

As Strasser also suggests, different kinds of American 'handwork' have also served in the construction of gender, in particular, what Ulf Mellström (2004) describes as gendered spheres of sociability. One of the most respected people at Four Corners is Roy, a senior mechanic who is incredibly gifted at fixing seemingly worthless things and acknowledged as such. Back when the landfill provided vehicles for the demolition derby at the local summer festival, Roy would take old 'junk cars' and remake them so that they could be driven and destroyed for local

amusement. But Roy is also responsible for fixing landfill vehicles that otherwise would be scrapped. While I was working there, one of his most impressive feats was to create a dazzling green truck from the remnants of two pickups that had been wrecked in work-related accidents. When the project was complete the remade vehicle looked newly purchased. For days, while it was on display in front of the maintenance building, everyone marveled at it praising Roy's 'natural' talent.

Mellström discusses the importance of 'tinkering-with-technology' in the codification and embodiment of gender (2004: 375). These social forms make possible the marking of 'masculine' spaces and communities of practice and, through what could be called their particular modes of valuation and individuation, create gendered exclusions in the process (2004: 380). For those at Four Corners without a mechanical background or state-of-the-art tools, remaking is riskier and may not be taken seriously. Around when Roy was rebuilding the green truck, a young, garrulous laborer named Eddy talked about acquiring an old car to 'fix up'. Few actually believed he was capable, however, and eventually he gave up on his idea.

Another man, nicknamed Timer, had a lifetime of experience rebuilding cars before he became a laborer at Four Corners. When we worked together, he was attempting to recreate a Malibu from discarded car parts he'd gleaned from junkyards and through 'deals' with friends and family. The Malibu gave Timer something to atone for the many cars he rebuilt and lost over the years, which he attributes to bad luck and past mistakes, but it also allowed him to claim personal time and space while at home through gendered (and gendering) practice. Renovating it helped him feel like a good father, offering occasional opportunities to teach his eldest boy how to sand down dents and do other 'body work'. It also gave Timer opportunities to escape from his family and spend weekend afternoons and evenings in the garage, drinking, listening to rock

on the radio and tinkering in peace. At home, one of Timer's favorite things to do with the machine was 'torquing it up' by revving the powerful V8 engine and burning rubber from the tires. The thick plume of smoke that filled the air and the tar-black streaks that stained the driveway were not merely signs of the engine's rotational force, tests of its performance and conspicuous displays of its power, but served as evocative demonstrations of Timer's skill as a mechanic. As he once proclaimed proudly while torquing the car, 'As long as Mac [it's previous owner] had it, he never smoked the tires. Now look at it! Do I know what I'm doin' or what?' Once forsaken and now partially redeemed, the Malibu objectified his own potential.

At the same time, the patchwork nature of his rebuilding effort occasionally left Timer frustrated and uncertain. On one occasion, the engine spouted flames; on another it began leaking oil profusely in his driveway. It was not always clear whether its cobbled together parts were still good. Eventually, these continual breakdowns forced Timer to sell the car, which meant he could not fulfill his dream of riding it to work everyday to show off to others his masculine handwork, as could Roy.

Like Timer, those who attempt to reuse another's discard are beset by uncertainty about what they have found and what it is 'really worth'. After I had worked at Four Corners for a few months I learned this firsthand when Zack, the youngest mechanic, offered me a desktop computer. Zack had retrieved the computer some time ago from the small tool shed at the top of the landfill, left behind by a machine operator who had salvaged it. Though he had never used it, Zack was attempting to secure an appropriate route of disposal for the computer as part of reordering his home and his social relations (see Gregson et al., 2007); more specifically, he was eager to part with the find because he wanted to make room in his house for the woman he'd just married. Given how rapidly computers become obsolescent, I was glad to accept a more up-to-

date model for free. After a time, however, the computer exhibited a range of mechanical problems that left me with lingering doubts about its worth.

Most findables possess an unsettled meaning until they can be explored more fully. According to Deleuze, anything newly individuated 'finds itself attached to a pre-individual half which is...the reservoir of its singularities' (1994: 246; see also Simondon, 1992: 300). One way to interpret this is that anything individuated has certain aspects that may remain hidden, a reminder of its prior state as someone else's rubbish. Scavenging something for reuse is a risky process because, removed from the social histories that molded it, one does not know much about what one finds. In fact, many scavengers at Four Corners confess that a number of the things they recover from the landfill end up back there eventually anyway: a lawnmower that can't be fixed, an unused toolbox, or a dented can of coffee all may turn out to be trash after all.

As Frow writes, 'Whatever has once been rubbish keeps a kind of memory of that state, an awareness of the possibility of relapse into it, such that...its value is insecure and is only precariously maintained' (2003: 35). From his perspective, similar to that of Thompson's (1979), this has as much to do with the movement of objects across competing regimes of value as it does the materiality of things. For instance, Zack's computer would have remained in his house had his wife shared his sense of what was reusable and worth keeping – as would have Timer's broken down Malibu. Indeed, as I will explain the very practice of landfilling represents another limit to the modes of valuation associated with scavenging and reuse, coupled with an altogether different conceptualization of rubbish relations.

## **LANDFILL CATEGORIZATION**

According to O'Brien, when waste materials are managed by 'modern societies', they are first 'divested of their intimate individual and collective meanings' so that they might be 'connected...to economic contexts in which their pecuniary value might release profits to private enterprise' (2007: 122). This is not simply a matter of commodifying waste, as he suggests, but about confronting its negative possibilities. All businesses dealing in rubbish must attend to its indeterminacy, as do scavengers. Junkyards earn profits by sorting through used vehicles and making their potentially reusable components available for salvage, while the regulations, technologies, and transactions that make up the waste disposal industry are meant to contain or lessen its potential for pollution, as much moral and social as environmental.

The American-style sanitary landfill was introduced as an affordable solution to the rising tide of waste and growing public concern for 'cleanliness' during the interwar years (see Hoy, 1995). The first 'sanitary landfill,' with its controlled tipping, trenching, compacting, and soil cover, appeared in 1938 in Fresno, California, though its use was not widespread until after the 1950s (Rogers, 2005: 87-9). Jean Vincenz, who established the design, was Fresno's acting city commissioner on public works. When combined, the techniques he advocated promised to dispose of waste loads more quickly and, equally important, to keep their gradual putrefaction from public view. While the regulation and design of landfills has changed over the course of the twentieth century, their basic approach to waste has not. Then as now, the primary purpose of landfills has been to render waste invisible as rapidly as possible, to prevent them from offending senses of place and of propriety.

Municipalities and waste contractors now must handle waste with reference to the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) of 1976 and its later versions, which define different wastes and appropriate treatments according to relative hazardousness to human health

and the environment. Consequently, even where wastes are reused in some way by the contemporary landfill industry (as a 'cover' material or as a source of alternative energy, for example), they are primarily dealt with not as a resource that can be tapped but as a problem to be solved for a fee. The calculation of that fee requires that mixed waste streams be rendered fungible, that is, transferable as a discrete form of property, thereby performatively establishing a 'frame' within which market transactions can take place (Callon, 1998: 19; see also Keane, 2008). Unlike gift and commodity exchange (Carrier, 1992), furthermore, detaching rubbish from its previous owner is seemingly straightforward since, ideally at least, items in the waste stream have been willfully abandoned. The more pressing problem is not alienation, but how to compare the diverse contents of waste loads, qualitatively and quantitatively, so that they can be effectively priced and handled.

This begins with the categorization of different forms of waste. RCRA distinguishes landfills based on what wastes they are allowed to receive. As a Type II landfill, Four Corners can receive municipal solid waste, demolition debris, contaminated soil, sludge, yard waste, and incinerator ash. Because hazardous waste is conditionally forbidden, the accurate classification of waste loads prevents fines from state regulatory agencies and provides a necessary paper trail to substantiate the continued legitimacy of the site. According to national regulations, waste generators must produce a document known as a 'waste profile' that verifies the contents and characteristics of waste streams on the basis of which a sales representative can create a binding contract. Each label assigns a mixed load of wastes to a particular class, with predictable environmental impacts and handling requirements. This must occur before a contract with a prospective customer is finalized, therefore it may involve formal distinctions that are impossible

to conduct in practice. The indeterminacy of 'the mass of common rubbish' is attenuated by these classificatory measures, but only partially. It is impractical to inspect every incoming truck.

Whereas the individuation of bits of rubbish through scavenging explores their individual possibilities, assigning different objects to general categories like 'hazardous' or 'ash' reduces heterogeneity and individuality: 'divesting... objective contents of any exemplary or unique character' (O'Brien, 2007: 121). This is further carried out in practice by way of a further reduction from abstract category to aggregate quality. After being assigned to a formal type, incoming loads are reduced to weight or volume so a price or 'tipping fee' can be assessed which stands in for the cost of assuming practical stewardship of waste, i.e. the burden of its negative value. Waste loads may be assigned a fixed price at the official signing of the contract between waste generator and landfill, for example stipulating a certain number of loads per day of a specified size. Or, as is also common, the weight or size of a given load may be determined during entry into the facility at the scale house, where additional documentation and measurement is required.

Attending to particular qualities of things and ignoring others is a common interpretive practice (Keane, 2003: 414). In the case of landfill operations, however, this is performed more systematically, as the selection of a few aggregate characteristics establish an interpretive frame by which all waste loads seem commensurate as exchangeable negative value. Establishing this base level of equivalence makes possible other forms of calculation in turn. Quantifying the incoming waste gives the landfill company a sense of how quickly the site is filling up and how much of its capacity or 'air space' remains available. The life of a landfill is projected through its permitted capacity, so preserving space in the short term is made possible through precise compaction methods and other technical strategies, which are meant to squeeze more waste into

less space. While in the long term the landfill can invest in expanding its capacity, the point not to be missed is that accumulating waste alone does not generate a reliable revenue stream. The landfill secures future earning potential by preserving capacity relative to the quantity of waste taken in, and this requires different forms of waste labor.

At first glance, it seems strange that most landfills would forbid scavenging, which after all preserves air space. Why not employ salvaging alongside the many other technical operations of landfilling? The reason for this is that they involve very different compartments toward material things, which also entail different ways of evaluating persons. The opposition between scavenging and tipping is part of the legacy of the sanitary landfill. Vincenz was primarily interested in ensuring a productive and orderly labor process, which led him to favor large scale, mechanized disposal over the slow and deliberate work of sorting and gleaning (Rogers, 2005: 97). By limiting the scope of rubbish relations, Vincenz ensured greater productivity and developed waste disposal into an economy of scale. By formally abolishing the slow search and spontaneous discovery of scavenging, he transformed waste disposal into a disciplined task capable of generating more efficient service and greater capital return, both of which critically depended on ordering unpredictable wastes into fungible units, a manageable stream.

The rationalization of the disposal process in contemporary landfills is thought necessary for containing the potentially harmful influence of wastes. In one sense, this is about protecting the environment, but in Vincenz' day this was also about establishing the profession of waste work as a clean alternative to the activities of rag and bone pickers, junk dealers and others who became identified with waste management during the previous century (Zimring, 2004; Pike, 2005). The rise of 'sanitary' forms of waste disposal was not just about the replacement of the



urban waste trades of a former era, moreover, it was about the creation of new forms of waste labor and new forms of transgression as well.

## **EMBODIED TRANSGRESSION**

The professionalization and rationalization of the waste industry during the twentieth century helped to mitigate the stigma of waste work, to cleanse it of its associations with marginalized urban scavengers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Today's operators and mechanics are skilled workers and the equipment they handle is expensive and sophisticated. This is often mentioned by operators in defense of their occupation, as one named Bart put it, 'I don't think [other people] realize how much work there is to it and how big of equipment, and how technical it is now. We aren't a bunch of big fat bones sittin' on a piece of equipment waiting for a truck to dump and let it sit there!' Yet many at Four Corners remain ambivalent about their class standing and the meaning of their occupations to the rest of society, particularly those with middle class aspirations. Bart concluded his statement quoted above by saying, 'Still, it isn't...a glorified job or nothing, you know, like lawyer or a doctor, it's just a landfill guy.' Here Bart voices recognition that his work bears relatively low status relative to upper middle class professions (Hughes, 1958). It is as if landfill workers exchange substance with the material with which they work and become waste themselves – worthless and without potential.

The orderliness of sanitary landfills, the rationalization of their work routines and spaces, offers employees the opportunity to avoid some of this contamination. For example, some workers invest in ideological and material separations between 'work' and 'home'. Different rituals of purification intercede between these realms, as many employees throw out their work gloves, wash their hands and arms, and change their uniforms and boots at the end of their shift.

These articles typically remain in the locker room, but smells have been known to linger on their persons on occasion, causing a particularly strong source of anxiety; a number of employees recounted to me particularly hurtful moments when their wives and children recoiled in their presence, complaining of landfill odors. A purification of work from home is further realized by those who do not publicly admit where it is they work, or simply say they work in 'construction'. It is also related to pervasive ambivalence, if not outright rejection, of scavenging. If clothing worn at the landfill threatens to destabilize the ordered separation of work and home spaces, the circulation of salvaged objects presents an even greater disruption, creating unwanted traffic between these separated realms. Those who do scavenge, furthermore, typically use transitional spaces of the home to store findables while they are being reassessed and remade, typically in 'masculinized' areas such as the garage or workshop. This negotiation of space does not eliminate the danger of waste, but places it in temporary abeyance (Hetherington, 2004). In fact, the ability to control or withstand potential contamination through contact with waste materials can acquire a mark of distinction all its own.

The capacity for some forms of waste to adhere to skin or clothes, to leave lingering odors or permanent stains, is only one dimension of the latent possibilities of discarded materials. On any given day my job at Four Corners usually included picking and bagging stray litter where it had accumulated around the perimeter of the site and along the access roads and slopes. 'Picking paper' efficiently from roadsides and perimeter fences meant learning to individuate 'garbage' from my surroundings and discern the best way to take it in hand to be bagged. From the perspective of my employers, for me to acknowledge rubbish in any other way was to waste time. A tennis ball becomes its distinctive color and shape as well as its ability to be handled, as does a scrap of tire or a clump of mud; it is irrelevant that one of them can be bounced off of the

road, or tossed back and forth between coworkers. A newspaper is not a text to be read, similarly, but a bit of paper that will blow out of reach if not quickly snatched out of the wind. When picking the ideal laborer is supposed to be immersed in a 'pre-theoretical' comportment toward things removed from additional forms of engagement (Dreyfus, 1991). This does not stop landfill workers from playing with tennis balls or reading newspapers that they may find, but when interpreting and interacting with objects in this way they are simultaneously committing acts of defiance.

Because the site is so large and work tasks are spread out throughout the property, disciplinary management of laborers at Four Corners depends largely on optical surveillance from a distance, which provides evidence for regular employee evaluations and shapes future managerial decisions concerning task assignment. My first few weeks at Four Corners, my other co-workers instructed me on how to 'look busy' as managers attempted to watch us periodically throughout the day. Certain signs are taken as privileged evidence of misspent labor power, including working too close to other employees, not working at all, or being spotted outside designated work areas. But one of the trickiest ways of avoiding actual labor while seeming to be immersed in one's task is, as one laborer liked to put it, 'taking your sweet old time.' Taking one's time meant working slowly, at a leisurely pace: 'we're not gonna go at it too hard, no sense bustin our ass.'

Besides taking regular breaks to talk, smoke, or go to the bathroom, a significant way of taking one's time is to carefully and selectively evaluate the materials one is meant to pick through quickly. Most employees were almost always willing to stop work to examine a worthwhile object, whether one that is reusable or merely interesting. In the process, things that had been reduced to mere weight and volume are individuated anew, selected out of an

anonymous background of potentiality to attain a distinct form. This offers more than a conceptual challenge to landfill disposal. Workers must break from a pre-theoretical immersion in the task at hand, whether rhythmically bending over to pick individual pieces of garbage or skillfully operating a compactor or bulldozer, in order to see piles of rubbish as worthy of reflection rather than of mere manipulation. In other words, they must bend or break a disciplined work habit in order to be open to the spontaneity of chance discovery.

Reclaiming objects from the waste, however temporarily, is not only about recovering value, but has a value in itself as well. Because scavenging takes focus and effort away from work tasks, it redeems time for personal enjoyment. Good objects may be buried or inaccessible, they may also require careful consideration and evaluation before they can be removed out of sight, all of which forces the worker immersed in an assigned task to apply themselves to the labor of individuation. At Four Corners, the pleasure that comes with successful salvaging has partly to do with the exhilaration of sneaking around behind the boss' back while 'on the clock.' This explains why the stories so often repeated about object recovery involve a degree of bravado.

This is especially true with items that have been consumed, such as drugs, food, or drink, which involve a deeper embodiment of the scavenged object and a more radical mixture of waste and person. According to Eddy, he once found a four-pound bag of marijuana as he picked steel off of the newly installed liner. Wary of getting caught with the contraband, he immediately hid the bag in the woods, returning later to split it with some of his coworkers. Though he tells me that the pot itself was awful, from the smile on his face it is clear that the transgression itself is what made the act worth remembering and retelling. Operators demonstrate similar enjoyment when they talk about the things they have consumed from the waste. In the past, loads from local grocery stores occasionally had to be dumped due to smoke damage. Such waste loads,

particularly when they include alcohol, came to the landfill escorted by government agents who had to guarantee that the items were properly disposed of before leaving. A few operators are fond of remembering how easily they fooled the armed ATF agents that watched them cover the skids with a thin layer of waste. After the agents had gone, I am told, they scraped the garbage off and dug out and divided it amongst themselves, then filled their garages with boxes and boxes of liquor. In the telling of the story, the spectacular find is made that much more significant because of the simultaneous violation of different barriers and rules of conduct, governmental, managerial and bodily.

Because they fall between purity and pollution, consumed discards, like other significant findables, can embody a sense of freedom from established orders, of successful defiance as well as luck. Outside the modes of valuation coworkers share, scavenged items may be seen as sources of contamination, but in the right circles the scavenger is given the appropriate social recognition, depending on the find. When I learned of Eddy's recovered pot, for example, I was expected to show how impressed I was by his brazen act of disobedience. That his illegal consumption of the drug involved the embodied expression of yet another form of transgression only served to further its relevance as something to be bragged about after it was smoked.

Like its ability to contaminate or express masculinity, the transgressive potential of salvaging is not guaranteed, the reuse of any item can generate debate between workers. Just as Timer once complained that Eddy cast aside a reusable television antennae, Eddy found it disgusting that Timer once ate snack cakes that were unloaded at the landfill by the manufacturer, still in their packages: 'There's a reason they were thrown out,' he would say, to which Timer would only shrug. On one occasion, I recall talking casually with a coworker at his home when he unexpectedly picked up the lid of an old pet food can from the floor of his garage, licked off the

contents, and said, 'Sorry if that grosses you out,' with a wry grin. The different idioms of pollution and valuation waste workers create are open to contestation and play, beyond the forms of stigma and discipline they endure in order to earn a wage.

## **CONCLUSION**

Within waste regimes devoted to industrial disposal, the politics of rubbish value acquires new forms of significance. This is particularly apparent in those places where neoliberal forms of government are being deployed to remold scavengers and their acts of recovery and renewal according to ideals of 'modern' sanitation and environmental protection (see Hill, 2001; Millar, 2007). Industrial-scale waste technologies like landfill and incineration, in particular, involve rationalized forms of waste labor and reduced conceptions of person-thing relations, opposing them to scavenging in theory if not always in practice. Yet, scavenging is only likely to increase worldwide as different wastes continue to move across borders, shadowing the circulation of goods and generating substantial economies of rubbish in the process (see Hansen, 2000).

The social and moral entailments of waste multiply in these instances, demonstrating that waste is not fixed according to its negative valuations, but open to varied forms of expression and entanglement. More than something done merely for survival, the practice of scavenging may come to possess value detached from the particular worth of the things one finds. Mac, another laborer at Four Corners, provides a good final illustration of this. As we walked around the slopes one windy day, picking stray paper bags that had blown away from the dumping site on top of the hill, I watched Mac put down his plastic bag full of scrap paper, bend his knees and pluck an old penny from the soil that I had barely noticed. It was scratched to the point of illegibility, but Mac carefully turned the coin over and studied it in his hands, trying to read the

date or the inscriptions along the side. Tired from a day's work, we took a break from walking along the uneven ground and picking wet trash. He explained to me that he was always on the lookout for 1943 pennies. They are very rare and valuable to coin collectors, Mac said, because copper production was halted in that year to support the war effort. The penny was not from 1943, nor were any of the others he had found over the years at Four Corners, but he placed it in his pocket anyway and soon after we continued working again.

For Mac, salvaging is not simply about avoiding work or acquiring things of value, although these certainly motivate him in much of what he does while at the landfill. Rather, it is something of an end in itself. A collection of knick-knacks are elaborately arranged above the television set in his living room: old coins with the dates worn off, small figurines like the ones his mother once collected, and diamonds with slight imperfections, some of which he believes to be valuable and others he merely finds pleasing. They serve as tokens of what is possible. If some possess doubtful exchange value as individual pieces, they still represent the significance of redeeming and reusing things that have been lost to others and hint at what other treasures might be out there still. Recovery reveals a level of spontaneity underlying his oftentimes tedious days and weeks. It is easy to see why it is that Mac fantasizes about one day leaving Michigan and going to Arkansas to spend his days at the Murfreesboro public mine. At the park, he once heard on television, tourists may dig in the ground and keep what jewels they find. Some people have made millions from what they've recovered there and, though the 'diamond fever' that once surrounded the site has since died down, the possibility for more treasure still remains. Mac insists upon this.

That, for him, is living the ideal life – far from home and work, with nothing but potential treasures waiting in the dirt. With this he encapsulates the desire that motivates those who dispose of things as well as those who sift them from rubbish: to start anew.

## References

- Alexander, Catherine (2005) 'Value: Economic Valuations and Environmental Policy', in James Carrier (ed) *A Handbook of Economic Anthropology*, pp.455-71. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.
- Appadurai, Arjun, ed. (1986) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Auyero, Javier and Debora Swistun (2007) 'Amidst Garbage and Poison: an Essay on Polluted Peoples and Places', *Contexts* 6(2): 46-51.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1984) *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Callon, Michel (1998) 'Introduction: the Embeddedness of Economic Markets in Economics', in Michel Callon (ed) *The Laws of Markets*, pp. 1-57. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Carrier, James G. (1995) *Gifts and Commodities: Exchange and Western Capitalism Since 1700*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Colloredo-Mansfield, Rudi (2003) 'Matter Unbound', *Journal of Material Culture* 8(3): 245-54.
- Dant, Tim (2005) *Materiality and Society*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1994) *Difference and Repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- DeSilvey, Caitlin (2006) 'Observed Decay: Telling Stories with Mutable Things', *Journal of Material Culture* 11(3): 318-38.



Douglas, Mary (1984) *Purity and Danger*. London and New York: Routledge.

Dreyfus, Hubert (1991) *Being-in-the-World: a Commentary on Heidegger's Being in Time*.  
Cambridge: MIT Press.

Edensor, Tim (2005) 'Waste Matter: the Debris of Industrial Ruins and the Disordering of the  
Material World', *Journal of Material Culture* 10(3): 311-32.

Erlanger, Steven (2007) 'West Bank Boys Dig a Living in Settler Trash', electronic document,  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/02/world/middleeast/02westbank.html?ex=](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/02/world/middleeast/02westbank.html?ex=1189656000&en=35b97766186f172b&ei=5070&emc=eta1)  
[1189656000&en=35b97766186f172b&ei=5070&emc=eta1](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/02/world/middleeast/02westbank.html?ex=1189656000&en=35b97766186f172b&ei=5070&emc=eta1), accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> September.

Ferreira, Mariana K. Leal. (2002) 'Tupi-Guarani Apocalyptic Visions of Time and Body',  
*Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 7(1): 128-69.

Frow, Jonathan (2003) 'Invidious Distinction: Waste, Difference, and Classy Stuff', in Gay  
Hawkins and Stephen Muecke (eds) *Waste and Culture: the Creation and Destruction of*  
*Value*, pp. 25-38. Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield.

Gille, Zsuzsa (2007) *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History: the Politics of Waste*  
*in Socialist and Postsocialist Hungary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Graeber, David (2001) *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: the False Coin of Our Own*  
*Dreams*. New York: Palgrave.

Gregson, Nicky, Metcalfe, Alan, Louis Crewe (2007) 'Moving Things Along: the Conduits and  
Practices of Divestment in Consumption', *Transactions of the Institute of British*  
*Geographers* 32(2): 187-200.

Hansen, Karen Tranberg (2000) *Salaula: the World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia*.  
Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hetherington, Kevin (2004) 'Secondhandedness: Consumption, Disposal and Absent Presence',

*Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 22: 157-73.

Hill, Sarah (2001) 'The Environmental Divide: Neoliberal Incommensurability at the U.S.-Mexico Border', *Urban Anthropology* 30(2-3): 157-87.

Hill, Sarah (2003) 'Metaphoric Enrichment and Material Poverty: the Making of "Colonias"', in Pablo Vila (ed), *Ethnography at the Border*, pp. 141-65. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hoy, Suellen M. (1995) *Chasing Dirt: the American Pursuit of Cleanliness*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hughes, Everett C. (1958) *Men and Their Work*. Toronto: Collier-Macmillan.

Keane, Webb (2003) 'Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things', *Language and Communication* 23: 409-25.

Keane, Webb (2008) 'Market, Materiality and Moral Metalanguage', *Anthropological Theory* 8(1): 27-42.

Medina, Martin (2000) 'Scavenger Cooperatives in Asia and Latin America', *Resources, Conservation and Recycling* 31(1): 51-69.

Mellström, Ulf (2004) 'Machines and Masculine Subjectivities: Technology as an Integrated Part of Men's Life Experiences', *Men and Masculinities* 6(4): 368-82.

Millar, Kathleen (2007) 'Making Trash into Treasure: Struggles for Autonomy on a Brazilian Garbage Dump', paper presented at the American Anthropological Association meeting in Washington, D.C., 2<sup>nd</sup> December.

Munn, Nancy (1986) *The Fame of Gawa*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Mydans, Stephen (2006) 'Manila: Sifting for a Living on Trash Mountain', electronic document,

<http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/05/21/news/city7.php>, accessed 10<sup>th</sup> December.

Myers, Fred, ed (2001) *Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*. Santa Fe: SAR Press.

Nagle, Robin (2001) 'Why We Love to Hate San Men', *Bad Subjects* 55.

O'Brien, Martin (2007) *A Crisis of Waste?: Understanding the Rubbish Society*. London and New York: Routledge.

Pike, David .L. (2005) 'Sewage Treatments: Vertical Space and Waste in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London', in William A Cohen and Ryan Johnson (eds), *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*. pp. 51-77. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

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

Sansi-Roca, Roger (2005) 'The Hidden Life of Stones: Historicity, Materiality and the Value of Candomblé Objects in Bahia', *Journal of Material Culture* 10(2): 139-56.

Sicular, David (1992) *Scavengers, Recyclers, and Solutions for Solid Waste Management in Indonesia*. University of California, Berkeley: Center for Southeast Asian Studies.

Silverstein, Michael (2003) 'Indexical Order and the Dialectics of Sociolinguistic Life', *Language and Communication* 23(3-4): 193-229.

Simondon, Gilbert (1992) 'The Genesis of the Individual', in Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (eds), *Incorporations*, pp. 297-319. New York: Zone Books.

Stewart, Charles (2003) 'Dreams of Treasure: Temporality, Historicization and the Unconscious', *Anthropological Theory* 3(4): 481-500.

Strasser, Susan (1999) *Waste and Want: the Social History of Trash*. London: Metropolitan Books.

Thomas, Nicholas (1991) *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.

Thompson, Michael (1979) *Rubbish Theory: the Creation and Destruction of Value*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Weiner, Annette (1985) 'Inalienable Wealth', *American Ethnologist* 12(2): 178-83.

Zimring, Carl (2004) 'Dirty Work: How Hygiene and Xenophobia Marginalized the American Waste Trades, 1870-193', *Environmental History* 9(1): 80-101.