OVERVIEW
Habits and practices of discard are deeply engrained within contemporary life; indeed, they are so casual and so continual that we almost consider them a right. When we look at them closely, however, we see that discard assumptions and behaviors have caused unprecedented environmental problems in the United States and around the world -- and that's only their most obvious consequence. The tangle of questions that waste inspires offers startling revelations about our relationships to the material world and to each other.

This class considers practical questions about living in a throw-away society while exploring some of the deeper cultural conventions around which that society is organized. We'll study the history and infrastructure of solid waste, consider how our discard habits reflect historically new patterns of thinking about time, examine the challenge of defining and managing various categories of waste, and survey economic and political effects of our cast-offs in a global context.

We’ll investigate these and other themes through readings, field trips, writing and editing assignments, regular contributions to a class blog, individual research projects, lectures from invited guests, and a practice-experiment.

REQUIREMENTS & LOGISTICS
Attend class. Participate in class discussions. Do your homework on time (reading, writing, editing, blog contributions, research project components, etc.). Communicate with me about any problems. Readings are posted on our Blackboard site. The book (Rats) is available through the NYU Bookstore.

GRADING:
- Writing/editing – 30%
- Class participation – 15%
- Research project – 30%
- Blog – 25% (extra credit for enthusiastic blog citizenship)

I. INTRODUCTIONS – to each other, to larger questions and connections that will frame our investigations this semester.

Class 1 | September 7 – In the Beginning
Who are you and why are you here? If you were to choose one question to investigate in detail this semester, what might it be?

Class 2 | September 14 -- Marking
In studying discards, an essential first step is to unlearn our usual ways of seeing. Which social behaviors or assumptions are “marked” and which are “unmarked”? What are the implications for discards as a category of study?

Class 3 | September 21 -- Unmarking
Discards can seem a trivial concern, but any single example of garbage is connected to an ever-expanding set of relationships. Today we continue our consideration of marking versus unmarking to place discards within that larger web.

Class 4 | September 28 -- Commons
Is garbage an abuse of a shared commons, or does it merely reflect a necessary side-effect of contemporary life?


• Write: A 500-word essay that either agrees or disagrees with Hardin. Follow the Formatting Guide, found on our Blackboard site under Assignments and on our blog under Miscellany (scroll down).

• Post: at least three photos of discards or their consequences. Define ‘discards’ as you wish, but be prepared to explain. Don’t forget to include your name on the pictures. Due Tuesday, September 27, by 5:00p.

II. GEOGRAPHIES OF DISCARD
So far we’ve talked about theories that are useful in understanding discards as a category and as a problem. Now we’ll consider specific examples, starting with questions about spaces and places.

Class 5 | October 5 -- Landscape
How does a place qualify as valuable or worthless? Can a landscape be discarded?


• Write: Your revised draft of the Hardin essay, incorporating the relevant comments from your editing partner. Follow the Formatting Guide. Hand in both drafts. All your writing assignments this semester will use this two-draft protocol. Your responsibilities as a writer and as an editor are equally important. If you shine on your editing partner, your grade will suffer.*


* Shine on = to ignore, pass by, reject
Class 6 | October 12 -- Ruins
Ruins stand as discarded architecture. They also point to cast-off jobs, communities, ways of life, histories.


• Write: Put Edensor in conversation with either Brekhus or with Hardin. How do those authors help make sense of Edensor’s notions about ruins? Phrased another way: how do we understand Edensor more fully because of the insights of Brekhus or Hardin? [Extra credit: draw on both theorists]. 500 words, por favor, and follow our Formatting Guide. YOU MUST HAND IN TWO DRAFTS: the first with edits from your editing partner, the second with those edits incorporated.

• Post: A paragraph describing your research project. This is known as an abstract. What question will you explore in depth? Keep it small and focused enough to be feasible for the equivalent of a 10- to 12-page paper. If you intend to use a different format, tell us what that is. Aim for 150 words.

Class 7 | October 19 – Landfills & Dumps
Landfills and dumps are generally despised, but – like ruins – they can haunt.


• Write: Recall our class discussions in September about the “away” and imagine contemporary life without it. What we might do with trash besides dumping it in a landfill, or burning it, or tossing it in the sea? Is it possible to eliminate (discard!) garbage completely? Use at least one of the texts we read for today. Follow our Formatting Guide. 500~ words. YOU MUST HAND IN TWO DRAFTS: the first with edits from your editing partner, the second with those edits incorporated.

• Post: Any reflection relevant to today’s readings as they connect to the themes of our class, and a thoughtful comment on a classmate’s research proposal. Be specific! Aim for 150 - 250 words.

Excursion | October 22 (Saturday)
Guided tour of Dead Horse Bay. We meet the bus at 8:45 that morning. Details TBA.
Class 8 | October 26 – Impacts Both Distant and Immediate

Plastic represents a new and pernicious kind of discard, with consequences far beyond any previously known forms of pollution. Our guest today is Max Liboiron, a Ph.D. candidate at NYU and an organizer with the Plastic Pollution Coalition.


Write: Tell us your reaction to Dead Horse Bay. Use at least two of the authors we’ve read for class this semester. Follow our Formatting Guide. YOU MUST HAND IN TWO DRAFTS: the first with edits from your editing partner, the second with those edits incorporated.

• Post: What resources will you be using for your research project? Post a preliminary bibliography that includes at least five sources.
  • Optional: Pictures from our trip

INFRASTRUCTURE
Class 9 | November 2 -- Cities

Urban spaces have a concentration of discard-related challenges. City trash also speaks loudly about the city itself.


  • Write: Pose and answer a question relevant to class themes. Use at least one text you haven’t yet used. Include reference to class discussions and/or the DHB trip. As per usual: Follow our Formatting Guide. 500-1000– words. YOU MUST HAND IN TWO DRAFTS: the first with edits from your editing partner, the second with those edits incorporated.

• Post: Any reflection relevant to today’s readings and the video, and a reaction to/ reflection on something a classmate has contributed to the blog. This is a good opportunity to play with questions or concerns related to your research project. (~150 words).
Class 10 | November 9 – Neighbors
Dr. Robert Corrigan is our guest this week. He teaches biology at Purdue University, is a consultant to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and has written the definitive texts on urban rodents and rodent control.


• Write: If you were designing a system to control rats in a city like New York, what would you suggest? Follow our Formatting Guide. YOU MUST HAND IN TWO DRAFTS: the first with edits from your editing partner, the second with those edits incorporated. As usual, 500-1000~ words.

• Post: Any reflection relevant to today’s readings as they connect to the themes of our class, and a reaction to/reflection on something a classmate has contributed to the blog. Aim for 150 - 250 words. Be specific!

Class 11 | November 16 -- Labor
Who is responsible for the labors of waste? What’s it like to do that work?


Burnstein, Daniel. 2006. Excerpt from *Next to Godliness: Confronting Dirt and Despair in Progressive Era New York City*. U Illinois P.


• Watch: “Waste Land” by Lucy Walker (approx. 90 minutes)

• Write: If your livelihood were centered on labors of waste, what do you imagine would be the hardest parts? In other words, if you were a sanitation worker or a scavenger or a street sweeper or a sewage worker, what would be the most difficult elements of the work? or of your life in that role? Use at least two of the sources assigned for today (the three readings and the film). As always, work with your editing partner on the first draft and hand in the edited version. Aim for 500-1000~ words.

• Post: --An outline of your research project and a reaction to/reflection on a classmate’s research project ideas.

Class 12 | November 23
No class – travel safely!
Class 13 | November 30 – Other Contexts
What creative thinking can we bring to some of the structures built to deal with our many forms of waste? And what of discards that travel far after they leave us?

Between this class and next, you have an exercise that requires adjustments in your thinking and in your daily rhythms. Starting on Monday, December 5, all of us will save all the garbage we generate for a 48-hour period. This includes anything that you would throw out in a garbage can or waste basket; it does not include toilet paper. We'll bring our trash to class on December 7.

  http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/142/

•Write: Choose one:
  a. A proposal for an alternative use of a waste-focused infrastructure
  b. A proposal for an alternative way to use wastes (define “wastes” clearly)
  c. A proposal for an alternative to American electronics recycling policies

  Be aware: these proposals can’t be small-scale. By now you know that problems caused by discards can’t be addressed at the local level in any truly effective way. You have to think big. Word count: at least 500, but longer if you need it.

•Post: Tell us where you are with your research project (progress? problems? surprises?)

Class 14 | December 7
Bring in your trash!


•Write: What’s the most significant insight or lesson you’ll take away from this semester? This is a broad question, but a successful answer will be specific and detailed. As per usual: Formatting Guide, edited draft along with the final draft, 500- words (or more if you wish)

•Post: Your experience saving your trash.

Project Due – Friday, December 16, by 3:00p in my mailbox at the Draper Program office
Include the draft that has feedback from your editing partner!