

# Garbage in Gotham: The Anthropology of Trash

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## INTRODUCTION

Garbage is a multifaceted category of material culture implicated in a host of environmental, political, and economic crises. It also encompasses a rich set of cultural assumptions, values, and traditions. The infrastructural requirements that garbage imposes on large-scale urban areas are not well understood outside a relatively small circle of experts, however, so perhaps it's not surprising that attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors inspired by rubbish are also largely unexamined in an academic context.

This makes garbage a particularly satisfying subject for anthropological scrutiny. How is this thing we call "trash" created, perceived, processed, ignored? What are the conventions that allow garbage to be an acceptable, even inevitable part of daily life? What environmental troubles can we trace back to, or from, rubbish? When we look a little closer to home, what are the economics of garbage in New York more than a decade after the city's last landfill closed?

The class starts with readings that propose more inclusive parameters for authoritative knowledge so that waste in general, and garbage in particular, might find a place in academic discourse. We then look at ideas of private property and value imparted to material objects and consider how such measures are inverted in the process of creating trash. This includes texts that consider distinctions between the sacred and the profane. We study philosophies and histories of waste and worth. We step into contemporary conversations about trash through several considerations, including the gendering of both domestic and municipal trash management, the history of garbage handling in various times and places, connections between garbage and consumption, labors of waste (who exactly is responsible for taking away the trash?), garbage archaeology, the many ways in which discards are implicated in environmental troubles, and how solid waste and related industrial processes shape landscape -- among many other themes.

The class includes field trips and practices. Details are below. These are outside the conventional purview of an academic seminar, but garbage cannot be studied only from inside a classroom.

## DEADLINES

February 5: First response paper

February 19: Second response paper

February 26: Peer edits of 2nd paper

March 5: Project abstract

March 12: Peer edits of project abstract

March 26: Project outline

April 2: Peer edits of outline

April 9: Annotated bibliography

April 16: Peer edits of bib

April 23: Draft of final project

April 30: Peer edits of final project

May 4: (Sunday) Conference

May 14: Final project due

## FIELD TRIPS -- dates TBA

Freshkills Park, Staten Island

Freegan Tour, Manhattan

Dead Horse Bay, Brooklyn

Sims Metal Recycling, Brooklyn (tentative)

## REQUIREMENTS

- Attend class. If you can't be here on a particular week for any reason, please let me know ahead of time. Missing more than two classes jeopardizes your grade.
- Be a responsible member of our class community. This means regular participation in our class discussions and in the Forum within our NYU Classes Portal.
- Do the readings ahead of each class meeting. Same for films (these will be on reserve at Bobst; some will also be available online). Be prepared to discuss, ask questions, debate.
- Do the writing assignments on time and in proper format (double-spaced, 12-point type, one-inch margins). Writing includes peer-editing responsibilities. A final project, due at the end of the semester, will be a 15-page research paper or an equivalent work. This must address themes relevant to the class and must be developed in consultation with me.
- Take part in our field trips. These include an outing with Freegans in the Village, a trip to Dead Horse Bay in Brooklyn, a visit to Freshkills Park on Staten Island, and perhaps a tour of the new Sims Metal Management recycling facility in Brooklyn. You may not be able to come on all these trips, but please attend at least one (and preferably more). They will be happy when the weather is warmer.
- Take on our three primary Garbage Practices. It is a challenge to change even small habits of waste generation. The Garbage Practices require attention, memory, a little time. They require commitment. They challenge our awareness and our sense of time and of worth, our *habitus*, and our mental rhythms (among other variables).

*Saving* Choose a product that you would normally discard after using. Instead of throwing it out, save it and use it as many times as you can until it dies. Examples might be paper or plastic shopping bags, paper coffee cups, plastic water bottles, etc. Mark the date that you first reuse it and see how long it lasts. Also notice how many of them you save by using one over and over.

*Replacing* Choose a product that usually comes in discardable form and replace it with a non-disposable version. Again, bags – paper or plastic – come to mind. Do you always leave the grocery store with half a dozen plastic bags full of food? Use a couple of canvas bags instead. Do you drink a cup of coffee every morning and then toss the cup? Replace it with a durable mug or thermos. Do you use disposable diapers for your baby? Switch to cloth. Whatever you choose, use the permanent version every time you would otherwise use the disposable one.

*Collecting* At some point in the second half of the semester, everyone will save all garbage they generate for a 48-hour period. We'll choose that time together and everyone will save their trash for the same two days. This includes anything that you would throw out in a garbage can or waste basket; it does not include toilet paper. We'll then bring our trash to class. You won't be asked to display your trash as a collection of individual objects, but you'll share with each other the experience of not being able to throw out your discards. The dates for this will be determined during class discussion as the semester progresses.

*Keeping/Claiming* We will each choose one disposable, ephemeral something – a piece of packaging, a scrap of cloth, a bottle cap, etc. – and keep it. It will become our individual, unalterable, personal totem or talisman or amulet of this class, of our growing garbage awareness, of this particular moment in time.

## SCHEDULE

### Overview

#### 1. January 29 – Who are we and why are we here?

First response paper due by 8:00p Sunday, February 2, to the Forum section of our NYU Portal.

### Meanings

#### 2. February 5 -- Modern Concepts of “Waste”

Brekhuis, Wayne. 1998. A Sociology of the Unmarked: Redirecting Our Focus. *Sociological Theory* 16(1):34-51.

Hardin, Garrett. 1968. The Tragedy of the Commons. *Science* 162; p1243-8.

Locke, John. 1994 (1960). Of Property. In Peter Laslett, ed., *Two Treatises of Government*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP.

Ostrom, Elinor, et al. 1999. Revisiting the Commons: Local Lessons, Global Challenges. *Science* 284; p278-82.

→ Write a response paper of 500-750 words answering the question of why you're here. What draws you to this subject? What do you want to learn from this class? (Double-spaced, 12-point type, one-inch margins; label it LASTNAME-GG-YEARMONTHDAY – for example, NAGLE-GG-20140205)

#### 3. February 12 – Boundaries and Definitions

Calvino, Italo. 1993. La Poubelle Agréée. *The Road to San Giovanni*. New York: Pantheon.

de Certeau, Michel. 1988. The Unnamable. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: U California P.

Douglas, Mary. 1970. The Abominations of Leviticus. *Purity and Danger*, New York: Pantheon.

Miller, William. 1997. Thick Greasy Life. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

#### 4. February 19 – The Being of Thingness

Kopytoff, Igor. 1986. The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process. In Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP.

Miller, Daniel. 1998. Why Some Things Matter. In Daniel Miller, ed., *Material Cultures*. Chicago: U Chicago P.

Thompson, Michael. 1979. Excerpt from *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*. London: Oxford UP.

→ Practice Saving or Replacing (see details above).

→ Write a brief essay about your experience, using at least two of the readings we've done so far this semester (including today's texts, if you like). Did anything about the saving/replacing practice surprise you? Was any part of it challenging? Be specific in your details. Aim for 500-1000 words, remembering that more is not necessarily better. Writing concisely is harder than it looks. (Format: double-spaced, 12-point type, one-inch margins; label: LASTNAME-GG-YEARMONTHDATE). You'll be paired with a partner to read and edit each other's work.

5. February 26 – Material Culture and Everyday Life

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. Structures and the habitus. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Stanford: Stanford UP.

Ferrell, Jeff. 2006. Excerpt from *Empire of Scrounge: Inside the Urban Underground of Dumpster Diving, Trash Picking, and Street Scavenging*. New York: NYU Press.

Perry, Mark et al. 2010. Laying Waste Together: The Shared Creation and Disposal of Refuse in a Social Context. *Space and Culture* 13(1):75-94.

Rathje, William and Cullen Murphy. 2001. Excerpt from *Rubbish! What Our Garbage Tells Us About Ourselves*. Tucson: U Arizona P.

→ Give essay edits to your writing/editing partner.

→ If you were Saving, change to Replacing, and vice-versa. Be prepared to discuss your experiences in light of today's readings.

**Logistics**6. March 5 – Urban Space

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

Melosi, Martin V. 2005 [1981]. Excerpt from *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform and the Environment 1880-1980*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M UP.

Miller, Benjamin. 2000. Excerpt from *Fat of the Land: A History of Garbage in New York, the Last 200 Years*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows.

Watch “Garbage Land” (Iskander Films, 2009)

→ Write a description of your final research project. This should take the form of an abstract – that is, a 250-500-word tightly constructed overview. What is the subject? Why is it important? How will you explore it? What readings have we done so far that are or will be useful to you?

You'll be paired with a partner to read and edit each other's work.

7. March 12 – Plastics

Liboiron, Max. 2013. “Modern Waste as Strategy,” *Lo Squaderno: Explorations in Space and Society*. Special edition on Garbage & Wastes. No 29.

Liboiron, Max. 2012. Excerpt from “Redefining Pollution: Plastics in the Wild.” PhD dissertation, NYU.

Guest speaker: Max Liboiron

→ Give research project edits to your writing/editing partner.

8. March 19 – No Class -- Spring Break

9. March 26 -- Infrastructure

Evans, D. 2012 Binning, gifting and recovery: the conduits of disposal in household food consumption. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30(6):1123-37.

Hird, M.J. 2013. Waste, Landfills, and an Environmental Ethics of Vulnerability. *Ethics and the Environment* 18(1):105-24.

Offenhuber, Dietmar, et al. 2012. "Putting Matter in Place: Measuring Tradeoffs in Waste Disposal and Recycling." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 78(2):173-96.

Star, Susan Leigh. 1999. The Ethnography of Infrastructure. *American Behavioral Scientist* 43(3):377-91.

Watch "The Gleaners & I" (Agnes Varda, 2000)

→ Write an outline of your final research project. You may make it detailed, but keep it in outline form. Not all of you like to organize yourselves this way, but an outline is useful at this stage of your work. It can serve as a map to help you see where you're trying to go, or – just as importantly – it can make clear that you haven't quite found your focus.

You'll be paired with a partner to read and edit each other's work.

10. April 2 -- Labors of Waste

Nagle, Robin. 2013. *Picking Up: On the Streets and Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Reno, Josh. 2009. Your Trash is Someone's Treasure: The Politics of Value at a Michigan Landfill. *Journal of Material Culture* 14(1):29-46.

Watch "Trash Dance" (Allison Orr & Andrew Garrison, 2012)

→ Give outline edits to your writing/editing partner.

**Consequences**11. April 9 – Scale and "Real" Numbers

MacBride, Samantha. 2012. *Recycling Reconsidered: The Present Failure and Future Promise of Environmental Action in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Wagner, Gernot. 2011. *But Will the Planet Notice? How Smart Economics Can Save the World*. New York: Hill & Wang.

→ Write an annotated bibliography for your final research project. This should have at least 15 sources. Any or all of them may be drawn from class readings, but none of them have to be.

You'll be paired with a partner to read and edit each other's work.

12. April 16 – Geography & Ruins

Crewe, Louise. 2011. "Life Itemised: Lists, Loss, Unexpected Significance, and the Enduring Geographies of Discard." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29(1):27-46.

DeSilvey, Caitlin, and Tim Edensor. 2013. "Reckoning with Ruins." *Progress in Human Geography* 37(4):465-85.

[12. April 16 – Geography & Ruins, cont'd.]

Lepawsky, Josh, and Chris McNabb. 2010. "Mapping Flows of Electronic Waste." *The Canadian Geographer* 54(2):177-95.

Moore, Sarah A. 2012. "Garbage matters: Concepts in new geographies of waste." *Progress in Human Geography* 36:780-99.

Stoler, Ann, ed. 2013. Excerpt from *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*. Duke UP.

→ Give bibliography edits to your writing/editing partner.

13. April 23 – Gender

Strasser, Susan. 1999. *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*. New York: Metropolitan.

Watch "Waste Land" (Lucy Walker, 2010)

→ Write a 5-7 page draft of your final paper/project. If you want this draft to be a rough version of the entire final work, that's also an option. Format: double-spaced, one-inch margins, 12-point type, page numbers, header with your name and the paper title.

Use this as an opportunity to tune up your conference presentation.

You'll be paired with a partner to read and edit each other's work.

14. April 30 – Justice and the Future

Dillon, L. 2013. "Race, Waste, and Space: Brownfield Redevelopment and Environmental Justice at the Hunters Point Shipyard." *Antipode* (complete cite TK).

Falasca-Zamponi, S. 2011. Excerpt from *Waste and Consumption: Capitalism, the Environment, and the Life of Things*. New York: Routledge.

Foote, Stephanie, and Elizabeth Mazzolini, eds. 2012. Excerpt from *Histories of the Dustheap: Waste, Material Cultures, Social Justice*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.

→ Give project draft/conference talk edits to your writing/editing partner.

**GARBAGE in GOTHAM CONFERENCE: SUNDAY, MAY 4****Conclusion**15. May 7 – Now what?

End-of-semester overview, recap, reflection, and party

**Final papers/projects due May 14.**