

DISCARD STUDIES

FRSEM-UA.457.1.001

Prof. Robin Nagle

Fall 2011

Wednesdays, 11:00-1:30

22-24 8th Street (Draper Conference Room)

Office hours: Wednesdays, 2:00-4:00 or by appointment

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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 simultaneously exploring some of the deeper cultural conventions around which that society is organized. We'll study the history and infrastructure of solid waste. We'll look at how our discard habits reflect patterns of thinking about time in a historically new way, examine the challenge of defining and managing various categories of waste, and survey some global economic and political contexts of our cast-offs.

We'll explore 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 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 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?

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

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?

•Read: Hardin, Garrett. 1968. The Tragedy of the Commons. *Science* 162:1243-8.

•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?

- Read: Jorgensen, Anna and Marian Tylecote. 2007. Ambivalent Landscapes: Wilderness in the Urban Interstices. *Landscape Research* 32(4):443-62.

Purpura, Lia. 2010. There Are Things Awry Here. *Orion* November/December.
<http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/5933/>

- Write: Your revised draft of the Hardin essay, incorporating your editor's comments. 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.*
- Post: What did you take away from the "Ambivalent Landscapes" essay? Be specific. Aim for 150 – 250 words.

Class 6 | October 12 -- Ruins

Ruins stand as discarded architecture. They also point to cast-off jobs, communities, ways of life, histories.

- Read: Edensor, Tim. 2005. The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23(6):829-49.
- Write: Put Edensor in conversation with either Brekhus or with Hardin. How do they 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.

* Shine on – to ignore, pass by, reject

- 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.

- Read: Black, Frederick R. 1981. Jamaica Bay: A History. (Cultural Resource Management Study No. 3). National Parks Service.

Sullivan, Robert. 1998. Valley of the Garbage Hills. From *Meadowlands: Wilderness Adventures at the Edge of a City*. New York: Scribner.

Stegner, W. 1959. The Town Dump. *The Atlantic Monthly*, October; p78-80.

Melosi, Martin. 2002. The Fresno Sanitary Landfill as a National Historic Landmark. *American Society for Environmental History News* 13(2): Summer, p1+.

- 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 artist-in-residence at Wave Hill in the Bronx.

Read: TBA

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.

- Read: Melosi, Martin V. 2002 [1981] Introduction to *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform and the Environment 1880-1980*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press.

“From the Top of the Heap.” Friends of the Pleistocene, Urban Omnibus
<http://fopnews.wordpress.com/2010/11/09/from-the-top-of-the-heap-geologic-city-report-7/>

Calvino, Italo. 1972. Cities & the Sky 2 and Continuous Cities I in *Invisible Cities*. New York: Harcourt.

- Watch: “The Story of Stuff,” by Annie Leonard (20~ minutes)
<http://www.youtube.com/storyofstuffproject#p/u/22/9GorqroigqM>
- Write: Response question(s) TBA
- 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.

- Read: Sullivan, Robert. 2005. *Rats: Observations on the History & Habitat of the City's Most Unwanted Inhabitants*. New York: Bloomsbury.

One or two short articles by Corrigan.

- 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~ 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?

- Read: Coleman, John. 1974. *Blue-Collar Journal*, p 203-252. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott.

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

Asimov, Isaac. 1986. Strikebreaker. From *Robot Dreams*. New York: Ace.

- Watch: "Waste Land" by Lucy Walker (approx. 90 minutes)
- Write: Response question(s) TBA.
- 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.

•Read: Brown, Hilary. 2010. Infrastructural Ecologies: Principles for Post-Industrial Public Works. *Places*, October 25.

Grossman, Elizabeth. 2004. High-Tech Wasteland. *Orion* July/August
<http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/142/>

Wagner, Gernot. 2011. Going Green but Getting Nowhere. *New York Times*, September 7. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/08/opinion/going-green-but-getting-nowhere.html?_r=1&scp=15

•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!

•Read: Bridge, Gavin. 2009. Material Worlds: Natural Resources, Resource Geography, and the Material Economy. *Geography Compass* 3(3):1217-44.

- 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!