Trash Matters: Exploring Development, Environment, and Culture through Garbage

E-waste recyclers in China. Source: Foreign Policy, "Inside the Digital Dump"

Gallatin School of Individualized Study
New York University

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Course: IDSEM-UG1786
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Semester: Fall 2014
Time: Thurs. 3:30-6:10pm
Location: Room 501, 1 Wash. Pl.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course considers the production, management, and disposal of garbage as a dynamic cultural phenomenon that can lend insight into a broad array of questions at the nexus of environment and development. Most broadly, unpacking waste’s deep political and cultural dimensions provides for critical reflection on urbanism, social relations of difference, global economic processes, and people’s relationships to nature. After exploring theories of waste and value, the course examines a broad selection of historic and contemporary geographies of waste from New York to Bangladesh for insight into specific debates and phenomena inscribed within these larger themes. Specific topics will include: the role of discourses and practices of waste in patterns of injustice and segregation; concepts of pollution governing debates on sustainability and the urban environment; formal and informal labors of garbage management and questions of stigma and rights to the city; global waste circulations and capitalist globalization; the transformation of value and meaning involved in diverse processes of recycling; waste-based social movements and rebellion through disorder; the art of rubbish.
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

• To critically reflect upon the creation and destruction of value through examining discourses and practices of waste.

• To explore concepts and histories of development in a diverse set of contexts, from New York City to Bangladesh, through a close examination of the politics of consumption and disposal.

• To better understand questions of sustainability, urban ecological design, and people’s relationship to nature in the city through unpacking our relationship to trash.

• To consider the role of stigmatized labor in constructing and upholding gender, race, and class difference.

• To consider our own practices of consumption and waste through examining the specific waste geographies of New York City.

• To explore a set of social movements and artistic practices derived from the creative power of waste.

REQUIREMENTS

• Class attendance, participation, and leading discussion
  You are expected to read all assigned materials, attend all classes, and participate actively in discussions. If you are unable to attend class, you must let me know and come to my office hours that week. If you miss a film screened in class, you must view it in your own time. You will only be allowed one unexcused absence during the semester without penalty. Consistent lateness will be penalized as well.

You are expected to help lead class discussion for one week during the semester. Working with a partner also assigned for that week, you will be expected to make a short presentation on the week’s topic (about 10 minutes) and to come up with some points of discussion for analyzing the assigned texts.

• Writing Assignments

  Essay #1: Theorizing Waste
  Drawing on the readings for Week 2, write a short paper describing why waste provides a particularly insightful lens into understanding environment, development, and culture. Describe the complexity of waste as a cultural phenomenon and use this to reflect on relations of uneven development, unequal social relations, and people’s relationships to nature. Be sure to draw on and cite all four texts and feel free to draw from the additional readings. Length: 3–4 pages (12 pt. font, double-spaced). Due Tuesday, September 16th.

  Essay #2: Movie Write-Up
  Write an essay analyzing the film that you watched during the week of October 2nd. The analysis should briefly summarize the film but, most importantly, provide a critical analysis of how the film treats the subject at hand. Who do you think was its intended audience and how did that shape the narrative? What was the goal of the film? Did it fairly portray the
subject matter and what might have been missing? How does the film take into account the special qualities of waste? What insight is revealed? Length: 2 pages (12 pt. font, double-spaced). Due Sunday Oct. 5th.

**Essay #3: Garbage in Gotham**
Drawing on Weeks 3, 4, 6 and the field trip to Fresh Kills Park, write a short analytical paper considering the politics of garbage in New York City. You can choose your own focus, which may be the collection system, the labor force, or the contested history of disposal, but be sure to make an argument in analyzing that subject. You must cite at least 3 class readings, but feel free to draw on additional resources. Length: 5-7 pages (12 pt. font, double-spaced). Due Sunday, October 26th.

**Essay #4: Global Garbage**
Choose a topic from Weeks 8-13 on global garbage. Drawing on at least three of the course texts and 3 additional readings, provide an in-depth analysis of the topic that incorporates and goes beyond what was discussed in class. Additional reading from the syllabus and further research will help you to analyze the topic further. For instance, you could draw on a new example or geographical place to provide a comparison to the examples provided in class (e.g. examine e-waste in Ghana or garbage rebellions in South Africa). Length: 8-10 pages (12 pt. font, double-spaced). Paper Due: Sunday, December 7th.

**Late policy:** Turning assignments in on time is very important in this class. If you need to request an extension, you must do so well in advance of the assignment’s due date. Unless you have received an extension from me (only granted for serious/medical issues), lateness will be penalized as follows: each day that your paper is late, your grade will drop 1/2 of a grade point (e.g. from a B+ to a B). You are required to inform me if the paper is going to be more than two days late.

**Course Grades:**
- Attendance/Participation/Leading Class Discussion 25%
- Essay #1 Theorizing Waste: 15%
- Essay #2 Movie Write-Up: 10%
- Essay #3: Garbage in Gotham 20%
- Essay #4: Global Garbage 30%

**OFFICE HOURS and CONTACT**

I will hold office hours on Tuesdays from 2:00 to 6:00pm in my office by appointment. You can sign up for office hours here: [http://goo.gl/5i46R](http://goo.gl/5i46R). If you are unable to meet during my office hours, email me to schedule a separate meeting.

Email: I am best reached by email at rcf2@nyu.edu. Although I do encourage you to stay in touch with issues of concern, I also urge you to be considerate with your emails. I will do my best to reply within 24 hours.

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect,
responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.

**READINGS and FILMS**

Required readings for the course are listed in the weekly syllabus. All readings are either available at the NYU bookstore, through the library’s electronic resources (with a link on NYU Classes), or in the library’s reserves. Additional readings are listed as a starting place for further research for the papers and class discussion.

**Required Books**

Required readings for the course are listed in the weekly syllabus. Background readings are also listed, for further research. All readings are either available through NYU Classes, in the library’s reserves, or at the NYU Bookstore.


**Related Films**

The following is a list of some relevant films which will either be screened in class or you are encouraged to watch in your own time. Some films can be viewed online and others are available in the Avery-Fischer Center at Bobst.

- *Wasteland* (Dir. Lucy Walker) (2011)
- *Gone Tomorrow* (2002)
- *BAN*
- *DIFE!* (Jeremy Seifert)

**Other Resources**

- *Story of Stuff Project*: http://storyofstuff.org/
- *MIT Trash Track Project*: http://senseable.mit.edu/trashtrack/
**TRASH MATTERS**

*Exploring Development, Environment, and Culture through Garbage*

**COURSE SYLLABUS**

Week 1. **Introduction**  
*(September 4)*

Week 2. **Theorizing Waste and Value: Environment, Development, and Culture**  
*(September 11)*


Concepts from the Discard Studies Compendium [Selections]

*Additional Reading:*


Week 3. **The Rise of the Discard Society**  
*(September 18)*


Film: *Gone Tomorrow* (Heather Rogers)
**Additional Reading:**


**Week 4. Garbage in Gotham**  
*(September 25)*


New York Solid Waste Management Plan.

**Additional Reading:**


**Week 5. MOVIE**  
*(October 2)*  
*Details TBA.*

**Week 6. Waste Work in New York City**  
*(October 9)*

Nagle, Robin. *On the Streets and Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux [Selections].

**Guest Lecture with Professor Robin Nagle (NYU)**

**Week 7. Recycling Reconsidered**  
*(October 16)*


**Guest Lecture with Professor Samantha MacBride (Baruch College, CUNY)**
FIELD TRIP TO FRESH KILLS PARK ON SUNDAY OCTOBER 19TH (10AM-1PM)

Week 8. Waste and Environmental Justice in the US
(October 23)


*Additional Reading:*

Week 9. Toxic Exports: Global Dumping and E-Waste Recycling
(October 30)


Film: *Exporting Harm: The High Tech Trashing of Asia*

*Additional Reading:*


Week 10.     Global Dirt: Carbon
(November 6)

Readings TBA

Guest Lecture with Professor Jerome Whittington (National University of Singapore)

Week 11.     Bodily Burdens, Biocitizenship, and Toxicity: Bhopal
(November 13)


Additional Reading:


Week 12. Waste Livelihoods: The Zabaleen of Cairo  
(November 20)


*Additional Reading:*  


NO CLASS Thanksgiving Holiday  
(November 27)

Week 13. Waste and Rebellion  
(December 4)


Week 14. Designing Waste Solutions and The Art of Rubbish  
(December 11)