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CHAPTER 19

WASTE

JOSHUA RENO

19.1 INTRODUCTION

IN this chapter I will discuss the potential for an archaeology of the contemporary world that comes from interpretations of recently discarded wastes. Transforming the waste of contemporary societies from a problem into empirical evidence provides one of the clearest means of fostering a publicly engaged and politically relevant archaeology. This was the insight of William Rathje and his pioneering ‘Garbage Project’. Begun in Tucson in 1973 and ending with Rathje’s retirement over two decades later (Randall McGuire, personal communication), it was one of the longest running social science research initiatives in history. Maintained by Rathje, his students, and colleagues at the University of Arizona, the Project offered fledgling archaeologists an opportunity to train themselves in archaeological methods and learn about their society through its rubbish, which they excavated, sifted, and sorted like the material remains of any civilization. Initially, this involved processing waste materials left for roadside pickup, and by 1984 over a million items had been recovered in this fashion. The Garbage Project went on to excavate the landfills and dumps of fifteen different cities (see Rathje 2011: 176).

I will review the origins of the Garbage Project in archaeological theory, as well as the ‘stranger society’ of Cold War America, to which it owes its epistemological and material roots. I will then move on to consider the folk-archaeological activities of some waste workers, whose interactions with their society’s rubbish parallel those of professional archaeologists in interesting ways. In particular, I will examine landfill labourers at a large dump in south-eastern Michigan, where I conducted fieldwork as an employee from 2005 to 2006. Using these case studies, I will argue that what Rathje terms the ‘garbology’ of the modern world introduces distinct ethical and political complications into archaeological practice. This stems from the lingering association between things and persons that persists even when the two are radically separated, as they are by forms of modern waste management, and upon which both the opportunities and dilemmas of garbology are predicated. It is generally accepted that the distribution of waste affects how and what we experience (see Douglas 1966), but the more radical proposal from Rathje’s project is that the production and circulation of mass waste also mediates our capacities for reflexivity, that is, how and

what we can know about one another and ourselves. But embracing this idea means getting closer to garbage.

19.2 THE GARBAGE PROJECT AS BEHAVIORAL ARCHEOLOGY

The Garbage Project can be understood as a development in the ‘New Archaeology’ that emerged in the 1960s (Buchli and Lucas 2001; Harrison and Schofield 2010; see also Fewster, this volume). It is in many ways a logical counterpart to the methodological and theoretical approach known as ‘behavioral archeology’, identified most closely with the work of Michael Schiffer (1976, 1985), a graduate student at the University of Arizona when the project was founded.¹ Indeed, in one of the first essays to use the term ‘behavioral archeology’, co-written by J. Jefferson Reid, Schiffer, and Rathje (1975), the newly developed Garbage Project is depicted as the last of four strategies, each representing a different way of using material culture to describe and explain human behaviour (see Figure 19.1).

If strategies 1 and 2 represent traditional archaeology, with a shared focus on interpreting past behaviour through material culture, the latter two suggest that archaeological methods might offer insights into contemporary life as well. Rather than imagine archaeology as merely derivative of ethnology, as if the discipline were nothing more than an imperfect means of documenting a culture that one cannot experience directly (i.e. observation without the possibility of being a participant) Reid, Schiffer, and Rathje suggest that archaeological techniques can provide unique insights even when applied to present-day Tucson. This is so because archaeological methods challenge social scientists to concentrate their focus on matters of empirical detail and keep in check their tendencies to ascribe their own interpretations to observed phenomena.

It is helpful to understand the roots of behavioral archeology, which can be partly traced to Schiffer’s arguments concerning the formation processes of the archaeological record, first published in 1972. Schiffer’s central methodological insight is that cultural deposits must undergo a transition between the ‘systemic context’ within which they first became meaningful, and the ‘archaeological context’ within which they are later recognized as the artefacts of a particular cultural tradition. Furthermore, he argued that developing accurate archaeological interpretations required more than an understanding of the objects themselves, but familiarity with the processes by which they come to be preserved and found. This was not an entirely novel approach. As Lewis Binford (1981) pointed out in his critique of behavioral archeology, Robert Ascher had made similar claims in the early 1960s:

Every living community is in the process of continuous change with respect to the materials which it utilizes. At any point in its existence some proportion of materials are falling into disuse and decomposing, while new materials are being added as replacements. In a certain sense, a part of every community is becoming, but is not yet, archaeological data. (Ascher 1961: 324)

¹ Throughout this chapter, ‘behavioral archeology’ is rendered in its American spelling in order to signal the historical and social context from which this perspective emerged. Where ‘archaeology’ and ‘behaviour’ are employed as general terms, however, the British spelling is preferred.

		Material Objects	
		Past	Present
Human Behavior	Past	1	2
	Present	3	4

FIGURE 19.1 Strategies of a behavioral archeology, after Reid, Schiffer, and Rathje (1975)

According to Ascher, no data that a living community leaves behind can do justice to this continuous material becoming. He described the fallacious view that archaeological evidence can be taken for granted as a snapshot of a past culture, frozen in time for observation, as the ‘Pompeii premise’ (1961: 324), in reference to the ideal state of preservation of that historic Italian city after a sudden volcanic eruption in the first century AD. In his later account of Ellis Island Immigration Station in New York City (Ascher 1974), Ascher would show that such a premise was invalid even for an archaeology of the recent past. Decaying and abandoned, the cultural deposit of Ellis Island represents the inverse of Pompeii, a place that, despite its spatio-temporal proximity, has moved on from the past in a way that resists straightforward archaeological interpretation.

At Binford’s provocation, Schiffer (1985) agreed with Ascher that a ‘Pompeii premise’ lurked behind a great deal of archaeological interpretation. His distinct response was that this could be countered by focusing more attention to the formation processes that assemble archaeological sites, placing them on a continuum closer to or more distant from the Pompeii extreme. Ascher’s more cybernetic argument portrayed the process of archaeological site formation as if different forms of entropic ‘noise’ were hopelessly distorting cultural messages from the past; without the corroboration of collateral evidence, any archaeological interpretations would be highly spurious. Ascher’s answer to this quandary was to pioneer forms of experimental archaeology, the uses of modern techniques and materials to learn about past behaviour, or the second behavioral archeological strategy outlined by Reid, Schiffer, and Rathje (1975). But they were more optimistic than Binford would have them be. Unlike Ascher they argued that there is hope for archaeological interpretation, because formation processes, though distorting, are regular and predictable. They were perhaps emboldened in their assessment by the rise of ecological and environmental sciences in the 1960s and 1970s, which promised to clarify the influence of non-human variables in the journey of objects towards the status of archaeological artefact. But their views also reveal a novel reflection on the human tendency towards object discard and abandonment. These waste practices were not merely incidental to past and living communities, but rather represented a key to revealing habits obscured by too much distance or, alternatively, too much familiarity.

Indeed, the patterns of human discard might themselves be subject to laws, ones that those who get close to waste—whether by choice or circumstance—are in the best position to deduce. From this perspective, a landfill becomes an ideal archaeological setting. For one thing, it offers a means to understand that aspect of humanity so central to archaeological interpretations in a ‘behavioral’ vein. Through observation, one could deduce laws about practices of human discard, thereby assisting in the ability to decipher the formation processes leading from systemic to archaeological context. Indeed, the additional benefit

of studying landfills is that, arguably, they seem to represent an almost entirely ‘cultural’ formation process, one that does not allow non-cultural variables to play a leading role. The movement of wastes from bins to garbage collection facilities to dumps is entirely regularized in modern industrial societies. That is where objects (and sometimes people) go when someone wishes to be rid of them or, more precisely, rid of the relationship they share. When something is disposed of, it is not necessarily that the person discarding does not want the discarded object to be reused, but that they wish to be morally and physically detached from its further existence, in Ascher’s terms, its becoming. The choice to place the object in the bin reflects a decisive behavioural outcome, one that can be discerned from the discovery of that item in a landfill, in the same way that the removal of discard leaves a trace or ‘absent presence’ behind (Hetherington 2004; see also Fowles and Heupel, this volume). This is possible because the moment of object detachment can be isolated from the formation processes that led that item to be buried in that site. Because waste management practices are so regularized and systematic, in other words, their contribution to the artefact can be held constant as a variable, and recovered discards can be directly linked to the behavioural habits of those to whom they were formerly ‘attached’.

With Rathje, I argue that much can be learned about the contemporary world through its waste, even beyond the isolation of consumer behaviours. I will make this claim with reference to the history of garbology as a technique of journalism and police investigation, as well as to my anthropological fieldwork at a landfill in Michigan, which I call ‘Four Corners’. If waste sites provide good ‘archaeological contexts’ to scientific garbologists, as with all archaeological sites, they attract their share of amateurs as well, suggesting a possible fifth behavioural strategy, encompassing the folk-archaeological interpretations of those who live and work with waste.

19.3 THE GARBAGE PROJECT

‘In the three or so million years of humankind’ Rathje writes, ‘we have never had more reason than we have today to try to understand our relation to our artifacts—what we manufacture, use, and discard—and how our artifacts both mirror and *shape* our actions and attitudes’ (1984: 9). The implication of this statement, and much of Rathje’s popular writing on the subject of the Garbage Project, is that there are not only scientific, but also moral and political reasons why modern people ought to examine themselves more closely through their rubbish. Environmental concerns, for example, played a decisive role in the evolution of the Garbage Project and the motivations behind it (see Rathje 2011). When Rathje and his students began excavating landfills in 1987, they were not only interested in categorizing the contents of these waste sites, but also in assessing the rate at which household waste materials break down, their contribution to pollution, and the impact of recycling, composting, and other methods of diverting waste from landfill (see Rathje 1996).

The timing of their studies was not arbitrary; it was around this time that new environmental regulations were coming into effect regarding sanitary landfills. As old dumps were rendered obsolete, new sites appeared like Four Corners, the site of my fieldwork in south-eastern Michigan. These new landfills attempted to prevent the leakage of toxicants into groundwater and emissions into the air and were strictly monitored for their environmental impacts.

In a sense, the Garbage Project's move towards exploring the insides of landfills mirrored the evolution of waste management and its regulation in Euro-American contexts.

Even before the rise of new waste regulations, the Garbage Project was invested in contemporary social issues surrounding resource use and, more centrally, deciphering the sometimes-beguiling behaviour of consumers. The first method of waste recovery, the 'Regular Sort', employed specific categories to facilitate the deduction of rules behind the seemingly arbitrary decisions of household waste producers. One of the first patterns often cited by Rathje is the truism that self-reports are an unreliable way of gathering evidence of people's discard practices. As an example, Rathje and his students demonstrate a substantial difference between reported levels of alcohol consumption and actual consumption, as indicated by the average of beverage containers disposed of per household (see, for example, Rathje 1996). This discrepancy is important, not only because it offers evidence of a general behavioural regularity, but because it provides justification for the Garbage Project as a whole.

Precisely because of the Garbage Project's comparatively objective method of assessing patterns of material use and discard, Rathje was called to testify before dozens of government committees, congressional, legislative, and local, on the waste industry, resource use, and American waste habits. In 1980, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) began working with the Garbage Project in order to address a discrepancy in the data. In the 1977–8 USDA survey, it was found that as much as 35 per cent of total food energy was 'lost' somewhere between purchase and consumption and could not be accounted for (Ritenbaugh and Harrison 1984: 52). Overall, the 'Food Loss Project' did not find that edible food was being discarded at high rates, as was proposed to explain the discrepancy, but became a means of pointing out the limitations of various methods of refuse analysis (see Rathje 1984). In this way, the Garbage Project remains true to behavioral archeology; cultivating better understanding of material formation processes is paramount to understanding behaviour.

If the results of the Garbage Project are meant to complement a search for socio-culturally invariant behaviours, in conjunction with the other three behavioral strategies outlined above, the timely social concerns associated with each study during the 1970s and 1980s (food waste, meat shortages, and alcohol abuse) illustrate that behavioral archeology was intended as a means of improving the governance of household conduct through better social science (see Rathje 2011: 178). In this sense, the methods of archaeologists of modern garbage cannot be separated from larger political and moral questions of their time, not only concerning which particular social behaviours are of interest, but also how experts relate to their surveillance and control (see also Buchli and Lucas 2001: 6).

19.4 THE ORIGINS OF GARBOLOGY

The study of modern garbage, what Rathje also terms 'garbology', has always been subject to political and moral concerns, which are evident in the development of the practice in the twentieth-century US. The concern that people might either intentionally or inadvertently obscure what they really do 'behind closed doors' was a guiding motivation for innovations in the social sciences, policing, and journalism leading up to the Second World War and throughout the Cold War era.

The first self-described 'garbologist' was the radical American journalist A. J. Weberman, who began by recovering the household waste of celebrities as a means of writing and speculating about their lives and secrets: including Bob Dylan, Norman Mailer, and Richard Nixon (Weberman 1980). Garbology presumes that one of the best ways to know someone is to know what they throw away, which is based on a modern fascination with the difference between the 'real person' and the public front they present to others. The idea of unveiling the 'real person' concealed behind closed doors had already been a prevailing concern of modern states, increasingly paranoid about political subversives and radical movements, leading ultimately to the pre-war creation of secret police and intelligence agencies. Intelligence and security operations boomed with the start of the Cold War. In the US, law enforcement agencies performed surveillance by manipulating and violating the ideological public/private boundary, as well as rerouting the transfer of materials and messages across it. Along with wire-tapping, 'mail cover', and break-ins, so-called 'trash cover' was a frequently used surveillance technique of J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) during the 1950s and early 1960s (Powers 2004: 271). The FBI routinely used trash cover against those deemed to be real or potential enemies of the state, including leftists, organized crime, and the Ku Klux Klan. Around the same time, a cultural fascination around subversive and abject lives conducted in private inspired everything from the sex studies conducted by the Kinseys at Indiana University to the popular literature about serial killers and the dramaturgical sociology of Erving Goffman. Weberman's journalistic garbology was only the most recent incarnation of a broader cultural and political trend.

If waste has become a resource for revelations about the private individual and household in the twentieth-century US, so too has it helped to bring about the very divisions that these revelatory practices are predicated upon. The hidden self is partly a product of a waste management system that allows households to conceal their activities from observation. Waste is not only a sign of behaviour behind closed doors, in other words, but is precisely one of the modern elements that has allowed for such concealment. Just as waste practices define culture and society, they introduce the possibility of garbology as a meaningful enterprise.

If garbology became meaningful as a folk-archaeological practice in the context of the twentieth-century US, it is evident in many of the modern assumptions behind the practice. Firstly, that it is meaningful to distinguish between that which is open to the public and that which is concealed in 'private', the most foundational of which is the 'true' self. Secondly, and following on from this, there is seemingly greater objectivity, not just in material remains in general, but in those remains made available through the impersonal formation processes associated with landfilling. The conditions of modern waste removal and disposal reinforce these assumptions by separating households from their discards, thereby creating anonymous, aggregate waste streams that belong to no individual.

Landfilling is but one very common means of disposal within contemporary waste regimes. Zsuzsa Gille (2007) coined the term 'waste regime' in order to situate waste disposal within the encompassing modes of material production and imagination that characterize particular places and times. Landfilling disposes of the majority of wastes in Anglophone countries, but even where other methods predominate the prevailing waste regime tends to include the separation of the world's relatively affluent populations, and hence those most 'rich' in material culture, from sites of disposal. Professional and informal garbologists exploit the conditions of contemporary waste regimes to different ends: whether they peek

into dumpsters or explore the contents of landfills they rely on the importance other people place on being separate from waste matter (see Douglas 1966; Hawkins 2004).

Mass wasting of this sort is particularly suitable to the purposes of a discipline like archaeology (see Shanks, Platt, and Rathje 2004: 66), which is primarily based on recovering other people's excess material in order to feed 'an unceasing demand for more facts' (Shanks 1992: 56). But the archaeology of recent wastes introduces at least two significant complications. Firstly, as is oftentimes the case for other artefacts, the ownership of waste and control of access to waste sites can be highly contested. This is mediated by a second complication, which is the contemporaneity of the archaeologist and those who provide them with excess 'evidence'. Both of these dilemmas shape the possibilities of folk-archaeological interactions with wastes at dumping sites.

19.5 THE DILEMMAS OF GARBOLOGY

'Landfill sites are modernity's ruins'. (Shanks, Platt, and Rathje 2004: 67)

If garbology is older than the Garbage Project, it is also more commonplace. And, the exploits of journalists and policeman aside, none have more access to the wealth of rubbish produced by industrial societies than those who deal with it on behalf of others. Informal recycling is a particularly important economic activity for poor and marginalized populations the world over (Medina 2007). The fact that those who sort through waste are marginalized does not prevent them from making the most out of their proximity to trash (Alexander and Reno 2012; Hill 2001; Millar 2008; Reno 2009). We should not presume that in an ideal world everyone would be further from their wastes, especially when more proximity make some wealthier or more socially reflexive. At the landfill I call Four Corners, where I was employed as a common labourer for nine months, one is constantly reminded that rubbish has an origin, including other people to whom it relates, and about whom it might tell a story.

In Schiffer's terms, landfilled wastes are technically artefacts in an 'archaeological context', since they are bits of refuse removed from their original 'systemic context' wherein they had a social meaning and function (see also Schiffer, this volume, on 'afterlives'). However, in the case of landfills both contexts co-occur: items in the landfill are always potentially reactivated as systemically meaningful. Rathje (1984) and Ritenbaugh and Harrison (1984) both refer to the 'reactivity' of waste studies, their ability to impact upon those who released them into the hands of archaeological students. They indicate what this means for garbology as a form of data collection, but not its status as an ethical and political act.

The benefit of collapsing the distance between archaeological and systemic context is that without concern for the original meaning of artefacts, the garbologist can reinvent and reimagine material. One can engage in random acts of play and enjoyment (see Reno 2009), but also in theory speculate on formation processes and eschew meaning altogether. Due to the closeness of the systemic and archaeological context in the folk-archaeology of the contemporary, however, there remains the possibility that material remains will carry trace evidence that can be linked to particular people.

After I had worked at Four Corners for a few months I learned this first-hand 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 recovered it from one of the garbage loads. He cleaned it out but had never used it, now he was eager to part with the find in order to make room in his house for his new wife's things, as well as to have an excuse to lend me some of his video games, which he had been interested in doing for some time. I gladly accepted the gift. Given the rapid rate at which computers become obsolescent, in terms of fashion and functionality, my existing 1998 model was practically a dinosaur and receiving a replacement at no cost was too good a deal to turn down. But this was not a new computer, I would soon discover. When I first turned the machine on, traces of the former owner were suddenly everywhere. Pictures, documents, and applications still existed in abundance on the hard drive along with the full name of their former owner. I cleared the machine of all its contents, burdened with an ethical responsibility inadvertently foisted upon me by a person I could readily identify, perhaps even locate. For a time I considered trying to find the person, to create an interview opportunity to learn about the movement of waste out of an accidental garbological find, but I quickly decided against it.

At the landfill, it was not necessary to make such ethical decisions on one's own. Sometimes collective will would overrule someone's attempt to cling to a found object. In one instance, groups of us spent the week 'picking paper' that had blown down the northern face of the landfill from where they were tipping waste haulers up top. On the first day, I and two other young labourers stumbled across a large number of Polaroid photographs of a woman in various states of undress. They excitedly began to collect the photos and gather them under a large rock. I was deeply distressed by this, but was still new to the landfill and did not feel comfortable asserting myself over garbological activities with which I had little experience. To my relief, on another day I found myself again in that area of the landfill with two of the senior labourers, who asked me about the collection when they found it. After I explained, they promptly uttered their disapproval and threw all of the photos into the garbage bags with the rest of the stray paper, to be buried in the landfill.

When Rathje states, in one of the more widely cited findings of the Garbage Project, that paper constitutes more than half of the discards that he and his students have documented, he does not point out that these documents might be credit card statements, cheques, diaries, homework, or personal photographs. The everyday encounters that landfills make possible between labourers and waste regularly provide access to the people and lives they were once intimately connected to. Whether or not landfill workers wish to consider themselves scientists of human behaviour, they are forced to recognize that waste can speak volumes about others and I have often been impressed by their commitment to honouring the wishes of people they don't know and disposing of what they find. This may be done out of courtesy, or it may be a consequence of the fact that the relationships that concern landfill workers most are those they maintain with their co-workers and managers on a day-to-day basis, not the virtual connections that arise, linking them to absent people whose waste ended up at their feet. This, I believe, they share with archaeologists on the Garbage Project, where student-teacher relationships or those between academic colleagues exert more influence in shaping everyday ethical practice, in many ways, than relations to waste makers themselves.

It is in this regard, arguably, that professional garbologists, of the archaeological sort, have the most to learn from the compartments to waste that landfill work can foster. Because of their employment working with waste, landfill labourers form different interpretations of

waste that can reveal interesting characteristics, perhaps even amounting to a fifth behavioural strategy, the folk-archaeological interpretation of modern waste to interpret modern society and behaviours. Through the perspective of waste workers, the regularities that Rathje and his colleagues derive from the behaviour of individuals and households can take on other forms. For people working at Four Corners, for example, there were similar pseudo-archaeological laws that people shared. I will describe four.

The first concerns a general realization that comes from repeatedly witnessing the arrival of fresh waste loads and the complementary growth of the landfill itself: no matter what happens, waste keeps coming. That waste cannot be connected to individual places or groups, except of the most general sort (e.g. 'Canadian', 'municipal', 'construction and demolition'). It may adopt the appearance of a collectively produced entity but, in its most generalized manifestation as part of the mass waste stream, industrial discards become nothing more than brute matter. Assessed in terms of weight and volume, waste streams appear discultural or postcultural, and regardless of changing consumer tastes and habits they never stop flowing.

A second insight comes from regular encounters with other people's waste. No matter how personal, people will throw anything away without a thought, as is evidenced by my computer and the photographs. Regular scavenging reveals that people will also throw things away that are 'perfectly good' and can be remade with the right skill and commitment (see Reno 2009). Once again, these encounters have more to do with relationships at the landfill than they do connections between landfill workers and households.

A third insight arises from the conflicts that occur on occasion between landfill scavengers and the landfill company or the government operatives who sometimes appear to ensure materials are properly disposed of rather than reclaimed, for example spoiled alcohol. There is a general sense that whatever people throw away on an individual basis, corporate profiteering and government regulations are even more wasteful than the public. They may block access to scavenging, for example, or they may just commit profligate acts of wasting that defy explanation. On one occasion I stood atop the landfill and watched with a fellow labourer as someone's former home, a double wide trailer, was dragged to the dumping area, carved up by bulldozer, and pushed into the sludge pit. This was frequently done when homes were vacated and not considered worth the cost of clearing out and reselling. Sometimes landfill workers would be allowed—without management's knowledge—to grab anything of value before they were destroyed, but not this time. We watched as the accumulated memories of a household spilled out of the structure, furniture and photos and clothing, and all were shoved into the liquid muck below. The tragedy of Hurricane Katrina had recently been in the news (see also Dawdy, this volume), and the instant reaction of my associate was disgust that people were homeless in the gulf region and we were destroying homes here.

This leads to a fourth and final insight. Landfills do not only alter landscapes, but environmental and social consciousness as well. By making so much waste disappear so efficiently, they can also make it harder to grasp mass wasting at greater scales, which is perhaps why the image of waste production so often falls back on the more familiar image of household bins and individual consumers. Only those garbologists who peer into the contents of bins and landfills have access to alternative images of waste production; an abandoned trailer full of possessions torn to pieces, for example. I would submit that it is not only householder behaviour that can be analysed and about which regularities can be deduced, but—due to the familiar systemic context that garbologists share with those who make garbage—other social collectives as well. It is arguably the activities of corporations and other aggregate

social actors that are most responsible for the waste regimes, and hence formation processes of modern societies (see Graeber 2012: 281–2). Indeed, without the waste industry itself garbology would not be possible at all. Landfill labourers and other waste workers offer valuable reminders about the untapped possibilities of garbological study.

The question remains: might alternatives to landfill disposal, including incinerators, anaerobic digestors, pyrolizers, plasma arcs, gasifiers, and composting operations, involve potentially very different forms of social consciousness in turn? One can characterize these as more future-oriented technologies, because they rely on the transformation of materials into something entirely new, eliminating the possibility of reflection on their past relationships and meanings. The benefit of this is that it ideally unfetters mass waste from its association with pollution and impurity, allowing its commodification as a source of biofuel, fertilizer, and green credits. In Europe, for example, this has meant an increasing push—on the part of the waste industry—to rebrand their activities as centrally concerned with managing ‘resources’. But this future-orientation also potentially obscures their conditions of possibility, the waste regime of which they are only the most recent manifestation. While providing the image of sustainable loops of matter and energy, landfill alternatives threaten to maintain a similar detachment between waste producers and waste products, with the main difference being that no garbologist can ever reconnect them.

But this is only the case if waste is separated so thoroughly from those who produce it that it travels many miles, crossing social and geographical boundaries, before coming to rest. To the extent that waste settles ‘locally’ and its producers are required to tend to it in some way, for example by sorting their food waste for separate collection (Reno 2011), there are possibilities that such new practices could encourage more reflection concerning collective and individual waste production. In this sense, alternatives to landfill could do more than turn wastes into new resources, but make garbologists of us all.

19.6 CONCLUSION

If changes to the waste industry are to popularize garbological consciousness, to make of it something more than a tool of surveillance, this would require more opportunities for waste producers to meditate on their outputs. This would require not only disciplining waste disposal habits, for example training households and industries to separate their biodegradable wastes for collection, but also providing them opportunities to think about where their waste goes, who is affected by it, and what it says about the way in which they live. Zap Rowsdower writes in a similar manner about the availability of industrial ruins to non-archaeological actors, those who are ‘explicitly or implicitly enculturated to identify... the implications of these discards of development and progress’ (2011: 3; see also Lucas, this volume). He writes about lay urban explorers and professional archaeologists cultivating a nostalgic appreciation for the meaning of decay and loss, but one could just as easily refer to this as a cultivated comportment towards material possibility or, following Ascher, the continual becoming of places and things.

Garbology is older and more widespread than the Garbage Project or the sanitary landfill. Waste workers become amateur archaeologists when they peruse the wastes of capitalist modernity, and they too can draw on their encounters with material detritus to make

broadier claims about their present moment and human formation processes in general. They also highlight the ethical and political complications that challenge and inspire any archaeology of the contemporary world, complications which follow from the lack of distance between, in Schiffer's terminology, the archeological context and the systemic one.

Rather than dismiss the efforts of folk-garblogists as irrelevant or quaint, I would argue that their insights can contribute new insights into the material patterns that constitute everyday life in capitalist modernity and the formation processes of the record they leave behind. For one thing, as compared with the more practised analytical methods of archaeologists like Rathje and his students, their perspectives open up an appreciation for the 'behaviours' of collectives beyond the modern individual, such as the state and the corporation, and the formation processes they take a hand in shaping. Taken together, different groups of garblogists offer unique contributions to a future-oriented archaeology (see Dawdy 2009), as well as opportunities to reflect on the role of archaeological practice in shaping and living in that world.

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