

Out of Place:  
Possibility and Pollution at a Transnational Landfill

by

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To Jeanne and Charlie

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

During one of my first trips to Four Corners Landfill I interviewed Bob, the operations manager and my future boss.<sup>1</sup> We were in the white Ford F-150 he called his office, perched atop the bloated hill he'd been building from imported waste over the last twelve years, first as an operator, then as a high-ranking manager. Bob was approaching middle age, married, and had one stepson he loved dearly. Like a number of his employees he grew up on farms in Southeastern Michigan and had given up his dream to work that land for a steady middle-class income in the waste industry. I'd begun to ask Bob questions about what landfill labor was like and what kind of challenges it presented that other forms of work did not. In response, he decided to tell me about one of the worst days of his life.

As with other construction sites, accidents are not uncommon at landfills. Since the large, transnational firm I call "America Waste" acquired Four Corners in 1999, the site has developed a company-wide reputation for being a very safe place to work. Bob attributes this to the fact that he refuses to use people in the dumping area to signal garbage haulers and landfill vehicles where to go. The man known as Big Daddy, the general manager and his boss, believes that safety measures he

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<sup>1</sup> The names of all research informants and sites in this dissertation have been changed to protect their identities.

implemented when he took over are the reason for the landfill's stellar safety record and corporate recognition.

In the fall of 2003, however, Four Corners had its first and, so far, its only death. The man was a thirty-eight-year-old from Ontario, Canada with the Eastern European name of Jovan.<sup>2</sup> It was only his second day on the job, which is why most at the landfill credit the accident that took his life to inexperience. According to the police report, Jovan had stood in the wrong position while preparing to dump the contents of his sludge tanker into the fifteen-foot deep trench known as "the sludge hole." In the process, he was knocked head first into the sludge hole and suffocated underneath the thirty-five tons of processed Canadian sewage he'd hauled across the border.

Another truck driver spotted the incident from a distance and attracted the attention of the landfill management. Bob described for me the events that followed:

I come into work that morning and I was here about a little bit before six. I walked up to my office and they two-wayed me on my Nextel and said that, uh, somebody'd fell in the sludge hole. It was dark at that time so you know I asked em again because it kinda startled me and didn't sink in. I thought I heard what they said. So I ran downstairs, jumped in my truck, came flying out back here. And of course we had light plants so I could see down in the hole and could see his legs stickin outta there. Uh, so I immediately, not thinking, I know at night the sludge hole isn't completely full so we put a layer of autofluff<sup>3</sup> so that there's a little bit a layer to hold the stink down. I knew that was down there so I jumped down on that stuff so there was probably five-ten feet of sludge below me. I was standing on the autofluff and his legs were right there where I could reach them. So I grabbed hold of his legs but I couldn't pull at all so I grabbed a hold of his pant leg and rolled it

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<sup>2</sup> According to Canadian census statistics, since 1991 over ten percent of Ontario's one million immigrants have come from Eastern European countries like Poland, Russia, and the former Yugoslavia. This makes them the second largest group of immigrants to the area behind South Asians. Each of these groups is employed by the international waste hauling industry, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

<sup>3</sup> Autofluff is a cover material made of the ground up non-metallic components of vehicles. Four Corners had layers of autofluff spread around the top of the landfill in order to provide a cushion between vehicles and the soil layer (which quickly turns to thick mud in the rain).

up in my hand to get a hold of something to pull on, so I was pullin on that meanwhile a couple other guys came out there, they threw shovels down and couple other guys got down there with me and we tried pullin on it. But there's like a suction in there once you're surrounded with it and there's no way we could get him out.

At this point, local police and firefighters had arrived. Some climbed in the sludge hole with Bob and the other workers and tried to help (one fireman would later check himself into a hospital to have his blood tested for infection from the sludge). Bob got out of the trench and focused on removing the body:

I tried to collect myself a little bit. We dug him out with a backhoe and laid him out on a board down there. They told us we couldn't get him outta the hole otherwise it'd be a crime scene, so we laid him on a board down there.

Bob stood there only a moment, covered with pungent, grayish sludge and looking at the dead body of a truck driver he didn't know, when it dawned on him that the landfill was going into disarray. At the time, Toronto was sending all of its processed sewage to Four Corners, which made up the majority of the two thousand tons of sludge a day buried at the site, with the rest coming from wastewater treatment plants from the greater Detroit area. Without a trench for the morning's incoming sludge, the flow of truck traffic was disrupted. According to Bob, "All the sludge trucks were parking out back so we had twenty-thirty sludge trucks. We had to get the operator and get him on another backhoe so we could start digging another sludge hole."

Though order was soon restored, the experience forced Bob to see Four Corners in a way he never had before:

It's one thing about this business: the garbage never stops for nothing. Trucks keep comin. It made me think a little bit about it that time if I died now this place wouldn't stop for nothing. Garbage is coming here no matter what, hell or high water. We've never closed down here for nothing and it's just the

sheer volume. This place keeps still rollin. You gotta figure out why it happened. It wasn't only his second load and he wasn't trained properly. But this place won't stop for nothing. The garbage keeps coming.

The first time I heard this story from Bob, he repeated this phrase several times in succession: “the garbage keeps coming, the garbage keeps coming, the garbage keeps coming...” as if the verbal repetition revealed something significant about Jovan's gruesome death and his own failed attempt to save him.

If, following Mary Douglas ([1966] 1984), matter is “dirty” when it is categorized as out of place in some significant way, then further human investment is needed to determine its “proper place” and more still to get it there. The symbolic and structural approaches to taboo and pollution that emerged in anthropology in the 1960s and 70s, especially those of Douglas, Edmund Leach (1964, 1973) and Jean-Paul Dumont (1970), focused largely on the way in which ambiguous and anomalous phenomena challenge accepted categories and acquire a powerful and dangerous status as a consequence. Critics and supporters of this literature tend to confine themselves to ascertaining why persons and things become labeled as “dirt” in particular settings or as part of the human condition (see Bulmer 1967; Meigs 1978; Kristeva 1982; Valeri 1999). Though important, understanding why something is “dirty” in relation to received categories or existential dilemmas is not sufficient to explain how idioms of taboo and pollution are transformed and elaborated upon through social action (see Hutchinson 1985; Lambek 1992; Akin 2003). More to the point, limiting our consideration of pollution in this way may leave out what becomes of rejectamenta after it has been categorized as such.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> One could argue that Douglas left this dimension of pollution and purity relatively unexplored because her attention was largely devoted to what she called “dirt affirming philosophies,” such as are

When an object is categorized as polluted and polluting this marks not the end, but the beginning of a social process replete with possibilities. Here I am thinking of an often-quoted passage from *Purity and Danger* regarding the paradoxical power of “dirt”:

Granted that disorder spoils pattern, it also provides the material of pattern. Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realized in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognize that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power. ([1966] 1984: 95)

Precisely because “dirt” is indeterminate from the standpoint of a particular system of categories, ambiguous or anomalous, it seems to hold a secret power. According to Douglas, it was because pigs were a taxonomic anomaly for ancient Hebrews that consuming them meant failing to pursue “wholeness” and “holiness” in the eyes of God, thereby unleashing potential misfortune ([1966] 1984:50-8). Generalizing from this and other examples, Douglas went on to suggest how this dangerous potency is gradually lost. After they are identified as out of place and done away with, she argued, “rejected bits and pieces” go through stages of “undifferentiation” as they fall from something with identity into the “mass of common rubbish” ([1966] 1984:161). Here they are no longer out of place and no longer charged with power, “So long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous. It does not even create ambiguous perceptions since it clearly belongs in a defined place, a rubbish heap of one kind or another” ([1966] 1984:161).

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found among the Lele and other central African peoples, rather than “dirt rejecting” ones ([1966] 1984:165-6). I will consider this distinction at more length in the conclusion.

If Douglas had given more consideration to the “rubbish” of her own society, it may have changed her perception of the diminishing dangers and powers of discarded things. The billions of tons of discarded materials generated by industrialized societies every year do not lose their creative and destructive power when they are amassed together in bins, alleyways, dumps and landfills. Though undifferentiated, the once “out of place” piece of trash – regardless of its potential value – is charged with additional power as an emergent substance: mass waste. As such, it is difficult to place anywhere that will mitigate its destructive potential. As it is collected and sorted, mass waste seems to adhere to the places and people that encounter it. I mean “adhere” in two senses: it tends to stick to places and people, as if they’ve become consubstantial, but it also responds and gives in to them, generating new opportunities and social trajectories.

This dissertation joins recent scholarship on waste, filth and “public sanitation” in advocating for renewed attention to the role of pollution and purity in social life (see Hill 2001; Dutton, Seth, and Ghandi 2002; Hawkins and Muecke 2003; Hawkins 2004; Edensor 2005; Johnson and Cohen 2005; Gille 2007). Rather than focus on what makes something appear as “dirt,” I examine different dimensions of the world of industrialized disposal in the contemporary U.S., its relationship to histories of uneven geographical development (Chapter Two); the political ecologies it creates for human and non-human beings (Chapter Three); the competing theories of agency (Chapter Four), approaches to value (Chapter Five), and identification (Chapter Six) it makes possible for waste workers, and its relationship to the distribution of risk and the politics of recognition as they play out in interactions

between neighboring residents and the people they encounter (Chapters Six and Seven).

Before explaining the chapters in more detail however, it is necessary to provide an outline as to why the subject of waste is of special interest now and the kinds of theoretical problems associated with it.

### Waste Regimes and Transnational Waste Circulation

Over the last two centuries, worldwide urbanization and industrialization have made some form of collective waste management a necessity for the majority of the world's people. The existing waste disposal practices of many places are now used to reproduce hierarchical geopolitical divides between "developing" and "modern" nation-states (Onibokun et al. 1999), just as the alleged "filthiness" of subjugated peoples played an important role in the racialization and disciplining of colonial bodies (see Greenblatt 1982; Kupinse 2005; Anderson 2006a, 2006b). Since at least the 1970s, one prominent sign of global disparities in waste management and wealth, frequently seized upon by the international media and government officials, has been the visibility of scavengers. In Latin America, Africa, and Asia, tens of thousands of people make a living by scrounging large, infested dumps to supply informal but large recycling economies (Sicular 1992; Medina 2000; Hill 2001; Ferreira 2002). In segments of the international media, these scavengers are frequently mentioned as a public sign of the abject poverty of the so-called "third world."<sup>5</sup> Yet, as Sarah Hill (2003) points out in her discussion of "colonia" settlements in the vicinity of El Paso,

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<sup>5</sup> As Medina (2000) makes clear, moreover, scavenging would be a more profitable enterprise for many people if not for their exploitation by middlemen and politicians.

Texas, incidences of scavenging and poor sanitation are hardly limited to impoverished nations.

In most of North America, however, an alternative “waste regime” (Gille 2007) tends to dominate, one that makes possible the systematic collection, transportation and disposal of mass waste in an effort to spare the general population from impurity.<sup>6</sup> Sociologist Zsuzsa Gille developed the concept of “waste regimes” in order to account for societal differences in the “production, representation, and politics of waste” (2007:34). She uses this framework to uncover historical changes in waste management, considered broadly, over the course of Hungarian history. For example, between the 1950s and 1980s she argues that the popular model of waste employed by state institutions and business interests transformed from a “metallic model” focused on reusable scrap metal, to a “chemical model” emphasizing the hidden environmental and health risks of industrial waste (Gille 2007:41-104, 145-202).

Waste production and disposal in the U.S. are organized around what could be called a model of invisibility, insofar as the overwhelming popularity of landfills – which accounted for the disposal of 64.1% of the municipal solid waste generated in 2004 (Simmons et al. 2006:26) – is predicated on the importance of keeping waste hidden from view, amassed and buried in an out of the way place at a distance from its place of origin, increasingly to other counties and states. In this way, discarded waste is removed from sight, as are the people who make this vanishing act possible. The disposal of waste becomes akin to a publicly kept secret, that is, something most

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<sup>6</sup> As I will discuss in Chapter Five, this has important consequences for those who would still attempt to scavenge at such sites.

implicitly agree they would rather not talk or know about (Taussig 1999:50-1). The weekly schedule for garbage pickup might be known, but not the route that garbage trucks follow, the transfer station where their contents will be sorted, or the landfill where they will eventually end up, in some form. People are intimately familiar with toilets, but not the network of sewers that carry away their flushed material, the treatment plant where it is processed, or the people possibly risking their lives dumping the final product at a landfill.

The invisibility model was an important counterpart to the rise of mass production and consumption in the late nineteenth century and its resurgence after the Second World War (see Fox and Lears 1983).<sup>7</sup> If commodities are to be replaced by newer models, their remains have to be removed from the possibility of reuse or repair (see Strasser 1999). But what makes the United States the world leader in waste produced has more to do with the realms of industrial production. Some estimate that as much as 88% of the 11.7 billion tons of waste produced each year comes from resource extraction, manufacturing and mining, with MSW accounting for approximately four hundred million tons.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the U.S. is also the greatest producer of hazardous waste, generating somewhere between 180 and 250 million tons annually (Gille 2007:157). For wastes such as these, finding their “proper place” is a more pressing concern and a riskier proposition.

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<sup>7</sup> Today, U.S. consumers spend “more on trash bags than ninety other countries spend on *everything*. In other words, the receptacles of our *waste* cost more than all of the goods consumed by nearly half of the world’s nations” (LaBarre quoted in Pink 2006:33).

<sup>8</sup> These figures are based on a study of U.S. waste statistics compiled by Tufts University (<http://www.tufts.edu/tuftsrecycles/USstats.htm#top>, accessed June 6, 2007).

The concept of “waste regime” is helpful because it introduces a comparative dimension to the description of waste management systems according to their political and material ramifications. Since the 1980s, however, there has been increasing awareness in the international community that particular “waste regimes” are not isolated from one another, but are linked by global flows and interconnections (cf. Wolf 1982; Coronil 1997). In many ways, this realization mirrors the shift in material culture studies from focus on isolated patterns of exchange to the transnational and transcultural circulation of objects between distinct regimes of value (Appadurai 1986; Thomas 1991; Myers 2001). Just as art objects and commodities change in significance and worth as they are “recontextualized” within new regimes of value (Thomas 1991:9), the international waste trade is motivated by the changing disposal cost of waste matter as it passes between alternative waste regimes.

By the 1980s, greater standards of environmental regulation had developed in those countries responsible for producing much of the world’s waste. Toxic or hazardous waste, in particular, began to be evaluated differently from other forms of discard, acknowledged for its negative effects on the environment and on human health if not treated with the appropriate care. Because this new set of regulatory criteria raised the cost of disposal for these materials, it became economically advantageous for some companies to export their waste to those parts of the world, such as Africa, lacking similar standards for the evaluation of waste and offering cheaper ways of handling it. As a consequence, the amount of dangerous wastes exported to poorer parts of the world increased dramatically, leading to growing concern over the spread of global environmental injustice by the mid 1980s.

Eventually this culminated in *the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal*, an international treaty signed in 1989 and brought into effect in 1992. Not all signatories to the Convention eventually ratified it, the United States being the most significant nation not to do so. More importantly, according to its critics, the initial draft of the Convention only required that waste dealers acquire the explicit consent of importing countries; it did not ban the movement of waste into poorer parts of the world altogether. For this reason, in 1991, a number of prominent African states established the Bamako Convention, which instated such a ban on imports into Africa. Not long after, an important amendment to the Basel Convention was drafted in 1995, applying such a ban on a global scale.

Not surprisingly, none of these agreements managed to stop the pollution of global peripheries at the hands of wealthier nations. Soon after the Basel Convention was signed, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank began encouraging debtor countries to make repayments by increasing export earnings, which led many to accept polluting industries or incinerators to process the waste of wealthier nations (Yearly 1995:166-7). In fact, in 1990 Hungary's Garé dump (the waste site that is the primary focus of Zsuzsa Gille's book on socialist waste regimes) was chosen as a site for a toxic waste incinerator through a joint venture between a French corporation and the Hungarian chemical works that had operated the dump since 1968 (Gille 2007:4). Though the available statistics are questionable for a number of reasons, there is evidence of a trend toward increased transboundary movement of waste since the 1990s, both legal and black market. On the other hand, this movement has in some

ways shifted away from the straightforward core-to-periphery models of exportation that inspired the Basel Convention in the first place. According to the data reported to the Basel Convention by its signatories, as of 2000 the vast majority of the more than eight million tons of waste traded internationally was circulated between OECD member nations.<sup>9</sup> In many cases, international waste is transported to intermediaries between the source country and the country disposing of it, sometimes where it undergoes treatment before being dumped elsewhere. This is one of the reasons why Germany and the Netherlands appear to lead all other nation's reporting to the Convention in waste imports and exports (United Nations Environment Programme 2002).

The changes brought about by the Basel Convention have not diminished the political controversy of waste exports nor removed the possibility of exploitation occurring on different scales of global engagement. Part of the problem with core-periphery models of "the world system" is that they tend to reduce "globalization" to a unitary, monolithic project (see Jessop and Sum 2006:276-9). As a global process, the international waste trade cannot be reduced to a binary model of prosperous exporters and impoverished importers, though this is a key dimension of the phenomenon as it now exists. The proliferation of neoliberal ideology and free trade agreements has resulted in strange and sometimes counterintuitive social and

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<sup>9</sup> The Basel Convention makes use of distinctions between OECD and non-OECD nations as well as EU and non-EU nations in order to have a ready grouping of nations already joined in multilateral trade agreements. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development was created after WWII to implement the Marshall Plan in Europe. Furthermore, because members of the OECD include twenty-four of the world's wealthiest nations, the Basel Convention employs a division between "OECD" and "non-OECD" nations to signify relative degree of economic prosperity. However, six members of the OECD are generally regarded as newly industrialized (Turkey and Mexico) or developing (Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic), so the distinction is far from ideal.

environmental imbalances. The exportation of Canadian waste into Michigan provides one such example.

### The Research Setting

Defenders of the Canadian-U.S. waste trade like to point out that Michigan exports thousands of tons of hazardous waste into Canada annually, making the importation of several million tons of non-hazardous Canadian garbage appear favorable by comparison. In 2005, near its peak, Michigan imported approximately six million tons of waste from out of state, two thirds of it from Canada. This was 18.6% of the total amount of waste disposed of in Michigan and 13% of all of the waste imported by states in the U.S. that same year (Simmons et al. 2006:32).<sup>10</sup>

Three events occurring in roughly the same period – from the late eighties to the early nineties – help account for why Michigan in particular arose as a leading waste importer. In the 1980s, partly in response to highly publicized images of a cargo of New York City’s waste wandering from port to port, searching for a place to dump, there emerged widespread concern that the U.S. was quickly running out of dumping space and a waste crisis was looming in the near future (see Rathje and Murphy [1992] 2001). In order to ensure enough dumping space for the future, the state of Michigan encouraged counties to develop waste management plans around the capacity or “air space” of their existing landfills. As an incentive for waste firms to build landfills in their state, the government offered tax-free bonds toward waste facilities. With a surfeit of landfill space (see Map 1.1), some large enough to handle

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<sup>10</sup> By comparison, most states import less than a million tons of waste per year. The leading waste importer in the U.S. for the last several decades has been Pennsylvania, at 10.5 million tons in 2005, or more than 20% of the nation’s waste imports (Simmons et al. 2006:32).

local waste disposal needs for decades into the future, landfills had to compete more in order to get local contracts.

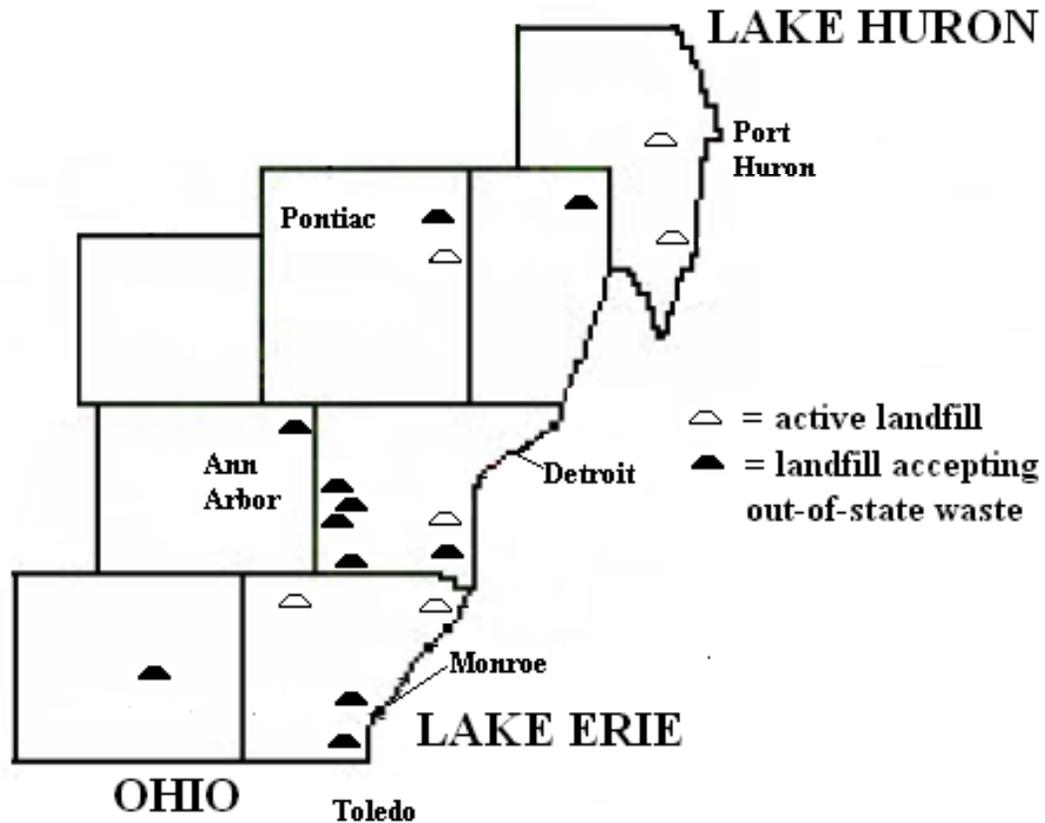
The most concentrated grouping of waste disposal sites in Michigan is located where the majority of the population is as well, in the eight southeastern counties surrounding the city of Detroit. Best known nationally for its meteoric rise to become the center of American industry, in the last thirty years southeastern Michigan has become better known as the regional center of the so-called “Rust Belt” (High 2003; Cowie and Heathcott 2003). Though this area rose to prominence in the postwar era, at one time responsible for producing the majority of the goods consumed by Americans, as a result of global economic restructuring as many as 22.3 million Americans lost their jobs when more than 100,000 plants closed and from the sixties to the early eighties (High 2003:93).

The cultural transformation that occurred at this time in the Midwest goes beyond economic hardship, moreover, it is also about material signs of progress and prosperity turning into dated rubbish:

What millions of working men and women might have experienced as solid, dependable, decently waged work really only last for a brief moment...Because capital was fixed in giant machines bolted to the floors of brick-and-mortar factories, the industrial culture that emerged in various places at various moments had an aura of permanence, durability, and heritage. [Cowie and Heathcott 2003:4]

The gradual transformation of southeastern Michigan’s industrial landscape from permanent fixtures to rusted hulks has been accompanied by a movement of the population of urban areas, especially Detroit, away from the city into rapidly growing suburbs. It is at the easternmost edge of the suburban sprawl, where new highways have been built to serve commuters, that the state’s newest landfills were created in

the eighties and early nineties by large waste firms, with the help of government assistance.



Map 1.1: Map of the counties of Southeastern Michigan depicting existing landfills

There are seventeen active sanitary landfills in southeastern Michigan, and many more that have been closed down in the last thirty years since the EPA toughened national standards. Most could be described as lying in mostly rural areas on the periphery of the greater Detroit metropolitan area. The site I call “Four Corners” is one of these landfills. It is the product of the changing landscape of waste disposal companies that occurred in the 1980s, as smaller firms were acquired by larger ones until, in the last decade, only a handful remain, the largest being Waste Management, Allied Waste, and Republic Services. When the company I call “America Waste” purchased Four Corners from a competitor, they had bought a

landfill with incredible dumping capacity but no available contracts. They had to cut their prices and search for new customers in order to run their state of the art facility.

All of this co-occurred with a dramatic change in the regulation of landfills and a concomitant transformation of the operation of waste sites and their market dynamics. In the early 1990s, all landfills were required to meet the new technological specifications discussed in the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act of 1976, then further elaborated throughout environmental laws of the 1980s. With the deadline approaching, landfills began to disappear by the hundreds and those that survived were required to grow in size in order to earn enough capital to pay for the cost of running a state-approved sanitary landfill. Since there was a plethora of waste sites in Michigan of substantial size, they had to lower the cost of dumping, or the “tipping fee” in order to remain competitive. By lowering their prices they expanded their market areas beyond local municipalities and across state and national borders. For their new customers, the additional cost of transportation was more than made up for by the lower cost of disposal.

Also important at this time was the signing of NAFTA, which promoted more traffic across the Michigan-Canadian border, extending the longstanding economic interdependence between Ontario and Michigan – leading back to the “Autopact” of the 1960s and the fur trade between Fort Detroit and Montreal, before that. More importantly, the NAFTA agreement left state officials seemingly powerless to stem the tide of waste importation. Even if state officials wished to challenge NAFTA, furthermore, in *Fort Gratiot Sanitary Landfill v. Michigan DNR* the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional for Michigan to place limits on trash imports

because this was interference in free commerce laws nearly two centuries old. This ruling essentially defined waste as a fungible good, an interpretation substantiated, some argue, by NAFTA as well (McCarthy 2006). Without Michigan's ability to regulate the waste trade or ban it altogether, despite frequent attempts on the part of the state legislature over the last five years, the movement of waste has been left largely to the market in disposal cost.

Over sixty percent of the landfills in southeastern Michigan, including Four Corners, receive out of state waste. At the end of 2000, it agreed upon a ten-year contract with the city of Toronto, accepting over a million tons of MSW per year, a contract that propelled Michigan into becoming the nation's second leading waste importer, behind only Pennsylvania. This development brought a great deal of negative attention to Four Corners and roused statewide opposition to the importation of out-of-state waste, particularly from Canada. My choice of Four Corners as a research site is meant to bring my ethnography into dialogue with the politics and profits of waste importation, broadly conceived. In so doing, I aim to establish connections between everyday experiences of purity and pollution and the interconnected waste regimes in which they take part.

### Structure of the Dissertation

I began researching Four Corners in the summer of 2004, when I conducted employee interviews there with the cooperation of America Waste. In the spring of 2005, I began conducting participant observation there as a part-time laborer, where I befriended employees and learned first hand what daily life was like for them in and out of work. In addition to working (and avoiding work) alongside them, I

participated in social gatherings of different kinds, both at the houses of coworkers and their family members and online in Playstation “gaming rooms” where we conducted covert ops late at night as imaginary terrorists and Navy Seals. I used time while not at work to conduct interviews and observation in Harrison and the surrounding area. In order to understand the community better I spent many hours in the collected archives available in the basement of the Riverside Historical Museum; I also attended local social events, such as the landfill sponsored “Summer Fest” in the center of town and the annual “turkey shoot” at the old landfill, among others.

I continued at Four Corners for seven months in this capacity, before I became a full-time employee on advice from my coworkers, who felt it would give me a better sense of how physically demanding their jobs could be. After two more grueling months working full time, and a weeklong stint working alongside Tanya in the snack shack adjoining the landfill, I began the second phase of my project. This involved interviews and observation conducted among local activists organizing against the landfill in the neighboring community of Brandes. During this time, I attended demonstrations against the landfill and other meetings, formal and informal, among Brandes activists. A good deal of my time in Brandes was spent in the “coffee klatch” of a towing business and party store that I call “Lions Service,” where the founding members of the activist group frequented. I remained in regular contact with the group up until their political activities stopped around the end of 2006, after they had succeeded in stopping the importation of Canadian sludge but failed to prevent Four Corners bid for expansion.

The dissertation is divided into chapters that reflect my ethnographic division of labor. Chapters Two and Three examine the complex relationship between Four Corners Landfill and the rural environment in which it is located; chapters four and five look at Four Corners from the perspective of its workers and their everyday lives; finally, chapters six and seven devote more attention to the people opposed to the landfill, from the local area and beyond, and the ways they imagine its impact on their lives.

As sanitary landfills increased to an estimated 20,000 by the 1970s to meet the waste demands of America's consumer society, their construction and operation became intertwined with the fate of numerous towns and cities, altering their environments and shaping their political and economic trajectories. Chapter Two asks why it is that waste flows where it does in the contemporary U.S. Using archival documents and oral histories gathered while investigating the community of Harrison, I ask how it happened that it became home to two landfills in the late twentieth century. I describe how it became selected as a recipient for wastes of different sorts as part of its pre-emption (Pascoe 2001) as a rural periphery. Rather than take its status as "rural" for granted, however, I develop a historical argument concerning how it was that Harrison came to be seen as a "natural" place, attractive for the fantasies and schemes of outsiders and newcomers.

In Chapter Three, I describe in more detail the landscape of the landfill that is the primary focus of the dissertation. In particular, I attempt to describe the strange articulation between pollution and protection that motivates the regulation and operation of the "sanitary landfill" in the contemporary U.S. and elsewhere. I explain

how the earliest landfills to bear the name transformed over the course of the twentieth century into a carefully regulated way of protecting waste from the people and the surrounding environment. I discuss in detail complex ecological arrangements that are managed by landfills planners and technicians in the present day, highlighting the ways in which solutions to the problem of environmental containment lead to unanticipated consequences. Specifically, I argue that by attempting to contain waste, landfill planners end up entangling the landfill and its material processes even more with their surroundings. In order to demonstrate this, I describe different ways in which non-human beings, from bacteria and archaeobacteria to species of birds, become participants in the political ecology of the landfill and shape day-to-day life at and around Four Corners.

Chapters Four and Five are both based on my time spent as a laborer at Four Corners and my observations on personhood, sociality, and conflict at the workplace. In the first, I begin to discuss landfill workers in more detail, examining their class and kin relations and the different ways in which these are shaped by the specific work they do and the wages they earn. I explore these dimensions of waste work through the concept of autonomy, which is of great importance to landfill workers and, I argue, is reflected in the middleclass futures they try to achieve for their families and the class structure they reproduce at the landfill. By examining the attachments that landfill employees form at the workplace, I reveal how attaining and expressing one's autonomy serves as a way of negotiating class conflicts and identities in the contemporary U.S.

In Chapter Five, I discuss scavenging and landfilling as alternative approaches to procuring value from rubbish. I find that these practices respond to the indeterminacy of abandoned things by means of distinct semiotic modalities. Scavenging relies on building an enduring familiarity with an object by harnessing its hidden qualities. Landfilling, on the other hand, requires that loads of refuse be evaluated according to their aggregate material qualities, a form of abstraction that facilitates the calculation of service fees and the systematic mass disposal demanded by late capitalist societies. But landfill employees also challenge managerial authority by secretly reclaiming individual objects. They do so not for material gain alone, moreover, but to restore a sense of autonomy and possibility to their lives. Consequently, competing claims about what counts as trash or treasure are as much about the worth of persons as they are the value of material things.

Both Chapters Six and Seven also discuss landfill workers, but are primarily concerned with the different ways in which people living in the vicinity of Four Corners imagine the waste trade, both the people who ship waste across the border and the environmental risks that they face because of it. In the former, I discuss some of the further social entailments of international waste trade between Michigan and Canada. Specifically, I examine how the perceived pollution of international borders post-9/11 serves to shape encounters between white, rural Michigan residents and the Sikh truck drivers that supply Four Corners Landfill with waste from Canada. I find that the misconstrual of Sikh waste haulers as “Arab” involves the conflation of foreign bodies with foreign waste and shapes the interpretive repertoires through which Michigan residents think about and engage with the international waste trade.

This has consequences not only for encounters between some Canadian truck drivers and Michigan residents, but for the ways in which both groups imagine themselves and their lives in the context of the “war on terror” and the global circulation of waste.

In Chapter Seven, I discuss in more detail the local activists actively opposed to Four Corners and attempting to come to terms with what they perceive are risks all around them and a lack of public recognition. Through a consideration of their different attempts to make sense of the influence the landfill holds over their lives, I trace the variety of ways in which opponents of Four Corners have attempted to gain public recognition for the problems they face and affect some kind of local change. I describe the different “public forums” they participate in as bringing new opportunities for political recognition as part of ambivalent alliances with government officials, politicians, and lawyers. Each of these “forums” and the different groups associated with them fail to give local residents the empowerment they seek, I argue. Rather than give them their own voices, I argue, these different public forums frame them as mere victims of pollution. The impact they do have on their circumstances, therefore, never appears to satisfy their desire for change.

In the pages that follow, people and places are shown reacting to the creative and destructive power of the waste to which they are exposed and that adheres to them in different ways. All of the chapters share in common a focus on landfilling as a complex way of dealing with pollution, one that creates contaminated environments, bodies, towns, and borders, while at the same time generating new political, economic, and ecological possibilities out of the “spoiled patterns.”

## Chapter II

### Pre-empted Landscapes: Waste and the Production of the Rural

On two separate occasions the rural, southeastern Michigan Township that I call “Harrison” was selected to receive waste from beyond its borders.<sup>11</sup> First in 1975, then again in 1992, large tracts of Harrison farmland were converted into sanitary landfill despite outspoken protest from area residents. Of the two landfills, the one that remains open, which I call “Four Corners,” receives the majority of its waste from as far away as Newark, New Jersey and Toronto, Canada. In this chapter, I explain Harrison’s role in regional waste circulation as it relates to a “territorial division of labor” (Smith 1990) whereby some locales attract the wastes and the fantasies of people from other, sometimes distant, places.

As with other landfill host communities, the 11,822 people that resided in the sparsely populated township of Harrison as of 2006 possess relatively lower incomes and a greater percentage of people below the poverty level than is typical of the area, though still better than the national average (see Table 2.1). Also in keeping with the literature on environmental injustice, the township has historically had a greater percentage of minorities than is typical of the area (see Bullard 1990). For more than

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<sup>11</sup> As I describe in more detail in the fifth chapter, the area a landfill serves is determined by the disposal market it participates in; this may encompass municipalities in the vicinity of the dump site – as it did in the U.S. for much of the twentieth century – or, as with many of today’s regional landfills or “megafills,” a larger, even international region.

forty years, over ten percent of Harrison’s population has been African-American, as compared to two percent or less among many most neighboring townships.<sup>12</sup>

	Percentage of individuals below the poverty line			Median household income		
	2000	1990	1980	2000	1990	1980
Harrison Township	10%	7.6%	8.9%	\$56,810	\$56,902	\$53,643
Calvin Township	5.7%	4.5%	5.5%	\$69,892	\$68,520	\$56,372
Jackson Township	6.3%	7.2%	5.5%	\$59,498	\$63,570	\$59,064
National average	12.4%	13.5%	13%	\$49,163	\$44,778	\$41,258

Table 2.1: Harrison’s income and poverty levels (adjusted to reflect 2006 dollars)

Located on the outskirts of Detroit’s growing middle class suburbs, the township’s few remaining businesses are largely dependent on the growth of these areas. Most of the more prominent establishments that were bolstered by the farming boom of the fifties and sixties are now gone, many of their lots are overgrown with tall grass. Three party stores, a family bakery, a couple of restaurants, a gas station, a mobile home supplier, and a hardware store chain are some of the only remaining retailers. The latter is an important supplier for the two-dozen or so small, family-owned construction businesses that have appeared in and around Harrison in response to the incredible growth in population that neighboring locales have received since 2000 (between 18-19% on average) in tandem with the national housing boom, while Harrison’s population has remained relatively stagnant during this span. In fact, since the late nineties construction work provides employment for over ten percent of the township’s population, nearly twice the percentage of people employed in that trade in neighboring locales. The proliferation of small businesses in the township has

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<sup>12</sup> Though the community of Riverside is now more on par with this figure, many neighboring townships remain around one percent or less. Consequently, Harrison is still locally perceived as having a more pronounced African-American constituency.

partially buffered the impact of widespread layoffs, which have devastated industrial manufacturing in the area. From 1979 to the present day, manufacturing dropped from employing over forty percent of the township to just over one quarter, while the unemployment rate in the township declined.

Another consequence of the last several decades is that once prominent gathering places for local residents have lost their former centrality in social life as Harrison's residents have become more affiliated with the civic organizations and public institutions of neighboring centers, such as Riverside. The old dance hall and Polish cultural center is now maintained by the township largely for its historic value, while the once popular skating rink is up for sale and seldom used. Meanwhile, many old farms and orchards have been abandoned, though some planted fields and horse farms can still be found. The only sign of recent construction are the prefabricated houses that have sprung up here and there along the main roads of the township, though work has slowed considerably since the recent burst of the housing bubble, associated with what Robin Blackburn (2007) calls the "toxic waste" of the sub-prime market. The multi-million dollar landfill is by far Harrison's most successful business; furthermore, through its host fee agreement it is responsible for over forty percent of the township budget. When the landfill temporarily slowed its waste intake in the late nineties, during a transfer of corporate ownership, the township went into a brief financial crisis. This dependency on Four Corners Landfill, which is widely unpopular in the area because of its Canadian contracts, has led many people outside the community to give it the nickname "Harri-scum."

I relate the production of this landscape to Harrison's transformation into a rural periphery for local centers, as well as more distant ones. In particular, I focus on two important and interrelated aspects of Harrison's rural transformation: first, the naturalization of its landscape and second, its pre-emption by "outside" interests. The first comes from Henri Lefebvre's (1996:118) observation that the history of relations between town and country are often reflected in categorical separations of "culture" versus "nature," respectively, as well as Raymond Williams' argument that the social processes that bind histories of town and country gradually become "dissolved into a landscape," thereby giving exploitative relations between them the appearance of a natural state of affairs (1973:125). Thus, the process of becoming rural is reflected in representations of the landscape as essentially "natural," "wild," or "undeveloped."

As I explain below, the Great Lakes region was reduced to an "abode of wild beasts and wild men" through the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, but forms of naturalization persisted in places like Harrison long after the emerging American Republic had colonized much of the area. I begin the chapter with a discussion of how early efforts to map Harrison's environment led to its slow colonization, as much of the township was labeled undesirable "marsh" or "wet prairie" for much of the nineteenth century. As anthropologist Kenneth Lewis argues, "The avoidance of swamplands had profound implications for settlement patterning in Southeastern Michigan" (2002:59), leading, in some cases, to the creation of rural farmland at the periphery of larger centers. Later on in the twentieth century, thousands of newcomers would be drawn to the township, hoping to find abundant land, privacy, and a close community in "the country."

Following David Pascoe's (2001) depiction of airport spatial layouts, I also devote this chapter to explaining the different ways in which Harrison's naturalized landscape has been pre-empted, that is, shaped more so by various "outsiders" than by local inhabitants. In his discussion of the history of London's Heathrow airport, Pascoe describes how certain developments undermine local senses of place: "The airport does not simply pre-empt and efface such territory; they also evacuate the historical significances of areas" (2001:84). In this respect, airports are no different from other developments commonly found in rural peripheries. It is no accident, for example, that before its transformation into an international transportation hub Heathrow began as a disposal site for sewage and horse waste from the city. The same conditions that made the rural outskirts of London an attractive site for waste simultaneously readied it for another development project, which, however beneficial it may be for locals in some ways, providing jobs and revenue for the town, is primarily intended to serve the interests of people from outside the community.

My use of "pre-emption" is meant as a way of describing the existential predicaments of Harrison residents as they struggle to live in a place of someone else's making.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, I use this concept as a way of circumventing the kinds of assumptions that have tended to motivate many studies of the "Midwestern small town" over the course of the twentieth century (see Lynd and Lynd 1929; Blumenthal 1939; Billigton 1966; Varenne 1977). On the one hand, there is a persistent tendency to naturalize the "ruralness" of such places rather than examine this characteristic as a historical product, as I aim to do in this chapter. Furthermore,

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<sup>13</sup> Maria Kousis refers to this process as "ecological marginalization," a combined process of resource extraction and waste dumping that exploits rural areas. She leaves aside, however, the way in which such processes produce rural landscapes to begin with, which is the focus of much of this chapter.

many of these studies have focused on conflict between “locals” and various “outsiders” in terms of an actually existing community with shared interests (Salamon 2007:4). But whether a particular interest qualifies as that of an “insider” or “outsider” can be a matter of considerable ambiguity, and struggles over the future of Harrison frequently hinge on the openness of such distinctions.

In the juridical sense, pre-emption is often defined as the sovereign right of the state to appropriate land for public use. However, the historical origin of pre-emption is said to be the Greek right of “protimisis,” which possessed an alternative meaning in Medieval law. In Romania, for example, protimisis gave members of a land-owning community the right of first refusal if one of them was intent on selling, a custom, some claim, which empowered peasant communities against nobles (Georgescu 1965; Mateescu personal communication, January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008). What I mean by “pre-emption” falls in-between these two senses. As a process it is a mixture of outside and local interests, which changes a landscape in ways that seem out of place to those who live there, but which they may eventually come to embrace nevertheless.

Local ambivalence about pre-emption is evident in the creation of Harrison’s second landfill in the corner of the township. Ned Garten remembers how his lifelong neighbors, some of whom could trace back their families in Harrison for generations, became complicit in a Detroit-based waste firm’s bid to take over his family’s farmland in the early nineties. He recalls the day his father came home, “pissed off” that County Services, the company that owned the dump down the road, was seeking to build a new site in their backyard, the one that would eventually

become Four Corners. Ned was already out of high school at the time and working several jobs in order to make ends meet. At that time, he still had plans to one-day farm the area, some six hundred acres of fertile land, as he had with his father and brothers while growing up. “This was top-notch land here, you know, the soil was perfect,” Ned told me. He loved not only farm labor, but also how people from the area all seemed to know one another and help each other in times of need.

Yet, it was these same neighbors that were selling off their land one by one, knowing it would become a landfill. Many of those who choose to surrender their land were older couples, or widows, who no longer wanted the responsibility of looking after a farm, or whose adult children (who also didn’t want this responsibility) encouraged them to sell. In the process, they came to see their property as a burden and the landfill company’s offer as an opportunity. “They wanted out from underneath it,” Ned said, and they “just [saw] dollar signs.” The number of active farms in the township had been declining precipitously since at least the 1940s, as factory jobs promised more income and less intensive labor. The 1980s had been a difficult time for many American farmers and, though people in Michigan’s Lower Peninsula did not lose as much as those further west (see Dudley 2000), there was strong incentive to sell to County Services and move on. Some moved “up north,” Ned says, as many middle class Michigan residents plan to do one day, while others left the state entirely. Though Ned says he doesn’t hold them accountable for their actions, he hints that other neighbors may have felt differently – one of the first houses to sell had all of its windows smashed in overnight.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ned claims this may have been the work of local “Satanists” rather than angry residents.

The sale of their neighbor's properties presented the Gartens with a dilemma. Ned's parents and grandparents did not want to sell the places where they had lived and farmed for decades, but they relied heavily on sharecropping their neighbors' land in order to make farming viable (indeed, Ned's father had long since taken on additional factory work to supplement their crops, which did not produce enough revenue as it was). Within a few months, County Services had appropriated a substantial portion of the land the Gartens needed to sharecrop and moving became inevitable. Ned regretted his family's decision to sell his birthright, but when the landfill offered him a job he needed the paycheck. Eventually, he became an operator and, for a time, the second-in-command to Bob, in direct line for a promotion to management in the not-too-distant future. However, for undisclosed reasons he eventually fell out of favor with the landfill management and, after the sludge contracts were eliminated to quell public opposition to landfill expansion, he was laid off with little explanation.

The loss of the Garten farm and the mixed benefits that Ned and his neighbors derived from this, demonstrates the complexity of processes of pre-emption in rural locales, particularly its inclusion of a wide assortment of social actors and interests, both in and outside of the idealized community. In fact, the Gartens and their neighbors were ultimately unaware of just how many people played a role in the acquisition of their farmland. As I mentioned in the introduction, sites like Four Corners were promoted through government tax incentives in order to serve as long-term solutions to a perceived garbage crisis. Harrison's acting supervisor at the time had supported the landfill due to pressure from powerful state and county officials

that saw it as a crucial part of a general waste management plan. In exchange, the supervisor would later negotiate to have a wetland preserve placed next to the landfill to block its expansion. Yet, this too was done on the county's behalf – the wetland site was a mitigation intended to compensate for wetland the county had lost during a recent airport expansion. Furthermore, Harrison's current Supervisor finds the presence of the preserve more disturbing than the landfill beside it, since the former cannot (and will never, according to the terms of its creation) produce tax revenue for the township. I heard similar criticisms of the wetland as a "waste of prime land" from a number of residents.<sup>15</sup>

These different forms of pre-emption can be partly understood as outcomes of Harrison's transformation into a rural backwater through uneven geographical development (Smith 1990; Harvey 1996, 2006). Marxist geographers use "uneven development" as a way of describing the material world as shaped by processes of capital accumulation and circulation. Places are not given, they argue, but are differentiated through successive cycles of investment and divestiture as part of the dynamic "see-saw movement of capital" (Smith 1990:137-9). In the process, rural places help absorb capital surplus, including surplus population, and become further entangled in exploitative relations vis-à-vis local centers. The emergence of industrial capitalism in the U.S. led to greater interregional economic integration and intensified struggles between settlements over relative prosperity and influence (Lewis 2002:310; Smith 2003:16-17). As an illustration of this, I highlight the

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<sup>15</sup> The most deeply effected by this "waste" may be Tom Rhodes, who farms the plots remaining on the landfill property and used to farm almost half of the nine hundred acres now "permanently" transformed into wetland: "to me," he said, "they turned some good productive farmland into junk land."

disappearance of two prosperous villages from Harrison in relation to the rise of the nearby town of Riverside, which gradually depleted competing settlements of people, businesses, investments, and even historical memory (see Pascoe 2001:84).

As places become differentiated in this way, “territorial divisions of labor” result (Smith 1990), which include the uneven distribution of waste sites. As a consequence of becoming rural, out-of-the-way places like Harrison possess cheap, abundant land that attracts the schemes and fantasies of a variety of actors and institutions seeking to take advantage of the “natural” setting, whether as a repository for foreign garbage, rare wildlife, dead animals and freed pets, or as a serene place to escape from the pressures of the city and the suburbs. In some of these cases, the landscape of the township is pre-empted in ways that present challenges to people who would live there. When changes to the land are extreme and relatively permanent, as is the case with landfills, people like Ned may struggle to make sense of what once-familiar places have become and accept the strange new possibilities they introduce.

#### “The Abode of Wild Beasts and Wild Men”

In a sense, Harrison’s landfills are but extreme instances of how distant forces and interests have been shaping the township’s physical landscape since the colonization of the Old Northwest. In an essay that calls for more consideration of America’s colonial past and present, Michael Warner (2000) warns against the usage of “settlement” to describe the gradual depopulation and repopulation of the New World. The problem with this term, he argues, is that it substitutes a seemingly benign relationship between pioneers and land for complex and power-laden

relationships between a wide variety of social actors (Warner 2000:56). One could add, further, that people did not just “settle” colonies in the New World, but transformed whole environments.

Harrison owes its current shape – both the dimensions of its borders and the density of its population – to struggles over the Northwest Territory during the early years of the American Republic, involving displaced indigenous groups, European empires, backcountry settlers of diverse origins, ex-soldiers, and elites from the east. All of these groups were invested in the lands surrounding the western Great Lakes, yet their roles in shaping it differed substantially. During the so-called “Beaver Wars” of the 1650s and 1660s, enemies of the Iroquois were exiled in present-day Wisconsin and Northern Michigan, where their concentrated numbers overburdened local supplies of game, fish, and corn (White 1991:42-7).<sup>16</sup> Alliances with the French enabled the “refugee” groups to establish peace with the Iroquois and occupy areas rich in fur-bearing animals throughout the region, which ushered in a period of prolonged trade between Europeans and native inhabitants of the western Great Lakes, structured around the cyclic rise and fall of deer and beaver. Historian Richard White (1991) describes the area prior to this period of “dependency” as a border zone of collaborations, accommodations, and misunderstandings, a “middle ground” which, though quite violent, was not dominated by the designs of either Europeans or Native Americans.

This changed with the American Revolution and the decline of trade relations with the French and British. American control over the west was gradually

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<sup>16</sup> Iroquois marauders were moving west in their search for combatants to atone for or replace kin they had lost to war and foreign disease; they were also searching for new hunting grounds to meet the demand of the global fur trade, which had begun to deplete game in the east.

established by way of an alternative political ecology, as lands previously shaped through indigenous-European exchanges gave way to landscapes structured around state administration, private ownership, and cultivation. Unlike the Europeans that had preceded them, new “backcountry settlers” were not primarily interested in trading with Indigenous groups to supply a global fur market; rather, they wanted land to develop, farm, and/or sell.<sup>17</sup> Native Americans were aware of this distinction between the Europeans and Americans, sometimes using it to choose allegiances in times of war. The visions of charismatic prophets like Neolin, Tenskwatawa, and Trout blamed the fur trade for corrupting human/animal relations, but they saved special scorn for encroaching backcountry settlers, who were described as evil beings descended from a “Great Serpent” reminiscent of the Christian Devil (White 1991:507).

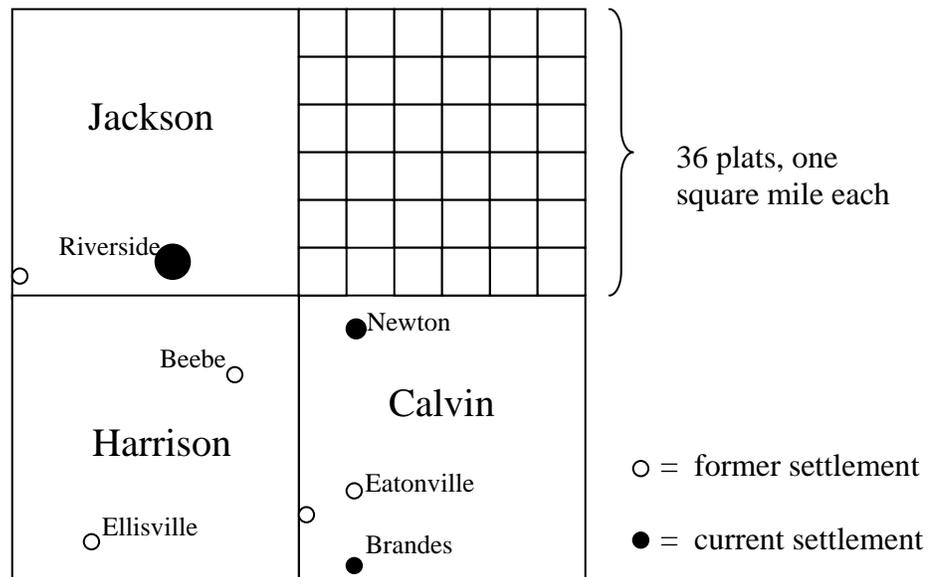
The rise of the American Republic brought with it a new way of controlling lands and inhabitants to the west. Following the pronouncements of John Locke over a century earlier (see Tully 1993), new settlers were claiming land that they perceived as having gone to waste through indigenous and French “misuse” (Lewis 2002:158-9). In European and indigenous hands, the Old Northwest had become a “waste wilderness,” as one pioneer put it, “the abode of wild beasts and wild men” (Barillas 1989:7).<sup>18</sup> This was also the perception of American elites back east, though they tended to view the new settlers in a similar way. Otherwise known as “white savages,” backcountry settlers tended to ignore official property treaties with Native

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<sup>17</sup> Though some American settlers came to depend on the federal annuity payments supplied to their Indian neighbors for land cessions.

<sup>18</sup> Yet, this vision of “wilderness” was not incompatible with acknowledgement of prior human modification of the environment. In places like Michigan’s southern peninsula, new settlers were quick to identify and exploit forest clearings that had been created through cultivation.

Confederacies and the British (White 1991:417-18, Cayton and Onuf 1990:5-8) and occasionally defied Philadelphia through open revolt (Watts 2001:23-38). Prominent architects of western expansion, such as Jefferson, intended to dictate the colonization of the Northwest so as to remake all “savages” into citizens. The practice of farming private plots of land was meant to give “wild men” of the Northwest the character to govern themselves as their territories developed into states.<sup>19</sup>



Map 2.1: Township Grid System as created by NW Ordinance

The Northwest Ordinance, passed by the Continental Congress in 1787, provided western territories with a path to statehood by systematically dividing up ceded or seized Indian lands for sale and resettlement. Newly colonized areas were organized into Townships before they could be divided between competing

<sup>19</sup> Jefferson proposed a Lockean design for national uniformity through labor, land, and government: “When once you have property, you will want laws and magistrates to protect your property...you will unite yourselves with us...and form one people with us, and we shall all be Americans” (White 1991:474). Some Ottawa and Potawatami actually managed to remain in their ancestral lands by adopting agricultural practices that integrated them into the regional frontier economy (McClurken 1986:48, Lewis 2002:88). When agents of Michigan’s Superintendency and the Jackson administration pushed for removal in the speculative rush of the late 1830s, local settlers had become reliant on the annuity payments that members of the Ottawa tribe received from the federal government for land cessions and had formed close ties with Native inhabitants (McClurken 1986:38-42).

settlements (see Opie 1987). Harrison, for example, was established in 1840 in its current size, following the terms of the Ordinance, while neighboring Calvin and Jackson were gradually subdivided by growing towns (see Map 2.1).

Unlike the more or less “organic” growth of the original colonies, colonization in nineteenth century America was thus deliberately shaped according to enlightenment categories of spatial and political order (Hannah 2000:118). The Northwest Ordinance readied the area for propertization and exploitation at a time when the Republic was at its most vulnerable and new lands for settlement were highly valued (Cayton and Onuf 1990:6-9). When peace in the Northwest Territories was established by 1815, the American government could use the sale of land to pay off wartime debts.

In addition to providing a rationale with which to subdivide property to homesteaders, the Ordinance was also meant to limit the political and economic power of emerging territories by subjecting them to internal fragmentation and eastern governance (Watts 2001:14). William Appleman Williams was one of the first to describe early America as a form of empire founded on internal colonialism, with commercial centers like New York and Boston serving as the would-be “mother countries” of western territories in an exploitative mercantile system (1958:139-42; see also Nye 2003:261). Less discussed is how these acts of spatial governance were practically and materially deployed (but see Hannah 2000). In order to rule the division and distribution of a disputed territory from a distance, the American government and powerful business interests had to make the west knowable (see Latour 1987:227). For this purpose, they relied on the production and circulation of

distinct semiotic technologies, the most prominent of which, and perhaps the most important supplement to the Northwest Ordinance, was the scientifically precise and detailed map.

### Wet Prairie and Oak Openings

According to popular historiography, Michigan's colonization was delayed because its environmental conditions were poorly understood. Consequently, the state's rise to prominence with the rest of the Midwest in the nineteenth century is attributed to accumulated knowledge about the land – its fertile soil, hardwood lumber, and iron and copper resources – and the eventual transformation of this natural potential into material wealth. While this account is implicitly supported by an underlying moral narrative of historical progress and national becoming, at the same time it is right to point toward the important role of representations of the environment, from landscape paintings to maps, in patterns and strategies of American colonization. The dissemination of newly acquired representations of the Old Northwest, whatever their accuracy, had a profound impact on the settlement of areas that were deemed to be on inferior or unusable land, Harrison among them.

After the Revolutionary War, early travelers described Michigan territory (which once included present-day Michigan, Wisconsin and parts of Ohio and Minnesota) as an impassable and disease-ridden swamp (Lewis 2002:22).<sup>20</sup> While the area surrounding the settlement at Detroit was reportedly covered in swampland for forty miles in every direction, much of the territory was actually composed of dense forest (Lewis 2002:170). In addition to these environmental misperceptions,

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<sup>20</sup> This perception was so widespread that millions of acres of Michigan Territory were removed from the "bounty lands" act, which was meant to supply soldiers of the Revolution with western lands.

another important reason for the “delay” in Michigan’s colonization was the treacherous Black Swamp outside present day Toledo, which prevented backcountry settlers from accessing Lower Michigan overland. Until the opening of the Erie Canal provided an alternative to land travel in 1825, Michigan initially grew very slowly, while settlers from New England and the upland South flocked to Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois in record numbers.

Misconceptions of Michigan’s environment are said to have been corrected by better representations of the area in the form of popularly circulated maps. According to Lewis, over a century of European presence in the pays d’en haut produced “relatively little knowledge” of the regional landscape (2002:21). While the waterways had been extensively explored, Europeans had ventured very little into the interior of the continent. Of course, the accommodations and exchanges of the middle ground had produced mutual understanding about a great many things, including the distribution and availability of fur-bearing animals in the Great Lakes region. As many phenomenologically-oriented anthropologists have noted, there are many important things “known” about familiar places that cannot be adequately represented abstractly, divorced from embodied memories or shared cosmologies (Ingold 2000; Basso and Feld 1996). What qualifies as a “better” or more informative representation of a place ultimately depends on how it is going to be used as a signifying form.

Historically, it is only with the rise of certain tools of government, such as property claims and tax structures, that precise measurements and methods of surveying have been deemed necessary (see Scott 1998). The kind of knowledge

American settlers, politicians, and land dealers desired about the ecology of the Northwestern frontier was the sort that could be integrated into an emerging political economy heavily reliant on private property and regional commerce. The earliest maps and surveys commissioned by the federal government were used to draw firm boundaries between U.S. and British held territory, as established by the treaty of Greenville. These federally imposed spatial coordinates facilitated land sale and distribution, but future surveys were desired by federal and territorial authorities in order to attract new settlers to the area.

To work successfully, maps must train the gaze of the user on particular dimensions of an isolated place, to the exclusion of others, while at the same time giving the appearance of a view from nowhere, detached from any situated perspective. At the same time, “no map, however ‘modern’ or sophisticated the techniques of its production, can be wholly divorced from the practices, interests, and understandings of its makers and users” (Ingold 2000:225). A map is a form of semiotic technology that hinges – like any iconic sign – on selective resemblance, mediated by shared understandings of what qualifies as a relevant similarity or difference (Peirce 1955:102). Put another way, all maps – no matter how detailed – require an active interpreter with sufficient collateral knowledge of the right mapping conventions.

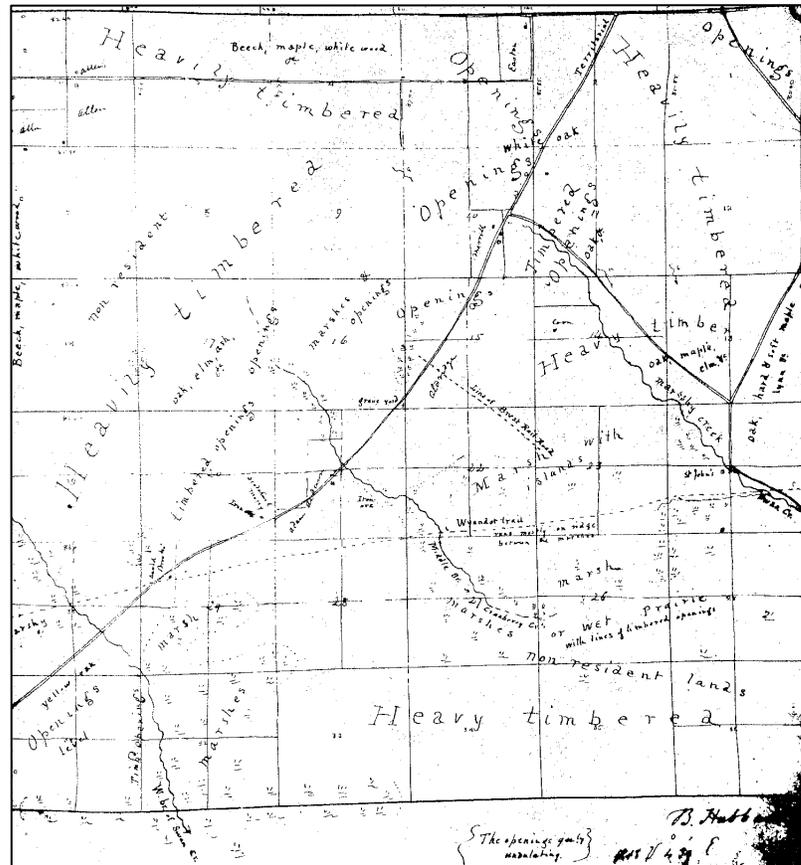
When they examined early guides and maps of Lower Michigan, settler colonists were filling in interpretive gaps about the meaning of different places and their relative significance. For example, farmers migrating west would have paid close attention to whether land contained low-lying “wet prairie,” or forest clearings,

also known as “oak openings.” Wetland could be drained, and much of it was in the Detroit area, but to Americans and Europeans of the early nineteenth century swamps and the infectious “night air” they produced were more than a barrier to cultivation – the “atmosphere” generated by wetlands was believed to contain disease-causing miasmas (Miller 1989:190, Baldwin 2003). In the early nineteenth century, there was also still widespread belief in the process of spontaneous generation. Conditions of decay, it was believed, begat life forms that pestered and plagued humanity, such as mice and fleas (Hamlin 2005:11). Living near old wasteland was, among other things, a potential source of further pollution and pestilence.

Oak openings, the product of successive cycles of cultivation, carried an altogether different connotation. Like the interlocking trails that were cut through Michigan’s dense forest during the height of the fur trade, these clearings provided excellent sites for the advancement of settler colonialism, to the disadvantage of those who had initially created them (Lewis 2002:68-70). The importance of these qualities of the landscape are evident in two different maps of the early nineteenth century, one by John Farmer, an influential cartographer of the Old Northwest, and another by Bela Hubbard, a famed geographer, explorer, and land owner in early Michigan.

When Lower Michigan was vindicated by new surveys, not all areas were found to be equally redeemable – in 1830, Farmer identified large tracts of the area that would later become Harrison as “wet prairie” in his widely circulated *Emigrant’s Guide* to the Michigan Territory. Farmer did say that the wet prairie was “serviceable” to the industrious farmer, but it did not compare favorably to the rest of the Lower Peninsula, which was depicted in his maps and in travel accounts of the

time as having near-ideal farmland. Yet, in a map produced by Hubbard depicting Harrison circa 1818 – when Hubbard was himself only four years of age – the township is depicted in a very different light. His map shows it as a “heavily timbered” place, yet one that possessed numerous oak openings and only a few isolated marshes (see Map 2.2).



Map 2.2: Bela Hubbard map of Harrison, circa 1818

Compared to Farmer’s map, Hubbard’s is detailed with more local specificity – he depicts forest areas, labeled as elm, maple and beech; he also gives the location of the thirteen local resident families, a graveyard, an old Indian trail leading to the camp at Wyandotte, and a territorial road leading to Detroit. Hubbard’s rendering of Southeastern Michigan’s landscape does not prove Farmer’s false, per se. With iconic grounds of representation, similarity between represented object and sign is

always a matter of degree (Mannheim 2000:107-8). There is a great deal that both maps leave out, or leave implicit. For example, both frame their depiction as a bird's eye view of the official township boundaries, as set by the terms of the Northwest Ordinance, thereby implicitly endorsing the legitimacy of eastern governance over what was already inhabited landscape (Nye 2003:25-6).

Compared to Hubbard, Farmer's tendency to reduce the heterogeneity of surface features – distinct types of woodland, trails, and farmed lots, in addition to marshes and clearings – was more intent on addressing the prevailing concerns of the prospective landowner back east. It was this depiction, furthermore, that proved the most influential for Harrison's future. It was partly in response to environmentally descriptive maps like Farmer's, which suggested that much of the area offered good land for the aspiring farmer, that Michigan's population increased by 537% in the 1830s (Cayton and Onuf 1990:29). The population of Harrison also grew during roughly the same period, multiplying its population from a few dozen to a few hundred in the span of two decades. But at its founding in 1840, which was late by the standards of its county, the township still had a population of less than 228 and, at the turn of the century, less than 1500. Until the 1960s, when newcomers were attracted to the township for its rural appeal, Harrison consistently held the smallest populations by a significant margin in an otherwise populace county (see Table 2.2).

In 1863, a newer map of Michigan – now officially a state – was produced in New York based in large part on Farmer's work. At a time of growing investment in the state's infrastructure, when the power and size of locales were being determined for years to come, this map portrayed the entire township as submerged in one large

wet prairie, the only one of its size in the whole of southeastern Michigan! Even more modest representations continued to denigrate the worth of at least the southeastern portion of the township. In an 1871 booklet for “settlers and land dealers” prepared by Farmer’s son, almost one-third of Harrison was labeled “marsh,” including both of the areas now occupied by landfills.

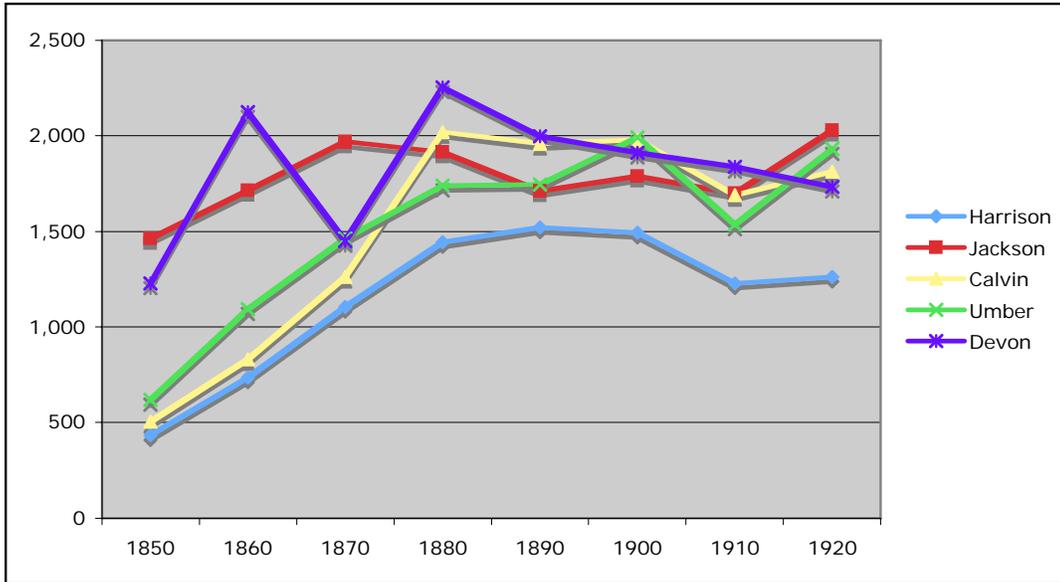


Table 2.2: Population growth in Harrison and the surrounding area

Regardless of their original accuracy, Farmer’s maps were now greatly at odds with the transformations that had been introduced into the area: farming families had adapted much of the area labeled “marshland” for cultivation by the 1870s. In Harrison, as elsewhere in Lower Michigan, the razing of forests and the draining of wetlands had reformed the landscape on a massive scale and little of the ecology of the previous centuries remained intact (Barillas 1989). The lingering inaccuracies of popular maps reflect the continued influence of the Eastern states in the representation and transformation of land in the Old Northwest, even as the region grew in political and economic influence into the powerful “Midwest.”

Harrison would remain a farming community until the mid-twentieth century, when manufacturing work would first supplement and then finally supplant farming as the primary occupation of residents. It would be the last township in the area to begin commercial farming and one of the last to stop relying on it as the principal means of employment. However, agriculture would be enough to sustain prosperous villages in the late nineteenth century and attract immigrant groups well into the early twentieth century, before competition with neighboring locales and a changing national economy furthered its rural transformation.

### The Struggle of Localities

As influential as early maps may have been for Harrison's path toward becoming rural, there is an altogether different moment that some area residents use to explain the township's history: the loss of a St. Louis-Detroit railroad depot in the 1880s to the neighboring village of Riverside. The train depot was originally intended for Harrison's village of Ellisville, which, along with the village of Beebe to the northwest, was the center of social life in Harrison from the antebellum years through the Great Depression. But the railroad line deviated from its originally planned route and the depot was placed in Riverside instead, connecting it to one of the largest routes of interregional trade in the Midwest.

Some of Harrison's more recent residents are unlikely to know this tale, and even those that do know it now tend to think of Riverside as part of their community (they grew up going to Riverside to shop, go to school, work, or attend church) and are typically less inclined to describe the relationship between the two locales as one

of competition.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, in statements like the following an implicit connection between Harrison's loss and Riverside's gain is evoked. In a solitary paragraph written by Phyllis Kettle to conclude a chapter in her short history of Harrison, she writes, "Gradually over the years, both Ellisville and Beebe began to disappear; Riverside becoming the shopping center due to its having a railroad." Ultimately, Phyllis is right to make this connection, as are other residents of Harrison who know the story – their sense of having inherited a town that has *lost* reflects the legacy of the rise of nineteenth century American capitalism.

As of 1840, when Harrison was first established as a municipal township, the newly established state of Michigan was not yet integrated into a national, capitalist economy, but predominantly engaged in agricultural production for limited regional exchange and local subsistence (Lewis 2002:175). Indeed, America's capitalist economy was still in formation in the early decades of the nineteenth century and its eventual outcome was still very much in question. Prior to 1845, the Michigan economy was primarily regional in scope – any agricultural surplus produced in Harrison or elsewhere was unable to feed more urbanized areas to the east because of the long duration of canal transport. Those exchanges that did occur in the area were facilitated by the stabilizing effect of eastern bank notes, which served as a common unit of exchange value (Lewis 2002:271-3). A steady influx of eastern-backed currency maintained the regional economy and also prepared it for entry into the more national, domestic economy that would come later.

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<sup>21</sup> This is true even of African-Americans who remember a time, not so long ago, that they were unable to buy property in Riverside. Those that do remember tend to be very reserved about making negative comments about their neighbors and friends, as are people in Harrison in general.

At the same time this also left western finance vulnerable to the crises of the Jackson era, which at the time were the worst in American history (Lewis 2002:113-4).<sup>22</sup> Harrison was founded in the midst of the devastating economic depression that accompanied the Panic of 1837. Its rise in population at this time may have been aided, in fact, by the plummeting price of land in the west – which would have made farmland highly affordable compared to previous years. Places like Harrison could survive the depression in large part because regional exchange provided a source of revenue for small farmers, detached from a reliance on eastern commerce (Lewis 2002:113-4). Already at this time, Harrison was home to two concentrated settlements – Ellisville to the southwest and Beebe to the northeast, roughly situated along the territorial road leading to the city and at a distance from the sections labeled “swampland” in many of John Farmer’s popular maps. Neither of the villages was particularly large, but they contained the majority of the township’s population and, by the time of Reconstruction era, they both possessed post offices, general stores, mills, churches, and schools.

Ellisville and Beebe were prominent local centers in Harrison throughout the war years and into the 1870s. During this time, the American economy went through a transformation of historic proportions. Financed with British capital, railroads were built throughout the Old Northwest from the 1850s onward, making Chicago the central hub of national commerce after the Civil War (Cayton and Onuf 1990:38-9). Railroads changed the shape of markets by bolstering demand, with geographic

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<sup>22</sup> The creation of trade networks between east and west were supported on another level by Democratic-Republicans who believed it was one of the only ways to maintain a sense of national unity among the American people through mutual economic interest rather than explicit “political affinities” (Cayton and Onuf 1990:5).

distance less of a barrier to commerce, exchange value was able to circulate relatively unmoored from the material limits of individual commodities (Lewis 2002:227).

Michigan railroads connected with lines running west to Chicago and Northeast to the coastal cities, which made them a leading supplier of grain, copper, and hardwood timber by the 1870s (Lewis 2002:232-3). Improvements in transportation infrastructure led to more specialized agricultural production on a grander economy of scale (Lewis 2002:281).

More to the point, it placed more emphasis on the political-economic relations between different locales, whether neighboring or distantly connected, providing a more systematic patterning to uneven development (Lewis 2002:310; Smith 2003:16-17). It is through such processes that one can explain Riverside's historical success competing with neighboring locales for resources, population, capital investment, and general symbolic recognition. With the emergence of American industrial capitalism in the post-Civil War era, the success of one center became directly related to the failure of another, a sign of its own lack of capital investment (Smith 1990). Such place-level competition was readily apparent to some at the time. In 1886, the first newspaper of Riverside identified out-competing neighboring communities as a collective goal: "Riverside bids fair to hold her own in the struggle of localities to draw trade, and become a social, educational, and literary center." The editorial went on to connect this strive for local dominance with the creation of a newspaper: "Nothing will so much aid a community in this struggle as a paper devoted to the interests of the people." The newspaper editor was right to be confident. Unlike

Harrison, Riverside was considered prime farmland during the height of Midwestern migration and, even more important, was strategically located on a major river.

Earlier that decade, a new railroad system had begun construction that would connect Detroit with St. Louis, the second largest city in the Midwest and a major hub of western commerce (Teaford 1993:49). The St. Louis connection was, in fact, originally planned to pass through a depot in Ellisville, just as some locals believe today. This provided the most straightforward path between the St. Louis main line and the depot in downtown Detroit. As late as 1883, a detailed map by Farmer would state that a depot existed in Ellisville, so confident were some in the course of the railroads development and Harrison's prosperous future. But for reasons unknown the railroad company changed the original course and established a depot in Riverside instead, sealing its fate as the locally dominant "center" that some of its residents intended for it to become. From 1890 to 1920, the population of Harrison declined by 17% while Jackson Township and Riverside continued to grow by that same margin (see Table 2.2 above).

In some ways, the differential placement of railroads shadowed the growth of roads within the Lower Peninsula, which meant privileging larger centers and routes of regular intra-regional traffic over others (Lewis 2002:207). Neither Ellisville nor Beebe were located on major roads (in fact, it was not until the 1970s that the township had close access to a major highway, which coincided with its largest growth in population and the rise of its landfills), whereas Riverside was located on the main thoroughfare leading to Detroit. According to Kenneth Lewis, the uneven development that came after the Civil War in Lower Michigan was fairly continuous

with that of the antebellum period, and Harrison's history seems to bear this out. As I explain in the next section, Riverside's short-lived stint as a transportation hub was overshadowed after several decades by the spread of Ford automotive factories into the hinterlands of the Detroit area, particularly alongside major waterways and routes of travel, which further determined its place in the local geographical hierarchy.

In Harrison today, little evidence of Ellisville and Beebe remain, the last thing to disappear from the latter was a family owned grocer that was gone by the early 1930s, while the former maintained a school for a number of years before the districts became consolidated and Harrison's students began attending schools in more populace townships. Many of the structures that once stood in the oak openings are now gone; a few houses have been built at the intersections where the villages once stood, but nothing is left that would indicate that the empty fields and heavily wooded plots were once active centers of town social life. There is still evidence of the foundations of some of the disappeared buildings, but knowledge of where they once stood is preserved only in faded photographs and the memories of a select few residents still invested in the town's past. That past was lost, piece by piece, as part of Harrison's transition from one small collection of settlements among many into the rural periphery of prosperous centers. Over time the buildings were moved or burnt down; the businesses closed and supplanted by others closer to new population centers. One mill was actually donated (or sold) by the town to Henry Ford's Greenfield Village, where it is included as part of an authentic frontier-aesthetic

marketed to tourists. Some feel that Harrison residents have lost an important sense of themselves partly as a consequence of this active forgetting of the recent past.<sup>23</sup>

Ellisville and Beebe left in their wake a township whose inhabitants are largely dependent on wealthier and more populous centers for news, religious worship, consumption, education, civic membership, and employment to the present day. Riverside's victory in this "struggle of localities," in fact, is evident in the dissolution of a firm divide between the townships – many new residents complete the marginalization of Harrison by failing to distinguish their home community from that of Riverside, some newly arrived youth are unaware such a distinction even exists and tell others they are "from Riverside" based on their zip code.

By the early to mid twentieth century, however, Harrison's loss of identity to Riverside became an integral part of its appeal. Becoming "rural" is not simply about what a place lacks – whether infrastructure, businesses, or population – but also about what is made possible as a consequence of such un-development. As part of its emergent rural position vis-à-vis neighboring locales, Harrison's acquired a bucolic appeal to people from the Detroit area, the South, and Eastern Europe. To them, the township seemed to be out in the middle of nowhere, which they associated with having enough land to grow food, experience "nature," or simply be left alone. Various waves of newcomers would define Harrison throughout the twentieth century, providing opportunities for local revitalization, creating many of its most

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<sup>23</sup> In this respect, Harrison contrasts sharply with the small city of Riverside directly to the north. At Riverside, a historical society meets regularly to discuss local history, an annual tour takes interested residents around to local houses of historical interest, and sites of local importance are preserved to maintain a connection with past origins.

enduring civic organizations and businesses, and leaving a lasting impression on rural life in the township.

#### “The Feast in the Wilderness”: Newcomers

During the 1920s and 30s, places that had become rural vis-à-vis local centers began to attract more residents as Americans increasingly left metropolitan areas for smaller communities along the urban periphery (Carr 1952:26). This process of suburbanization, which had already begun in parts of industrialized Europe decades earlier (Fishman 1987), was encouraged by the decentralization of industrial production associated with the booming automotive industry. According to geographical theories of capitalist crisis and accumulation, surplus population gradually follows the same course as surplus capital – periodically flowing into areas previously left undeveloped in order to increase profits (Smith 1990). After 1925, most industrial development in the Midwest took place on the fringes of urban centers like Chicago and Detroit, giving what had previously been smaller towns an opportunity to expand (Kenyon 2004:20).

Riverside was well placed to attract migrants from the city because it was situated on a main road nearby three large automotive plants, built in the 1930s and 40s. It grew by almost 115% between 1929 and 1949, as people relocated to live within the new industrial center of the country. Like many of its neighbors, Harrison doubled in population during this time as well, undergoing a fundamental shift in the process. Harrison gradually became “postagrarian,” in Salamon’s terms (2007), as its social fabric was shaped less and less by agricultural production and farm life. At first, factory work was something that was done in order to contribute to the

household income and supplement farming. But between 1930 and 1950, the number of farmers gradually declined, despite a booming national farm economy in the postwar years, until more than half of the population was dependent on the automotive industry for income.

As incoming migrants removed the common thread that had brought people into Harrison for a century, the township was reimagined as a place. As various newcomers became integrated as members of the community, thereby losing their “outsider” status and making what may have been a difficult process of assimilation seem as if it were inevitable, they were able to help redefine what Harrison was. In particular, many had settled there because they saw it as a “rural” place that appealed to their fantasies of abundance, independence, and community. These new residents and their visions of rurality gradually became a part of this Harrison’s imagined landscape in turn.

By the time Beebe and Ellisville had faded from memory and from the landscape, Harrison had already become known in the area for its “hillbilly” influences, a term used in the Northern states to refer to migrants that arrived during the interwar years from the Upland South. Tens of thousands of upland southerners moved north to find work in America’s growing auto industry during the early part of the twentieth century, some of them directly recruited into factories to make up for frequent labor shortages (Carr and Stermer 1952:41). Harrison was not the most popular destination for southern migrants, but it did serve to absorb surplus population from other areas, offering cheaper housing than most including three trailer parks by the 1960s. Some southerners were surely attracted to the township

because of its open farmland similar to what they had known in the south. If that is so, it is also true that they played a seminal role in redefining Harrison's brand of ruralness to the present day. "Hillbilly" is still a term in use in the Harrison area, by landfill employees as well as local residents, to playfully refer to marked whites from the township:

"Hillbilly" was the name given to southern whites who either willfully or "ignorantly" failed to assimilate into northern norms of respectability (that is, whiteness). They were objects of contempt for transgressing a racial order that was rapidly losing its semblance of naturalness. "Hillbilly" labeled problematic white bodies and behaviors that disrupted the implicit color line in Detroit at a time when its informal behavioral dictates were a primary means for maintaining racial segregation. [Hartigan 1999:28]

Among the transgressive activities historically associated with Harrison's southern hillbillies are cockfighting and moonshine stills. These are more closely identified with the Depression era, most residents are prone to say that they were more prominent social activities prior to the second world war and there are even some who claim that Harrison served as a site for illegal operations for the notorious Purple Gang that ruled the crime world of Prohibition Era Detroit (Kavieff 2000). At the same time, many Harrison residents across generations claim to have knowledge about where stills can be found today, have personally attended a cockfight, or can at the very least point out homes where cocks are raised for regional competition.

These elements of Harrison's southern legacy are often commented upon with a humorous tone, usually in a self-deprecating or mocking manner.<sup>24</sup> And though "hillbilly" remains a part of local discourse, it is used more generally and not to mark

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<sup>24</sup> Other ties to southern identity are less often remarked upon except when circulated as rumor, such as the alleged presence of Ku Klux Klan members in the township. While I found no evidence to substantiate this claim, there are those who believe it and over the years there have been incidents that could qualify as hate crimes, such as the mock lynching of effigies in public parks.

and segregate specific “white bodies” as it once was. A far more important aspect of social identity in contemporary Harrison is whether one is “Polish” or “black.”

If upland southerners came to the Detroit area searching for employment in the booming auto industry, others were attracted to Harrison more for its ruralness, specifically the availability of cheap land and relative seclusion. As early as 1885, Polish farmers who were having trouble acquiring property in Calvin or Jackson townships found Harrison more open to their presence, by 1930 almost one quarter of Harrison’s population was foreign born, twice the average percentage in surrounding townships.<sup>25</sup> More so than the upland southerners who would come later, Eastern European farmers became influential in Harrison’s social life and, as the income of farmers rose in the post-war years, supplied important new businesses and civic organizations to the area. Two of the more significant for Harrison, throughout the twentieth century, were the Polish Community Center (PCC) and the Harrison Skating Rink. The former served as an important site for the local chapter of the Polish farmer’s association, giving them a place to congregate and plan community events, but is also provided a dance hall and reception center, where many local weddings were held in the post-war years. In terms of its importance as a site for local gathering, the PCC was matched by Harrison’s Skating Rink, owned by two generations of a prominent Polish family, where many young people associated and met their future spouses from the 1940s to the 1970s.

The loss of the PCC and the skating rink, in recent years, has led the current political leadership of the township to seek alternative ways of bringing the

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<sup>25</sup> When a Catholic church came to Riverside to serve Harrison’s Polish populace, it was met with a great deal of local resistance and only achieved acceptance through a clever land deal.

community together and, in particular, to draw younger families with children into the area to raise property values and increase the tax base. To this end, both Harrison and Riverside have developed separate proposals for a community recreation center that would provide a gym and activities for young people of different ages as well as young, middle class adults. Interestingly enough, such a place already exists at the border of Harrison and Riverside, as part of a new Evangelical church. However, it has largely gone unnoticed by politicians in both communities, which is almost certainly related to a tendency for political leaders to neglect the contributions of African-American churches to the community in general since the 1950s.

While the PCC and Skating Rink are now lauded by many residents for their contribution to bringing together Harrison as a community, both at one time served as important sites for racial segregation as well. The African-Americans who arrived in Harrison in the post-war years were seeking much the same as their Eastern European predecessors had, a truly “rural” setting where they could establish themselves away from urban life. Marie Willis was twenty-one when she and her husband bought a house in Harrison in 1953. They had heard about the township through their congregation in Detroit. Their minister had brokered a deal with a retiring Polish farmer for eighty acres in the northeastern part of the township, near where the village of Beebe had once been. It was the preacher’s vision that the whole Detroit congregation move onto this land, where a new church was being built, in order to establish themselves in a better environment, outside the city. Not all followed his lead, but six other families moved onto that same block, each with five acres.

Many of the church members, Marie recalls, had originally moved to Detroit from the south in the 30s and 40s, her own family had moved their grocery store north from Georgia when she was still a child. Importantly, all placed a high value on being able to produce their own food as a consequence of having lived through the Great Depression. Though few of them had ever been farmers and, Marie admits, hadn't the faintest idea of how to tend a garden, the idea of settling in the country and being able to produce their own food held great appeal for those that moved to Harrison from the city. Though they were not immediately welcomed and held the status of "newcomers" for a number of years after they arrived, Marie says the different families in her neighborhood received a great deal of assistance from one another, as well as from some of their white neighbors with more experience farming. She remembers when the general assembly of the church would meet for ten days in June, an event that culminated in a picnic called "the Feast in the Wilderness" where food was gathered at the Harrison church and publicly distributed, something still practiced to this day.

Following this initial wave, an additional one thousand African-Americans migrated to Harrison from the city between 1940 and 1960, eventually constituting nearly twenty percent of the township's population, as compared to less than nine percent for neighboring areas. Abel Watson was not a member of Marie's church, but came to Harrison with family in 1956, also with an interest in having his own garden. Like many other black southerners, he originally moved to Detroit for the promise of employment and greater racial equality, but he had a strong desire to settle in the country. Having lived through the Depression raising cotton and producing syrup in

Alabama, he became set on this goal as a young man, “I’m gonna get a place out in the country. When I’m too old I’ll raise a garden and live on that.” After being drafted in the Army during World War Two and narrowly escaping combat, he returned to Detroit as a self-described “hustler” and managed to get enough odd jobs and factory work to build his family several houses on a Harrison plot. He eventually became known as a local school bus driver for one of Harrison’s schools, as well as the president of the NAACP for the area, though now he’s retired from both, “livin’ on the master’s care” and the help of his children.

For Marie, Abel, and other black “newcomers,” Harrison was attractive precisely for its ruralness, for the abundant land and peaceful, tight-knit community it offered. At the same time, the township did not fulfill their fantasies exactly as anticipated. At that time, it was also very difficult, if not impossible, for African-Americans to acquire property in Riverside. “I’ll tell you bout Riverside,” Abel said to me, “Riverside was a place if you ever know what discrimination was, it was full of it.” He recalled when a racially mixed couple managed to acquire a home in Riverside in the mid 1960s and were quickly and quietly pushed out of town. Though some Polish farmers were more willing to sell them property, for some time the southern half of Harrison Township was not open to non-whites. Black residents even began to call the road that racially segregated the township the “Mason-Dixon Line” and this did not change substantially until the 1960s.

It was around this time that African-Americans had begun to protest the segregation of the Harrison Skating Rink, which was only open to black youth on certain nights of the week, allegedly because they had “different taste” in music and

dance. In response to this, as well as the long-term exclusion of African-Americans from weddings and events at the PCC, Marie and others from her congregation began the Harrison Civic Society (HCS) in the late fifties, an organization that was intended to establish racial equality in the area and also provide black residents with a place of their own, equivalent to the PCC, where they could gather together. After several decades of influence in the town, members of the HCS became incredibly prominent in Harrison's civic life. One prominent member became the first full-time policeman and helped build a more professional police department in Harrison and is remembered as one of the township's most beloved civil servants. The HCS building itself still stands and, through Marie's continued leadership, is a site of regular community activities. In 1967, the BCS building was the site of the first free health clinic for disadvantaged families, made possible with the aid of a federal grant. Though the clinic is now gone, the BCS building still serves as a regular meeting place for different social groups and annual events, though it is no longer what it once was and Marie is constantly dreaming up new ways of interjecting more youth and more money into the aging organization.

Like upland southerners and Eastern Europeans before them, African-American migrants to Harrison became part of its unique rural fabric. By the 1980s, African-American residents and their new neighbors had broken down many local racial barriers and done much more besides. They had also transformed the township's image to one of a rural haven of community and safety, radically opposed to the police brutality, race riots, gentrification, poverty and crime that dominated local images of Detroit in the latter half of the twentieth century.

“Too Much Change”

Anyone who visits a familiar rural area in the United States is impressed anew by a paradox: the countryside is becoming emptier, and the countryside is filling up.  
[1975:194] - John Fraser Hart

Early on in my research, Phyllis and Tony Kettle offered me a tour of Harrison. They lived in a subdivision in the neighboring town of Riverside to the north, but she was originally raised in Harrison and, having written the only existing book on its history, was something of a local expert. The highlights of the tour were an old graveyard where recent restorations were being sabotaged by badgers; two country-road intersections where the villages of Ellisville and Beebe, now gone, had thrived less than a century ago; a privately owned patch of woods containing the remnants of the old Territorial Road, called the “Indian Trail” by locals; and, finally, the old County Sand and Gravel Landfill, now covered with dirt and grass yet, underneath the calm surface, steadily pumping biogases into a nearby power plant.

During our tour, Phyllis proved herself adept at recalling local history, she pointed out empty lots that had once contained prosperous businesses and houses that were formerly inhabited by eccentric families (e.g., the town’s only “mansion,” where the children had to sleep in the basement to avoid damaging the fancy furniture, or the house where spiritualists once regularly conducted séances for the dead). Phyllis also told me about a scandal a few decades ago where a mortician at a new town graveyard was found to be replacing caskets with cheap, flimsy boxes. This became apparent when animals began digging up human bones that floated to the surface during a particularly wet season. Phyllis remained oddly silent as we passed by the

dozens of small churches located within Harrison, most only a few decades old or less. Phyllis herself went to church in Riverside, along with many other Harrison residents. Many explained to me that most of those in Harrison are predominantly African-American and attract primarily out of town people. Whether or not this is true, and I could not verify it for a fact, it does fit with general perceptions within the township. To a significant number of residents (over eighty percent of them white) the many churches of Harrison seem out of place, belonging to others and not themselves.

As she spoke, our unofficial historian mused about “slower times,” as she put it, when people in Harrison knew their neighbors and everyone helped and trusted one another. She contrasted this image of Harrison’s past with its lower-income trailer parks, now several decades old, where crime is more common because “people live too close together.”<sup>26</sup> Phyllis’ memory momentarily failed her when we arrived at the corner where her family’s farm once stood. Phyllis’ parents had owned eight acres of fertile land on the southwest part of town, down the road from the intersection that formerly belonged to the nineteenth century village of Ellisville. Now the remaining traces of Ellisville are largely gone, new houses have sprung up along the road, and very few of the residents possess familiar faces or names.<sup>27</sup> As we passed by, Phyllis hesitated when trying to recall certain details, such as where her uncle’s house had been located and when certain events occurred. She felt compelled to offer an

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<sup>26</sup> Other, younger residents described the trailer parks of the seventies to me as a close “community” or “neighborhood.” Mac, a former resident of one of them, took me on a tour not unlike Phyllis’ where he bemoaned the recent disappearance of people from them and connected this to their fall into disrepute.

<sup>27</sup> The one exception is the state-recognized centennial farm down the road from her childhood home, which is still occupied by Maude, the elderly matriarch of the well-known Bryant family.

explanation for her lapse in memory, it had been too long: “You see, we don’t come here because it doesn’t mean anything anymore.” “Everything has changed,” Tony added. “Too much change,” said Phyllis.

Despite appearing initially disoriented, Phyllis did eventually begin to tell us family stories, about the big fire that had nearly cost them their house; about huddling inside while tornados passed by on the fourth of July; about the Indian artifacts they would find while plowing the field; and about the swamp where they used to raft in the summer and ice skate in the winter (“We lived in the swamp!” she said). But things had changed. The swamp had been filled in, to start with, and strangers now lived in the house that had been part of her family for two generations (“They closed in the porch; that’s not the thing to do!”). It should come as no surprise that, for Phyllis, it is these recent changes, however superficial, that challenge memory and meaning, more so than the disappearance of official town history, to which she has devoted many years of her life. While it distresses her to see the old graveyard uncared for and the old Indian trail blocked from public access, it is the minor alterations of recent decades that keep her from traveling deep into Harrison more often, into a recent but far more intimate past.

In Harrison, there are many sites that elicit that strange combination of historical memory and amnesia evident in Phyllis’ reaction to her childhood home: there are the grass-covered lots that once contained popular bars, closed down in the 1970s; the rebuilt general store boarded up by old Matt Robinson’s widow and, rumor has it, still stocked full of groceries; the large, eighty acre lot purchased by Marie Willis’ non-denominational church in the 1950s, now fenced-off from public access;

the 900 acre wetland preserve created in the mid-1990s on land drained for cultivation by generations of farmers; or the Harrison Skating Rink at the center of town, now marked with a “for sale” sign by its owner. In each of these cases, familiar sites are fading away or wiped from the landscape, and the decay of Harrison’s past is tied to the emergence of some unknown future.

Increasingly, Harrison’s landscape appears to its former and current residents as if pre-empted by outside forces, at a remove from their collective and personal goals (cf. Davies et al. 2003). This is no less true in neighboring rural communities. In fact, some argue that the rural Midwest has become more subject to outside pressures since the national farm crisis of the 1980s:

The small town relinquished more of its autonomy, as its own institutions closed, migrated, or merged...The smallest towns became in every sense satellites of larger townsites, while the countryside at large became economically, socially, and culturally ever more integrated into the institutions, tastes, and dictates of distant metropolises. [Davies, Amato and Pichaske 2003:375]

Yet, as I have shown, such territorial relations have been central aspects of the production of the rural since the late nineteenth century, as part of what Neil Smith calls the “see-saw movement of capital” (Smith 1990:137-9). Constructing a Marxian analysis of the geographical unfolding of capitalist relations, Smith argues that the concentration of capital investment in certain places, those more developed, leads to a gradual decline in profit. Whereas “the underdevelopment of specific areas leads, in time, to precisely those conditions that make an area highly profitable,” for example, high unemployment, low wages, and reduced worker organization (1990:148-9). In the case of Harrison and similar rural areas, cheap land, relatively weak public resistance, and a potentially pliable town government are all attractive to the least

popular of development projects (Fitchen 1991). I consider several in the pages that remain.

#### County Sand and Gravel: 1964-1993

County Sand and Gravel (CSG) began operation in Harrison in 1964, not far from where the village of Ellisville once stood, in the southern half of the township. It got its name from the preferred method of waste disposal at the site, which was to dig a pit, dump garbage, and burn and bury it. The dump was locally unpopular and was eventually shut down by the supervisor in the early 1970s. In 1975, however, the wealthy and well-connected owner of a Detroit hauling company, named Michael Bruno, purchased the dump and converted it into a state of the art sanitary landfill. Along with his hauling operation, it was one of the cornerstone businesses of County Services, Bruno's private company that specialized in waste management until the early 1990s. Prior to that time, there were a greater number of landfills in the U.S., which meant that there was a smaller market share for each waste site. The landfills that were sited in the fifties and sixties reflected this and the companies that owned them frequently adjusted to the competitive marketplace by acquiring other landfills and hauling operations as well. For reasons both legal and illegal, some firms did better than others. County Services began as a small, Detroit-based hauling company and, over the course of four decades, went on to acquire eleven different landfills and several smaller hauling companies – an operation worth \$750 million as of 1998, when it was finally sold to a bigger waste corporation.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Because of the structure of the waste market and the influence of industry insiders on the determination of prices for hauling and dumping, the American waste industry became susceptible to corruption and a popular front for organized crime in various parts of the country during the twentieth

At the time of CSG's closure it covered 240 acres and contained a reported 14.25 million gallons of waste, nearly a third of which was acquired in its final four years. Acquiring all of that waste during its forty years of operation made CSG a nuisance to many of Harrison's residents, though some were clearly affected by it more than others. Because it was sited in the midst of the township, the traffic heading to the site clogged the main road through town, spreading odor and noise throughout the area. Though this was much worse in the last years of its operation, there is evidence of organized local opposition to the landfill at least as far back as 1975, when Bruno reopened the site.<sup>29</sup>

Even after the landfill closed, CSG continued to create problems for its immediate neighbors. Its original design was not meant to guard against the leaching of landfill liquids off-site<sup>30</sup> and, in an attempt to correct this problem and fulfill the terms of its post-closure agreement, County Services paid for the construction of a slurry wall along a corner of the oldest part of the site, susceptible to leakages through surface water runoff. This proposed solution led to a lawsuit in the late nineties, when the now closed landfill was accused of raising the water level in a number of local basements. The landfill paid to install sumps in the basements of nearby residents and the suit was settled out of court.

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century (e.g., Rogers 2005:183-4). To this day, Michael Bruno is believed by some to have an affiliation with Detroit's once prominent mafia families, an allegation that some use to explain the mercurial rise of his company despite a competitive marketplace and repeated environmental infractions (cf. Almond 1994).

<sup>29</sup> In the 1980s, residents also fought County Service's attempt to add more acreage onto its existing site for the purpose of establishing a hazardous waste landfill. Due in part to their efforts, at least according to a report from the Department of Natural Resources, this effort to enter the hazardous waste market and further endanger the health of neighboring residents proved unsuccessful.

<sup>30</sup> During the first twenty-five years of its operation, in fact, no leachate collection system was in place – the only barrier between leaching substances and local groundwater was unevenly distributed clay subsoil which, though rather impermeable, was not always successful.

There are other ways in which Bruno and his company's pre-emption of a portion of Harrison was ambivalently connected to community betterment, making this operation owned by an outsider a self-described "neighbor." Despite its problems, some residents, like Phyllis, claim that County Services was always very good to its neighbors and, like others, compares it favorably to the newer landfill, Four Corners. CSG did play a significant role in the community, employing residents and sponsoring local activities and events. For years, Bruno was the largest sponsor of Harrison's annual "Summer Fest," a parade and carnival that is enormously popular in the area. CSG's sponsorship of the festival was passed on to management at Four Corners' later on, who continue to provide much of the budget for the event as well as supplies and other services.

#### After the Highway: Opportunity in the Opened Periphery

In the 1970s, the state of Michigan began construction on a new highway intended to address the higher traffic volume flowing between the more populous suburbs of the Greater Detroit area. Many people in the area recognize the coming of the highway as ushering in a new phase of developments in the area, including more speculative business schemes. Maude remembers as a child watching construction crews as they split open the ground of neighboring farms and shaped the terrain into six lanes of concrete, stretching north and south for miles. She recalls listening to the machines work all hours of the night and waking up in the morning sometimes to find that grave robbers had raided a historic graveyard in her backyard, rumored to be over one hundred and fifty years old, in order to sell the collectible artifacts one could find.

For Maude, what was built (and what was stolen) seemed to have ushered in a gradual change in the area. This can be seen in the present day. Because he is positioned on an exit directly off of the highway, her father is given more customer exposure to his used-vehicle business than he might otherwise expect. At the same time, it was the new highway that brought the massive car-resale lot and the large gas station that currently neighbors her parent's residence. It was also the highway that attracted County Services to the property across the street from his house for the site of their proposed landfill.<sup>31</sup>

The property, a square mile or more of thick forest alongside the highway in Calvin Township, is known locally as "Spaceworld" in reference to a failed development project that was proposed for it a number of years ago. The owner envisioned a massive theme park dedicated to outer space related themes – hence the name – but the project never materialized. In the last decade it transferred in ownership to the owner of County Services. When changing national regulations required CSG to close by 1993, County Services selected the Spaceworld site as the place for its replacement landfill, one that would satisfy the stricter environmental guidelines now in effect. The decision met with swift local resistance. Maude's parents were two of the main organizers behind the effort to stop the landfill, but a number of concerned Brandes residents joined them as well. Eventually, the Calvin township government became aware of the popular opposition to the proposed development and ceased all negotiation with County Services.

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<sup>31</sup> At least one group of local activists in neighboring Brandes hold County Services accountable for the mysterious deaths of two of their friends, who helped them prevent the landfill from being sited in their town in the 1980s.

The waste company turned, as it had once before, to Harrison. Only a few miles west of the highway, the Harrison border satisfied County Service's requirement for a cooperative township, a politically ineffectual population, and cheap land. It also satisfied the existing Township board, which demanded that the new landfill be sited on the edge of town, to avoid the local problems encountered with CSG. A new host agreement was also created, as per state requirements, which promised the township one dollar per ton of waste buried at the site which, given its impressive size, added up to several million dollars a year – more than Harrison's total town budget at the time.

But these were not the reasons given by County Services when they applied to place their new site in the southeast corner of Harrison. As Lefebvre writes, “the old exploitation by the city, centre of capital accumulation, of the surrounding countryside, gives way to more subtle forms of domination and exploitation, the city becoming centre of decision-making and apparently also of association” (1996:119). With the new set of environmental criterion imposed from the state and federal government, County Services was ultimately answerable, not to Harrison or its people, but to state regulators from Lansing and Detroit. For their behalf, County Services argued that Harrison's geological history made it ideally suitable for a landfill. As glaciers receded from the interior of Michigan around ten thousand years ago, they left behind thick clay deposits in certain places, a natural barrier preventing extensive drainage of materials on the surface into the groundwater below.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> In a related rhetorical move, when defending the importation of Canadian waste years later, employees of the new company would routinely argue that Ontario lacks the natural inheritance to support landfills of similar scale and capacity. “They don't have the right geology,” one of Four Corner's managers, would say to inquisitive locals.

Attempts to naturalize Harrison's newfound role in a territorial division of waste labor as geological destiny is not simply the tactic of a manipulative waste disposal firm (one that knows extensive clay deposits also exist in communities surrounding Harrison), in a sense such rhetoric is correctly identifying Harrison's destiny as inscribed within its landscape, of which Four Corners Landfill is only the most recent expression. Then as now, residents of Harrison recognize that what really distinguishes them from neighboring areas is its natural surroundings. This seemingly "untouched" rural environment, one that was made possible by the decay of old developments, is what continues to attract new residents to the area and keeps long time residents from moving, is also the reason why many wish the landfill to remain in business and why many others wish to see it close down.

#### "Country Living at its Finest": Naturalizing Uneven Development

After the highway made the area more accessible, Harrison and neighboring townships began to appeal to new groups of newcomers. Between 1990 and 2000, its population increased by almost ten percent, which was comparable to the population increases it had experienced earlier in the century from Eastern Europeans and African-Americans, respectively. Like newcomers to Harrison of the past, they have been received with a mixture of acceptance and ambivalence. However, they also come at a critical juncture in the history of the township.

As part of Four Corners host agreement with the township, they financed a new, state of the art Fire Station. Once the landfill began receiving all of Toronto's waste in 2002, furthermore, it began giving the township between two and three million dollars a year of revenue, previously the amount had been smaller though still

substantial for a small township with a meager tax base. Within a few years, the township became dependent on the landfill for almost half of its budget and has continued to find new purposes for the money, including an emergency dispatch system, a library, and a recreation center, all of which would pull it away from dependency on Riverside. The landfill has become a vital resource, one that residents defend against attack when necessary, as when representatives went to Lansing to stop a ban on the international waste trade, or dozens of locals signed letters to the state asking them to approve a landfill expansion.

Harrison's current supervisor does not like the landfill, but sees it as necessary. No one had mentioned CSG when he came to the township in 1991 after hearing people at his auto-plant talking about a place in the countryside (which they incorrectly identified as "Riverside") where people could still get freshly grown food and experience the neighborliness of a small town. By this point, the segregation of the Mason-Dixon line was a dim memory and blacks had moved deep into the southern portion of the township, so he says he felt no social pressure about where he could live. Many of the attitudes about "newcomers" had begun to change by this time too, which allowed him to parlay his relationships with his new "neighbors" into a successful bid for township supervisor, a rare thing for an African-American in the area.

Still, not all of Harrison's new residents have achieved equal acceptance. Indeed, some are considered less welcome than the landfill! Like Harrison's latest Supervisor, a number of newer residents are autoworkers that have retired or are close to it. Though they vary in terms of household income, they may be responsible for

raising the median to its current level, which is close to the national average, though lower than surrounding areas (see Table 2.1 above). One man I talked with named Harold purchased his house in order to fulfill his dream of life in the country. He recently accepted a buyout from the auto company he worked for (a strategy now being employed by the Big Three in order to lower what are seen to be inflated labor costs) and was using the money, among other things, to finance his large property. Like many others, he wanted to move to the country so that he could do what he wanted with his land in privacy. At his famous Halloween barn party, however, it was revealed to me by his landscaper – a man named John who had grown up in the area – that Harold had begun feuding with his neighbor, also a newcomer. In fact, though John had been selling pine trees for fifteen years, he'd recently been getting more and more work from Harrison residents looking to “block out” their neighbors.

Indeed, it is widely agreed in Harrison that most of the residents that have come in the last decade tend to be less “neighborly” and to participate less in town civic life.<sup>33</sup> It is said that they tend to think of their residences more as an address or an investment than part of a community. Harrison residents feel the same about new businesses, whose owners rarely live in the township. The ones that attract the most scorn from township residents are the Chaldean “party store” owners from the metro area, Sammy and Ed, who see Harrison as an excellent location for a small business, precisely because of the lack of competition, and hope to expand their investment in the township. When I compared these men to the immigrants who came to Harrison before, one woman of Polish descent shouted at me, “they built this country, but these

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<sup>33</sup> Harold, for his part, is a regular participant in Harrison politics – some have even suggested that he run for Supervisor next!

people just want to live off of it!”<sup>34</sup> John, the local landscaper, agreed with this assessment, though I later learned that he and his wife had taken Sammy with them on their last vacation to Mexico!

Such ambivalence toward Harrison’s latest newcomers is partly related to general concern about the direction of the township’s future, including how best to raise its profile in the area, how to attract more homeowners and raise the tax base, and how the landfill money the township receives should be spent and what should be done when it runs out. Residents disagree primarily about the future of the town’s development, about whether flea markets or more trailer parks should be allowed to operate within the township. People increasingly write anonymous letters to the editor of Riverside’s local newspaper, criticizing the decisions of the Planning Commission with introductions like the following, “The smell in Harrison is getting even worse, like garbage not picked up for weeks, or dead animals.” Local politics have become increasingly contentious around such issues and have begun to spillover onto the Internet. Until recently, a new conservative website run by an anonymous resident appeared online, calling itself “www.harrisonmorons.com.” Aside from posting a new “Moron of the Month” page lambasting local politicians, the site also included a “blight page” with photos of properties considered poorly kept by residents, as if policing the landscape for people and homes that do not belong.

As the question of “what ought to happen” turns into “who doesn’t belong” or “who is hurting the township,” there has been a concomitant invasion widely reported about in the press, that of wild animals. The characterization of the rural as the

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<sup>34</sup> On the contrary, Sammy has more plans to invest in the township than any other residents with whom I spoke.

“nature” to the “culture” of more developed and more heavily populated areas has been a longstanding aspect of town/country relations (Williams 1973; Lefebvre 1996:118). It is interesting to note, therefore, that fantasies about Harrison’s “natural” character are acted out in other ways, beyond the schemes of companies, entrepreneurs, and government bureaucracies. This is particularly evident in a well known and much-discussed problem in Harrison related to roaming packs of wild dogs. These dogs, it is widely agreed, are strays that have been dropped off to live “in the country” by people from the surrounding suburbs. Once in Harrison, they join in packs and cooperate together to gather food from trashcans, or corner and attack small pets, chickens, and even ponies. Harrison police now shoot them on sight, though controversially they do not allow residents to do the same. Some residents take an active part in adopting the dogs they find, as a number of residents in the vicinity of Four Corners are known to do, or take them to shelters, as Phyllis recalls doing while growing up.

Being that everyone knows the source of these animals, they provide a symbol, mobile and dangerous, of the influence of “outside” images of Harrison. But equally troubling for many residents is the one hundred pound female cougar that was periodically spotted in the southern portion of the township during 2004 and 2006. Though the Department of Natural Resources reports that cougars have been extinct in Michigan for over a century, spreading some suspicion that the sightings are a hoax, many locals claim to have seen the animal. Others have found their livestock dead, necks broken, alongside the tracks of a large feline. Like the wild dogs, the cougar’s presence is interesting, I would argue, as a naturalization of political

anxieties concerning “inside” and “outside,” “wild” and “developed,” that are now at the core of political debate about the future of the township (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2001).

It is of course ironic that many of those seeking “country living at its finest” (as is Harrison’s official motto) are disturbed by the presence of wild creatures and anxious to begin developing the township. In another sense, the cougar and the wild dogs make Harrison appear as if a wasteland for unwanted and feared creatures, just as it has become a dumping site for foreign refuse.

#### Conclusion: Wasteland



Figure 2.1: Discarded deer carcass left by the roadside in Harrison, photo by J. Reno

On the roadside at the edges of Harrison, during deer season, one is likely to find the stripped carcasses of hunted deer left to decompose (see Figure 2.1). The management at Four Corners have come to expect this every year, though they do not clean up the animals themselves. Harrison is now a place where people go to hunt deer and a place to recycle them on the roadside, a regulated wilderness area and a place to let one’s former pets run wild, a dumping ground and an appealing

countryside. Its littered landscape expresses many of the contradictions that dominate rural America because of the fantasies that it inspires from others.

By the time County Services began buying up the farms in a square mile plat of Harrison Township, their plan for a new landfill was already approved at the state and county level. It was said that the landfill would supply Michigan's municipalities for several decades, thereby avoiding an impending waste crisis. Environmental critics, such as Ann Arbor's Ecology Center, resisted the measure for fear that it would create more open dumping space than Michigan communities could fill and attract waste from elsewhere, as had already happened in Virginia and Pennsylvania.

In recent years, environmental sociology has brought increasing attention to what Ulrich Beck (1992) calls the "distribution of bads," that is, uneven exposure to environmental and health-related risks across multiple geographic scales. According to Beck, with the global proliferation of industrial capitalism "some people are more affected than others by the distribution and growth of risks," presumably to the benefit of others (1992:23). The environmental justice literature offers a compelling explanation for how such risks are socially allocated, demonstrating how, in the U.S. and abroad, firms and politics tend to locate polluting sites in the vicinity of marginalized populations (Bullard 1990; Bryant and Mohai 1992). As Robert Bullard writes, "Historically, toxic dumping and the location of locally unwanted land uses...have followed the 'path of least resistance,' meaning black and poor communities have been disproportionately burdened with these types of externalities" (1990:3).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> More recently, Kousis (1998) has suggested that waste circulation tends to impact rural areas more on a global scale, across ethno-racial divides.

When developers seek to build unpopular developments, they need only attend to the land itself in order to reproduce territorial divisions of labor. A widely circulated industry study released in California in 1984 found that resistance to disposal facilities is least effective and waste sites are more easily sited in “low-income rural areas with populations of less than 25,000 that [are] older and [have] high school or less education” (Rogers 2005:197-8; cf. Harvey 1996:366-369). But even companies that do not seek out peripheral areas are likely to locate waste sites within them through a process of trial and error, merely in the guise of doing good business. After the whiter, wealthier, and more populous Calvin Township rejected County Services’ proposal, they choose to develop the site in Harrison instead.

Some Harrison residents were relatively complacent about the land deal (as were some no doubt in the Brandes area) and it is not difficult to see why given that many of the township’s most prominent politicians and business people at the time were known associates of Michael Bruno, the owner of County Services, and the prominent state politicians who had approved of the landfill expansion. In fact, allegations of corruption surrounded the last years of one of Harrison’s most prominent and influential political families partially because of their relationship to the landfill. During the last tenure as supervisor of the most prominent politician in the family, he and his wife were given a place to live (for a reported bargain) in a house on County Service’s newly acquired landfill property. This was compiled with other allegations of corruption that were printed in local newspapers, especially the one produced in the neighboring village of Riverside. All of the claims made may not

have been accepted in Harrison, but it is no accident that the heavily criticized supervisor was eventually ousted in disgrace through a recall campaign.

As they had in 1975, people in Harrison protested the new landfill, but they were ultimately unsuccessful. Some of the Brandes activists I spoke with speak unkindly about the resistance of the Harrison community to the landfill, as if they did nothing. What seems to be the case, rather, is that activists in both communities did a poor job of communicating and collaborating on their objectives. Opposition to the landfill in Harrison was concentrated in some of the local, predominantly black, churches, with which the overwhelmingly white Brandes residents had little or no association.

The Garten family was the last to sell their land, stubbornly refusing until the very end. When they finally realized they had no choice, they waited as long as possible hoping to get enough money to buy some farmland in a different county, so that they could “do the same thing that they was doin” for so many years, according to Ned. Ned remembers being unhappy at his family’s decision to sell what was effectively his birthright to be turned into a mountain of garbage. It was with a certain degree of ambivalence, therefore, that he accepted an offer from the landfill to begin working there. This invitation was likely extended partly as a conciliatory gesture to smooth over the transfer of property and partly out of necessity: “Cause they knew we was farm boys. They wanted a couple farm boys because they were starting a composting operation out there. So [they wanted] somebody that was familiar with tractors and farmin’ and what it took, you know, to raise crops.”

Ned worked at Four Corners until losing his job in 2007, though he managed to advance through the ranks prior to that. It felt strange at first, but not totally dissimilar from farming, “just tearing up the fields and stuff.” Eventually, he was even made responsible for tearing down his grandfather’s house. As difficult as this was for him, in the process he was able to keep and smuggle home, without formal authorization, a large, sturdy beam from the old building. He transported it intact and used it as a central support beam in the barn he was building next to his new home, near where his grandparents and parents had relocated. For Ned, the beam served as a “transitional object” in response to his forced displacement from a place populated with objects to which he had grown attached (Parkin 1999). Taking and reusing the beam is meant as a material objectification of the place he once farmed and the people he farmed with, as well as the person he had wanted to become.

Ned’s loss of his family’s land and his involvement in the transformation of that land into something new represents well the ambivalent position of Harrison residents in the pre-emption of their township and the replacement of its prior significance and history with something different, though not without some benefits. It also demonstrates, along with the many other developments, schemes, and fantasies I have mentioned, the close connection between the peculiar socio-economic fortunes of rural areas and the story of their social landscapes. For Ned, as for Phyllis, losing the Harrison they knew is implicated with a new world in the making, one that, since the coming of the highway, seems more and more shaped by the interests of the world outside than was the case previously. This is no more apparent than in the way different corporate and government actors have intervened over the years to procure

Harrison land for the wastes of other places. The myriad consequences of this process will be the subject of the remaining chapters of this dissertation, beginning with the complex relationship of American sanitary landfills with their surrounding environment.

### Chapter III

#### Four Corners: the Political Ecology of Landfills

According to an article in the September 2007 issue of *Wired*, an American magazine known for its hip take on the latest developments in technological culture, the newest hope for a cure for cancer may be floating in a diseased lake near Butte, Montana. The product of an abandoned mine operation that was allowed to flood when the mining company closed down, the polluted lake is home to unique species of microorganisms that have adapted to survive amid heavy metals and toxic chemicals. Having evolved in an unusual ecological niche, one that is deadly poisonous to most creatures, these colonies of bacteria and fungi are now attracting local bioprospectors. According to a team of American research scientists that have gathered samples of these microbes, they demonstrate the ability to attack ovarian cancer cells in a laboratory context and may hold the promise of a new medical breakthrough if investment capital is forthcoming from the biotech industry.

Whatever the validity of these claims – which the Montana researchers admit are preliminary results meant to attract funding from Big Pharma – this article illustrates an important fact about the nature of environmental pollution: it is not where life grinds to a halt, but where strange networks of ecology, knowledge, and profit emerge and new opportunities for life and death are made possible. Of course, the results of environmental pollution are rarely so utopian as in the scenario

described above, where some of the world's deadliest waste holds future medical promise. What it demonstrates, rather, is that pollution events are worth studying on their own terms, as novel configurations of human destructiveness/inventiveness and ecological relations.

In this chapter I aim to illuminate the socio-natural complexity of landfills, as sophisticated and messy sites of controlled pollution, in order to provide a point of departure for the chapters that follow. I focus, in particular, on the sanitary landfill that I call Four Corners, the place where I worked as a laborer for nine months of my fieldwork. As with the previous chapter on Four Corners' host community, the township of Harrison, my discussion of the landfill is not meant to be a description of a static, or naturally bounded, research setting, but an exploration of the ways in which "settings" are actively produced through relations at once social, political-economic, and environmental. As I will endeavor to show in this chapter, just as landfills arise from specific conditions of possibility they also *make possible* new configurations of techno-science, government regulation, and ecological relating.

In order to properly frame these multifaceted entanglements, I describe landfills as landscapes in the process of formation. The concept of "landscape" has recently been put to use by anthropologists who seek to anchor social analysis within specific settings and challenge the assumptions behind categorical separations of nature from society, and geography from the human sciences (Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995; Balee 1998; Ingold 2000). Tim Ingold, for example, defines landscape as "the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them" (2000:192-3). Knowing a landscape as such is not

exclusively a cognitive task, but an embodied process, constituted by the dialectics of movement and perception (see Ingold 2004). As the unfinished product of cumulative actions inscribed upon the earth's malleable surface, landscapes are a material realization of the past as well as a prepared stage for brand new tasks and relations.

It is worth noting that this understanding of landscape does not exclude other-than-human beings from consideration. As Darwin (1985[1881]) demonstrated through his study of earthworm behavior, humans do not have exclusive claim over the power to transform land and alter the environment – whole landscapes possess a generative potential to support life due to the cumulative activities of worms mixing and mineralizing the soil. Rather than foreground human dominion and mastery over a separate worldly “nature” – an anthropocentric fantasy arguably precipitated by centuries of capitalism (Smith 1990) and statecraft (Scott 1998) – I describe landforms as they are generated and sustained by the multitude of beings inhabiting them, human and non-human, and their interlocking histories.

I begin by discussing the short history of American landfills. By focusing on waste disposal in relation to the political ecology of landfill landscapes, I attempt to avoid the problems associated with the popular historiography of waste management, which tends to portray the development of sanitary engineering as the evolution of human technical adaptation to collective waste disposal needs (Miller 2000; Melosi 2001). As is argued within the field of science and technology studies, changes in technological form do not follow a progressive, linear path from design to realization, but involve errors, disputes, failures, and non-human agency (see, for example, Yates

2003). The history of waste disposal is no different, as becomes especially clear by evaluating the twentieth century transformation of the sanitary landfill through the lens of political ecology. By this I mean an analytical perspective that integrates political economy, forms of governance, and the history of science and technology in order to understand the reciprocal relations that form between humans, non-human beings, and their environmental surroundings (see Biersack et al. 2006).<sup>36</sup> The American landfill began as a combination of methods intended to restore order and efficiency to mass waste disposal in the service of consumer capitalism. Amidst problems with contamination it was reborn as the “modern” and “engineered” waste site of the present day, now heavily regulated by state and federal environmental agencies and committed to specific models of environmental protection and human health.

As proponents of ecological modernization theory suggest, the risks attendant to environmental pollution may be more complicated, less predictable, and more harmful than can be empirically verified (Beck 1992, Adam 1998). The complexities of landfill environments, for example, do not lend themselves to mainstream environmentalist critiques for the simple reason that these are tailored toward instances of straightforward pollution or outright disaster (see, for example, Fortun 2001, Petryna 2002, or Kirsch 2006). Such occurrences are common enough, but they cannot help us to understand sites that integrate environmental pollution and protection in more subtle ways. Through a discussion of the different socio-natural subsystems of Four Corners that constitute its material landscape, I emphasize how

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<sup>36</sup> “To speak in terms of political ecology is to lay particular emphasis on the local communities and geographies affected in so many ways and to see them as well as the overarching technology and politics as part of an interconnected human-natural ecology” (Mathur 2001:13).

landfill management and technical staff strive to harness human and non-human material to fulfill their governmentally mandated obligation to protect the surrounding environment and its inhabitants.<sup>37</sup> Each new act of attempted control and containment, however, leads to novel ecological arrangements that make possible new forms of local contamination.

Part of the reason for this, and a key argument of this chapter, is that the political ecology of landfills continue to develop beyond the intentions of their human designers, spiraling to envelop ever more sets of environmental and social relations. I expand on this point in the last section, in a discussion of some of the non-human species that have become entangled with Four Corners landfill rather unexpectedly.<sup>38</sup> Specifically, I focus on three bird species conspicuously present at the site – bald eagles, seagulls, and starlings – and the active role they play in shaping everyday life at and around the landfill.

By developing an interpretation of avian-human encounters at Four Corners, I am intentionally trying to push ecological and phenomenological forms of analysis beyond their usual limits. Ecologically oriented analysis is typically reserved for discussion of creatures in evolved harmony with their surroundings (Darwin 1985, Uexkull 1985, Hoffmeyer 1996), or for “companion species,” such as domesticated pets, which are symbiotically or spiritually bound to humans (Hallowell 1955, 1960, 1992, Haraway 2003, Kohn 2007). By contrast, I use this literature in order to discuss animals that seem out of place – endangered, protected, invasive or pesky –

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<sup>37</sup> They’re equally (if not more) pressing obligation to generate profit for the landfill company will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

<sup>38</sup> In the last chapter I address the consequences of these unforeseen entanglements as they impact people in the neighboring communities and are addressed by intervening agents and institutions of different kinds.

rather than smoothly integrated into locales and relationships (cf. Knight et al. 2000). In so doing, I make the point that non-humans are not always environmentally adjusted, lovable companions, or trusted providers, but they are co-present beings capable of demanding acknowledgement or frustrating human intention on a day-to-day basis.

By fashioning ties with its surrounding environment, Four Corners reshapes the landscape, ostensibly in a permanent way, to serve as a container for decomposing wastes. Yet, understanding Four Corners as a site of diverse possibilities complicates the conventional critique of waste sites as places of straightforward pollution, where the movement of waste begets more waste (see Gille 2007:25). The point is not to balance these criticisms with accounts of ecological diversity and adaptation – as if every dump were a cure for cancer waiting to be realized. My intention with this chapter, rather, is to sharpen environmental critique by drawing attention to the worlds that waste sites create, not by destroying environments but by becoming enmeshed with them and their diverse inhabitants in complicated ways.

#### The Rise of the American Sanitary Landfill: 1938-1976

A recent American textbook on solid waste management defines “sanitary landfill” as an “engineered method of disposing of solid wastes on land in a manner that protects human health and the environment” (Tchobanoglous and Kreith 2002: A.15). With this definition, the authors highlight what is supposed to be the defining purpose of today’s state-approved sanitary landfills: to contain waste in such a way that human and non-human life are shielded from its potentially harmful influence. Describing this method of containment as “engineered” serves to distinguish sanitary

landfills, which apply the latest in material science and disposal technology, from less sophisticated forms of waste burial like open dumping.

Yet, the earliest waste sites to bear the name “sanitary landfill” did not satisfy the above definition. Though technologically sophisticated for their time and partially designed to improve public health, they were not meant to protect environments or people from waste, per se, but rather to make mass waste disposal suitable for an American economy fueled by profligate waste at the levels of production and consumption. The disparities between these different types of sanitary landfill, specific as they are to distinct moments in the history of American waste management, reveal the specific political, socio-cultural, and (I would add) ecological genealogies within which technological forms are inextricably embedded (cf. Ingold 2000:314).

The name “sanitary landfill” was first used in the late 1930s, at a time when many American municipalities were seeking waste disposal options that could lessen the rising costs of public sanitation in a recently urbanized society. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, practitioners in the nascent field of sanitary engineering were heavily reliant on European models of sanitation and disposal to manage the abundant waste of America’s growing cities. Engineering journals such as *City Government*, *Municipal Government and Engineer*, *Public Works*, and *Civil Engineering* exchanged and debated new trends in incineration, waste reduction, recycling, and dumping, sometimes looking to English or German methods for recent innovations. In the 1890s and early 1900s, crematories or destructors were the most preferred method of disposal, at least by those in the mainstream of sanitary engineering, but

they were also the most expensive. As a consequence, hog feeding and open dumping, methods of waste disposal millennia old and geographically widespread, were far more popular in early twentieth century America.

The Fresno Sanitary Landfill, which began operation in 1938, is considered by American historians to be the first “sanitary” alternative to the common dump (Rogers 2005:87-9). Jean Vincenz, the man widely credited with inventing the design, was Fresno’s acting city commissioner on public works. While not particularly new, in combination the techniques Vincenz implemented promised to dispose of waste loads more quickly and, equally important, to keep their gradual putrefaction from public view (see Figure 3.1). Trenching provided stability to the structure and a layout accessible to large transport vehicles, which through controlled tipping could stop and dump in an efficient, orderly manner. Compacting the waste, meanwhile, provided more dumping space and, along with the use of daily soil cover, offered a means of removing the deposited waste from sight.

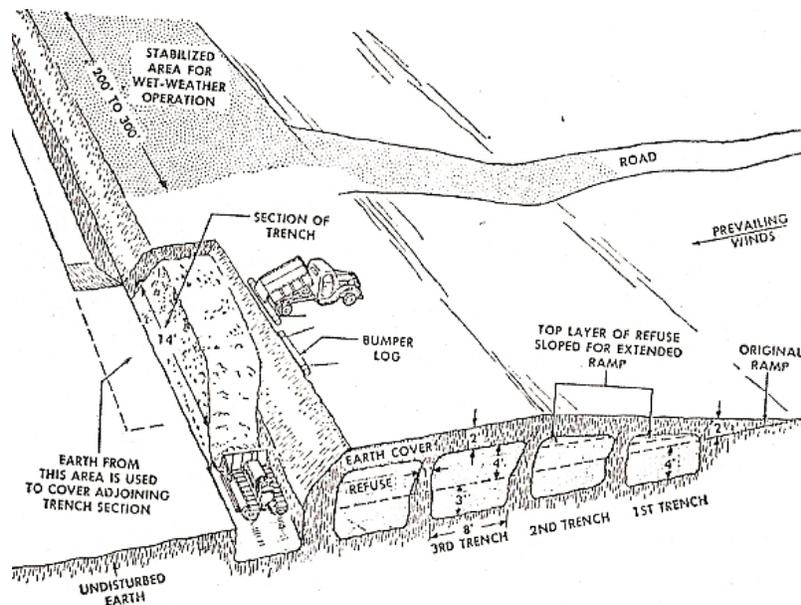


Figure 3.1: Cross-section of an early sanitary landfill design, demonstrating the four methods of trenching, tipping, compaction, and soil cover (Durham 1947)

What is significant about the advantages associated with Vincenz design is that they have little to do with the health of the surrounding area and its inhabitants. Ultimately, Vincenz was more interested in lessening the cost of disposal than he was in addressing its environmental impact. Indeed, the process he advocated provided the illusion of having lessened the local impact of waste sites by reshaping the visible landscape (a strategy contemporary landfills accomplish through strategically placed trees and dirt stockpiles), while polluting the groundwater in the area. Indeed, compared to the open dumps of the past, with their rampant rodent and insect problems, strong odors, and fire outbreaks, the new “sanitary landfill” appeared far more appealing (Rogers 2005:86-89). As presented by its advocates, the sanitary landfill was not imagined as a habitat for disease-ridden pests, such as rats and cockroaches, whose genealogies had been tied to human waste for centuries (Crosby 1986:190-3), but aspired to achieve a technological orderliness detached from the unpredictability and destructiveness of non-human creatures and physical decay.

At the same time, environmental perception did play a role in the initial spread of Vincenz’ design. After the Fresno site opened, landfilling was popularized in the U.S. as a way of reclaiming the low-lying swamp adjoining some urban areas (Rogers 2005:89-94). In places like New York, San Francisco, Oakland and Chicago, the sanitary landfill offered a way of remaking and reclaiming what were thought to be worthless landscapes by way of a transubstantiation of waste material into usable property.<sup>39</sup> Despite the success of some early experiments with the new disposal

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<sup>39</sup> This reveals another significant disparity between the earliest sanitary landfills and those sites that were to follow by that name: the geographical proximity of the former relative to the centers of waste production. As landfills gained in popularity and size, and their adverse side effects became more

method, however, the vast majority of municipalities continued to use alternative solutions to serve their waste disposal needs. A municipal survey conducted by *Public Works* in 1940 found that hog feeding and open dumping were still responsible for nearly 64% of the waste dumped in the U.S., whereas only 6.7% went to sanitary landfills (Editors of *Public Works Magazine* 1940:31). In fact, Vincenz' design did not become widely popular until the late 1940s and early 1950s, when it was adopted by the U.S. Army. Vincenz had joined the Army Corps of Engineers in 1941 (Rogers 2005:94). Mostly likely because of his well-positioned role as assistant chief in the Repairs and Utilities Division, the Army Corps of Engineers began to adopt the landfill around their bases and camps. Ostensibly because of the high cost of incineration and the health risks associated with open dumps and hog feeding, the army championed the landfill as a technologically sophisticated and cheap alternative, though they did not seem to give consideration to other methods that would have involved more reuse or reduction of waste (Durham 1946, 1947).

The journey of landfill technology from the public sector, into the military, and thence into private use fundamentally changed its national reputation. As part of military practice it was granted legitimacy as a technologically sophisticated form of engineering, billed as an odorless and hygienic form of waste disposal in direct contrast to local hog farms and dumps (Durham 1947:21).<sup>40</sup> As the sanitary landfill rose to prominence, waste disposal alternatives fell out of use. Like many rural

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evident, they were increasingly located at the periphery of heavily populated settlements. Similar to early efforts at urban reclamation through landfilling, the newly created waste landscapes of the present day also involve a transformation of land value and perception, see Chapter Five.

<sup>40</sup> It was not the only piece of technology to undergo such a transmutation in mid-century; the American military is credited with revolutionizing industrial research and development in the early post-war years (Vining and Hacker 2007:4). The landfill was but one form of technology sanitized and legitimized by the military-industrial complex at the beginning of the Cold War era.

communities, Birmingham, Michigan had used hog-feeding methods into the 1930s, until cases of trichinosis caught the attention of the national media and were traced back to contaminated pork (see Rogers 2005:84-5). Nearby Detroit and Royal Oak had functioning reduction plants for a number of decades, operations that treated waste in order to produce usable fertilizer and grease. Though common throughout the U.S. by the late 1880s, reduction – or the Merz process, as it was known – was disparaged by sanitary engineers of the early twentieth century because it could not dispose of ash or other kinds of “refuse,” for which incinerators were needed (Rogers 2005:83; *Public Works* 1921:282; Branch 1900:4). The Detroit reduction plant closed in 1938, ostensibly due to the falling price of grease, as did the one in Royal Oak not long after (Rogers 2005:83).

In part, this change in waste disposal preference had to do with a change in the actual composition of American waste. The landfill was the better fit for the changing disposal practices of twentieth century America, which had an expanding middle class founded upon conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899; Strasser 1999). Between 1940 and 1949, the amount of garbage produced per person per year rose in the U.S. from 182.5 pounds to 632.6 – with what one can assume was a corresponding rise in the amount of industrial waste (*Public Works* 1949:49). Landfills did not discriminate between types of waste, its practitioners were indifferent to whether materials could be recovered as scrap, grease, fertilizer, or hog feed. As one Army engineer put, “landfills dispose of all types of refuse materials, thereby eliminating the need for segregation of materials and separate collections” (Durham 1947:21). As with the elimination of animal interference, the goal of

eliminating segregated waste streams was the achievement of simplicity in form and function.

“A Unique Beast”: Sanitary Landfills as a Form of Political Ecology

If the sanitary landfill of the 1950s and 60s was popularized for its efficiency and orderliness, the landfill design promoted by the EPA since the late 1970s represents a different model of disposal, one organized around notions of containment and protection. Over the course of the twentieth century, the limitations inherent in the Vincenz//Army Corps style landfill became increasingly apparent, as the purpose of waste management was reimagined according to the emerging discourse of popular environmentalism. Despite its popularity as a “sanitary” alternative to the common dump and other waste disposal methods, the original landfill design failed to account for the migration of contaminating substances, odors, and pests from waste sites to surrounding areas. These problems attracted the attention of the mainstream national public with the Love Canal disaster of the late 1970s, but had surfaced long before in a variety of local environmental struggles (Szasz 1994:13-14).

Emphasis on environmental protection was the outcome of the 1960s and 70s, when environmental movements began to gain membership and notoriety throughout the world. In the U.S., the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was founded in 1970, the same year as the first Earth Day, with the intention of standardizing environmental policy and enforcement nationwide.<sup>41</sup> The creation of the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA – pronounced “rick-raw” by professionals in the environmental fields) followed in 1976. Technically an amendment to the Solid

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<sup>41</sup> At the same time, similar government agencies were developing in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Western Europe.

Waste Act of 1965, RCRA was more far-reaching than its predecessor, establishing national standards for the operation and closure of waste sites.<sup>42</sup>

Crucial to the new framework that the EPA was promoting through RCRA were distinctions between “hazardous landfills” and “solid waste landfills,” on the one hand, and “dumps” and “sanitary landfills,” on the other. This is also a prominent distinction for many of the landfill employees whom I met, as well. The former is related to the classification of the waste streams dumped at a given site, whether they are deemed more hazardous to human and environmental health and thus worthy of more careful attention; hazardous or “type one” landfills accept PCBs, contaminated dirt, or radioactive waste, while MSW or “type two” landfills rely more on household trash, construction and demolition debris, and non-hazardous sludge, industrial waste, and ash. In response to this distinction, the waste disposal industry has diversified over the years into specialized niche markets – hazardous and non-hazardous – involving very different regulations, costs, and services.

The latter distinction – between dumps and sanitary landfills – had an even greater impact on the waste industry and state regulation. In Subtitle D of RCRA, states were made responsible for determining which of their waste sites fit the criteria for “sanitary landfills,” those that did not were by and large determined to be illegal. Given the popularity of open dumping in the twentieth century U.S., the new RCRA regulations fundamentally transformed the waste industry in the decades that followed. Faced with the cost of new regulatory requirements, 70% of America’s landfills closed between 1978 and 1988. Those that remain are increasingly called

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<sup>42</sup> Individual states were made responsible for creating their own solid waste plans, which had to be at least as stringent as the federal guidelines.

“megafills” because of their large dumping capacity, or “regional landfills” in reference to their tendency to serve ever-larger geographic markets in order to generate substantial profit. The actual text of RCRA was initially somewhat vague about what qualified as a sanitary landfill. For several decades, those in the waste disposal industry anticipated further clarification on Subtitle D, which later came in the fall of 1991. The reauthorized sections of RCRA came into effect on a national scale two years later, in the fall of 1993. At that time, CSG closed down at this time and its operations were assumed by Four Corners, which City Services had opened that summer in anticipation of CSG’s federally mandated closure.

Thus, while the process of acquiring this new site was fraught with political controversy and contestation, as I recounted in the previous chapter, it was also facilitated and transformed by government policy. On the one hand, the state of Michigan encouraged counties to site new landfills in the late eighties to satisfy new environmental laws, which required each county to provide for its long term waste disposal needs. On the other hand, state and federal environmental agencies shaped the course of these developments by making the basic criteria necessary to run a landfill more stringent, requiring more in capital investment and forcing smaller landfill sites to consolidate into a handful of much larger ones. This, in turn, drew those landfills still remaining into ever larger and increasingly trans-territorial disposal markets.

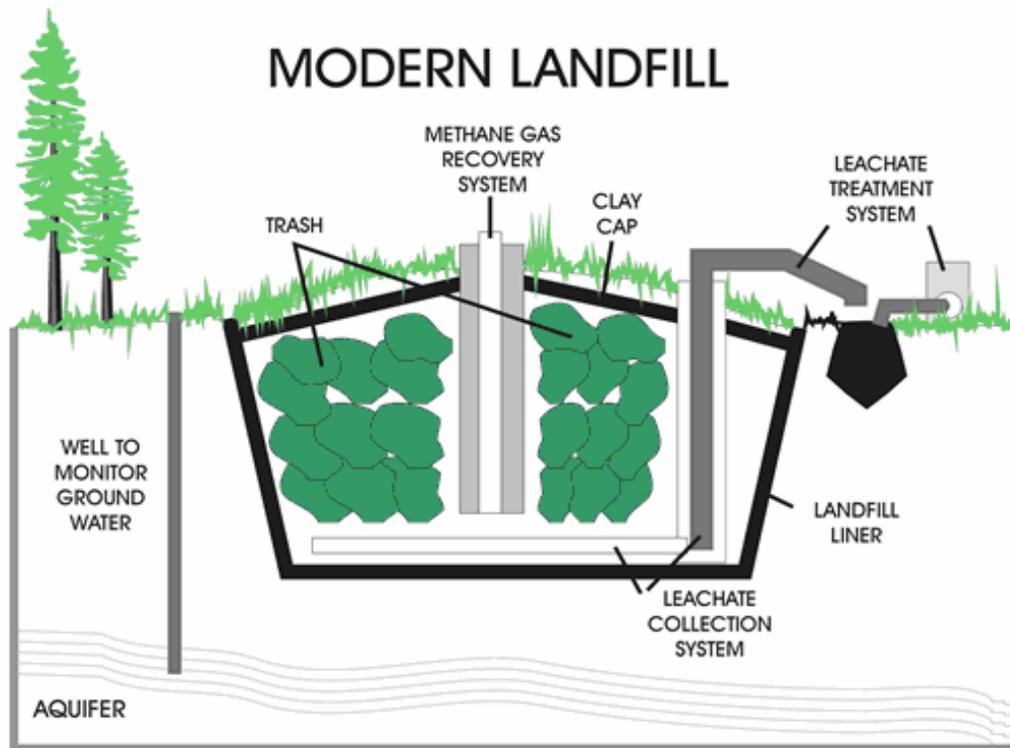


Figure 3.2: Typical sanitary landfill design, courtesy of the U.S. Energy Information Administration, <http://www.eia.doe.gov/kids>, September 2006

What really makes Four Corners and the new generation of landfills distinct from their predecessors is that new regulations and markets have resulted in more complex entanglements with the immediate surroundings and their various inhabitants. According to parts 256-258 of Subchapter I of the EPA Guidelines, sanitary landfills must:

- be located at a suitable distance from airports, flood plains, wetlands, fault lines, areas with periodic seismic activity or that are otherwise unstable (258.10-15)
- cover all active dumping areas with soil or other materials at the end of each day (258.21)
- prevent the spread of disease vectors associated with rodents and insects (258.22)
- monitor and control the levels of methane gas released into the atmosphere from the decomposition of waste to prevent onsite explosions and ensure good air quality (258.23-24)

- monitor and control water runoff from the site and the discharge of leachate, or any fluid that has come in contact with waste (258.26-27)

To satisfy these criteria, landfills must organize disposal activities around an array of internal subsystems: earth moving and soil distribution; engineered liners; gas and leachate collection and treatment; and groundwater and environmental monitoring (Figure 3.2). These objectives have led to engineered environments, continually evolving to entangle waste disposal with local ecology in complex ways. This deep intermingling of machines, labor, and materials with beings, relations, and histories, is at the heart of contemporary landfill design.

The implementation of these various subsystems involves a considerable amount of capital investment in construction materials, equipment, personnel and land, otherwise referred to as “airspace,” which remains the most important landfill resource. The available “footprint” of a landfill is divided into different “cells” – or dumping quadrants – which expand vertically into permissible airspace when they are “active.”<sup>43</sup> To transform available airspace and land into a landfill compliant with government regulations requires a greater degree of skill and knowledge than was the case for much of the twentieth century. To shield people and environments from landfill processes and products, municipalities and waste corporations acquire a legally bounded territory wherein conditions are carefully controlled and monitored so that, ideally at least, the possible impacts of degrading waste on human and environmental health are eliminated or diminished. The result is an ecological

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<sup>43</sup> In addition to its value as future dumping space (or potential dumping space for areas not yet approved as such) land is important as a source of soil cover, with clay soils being the most useful due to their relative impermeability, as well as a place for storage of equipment and different materials, such as compost piles – for growing grass on “capped” or covered areas.

arrangement that maintains a semblance of practical control by attempting to influence local environments in a selective fashion. To contain the waste on site, active landfills enlist a limited set of social actors (in the form of waste workers and state officials) and environmental surroundings (in the form of ambient air, water, land and animal life). Put another way, certain people and environments are selectively incorporated into the process of waste disposal so that other people and places can be spared the risk.



Map 3.1: Four Corners from Above, Adapted from Microsoft Virtual Earth, 2007

## The Landscape of Four Corners Landfill

Four Corners is not the biggest landfill in the country, its current “footprint” boundary – its permitted dumping capacity – is barely a quarter of the famous Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island (which can be seen from space). But if plans for future expansion are eventually realized, it has the potential to grow into one of the most massive structures in the Great Lakes area.<sup>44</sup> In 2003, Four Corners accepted more waste per day than any other landfill in the U.S., but by 2005 improved methods of recycling in Toronto lowered their intake by twenty percent. The landfill still receives about 10,000 tons of waste a day, an impressive amount by any standard. Currently almost three hundred acres wide, over three hundred feet above the ground and growing, Four Corners dominates the surrounding landscape. Standing at the very top, landfill workers try to find the outline of Detroit far out on the horizon – on very clear days one can make out the plateaus of two or more landfills rising out of the trees in the distance.

Cory, a civil engineer in his early thirties, is responsible for seeing to it that America Waste’s several disposal sites within the region remain within the environmental guidelines established by the county, state, and national governments. He divides his time between them, but his central office is located at Four Corners simply because its sheer size and complexity require more attention than most other sites. Cory says, half-jokingly, that he takes “ownership” of the landfill’s development, having been part of it in one way or another since it opened in 1992.

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<sup>44</sup> The biggest landfill in North America in terms of permitted capacity or “airspace” is the Apex Landfill outside of Las Vegas.

He is proud of his ability to keep the site in compliance with regulations, but also prides himself in going above and beyond them when the situation calls for it.

In 2005 it was discovered that a damaged underground pipe leading away from the landfill was leaking. Presumably it had been ruptured at some point when City Services still owned the site and now it had contaminated a section of soil near the gas plant. Cory felt that they should clean it up, despite the fact that its contamination “values” met regulatory cleanup criteria – meaning it was not too polluted to remain where it was – and the measure cost the landfill \$200,000.

We said “we’re gonna clean it up”. You know we don’t want to leave that contamination at our facility we’re gonna dig it all up...I wanted to do it. I didn’t want to leave it in there, I didn’t want to have to say “yea we have a great site its all Greenfield, its all been built from scratch, and its clean, except for *that*. And my boss felt the same way, we agreed together, and I don’t know how much flack he’s getting from upstairs... but I feel good about that decision, wholeheartedly.

In fact, Cory and the managerial staff at Four Corners argue that they actually exceed regulatory requirements in a number of ways of their own accord. At the same time, there are plenty of instances when the various substances and material processes they work with present challenges to the creation of a “clean” site. In fact, in these instances Cory and his colleagues may blame these phenomena themselves for whatever the problem is, as long as it persists. By projecting what may be human error on resistant “natural” forces they’ve yet to master, they are able to deny responsibility but also retain hope that the problem can be diagnosed and made legible. Describing disruptive events, systemic breakdowns, or accidents as “jobs to do,” Cory and his coworkers make them appear manageable.

Today's sanitary landfill is meant, in large part, to limit the uncertainty behind the breakdowns of landfill components by breaking them down into manageable subsystems and organizing them around the principle of containment. Landfill containment begins with restricting the flow of substances traveling through the air, along the surface, or underground from the landfill site, but accomplishing this means integrating actors and processes of different kinds in a controlled way. What is in principle a technology of containment serves to develop altogether new webs of ecological relations that can lead to new problems for those that bring them into being. In this way, each landfill serves as a biosocial laboratory of sorts, one that mixes waste with humans and non-human entities in an organized yet experimental fashion so that those people and places beyond the boundaries of the landfill property may remain relatively free from contamination.<sup>45</sup>

At Four Corners, the human participants in this "laboratory" were of three basic kinds vis-à-vis everyday landfill operations: a handful of government regulators, managers and technical specialists who oversee and control day to day operations; a few dozen operators, laborers and others who move, sort and transform waste in various ways; and a group of mechanics, office staff and other internal service workers who are responsible for maintaining or provisioning the labor of other employees.<sup>46</sup> Though all are involved in day-to-day operations, those with

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<sup>45</sup> Sanitary landfills are also counterlaboratories, according to Latour's terminology (1987:79), since they are assembled and organized in anticipation of conflicting claims from government regulators, lawyers and the scientists who have a stake in offering opposing interpretations of their "results."

<sup>46</sup> Notice that this hierarchy, as it relates to landfill operations, is not easily translated into class divisions. I will discuss class and other social dimensions of landfill labor in more detail over the next two chapters.

more power to design and organize work activities have a far greater influence on the shape that the landscape gradually assumes.

Problems at Four Corners come in varying forms, but they can be roughly categorized according to the variety of subsystems operating at the site at any one time, thereby keeping it compliant with regulations. Landfills are only able to separate waste from the surrounding environment by first using investment capital and financial credit to acquire land where a certain amount of dirt, water, and airspace can be requisitioned for construction. Just because elements from the ambient environment are enrolled in different technical procedures does not mean that they are polluted or corrupted per se, but it does increase the likelihood of unanticipated consequences that complicate or challenge landfill operations. Some problems, moreover, may even fall beneath the scope of managerial attention, lying unseen for a time because they are “inaccessible to the senses, invisible until they materialise as symptoms” (Adam 1998:17). Negotiating different problems as tasks to be accomplished, those who design and manage landfills maintain confidence that their mandated goal of protection from contamination can be realized with the right skill and guile, despite their lack of control over the many unseen forces at work in the landfill landscape.

### Soil and Water

Before a civil lawsuit was brought against Four Corners by locals in the neighboring township of Calvin, a matter which I discuss at greater length in the last chapter, the landfill held annual tours of the site open to the public. Many of the people in attendance were employees of the landfill and their families, though a

number of residents and politicians from the area typically came as well. At the open house the landfill accepts no business, food is served, games are available for children, Cory stands at a display ready to explain how the landfill works to protect the community and what its future projects are, and out front, near the maintenance building, children get their pictures taken and play on some of the smaller machines cleaned and left on display. During the tours, the highlight of the open house, Bob and the general manager, known as “Big Daddy,” take turns guiding a small tour bus filled with people, describing the passing scenery as they drive along the access road, up the ramp to view the composting operation and dumping area, and back around to the two gas-to-energy plants. For this event, the dumping area “up top” is covered with fresh soil and autofluff material and picked clean by laborers, while the large machines are washed and arranged neatly.

One of things mentioned prominently by Big Daddy during this ride is that in Harrison there is a relatively impermeable clay layer beneath the topsoil, which is better for landfill construction.<sup>47</sup> RCRA requires all active U.S. landfills to possess a high-density geo-synthetic liner, but an additional layer of clay provides an extra level of security against possible leaks due to tearing.<sup>48</sup> In Four Corners case, the layer of clay a convenient barrier between compacted rubbish and the groundwater traveling beneath the site that supplies a number of area homes and farms before emptying into Lake Erie. In addition to offering a technical safeguard, the soil also

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<sup>47</sup> In fact, much of Eastern Michigan possesses heavy deposits of clay – the accumulated inheritance of several millennia of receding glaciers. As discussed in the previous chapter, landfill sites are chosen due to a variety of historical factors.

<sup>48</sup> Locating places with appropriate environmental conditions is therefore also an important part of the formal criteria submitted to environmental regulators during the selection process for siting a new landfill.

plays a role in public relations. Engineers at other landfills in the U.S. and Canada told me that having extra safety measures makes the general public feel safer even when these systems are effectively redundant. Furthermore, Big Daddy tells the people on tour that the conditions in Canada are not ideal for landfill construction, thereby justifying why Four Corners imports so much, a matter of political controversy as already noted. In truth there are a number of landfills in Canada and several, not far from Toronto, with a substantial deposit of clay and for all intents and purposes equally stable geological conditions.



Figure 3.3: Todd about to remove a pump from a frozen retention pond, photo by J. Reno

But constructing a landfill in such a place also creates certain problems. The impermeable soil is one of the reasons that Harrison, like any number of towns located in the counties along Michigan's southeastern shore, possesses relatively wet surface conditions throughout the year (Lewis 2002:39). Constructing a landfill on marshy ex-farmland can certain difficulties. In 2006, for example, a newly

constructed leachate tank with a capacity of a half a million tons began to float when the field it was built in suddenly flooded. Though it didn't move very much, part of its exterior was damaged and the outside engineer employed for the project claimed he had never seen such a thing in all his years of building tanks.

Because the ground is rather poor at containing or absorbing storm water runoff, moreover, excess fluid will tend to migrate down the slopes of the landfill and off-site into surface drains. If such liquid has been in contact with rubbish it is categorized as "leachate," according to state and federal regulations, and considered a potential contaminant. In order to control the flow of water on the landfill property and prevent the accidental migration of leachate off-site or into underground aquifers, Four Corners was built with carefully arranged diversion berms, perimeter ditches, and pipes to direct excess runoff into one of several detention bins where it can be monitored and carefully discharged. During "big winters," some of these ponds grow to inordinate sizes and need to be drained periodically, which requires that they be pumped (see Figure 3.3).

By way of a corrective that is at once engineered and naturally occurring, the intended boundary between inside (contaminated leachate) and outside (pure water) is temporarily maintained. However, this solution leads to still more complications that must be addressed. To successfully control and monitor water runoff and leachate collection, two small streams, long used by local farmers and still feeding into nearby farms, were rerouted before the landfill was built. Though a farmer still cultivates beans and corn on some of fields left on the landfill property, one of the redirected streams has since transformed into genuine wetland. This does not necessarily pose a

problem since they are on the northeastern edge of the site, but because of their proximity the perimeter ditches around the landfill tend to sprout cattails – a species used by environmental specialists to identify an emerging wetland – and attract families of burrowing muskrats, insects, frogs and even small fish.

Management at Four Corners is always wary of encroaching wetland because the government protects such areas from development, so every summer they send laborers to the perimeter ditches to cut down the ominous vegetation. An additional concern from the perspective of management is the tendency for berms, ditches, ponds and detention bins to catch the loose paper that blows down from the dumping area on windy days. This can be beneficial insofar as these barriers prevent such paper from exiting the site and landing in agricultural fields and residential backyards. However, they are often difficult for the paper-pickers to remove and may serve as a noticeable sign to government inspectors and corporate visitors that garbage is out of place.

### Feeding a Bioreactor

The tours that Bob and Big Daddy organize around Four Corners end at one of the gas-to-energy plants that are situated in the corner of the site. This is the only time people are allowed to get out and examine landfill operations for themselves, which is not only because it is the safest location available for inspection. The landfill management is well aware that the plants promote better than any other aspect of the site the idea that Four Corners is dedicated to reusing waste materials in a productive fashion, not just dumping them but transforming them into something socially beneficial. Given the international attention being given to clean energy

alternatives, waste-to-energy plants are spreading in popularity worldwide, often supported by government incentives. To this end, many landfills are being converted into living bio-reactors, harnessed for private and public use (see Figure 3.4).

All landfills produce methane and other biogases as part of the processes of decomposition going on under the surface. Landfill contamination not only passes into the ground if left unchecked, it also moves through the air. Under Subtitle D and the Clean Air Act, landfills are responsible for monitoring and collecting the gases generated through bioreaction, especially methane which is a powerful greenhouse gas with a far greater global warming potential than CO<sub>2</sub>. Most landfills burn off excess gas by channeling it to large flares positioned strategically around the gas field. With the recent spread of “megafills,” using this waste material as a “green” energy provides an innovative and attractive alternative. Methane gas burns much cleaner than fossil fuels when converted into electricity, is easily harnessed for this purpose, and is in abundant supply.<sup>49</sup>

Four Corners’ gas company, Harrison Electric, purportedly generates enough electricity to power over 10,000 homes. The practices would not generate enough revenue on its own, I am told, so the company makes up for the cost by selling “green credits” to costumers for the right to draw electricity out of the same energy grid that the landfill gas plants contribute to. I am told by employees of Harrison Electric that they do not produce enough energy to meet the cost of operating the plants, but that

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<sup>49</sup> The U.S. is particularly rich in methane because of the abundant amount of waste produced by landfills and by cows. An average cow belches out up to 300 pounds of methane a day. There is a California researcher who proposes placing special pouches over their mouths to capture the gas to convert into energy (Cortese 2007).

the project is worthwhile to the power company they supply because of the federal tax breaks it receives for participating in “green energy” production.

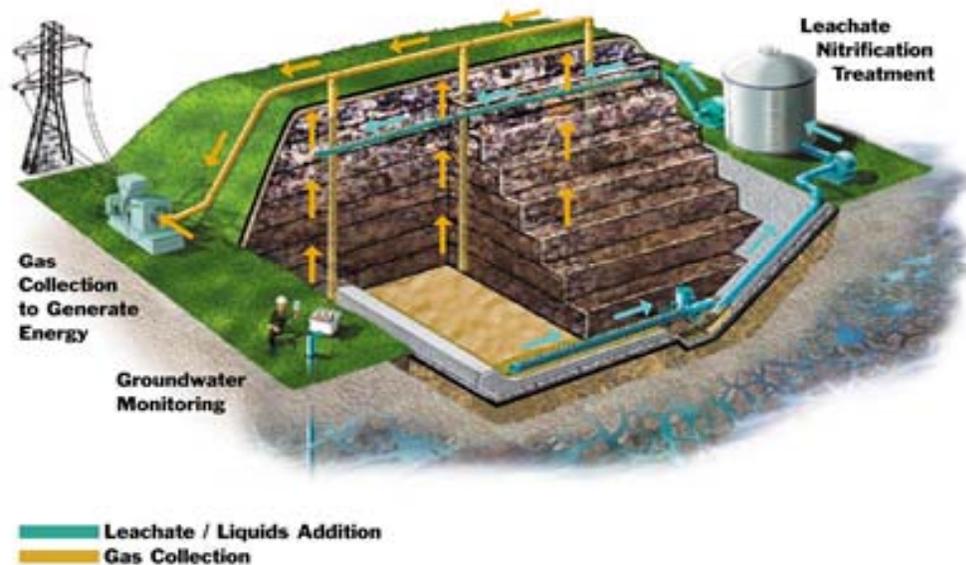


Figure 3.4: Landfill Gas-to-Energy Design, Waste Management Website, 2007

Though they share one employee, the gas plant is run separately from the landfill; some tasks concerning the gas system overlap and involve employees from both operations, but they are formally distinct and often appear that way in everyday practice. In theory, the gas company and the America Waste possess overlapping interests – the former aim to increase the amount of methane they receive while the latter are intent on preventing excess biogas from escaping the landfill. However, I have heard employees at Four Corners complain that the people from the gas company are always disappointed by the levels of methane they are extracting and are bothered when the plant has to be shut down because of occasional repairs to the gas lines or wells.<sup>50</sup> Landfill employees, on the other hand, are accused of constructing

<sup>50</sup> The gas plant shuts down automatically if it takes in too much oxygen, which occurs when one of the hundreds of gas wells installed throughout the landfill is damaged, e.g. by a machine, as happens from time to time. The field technician for the gas plant has a beeper on his person at all times that alerts him whenever this has happened.

the gas field so that too much stress is placed on certain areas, speeding up decomposition but making the flow of methane to the plant irregular and unsustainable in the long term. According to one of the gas plant employees, the unseen effects of this are now beginning to surface. Some wells are “drying up” before they ought to, while others are overburdened because they are not sufficiently drawn from and end up releasing excess methane into the atmosphere. Along the bottom of the northern slopes and in places along the gravel road that wraps around the southern and western slopes, pungent gas bubbles up from the ground and leaks slowly into the air.

The production of biogas makes landfills complex bioreactors, though this designation is usually reserved for when energy output has reached a certain amount. Places like Four Corners become vastly more productive bioreactors by incorporating wastes, such as sewage sludge, and implementing practices, such as the recirculation of leachate, which speed up the process of decomposition already going on within the landfill. An intricate network of underground pipes are responsible for diverting leachate out of the landfill where it is collected in tanks, poured into a “water wagon” and hauled back to the open face of the landfill to be sprayed and recirculated. This is another measure meant to keep leachate from impacting the underground water supply or overburdening the local sewer system; it also fuels the bioreactor operating within the landfill, powered by the work of anaerobic bacteria and archaeobacteria.

Descended from some of the oldest life forms on Earth, these microorganisms, amass enormous underground colonies by feeding off of the primal energy released from metabolic processes such as methanogenesis – a way of extracting energy from

methane that traces back to a time when this substance dominated the atmosphere. Landfill employees, for their part, rarely refer to this unseen activity bustling below the surface directly, it is such a taken-for-granted aspect of the materiality of waste that they tend to describe what is effectively a billion-year-old adaptation as a mechanical process, something the “landfill does” or that “happens because of bioreaction.” However, landfill personnel are well aware that continually recirculated leachate speeds up the process of decomposition and, if asked, the technical or managerial staff will point out that this works by providing additional nourishment for the innumerable microbes living off of the landfill in cooperative colonies below the surface. The man who runs the gas plants, Leon, was the most straightforward in attributing agency to the “methogens,” as he called them. “They speed up decomposition. Because they’re an anaerobic bug, they die in the O<sub>2</sub>.” Affectionately referring to them as his “spacebugs,” Leon acknowledges their unseen activity more than most.<sup>51</sup>

Around 2000, the landfill managerial personnel began experimenting with new ways of raising the rate of bioreaction by adding sewage sludge from the city of Toronto and from wastewater treatment plants in the Detroit area. Ultimately, combining this biochemical soup with fresh garbage makes additional dumping space available more quickly by speeding up the geological “settling” of the landfill. Cory points out that it thereby benefits the host community as well, by shortening the lifespan of the landfill and quickening its eventual “return” to local residents.

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<sup>51</sup> Since archaeobacteria were initially assumed to live only in the harshest of conditions, with this nickname he jokingly makes reference to their significance within the biosciences as well.



Map 3.2: Active Cell Area “Up Top” at Four Corners, adapted from Google Earth, 2007

But harnessing different landfill subsystems to the powerful work of microbial bio-reaction is related to new problems as well. For one thing sludge is far less stable as a form of construction material than is garbage. For that reason, Bob and other managerial staff devised a way of depositing sludge that maintained structural stability of the landfill and also kept pace with the large amount received on a daily basis. Rather than compact sludge with garbage, separate trenches are dug up top, where cover was already applied from a previous weeks dumping, and sludge is laid over the top of already compacted garbage. The location of the dumping areas and the sludge pits rotate within the boundaries of the cell until they have filled it to capacity (see Map 3.2).

There are additional problems created by the bioreactor system that have not yet been adequately resolved. For one thing, with an increased volume of biogas, related to the intensification of bioreaction, there is more likelihood that some of it will escape collection, plague local residents, and contaminate the atmosphere. Furthermore, sludge and recirculated leachate may be creating a high-pressure situation where vertical migration through the landfill is not possible and both gas and liquid are forced laterally.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, during the spring and summer of 2006, relatively new cells that had been filled and “capped” with dirt began to spew sludge and leachate through several cracks in the northern slope of the landfill. Throughout 2007, the collection systems for those portions of the landfill have been under continual repair.

At the same time, working with the waste products of microbes provides other opportunities as well. All landfills must grow grass upon capped cells as part of the gradual preparation for eventual closure and reclamation of the area by the host community. At Four Corners, Bob has developed a composting method that uses local yard waste. Local residents are invited to drop off their yard waste for free at the back of the site. The waste is then mixed and left to decompose, during which time anaerobic bacteria and archaeobacteria break down the organic material into productive, nutrient-rich fertilizer. The composting piles go through several cycles of being “turned” by a dozer, during which time the anaerobic creatures die and the gas they excrete is released for many miles, before being turned back over to new generations of microbes. In his description of the process of composting, Bob gives

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<sup>52</sup> Thanks to Professor Steven Wright for his assistance with the fluid mechanics under consideration here.

the microbial colonies due consideration, pointing out that “turning” the compost gives different microbes a chance to work in sequence – anaerobic, aerobic, anaerobic, and so on. As the process concludes, the fertilizer is offered for free to local farmers (some of whom, Bob says, claim it is the best fertilizer available) and used to plant grass over capped sections of the landfill.

Despite their advantages, the foremost problem with these different ways of harnessing the activity of microorganisms is that, along with methane, they tend to release strong compounds, such as hydrogen sulfide. In fact, it may be that the archaeobacteria that produce methane and the bacteria that produce hydrogen sulfide are billion year old symbiotic partners, these different colonies of prokaryotes tend to congregate together under such conditions. Either way, the gases released from the composting pile, the deposited sludge, or the landfill gas outrage neighboring communities to the south and east and create yet another issue – one of the biggest ongoing regulatory conflicts at Four Corners – odor.<sup>53</sup>

Controlling odor emissions is a constant struggle that takes up a great deal of the time of the landfill engineer and managers at Four Corners and are the single most important factor shaping their relationship to county and state regulatory agencies. Wind speed and direction, temperature, the unpredictability of gas production and collection, these and other factors seem to conspire against their intentions and frustrate every technical solution they implement. Looking through the history of correspondence between Four Corners and state and county regulators reveals a series of technical solutions proposed over the years, each one alleged by Cory or his predecessor to be the answer to the odor problem.

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<sup>53</sup> For more on the politics and science of odor regulation and contestation, see chapter seven.

I remember coming into work one morning only to encounter Cory in the parking lot, smiling and eager to tell me that he'd discovered a new way to control odor problems – all they needed to do was to install a weather device that would help him predict, based on temperature and other factors, the possible extent of the odor each day. As far as I know this was never attempted. To this day, the most successful innovation to stop the spread of odor has been the perfume lines that surround the base of the landfill in strategic locations and spray a fine mist of deodorizer during the summer months to “catch” the odor particles in the air. More recently, Bob's Stink Eliminators (SE's) are the anti-stink strategy invested in with the most labor – when people call to complain about the smell, for example, Bob or Big Daddy will answer their pleas by repositioning the SE's in the direction of the prevailing wind. In general, however, these correctives seem to do little to stop the odor when it is particularly strong, especially when it involves sludge.

The socio-natural complexities at Four Corners ultimately interfere with regulatory agencies assigning blame and with popular fronts of environmental resistance proposing viable alternatives, leaving the participants caught in various “double binds” that complicate activist, governmental, and industrial responses to environmental disaster and risk (Fortun 2001). In the case of Four Corners, it is clear that for the regulation, engineering, and critique of landfills to become adequate, they must develop a perspective on ecological relations that attends to the seen and the unseen (Adam 1998) as well as the human and the non-human (Latour 2004). Leon's “spacebugs” are only one of the many creatures that inhabit the landfill landscape and, in so doing, shape its political ecology for the humans that share it. In order to

suggest possible entryways into such a perspective, I offer an analysis of a class of non-humans omnipresent at contemporary landfills that go relatively “unseen” in environmental critique and state regulation, namely birds.

#### Avian Idioms: Four Corners as a Behavioral Environment

The getting of a bird's-eye view is helpful in becoming oriented, and the explorer will look down from a high place if possible. [Gibson 1986:199]

What happens if, instead of imagining a landfill from the perspective of human beings, we attempt to introduce an alternative point of view, that of a non-human being for whom landfills are also significant and who act as uninvited participants in their day-to-day operations?

Non-human creatures are implicated in the circulation of human waste in every step of the disposal process. Various creatures would lay claim to the crumbs we cast aside or the food we stow away in our homes, while dumpsters and sewers are well known to attract different nocturnal scavengers. Worldwide, the fate of human leftovers has become practically unthinkable apart from different non-human beings – mice, rats, cockroaches, flies, pigs, dogs and raccoons, to name a few – that are drawn to them for sustenance. This is no less true for what increasingly marks the “end” of disposal in many parts of the world, the dump. Microbes propagating within the landfill and the grass planted along its surface may be the only non-human life-forms purposefully enrolled in the business of North American waste disposal, but scores of uninvited organisms gather around Four Corners to subsist and dwell. Hornets and wasps nest in the folds of geo-synthetic liner poking out of the earth along the edge of constructed cells, geese return year after year to gather in the

retention ponds and tend their young, stray cats and dogs wander alone and in packs and are sometimes adopted by local families or landfill workers, mice and rats hide under stray garbage during the winter months for warmth... and so on.

The fact that Four Corners is home to a multitude of beings is partly a testament to its environmental continuity with the neighboring woods, wetland and agricultural fields.<sup>54</sup> A birds-eye-view of Four Corners makes this clear (see Map 3.3). From above all one can see is a heterogeneous assemblage of features that make up the surface of the Earth. The birds-eye-view allows one to perceive all at once the history of human transformation of the seemingly out of the way place – the landfill now under construction, century-old farmland, roads, the constructed wetland preserve – less apparent but equally important are non-human activities on other scales, the microcosmic work of landfill bacteria and archaeobacteria, or the movements of non-human animals contributing in their own way to the shared landscape.

Of the many species that thrive at landfills, I have chosen to focus on birds in this section because whereas most other landfill inhabitants wisely hide their presence from potential predators or competitors, or remain too small to be noticed as in the case of microbes, birds are ubiquitous in day-to-day life, largely because flight allows them access to multiple niches in the landscape. I use human-avian relations at and around Four Corners in order to illustrate the ways in which landfill ecologies spiral

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<sup>54</sup> In 2005 a member of the MDEQ argued that Four Corners should not build a perimeter fence because it would disrupt the movement of creatures between the nearby wetland preserve and the landfill property. A different official overruled her, however. Traffic between the preserve and the landfill continues despite the fence.

out of exclusively human control in ways that may be largely imperceptible to landfill workers, government regulators, and environmental critics.



Map 3.3: Bird's-eye-view of Four Corners property, the wetland preserve and neighboring farmland, adapted from Microsoft Virtual Earth, 2007

When birds scan an area from above, one can surmise that they do not see choices between nature and culture, or between protected wilderness, cultivated fields, and contained pollutants. The most one can say about their perspectives, perhaps, is that they must be equipped to identify different behavioral possibilities or affordances – easy meals, nesting locations, familiar landmarks for migratory travel, or places where predators may be on the prowl – which are available at most landfills in ready supply (Map 3.3). The perceptual psychologist James J. Gibson used the concept of *affordance* to explain the meaningfulness of environments for the creatures that inhabit them, the signs of opportunity and threat that provide different species avenues for directed action in the world: “The affordances of the environment

are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill” (1986:127). Developing similar insights, the Estonian ethologist Jakob von Uexkull (1985) advocated the investigation of the “inner worlds” of different species, each furnished with alternative understandings of their surroundings or *umwelt*. An ardent opponent of vulgar Darwinism, von Uexkull sought a method for characterizing the behavior of animals that did not reduce their activity to pre-determined mechanical responses (Hoffmeyer 1996:54-5).

Examining the interpretive propensities and perceptual capacities of different creatures, often dubbed “biosemiotics,” von Uexkull’s work reveals that all living creatures exhibit some level of intentionality, which “is tantamount to saying that they can differentiate phenomena in their surroundings and react to them selectively, as if some were better than others” (Hoffmeyer 1996:47-8).<sup>55</sup> The resulting behavior is *intentional* in the phenomenological sense, after Husserl, in that it is *about* the world as interpreted by that being, the world as mediated by the perceptual cues the creature has access to because of the bodily form it has developed (Hoffmeyer 1996:47-8). The *umwelt* of most birds, for example, is shaped by the capacity for flight (e.g., their eyes are designed to assist in landing and taking off as well as identifying landmarks in the air for orientation) and this makes their perception of the world they inhabit a different thing for them than for beings stuck on the ground. Evolutionarily speaking, the embodied *umwelt* of a particular bird forms in anticipation of the affordances made available by its surrounding environment, in the

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<sup>55</sup> As we have seen, even microbes must differentiate between compounds in order to digest the right ones, though their ability to do so is incredibly rudimentary.

way vertical lift affords flight. The basic tenet of an ecologically informed analysis is the embeddedness of the organism within an environment (see Bateson 1972:451).

But this evolved preparedness for one's environment need not constrain organisms to specific, predictable environments and fixed behavioral tendencies (what are typically referred to as instincts or fixed action patterns). Capacities for behavioral flexibility vary with different creatures, of course, but nothing precludes birds from forming their own distinct impressions of a new landscape (whether a city skyline, a landfill, or a protected wetland) and developing an idiosyncratic response. Humans are, of course, much better at such creative adaptation than birds, or any other species for that matter. The capacities for self-interpretation and symbolic communication that play central roles in human agency, cultural forms, and social relations (see Geertz 1973; Taylor 1971; Keane 2003a) and are habits that non-human creatures, especially non-apes, seem unable to achieve. What studies in biosemiotics suggest is that that which makes us uniquely human, talents for self-consciousness and symbolic reference to start with, are part of a continuum of being rather than evidence of a categorical divide.<sup>56</sup> The important point, whatever creature is under consideration, is that they cannot be reduced to mechanical laws or human expectations.

Though unpredictable and alien in this way, non-humans are not thereby unknowable. The distinct *umwelts* that trap species within their own perceptual

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<sup>56</sup> Latour (2004:73-4) would object that the analytical use of such a continuum, though noble for its monist reach, presupposes a transcendent stance allegedly beyond both nature and humanity, but unavoidably more loyal to one or the other pole (i.e. a socialized nature or a naturalized society). While I think this is a valid, even vital critique of the Cartesianism that continues to haunt political ecology, it is only tenable so long as the false choice of society or nature is an unavoidable one, but Latour himself frequently indicates that it is not and never has been.

systems do not foreclose the opportunity to establish new kinds of trans-species engagement. This is because behavior involves information gathering that is not “mental” but participatory in nature (Ingold 2000:166-7). Trans-species interactions result from organisms exploring their world and finding significant others in the process (see Haraway 2003). Such interactions are not necessarily harmonious or successful, but they are interactive in a meaningful way. For example, I don’t need to know what a dog smells or a cat sees in order to form predictions about how it will likely behave in response to my actions and vice versa. As Eduardo Kohn argues, “Our world is also defined by how we get caught up in the interpretive worlds, the multiple natures – the *umwelt* – of other kinds of beings with whom we relate” (2007:17).

The anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell came to similar conclusions through his fieldwork among the Berens River Ojibwa of Manitoba. He pointed out that ancestors, spirits, or deities may be as real in some places as the rocks and trees, insofar as they are incorporated within a culturally patterned and socially acquired worldview (Hallowell 1955:87). Not all such beings need be particularly religious in nature, but Hallowell's initial examples were chosen to illustrate an important point: significant non-humans demand recognition and response from their human counterparts. Humans cannot afford to do otherwise because they are tied to these other-than-human persons through involvement in a shared moral universe (Hallowell 1992:91).

Hallowell characterized this shared universe as a behavioral environment, so called to distinguish his notion from interpretations of “nature” as something external

to persons (1955:86).<sup>57</sup> Insofar as Ojibwa grandfathers can metamorphose into a multitude of material forms in dream or waking life, seemingly ordinary stones and animals encountered in everyday life may turn out to be persons that talk and think as part of webs of mutual obligation (Hallowell 1960:34).<sup>58</sup> Hallowell's interpretation of Ojibwa behavioral environments invites us to recognize all human beings as immersed in a shared world where other beings act as mutual participants. This is the case even where human destructiveness and inventiveness seem to dominate environments, as in large landfills. While it is always possible to identify diverse and overlapping behavioral environments of varying scope, depending on one's focus, I examine avian/human encounters within Four Corners and the nearby wetland preserve in particular because they successfully illustrate failed attempts at environmental containment.

#### Feet, Fords, and Feathers

Understanding Four Corners as a behavioral environment means appreciating how different species, avian, human, or microbial, engage one another there. I suggest that such an analysis prepares us to better understand the relationship between landfills and their human creators and environments and their non-human inhabitants.

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<sup>57</sup> He found that categorical separations of "human" from "supernatural" beings (as well as "real" from "fictive" kin) could not account for the non-human beings with whom some Ojibwa developed strong interpersonal bonds, such as their "other-than-human grandfathers" or "guardian spirits" (1960:21-2).

<sup>58</sup> Interactions "in the flesh" make up only a fraction of the wide array of possible encounters between the Ojibwa Hallowell came to know and their non-human counterparts. During the shaking-tent ritual, typically performed to ascertain the causes of an illness, a conjurer summons his personal grandfathers who manifest themselves "detached from outward form" as the Winds that violently shake the tent (which is constructed for the event) and as distinct voices that speak from within the tent (1992:68-70). Another example is the presence of the mythical Thunderbird, which becomes manifest only in the form of thunderclaps which are its voice.

More importantly, this helps us to see new dimensions of political ecology and everyday sociality in the process.

Birds are uniquely accessible to observation by anyone who comes within the immediate vicinity of Four Corners, while other creatures reveal themselves only to those who actively explore the area. Depending on the season any number of bird species can be found at the landfill, the surrounding farmlands, and the neighboring wetland preserve. In the first two places they tend to find opportunities for sustenance and congregation and in the latter a place for nesting or security. In the process of searching out such affordances, birds bring these distinct settings together.

Understanding avian-human relationships at Four Corners contrasts in many ways from now classic anthropological works on this same subject. If one considers the importance of avian taxonomy in the cosmology and ritual practice of the Kaluli, as described by Edward Schieffelin (1976) and Steven Feld (1982), for example, people in and around Four Corners appear rather disinterested in avifauna. The Kaluli (in a way similar to the Berens River Ojibwa discussed by Hallowell) describe birds as “voices in the forest,” imagining them to be spirit reflections of the dead, a manifestation of unseen spirits in the visible realm (Feld 1982:45). In particular, it is bird sounds that Kaluli rely on as evidence of their unseen counterparts: “Bird sounds metaphorize Kaluli feelings and sentiments because of their intimate connection with the transition from visible to invisible in death, and invisible back to visible in spirit reflection” (1982:85). While eagles, gulls, and starlings are “metaphorized” in their own right at Four Corners, as I will explain more below, they do not possess the same depth of socio-cultural relevance as they do for the Kaluli, nor could they.

People at Four Corners do not even possess the avid interest in avian creatures that one *does* find among people in the area. Birdwatchers, or “birders,” keep detailed lists of the birds they have seen historically, or that season, and compile tables and field guides for ready use in the identification of rare species (see Law and Lynch 1999). Similar practices date to before the environmental or conservation movements in the U.S. A related fascination with avian form and classification was apparent among pigeon breeders of nineteenth century London, from whom Charles Darwin learned the intricacies of domestication and selection pressures (Feeley-Harnik 2007). Neither breeders nor birders are welcome at Four Corners, where some Ann Arbor birdwatchers tell me they occasionally desire to go to glimpse the gull specimens, though some other landfills allow this. The management at Four Corners indicated to me that this was a waste of time and might interfere with the smooth running of daily operations.

Indeed, the significance of birds at Four Corners – as with most non-humans on site (whether mechanical or flesh and blood) – can be broken down into whether or not they interfere with or distract from workplace activities. I have been with both common laborers and managers as they stopped walking or driving to quietly observe the path of a bald eagle or heron gliding across the sky, or a red-tailed hawk perched on one of the gas pumps on the slopes. At times such as this, the presence of a specific bird in flight offers a pleasant distraction from work: Bob, the operations manager, stops his truck for little else that is not work-related, while laborers like Mac and Eddy were eager to find a reason to stop working and contemplate something else. Still, during these moments not much is said about the significance

of the birds per se, except to point out their path of movement or mention if they'd been seen earlier that day. The importance of task-oriented activity at the site, organized around solving technical problems as they arise, also makes birds a ready source of irritation and creates occasional trans-species conflicts, which are sometimes violent.

With access to nearly anywhere on the landfill, their ability to fly more than anything makes birds stand out to people on the ground, who are far more restricted in their movements, confined to being in pick-up trucks and machines at Four Corners until they can clock out. There are clear differences among different workers concerning the importance of birds, but overall little interest in discussing them at any great length.<sup>59</sup> Yet, birds do have a significant presence at the landfill and their habits exemplify very well the complex entanglements that regulated landfill construction now perpetuates within specific locales. I will discuss three kinds of birds at Four Corners Landfill, seagulls, eagles, and starlings, each of which demonstrate something unique with respect to human/nonhuman relations and give an indication as to the complexity of political ecologies like those propagated at landfills, which spiral out of the control of human intention and regulation.

### Soul Chickens

Seagulls have become so commonly associated with landfills that their predictable presence is incorporated into state regulations. For instance, landfills may

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<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, the second most common reason for people to be in the vicinity of Four Corners is to visit the wetland preserve to the west of it. It is not the only such place, there is an extensive park system throughout southeastern Michigan, but it is one of the only places where most inhabitants of the Lower Peninsula can go to see avian wildlife – especially the bald eagles nest, great blue herons, and wood ducks.

only reach a certain height of airspace depending on their proximity to airports, to prevent flocks of the birds from interfering with landings. Seagulls, as adept scavengers, are attracted to landfills and dumping sites because they provide easy opportunities for quick meals like lakeshores and beaches. Certain species of gull are common year round in the lower Great Lakes, moreover, because their propensity for surface-water feeding makes summer breeding near large water sources highly attractive.<sup>60</sup>

To watch ring-billed seagulls as they gather every summer at Four Corners is to witness the kind of stubbornness possessed of some living things that makes for a formidable pest. The workers and managers dislike seagulls because they are loud, they defecate on machines and people indiscriminately, and when they settle on the garbage to feast they obstruct the vision of machine operators who distribute and compact waste, often refusing to move unless threatened with violence. Cory, the site engineer, also detests the seagull, which he calls “worthless rats with wings” and “wretched, vile birds” with barely contained disgust.

In Cory’s case, what so troubles him about seagulls is their tendency to pick anything out of the trash for consumption. Seagulls, for their part, do not seem to care much for the people and machines restricting their access to a convenient food source, though they are far more likely to attack another, lower status seagull to get food than bother a human for the same reason. At minimum, they discern that their human interlocutors are neither predator, nor prey, nor seagull and thus are beyond the repertoire of interpretive responses that have been inculcated into their

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<sup>60</sup> It is for this reason that Michigan landfills in particular draw out types of gulls so unusual that part-time bird watching enthusiasts (self-described “birders”) seek out local dumps to spot one.

dispositions over the course of evolutionary history. This doesn't change the fact that a flock may decide to move in around a landfill worker to establish feeding territory, anticipating correctly that the latter will move (as happened to me while I was picking garbage up top on one occasion); or that a worker can similarly run toward a seagull shouting and expect the same (as any child visiting a beach quickly discovers). Such limited forms of communication are possible, which make birds significant others, more than just species that are good to think with on one's own terms (Haraway 2003:4-12). Faced with a seagull that may defecate on your head, assessments of their relevance extend beyond the "merely" metaphorical. Picking garbage on top of the landfill, in seagull territory, it wasn't enough for me to settle for my own interpretation of my winged interlocutors, I was forced to wonder what they were thinking, what their perspective on myself and the dump was.

In general, however, both gull and worker carry on about their business year after year without considering the other to be more than a minor nuisance or threat. There are moments when they become far more significant, however, and a level of transspecies creativity is the result. Gulls are one of many migratory bird species that are protected under joint environmental agreements between Canada and the U.S. almost a century old. It is possible to kill one, however, if you go through the proper channels and acquire governmental approval from the Department of Natural Resources. John, or "Big Daddy" as he is known, has been the general manager at Four Corners for a number of years now and abhors seagulls, or as he calls them with his gruff Louisiana accent, "soul chickens." Years ago he received approval to torment the landfill gulls in any number of ways, shooting as many as one hundred a

year and scattering their flocks for an hour or so in the process. He has fairly good aim and can usually kill or “wing” several before they scatter. Most workers agree that this does more for Big Daddy than it does for pest control, but on any given day during the warmer months one is likely to hear shotgun blasts and exploding “bird bombers” and “bird screamers” coming from up top, which indicate that he is out in his GMC firing shots into flocks as they scatter and scream.

The small and relatively unsuccessful war that Big Daddy wages year after year is as much interpretive as physical. For instance, he instructs all the laborers not to move the dead ones from where they lie so those left alive will feel threatened by the sight of their slaughtered kin. Other landfill managers are known to employ similar methods to communicate a sign of threat to seasonal flocks – at one landfill to the north of Four Corners they actually play the sounds of dying seagulls to scare away the birds. Big Daddy's tactics never seems to work, but they do result in the occasional surprise encounter with a desiccated seagull carcass when one is sent to pick garbage or spread grass seed on the slopes. As Kohn (2007) argues, attempts to construct such “transspecies pidgins” may often fail, but that does not stop the participants from having to interact and respond to one another. Big Daddy's gamble that they read carcasses of familiars in this way is not born out, whereas their gamble that a regular food source is worth the trouble of being occasionally startled or killed seems to pay off regularly.

If seagulls represent the prototypical landfill pest, they are simultaneously a concern for the resident wildlife biologist of the nearby wetland preserve. The preserve was constructed in the late nineties to compensate for a major expansion of

the Detroit Metro Airport into wetland areas along its borders. Dozens of species were transplanted from around the airport, dirt was removed, and trails and a boardwalk were created so that almost one thousand acres of former farmland could be converted into an environmentally protected zone and tourist destination for metro Detroiters. Just as the marshes attract new people to hike, canoe, picnic and ride horses, it also attracts the seagulls that have been nesting in the region since it was farmland. Gulls may feast at Four Corners, but they spend their evenings in the nearby marshes. Consequently, they represent a danger to the sensitive ecology of the preserve because their feces is contaminated by the garbage they regularly eat. In fact, the biologist now in charge of the preserve claims that their seasonal presence is associated with spikes in levels of E. coli bacteria in the water. Since only canoeing is permitted, not swimming, the levels are not high enough to raise concern, but he performs analysis during the warmer months when ring-billed gulls come to mate just in case. For him, the seagulls are a constant reminder that wetland and landfill constitute an encompassing ecological field, a nexus of interpretive guesswork and behavioral relations.

### Bald Eagles

Contrary in many ways to the seagulls that plague both landfill and wetland are the most treasured non-human species at either site – the bald eagle couple that nest in the preserve year after year. One of only two in Southeastern Michigan, the nest is the prized possession for the marsh and one of its principal attractions for ecotourists, for whom a bald eagle is a rarely encountered natural spectacle. But the location of the preserve, chosen by the county airport in order to compensate for

wetland sacrificed to an expanded terminal, has its risks as well. One year the nest was disturbed by a helicopter flying overhead and the eagle adults would not return to care for their young.<sup>61</sup>

The proximity of a revered national symbol to a massive dump is too great a symbolic contrast to be ignored by local residents in and outside of Harrison, a substantial number of whom distrust the landfill on principle. One of the naturalists at the wetland informed me that a local reporter contacted her recently to confirm rumors that the bald eagles were leaving because of the powerful stench of the landfill. In actuality, birds cannot smell, anymore than they can deny the attraction of a free meal. Just as many gulls associate waste sites with food sources, the local eagles have developed the frequent habit of appearing to eat whenever they hear Big Daddy firing his shotguns. Like most predators, eagles are known to scavenge easy prey when it is available. After years of Big Daddy's war against the landfill seagulls, the bald eagles have come to interpret the sound of gunfire as something like a dinner bell, although they are not always rewarded for their effort.

This association may have grown in strength initially because the seagull flocks become scattered and disorganized when the firing begins, attracting the eagles hoping to take advantage of the chaos. Now the eagles know to scan the landfill for wounded or dead gulls when they hear shots fired. This habit has become so predictable that it allows for successful predictions about bird behavior. Once on the back road while I was picking autofluff – the shredded rubber and foam leftover from scrapped vehicles – I saw one of the eagles diving into a ditch, lifting up into the air

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<sup>61</sup> The wetland staff have since learned that a number of nests were similarly disrupted that same year as part of a bald eagle tour that was being offered in the region, but has since been stopped by authorities.

again, and diving back down with claws outstretched. I had recently heard shots from above and hypothesized that it was after a wounded seagull. The eagle was scared away as I approached, but my initial interpretation was correct and as soon as Big Daddy descended the hill I led him to the disoriented gull to end its misery.

What the eagles have done is acquire a new habit by way of an interpretive reaction to causally associated events, a process behavioral psychologists call “stimulus generalization” (Deacon 1997:80). This is elementary learning to be sure, but it also involves a level of intentional selection of possibilities that extends beyond the mere replication of an instinctual drive. As Darwin argued with respect to earthworms over a century ago, even the most rudimentary of beings is capable of some basic judgments and decision-making in its day-to-day existence. Over the course of dozens of experiments, Darwin witnessed worms varying from their instinctive dragging behavior in all sorts of ways in order to manage differently shaped materials:

If worms are able to judge, either before drawing or after having drawn an object close to the mouths of their burrows, how best to drag it in, they must acquire some notion of its general shape. This they probably acquire by touching it in many places with the anterior extremity of their bodies, which serves as a tactile organ. [1985:97]

Through such limited perceptual abilities as worms have, a general understanding of their environment is acquired and, from this information, they learn how best to act within given circumstances. It is the same with eagles, whose eyes and ears are far more complicated organs. They may eventually come to associate a given stimulus with an available food source, but must first be capable of flexibly adapting their

behavioral tendencies to new situations – inherited and acquired behaviors are thus thoroughly entangled in varying intensity.

Without exception, all who come to the landfill admire the presence of bald eagles. But their habit of appearing when guns are blazing causes some anxiety on the part of Big Daddy, who does not want to risk injuring a bird that he reveres and that, more importantly, is protected by the state under steep penalty of law. It was with a considerable amount of trepidation, therefore, that he received the news during the summer of 2006 that a dead bald eagle had been found on the property by some of the laborers. “Was it shot?” was his initial, desperate reply. The eagle had been dead too long to tell for sure, but the laborers were happy to leave their boss in doubt and spoke of the event to others with smiles and knowing looks which implied that he had been responsible. In general, laborers at the site are pleased by anything that vexes their bosses, so long as it does not come to affect them in turn, but in this case were particularly fascinated by the taboo corpse of a protected animal.

According to the naturalists at the wetland preserve, however, no eagles are unaccounted for. The dead one is likely a stranger given that its leg was banded. The Fish and Wildlife Department have yet to successfully band any one of the many fledglings that have been raised at the Marshes over the years. I wanted to make sure that it was an eagle and take a corroborating photograph, so a coworker and I examined the carcass, but could not determine the cause of death. We discussed removing the body, but the thought of the possible \$10,000.00 fine for possession of bald eagle remains encouraged us to leave it along the edge of the woods, where it had been found. Among workers and management, it was not debated whether the

dead eagle should be reported to the Department of Natural Resources or the naturalists at the wetland. In part, this is because many employees enjoy hunting in their spare time and believe the DNR to be an unforgiving and overly punitive governmental body. Furthermore, employees have learned not to offer information to inspectors unless directly requested, and since worker relations with non-humans is not a regular part of regulatory investigation, except indirectly, the right questions are never asked.



Figure 3.5: Bald Eagle Carcass, photo by J. Reno

Having decided to leave the body by the woods, we examined the remains with fascination, fear, and a sense of excitement. We marveled at the power of that small corpse, its ability to change our lives, summon protection from the state, or condemn our boss by its mere presence. More than the potentially dangerous consequences of eagle-human encounters, it represented the landfill's strange capacity to simultaneously sustain life and accumulate decay. After all, the presence of eagles is a common occurrence at Four Corners, made possible because of Big Daddy's war on the soul chickens, but the presence of a species currently clinging to

existence is more than a little strange at a place of incredible environmental transformation. For this reason, it remains the one fact about my experiences with landfills that strikes many Americans as the most shocking.

### Shitting Birds

One last bird species will serve to demonstrate a final point about the presence of non-human beings, one made less well by protected species such as gulls and eagles, whether or not they are seen as pests – the political ecologies that link humans and non-humans in webs of mutual influence are not limited to one site, but have potentially wide ranging geographical and historical significance.

During the fall and winter months, when seagulls disappear south on their migratory paths, swarms of European starlings gather at the landfill to occupy the open niche for opportunistic garbage eaters. These starlings are fairly unremarkable except for their beautiful, almost eerie configurations in flight wherever they are found, which in Denmark are known as “the black sun.” This pattern of collective flight makes them appear more like organic swarms than hierarchical flocks. At Four Corners, starlings are fairly unpopular for some of the same reasons as the seagulls, reasons made painfully obvious by the way many laborers describe them when they are overhead: “shitting birds.” To the wetland biologist and landfill management they are far less of a concern than the seagulls, in part because their presence is less obtrusive because their diet consists of far less garbage.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> At another landfill owned by a competitor of Four Corners to the north, European starlings are a much bigger problem than either odor or gulls. Starlings will nest anywhere, so if a landfill is located near commercial sites (as this one is) they quickly invade the nooks and crannies of buildings or equipment and cause disturbances for which the landfill, as an attractive food source, is blamed.

The introduction of the European starling is considered one of the strangest and most catastrophic miscalculations of ecological impact in the history of Northern America. Unbeknownst to most workers and residents, the starlings at Four Corners represent an ecological disturbance originating outside the scope of the immediate environment. In 1890, eighty imported starlings were released into Central Park by a Shakespeare enthusiast and socialite named Eugene Schieffelin, who was attempting to give the average American exposure to Old World birds that were referred to in the plays of the Bard (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992:1). Schieffelin believed that encounters with the starling referred to in Hamlet IV would improve the character of the rude American lower classes, not such a strange notion given that hope for the very same improvement inspired the creation of Central Park itself and was popular throughout the Progressive period (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992:1).

By way of a New York City harbor, European starlings conquered the entire continent in half a century, devastating parts of rural America in particular. According to the naturalists at the wetland preserve, the starlings may have out-competed other bird species once endemic to Michigan that are missing from their refuge as a consequence. They know, for example, that the starlings now threaten their wood duck population because they appropriate their nests. Since their site was not constructed until almost a century after the introduction of European starlings, however, there is no way of knowing with certainty how the presence of this invasive species has transformed contemporary species-relations over generations of ecological growth. This demonstrates the way in which wetland refuges are in fact guesses as to how contemporary species interrelate, not an attempt at some original

“state of nature” free from human interference that is commonly associated with wilderness preserves. When wilderness areas are created it is not possible to remain faithful to a pre-human environmental stasis (see Cronon 1996). Though an invasive species, starlings have established themselves as part of the behavioral environment and have to be recognized as such.<sup>63</sup>



Figure 3.6: “The Black Sun,” courtesy of Bjarne Winklerom, <http://www.epod.usra.edu>, 2007

Imagine for a moment the multiple networks that led eighty individual birds from a passing reference in Hamlet IV, into the imagination and possession of Schieffelin, to eventually conquer a few square miles in Southeastern Michigan. The sheer complexity of these chains of selection and intervention illustrate the extent to which humans and non-humans and the encompassing ecological relations that join

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<sup>63</sup> This is even more the case for some American farmers. Starlings are most deplored for their tendency to spread disease among livestock; consequently they are a constant threat that has to be adjusted to in daily farm life.

them together merge into biopolitical arrangements that are global in scale. Like dogs, birds embody in the flesh the histories and connections that have made them possible (Haraway 2003:98). Each starling embodies the socio-natural history of expansion and settlement across the continental U.S. (Crosby 1986). Their current abundance attests to the dramatic reshaping of the North American continent over several centuries of European inhabitation.

In this sense, the place of Four Corners as a site for birds, whether they attract wonder or scorn, is part of a politics of landscape that goes beyond specific sites, regardless of how they are contained from the surrounding environment. The strange history of starlings demonstrates the degree to which given behavioral environments are not static and isolated contexts made fully predictable by evolutionary law, but rather constantly changing behavioral fields. The presence of the European starling in southeastern Michigan dilates the spacetime of Four Corners outward, into a deeper set of geographical and historical interconnections. The part the Four Corners plays in rural locales, discussed at length in the last chapter, is confirmed by the radical transformations they introduce in local ecologies, which continue to develop into new dynamics and relationships beyond the square mile where landfill workers directly operate. The political ecologies of landfills run amok in the actions of non-human creatures, like gulls, eagles, and starlings, demonstrating on yet another level the complex and unforeseen changes landfills introduce into the surrounding landscape, even if operating according to an ethos of protection.

## Conclusion

Challenging the distinction between growing and making, Tim Ingold argues that the creation of form is not the imposition of a transcendent designer's will – whether it be that of a genetic formula in the DNA or volition in the human brain – but a process with its own immanent potential. A weaver creating a basket does not impose a standardized form onto the materials with which they work, for “in weaving, a surface is built up rather than transformed, and the spiral form of the basket emerges through the rhythmic repetition of movement in the weaving, rather in the weaver's mind” (Ingold 2000:290).

In a similar way, I want to suggest that landfills are not merely the imposition of a human technological design onto a raw material substrate, made up of land, water, air, microorganisms, birds and the like. Rather, the specific rhythms of these environmental conditions and creatures help contribute to the form that the landfill eventually takes. Moving across the surface of the landfill in pick-up trucks or sitting alone in their windowless offices, the managerial and technical staff at Four Corners plan each project based on what is available, adapting their approach to each task as needed. In so doing, they are not *controlling* but *relying on* accumulated histories at different timescales – of migratory bird patterns, microbial colonies, geological deposits of clay and sand, and water flow above and below the surface. In doing so, they draw the landfill deeper into a array of ecological relations and possibilities of which their designs or government regulations form only a part.

Social theorist Barbara Adam points out that the depth of entanglement between intervening industry and local ecology creates unanticipated and open-ended possibilities.

Each technological in(ter)vention, once released into the socio-cultural fabric and its environment, has an impact of open-ended duration and scale that is unbounded in time and space. Its un/identified effects, in turn, constitute the conditions for further in(ter)ventions and actions. [1998:35]

Indeed, what most alarms Four Corners' critics is that no one knows what hazards the landfill *might* cause in the future. Suggesting solutions to the problems presented by landfills are as difficult for regulators and environmental activists as they are for landfill workers themselves. Surrounded by such a complex array of processes and entities, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish disease from cure.

It often seems as if the world works against the intentions of landfill technicians – weather conditions, thermodynamics, fluid and solid mechanics, and anaerobic digestion are simultaneously lawful components harnessed within landfill subsystems *and* unpredictable forces that are frequently blamed when systems break down or hazardous symptoms appear. From the perspective of local residents and environmental activists opposed to Four Corners, by contrast, the ambiguity of responsibility may make landfill management or shareholders seem assignable for any and all blame.<sup>64</sup> In certain moments landfill hazards tend to be interpreted as signs that evoke interpretations of hidden intent. On the same day that Cory might comment with frustration that the prevailing winds and high temperature will inevitably cause odor problems in the community to the northeast, one can hear people in that community voice their anger that the landfill company has *let this happen*.

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<sup>64</sup> This is also the perspective of some landfill workers, particularly laborers who tend to see every problem at the landfill as a consequence of managerial mistakes. For more on worker dynamics, see Chapter Four.

This tendency toward ecological entanglement is present in a variety of industries, moreover, and is not limited to sanitary landfills, per se. As Confined Animal Feeding Units (CAFOs) have become popular in the American meat industry, for example, they have attracted regulatory attention as sites of pollution and environmental risk, primarily due to their water runoff discharge and gas emissions (Donham et al. 2007). Like landfills, they too attract local opposition, develop in rural areas, and attempt to operate according to a model of containment. New “sealed dairies” are now being developed, for example, that are meant to recycle and reuse waste products in a variety of ways so that they do not escape the site of the CAFO and impact its surroundings (Beals, email forward, November 20, 2007). If contemporary sanitary landfills are a model, one would expect these efforts to new forms of political ecology that extend the depth of human-environmental relations even as they potentially increase the unpredictable arrangements such relations might eventually adopt and the consequences it might lead to, as yet unseen.

In such contexts, teasing apart the agency or influence of non-human beings, ecology, machines, and people is of concern for environmental critics, government regulators, and technicians and practitioners alike, it is no less of concern for those employed by these industries, moreover. As I explain in the next chapter, landfill workers are deeply interested in such matters as they relate to their own expressions of autonomy in and around the workplace.

## Chapter IV

### Expressing Autonomy: Class Struggles at Work and Home

One afternoon, Timer and I were finishing our work routine at Four Corners when we spotted his brother Mac speeding toward us in the old landfill pickup known as “the flatbed.” We were moving slowly around the northeastern base of the landfill, dragging the bags of paper and plastic we had picked out of the drainage ditch and leaving them alongside the dirt road for collection. The garbage bags were waterlogged and heavy and it was nearly time to clock out for the day, so Timer and I were pleased to have the opportunity to “bullshit” with his brother rather than work.

As we approached the driver’s side window of the flatbed it became apparent that Mac was agitated: his voice was high and shaky and his hands held the steering wheel in a tight, white-knuckle grip. Mac was supposed to be picking steel up top that day – a task done periodically to protect landfill vehicles from the metallic detritus scattered around the dumping area. Instead, he was using the flatbed to do a job usually performed at the start of the night shift: collecting bags, like ours, that had been picked and left by the roadside. This small act of rebellion came as a surprise to me because, of the two brothers, Mac was generally regarded as the more cool-headed and obedient one. He had his gripes about landfill management, to be sure, but nearly all employees were known to “bitch” about those in charge on occasion.

Then as now, most employee complaints were about Bob, everyone's immediate boss, who was often accused of working people too hard, favoring his friends ("Bob's boys") above others, and ignoring employee concerns.<sup>65</sup> During my first few months at Four Corners, Mac's complaints about Bob usually had to do with the latter's role as his de facto landlord. Mac lived in an old farmhouse on the landfill property that had been vacated when County Services bought the land in the early nineties. Occupied for several years by Mac and his mother, then by he and his dog Bea after her death, the house meant a great deal to him, even though its location was a source of periodic conflict. That day, Mac was particularly upset about the new metal fence that had been constructed around the perimeter of the landfill property earlier that year.<sup>66</sup> A large, locked gate now blocked access to Mac's driveway from the road and the landfill management wanted to begin locking it every night. "What if I am expecting company?" he had asked the security guard the night before our encounter, "How are people supposed to know I'm home?" Mac planned to speak to Big Daddy the next morning in order to resolve the matter, but after returning home that afternoon he was infuriated to discover that someone had locked the gate again. From his perspective, Bob and the landfill company were disregarding his personal stake in the property. "I feel like a damn prisoner in my own house!" he shouted to us from the flatbed, "They don't see it – *this is where I live!*"

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<sup>65</sup> Many employees at Four Corners insist that Bob is responsible for most of their ills. Some blame him personally for this, while others claim that being in his position changes people. It is clear, for example, that past operations managers have been criticized in similar ways.

<sup>66</sup> The fence was required by Michigan's Department of Environmental Quality to prevent illegal dumping and improve site security. The previous year, someone had snuck onto Four Corners and vandalized the "roach coach" (a trailer located on site that sells food to employees), which at that time was owned and operated by the wife of Bob, the landfill operations manager. Most believe that to have been the act of a disgruntled ex-employee, but not long before that someone had torched two of the larger, expensive tippers in what most landfill employees describe as a politically motivated act (most likely a response to Four Corners' reliance on the importation of Canadian waste).

Mac described himself to us as “hot,” a term I later heard used by some of the other employees.<sup>67</sup> By this he did not simply mean that he was angry, but that the strength of his anger was such that he was unable to restrain it: “I don’t give a *fuck!*” he yelled, “I’ll tell those motherfuckers *exactly* what I think!” The problem for Mac was that verbally abusing management could get one fired, something all of us were well aware of. Seeing how upset he was, Timer and I attempted to “cool” Mac down, calmly instructing him to be careful before “doing something [he’d] regret.”<sup>68</sup> At the same time, by showing respect for the dangerousness of Mac’s emotional state, we offered a less risky form of self-validation. The virtue of being taken for “hot” is that it makes a person seem primed for action, without requiring that they actually make good on their threats.<sup>69</sup> Thus, what workers are eager to express in such instances is not agency as such (i.e., the generic capacity to act), but agency as conceptualized in terms of overcoming constraint, which I gloss in this chapter as *autonomy*.

There are a number of ways of defining autonomy, but one helpful philosophical sense of the term comes from Isaiah Berlin’s (1969) notion of “negative liberty,” that is, the freedom from interference to do as one desires.<sup>70</sup> Others have since argued that the problem of freedom should be considered separately from that of autonomy of the will, or “self-rule” prior to any constraint imposed by others (see Christman 1988). I use freedom and autonomy interchangeably in the pages that

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<sup>67</sup> There were other terms for the same condition. Eddy, who was the youngest landfill employee at 19, was more likely to describe people as “pissed” in an exaggerated tone for effect – e.g. “Bob is piiiissed.”

<sup>68</sup> Though Timer also seemed intent on goading his brother on with phrases like “I’d say something if I were you...”

<sup>69</sup> Another practice that fulfills a similar purpose is the tendency for landfill workers to say, “I almost said something to him about that,” or a variation thereof, to indicate the potential for action without the necessity of performing it.

<sup>70</sup> This he contrasted with positive liberty, which is closer to the Kantian notion of individual autonomy of the will (Berlin 1969).

follow because I want to show that expressions of autonomy among workers at Four Corners are in fact bound to a relational theory of agency as “freedom from,” in particular, freedom from the hidden injuries and indignities of class structure and ideology (cf. Sennett and Cobb 1993).

One of the reasons being “hot” makes sense as a marked type of behavior at Four Corners, for example, is that it is set against the everyday reality of worker passivity, as commoditized labor power pressed in the service of capital. Many of my coworkers professed frustration or annoyance with our bosses much of the time, but most seemed to tacitly agree that very little could be said or done about it, at least in the presence of management. I was actually somewhat incredulous during our encounter with Mac that afternoon, not because I thought his complaint was illegitimate, but because he and other workers often “talked shit” about landfill managers without ever acting on their threats. Despite his bravado, Mac never did confront Bob that day – he claims that Bob knew to avoid him, which is why they never crossed paths. Similarly, Timer promised for weeks that he would call the fire department on Bob for burning wood in his yard which, like Mac’s, was situated close to the landfill; on a regular basis Eddy claimed that he would one day snap and “tell off” Bob, “beat his ass,” or blow something up.<sup>71</sup> In fact, almost everyone I met in the field – opponents or employees of the landfill – regularly insisted that they always “spoke their mind” and didn’t care what “other people” thought.

What I failed to appreciate at the time was the extent to which claims of autonomy were just that, a form of talk that was significant regardless of whether or

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<sup>71</sup> During my time at Four Corners, I heard of only one instance where a confrontation did take place; the laborer I had replaced was a former employee that challenged Bob to a fight the year before I started, after coming into work drunk and angry at having been told to pick paper.

not the threatened actions were carried out. Isaiah Berlin's notion of negative liberty has the virtue of making autonomy relational, but portrays others as serving primarily as barriers to freedom.<sup>72</sup> Social interlocutors are also important for autonomy because they serve as audiences who "co-author" the interaction, as did Timer and I with Mac (see Duranti and Brenneis 1986). As the moral philosopher Stephen Darwall argues, "To make a claim to anything, hence to autonomy, is to take up a second-person standpoint. It is to address a claim or demand to someone as a rational and free agent" (2006:264). We might take issue with what "rationality" and "freedom" mean here, but this interpretation is helpful insofar as it makes autonomy a matter of performative claims made to others.<sup>73</sup>

That such an elaborate way of asserting autonomy should have a place in Mac's social repertoire at the workplace is indicative of its importance as a form of talk at Four Corners. While only a few employees have ever lived in proximity to the landfill, neither Mac's problem nor his particular solution were especially unique. Achieving a socially recognizable sense of autonomy was a concern for the great majority of landfill employees. None of the people with whom I worked, nor those in the surrounding town that I met, liked being "told what to do," and they prided themselves in being empowered to choose their own path in life and enable the same for their children. Not surprisingly, such people are ambivalent about working for others, since it grants a sense of empowerment in certain respects, providing

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<sup>72</sup> Indeed, behind Berlin's philosophical project was an explicit desire to avoid the totalitarian forms of social control witnessed in the twentieth century.

<sup>73</sup> In this sense, considerations of autonomy are useful to supplement discussions of agency in the social sciences, which tends to focus on who has it rather than who facilitates or constrains it. Also, as Laura Ahearn (2001a) notes, agency too often loses its connection to sociality and becomes reduced to "free will" or "resistance" in the literature.

employees with income and occasional job satisfaction, and yet is also a source of periodic frustration and indignity. The result is that many are forced to adopt careful strategies to save face in front of coworkers, such as making a display of how “hot” they are in lieu of a risky confrontation with the boss.

In this chapter, I examine struggles to construct meaningful and socially recognizable forms of autonomy as they mediate different kinds of relations at Four Corners. In particular, I am interested in how powerful tropes of individual freedom and choice become part of interactions with various objects and others, from machines and money to family and management. I trace how these different attachments and entanglements evoke relations of class and kin in and outside of the capitalist workplace. Mac’s disobedient use of the truck worked as an assertion of individual autonomy, for example, by making reference to “nested hierarchies” (Gell 1998:55) of agent-patient relations at Four Corners, specifically, of class relations mediated by vehicles and skill. Through a discussion of class as it relates to different forms of movement at Four Corners, I find that agency is framed and expressed differently, and different forms of alienation and enjoyment are possible, dependent upon whether a landfill worker moves about primarily on foot, in Ford trucks, or in large machines. I argue, furthermore, that this differentiation of agentic possibility reflects with and reproduces a class structure.

It is important to note that Mac risks all of this (i.e., his attachments to the forms of class agency available to him) for the sake of even more important social attachments and obligations – to his house, his dog, and his mother’s memory. In the second half of this chapter, I consider how employment at the landfill becomes part of

additional claims of autonomy, this time not from managers, but from the pollution adhering to the maligned status of “waste worker.” I argue that those landfill workers aspiring towards middle-classness express their dreams of middle class autonomy in terms of caring for their households and uplifting their children to the status of middle class professionals, forms of expression that involve their own contradictions and constraints. I follow Bradd Shore (2003:8-9) in depicting American Middle-classness as fundamentally “aspirational” in nature, in other words, as being directed toward future becoming. In the case of those waste workers, especially the equipment operators, who maintain an ambivalent hold on their class identity due to the polluting nature of their work, I argue that their aspirations center critically on the possibilities afforded to the next generation, who alone can provide further expression of their father’s autonomy by acquiring unequivocally middle class careers in “clean” professions.

This second half, on earnings and kin, will be mostly devoted to the machine operators, who are more apt to have middle class aspirations, while the first half, on skills and movement, will be more closely devoted to the laborers, with whom I spent most of my time and whose labor I understand far better. Together, these different approaches form a portrait of class structure and class ideology as it affects landfill workers.

#### Freedom From: Class Relations and Theories of Agency

Behind Mac’s claim that he was “hot” was an implicit theory of agency and class conflict. If the generic capacity for “agency” is often taken as a basic category of human action, then describing specific theories of agency is a way of addressing

how different people interpret and realize that capacity (see Ahearn 2001a, 2001b). Mac believed that through his anger, through being hot, he was empowered to express things and act out in ways that were normally restrained. He told us, for example, that even before he'd decided to disregard Bob's order to pick steel, he'd been driving the flatbed in an erratic fashion: "I was so pissed I went *bahaing* down the south road, man."<sup>74</sup> Mac implied that he did this specifically so that Bob would take notice and "start up" with him. It is unclear whether Bob actually found out about Mac's transgressions, but that is beside the point. *Bahaing* in the truck was meant more as a subtle demonstration of Mac's autonomy, his freedom from Bob who, as an agent of the landfill company, dominated his work life and was attempting to exert more control over his home life. "You know what they're tryin' to do," Timer had said to his brother that afternoon, "They're tryin to get me to leave," he'd responded. Indeed, not long after the dispute Mac did move out and, within a few months, the old house would be demolished and a new leachate collection tank would stand in its place.<sup>75</sup>

Struggles to convey a sense of autonomy from others to others are partially related to the individualism for which the U.S. has been known since the early nineteenth century (see de Tocqueville [1835] 2004; Bellah et al. 1986). As I see it, however, representations of autonomy in American public life are sometimes better

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<sup>74</sup> To "baha" in a landfill vehicle usually meant having fun with it, revving the engine, speeding, or intentionally spinning on mud or ice, but what all of these share in common is their opposition to the approved uses of equipment as dictated by landfill management. I was once mistakenly assumed to be *bahaing* in a landfill truck during one of the colder parts of the winter. Big Daddy saw me go into a spin near the Maintenance Building and assumed it was intentional on my part, whereas from my perspective it was a consequence of the ice-covered roads. Still, what the vehicle did in my hands was interpreted as an act of rebellious play. I reacted to news of Big Daddy's accusation as I had learned to do from my coworkers, by saying "I don't give a fuck what he thinks" to their amusement.

<sup>75</sup> I discuss what became of Mac after he moved out in more detail at the end of the next chapter.

understood as a veiled way of talking about what is at stake in class relations. In a sense, ideas about “individual freedom,” “character,” and “choice” are prominent ways of interpreting the class dynamics of American society. One could characterize different forms of American individualism (in their social Darwinist or neoliberal variations, for example) as shaping prevailing perceptions of class phenomena, in the same way that linguistic ideologies mediate awareness of linguistic phenomena (see Woolard and Schieffelin 1994; Irvine and Gal 2000).<sup>76</sup> Historically, more analytical focus has been given to class-consciousness, especially after Lukacs (1971), and less to people’s lived consciousness of class itself, including how these mediate expectations, interests, and struggles in everyday life within capitalist social formations (see Lipuma and Meltzoff 1989).

Marx ([1867] 1990) makes clear in *Capital* that wage labor, the central feature of capitalist production, is characterized by the sale of agentive potential (i.e., labor power) to others. He was even more precise about the gradual evacuation of human agency throughout the successive transformations that make up the labor process. In later phases of capitalist valorization, the managerial class and the means of production come to possess an alien power over real laboring people: “The objective conditions of living labour capacity are presupposed as independent existences confronting it, as the objectivity of a subject distinct from living labour capacity and independently confronting it” (Marx [1857-8] 1993:462). *Alienation* is the process by

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<sup>76</sup> That autonomy is intimately bound with class is apparent across different schools of thought on the subject. I discuss Marx’s well-known investment in a particular vision of human autonomy further below. While Weber tends to describe class according to one’s “life chances,” rather than as a product of one’s relationship to the mode of production, per se, the consequences for individual autonomy in a classed society are much the same (see Hall 1997). In Bourdieu’s (1984) approach to social distinction, finally, class positionality becomes inscribed upon the embodied dispositions of actors and is evident at the most mundane level as the “tastes” they demonstrate through their patterns of consumption.

which living labor is beholden to the variety of capital forms “it” creates or labors upon and is then separated from (Carrier 1992:540). Many of the disputes concerning Mac’s house, for example, had to do with the encroachment of “the landfill,” as both alien product and powerful agent, on what he felt was his home (the conflict over the gate was no different).

But there are multiple ways of understanding autonomy and domination in the capitalist workplace that complicate the standard Marxian framework. In fact, the reason why “alienation” describes Mac’s situation so well is because this way of thinking shares with workers at Four Corners a similar set of background assumptions, what Webb Keane calls “semiotic ideology” (2003b:419; 2007:16-21), concerning, among other things, what qualifies as a legitimate social actor, what is merely acted upon, and what the appropriate relationship between them should consist in. Marxian categories of objectification, reification, and fetishism describe processes by which the agency of persons is short circuited through the (wrongful) apotheosis of things into person-like agents and vice versa. It is this set of background assumptions behind theories of alienation that provide them with their humanist persuasiveness (see Fromm 1961) and, some argue, make Marxian value theory inadequate for understanding places where alternative views of persons, actions, and relations prevail (Strathern 1988, but see Graeber 2001).

From an alternative yet complementary perspective, one could argue that enchainment in relations with social others and objects is a necessary precondition for the expression of agency, even in the capitalist workplace, and not only a possible barrier toward achieving it. Generally speaking, asserting autonomy is fraught due to

a reliance on “objective” (i.e., social and material) testaments to one’s individual power. As Webb Keane writes, in reference to the problem of establishing sincerity in acts of Christian conversion, “attempts to produce and sustain a relatively autonomous subject” can be troublesome for this very reason (2007:197). He adds, “The trouble is partly due to the clash between the presumed immateriality of that subject and the inescapably social and material character of those representational practices by which that ideal autonomy is made inhabitable” (2007:197-8). From the perspective of a particular semiotic ideology, one which places faith in an immaterial, divine agency above that of humans, the vagaries of representation place claims to autonomy or agency at risk, but they also invariably make such claims possible.

Consider, once again, Mac’s struggle against landfill management described above. In order to seem hot, Mac had to rely on different social forms and interlocutors. It was not enough to take the flatbed, Mac also called on me to verify his misuse of the truck, “Josh was there, he seen me do it.” I hadn’t actually seen it, but it was clearly important for him that I serve as witness to his act of defiance, so I nodded in agreement, thereby substantiating that he was indeed “hot.”

Becoming “hot” is a peculiar way to assert one’s autonomy, as it seems to involve a sense of agency and patiency in the same social actor, what from the Marxian view might appear to be a form of would-be social praxis corrupted by alienation. According to Alfred Gell (1998:21-3), patiency is the relational counterpart to agency insofar as someone *doing* requires a something *being done to*. But, in the case of being hot, there is an odd sense in which a person is being compelled to act and willfully acting at the same time. Mac claimed to be collecting

bags partially in the hopes that his boss would *force him* into a verbal confrontation. Being “hot” seems to involve a heightened sense of autonomy (i.e., a professed willingness to do and say what one wants in the face of social constraint) only through *submission* to ones allegedly “uncontrollable” emotional state. When one is “hot,” passion and action are not mutually exclusive, but relationally inform one another (see also Jackson 2002:340-1).

In what follows, I will consider other examples of autonomy expressed through interaction with social objects and others and the different problems and possibilities they introduce into social life at Four Corners.

### Social Objects in Class Structure

In this section, I would like to introduce the class structure of a typical landfill through a discussion of the relationship between autonomy and different objectual forms and relations associated with landfill labor. In particular, I will describe how class relations are not only expressed but also constituted through worker attachment to different ways of moving about the landfill and the social objects and skills associated with them. I will begin by discussing the general status differences among the various occupations at Four Corners, including their relationship to age and gender, and gradually delve into greater detail through consideration of the job with which I became most familiar, that of landfill laborer or “paper picker.”

### Indoor versus Outdoor Work in the Division of Landfill Labor

There are three basic kinds of workers employed at Four Corners and similar sites: a handful of managers, sales people and technical specialists who oversee and

structure day to day operations; a few dozen operators and laborers who move, sort and transform waste in various ways; and small groups of mechanics, office staff and other internal service workers who are responsible for maintaining or provisioning the labor of other employees, either by providing them with functioning machines and orderly work spaces or handling payroll and other clerical duties. In separating these different groups of workers in this way I am attempting to outline the complex class structure at Four Corners – and most other major landfills – according to relative distinctions in levels of skill, earned income, and professionalization, what Erik Olin Wright (1985) describes as the different “assets” that determine class position in combination. Like Wright’s, my approach to class positionality is relational, insofar as I interpret the relative constraints and advantages of different occupations with respect to one another.

During the time I worked there, management at Four Corners was composed of Big Daddy (the general manager), Bob (the manager of operations), and Doug (landfill supervisor and assistant to Bob). At any given time, one or more environmental and sales specialists were employed who worked at several sites owned by the landfill company but used Four Corners as their base of operations, as it required most of their attention on a day to day basis. Together, these managers and specialists receive upper middle class salaries, ranging from seventy-five to one hundred thousand dollars annually, are most likely to receive promotion to positions of greater authority and power within the landfill company and have the greatest job security. Though I have lumped them together here, as exemplars of the so-called “professional-managerial class” (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1977), the environmental

and sales personnel hold more specialized positions and require college degrees, whereas managers may not (e.g., Bob began as a laborer with no college degree, as he is fond of telling people). Moreover, this difference in what Wright (1985) calls “occupational assets” is typically reflected in earned income – though Bob has more responsibility, seniority, and authority than Corey, he makes considerably less than his associate. It is also worth noting that from the very beginning of Four Corners’ existence these positions have only been filled by men, though women have occasionally applied.

Outside professional and managerial workers, every position at Four Corners involves people with seniority paired with new, younger employees in training, usually in their early to mid twenties. Seniority is typically reflected in one’s hourly wage, such that a new laborer will make just over nine dollars an hour while a senior one will make twelve or more; similarly, a new operator currently earns \$18.25 per hour while a “lead man” will earn as much as a dollar an hour more. Because of these veteran/trainee relationships, one need not have had prior training before beginning in any of these positions and, consequently, upward mobility between different jobs is not uncommon. At the time I began working at Four Corners, three machine operators had previously been laborers and one had once worked at the scale house; moreover, one of the mechanics had also begun at the scale house and Bob the manager had been a laborer and an operator at one time. While only very few

employees think they are likely to get promoted to a managerial position, some expect promotion of some kind as a matter of course.<sup>77</sup>

One of the more obvious limits to such internal mobility is one's gender. While there have been female laborers and male scale house operators in the past, both involving incidents of alleged sexual harassment, most occupations are strictly divided according to gender, as it was during my tenure at Four Corners. All three mechanics are male, for example, two (Roy and Jerry) are certified mechanics with years of experience at or approaching middle age and one (Zack) is in his early twenties and still considering alternative career paths. Another example comes from the scale-house operators, who deal with incoming trucks as they enter the landfill, weighing, inspecting, and admitting them to the site. At the time of my study, all three were women, varying from middle age to college age. At "4000," the administrative building of Four Corners, located in an old farmhouse on the southern portion of the property, three female administrators handle all clerical work, two of whom (Henrietta and Andrea) are middle-aged and one of whom (Susan) is in her early twenties.

Working at 4000 and the Scale House share in common a number of work conditions that relate to ideologies of work and gender. In terms of actual labor, both involve a great deal of paperwork to record and structure various financial and material transactions on behalf of state regulatory agencies and the landfill company. Even more importantly, both jobs keep them indoors for the most part, outside of direct contact with other, predominantly male landfill employees. The one woman

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<sup>77</sup> As I will explain further below, the last laborer fired before I began my job had felt entitled to a position as a mechanic, so much so that he openly quarreled with Bob about it, which led to his termination.

who is most visible to male workers is Tanya, the owner and operator of the Snack Shack trailer parked along the access road at the base of the landfill. Though confined to the trailer most of the day, truck drivers and landfill workers treat Tanya as if she is more on display than other female employees, though this she seems to openly cultivate this attention through her provocative style of dress and mildly flirtatious behavior. Her playful interactions with the workers tend to hinge on her presence both inside and outside their workspace.

The pressure for women to remain “indoors” at Four Corners in terms of their occupations is strong enough that there has never been a female operator or manager at the site, or at many others I have visited. Nor is this entirely accidental. When one of the scale-house operators applied for the job of landfill supervisor that eventually went to Doug in 2005, she was not considered ostensibly because of her lack of field experience outside the scale house, even though it was well known that Doug knew less about landfills and had never worked for the company.

Those who have worked in the scale house or 4000, men and women, agree that one advantage is that one can avoid, for the most part, working in filth. Less remarked upon, but obviously advantageous, is the relative absence from managerial authority, which allows these workers to more freely converse with one another and take breaks throughout the day. These same advantages, coupled with the perceived comfort of being indoors, are what make clerical work at 4000 and the scale house seem boring or confining from the point of view of other, typically male landfill employees. In their explanation of why they like the work they do, many operators and laborers express distaste for “office work,” which they characterize disparagingly

as “pushing paper” all day. In other words, what appears as agency from one perspective – isolation from managerial authority – is seen as a greater form of constraint from another – confinement indoors.

Interestingly, this same kind of labor is associated with sales and technical people, who also work indoors – the former in a trailer situated alongside 4000 and the latter in an office attached to the maintenance building – dress in office attire, command their own schedules for the most part, and do a great deal of paperwork. It is not rare to hear a landfill worker impugn the masculinity of these better-paid workers, but in other ways they are able to signal their class distinction from both female clerical staff and other landfill employees through their free use of vehicles, which gives them unrestricted access to indoor and outdoor domains, an important part of work life at Four Corners to which I turn below.

#### Machine Movement and Skill

Outside those in management, specialists, like mechanics, and women, all remaining employees of Four Corners are either laborers or machine operators.<sup>78</sup> At the time of my employment at Four Corners, there were seven laborers and seventeen machine operators, all of them men ranging in age from nineteen to sixty-eight. Unlike those mentioned previously, these workers, who labor with waste more directly than do the others, spend the vast majority of their time outside around the landfill site or “up top” in the dumping area. While all share this in common and tend to look down on “indoor” office work as boring, if not emasculating, they are further differentiated according to skill and, crucially, their typical forms of movement.

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<sup>78</sup> The one exception was a laborer, Neil, who worked part time and predominantly indoors as the site custodial worker.

Landfill workers do not often discuss earnings and when they do typically only to those within their class grouping. At the workplace, a characteristic that expresses class rank better than any other between workers is the separation of those who are assigned work vehicles (or possess their own, exclusive vehicles) and those who remain primarily on foot. Management, for example, is characterized by the appearance of complete freedom and speed of motion, exemplified by their ability to freely roam the site in their individual pickup trucks.<sup>79</sup> These vehicles are in a very real sense, extensions of their agency and authority. Big Daddy has several vehicles for himself and no one else, some of which he never drives at all, excessive capacity for motion serves as a clear representation of his exclusive status. Bob has “his office,” which is only rarely driven by others, and for Doug it is much the same. I can personally attest to the apparent “secondary agency” (Gell 1998:20) possessed by these individual work trucks. When on occasion I was instructed to wash them, I was keenly aware of the agency of their owners extended through the machines left in my care – it as made clear to me that if I didn’t do a good enough job I would be making *them* look bad and might face ridicule as a consequence.

Sales associates and environmental specialists, like Corey, signal their superiority by taking their own vehicles, rarely seen, that they use to tour the site with clients and visitors. In each of these cases, there is no one overlooking their use of the vehicle, concerned whether they are using time appropriately or where they are headed. When I have driven with Bob, on occasion, this relative freedom became evident in his exploratory and carefree way of crossing the landfill. Especially when

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<sup>79</sup> At one time there was a similar vehicle given to laborers, but now only a privileged few are allowed to drive on site on a regular basis, though never with the same degree of autonomy as management.

up top, Bob was creative with his use of his vehicle – the routes he would take and the places he would venture were very spontaneous, sometimes alarmingly so. Riding along the rough terrain up top, near the edge of the landfill, Bob would drive with reckless abandon, making quick turns and venturing to areas with no clear vehicular pathway.<sup>80</sup>

The ability for management and others similarly empowered to roam freely is expressed not only through their ability to move quickly, but also to park in place for long stretches of time. Not moving is as clear a sign of agency as one can display at a busy worksite. I remember being nervous while working in sight of a parked row of SUVs up on the hill, which I assumed was a caravan of corporate personnel sitting and watching me, but later discovered was a group of college students on a tour with Corey. I had learned to fear parked vehicles from Timer, Mac and the other laborers with whom I worked. Seeing Doug, Bob, or Big Daddy's parked trucks up on the hillside was a sign that one was under scrutiny and had to work hard. Of course, this stillness can just as easily be used in forms of critique; a number of my coworkers insist that they have caught managers sleeping on the slope in their trucks on occasion – power to hold still becomes associated with potential for laziness.

Free to move and free to hold still, higher status workers are allowed greater autonomy in using their individually assigned vehicles. Operators and mechanics, on the other hand, must work in sedentary locations – either up top, in the shop, or

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<sup>80</sup> Part of this freedom of movement has to do with the faced-face nature of a manager or supervisor's day. The garbage keeps coming, after all, and they are obliged to keep up with it, moving from one part of the site to another, directing routine operations and special tasks, and solving problems as they arise. For this reason people like Bob are always engaged with their employees via their company Nextel phones, which essentially function like walkie-talkies, even if they are not managing them face to face.

working in or in between assigned workspaces on site. Machine operators may not be given the same vehicles each time, furthermore, and the machine to which they are assigned by management for that day will determine their degree of movement, to a great extent. If one is assigned to the loaders to haul dirt, to the roll off truck to empty the dumpsters from the citizen's ramp, or to the water wagon to recirculate leachate up top and dispense water on the roads, the task involves moving back and forth along designated routes, sometimes for the entire day. If one is dumping tractor-trailer loads on the tippers, flattening and sorting waste on the dozers and compactors, or digging in the excavator, then work is more stationery and movement is equally repetitive.

Operating vehicles, therefore, could easily create alienation at the workplace, of separation from ones work materials and products. But operators find additional ways to make the machines their own, replacing some of their alienness as company property with a sense of familiarity. It is one thing to learn to use a machine, which many operators learn to do through proper training. It is quite another thing to inhabit a machine that feels like one's own on a day-to-day basis, which many have learned how to do as well. Many operators keep things in their machines, stashed away for distraction or entertainment, like cigarettes, food and drink, or pornography. Machines become less like reified persons, in a Marxian sense, and more like the secondary agents described by Alfred Gell (1998) in his discussion of art objects. In the hands of a skillful operator, they are extensions of human agency and the work they accomplish together serves as an index of the capacities of the operator and not the machine alone.

At the same time this is a joint process, one in which both machine and person act as patient and agent in different ways. These are what Gell calls “nested hierarchies” of agent/patient relations (1998:55). After all, the machine pre-existed the operator, he had to grow accustomed to it. In another sense, any work accomplished by the two of them can be attributed to the supervisor or manager (insofar as the latter can be credited when accidents are avoided and productivity is high). And, ultimately, their continued relationship, based on skillful operation and skillful machine design and construction though it may be, is financed by the landfill company, which takes much of the credit and blame for what operators accomplish with their vehicles, particularly the mountains of waste they form.

But this alienness of landfill machines, their immense size and ability to reshape the earth according to the landfill company’s designs, can be awe-inspiring too. A number of landfill workers expressed to me their love of landfill machinery, their intricate forms and awesome power. The vast majority of operators have worked either in construction or on farms prior to working at Four Corners, and both of these activities require familiarity with machines of different kinds, including admiration for the skillful operation of a vehicle.<sup>81</sup> The enjoyment that operators can derive from their jobs, the same enjoyment that attracted many of them to pursue such a career, is as much an element in the reproduction of class as is, say, the education system (see Bourdieu and Passerson 1979; Willis 1977).

Appreciation for large machines and the work people can do with them is a very different way of deriving enjoyment from labor that I came to know as a laborer at Four Corners. Those who have remained laborers for many years have had the

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<sup>81</sup> For more on this, see the following chapter.

opportunity to turn down work as an operator, in fact, choosing instead the freedoms and indignities associated with the form of movement and skill that characterizes their work at Four Corners. To explain why they should turn down better wages, benefits, overtime pay, and union membership to remain laborers requires a better understanding of the claims of autonomy recognized by those with the lowliest occupation at any landfill.

“All we know is trees and mud”: Life on Foot

For nine months I worked at Four Corners as a laborer, the lowest paid and least skilled position at most landfills (and in other domains of the construction industry more generally). The tasks of laborers vary from day to day but mostly consist in walking the roads and slopes and bagging stray litter. Though laborers are considered relatively “unskilled,” they develop provisional expertise in a wide array of odd jobs, and though they have no official rank a select few are chosen by management for more interesting tasks, resulting in a certain amount of internal resentment and envy.

“Paper picking,” as it is called, is one of the basic tasks of laborers.<sup>82</sup> Because it is also one of the least desirable tasks, it serves as a way of ranking them as well. Including myself, the laborers at Four Corners at that time were middle-aged Mac, Timer and Maurice, as well as college-age laborers like Eddy and Todd. Of the six of us, Todd was being groomed to take over the failing gas operations at the landfill and

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<sup>82</sup> Paper picker is, in fact, another name for “laborer.” And though laborers sent to pick stray garbage around the site usually bag far more than paper products, by most estimates paper makes up as much as 40% of most MSW landfills in the U.S. (Rathje and Murphy [2001]1992:103-4), so it is not a bad gloss term for garbage that wanders from the dumping area, usually by force of wind, and needs to be collected to restore tidiness to the site.

with this privilege came less paper picking as well as regular access to a vehicle. This was a subject of contention and distanced Todd more and more from the other laborers who saw his being given a work vehicle at his disposal every day as a sign that he was being treated in a more privileged way by management. Interestingly enough, the preferred way in which to criticize him was to describe in lurid detail the sexual services he allegedly provided for Bob that day – instead of extending his agency, his possession of a work vehicle was seen as something granted to him and, therefore, to his coworkers expressed the agency of management acting through him, rather than his own.

The differences between the other workers and Todd became exceedingly greater as time went on, where it seemed as if he was choosing his own work and sometimes successfully avoiding it altogether. Meanwhile, the freedoms of all other laborers were increasingly becoming subject to managerial discipline. Toward the end of my tenure as an employee, management became more and more intolerant of laborers working in small groups and insisted that we separate whenever they caught us doing so in order to stop us from talking. It became popular at that time for Mac and his brother Timer to demand to know, of no one in particular, why it was that management didn't want me talking with them. The implication was that they were a dangerous influence and that it was forbidden for a reason other than the one provided. This was never put more revealingly than when Mac turned to me and said, with a slight smile, "What are they so scared of you talking to us for, man, all we know is trees and mud!" We had spent a good deal of that mild winter in the trees along the northern edge of the property, cutting them down with small saws in

preparation for the upcoming landfill expansion. We had spent even more of it trekking through deep mud along the back roads, cursing management for not giving us a ride to our worksite or taking turns complaining about anything we could come up with, particularly if it had to do with the weather or our beleaguered bodies.

It may be that if management didn't want me talking to Mac and Timer, or any of the other seasoned laborers, *it was precisely because all they knew was the trees and the mud*. Spending all our working days on foot, engaging with our immediate environment and with each other, we established a familiarity with the landfill that was not possible for those laboring in machines. After a few months I knew the best places to go to the bathroom almost anywhere on the landfill and where to stash extra garbage bags in case I ran out or for another paper picker to use in the future. I also learned to go around back to Mac's house for water on scorching hot days, and how to avoid Bea and find the garden hose. On cold days I knew to keep moving and talking to keep from freezing, or where to duck into the trees to get out of the merciless wind. There is a great deal of flexibility that comes with life on foot, which allows laborers to control task-driven time to manipulate it to their advantage. The first time I was sent to pick garbage all alone I spent the afternoon doing as I was taught and hiding out of sight in the back woods, so that I wouldn't be found until it was quitting time. Hiding was an important part of making it through each day because, while work had to be done, constantly working on your feet, in the outdoors, nine hours a day, five or six days a week felt impossible. I learned how to plan my routes back to the shop when it was time to go or time for lunch so that I could stop

working as soon as possible and take the longest possible amount of time to get back, without being caught by management along the way.

Part of this freedom, of course, was consignment to the outdoors no matter what the conditions. As Mac occasionally put it, “We’re the landfill niggers, man.” By this he meant that as laborers we were assigned the worst tasks for the least amount of pay and recognition, at the bottom of the class structure.<sup>83</sup> A popular image used to convey this classed divide was that of the boss or operator shielded from the weather in the cabs of their vehicles during the intense heat of the summer or the bitter cold of the winter. Most laborers, by contrast, are left on foot, in the heat, the cold, the rain, and the dust, to get dirty and work to exhaustion.

Ingold describes engaging with one’s surroundings in this way as a form of “immanent sociality” (2004:328), a way of relating made possible by exploratory movement on foot. This he contrasts with movement mediated by machines, which only allow passengers to skim the surface of the landscape without participating in it more directly (Ingold 2004). There is nothing romantic about such immanence, however. It is worn on the body in the form of calluses, sunburns, cuts, and aches and pains of all kinds.<sup>84</sup> It is also reflected in the kinds of objects with which laborers tend to form the greatest attachment and through which they express their particular sense of autonomy: their boots and gloves. Eddy and Todd joked that their favorite time of year, “Christmas at the landfill,” was when the “bootmobile” came in the

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<sup>83</sup> The racialization of lowly, unskilled labor through discourse such as this has been identified throughout American working class history and, some argue, reproduces an iconic identification between “whiteness” and “good” labor (see Roediger 1991). I discuss race and racializing discourse at and around the landfill in more detail in Chapter Six.

<sup>84</sup> Some are even convinced that Four Corners is responsible for their frequent colds. They might be right, during my time there I became sick far more often than I usually do.

summer, and the landfill company pays for one new pair of boots of each worker's choice. Eddy and Todd's evident glee was not completely in jest, since the wear on a laborer's boots is drastic after a full year. On "bootmobile day," operators and other workers are far less interested, one even told me that he'd had the same pair for over five years but kept taking the new ones home anyway. Others bought boots that were impractical, some that I was explicitly warned by my coworkers not to get – steel toe boots, I was told, freeze your feet during the winter. It is similar with the cotton gloves that managers pass out at the beginning of each day to workers. Laborers often ask for an extra pair, in case they get ripped or too dirty, or for extra protection on cold days. I was overjoyed when Eddy showed me the secret location where extra gloves were kept in the shop of the maintenance building, which I had to make frequent use of to replace my own.

Laborers have additional equipment that mediates their engagement with the site. Roaming the landfill in all temperatures and conditions is enabled by dress, a crucial component of each morning's preparations for beginning work. In the summer: sunscreen, a hat, and bottled water. In the winter: hat, two pairs of gloves, two pairs of socks, long underwear, coveralls, and a thick winter jacket. Though hardly the air-conditioned cab of a vehicle, these extra garments also mediate between worker bodies and filth or weather. If one knows where to look, it is easy to see the material traces of laborers who have been in one location or another. Though their primary task is to keep the site tidy, they always seem to leave behind signature litter. Old, discarded gloves can be found almost anywhere. Mountain Dew bottles and Newport lights meant that Eddy was around, whereas Pepsi was indicative of

Mac, and Timer drank ginger ale and smoked Marlboros almost exclusively. One can find old rakes all over the site that were taken from the shop and left behind, or that were broken and then stashed away.

These engagements with the surrounding environment, an intimate understanding of certain places and routes, are constantly undone by the slow and steady changes that occur at the landfill. The woods in which we once hid, worked and went to the bathroom have now been cut down in preparation for a future cell. The process began, little by little, with myself, Mac and Timer cutting down trees one at a time. Timer had once joked that the woods were his home. Once when I went to sneak away he asked if I was using the spare or the main bathroom; later that day when we took a break he told me to join him on a log in his “living room.” “I have warm memories of these woods,” he told me wryly, “warm memories.” On another occasion, Mac told me that he felt guilty about cutting down the woods, where hawks nested and animals lived. Of course, neither he nor I really controlled the future of those woods. After I no longer worked there, a company was hired to cut the trees down with machines and the laborers were sent to accomplish a different task. These material entanglements do not merely *reflect* the division of labor at the landfill – as if they were class relations naturalized into the environment – they are actually part and parcel of what make such relations possible. Some get to build a mountain and some get trees and mud. Most laborers are paid little and are worth little because they engage in the lowliest and least skilled forms of labor, where “skill” involves learning to repair and operate machinery. Their labor appears less productive, as a consequence, and more reactive – they tidy up the landfill as others construct it.

Yet, for some laborers, this subsidiary position is preferable to one with more pay, union representation, overtime, and better benefits, such as that of an operator. Mac and Timer have worked at Four Corners for over a dozen years as laborers and had chosen never to be promoted. While we worked together side-by-side one morning, they informed me that Bob had once offered to promote them both to operators, but they had quickly turned him down. This puzzled me, knowing as I did how precarious their finances often were, and I told them as much. Some weeks later Mac and Timer brought the issue up once more, seemingly intent on providing me with a more elaborate answer. We had just arrived at work and were discussing a young operator recently fired for being involved in his third accident on site. Others were saying that it was cruel of Bob to fire him so close to Christmas, during the long off-season for construction work, and right after he had bought his first house. "See," Timer said turning toward me, "*that* is why I don't wanna be an operator. I probably could be, but I don't want to deal with Bob's shit!" On another occasion, Mac echoed his older brother's claim: it was better to remain a laborer than to submit oneself to closer supervision and evaluation. He equated becoming an operator with working directly with Bob, which we all had to do on occasion when selected for special tasks.

It was not simply that one had to work harder around the boss, rather, the problem was one of not being able to choose how hard to work and when. "Bob rides you," Mac would say, "he rides you and rides you until you can't take it no more." He and his brother liked to name people who had quit because of Bob pushing them too hard; one laborer in particular was being groomed for a promotion to a mechanic

until he lost his temper and challenged Bob to a fight.<sup>85</sup> It is not simply that Mac and Timer were avoiding further responsibility by remaining laborers; they were avoiding the further indignity of having to constantly act insincere and subservient as one of “Bob’s boys.” Originally, I had taken for granted that a promotion – any promotion – would be an improvement from being a laborer, but Mac and Timer agree that it is preferable to being a machine operator, stuck in one location all day, easily observable and highly accountable. Operators receive more discipline and are far more likely to be fired as a consequence.<sup>86</sup>

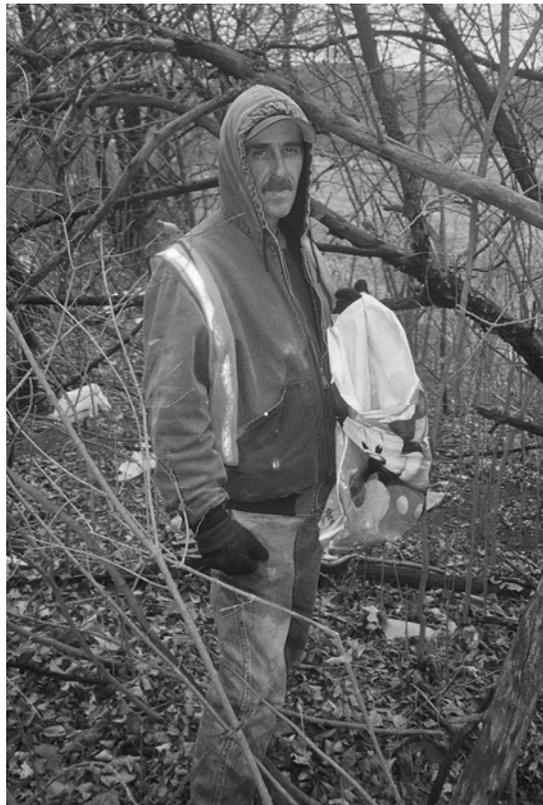


Figure 4.1: Mac in back woods picking paper

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<sup>85</sup> Those workers that did put up with the boss, including some laborers, were mocked for their apparent emasculation and labeled “cocksuckers” or “kiss asses.”

<sup>86</sup> It is also true that, making considerably less, Mac and Timer are relatively free from the possibility of layoffs. Four Corners can always run with fewer operators, but requires a least a few laborers to perform odd jobs and to maintain and landscape the vast property. This is partly why Bob had no problem hiring me, since it didn’t cost the company much and they could always use another laborer.

For Mac and Timer, the relative freedom from observation and discipline that they relish, despite its drawbacks, is not worth losing for better pay and more opportunity, but clearly not all workers would share their opinions. Aside from the joy they may experience working with machines outside, developing what they see as a bona fide skill, all operators still see work as work, that is, a compromise of their time and energy in exchange for money. For them, money affords another kind of autonomy to which I shall devote the remainder of this chapter.

### Middle Class Conflict: Families and Finances

If, as I have said, a prevailing ideology in the U.S. represents class phenomena as matters of individual autonomy and freedom of choice, then laboring with waste holds certain problems for those who do it as their profession. Working with waste is stigmatized to the extent that it involves associating with polluting matter on a regular basis, albeit to varying degrees (see Walsh 1975, Perry 1998). This is perhaps the most obvious way in which waste, as a form of abject “dirt,” adheres to people exposed to it. It is as if through their labor they exchange substance with the material and become waste themselves – worthless and without potential, human shit.

Michael Silverstein (2003) discusses a related process in his analysis of “oinoglossia” or wine talk, a discursive genre that if done correctly, can express the good taste and distinction of both the speaker and the substance they imbibe. They result is what he calls “life style emblemization” or the naturalization of class position into ones body and its seemingly refined state (2003:222). The described qualities of the wine, its body, harshness, and acidity, are taken as qualisigns embodied in the object and realized on the tongue of the taster with the wherewithal

to distinguish them. The whole performance is practical (that is indexically iconized) proof of high status:

[T]he basis for using these figurations authoritatively is the fact that, in essence, 'it takes one to know one,' that there is, in other words, a consubstantiality of inhabited/figured essence between the intentionality doing the evaluation and the object of the evaluation. [2003:226]

In a similar way, those who work with waste are seen to be infected with its seemingly sticky, malodorous, and dirty qualities. And once again, I would argue, this comes down to a matter of autonomy. Indicators of class status, like profession, are generally interpreted as a reflection of individual potential, so that there is a causal relation typically assumed to exist between the kind of job a person has and their power of will: a garbage collector must have made poor choices to wind up in their profession; a CEO must possess a quality that enables success. Employees at Four Corners must contend with a tendency for others to imagine them as having ended up in an occupation rather than having chosen it.

There are other ways in which waste seems to adhere to landfill workers. Because of the controversy surrounding Canadian waste importation to the site, those in charge are sometimes made to feel as if they are involved in a corrupt and predatory form of work. Big Daddy echoes the opinions of a number of other landfill employees when he says that such disapproval is "easier to deal with" by hiding details about your profession:

Everybody that I've run into and my wife run's into...with her job and when they find out that I work down here and we take Canadian trash, automatically everyone's against that. My method is I don't tell people where I work. Cause I don't want to get into an argument. If people ask me what I do I just tell them that I'm a construction supervisor.

For Big Daddy, this is about more than mere embarrassment:

I always feel like, you know, who else in the state of the Michigan can get up in the morning and go to work knowing that the whole state hates you: the governor hates you, the Wayne County executive hates you, the people hatechya. Who who who does that? Very few people in the state of Michigan. Most people when they get up in the morning and and get their cereal and their cup of coffee and they're getting ready to go to work they don't go to work thinking that the whole state hates them because of political and emotional issues, you know, probably not. They know that the whole state don't hate um, where you know that...here.

Like many, Big Daddy feels vilified for corporate decisions that are not under his control. The imagery in his words (“get up...get their cereal and their cup of coffee...”) reveals a desire to be recognized as normal, like all of Michigan's employed residents, as anonymous and satisfied with their daily routine. Doing a job well will never be enough, so long as others deprive him of the right to take pride in who he is through what he does.

The potential stigma of dirty work in America is not one that bothers all workers. To start with, few would regard Corey the engineer as doing dirty work. In part this is reflected by his day-to-day appearance at Four Corners – khakis, clean shoes, no gloves, and a short sleeve polo shirt. His main concern is the specialized “symbolic” labor for which he earned his college degree, pouring through regulations and dialoguing with regulatory agencies on behalf of the landfill. Corey is, in fact, known to be slightly squeamish when it comes to “germs” and told me that he hates going on the landfill for this very reason. While other employees enjoy teasing him for this on occasion, behind his back, they do not scorn him in the same way as they would a coworker for the simple reason that his profession is “cleaner” than theirs in multiple ways. In particular, working at a landfill loses its stigma where educational “assets” like advanced degrees serve as indicators of ones earning potential. This is a

distinction that all landfills workers are aware of – as I will continue below, it is one they hope to achieve for their children – and that they react to in different ways. Some clearly feel inadequate for what they themselves did not achieve, others enjoy teasing Corey and other college-educated types (myself included) for their lack of practical know-how and real world experience. Bob, for his part, has a somewhat ambivalent relationship with Corey. In conversation, Bob always seems to defer to his expertise, even when he clearly feels that he knows best.

If someone like Corey is seen as unequivocally middle class, many landfill workers feel as if they occupied “contradictory class locations,” in Erik Olin Wright’s sense (1985). He originally developed this notion in order to make class theory adequate to the many internal divisions that distinguish the middle classes from one another, a traditional problem for Marxist theory (1989:4). During my stint as a waste worker, for example, I was both the object of managerial discipline and exploitation from the landfill company and a graduate student earning my stripes as a legitimate “fieldworker” – a dual positionality that left my coworkers and managers amused, perplexed, and suspicious at different times. “So you wanted to work at a landfill!” one operator shouted to me as I picked paper along the road my first week, laughing as he drove by. “They don’t teach you that in grad school?” my bosses would occasionally chide me when I was unable to perform a task to their expectations. Wright eventually abandoned his concept because it did not satisfy his goal of outlining contemporary class structure, particularly its relationship to exploitation (see Wright 1989). I would argue that class contradiction is a useful way of examining ideologies of class as they articulate with class positions in a variety of

social settings. The result is a more nuanced approach to class structure that does not reduce social relations to economic variables like earned income, but embeds them in interesting ways.

For laborers, in general, class contradiction is less apparent in their self-perceptions and actions. Being a laborer compares well to other low-skill jobs which are open to the same labor pool. Laborers start at over \$9 an hour, considerably higher than minimum wage at Michigan which is currently set at \$7.15 an hour; after several years, moreover, they earn incremental raises so that senior laborers, like Mac and Timer, can make as much as \$12 or slightly more. If saved properly, this is enough for a new vehicle – such as Mac and Todd drive – but it is still not enough to acquire many of standard accoutrements associated with a middle class lifestyle, especially a house. Consequently, some laborers supplement their income with other work, usually as part of the area's informal economy. But they do not all share middle class aspirations. Some, Mac and Timer among them, do not aspire to own their own house, go on lavish vacations, or send children through college – however, they do aspire to own their own vehicles, live independently, and, in Timers case, support his children as best he can.

In contrast, many of the non-laborers at the landfill make middle class incomes, are unionized, and garner overtime pay. But insofar as they work in a somewhat stigmatized profession, that of a waste worker, they tend to think of themselves as not fully middle class. Waste workers are especially likely to experience this stigma during exchanges with others if they've come to believe that waste work has squandered their potential to attain a higher class standing. Bart, a

lead operator, explained to me that this can make telling other people where you work difficult at times:

...It seems like whenever I say where I work it's hard to say, I don't know why. But especially hard when I'll see someone that I either went to school with or a teacher. Because my kids go to the same school I went to, so I'll see teachers that used to teach when I went there and they'll ask me "so whatcha doin now?"

It is no accident that the most feared interlocutors are those from Bart's youth, those that knew him before his options felt so limited, who make him feel the strongest regret:

It doesn't seem like I'm very proud of working at a landfill, but I work hard to do what I can for my family...I don't think [other people] realize how much work there is to it, and how big of equipment, and how technical it is now and...we just aren't a bunch of big fat bones sittin on a piece of equipment waitin for a truck to dump and let it sit there. Still, it isn't considered to me as a glorified job or nothing, you know, like a lawyer or a doctor, it's just a landfill guy.

In this quote, Bart shifts back and forth between embarrassment and self-defense. There is a sense in which he is perfectly comfortable with who he is, and another in which certain others provoke in him a sense of personal failure. The view he fears others hold of him does not give due credit to the things he has made possible for his family, to his potential for being responsible.

Bart shares his anxieties with a number of his coworkers. It is for the same reasons that George, an older operator, does not tell his neighbors what he does for a living. He would rather his nice, suburban house speak for him, "People probably see my house and don't realize who lives there. That's why I like to have nice things, that's why my wife and I like to live next to upper class people—*just cause I work at a dump doesn't mean I'm a dump!*" The sense that others might consider one "a

dump” is inescapable. Other operators, like Rich and Dan, have had success with talking people out of their misconceptions about waste work. Rich, for example, confronted his new landlord over the man’s apparent prejudice: “he asked where I work and I told him...and he kinda [made a face] like he was stereotyping me as a dirty person. I explained to him, I come home clean.” But even Rich’s unique success in this regard doesn’t instill him with much confidence in his daily interactions: “I don’t go around advertising it. Most times somebody asks what I do I say heavy equipment operator.” Even those with enough confidence to stand up for themselves when publicly maligned cannot help but feel on occasion that they are, to use George’s words, a dump.

Whether this anxiety is self-imposed or learned from negative encounters with others, the temptation is to disavow one’s occupation, to rise above the dirt. Though not all will admit to having experienced it, and in one way or another most of those with middle class aspirations have ways of overcompensating for this perceived injury to status. Below I discuss two ways in which this is accomplished, through financial spending and saving, on the one hand, and through investment in one’s children, on the other. Both of these strategies involve using money and the things it can buy as indices of social power (see Graeber 2001:67), in order to make a claim for autonomy against a generalized sense that this is something they, as waste workers, appear to lack in certain respects. I will consider some of the ways in which they do so, particularly as regards money, the primary substance that passes between the two realms, and the kinds of autonomy and attachment that it can generate for

those workers with middle class aspirations, i.e., desire for a house, health benefits, two vehicles, regular, annual vacations, and, above all, college-bound children.

### Buying and Saving Up

“I have a champagne appetite but a beer billfold. I like the nicer things.”  
George, machine operator

Robert Bellah et al. (1986) describe the new American middle class as caught between the opposite extremes of wanton acquisitiveness and rational accumulation, what could be labeled as buying up and saving up. Landfill operators are aware of the temptations and opportunities of their middle class income and a number have attempted to transform their financial rewards into a secure middle class future for themselves and their families. Others are less comfortable with their finances, happy with what they are able to afford, but unprepared for large expenses like college for their children or retirement for themselves.

Yet, for almost all operators, taking a job at a place like Four Corners is already a financially responsible decision, not because of the size of the wage they earn but its regularity and its perks. In southeastern Michigan, the most common alternative for people with their skill assets and class background is as equipment operators in the construction business or factory workers in the automotive industry. The latter is not an option for many, as it is well known that “Fords” and other companies have been attempting to phase out their entrenched union for decades and anyone now getting hired into a high-paying, secure job needs to be related to a manager or a high-ranking union member. Working construction, however, pays comparable to the base pay at local auto plants. All agree that construction pays

much better than work in the waste industry, as much as \$25 dollars an hour or more as compared to \$18.25 to \$19.25 dollars an hour at the landfill. However, it is irregular and seasonal. So, whereas the construction industry offers between five and eight thousand dollars more a year than the median family income in the places where they live, their landfill pay combined with their spouse's wages give them enough to pay for mortgages on houses of average value for the area, around \$100,000, as well as a payment on a vehicle or perhaps two. Most importantly, from their perspectives, work at Four Corners offers a good benefits package that many need for their children and spouses.

In the contemporary U.S., a middle class life is arguably predicated on feelings of heightened financial awareness, if not anxiety, and this makes decisions such as the ones operators makes a necessary compromise. Robin Blackburn relates this tendency, that middle class families in America and abroad becoming more and more concerned with managing the financial dimensions of almost every domain of life, to a process of society-wide "financialization" (2006:31). With this term, he means to emphasize the way in which fostering middle class identity depends more on relationships with "finance houses" and "commercial suppliers" than those with the state or the community. Blackburn is particularly interested in how the state and private institutions manage retirement on behalf of the laboring public. Interestingly, Four Corners imposes a financial regimen on its workers as compensation for not having paid vacation or time off from injury. This is a "vacation/holiday fund" which is automatically extracted from weekly gross earnings at 14.5 percent. This makes operator's earnings tight during the middle of the year but at years end, after taxes,

this can amount to as much as seven to eight thousand dollars. In this way, the landfill itself institutes a form of financial management in the guise of “protection.”<sup>87</sup>

The extent to which middle classness is integrated with systems of financial credit and creates a sense of financial awareness is evident in machine operator Bart’s description of his monetary habits:

I’m not that great of a money saver. A good money spender, and I’m a good bill payer... I’ve got awesome credit. I could go to a bank and probably buy about anything there is cause I don’t ever remember being late on a bill, ever. So that’s good, but I’m great for a bank because I finance everything there is! It don’t matter if I make 20,000 or if I make 150,000...I know that’s not good but that’s the way I am.

On the one hand, Bart associates his responsible bill paying with having good credit, made possible, he told me, by his regular income from the landfill. Yet, his habit of financing large purchases, such as family vacations, simultaneously makes his earned income, whether “20,000...or 150,000,” somewhat irrelevant. The more he pays off his debts, the more his credit allows him the opportunity to spend however he likes leaving him at risk, he told me, of overextending his family’s finances. This push and pull between buying up and saving up are not simply individual habits of spending, but have been promoted through lending institutions. In recent years, “Finance houses have teamed up with retailers to shower so-called gold and platinum cards on all and sundry with the hope of ratcheting up consumer debt” (Blackburn 2006:44). Indeed, in the U.S. consumer debt rose from 110% of personal annual disposable income in 2002 to 130% in 2005 (Blackburn 2006:44).

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<sup>87</sup> Operators themselves adopt financialization in different ways, but especially with regard to overtime work. Though effectively limited to fifty hours a week, managers occasionally let workers desperate for overtime work extra, particularly when there is a shortage of workers or a push to finish a special project. This gives operators a chance to increase their weekly wages at times as well as a sense of financial control.

There is less at stake, and presumably less need for monitoring and extending ones finances, if an aspiring middle class worker does not (yet) have the responsibilities of a family or has avoided paying child support. At Four Corners, the youngest employees are typically the least permanent, holding part-time positions at the scale-house or as laborers. This may be because they have not yet acquired the skills to work as mechanics, operators, or administrative staff. On the other hand, it also could be that they desire a more temporary or laidback job, one that requires only minimal skill and provides a weekly paycheck slightly over minimum wage.

But younger people are not always in less permanent positions at the landfill. Zack began at the scale-house as an adolescent and later moved into the shop where he now works as a mechanic. Though he has become more of a permanent figure at the landfill, his young age still relieves him of many of the anxieties that other workers must learn to deal with. For him, any stigma associated with waste work is vastly outweighed by the possibilities it has provided him financially. Because of his work at the landfill, Zack was able to purchase a house, something that few friends his own age are capable of doing. The stigma of waste work may not be experienced as such until he is old enough for it to be recognized as *his profession*. When Bob bothers him the most, Zack fantasizes about applying at the local prison as a guard, or finding an altogether different job. Other landfill employees are not so fortunate. Being older, they have become enchained to social networks that invest them more deeply in what they do for a living. Their possible futures are more closed, overdetermined by their present obligations.

A long-term operator like George, for instance, has gradually become resigned to the fact that landfill work is his career. He doesn't plan on doing anything else until he retires, nor would he necessarily want to. Like many of his colleagues, accepting waste work as his profession was not exactly a choice for George, but more of a realization as his financial and personal entanglements accumulated. For those I interviewed, becoming a spouse or a parent means having to be "responsible." This entails working hard to bring money home and managing it so that it will accomplish the greatest good. Zack may not be equally enchained by his own relationships, but he also receives none of the respect and personal satisfaction that come with being a successful "provider."

For those landfill workers earning middle class incomes, such as operators, becoming "responsible" forces them to give up lucrative jobs for more steady, long-term work. Many felt obligated to settle into their current profession because they believed they were choosing stability and security over what George describes as a world lived "paycheck to paycheck." However, stability is not only about the balance and regularity of a steady paycheck, it requires adopting a new character with respect to finances and relationships. Responsibility means sacrifice: frivolous purchases must be abandoned, or perhaps set aside for a future retirement. The preference is not for saving over spending per se, but for saving up to buy things that are seen to be, in and of themselves, secure and responsible. Houses in good neighborhoods and brand new vehicles are two expenditures that most operators are able to afford because of their steady incomes. These are "responsible" purchases, on the one hand, because they are intended to save and even to make money over time (by accumulating equity,

for example). On another level they are believed to create a material and symbolic foundation for the growth of a family and its future (cf. Bourdieu 1990; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Bahloul 1996).

Some landfill workers could afford such things before they began working at Four Corners, but a number owe their “responsible” buying to their choice of a regular paycheck. According to Carl, a younger operator who began as a laborer, the “big pay” he now receives brought him a middle-class lifestyle he never would have imagined otherwise. For the first time, he and his wife have a house, a driveway, a basement, a pool, and a two-car garage. It is the same for Bart, a long-term operator, who contrasts his current circumstances with those of his childhood: “My parents were kinda like I was [before becoming an operator] they had vehicles that got us by, but they never had brand new vehicles.” Unlike his parents, Bart was able to buy a house at a young age and take regular vacations with his daughters to the ocean: “I never remember doin much with my parents when I was really small.” Vacations may not be an investment, like houses and new vehicles, but they too signify a middle class lifestyle. And they too are implicated in the renewal and preservation of family relations, through shared experience and memory.

Other operators might label Bart's decisions frivolous, as he is well aware. Not because he is spending money, but because he doesn't know how to save up for what he *should be* spending money on. The slightly older George is a good example of one who focuses almost exclusively on saving up for a secure future. He contrasts his own stance toward money with that of his parents, “Like I say, my parents were not very fortunate and my dad was not very business smart. And so I said I don't

wanna end up like that.” After several years in the waste industry, George had saved up enough money to purchase a new home shortly after he was married. He and his wife agreed that they ought to “build up a bank account” before having children so they waited seven years to do so. George is clearly proud of the results, “We weren’t knocking down big bucks, but...there was enough there that there weren’t great favors and that’s how we did it. No help from anyone, no help at all.”

What enabled George to accomplish his goals was only in part a consequence of the financial decisions he and his wife made. He says he learned a great deal from his father, who worked in the same electric company most of his life, about the importance of settling into a job. George calls himself a “lifer,” not because he loves working at Four Corners (he would always rather be home), but because he believes in the opportunities that come with holding a steady job. It was being a lifer that allowed George's wife to quit her job in order to raise their two kids at home, or that keeps him motivated with dreams of an extravagant retirement. George always wanted to retire at fifty-five, but now knows he won't be able to because of the stock market, which he has been playing for over twenty years. This does not lessen his excitement about the prospect of no more work:

G: I've been planning this for a long time, I don't know how it's gonna work out. Let's put it this way, I got big plans! I just wanna be financially secure; I just wanna have it made at the end. All this hard work I want it to pay off.

J.R.: What qualifies as financially secure, in your opinion?

George: Have a house of your choice, maybe a racecar for a hobby, and just being able to do things, you know be able to go out there all the time, go on nice vacations. Just finally being able to do what I want to do, instead of just common work everyday.

Whether security means being able to give vacations to one's children, or saving up for a dream retirement depends in part on the biography of the worker, if their children are grown, awaiting college, or yet to be born. But all seem to believe that there is an ideal balance between saving and spending that they have not quite attained.

This is in part because the “middling classes,” as they were once called, are always anxiously struggling for the appropriate balance of self-fulfillment through spending, a concern that marks the very creation of the American bourgeoisie (see Weber [1920] 2002). But it is the struggle itself, and not its successful completion per se, that identifies the practices of certain waste workers as legitimately “middle class.” Dan, for example, uses his success as a “provider” to justify the legitimacy of his profession, “I’m an operating engineer that pushes garbage, okay, making damn good money...I’m here to support my family same as [other people] are.” His middle-classness is evident in his effort to be responsible, to work hard to support those that depend on him. The problem that arises, however, is that others need not recognize Dan's claim as legitimate, i.e. they may not see him through what he has accomplished but what he does.

“Whatever they want to be”: Middle Class Hopes

Though much divides the different groups of workers at Four Corners, one thing that pervades and, in some cases, overrides their class relations is kinship.<sup>88</sup> In

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<sup>88</sup> As I have said, Timer and Mac are brothers, but they are the only two employees who are related and doing the same job. Zack and Todd got their jobs through their uncle and brother-in-law, respectively, both of who are high-ranking landfill employees. Henrietta, the lead administrator at 4000, got her son Eddy his position as a laborer, her honorary niece Andrea a job at the scale-house, and Andrea's mother, Penny, a clerical job at 4000. Bob and Big Daddy both like to think of themselves as possible

general, home life and work life are not directly opposed for most workers, like alternative “spheres,” but interrelate with one another in interesting and complicated ways. Home is not merely a “haven” from work (see Lasch 1977), but a source of stress and anxiety as well; similarly work does not simply compete with everyday life (Hochschild 1997), but facilitates it in important ways.

Away from work, the realities of performing landfill labor sometimes come to the fore. Everyone at Four Corners has small rites of purification they follow after they clock out. Most feel as if changing uniform and boots at the end of the day prevents any smell from following them home, a number of others remember moments when their spouses or children have made remarks, both playful and hurtful, about their odor. Bart's daughters have told him at times that he “smells like landfill” and shouldn't come anywhere near them until he showers. Such remarks may mean nothing, most of the people I spoke with seemed unmoved by them, but they do indicate that, on some level, the *possible* stigma of waste work is evident in everyday life. At the same time, relations “at home” and with one's family provide opportunities to transcend this stigma and embrace another sense of autonomy.

Buying is unable to secure middle class status without saving up. Similarly, giving your family the *things* that you never had is less successful a strategy than giving them *opportunities* for a better future. This future orientation is a necessary component of what it means to be and to become middle class in the credit society of

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father figures for Eddy, who lost his father at a young age, though the feeling is far from mutual. It is not entirely in metaphor, then, that Debbie, Bob's wife and the former owner and operator of the Snack Shack, once described the landfill employees to me as “one big family.” Those without relations on site still have family ties to the area and the land. In part because Harrison is such a small town, one of the newer operators happens to be a good friend of Timer's estranged daughter, who is now a stripper in the neighboring town. Ned, of course, grew up farming the plat that the landfill now owns.

the contemporary U.S. For employees at Four Corners, as for most Americans aspiring to be middle class, encouraging and imagining success for their children offers a sense of personal fulfillment. More specifically, what is ideally hoped for is that one's children will have the freedom to choose to do "whatever they want." The ambiguous realm of "middle-classness" hinges on the freedom one has to acquire and to create the life they desire. Money is nothing but the objectification of such agentive possibility, of the option to do as one pleases (see Graeber 2001:67 and Simmel [1901] 1990). The problem is that not just any "life" will do. That is, not every kind of job indexes such freedom. As discussed above, waste work represents a lack of control over one's destiny. The interpretive logic at work suggests that no one would rightly choose to do such a thing if they had the power to do something else.

If the children of waste workers acquire positions as college-educated professionals, that is, if they manage to be unambiguously middle class, they will signal to others that they had the accumulated "capital" to be what they wanted to be. This presupposes that their parents gave them more than things, but empowered them to create themselves anew. In this way, a middle class identity is ensured through what it makes possible in the next generation. Waste workers imagine a future that *will someday guarantee* that they were always already middle class.

In some cases, such hope is also about regret. Dan, for example, wasn't pushed to go to college and only his youngest brother ended up attending out of all his brothers and sisters. He imagines a better life for his own son, which he views as a step above the many blue-collar professions he has worked in:

I wanted him to go to school so he wouldn't have to work construction, be a truck driver...I've always made good money and I've been a good provider,

but get educated and do what *you're* doing [referring to the interviewer, J.R.] do something with your mind and stay clean...make your generation a little bit better, live longer...I'm about ninety-nine percent sure that it's taken a few years off my life, one way or another.

Dan envisions a life that is unambiguously middle class, involving clean, mental labor. It is not about money per se, but about building a better, longer, healthier life. It is about always having the option to do otherwise.

Unlike Dan, Bart did attend some community college. In fact, he was encouraged to pursue math and accounting by a high school guidance counselor, which he majored in before switching to auto-mechanics instead. While it is clear Bart doesn't regret changing degrees, he does like to know that he was capable of leading a different life, perhaps a white collar one, due to his natural proficiency with numbers. Moreover, like all parents I spoke with, it is important to him that his daughters choose something that appeals to them, whether that is blue or white-collar labor. But the possibility of doing whatever you want implies having the power to choose, and that power is popularly imagined to come from earning a college diploma:

J.R.: Do you expect your kids to go through college?

Bart: I want 'um to. And, the oldest one, she's planning on it and I expect her to.

Bart describes how contributing to his eldest daughter's post-secondary education would have been unthinkable without his current income:

Where I worked before, I, of course, would try to do anything I could to help out to put her through college, but I don't see how I could do hardly anything at all. But, making more money like this I would find a way to finance something to where I would get my kids through school. [In the past] they'd probably have to pay for more or less everything by themselves.

The more college is paid for by parents, the more children begin life unencumbered by financial debt. Such freedom from constraint is, in fact, the ultimate goal. College is another financial burden associated with being a “good provider.” In a way, it is the most successful investment because it has the potential to renew a family’s capital (and therefore the “provider’s” sense of accomplishment) into the indefinite future.

That children should be unencumbered by financial limitations does not mean that landfill workers do not have their own preferences as to what their children *should* do. While all parents that I spoke with say they would be happy for their children to work in the waste industry *if that is their choice*, very few would prefer they make that decision. According to Bart:

[My oldest daughter] can do bigger and better things. I’d try to tell her workin outdoors, the mud, the rain, the snow, the cold, you do get dirty, you do get stinky. I would think that she could get herself a nicer job. The younger one could too. Dream world would be my daughter bein in some type of medical field, and the youngest one I always thought she’d be good at like a vet.

Bart’s preference is not for just any professional middle class occupation, moreover, but one that is secure:

The older one, she actually thinks she wants to be a lawyer but I think that’s a tough field; there are tons of them out there. If she would specialize in something in the medical field you can do pretty good.

Bob, the operations manager, wants the same thing for his adopted son, Taylor. So he is ambivalent about the child’s professed desire to do his father’s job one day, which he showed from an early age by creating multiple drawings of pieces of the equipment (see Figure 4.2). Bob treasures the pictures, which hang above his desk in the management offices, but he relates his son’s desire to be a waste worker to a lack of interest in classroom pursuits (something his father shared at his age): “[He] talks

about working out here someday, running equipment...He has a lot of problems in school...I hope he goes to college someday, but...he has a hard time goin to school, sittin still all day.” This inability to sit still is something Bob can relate to, and there is a sense in which he is proud that Taylor would rather be active and outside. But at the same time, this is not his stated desire for him.

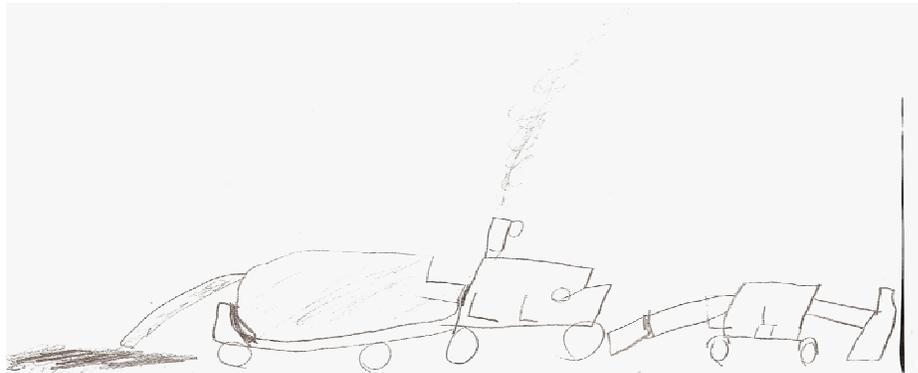
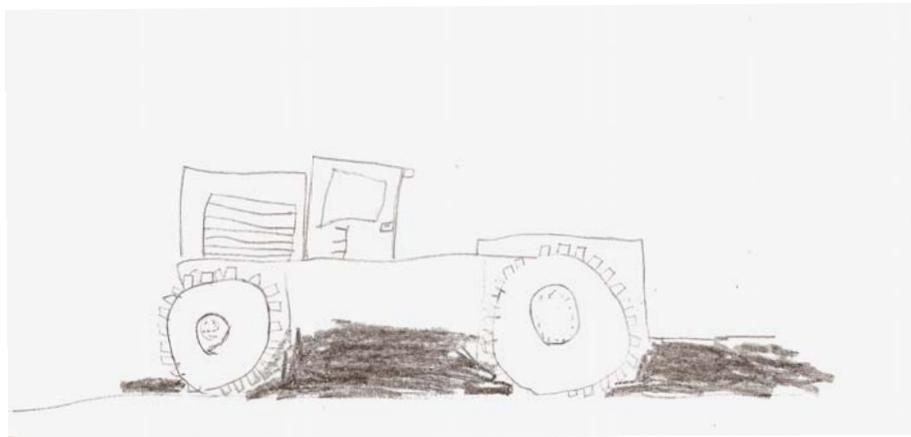


Figure 4.2: Taylor’s drawings of a leachate hauling “water wagon” and garbage tipper (above) and of a compactor (below)



Rich has similar thoughts with regard to the future of his children. According to him, they would do well in the waste industry, but he fears that it is not stable enough to support them, “I don’t think it’s the most secure of trades. I’d try to steer them away from it, get um something that’s a sure bet.” This suggests that the ideal is, in fact, to create more responsible, middle class providers. Parents do not want

their children to have it easy, rather, they hope for a life that will “build character,” one that involves responsibility, integrity, and a work ethic, most of all. Bob, a former operator, expresses concern that his child not grow up “spoiled” or with a false sense of security: “If he wants to be an operator that’s fine, but he’s gotta earn it I’m not gonna give it to him...I don’t want him to have that false sense that he’s got something guaranteed here.” It is important for children to think that anything is possible *and* that nothing is guaranteed. Autonomy can only be signaled if they choose the *right* profession, one they seem to have earned and to treat with care, proving that they became the people they want to be.

The ideal, in other words, is for their children to seem as if they had a choice. Even the intuitive middle class American remark, “I want my kids to do whatever will make them happy” implies *the power to choose between unhappiness and happiness*. In order to build a middle class legacy, however, landfill workers hope that choice will lead to something “better” than their own lives. As Timer told me, if his son expressed interest in working at a landfill he would be completely frank: “Landfill ain’t no place to work, I don’t want you to wear the same shoes I wore. You can do better than that.” Wearing different shoes (quite literally, loafers rather than work boots) does more than help the next generation to live “better,” it helps their parents get beyond what can be a strongly felt sense of personal limitation.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> It is not surprising given the value of individual autonomy among Americans that, when asked about the stigma surrounding their work, many landfill employees claimed indifference to the imagined disdain of others. I am not a person who cares what other people think, was a common response. This automatic verbal reaction, however, seems to disguise anxiety at a deeper level. Indeed, many of those who claimed to be unmoved by the opinions of others expressed discomfort with social prejudice in other ways (e.g. by raising their voice during the interview or offering prepared responses to their imagined aggressors, for example). However, many of those I interviewed and befriended did confess to feeling some form of embarrassment or inadequacy from time to time. At the very least, all are

## Conclusion

There are a number of ways that landfill work and wages can provide material for the expression of a sense of autonomy. If waste work gives landfill workers the impression that they are consubstantial with the material with which they mix their labor – shit, people without potential – then it is in enjoyment of their work or a hoped-for middle class future that many see their chance for proving to themselves and others what they are capable of, that is, what they are really made of. Contemplating such freedoms, for themselves and others, gives them a set of practices through which to negotiate facets of their class position in the present as well as potentially transform class structure across generations.

It is often said that the U.S. is seen by its inhabitants as a classless society, one in which the middle classes dominate, social mobility is high, and individual merit is the primary determinant of socio-economic success. It makes sense that where individual autonomy is prized as a cultural value, the role of class background in the shaping of what Weber called “life chances” is not likely to receive explicit acknowledgement (see Hall 1997:47). Yet, as I have endeavored to show in this chapter, ideas of autonomy can also serve as a way of interpreting one’s class position, both its limitations and possibilities. Relatively speaking, workplaces are clearly sites of “patiency” in Gell’s (1998) terminology or heteronomy, insofar as wage labor involves the sale of labor power as a commodity. Yet, for the varied workforce at Four Corners, worksites can also provide the material for situated

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aware that such a stigma is associated with waste work, regardless of their particular ways of addressing it in everyday life.

representations of autonomy, whether through the wages they provide, the embodied labor practices they involve, or some other source.

Deciding what is exploitation or alienation in these contexts is no simple matter. When is a work vehicle an extension of personhood, a toy to baha in, and when is it a tool of managerial control and class distinction? When is “dirty” wage labor a mark of social stigma and when is it something that nurtures a child’s future potential? Exploitation is not absent from Four Corners, but it cannot be reduced to straightforward subjugation, with workers repeatedly dominated by managers, machines, and capital. Capitalist workplaces reflect social life in general, where we all serve as both agent and patient of social action (Gell 1998). Class exploitation is a complex process in which people are made things, in certain ways, but it is also a process through which certain kinds of personhood are achieved, even of a desirable sort. Of course, this may provide little more than a coping mechanism, helping workers to get through the day. As Ingold writes, “The worker does not cease to dwell in the workplace. He is ‘at’ home there. But home is often a profoundly uncomfortable place to be” (2000:332). Achieving a sense of autonomy at work may only help to make a hard or degrading job bearable.

In the case of Four Corners, people struggle daily in a number of ways to assert a sense of autonomy, sometimes in opposition to their superiors at the workplace or to their own wives and children. Interestingly, it is through strategically enchaining themselves to new relations with persons and things, not by dissociating and detaching themselves as solitary “individuals,” when they are most successful (cf. Strathern 1988:197-9). In the next chapter, I describe these practices of enchainment

in more detail through a consideration of landfill scavenging. By comparing the ways in which landfill workers recycle and reuse waste from the site to the processes of valuation particular to the waste industry, I explore in more detail the kinds of exploitation and resistance one finds associated with waste labor and how they become apparent in competing ways of categorizing rubbish.

## Chapter V

### Your Trash is Someone's Treasure: Disposal and Renewal

The gastric connotation of the word “consumption” could explain why it is so commonly enlisted to represent general use. The bodily incorporation of food might evoke better than any other image the notion that objects are not radically separate from subjects but a crucial part of their continual growth. However, to the extent that consumption is envisioned as a process by which individuals destroy or use up things, the metaphor becomes more problematic as a way of characterizing person-thing relations.<sup>90</sup> For one thing, to portray consumption as the final act in the dramatic “social life of things” leaves out the wide assortment of human activities devoted to the worthless, the used-up, the rotten, the broken, or the outdated.

Nothing used is ever entirely used up – some residue is inevitably left behind in the process of production or consumption that must be dealt with in some fashion. Many tokens of value are more durable than food, of course, and may escape disposal for an indefinite period. For instance, they may attain lasting significance through sustained involvement with the ontogenesis of subjects, like a child's favorite toy (Miller 1987), or the creation of symbolically “dense” social histories, like a Kula valuable (Weiner 1994; Malinowski [1922] 1961). However, even such singular

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<sup>90</sup> As David Graeber (2007) argues, using a process whereby desiring subjects engulf objects to stand in for such a broad range of activities may serve to depict person-thing relations as primarily destructive and individualistic (rather than creative and social) and human societies generally as collections of possessive individuals determined to exclude others from their property.

treasures as these must be separated from a disposable husk at some point in their careers as social objects for someone to inscribe and realize their values (e.g., the manufacturer's box the toy was purchased in, or the fragments of shell leftover from the production of an *mwali* arm bracelet).

From this perspective, waste and value appear dialectically opposed.

"Waste," John Frow writes, "is the degree zero of value, or it is the opposite of value, or it is whatever stands in excess of value systems grounded in use" (2003:25).

Following Annette Weiner (1985, 1994) and Terrence Turner (1979), David Graeber argues that the worth of a token of value can be measured by the action that goes into making and preserving it. Like the qualisigns of value described by Nancy Munn in the context of Gawa, material things can come to signify certain values "in themselves" by embodying positive qualities (1986:16-17). In this light, waste would seem to be the prototypical qualisign of "negative value," something that is not worth our time or creative energies and whose very objectual form signifies its worthlessness to us, by way of material decay for example.

And yet, the worth of a thing is continually reassessed, as a number of anthropologists of material culture emphasize (Appadurai 1986; Thomas 1991; Myers 2001), and as waste is carefully moved around, transformed, or indifferently cast aside the possibility remains that someone else will reassess its actual or potential value. In this respect waste appears more akin to Mary Douglas' definition of "dirt," a category betwixt and between value and non-value, as well as purity and pollution, one that facilitates transactions between these seemingly opposed realms (see Thompson 1979; Moser 2002). As I describe below, discarded objects can represent

the person who found or fixed it in a positive light to others, a qualisign of their potential.

For scavengers the world over, waste is not fixed in its designation as “polluting” or “valueless,” but is a material that may prove highly valuable and enriching, if also (like Douglas’ dirt) potentially dangerous. In Manila, around 150,000 people are permitted to scavenge the city’s refuse for items to sell and reuse every day, and they keep returning, attracted by the prospect of earning three or more dollars a day, even though over two hundred were buried alive when the dump collapsed during a monsoon in 2000 (Mydans 2006). Similar accounts of the relationship between hope and wasted lives and things come from the periphery of the Baixada-Santista region of southern Brazil, where Tupi-Guarani travel long distances to places where “the garbage is fat” with high quality goods (Ferreira 2002:146), from dumps in the poverty-stricken West Bank, where Palestinian children wait for the garbage loads from the new Israeli settlements to subsist on and play in (Erlanger 2007), or from the dumps that serve Nairobi, where hundreds of the city’s poorest children expose themselves to lead poisoning and anemia in order to find metal and plastic bags to resell on the informal market (MSNBC News Services 2007).

As these examples begin to indicate, the reclamation of waste presents interesting problems for a consideration of the politics of value. On the one hand, this is about access to waste sites and the ability to profit from them. Throughout Latin America, Asia, and Africa, uneven geographic development, the agendas of political officials, and the profiteering of middlemen tend to limit the availability of the “best waste” (Sicular 1992; Medina 2000; Hill 2001; Ferreira 2002). On the other hand,

these examples demonstrate how the politics of revaluing discarded things is caught up with interpretations of personhood and morality. This is evident from the news stories that circulate on the topic, which focus on international scavenging as a synecdoche for inequality and poverty in global peripheries. Working with waste is assumed, often correctly, to be something done primarily out of necessity; the people who do it are consequently portrayed as suffering through the indignities of waste work, though this not always evident in the narratives of the scavengers themselves.

Due to the greater material wealth and disposal habits of the societies they serve, Northern American landfills tend to contain what would be considered substantially “better” trash on the informal waste market – i.e., scarce, quality, high-priced goods – but it is unlikely that scavengers will be officially permitted to sort and reclaim it, and even if they manage to do so, their efforts remain burdened by uncertainty about what they will find and a sense of ambivalence at having to dig through trash to get it. But people do reclaim rubbish at these landfills, driven by the anticipation of what they might find and the needs and desires it might fulfill.

In this chapter, I discuss the forms of scavenging and reuse that exist among employees at Four Corners Landfill. In particular, I consider the politics of revaluing waste as something potentially worthwhile and how it compares with an alternative strategy for procuring value from rubbish collecting and sorting, that of landfilling. In so doing, I consider the nature of person-thing relations caught up in the afterlife of things, beyond the realm of “consumption” proper, after they have been cast aside for disposal, sometimes after having been used up and sometimes without having been used at all. I find that landfills, like scavengers, assume risks in taking on the rubbish

of others. I see these similarities as corresponding to three aspects of wasted objects to which I give consideration: their unknown potential, for good or ill, the actual traces they bear of their former users and handlers, and the categories of meaning and value to which scavengers attempt to restore them.<sup>91</sup>

Scavengers at Four Corners approach any salvaged object with cautious optimism until they have a chance to become familiar with its imperceptible qualities. Finding something in the rubbish is a first step, a moment of “individuation” (following Deleuze 1994) whereby a thing is pulled out of the mass of common rubbish and gradually revealed in its uniqueness (its particular worth and history) as well as its more general significance (the category of thing to which it belongs or its exchange value). Such exploratory engagements are different from the representational practices mobilized by sanitary landfills to procure value from rubbish.

Unlike scavenging, the technology of mass disposal reduces heterogeneous waste loads to aggregate qualities like weight and volume, thereby attenuating the potential dangers of rubbish and securing a profit. In the process, landfills also limit connections between wasted items and their previous users or present handlers, thereby downplaying the sociality of discarded objects in favor of the generation of waste streams. In some ways competing with this ideal model, I argue that landfill workers engage in practices of scavenging and general reuse in the act of renewing themselves and their relations with others. Recovered and remade things, I argue, serve as qualisigns of value that embody and reflect the qualities of the scavengers

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<sup>91</sup> This tripartite division takes inspiration from the philosopher Charles Peirce’s (1955) division of phenomenal reality into Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.

that redeem them. In some cases this makes scavengers appear skillful, daring or lucky, in others it can place their reputation and status at risk. Regardless of the outcome, the recovery of treasure from the trash aligns personhood and desire with the politics of valuation and disposal.

### Scavenging Findables

Because scavenging is against official policy at Four Corners, and most other American landfills, as I will explain more below, it has to be done in secret. But this does not stop a wide assortment of objects from being smuggled out of the landfill in the backs of pick-up trucks and the trunks of cars. Not everyone scavenges regularly, but most of those working in close proximity to the waste loads have reclaimed something salvaged something at least once before, even if only to use temporarily on site as a tool or a temporary gag. Many are convinced that one can find almost anything in the trash with the right combination of luck and skill.

After I had worked at Four Corners for a few months I learned this firsthand 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. After a time, however, it soon manifested a number of mechanical problems which left me wondering who last threw it away and why, as well as how it was handled in the waste stream. These lingering doubts about its value have haunted all of my interactions with the machine since. Is there an incurable deficiency in the hardware, I ask myself repeatedly, or was the person who sent it to the landfill simply taken in by a newer model? Was it damaged on its journey from Detroit, Canada or New Jersey to the top of Four Corners, tossed around inside garbage trucks and battered by machines?

My first experience salvaging “findables,” as Charles Stewart (2003) calls them, was fairly typical. A sense of open possibility hovers around all encounters with rubbish, which can leave one exhilarated or uneasy at different moments. The unknown potential of recovered items, along with their lingering connection to former users and competing assessments of their meaning and value, are three aspects of dealing with rubbish that shape the practices of both scavengers and landfill companies. When scavenging, one never really knows what will be found or whether it will turn out to be truly worthwhile. When things are rejected, Mary Douglas argues, they begin as “recognizably out of place, a threat to good order” ([1966] 1984:161), but at this point they still resemble their former existence as social objects:

At this stage they have some identity: they can be seen to be unwanted bits of whatever it was they came from... their half-identity still clings to them... But a long process of pulverizing, dissolving and rotting awaits any physical things that have been recognized as dirt. In the end, all identity is gone. The origin of the various bits and pieces is lost and they have entered into the mass of common rubbish. [1984:161; see also Edensor 2005]

Having been cast aside, tossed around, and mixed with irredeemable and polluting things, the identity of individual forms in the rubbish is placed at risk. Different

materials disintegrate at different rates – one can dig a hole in the side of an old landfill and still read old phonebooks and newspapers, while food waste may last only a few days – but there is always a shrinking window of opportunity in which to reclaim different materials and perhaps restore them. In certain cases, it may be scrap metal that one is looking for and the loss of a past identity mixing in the rubbish helps prepare this raw material for later recycling.

But outside of the sale of scrap, scavengers are typically interested in discarded objects for the uses they were originally intended for, clothes that can be reworn, food that can be cleaned and consumed, durable goods that can be restored and perhaps resold. In order to begin to restore a salvaged item, someone must first pick it out as an individual object from the “mass of common rubbish.” Individuation involves assigning something an identity by selecting from a myriad range of possibilities and relations (Deleuze 1994). When scavenging waste, this is not merely the process of choosing the categorical “type” to which an item belongs, but the unique characteristics it possesses (see Deleuze 1994:251-2). In addition to establishing what kind of thing it is, a scrap of paper, a plastic bag, or a computer, individuation involves an ad hoc determination of what it might be “worth,” both to the individual scavenger and to others. A number of workers at Four Corners, for example, like to say that they go “shopping” for particular items they currently need at home throughout the day. Others reclaim something simply because they think it is worth money, identifying a commodity as potentially saleable. One operator is jokingly called “E-bay,” because of his proclivity for posting things he’s found on the Internet for supplemental income. This may be why an unknown operator set the

computer aside that Jake found and eventually gave to me, they may not have needed one, but a whole, undamaged computer stands out from the regular household garbage scraps one normally encounters in loads of municipal solid waste.

If reuse is founded upon chance encounters, at Four Corners there are different ways in which landfill employees mitigate the uncertainty involved in finding particular items in the rubbish. Discovering the treasures afloat in waste streams requires opportunity, tact, and quite a bit of luck. Landfill workers must have ready access to loads, so some have developed contacts among other employees who will notify them when particular items become available that they might want; individual landfill scavengers have developed their own stratagems for deciding quickly, and often from a distance, whether a given object is worth the trouble of recovery.

Discovering specific findables is often associated with particular landfill activities, as most employees on site are well aware. One gradually learns where and when to expect certain loads that might offer potential finds of a distinct sort, knowledge that is helpful when you are “shopping” for something specific. When laborers sweep the Citizen's Ramp at the start of the day (the place where local residents can unload their own waste), they know items discarded there are likely still intact and may include usable furniture, electronics, tools and magazines. The dumpsters of the Citizen's Ramp are also located close to the parking lot, making for easy access to and from one's car if something substantial is found. Other areas of the landfill hold their own treasures. Sometimes abandoned doublewide trailers are brought in to be demolished and pushed into the sludge pit, often with many of the

possessions of the former occupant still inside. The ash cells, meanwhile, are littered with coins that have survived incineration. Along the dirt roads winding around the slopes of the landfill to the main dumping site, finally, one can find old spools of copper that can be taken in to a nearby junk dealer and sold as scrap, if they can be pried from the ground.

These and similar methods of evaluating the potential of different waste loads and locations offer rules of thumb until further examination can take place. But even after a specific item is found, most retain an unsettled meaning or value until they can be explored more fully and finally reveal their unknown potential. Found food might make the eater sick for example, or a piece of electronic equipment might suddenly break down. According to Deleuze, following the writings of Gilbert Simondon, anything newly individuated “finds itself attached to a pre-individual half which is...the reservoir of its singularities” (1994:246). I take him to mean that something individuated has certain aspects that still hint at its once formless, rubbish-like character.

Whatever has once been rubbish keeps a kind of memory of that state, an awareness of the possibility of relapse into it, such that the newly aestheticized object...is valued precisely because its value is insecure and is only precariously maintained. [Frow 2003:35]

Scavenging something for reuse is a risky process precisely because one does not know the ultimate value, or values, of what one finds. In fact, many scavengers at Four Corners confess that a number of the things they recover from the landfill end up back there eventually anyway – a lawnmower that can't be fixed, an unused toolbox, a can of discarded coffee all may turn out to be junk after all. It might be thrown away, or simply stored until it can be fixed or some future use can be found.

As scavengers come to know the thing they have redeemed from the rubbish, the thing may reveal more than its value or functionality, but also show traces of the persons that used it previously.<sup>92</sup> Like old places, resonating with the ghostly presence of their former inhabitants, in their own way used and abandoned things are also “personed” (Bell 1997:813). As Robin Nagle (2001) writes, in reference to Annette Wiener’s (1985) interpretation of inalienable possessions:

Garbage is given-while-kept. An object classified as trash must be removed by the san men who take it to the “away,” a very specific place where it will endure, albeit buried and anonymous. We give it away, but it never really goes away. On the contrary: it is kept for generations.

In some ways, garbage is literally “kept” by its past owner after being discarded; according to several important state Supreme Court cases, U.S. citizens possess a legal right to see their waste discarded without being tampered with by the police, for example. This giving whilst keeping is not only a conceptual or legal matter, however, it may also be inscribed in the form of the discarded object itself. With respect to the computer I was given by Jake, I cannot help but acknowledge the shadowy trace of its former owner(s), the ones who presumably decided it was valueless. In this case, a man’s name was actually on the hard drive, greeting me as I turned it on. There are other circumstances where the connection between a person and a discarded object may expose them in ways they did not intend when they gave their refuse over to the waste industry, as when Todd and Eddy found a collection of amateur nude photographs of a woman blowing around the landfill.

Erving Goffman describes people who are similarly exposed to other people’s lives because of their work with refuse, “Thus the janitor, by virtue of the service he

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<sup>92</sup> This is, in fact, one of the principles behind the garbology movement in the archaeology of “modern societies” (see Rathje and Murphy [2001]1992).

provides, learns what kind of liquor the tenants drink, what kind of food they eat, what letters they receive, what bills they have left unpaid..." (1959:155).

Importantly, he does not describe such "specialists" as empowered by this knowledge, but rather as morally bound to protect it on behalf of the "client" that employs them (Goffman 1959:157-8).

Indeed, it is not only the identities of other people that become exposed in the process of scavenging, their bodies and names, but that of the scavenger as well. These indirect transfers of property evoke sentiments and ideas about the morality of ownership and inalienability. I could not help but feel guilty for possessing a computer so obviously connected to another without their having intentionally alienated it to me. Similarly, Timer and Mac were quick to throw away the amateur nude photos that their younger coworkers had carefully collected from the side of the hill. Adding, so as not to seem judgmental or haughty, "you see one you seen 'um all." As I will explain more below, it is not just money and utility but also personhood that is at stake in acts of reclamation, whether involving material from the landfill or elsewhere. Workers at Four Corners become invested in salvaged objects as signs of personal and social renewal as well.

### Landfilling

The same social characteristics of rubbish relations that shape scavenging practices are evident in the ways in which landfills procure value. The indeterminacy of rubbish, its unknown potential, possible connection to its former owner(s), and ambiguous meaning, makes industrial waste disposal a risky affair. In part, this is because of changes in the waste stream introduced by the waste industry itself.

If things of questionable value are everywhere to be found in the world, it is only when a system of elaborate disposal radically separates owners from their abandoned possessions that amassed forms of “waste” seem inherently irredeemable. Systematically detached from those who used and valued them, abandoned objects appear to collapse into mere thingness, devoid of form (Douglas [1966] 1984:161; Edensor 2005). This is similar to the fate of the capitalist commodity at the start of production, which seems to possess a value in itself rather than as a consequence of a specific form of social inscription (Marx [1867] 1990: 164-5). A kind of reverse fetishism accompanies rubbish bound for waste disposal facilities: it is the social relations involved in the destruction of commodities, rather than in their production, whose labor is lost from view.

All businesses dealing in rubbish must subordinate the heterogeneous contents of waste streams to profit mechanisms. The indeterminacy of rubbish is significant here too. Junkyards amass profit by sorting through used vehicles and making their hidden treasures available for salvage, landfills by taking on the burden of waste and containing its potential for dangerous pollution. In the former case, abandoned things are left open for redefinition and reuse; in the latter their hidden potential is precisely what must be guarded against. For nearly a century, the waste management industry has accomplished this by way of processes of abstraction that are usefully contrasted with the kinds of representational practices involved in scavenging.

To generate surplus value by amassing waste, the sales personnel at places like Four Corners must first categorize waste streams in ways that predict the severity of their potential environmental impact and the ease of their translation into

construction material.<sup>93</sup> For a Type II landfill like Four Corners, the list of allowable waste streams includes household garbage, demolition debris, contaminated soil, sludge, yard waste, and incinerator ash. These are general collections of particular substances that give an indication of the source of disposal yet simultaneously evacuate the materials of the contexts that originated them. This must occur before a contract with a prospective customer is finalized, therefore it may involve formal distinctions that are impossible to conduct in practice. According to national regulations, waste generators must produce a document known as a “waste profile” that verifies the contents and characteristics of a waste stream on the basis of which a sales representative can create a binding contract. It is impractical to inspect every incoming truck, however, and Four Corners has received occasional fines for mischaracterized waste loads it has received in the past.

While inexact, this formal classification system serves an important purpose. Landfill companies rely on this level of generality to isolate the kinds of rubbish with the potential to compromise the safety of the immediate site and the surrounding area. Sanitary landfills are intended to serve as a mode of containment and each one is technically specified for particular forms of waste. At Four Corners, where hazardous waste is forbidden by law, classifying waste loads avoids costly fines from state regulatory agencies and provides a necessary paper trail to substantiate the continued legitimacy of the site. The unknown potential of waste loads is attenuated by these classificatory measures, but not in a way that is attentive to the actual qualities of

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<sup>93</sup> It is worth noting that waste companies hedge risk in other ways as well. America Waste, the large waste firm that now owns Four Corners recently had \$1 billion in unsecured debt upgraded. According to the investment company that advocated the upgrade, "America Waste's business model, moderate leverage and focus on franchise and integrated service markets provides additional downside protection to creditors compared to other waste companies" (Waste News 2008).

each load or piece of rubbish, something which is neither feasible nor profitable on such a large scale.

If these modes of homogenizing classification help to limit the negative possibilities associated with waste, they are further carried out in practice by way of a further reduction from category to quality. After being assigned to a particular form of waste, incoming loads are reduced to aggregate qualities like weight or volume so a price or “tipping fee” can be assessed which stands in for the cost of assuming practical stewardship of waste, i.e. of suffering its negative value. This may occur at the official signing of the contract between generator and landfill, stipulating, for example, a certain number of loads per day of a specified size. Or, as is also common, the weight or size of a given load may be determined during entry into the facility at the scale house, where additional documentation and measurement is required to determine the type of load and the material properties of interest.

In a way, this selection of particular qualities for evaluation is no different from abstractions that occur during everyday forms of semiosis. If material things possess a range of qualities “bundled” together, only some of them can be attended to at any given moment for social uses (Keane 2003b:414). When carrying food home from the market, one is typically far more attentive to the cumulative shape and heaviness of the groceries rather than their individual flavors and colors, for example. In the case of landfill corporations, however, this form of abstraction is performed far more systematically as a few aggregate qualia become the standard of commensuration by which all waste loads are made equivalent as exchangeable negative value. This abstraction of relative heaviness and volume foregrounds the

abstract *thingness* of waste, which is not only necessary for the commodification of landfilling as a service but for enlisting a diverse array of building materials in the construction of a mountain. It is also a manifest consequence of a society dependent on systematic mass disposal to fuel its engine of consumerism.

This emphasis on top-down forms of categorizing rubbish – that is, determining its character and qualities from “above” by way of formal classification and quantification – has been part of the legacy of the sanitary landfill from its conception in Fresno, California during the interwar years. Its inventor, Jean Vincenz, was primarily interested in ensuring a productive and orderly labor process, which led him to favor large scale, mechanized disposal over the slow and deliberate work of sorting and gleaning (Rogers 2005:97). For centuries, capitalist production filled the urban underworld of the newly industrialized west with scavengers. In nineteenth century New York, Paris and London were a stunning variety of urban poor living off of the abandoned abundance of their societies (Pike 2005). By the end of the century, however, scavengers were increasingly marginalized by the emerging middle classes as hygiene and conspicuous consumption were embraced and the immigrants who worked in ‘dirty’ occupations were increasingly feared and detested. In particular, it was the negative image of scrap dealers and collectors that was an impetus for the national reformation of the waste industry in the early twentieth century USA (Strasser 1999; Zimring 2004).

By limiting the scope of rubbish relations, Vincenz ensured greater productivity and developed waste disposal into an economy of scale. By formally abolishing the slow search and spontaneous discovery of scavenging, he transformed

waste disposal into a disciplined task capable of generating more efficient service and greater capital return. Vincenz also provided a generally appealing (albeit unsustainable) solution to the increasing amount of waste generated by America's growing consumer society: remove it from sight.

Though there are exceptions, contemporary landfills remain faithful to the vision of Vincenz by disallowing or discouraging employee salvaging. Landfills do not merely sacrifice the possibility of reuse and restoration for the sake of orderly and quick burial, but are fundamentally opposed to them on another level altogether. As part of a service industry, they must appear committed to the intentions of their customers, who presumably expect their rubbish to be removed from circulation once and for all. To do otherwise would prevent the clean break between owner and possession that is so important for capitalist consumers and industry. The stakes of abandonment are high, for example, when "identities" can be stolen from discarded personal information or discontinued corporate products can be recovered for resale.

The public availability of rubbish, though limited, leaves persons and corporations vulnerable to re-entanglement with what they have casually cast aside. It also gives waste workers opportunities to challenge the ways in which the waste disposal industry defines waste and waste work.

### Scavenging as Transgression

On any given day my job at Four Corners usually included picking and bagging garbage where it had accumulated around the perimeter of the site and along the access roads. "Picking paper" efficiently from roadsides and perimeter fences meant learning to isolate "garbage" from my surroundings and discern the best way to

take it in hand to be bagged. From the perspective of my employers, for me to acknowledge rubbish in any other way was to waste time. A tennis ball becomes its distinctive color and shape as well as its ability to be handled, as does a scrap of tire or a clump of mud – it is irrelevant that one of them can be bounced off of the road, or tossed back and forth between coworkers. A newspaper is not a text to be read, similarly, but a bit of paper that will blow out of reach if not quickly snatched out of the wind. The ideal laborer, therefore, is supposed to be immersed in a “pre-theoretical” comportment toward things removed from additional forms of engagement and inventiveness (Heidegger [1927] 1996; Dreyfus 1991). This does not stop landfill workers from playing with tennis balls or reading newspapers that they may find, but precisely because they fail to categorize such objects as they are supposed to, those who reuse rubbish are simultaneously committing acts of defiance.

Because the site is so large and work tasks are spread out throughout the property, disciplinary management of laborers at Four Corners depends largely on optical surveillance from a distance, which provides evidence for regular employee evaluations and shapes future managerial decisions concerning task assignment. My first few weeks at Four Corners, Timer, Mac, Eddy and my other co-workers instructed me on how to “look busy” as managers attempted to spy on us periodically throughout the day. Certain signs are taken as privileged evidence of misspent labor power, including working too close to other employees, not working at all, or being spotted outside designated work areas. But one of the trickiest ways of avoiding actual labor while seeming to be immersed in one’s task is, as Timer liked to put it, “takin’ your sweet old time.” Taking one’s time means working slowly, at a leisurely

pace. As laborers often say as they go picking, “we’re not gonna go at it too hard, no sense bustin our ass.”<sup>94</sup>

Besides taking breaks to talk, smoke, or go to the bathroom, a significant way of taking one’s time is to carefully and selectively evaluate the materials one is meant to pick through quickly. Most of the employees I worked with were almost always willing to stop work to examine a worthwhile object, whether one that is reusable or merely interesting. In the process, things that had been reduced to mere weight and volume are individuated anew, selected out of an anonymous background of potentiality to attain a distinct form. This offers more than a conceptual challenge to landfill disposal. Workers must break from a pre-theoretical immersion in the task at hand, whether rhythmically bending over to pick individual pieces of garbage or skillfully operating a compactor or bulldozer, in order to see piles of rubbish as worthy of reflection rather than of mere manipulation. In other words, they must bend or break a disciplined work habit in order to be open to the spontaneity of chance discovery.

Reclaiming objects from the waste, however temporarily, is not a product of their attractive or interesting qualities alone, therefore, but is also enriched by the process of acquisition itself. Because scavenging takes time, it redeems time for personal enjoyment. Good objects may be buried or inaccessible, they may also require careful consideration and evaluation before they can be removed out of sight,

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<sup>94</sup> This is a possible form of resistance for laborers precisely because it is often hard to tell how much work one has really accomplished. On a very windy day, for example, one can pick and pick and still not make any kind of “dent” in the amount of paper on the site. I had a similar experience picking the exit ramp to the landfill, where a constant stream of autofluff would cascade off of the wheels of passing trucks and whatever area one had picked earlier that day would be covered with garbage again by the time it was quitting time.

all of which forces the worker immersed in an assigned task to apply themselves to the labor to individuation. At Four Corners, the pleasure that comes with successful salvaging has partly to do with the exhilaration of sneaking around behind the boss' back while "on the clock." This explains why the stories so often repeated about object recovery involve a degree of bravado.

According to Eddy, he once found a four-pound bag of marijuana as he picked steel off of the newly installed liner. Wary of getting caught with the contraband, he immediately hid the bag in the woods, returning later to split it with some of his coworkers. Though he tells me that the pot itself was awful, from the smile on his face it is clear that the transgression itself is what made the act worth remembering and retelling. There is a similar enjoyment had by operators when they talk about the things they have consumed, sometimes literally, from the waste. In the past, loads from local grocery stores occasionally had to be dumped due to smoke damage. Such waste loads, particularly when they include alcohol, came to the landfill escorted by government agents who had to guarantee that the items were properly disposed of before leaving. A few operators are fond of remembering how easily they fooled the armed ATF agents that watched them cover the skids with a thin layer of waste. After they had gone, I am told, they scraped the garbage off and dug out and divided the alcohol amongst themselves. In the telling of the story, the spectacular find is made that much more significant because of the depth of the transgression, both against bourgeois taste (i.e., "eating from the garbage"), against agents of the state, and against the landfill company itself.

When someone stops working to reclaim an object, they take active control of their destiny at that moment, willing to go wherever the possibilities of the strange new treasure may take them. Tethered to it, their labor power becomes suddenly their own and not the manipulable possession of either management or the landfill industry. The worthwhile findable becomes an embodiment of this freedom in and of itself, making it what Nancy Munn (1986) calls a “qualisign of value” in her ethnography of the island of Gawa. Munn wants to suggest that certain material forms in Gawan life, such as bodies, yams, stones, canoes, and kula shells, signify certain values “in themselves” (1986:16-17). In other words, Gawan’s need not think, “the food in my stomach means that I have lessened my capacity to expand my social influence,” because they experience the quality of *heaviness* as an embodied sign (what Munn calls a “qualisign”) of that negative value (1986:80). The sign not only represents something, but also serves as an embodied, causal consequence of Gawan actions, e.g. eating their own food, as such they reflect on the person that performs these actions.<sup>95</sup>

The rubbish item one has recovered from the landfill embodies, for workers, a sense of their own successful defiance and luck. Even if they themselves did not feel that way as they were scavenging, the object carries that possible significance with it out of the landfill. When other workers hear about it or see it they respond by giving the successful scavenger the appropriate social recognition. When I learned of Eddy’s illegal find, for example, I was expected to show that I was impressed by his

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<sup>95</sup> As a non-symbolic sign (a mixture of iconicity and indexicality), qualisigns of heaviness demonstrates that signification partakes of the actual world (i.e. it is not arbitrarily cut from it) and has actual effects as a consequence (i.e. is not merely about propositional meaning, see Silverstein 1976:22-3).

act of disobedience. That his consumption of the drug involved the embodiment of yet another form of transgression only served to further its relevance as a qualisign of value, to be circulated through discourse after it was smoked.

However, the significance of salvaged items only begins with their initial recovery. Reused objects become more substantial signs of personal skill and more efficacious in social relations if they are successfully restored to use. To conclude this chapter, I would like to consider these different ways in which everyday forms of salvaging, beyond the scavenging of discarded waste, transform and challenge the personhood of landfill employees in different ways.

### The Stewardship of Objects

In her social history of trash and trash-making in the U.S., Susan Strasser (1999) argues that once widespread forms of recycling and reuse once common began to disappear in the mid twentieth century, as wanton disposal and consumption marked the transition to post-war consumer capitalism. This can be seen, for example, in the disappearance of domestic journals extolling “handwork” needed to mend and repair old furniture, quilts, or clothes, linked to an “intimate, tactile understanding” of objects and their materials and reproduction of the household (Strasser 1999:10); as well as the sudden replacement of urban scrap industries, which collected old bottles, rags and bones, and all manner of materials for processed reuse, with the current waste industry structured around mass disposal (Strasser 1999:108-109).

At the same time there are many people in the U.S. that still reuse things in a similar way as was done a century ago. Kevin Hetherington (2004) convincingly

argues that there are many stages of ordering that things go through before they end up in the rubbish, certain closed off spaces of the standard middle class household – such as the garage, basement, attic, or closet – tend to serve as places where things can be put in abeyance until they can be properly sorted. Strasser recognizes that the transition away from what she calls, the “stewardship of objects” is reflected in an array of skills according to which people are socially differentiated:

People in different categories – rich and poor, old and young, women and men – sort trash differently in part because they have learned different skills. Fixing and finding uses for worn and broken articles entail a consciousness about materials and objects that is key to the process of making things to begin with. [Strasser 1999:10]

Because of this, it is not simply that people will reuse objects more creatively out of necessity, as is often assumed to be what motivates scavengers (see Mintz 1989), but also based on what kinds of “handwork” with objects they are capable of and invested in.

In keeping with Bourdieu’s (1984) approach to class distinction and reproduction, the embodied knowledge required for doing handwork of different sorts tends to be distributed according to class background at the landfill. Those of lower and lower middle class backgrounds tend to have more knowledge with handwork of different sorts and are more invested in acting as stewards of the things they possess, whereas those of more elevated class background tend to have less of an ability and inclination to do so.<sup>96</sup> At the same time, Eddy grew up in a low-income family in the suburbs and has approximately the same interest and ability when it comes to the

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<sup>96</sup> The ability to scavenge at Four Corners is also partly shaped by class difference and the division of labor. Those who most want to scavenge, such as the low-paid laborers, often must pick paper along the slopes and roads or do landscaping, which affords the least opportunity to observe the incoming trash loads directly. Those with access to all the incoming trash loads are likely to be the higher paid and unionized machine operators who are often more ambivalent about salvaging.

creative reuse of objects as does Todd, who also grew up in the suburbs but in a firmly middle class family. Indeed, rural residents and particularly those with experience farming, seem to have more of an aptitude for tinkering and repairing, in part because they spent a lot of time from an early age doing so.

Such distinctions are also gendered, insofar as the kind of tinkering that “farm boys” and other rural people are more invested in usually involves machines and electronics, which contrasts with the more “domestic” work investigated by Strasser (1999) that centers on objects like clothing, food, and furniture. This emphasis in focus also affects the kinds of things that landfill scavengers are likely to bring home. Equipment and electronics of different sorts are far more likely to be scavenged or “shopped for” than are clothing and furniture.<sup>97</sup> At the same time, these forms of reuse, whether or not they involve scavenging, are not divorced from the sociality of the household, but are often deeply implicated in the production of persons and the management of relations.

### Fixin’ Up Machines

It is not only that reuse relies on knowledge of the processes by which a thing is produced; in some cases it may involve “even more creativity than original production” (Strasser 1999:10). As such, remade items serve as qualisigns of value insofar as they serve as an embodiment of the remaker’s skill to those that recognize it. One of the most widely respected people at Four Corners is Roy, one of the senior mechanics, who is incredibly gifted at fixing things and acknowledged as such.

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<sup>97</sup> This may be partly the result of the fact that none of the female employees at Four Corners are in a position to scavenge there, given that their work tends to be enclosed within buildings and away from the waste, as I explained in the last chapter, but I could not verify this and do not want to assume that these habits of reuse remain gendered exactly as they were almost a century ago.

While I was an employee there, one of his most impressive feats was to rebuild a dazzling green truck from the ruins of two different pick ups that had been wrecked in accidents up top. The project took weeks, but when it was complete the remade vehicle looked as if it had been newly purchased. It served as a clear token of Roy's worth, like a qualisign it publicly signified in its very form his skill as a rebuilder. For days while it was on display in front of the maintenance building, before Big Daddy would let anyone drive the vehicle, everyone marveled at it and spoke of Roy's amazing talent. It was even rumored that Big Daddy was jealous of the attention and tried to claim that he was responsible for the truck.

For others, with less background, no company backing or state of the art set of tools rebuilding cars can be a bit more risky. Efforts to do so may not always be taken seriously, to start with. Right around when Roy was rebuilding the green truck, Eddy began to talk about acquiring an old car to "fix up" for himself, even going so far as to offer Timer money for a beat up old car sitting in his driveway. Few that I talked to actually believed he would or could. It may be, furthermore, that one has to rely on riskier forms of reuse that do not guarantee acknowledgement from others.

I befriended Timer that summer by coming over to his house on weekend afternoons to help him restore an old Malibu in his garage. The latest in a series of old cars he had worked on during his lifetime, the Malibu was purchased from his younger brother and coworker Mac. Though technically a composite of three different cars (the body of a 1978 Malibu, the interior of a 1985 or 1986 Monte Carlo and the powerful V-8 engine of a 1981 Caprice), the car was in fair shape and needed only some bodywork and engine repair before Timer would consider selling it.



Figure 5.1: Timer's Malibu with Four Corners in the background, Photo by J. Reno

For some landfill employees reusing and salvaging make possessions available that might otherwise be out of reach. Despite living paycheck to paycheck, Timer seems to own more possessions than he knows what to do with, including, at last count, five working televisions and three ride-mowers. Since I've known him he has given me two pairs of boots, one snowsuit, baby clothes, and a large television and has tried to give away or sell many other items as well.<sup>98</sup> For him and other employees, revaluing rubbish offers a back door to middle-class consumerism outside the formal marketplace in goods. At the same time, finding such treasures is about much more than material gain. On the one hand, the Malibu allows Timer something to atone for the many cars he has rebuilt and lost over the years, which he attributes to

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<sup>98</sup> On one occasion, when my wife and I decided to purchase a new vacuum cleaner, I asked Timer if he had one to see if he'd want ours. Instead, he surprised me by responding, "I've got one I can give you if you need it," assuming that I was asking him what he had because I was the one in need.

bad luck and past mistakes. Renovating the car also helps him to feel like a good father, offering opportunities on occasion to teach his eldest boy how to sand down dents and do other body work, thereby passing on gendered knowledge of certain kinds of “handwork” he can use to maintain and repair cars in the future. At the same time, the Malibu also gives Timer an opportunity for escape from his family on the weekends, when he spends afternoons and evenings drinking, listening to the radio and tinkering in peace.

Unlike what he brings home with him from the landfill, the Malibu lacks much of the indeterminacy of a scavenged object precisely because he was related to its former owner and worked on the car in the past. Timer knew, for example, the peculiar makeup of the car beforehand because he had helped his brother reassemble it years before. He also knew the firewall needed replacing because he'd seen it damaged when the Caprice engine was originally lowered into the Malibu by one of the landfill machine operators. This provided him with an understanding of the machine before it became “his,” which also made it more attractive to purchase.

Rebuilding the Malibu with other recycled pieces, on the other hand, involves quite a bit of uncertainty. One afternoon Timer and I visited a nearby junkyard to pick up a starter for the engine. There was already a starter in the trunk of the car when it was purchased, which he assumed belonged to the original Malibu engine, but it was too small to be compatible with the components of the Caprice engine so he decided to take it with us for barter. At the junkyard, Timer and I wandered in-between old Chevy cars, searching for a 1981 Caprice that, with luck, would have the correct starter. Each vehicle was sorted by manufacturer and jacked up on cement

blocks to enable the stripping of parts. Eventually Timer spotted an old white Caprice and immediately climbed underneath to make sure the starter was intact. Once it was successfully extracted, Timer studied the part carefully. It seemed to be in good condition, but he wanted to make sure it was worth the cost. At the entrance he found an old battery with cables and quickly hooked it up, but was disappointed when the starter motor didn't spin. We tried again in the parking lot, this time using the battery from his van, but still had no luck. Betting that the cables were probably faulty, Timer decided to risk the exchange anyway, so we paid the fifteen dollars, turned in the Malibu starter and left, intent to get back to his garage where the Caprice starter could be properly tested.

Only after the starter motor had been given a definitive opportunity to work, we both felt, would we glimpse its possible worth. The starter could break, it could gradually rust, or perhaps a mechanical problem will someday manifest itself that is now hidden. However, even if the starter malfunctions at this point, reminding Timer of its former status as someone's "rubbish," it is not likely to return completely to its prior state of indeterminacy, of unknown potential. Instead, it would be more like an obstinate tool as described by Heidegger ([1927] 1996: 67-71) and elaborated by Hubert Dreyfus (1991: 70-83) – Timer would cope with the disturbance and perhaps even restore the starter to taken-for-granted use.

Ultimately, to better understand its possible value to him and the car, Timer had to incorporate the starter as a component of a larger whole, his Malibu, where its value partially depended on whether it would successfully disappear into the background as part of a sequenced interaction, that of starting up and running the car

(Miller 1987: 85-108). At home, one of Timer's favorite activities with the machine was "torquing it up" by revving the powerful V8 engine and burning rubber from the tires. The thick plume of smoke that filled the air and the tar-black streaks that stained the driveway were not merely signs of the engine's rotational force, tests of its performance and conspicuous displays of its power, but served as evocative demonstrations of Timer's luck and labor. As he once proclaimed proudly while torquing the car, "As long as [Mac] had it, he never smoked the tires – now look at it! Do I know what I'm doin' or what?" As an integrated component the starter contributes to the restored value of the Malibu, redeeming the car's worth and objectifying Timer's own potential. Indeed, the value of the restored Malibu could be described as the congealed expression of the creative energy Timer, his sons and I have put into repairing the machine, under his guidance (Graeber 2001:67).

At the same time, the patchwork nature of his rebuilding effort occasionally left Timer frustrated and uncertain about what he was making. On one occasion, the engine spouted flames; on another it began leaking oil profusely in his driveway. It is not always clear, despite Timer's familiarity with the machine, whether its parts make up a fully functioning machine. Eventually, these continual breakdowns forced Timer to sell the car, which meant he could not fulfill his dream of riding it to work everyday to show off to others his handiwork, as could Roy.

Partly because of the possibility of such material breakdowns in the things they scavenge, many landfill workers are ambivalent about what it represents to others. Possessing a salvaged item may give the impression that one cannot afford a new one; in such instances the former rubbish-character of the salvaged thing seems

to spill out and infect the scavenger's person. This became especially clear to me after one of my interviews with George the operator, where he asked me accusingly whether I was planning on portraying he and his coworkers as "dirty" for salvaging things from the trash: "Just because I work at a dump," he shouted, "doesn't mean I'm a dump!" This is not only a consequence of what people think about scavenging, moreover, but about what "waste" becomes under a regime of disposal that relies on an attempted separation of people from their discards.

Indeed, many of the operators – especially those seeking to establish a middle class identity – feel ambivalent about scavenging (which they are more likely to call "salvaging") precisely because of the opinions of others who do not share the notion that waste is a relative category, open to reevaluation. As one spends more time at a landfill, salvaging gradually seems more and more like a normal practice, but conflicts may emerge at home as spouses express disgust or disdain over a practice that, like waste work in general, is symbolically labeled as a "lower class" activity. Bart recounts one such incident with his wife, after he started working at his first landfill:

[P]robably no one would think about takin things home and eatin it from the garbage, but they used to throw away dented cans uh coffee and I used to take them home...long as they weren't punctured I figured hey there's nothing wrong with this...At first [my wife] was like, uh there's no way I'm drinking that...but eventually, she took it. Wash it first, of course.

Bart begins his story by indicating his own exclusion from the perceived norm—"no one would think..." He thus positions himself outside the mainstream even as he attempts to justify the practice as clean and reasonable. His wife's conversion to his point of view is evidence to that effect. However, that what he is doing in the story is

generally stigmatized never escapes Bart's awareness. And, not, he insists that he would no longer do this now that his family is better situated financially.

The younger Carl offered a similar account, although his wife seems not to have embraced scavenging in any sense since he became an operator. In fact, she only recently claimed to have knowledge that he did it at all. Soon after, she falsely accused him of taking a bike from the landfill, something that he had actually received from a friend. It was not the suggestion that he was salvaging that bothered him necessarily, but the implication of her remark, "the way she said it, made me feel like I go door to door pickin up people's shit or something."<sup>99</sup>

For those operators who are attempting to establish themselves as clean, middle class professionals, salvaged things do not always embody their skill or luck to those outside the landfill, but represent something else entirely. Just as the scavenging seems to index a need to take free things that one cannot afford, many landfill workers invest in new commodities to establish their financial and personal worth as well. In this respect, the attraction of redeemable commodities does not diminish the allure of brand new things, without the risk to ones person associated with the former.

### Conclusion

It is likely that scavenging will only gain in popularity worldwide, as the circulation of waste increasingly becomes global in scale. Aside from being a potentially dangerous and dehumanizing activity, scavenging is often fraught with additional complications and obstacles, despite the transformative possibilities it may

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<sup>99</sup> This perceived disdain is compounded by the fact that Carl's wife refuses to visit the landfill. "Why would I want to go to *your work*?!" she says when invited.

promise. In this chapter I have examined the importance of reuse for some of those with access to the abandoned materials of American consumer society. I have shown that, beyond its status as a maligned way of satisfying needs, scavenging is distinctive for its introduction of possibility into social relations and ideas of personhood. Mac, Timer's younger brother, provides a good final illustration of this.

In the latter half of 2005, Mac spent a great deal of time reminiscing about the changes that he'd seen over the years and his "good and bad memories" of living in his house on the landfill property, the one his mother had fallen in love with almost ten years earlier. That summer he had decided to finally move out and relocate to a trailer park in the neighboring township. His mother had passed away several years before and (aside from the newly constructed fence discussed in the last chapter) he resented the way that the landfill management occasionally used his yard for storage, how they refused to repair damage done to his furnace and roof, occasionally filled his house with dust or the smells of melting tires and plastic. Aside from the discomfort of living at the base of a landfill, Mac often reflected on how much the area had changed since he'd moved in. "I remember when all this was fields," he would say, "There was a house where that dirt pile is, and they burned that down, there was another over by where the 'fill is now...'"

He's come to love his new trailer, being around more people and avoiding hassles from work, but when he is sent to work out back he is confronted with an alien landscape only barely resembling the one he knew and that his mother once adored. Not soon after moving in, however, he began to encounter the ghost of his mother. As if offering comfort to him at a time of transition, she would manifest

herself in a number of ways, but the most common was for one of her former lamps – one she always loved, Mac says – to light of its own accord in order to give him direction in making important decisions. It was not the first time Mac has had encounters with ghosts. His old home farther north in Harrison, where his family had lived in the sixties, had been haunted by a young girl who had drowned in a well underneath the house many years before. He says that she spoke regularly to his sister and “made weird things happen” on a periodic basis. Whatever the extent of her spiritual presence, Mac’s mother’s memory is made readily apparent in the materials she bequeathed to him after her death (see Marcoux 2001:216). Aside from his lamp and certain other pieces of furniture, Mac still has a collection of angelic figurines that she had accumulated over the years, proudly on display in his living room. Yet his trailer is filled with much more. A collection of knick-knacks are elaborately arranged above the television set in his living room: some old coins with the dates worn off, small statuettes and figurines like the ones his mother collected until her death, and diamonds with slight imperfections, some of which he believes to be valuable and others he merely finds pleasing to the eye. These things, few of which would be considered valuable by others, are tokens of the possible as well as mementoes of the past. If some possess doubtful exchange value as individual pieces, they represent the value of redeeming and reusing what has been lost to others, either through discard or death, and hint at what might be out there still.

As we walked around the slopes one windy day, picking stray paper bags that had blown away from the dumping site on top of the hill, I watched Mac put down his plastic bag full of scrap paper, bend his knees and pluck an old penny from the soil

that I had barely noticed. It was scratched to the point of illegibility, but Mac carefully turned the coin over and studied it in his hands, trying to read the date or the inscriptions along the side. Tired from a day's work, we took a break from walking along the uneven ground and picking wet trash while he explained to me that he was always on the lookout for 1943 pennies. They are very rare and valuable to coin collectors, Mac said, because copper production was halted in that year to support the war effort. The penny was not from 1943, nor were any of the others he had found over the years at Four Corners, but Mac placed it in his pocket anyway and soon after we continued working again.

For Mac, salvaging is not simply about avoiding work or contesting managerial discipline, although these certainly motivate him in much of what he does while at the landfill. Rather, it is something of an end in itself. Recovery reveals a level of luck and spontaneity underlying his rather predictable and oftentimes tedious days and weeks. It is easy to imagine why it is that when Mac fantasizes about leaving the landfill and Harrison, the place he has lived nearly all his life, he imagines going to Arkansas to spend his days at the Murfreesboro public mine he once heard about on television. At the park, tourists can dig in the ground and keep what jewels they find. Some people have made millions from what they've recovered there and, though the 'diamond fever' that once surrounded the site has since died down, the possibility for more treasure still remains; Mac insists upon this.

That, for Mac, is living the ideal life – far from home and work, with nothing but potential treasures waiting in the dirt. With this he encapsulates the strong desire that tends to motivate those who dispose of things as well as those who sift them from

rubbish – to start anew. That was what eventually led him to leave the house he'd occupied with his mother in her last years for his own trailer. And just as the landfill quickly converted the old house into the access road to the new leachate tank, Mac managed to salvage old, heavy stones and plants he'd grown for years for his new front yard, in defiance of what felt to him like an eviction. Mac also successfully transplanted a number of the flowers he had carefully grown over the years in his garden, as well as a flowering bush, a Rose of Sharon about four feet tall that, he has placed at the entrance of his new home.

If, as I have shown, Four Corners is a site of numerous forms of salvaging, there are other elements of the waste industry, other forms of filth and impurity, that appear unrecoverable, unsalvageable to the people who work at the landfill or live in its shadow. This inassimilable form of pollution will be the subject of the chapters that remain; it includes not only the human sludge that crosses the border leading to the site but, as I argue in the next chapter, some of the border-crossing people who haul it, people who are taken for contaminated and contaminating cultural figures.

## Chapter VI

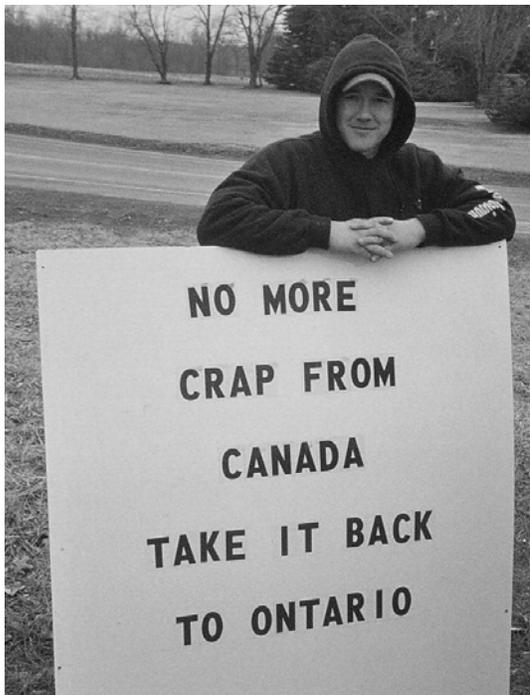
### Border Anxieties: the Poetics and Predicaments of Waste Trafficking

During the initial period of my fieldwork in the Harrison area, I had never encountered an activist group in the neighborhoods around Four Corners landfill, leading me to suspect that active political opposition was concentrated in places like Lansing and Ann Arbor, at considerable distance from any major landfills. This was an opinion also shared by a number of landfill employees as well. In 2004, the same year that Governor Granholm signed a bill meant to curtail the flow of Canadian waste, the main county road leading from the interstate to the landfill entrance had been decorated with signs in support of the Don't Trash Michigan Campaign, but the signs were gone when I began my long-term fieldwork in 2005. By then, those who claimed that state lawmakers could simply legislate the waste trade out of existence had been proven wrong.

I first saw people demonstrating against Canadian waste importation one morning in the spring of 2006, on my way to an interview. They stood at the intersection of Brandes Street and the county road with large handmade signs, three middle-aged men and a younger man, distributing flyers to passing motorists about an upcoming meeting and hollering "go back home!" to the waste haulers that sped by every few seconds. I introduced myself and discovered that despite what many of the landfill employees thought they were actually from the surrounding area.



Figure 6.1: Calvin residents demonstrating against the Canadian waste trade



The men had known each other for years and all were members of the same local church – the three older men, Bill, Jacob and Roy, were fairly prominent in the politics and business of Brandes. The staging area for many of their activities was Lions Service, a small party store and towing operation at the center of town, which a

handful of local families frequented.<sup>100</sup> I also learned that there was a fifth demonstrator, Ron, a middle-aged small business owner who lived farther north in Newton. He drove by as we were talking and was greeted with cheers from the other demonstrators; his pickup was moving at a slow crawl down the fifty-mile-an-hour county road, stranding tractor trailers behind him as they headed for the border to pick up another load of Canadian waste.

They told me they wanted to draw public attention to the waste trade and what it was doing to their community and their lives. According to Bill, they also hoped to impact the landfill's business in some way and force its owners to recognize the harm they were causing (that was why Ron was trying to cause a traffic jam). But the decision to take political action did not come easily to them. As Bill, one of the more outspoken local activists would later tell me, "I'll be honest with you. In my younger days I woulda took a activist and strangled him an put him up in a tree." Many of those opposed to Four Corners, though by no means all, were staunch conservatives who suspected "activists" of being people that didn't have real jobs or responsibilities and wanted to interfere in other people's business. After thirteen years of living down the road and downwind from Four Corners, they decided to take direct political action when, only days before, a Canadian truck went off the road and spilled sewage sludge on the roadside not far from their homes. Brent, Jacob, and Roy lived on the

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<sup>100</sup> Despite their recruiting efforts, the number of activists regularly involved in their demonstrations or rallies never reached more than a dozen or so, which may be partly because of their greatest strength – their deep and longstanding connections to the local community. Most of the other most vocal opponents of the landfill were newer residents living in the new subdivisions, who tended to shy away from places and events that seemed designed for community insiders. The activists themselves accuse their neighbors of being too caught up in their own families and careers to make time for local politics, not unlike the sentiments of Harrison residents toward recent newcomers mentioned in Chapter Two. At the same time, they concede that the landfill tends to affect them more due to the location of their residences.

corner, where they suffered from frequent truck traffic, dust and debris, and the occasional roadside spill. Bill lived farther north, in Eatonville, where on a daily basis, like hundreds of other residents of Brandes and the surrounding area, he was exposed to pungent odors emanating from Four Corners. Many claimed that the smells were getting worse and reaching farther distances, all the way to Ron's house.

None of these criticisms were a result of Canadian waste exclusively, but were part of the social cost of living down the road and downwind from an operating landfill. Yet, these demonstrations were explicitly directed at the waste trade, and all those involved claimed that the location of the landfill was less of a concern by comparison. The signs they'd made the night before read "No More Trash in Canada," "Keep Canadian Trash in Canada!!" and "No More Crap from Canada, Take it Back to Ontario." Partly, this approach was adopted to attract broad support for what were problems specific to their own neighborhoods. The waste trade had already attracted statewide attention over the last several years because of the work of environmental groups, state politicians, and journalists. They were hoping to channel already existing opposition to waste imports to effect local change.

On another level, opposition to the waste trade was a matter of principle, not simply a political tactic. The many grievances local residents expressed about living near Four Corners were often framed in terms of the Canadian waste trade.<sup>101</sup> That Michigan was being "trashed" by another government, a foreign one at that, was unacceptable and unreal.

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<sup>101</sup> Many locals insist, for example, that the quality of the trucks, drivers, and garbage coming from Canada are lower than their American counterparts. In some cases this was true. One Canadian waste hauling company was notorious for its dirty, foul-smelling trucks and inexperienced drivers. However, the majority of the Canadian trucks and drivers I surveyed while working at Four Corners seemed at least as good as the American ones if not better.

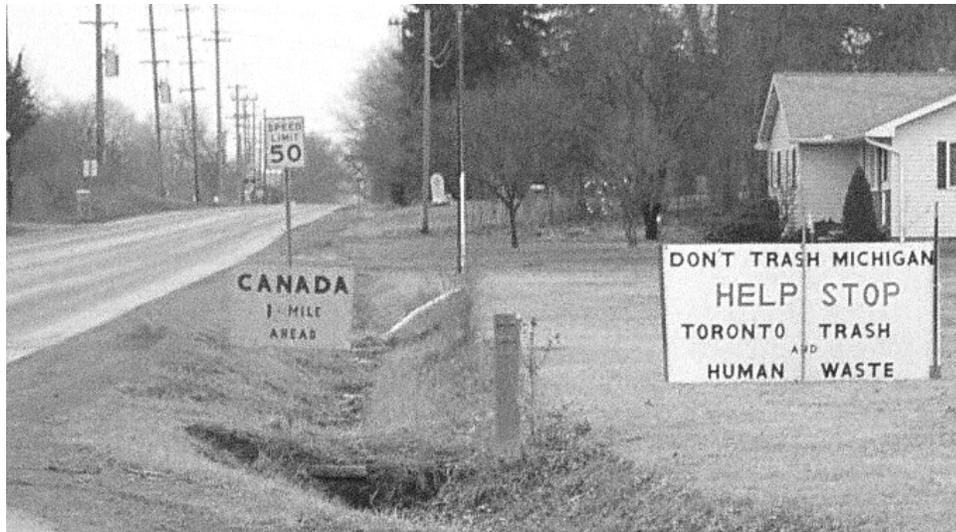


Figure 6.2: Photo of Signs by the roadside, J Reno, 2006

Bill, a fifty-seven year old small business owner who was instrumental in organizing the small demonstrations, made it clear to me that his grudge was with the international waste trade and, at least for the moment, not with the landfill per se. Four Corners is located only a few miles southwest of his lifelong home, where he has lived since before subdivisions, landfills, or the interstate highway came into the area. During one of our conversations while hanging out at Lions Service, I asked Bill whether residents of Brandes were equally upset about waste coming to Four Corners from other towns, counties, or states as they were about the waste from Canada:

Bill: I think people are all right with our own garbage.

J.R.: Why do you think that is? Because it could just as easily stink.

Bill: Well here's a perfect example of that, let's just both get over here and I'll shit on the middle of the floor and you shit on the middle of the floor, and if you have to clean up both piles would one be more offensive to you Josh? You know, if I shit in the middle of my floor I don't like it, but **it's my shit!**

To my very great surprise, Bill was using the link between a body and its own filth as a metaphor to convey the moral responsibility of a nation-state for the refuse of its population. I asked him to clarify:

I just think, personally, I'm all right with Michigan garbage. It is the principle that each and every one of us have got to take care of our own shit. If a state produces X amount of garbage a year they should be able to control their own garbage. It goes right down to my personal stuff: I think we should take care of our own stuff. And certainly when someone has the resources like Canada does, **they're Siberia**, you don't have to go very far north of Toronto and it is **barren**. And that, I guess, is what upsets me more.

Bill's opposition to international waste is founded on "Canada's" assumed administrative responsibility for "its own" population and territory. This allows him to talk about collective waste as if it were morally bound to state governance, as each of us is to our own shit. Both "Michigan" and "Canada" are portrayed as having violated a certain biopolitical responsibility for their populations.<sup>102</sup>

That conversation with Bill helped me to understand the extent to which most people see waste as fundamentally bound to the people and polities that produce it. His conception of proper waste management – for individuals or nations – as a moral stewardship of "one's own waste" is a sentiment many other Michigan residents seem to share. It is not for governments, businesses, or markets to determine the fate of waste, many feel, because all waste products are morally bound to those (national collectivities) that produce it.

This interpretation of proper waste management hinges on the role of sovereignty in the state/territory relationship. At one point, Jacob placed a sign in his

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<sup>102</sup> Each state's assumed stewardship for "its own" collective waste is a part of the biopolitical governance of populations that have been a part of the growth of neoliberal "governmentality," according to Foucauldian scholars, for several centuries (Rabinow and Dreyfus 1983; Rabinow and Rose 2003). I discuss the growth of waste disposal and its relationship to state rule in more detail in Chapter Three.

yard along the roadside that read simply “CANADA – 1 MILE AHEAD.” The point of the sign was to mock Canada and the landfill’s ability to sustain such an unpopular practice against the will of the overwhelming majority of Michigan residents. It also provides a counterintuitive perspective on the consequences of neoliberal market arrangements. For Jacob and his friends, it was as if Canada was exerting control over their neighborhoods through the aegis of a free market in waste disposal.

### Violated Borders

In some ways, the criticisms of the Calvin activists resemble the governments they criticize. Though all states must actively assert territorial sovereignty to varying degrees, many now appear concerned about their borders like at no other time in history (Sassen 2000:228-9; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000:324). Contemporary nation-states are widely perceived as vulnerable to threats from within and without, a fact that John and Jean Comaroff explain with reference to the cross-border movement of people, goods, and capital associated with economic globalization (2001:635).<sup>103</sup> With the sovereign power of individual states mitigated by the flows and institutions of global capitalism, the violation of borders becomes a more pressing concern.

If border protection has taken on greater import for these reasons, that importance is expressed in a wide variety of forms. International environmental

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<sup>103</sup> During the 1990s, it was frequently argued that international economic flows would challenge national sovereignty in a variety of ways. This has since come under heavy criticism as a number of scholars have argued that the relationship between governments and global capitalism is far more complex. For one thing, many of the central characteristics of economic globalization are made possible at the state-level, materializing “through national institutional arrangements, from legislative actions to corporate agendas” (Sassen 2000:228). Moreover, what may seem as threats to the sovereignty of the nation-state may be part of flexible strategies intended to engender “new economic possibilities, spaces, and techniques for governing the population” (Ong 2006:7; see also Larner and Walters 2002).

controversies seem particularly well suited to channel border anxieties because they have the potential to give the nation-state's inclusions and exclusions the appearance of practical necessity and ecological urgency. Arguments about what belongs inside and outside the national territory become structured around its health as a "life-sustaining habitat" (Coronil 1997:8), which gives the appearance of unifying the divided public behind a common cause (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001:636-7).

The remaining chapters of this dissertation explore the U.S.-Canadian waste importation, one such international environmental controversy. Though beginning in the 1990s as part of bilateral trade agreements, the circulation of waste across the U.S.-Canadian border did not receive widespread public attention until the City of Toronto began shipping all of its waste to Michigan in 2002, having been stopped by indigenous activists from siting a new landfill site in a large mine far north of the city. Michigan's Governor had been criticizing Toronto officials since early 2001, when its shipment of hazardous and municipal solid waste to Four Corners placed Michigan above Virginia as the nation's second leading waste importer. Despite this and other attempts by state and national representatives, the amount of waste imported from Canada has steadily increased over the years, from just over two million tons in 2002 to over three and a half million in 2005, nearly twenty percent of the waste produced in the state that year.<sup>104</sup>

Many Michigan residents believe that Canadian waste represents a danger to their state's environment and, in a more general sense, its future well-being. The

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<sup>104</sup> The amount of Canadian waste dumped in Michigan now seems to be declining, having dropped by six percent in 2007's fiscal year. This is partially attributable to political and public opposition to the practice, but is also related to rising transportation costs and improved recycling programs in Canada (see Click on Detroit 2008).

southeastern Michigan residents whom I have spoken to say they find it particularly troubling that a state which they know for its freshwater resources and picturesque Upper Peninsula has been chosen as the preferred dumping ground for a foreign country. “This is supposed to be the Great Lakes States,” I have often heard from local activists, “not the Great Waste State!” When the issue arises every few years, often in tandem with state elections, it is viewed as an urgent problem of the moment. The waste trade is portrayed as lying beyond “politics” per se, insofar as there is little disagreement *that* it should end only disagreement *how*, and there are no visible defenders of it from either political party.<sup>105</sup>

In this chapter, I relate the experiences of activists opposed to the Canadian waste trade and workers employed by it to transformations in American border relations over the last two decades. The growth of the waste trade occurred in tandem with the onset of NAFTA and the Bush Administration’s “war on terror”; consequently, its public reception has been shaped amid heightened national concern about border crossings and the dangers they pose to American jobs and lives. I begin with a discussion of the different international flows, agreements, and disputes that have shaped the Mexican and Canadian borders. From there I argue that analysis of the U.S./Canadian border, which has been relatively neglected in border studies generally, offers a valuable perspective on what Andreas and Biersteker (2003) call the recent “rebordering” of America.

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<sup>105</sup> Ultimately, the lack of open political debate over the issue masks the very real conflicts that set residents and communities against one another over the fate of Canadian waste and mystifies the “social government” of capital (Pietz 1993:147) as it manifests itself through the imbalances of the international waste disposal market.

As Patricia Spyer writes, “Efforts to stabilize the boundaries between persons and things...also often entail an assertion of the distinctions between differently valued persons” (1998:8). In order to connect ideas of border vulnerability to the waste trade, I focus on passing encounters between Sikh Canadians hauling waste from Ontario’s municipalities and the white residents, activists and landfill workers who overwhelmingly mistake them for “Arabs.”<sup>106</sup> I describe these as “encounters” as opposed to “interactions” because often they are too brief to resemble more sustained forms of social relating. Fleeting encounters are a common form of “stranger sociality” in societies like the U.S. (see Povinelli 2006) and though brief, they do involve a momentary act of recognition whereby the other is “placed.” At the very least, encountering a stranger means identifying them as strange in a familiar way: “Strangers are not simply those who are not known in this dwelling, but those who are, in their very proximity, *already recognized as not belonging*, as being out of place” (Ahmed 2000:21).<sup>107</sup> In this chapter, I consider encounters between familiar strangers in the context of a public demonstration, across the retail counter, at the border, over the CB radio, or at the scene of a car accident. In each case, strangers are already identified according to a misconstrued identity that shapes interpretations of the encounter and of the harms precipitated by the international waste trade generally.

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<sup>106</sup> Though Trinidadian drivers are also mistaken for Arabs, I focus mostly on relations between Sikh drivers and Midwesterners since they are the predominant immigrant group among Canadian drivers and the one’s most representative of what residents of Southeastern Michigan identify as characteristically Arab.

<sup>107</sup> Elizabeth Povinelli (2006) contrasts the stranger sociality that structures sexuality and intimacy in the U.S. with the kin sociality so crucial in aboriginal Australia.

Incidents of mistaken identity are about more than simple error, therefore. After Michael Herzfeld (1997:21-32), I describe them as a form of “social poetics,” a term he uses to explain how essentialism is used for the purposes of reifying cultural differences and similarities in everyday life (e.g., as ethnic stereotypes). The cultural figure of the Arab immigrant, I argue, is part of an “interpretive repertoire” (Hartigan 1999:15) of social types employed by landfill workers and nearby residents in day-to-day life. As John Hartigan puts it, “Cultural figures mold experience and narratives into comprehensible accounts in an interpretive process connecting events or persons as replications or fulfillments of anticipated social identities” (1999:285). They are thus a social type in relation to which people are identified or identify themselves as replicas: “the Arab immigrant,” “the Sikh man,” “the Canadian,” or “the American.” These social poetics mark Sikh waste haulers as sources of social pollution who are responsible for an array of social ills from poor English skills and bad driving to drug trafficking and terrorism (see Urciuoli 1998).

Interestingly, however, the Sikh drivers are themselves engaged in a similar form of poetics insofar as they identify their religiously motivated bodily adornment, or lack thereof, as a means of evaluating whether or not they are “truly” Sikh. The same set of bodily signs used to judge “Arabness,” in other words, enables the drivers to negotiate their distance from what Brian Axel (2001) calls the “fetishized” – i.e., essentialized – male body of the Sikh Diaspora. As I will explain, even choosing *not* to wear the garb of a devoted Sikh man serves to label one's character in the eyes of others. Rather than contrast the racism of ethnoracial misconstrual from the signs that Sikh drivers are trafficking in as part of the construction of a global diaspora, I see

these as related forms of identification whereby individual persons are fixed as token examples of a categorical type (see Althusser 1971; Hacking 1986). By acknowledging the similarity between these seemingly opposed ways of “making up people,” in Ian Hacking’s terminology, I foreground the performative and situated character of social identification, in contrast to “identity politics,” which tend to rely on the assumed existence of primordial, unitary selves (see Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

When they identify or are misidentified as a type of person, “Arab” or “Sikh,” the drivers hauling waste across national borders become drawn into inclusions and exclusions of transnational significance. For opponents of the waste trade, these racist misconstruals of identity also serve as commentaries on contemporary border anxieties surrounding free trade and national security. As I explained in the introduction, Canadian waste exportation is made possible by NAFTA, as well as a waste disposal industry rapidly consolidating into larger, transnational firms with a larger share in regional markets. Given the politics of national exclusion and belonging that surfaced throughout the U.S. after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, moreover, some of the activists I discuss use imputations of “Arab” identity to elevate their opposition to liberalized waste exchange to the status of “homeland security.” In this way, Canadian waste haulers are accused of posing a general danger to the nation as a whole, rather than to environments, families, and bodies in isolated pockets of rural Michigan. Opponents of the waste trade attempt to close the gap between local and national concern, thereby attracting public scrutiny to transborder exchanges which have been “depoliticized” by neoliberal market arrangements (see

Ong 2006). Consequently, their use of ethnic misidentification employs local habits of social categorization in an attempt to convey a sense of political marginality, something that will be discussed in greater detail in the last chapter.

### American Rebordering

All nation-states continually reinvest in their borders, partly to create the perpetual illusion of a spatially and metaphysically fixed national entity (Mitchell 1991:94). But because states are not transcendent social powers but the structural effect of a diverse array of interests and institutional processes (see Abrams 1986, Mitchell 1991, Coronil 1997, Jessop and Sum 2006), national borders can never be fixed or absolute. Consequently, they remain ambiguous and contradictory social facts:

Borders are simultaneously sites of nexus and convergence as well as lines of delineation and disjuncture. They are alternately flexible and fixed, open and closed, zones of transition as much as institutional settings. As places where people meet, exchange, and change, the areas adjoining borders are as prone to hybridization as they are to separation and polarization. [Loucky and Alper quoted in Evans 2006:xviii]

From the regionalism and “open border” rhetoric of the first decade of NAFTA to the unilateralism and “homeland security” in the years following the terrorist attacks of 2001, America’s international borders have undergone constant reconfiguration, alternately open and closed, contested and cooperative, peaceful and militarized.<sup>108</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the U.S. government sought to establish definitive borders in order to achieve administrative control of disputed territories adjacent to

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<sup>108</sup> This is not to suggest that American borders have simply vacillated between economically driven deterritorialization to security driven reterritorialization. Precisely because of their constructedness and fluidity international border relations are not reducible to singular processes or tendencies at any one time.

and inhabited by potential enemies and to make these areas available for further settlement and resource extraction (the Northwest Ordinance discussed in Chapter Two was integral to this process). The effort to secure large tracts of the North American continent under a single, American government remained a fundamental challenge for the incipient nation-state well into the late nineteenth century, punctuated by the Civil War and periodic clashes with indigenous inhabitants. Throughout this period and the twentieth century, the Canadian and Mexican borders with the U.S. have been subject to continual processes of “rebordering” – that is, of transformations in state policy, public perception, and economic circulation (Andreas and Biersteker 2003) – as part of ongoing disputes over security, fair trade, smuggling, immigration, and environmental pollution. More generally, these border relations reveal the now much remarked upon “global hegemony” of the U.S. struggling to dominate transnational relations even with its nearest and closest trading partners.

When compared directly, the U.S. borders with Canada and Mexico seem to represent opposite ends of a spectrum. In contrast to the heavily patrolled Mexico/U.S. border, the considerably longer U.S./Canadian border is generally unguarded. Furthermore, while both nation-states are heavily reliant on the U.S. for trade and remain concerned about a loss of sovereignty to their hegemonic neighbor, Canada has three times the GDP of Mexico and a higher standard of living (Statistics Canada 2007; LatinFocus 2008).<sup>109</sup> Mexico’s near complete economic dependence

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<sup>109</sup> According to current estimates, 87% of Canadian trade is bound for the U.S. while the figure in Mexico is closer to 90% (Andreas and Biersteker 2003). In addition to their historical economic dependence on the U.S., Canada and Mexico are both leading contributors to its immigrant population.

on its northern neighbor is well known and well encapsulated by the movement of American capital south into Mexico for profitable investment and of cheap Mexican labor and products north for the benefit of U.S. producers and consumers (Fernandez-Kelly 1983, Heyman 1994). The hybrid product of Spanish and American colonization, to many scholars *la frontera* represents equally well both cultural imperialism and transcultural hybridity as well as border crossing and border closure (see Fernandez-Kelly 1983, Alvarez 1987, Kearny 1991, Rouse 1991). As a consequence, the Mexican-American border has become a common synecdoche for all international borders. Robert R. Alvarez summarizes the border's significance: "No other border in the world exhibits the inequality of power, economics, and the human condition as does this one" (1995:451).

In stark contrast, the relationship between U.S. and Canada is frequently evoked as a prime example of binational cooperation, even uniformity. In 1909, the two countries established the International Joint Commission (IJC), in order to provide disinterested arbitration between conflicting parties on either side of the border. In 1958, the U.S. and Canada formed the NORAD missile defense system, which would solidify their close partnership during the decades of the Cold War. In 1965, governmental officials signed the Auto Pact, which developed the Canadian auto industry, aided American corporate expansion, and ushered in the most profitable international economic relationship in the world. In 1972, the U.S. and Canada signed the first international agreement to restore and protect a transborder ecosystem – the Great Lakes – a project to be overseen by the IJC (Botts and

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While immigration from the south is well-known, it is less often discussed that over 2.8 million Canadians resettled in the U.S. between 1840 and 1940 (Ramirez 2001).

Muldoon 2005:2). Throughout the 1980s, building on these earlier partnerships, U.S. and Canadian corporate interests collaborated on the terms of continental free trade before the NAFTA agreement was eventually drafted with Mexico (Jamieson et al. 1998:249).

Yet, despite this impressive array of historic bilateral agreements, Canadian-U.S. border relations have not been without conflict. Throughout the twentieth century, long after the U.S. and Canada had abandoned their previously adversarial relationship, disputes between the two nations continued. Such border conflicts were often centered in specific transnational regions. In the Pacific Northwest, for example, hotly contested trade disputes arose surrounding the circulation of lumber and salmon, which continue to this day (see White 1999; Zhang 2007). In the Great Lakes, meanwhile, border conflicts tended to be more environmental in nature, especially complaints about American indifference toward or circumvention of Canadian environmental regulations and concerns.<sup>110</sup>

More generally, Canadian dealings with the U.S. have been animated by a central tension between preserving national sovereignty and dignity and maintaining a partnership critical to both parties. This is what is said to have inspired Canadian opposition to NAFTA in the late 1980s, particularly among organized labor and left-leaning political-economists (Jamieson et al. 1998:250-2), as well as popular opposition to regional economic trade agreements elsewhere. Similar problems were

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<sup>110</sup> In the latter half of the twentieth century, for example, concerns arose concerning acid rain precipitated by industrial pollution from the U.S. side of the border (Schmandt, Clarkson, and Roderick 1988). Similarly, there was a general public outcry in Canada when the governors of the Great Lakes states met together to form an “Annex” that would dictate the future of the lakes and their resources, particularly where water diversion was concerned. Many Canadians feared an American takeover of the Lakes legitimated through circumvention of Canadian sovereignty over its resources (Dempsey 2004).

raised along the southern border, where Mexico's increased dependence on American capital and consumers has been accused of weakening the government's ability to resist U.S. interests (Hill 2001; Andreas 2003:12; Bacon 2005:54-5). Tensions along both borders are characteristic of concerns throughout the 1990s that international economic flows would increasingly challenge national sovereignty. On the American side of *la frontera*, for example, the introduction of NAFTA coincided with a new wave of border protection policies, with an unprecedented expansion in the Immigration and Naturalization Service and a partial militarization of the border as part of renewed focus on the "war on drugs" (Andreas 2003:3-5).<sup>111</sup> The border rhetoric that emerged after the 9/11 terrorist attacks did not eliminate these past concerns over the unwanted importation of drugs, immigrants, or environmental harms, but gained new significance.

In response to the attacks, the U.S. began creating a new security state apparatus and rejecting, symbolically at least, the open border philosophy associated with NAFTA policies (Young 2003, Andreas and Biersteker 2003). On the day of the attacks, border traffic was brought to an immediate stop, disrupting the busiest international passageways in the world. Canadian truck drivers tell me that the wait time to enter southeastern Michigan was over six hours at the border, creating a thirty-mile traffic jam. For over a week, the Ambassador Bridge connecting Windsor and Detroit was closed. For months afterward those crossing the border were subject to frequent searches, sometimes by military personnel (Miller 2006:52-3). Certain areas, like the bridge crossings between Southeastern Michigan and Southwestern

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<sup>111</sup> More recently, border protection has again become a major national issue in the U.S. and is likely to play a large role in the 2008 presidential election.

Ontario, became the focus of greater security and surveillance measures than others, but this was part of a shift in border policy, with security concerns now trumping international trade agreements. As one commentator puts it: “the U.S. border security response immediately following the September attacks was the equivalent of the world’s most powerful country imposing a trade embargo on itself” (Andreas 2003:9).<sup>112</sup>

Though part of a general policy shift, the Canadian border became a special source of public concern after the attacks. Pundits and politicians identified the largely undefended border and relatively liberal Canadian policies towards immigration as grave security threats (Andreas 2003:8). Some claimed that would-be terrorists could easily sneak into Canada by exploiting its open acceptance of international refugees and that their government agencies had a poor record of combating known terrorist groups operating within its territory (Hristoulas 2003:30-1). In fact, in the immediate aftermath, several prominent politicians and news outlets mistakenly stated that all nineteen hijackers responsible for 9/11 had crossed the border illegally from Canada (Clarkson 2003:76). Though this was known to be false, it spread so easily precisely because after the attacks “Canada’s image was transformed to that of a country intent on polluting the United States” (Miller 2006:55).

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<sup>112</sup> According to Andreas (2003), such rebordering measures did not provide satisfactory protection from illegal breaches, but were largely meant to reassure the general public. Despite early claims that tighter surveillance would mean the end of NAFTA, traffic along both borders – both illegal and legal – continues at a high pace. Negotiations between NAFTA members eventually led to a “Smart Border” program, meant to relax security for “Just-in-time” manufacturers and frequent business travelers (Hufbauer and Vega-Cánovas 2003:33). President Bush’s initial proposal to introduce a new surveillance program along the Canadian border was quickly retracted, reportedly because it would interfere with legitimate commerce.

It would be too hasty to conclude from this that Canada became seen as a threat to American security and well-being equivalent to that of Mexico, whose leaky border is still a more popular target for criticism in the public sphere. The benefit of examining anxieties surrounding Canadian contamination is that they involve problems altogether distinct from those associated with the more often examined Mexican border. With the former border, a historically more symmetrical relationship allows Canada more freedom to dictate its own, often more liberal policies without succumbing to American pressure.<sup>113</sup> In addition to the border conflicts already mentioned, Canada's ability to challenge U.S. global hegemony in the region is apparent in the long-standing conflict over the Northwest Passageway through the Arctic Ocean (Struck 2006).<sup>114</sup>

Another significant point of contrast with *la frontera* is the different set of predicaments that the American-Canadian borderlands present with respect to local "interpretive repertoires" of ethno-racial identification (Hartigan 1999). As Alvarez argues (1995), transnational migration and exchange have made the borderlands along *la frontera* a productive site of ethnic fluidity as well as nationalist imaginings. Given that the American-Canadian borderlands have been constituted by an alternative history of transnational migrations, the different forms of social encounter

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<sup>113</sup> On U.S. neoliberalism and its influence on Mexican waste regimes and environmental policy see Hill (2001).

<sup>114</sup> Canadians have long maintained that they control access to these waters, against claims made by the U.S. and E.U. that they are international shipping routes. Disputes between the U.S. and Canada were temporally settled with the "Arctic Cooperation" agreement in the late eighties, but were exhumed once again by recently elected Prime Minister Stephen Harper who asserted that the passage consisted of "internal waters" within Canada's sovereign territory in the spring of 2006 (Struck, November 6, 2006). These events have been motivated in large part by the melting of polar areas that once obstructed passage, which most attribute to global warming.

that result offer new insights into issues of ethnic identification and discrimination, especially after 9/11.

### Politicizing the Waste Trade

The rebordering of America after 9/11 gave North American borders renewed significance. For many Michigan residents, waste trafficking across the Canadian border has taken center stage as a meaningful trope for widespread fears about personal, economic, and environmental insecurity in a world dominated by challenging new forms of global connection.

With respect to the waste trade, the unique sets of problems introduced by the American-Canadian border are apparent in local perceptions of truck drivers hauling waste from Ontario. The number of drivers of immigrant backgrounds is made larger by the city of Toronto's significant minority population, which has been augmented by Canada's relatively liberal policy toward immigration. They have been drawn into waste trafficking over the years because it is an unskilled, low-level occupation with high turnover and thus constant need for new drivers. Some may find driving a truck preferable to other jobs available in the service sector because it requires only minimal competence with English. Sikh immigration to Canada increased significantly after the 1960s and the Sikh diaspora was dramatically transformed again following the political crisis that overtook Punjab in the 1980s (Dusenberry 1997:740-1; Axel 2001). At Four Corners, a noticeable number of Canadian waste haulers are Sikh and have been shaped by this global history.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> As I describe further below, the self-positioning of drivers relative to this history (see Axel 2001), has had a significant impact on the reception of the waste trade in landfill communities and landfills.

The majority of Michigan residents appear opposed to the waste trade, though some groups are more outspoken about the issue than others. Numerous websites, radio programs, television stories, and newspaper articles have been devoted to Canadian waste since it achieved statewide recognition around 2002. Michigan environmental groups, like the Ecology Center based in Ann Arbor, were already opposed to the practice before it became widespread in the mid 1990s, but state politicians have been more successful at reaching a larger public. Consequently, the waste trade has been an important factor in several election campaigns in Michigan, particularly for Democrats, and has also been the subject of a slew of bipartisan bills passed in the state legislature as well as six bills in the U.S. House of Representatives and two in the Senate, all awaiting further consideration and all seeking to regulate or abolish international waste imports through different means.

### Sikhs Taken for Arabs

Taken in another light, Jacob's roadside sign proclaiming "CANADA, 1 MILE AHEAD" can be seen as a provocative call to action intended for a nation-state ideologically recommitted to monitoring border exchanges after 9/11. Despite the involvement of a number of state and local politicians in efforts opposing the waste trade, the perception among many residents in the neighborhood of Four Corners is that politicians are either unable or unwilling to commit themselves to stopping waste imports.<sup>116</sup> Consequently, some came to believe that they had to coerce politicians to devote their attention to the issue; the demonstrations were partially intended as a means to do so. It was in order to reinvigorate public discussion of the issue,

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<sup>116</sup> I explain in more detail the ways in which politicians failed to meet the expectations of Brandes activists in the next chapter.

furthermore, that some Brandes activists actively sought a connection between the waste trade and the post-9/11 climate of suspicion and surveillance surrounding Arab people.

At a small rally organized at the nearby wetland preserve by members of Michigan's Democratic National Committee, Bill approached the district representative from the state legislature with this idea. I had heard this argument from Bill before; it was one of his favorite ways of casting suspicion on the landfill's activities. The first time was the morning of their first demonstration: "This might make me sound like a racist," he began in his characteristic style, "but ninety percent of them Canadian truck drivers are Arabic. Shouldn't that be a homeland security issue?" That morning I made the mistake of trying to correct him. Fewer than half of the several dozen Canadian truck drivers had immigrated to Canada, none of them Arabic. The people being mistaken for Arabic were originally from Punjab and Trinidad and there were no more than a dozen of them working at any given time.<sup>117</sup> The first time I responded this way I was politely dismissed, "Six a one, half dozen of the other," Bill said. "They're probably about as different from each other as Brandes is from Eatonville," someone agreed. Before I could respond, the subject had been tactfully changed.

Months later, having spent more time with the group of activists and their friends and families, I realized my error. This misconstrual of Arab identity was not about ignorance of geography or anthropology, so much as a deliberate attempt to

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<sup>117</sup> My figures are inexact because of the turnover in employment in the waste hauling industry, particularly at the time of my fieldwork, and the lack of independent demographic data for the companies in question. My understanding of the ethnic makeup of waste haulers, which arises from my own observations working at and around Four Corners, has also been substantiated by the drivers themselves.

politicize their grievances. At the rally in the local marsh, when Bill approached the state representative, I realized how carefully he was trying to match his criticism to popular events. At the time, the spring of 2006, the Dubai Port scandal was receiving a great deal of attention in the national media. The Bush administration was being attacked for allowing a company owned by the United Arab Emirates to take over control of six large U.S. ports, a deal disparaged as a threat to U.S. security. At the rally, Bill tailored his critique appropriately to the daily news: “you know that it’s Arabs that own all the trucks that haul garbage out here. Now that’s a homeland security issue!”<sup>118</sup> The state politician carefully skirted the issues that Bill was attempting to raise, recognizing some of their unsavory implications perhaps. However, they reveal his intention to elevate the importance of the waste trade by forging a connection to a polluting “Arabness.”

American concerns about people crossing the border from Canada are not entirely new. Throughout the 1800s, American officials worried that different Native American groups would migrate north, into territory claimed by the rival British Empire, and carry out raids against newly settled whites from across the border (see McGrady 2006). In the 1890s, amid rising concern about unchecked immigration from Asia and southern and eastern Europe, people along the northern border actually called out for more comprehensive protections against cross-border immigration (Ramirez 2001:41). At times Canadians, specifically French Canadians, were racially marked by some labor groups as inferior whites or “the Chinese of the East” (Ramirez 2001:50-1; cf. Hartigan 1999:28-37). For the most part, however, immigrants from

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<sup>118</sup> This was also untrue; the different hauling companies bringing waste from Ontario to Four Corners were all under Canadian ownership, though a Dutch company had recently negotiated the purchase of the company responsible for hauling Toronto’s trash.

Canada were spared the racist nativism directed at other immigrants, even when their numbers were restricted in the 1920s. The greater fear, then as now, was that unwanted foreigners would use Canada as a point of entry to the U.S. (Ramirez 2001:54).

The tendency to mistake waste haulers as “Arab” forms a part of this transnational history, but has been shaped more directly by the president’s recent claim that the U.S. and all of its citizens are part of a battle of “civilizations” at home and abroad (Palumbo-Liu 2002). Since the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, Arabs in general have experienced more forms of everyday discrimination and state discipline (Salaita 2006). This has been particularly acute in areas with large Arab-American populations, such as Metro Detroit, where possessing “Arab” ethnicity confers on one the status of “political and cultural ‘dirt’” (Shryock and Howell 2003:458). The current political climate also affects those who are merely *assumed to be* Arabic.<sup>119</sup> When Bill and others mistake a Sikh Canadian for an Arab, they are attempting to disparage the driver’s otherwise hidden character and personal agenda with implicit reference to this pervasive atmosphere of fear and suspicion.<sup>120</sup>

Bonnie Urciuoli (1998) has described this kind of social categorization as it impinges and structures the everyday lives of immigrant Puerto Ricans in New York City. She argues that discourse about marked ethnic others – i.e., those persons that fall outside the assumed white, middle class mainstream of American society – serves to *racialize* them in ways that conflate social class and individual character with

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<sup>119</sup> Shortly after 9/11, a Sikh gas station owner was killed by a white man who purportedly mistook him Arabic; but this was not widely publicized in the media (Schildkraut 2002:523).

<sup>120</sup> The characters and intentions of Sikh drivers are hidden from local activists in two ways, by a sociolinguistic and cultural divide that can make communication between them difficult and by the nature of waste hauling, which keeps the drivers from mingling to any great extent with locals.

significant markers of difference. In the speech situations she analyzes, Latino accents and code-switching are taken to be indicative of low socio-economic status and poor character, and are actively marginalized within public spaces, e.g. workplaces and schools. Through language prejudice, “[r]acialized people are typified as human matter out of place: dirty, dangerous, unwilling, or unable to do their bit for the nation-state” (Urciuoli 1998:15).

Sikh drivers are actually doubly foreign to the Americans that perceive their movement to and from Four Corners Landfill. In terms of the markedness relations of semantic categories (Waugh 1982), ethnic minorities are a marked subcategory brought into semiotic relief against a homogeneous and unmarked background of generic Americanness (and generic Midwestern Americanness at that!). All Canadians are thus marked and landfill employees and locals alike enjoy manipulating their national otherness to different effects. For example, some landfill operators enjoy mimicking the diphthong “eh” frequently present in the speech of many truck drivers because, as a characteristic feature of speech in southern Ontario, it has become an ideologically loaded marker of “Canadianess.”<sup>121</sup> By contrast, being a New York Puerto Rican holds at least the possibility of becoming successful/assimilated within the so-called “melting pot” according to American multicultural discourse (see Urciuoli 1998:22-5). By contrast, Sikh drivers are inassimilable others, which is what makes them such attractive targets for Americans who wish to criticize the practice of waste importation.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> As is often the case with iconic parody, the linguistic form is expressed in an exaggerated form, typically over the CB radio.

<sup>122</sup> It might also be their double-markedness that makes Sikh truck drivers appear more numerous to Brandes residents than they are.

When Brandes activists observe drivers with brownish skin, foreign accents, long beards and turbans<sup>123</sup>, they actively conflate these signs of otherness with character traits that are assumed to co-occur with them, such as Anti-Americanism and Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>124</sup> Consequently, people are suspicious of the Sikh driver's hidden motives. News spread quickly when two "Arab" drivers were arrested in possession of a few hundred thousand dollars as part of a drug trafficking sting several years ago. Few act very surprised by this incident, but most are heavily invested in its symbolic import. According to rumors now widely circulated among local residents and truck drivers, "Arab" waste haulers have smuggled everything from illegal immigrants and drugs to dead bodies across the border, hiding them inside their trucks as they pass through.<sup>125</sup> The very alien-ness of the drivers identifies them with the contaminating substances (both real and imagined) that they carry into the U.S.: they are unwanted, human waste.

If Urciuoli uses "racialization" in order to analyze the semiotics of exclusion and prejudice, Michael Herzfeld (1997) uses the term "social poetics" to draw attention to the more unexpected and performative qualities of such essentialisms when they occur in everyday practice. All nations, he argues, circulate discourse that reifies shared (or foreign) characters and histories into static types, with stereotyping as one example (1997:21-32). But nationalist typologies of the foreign and the

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<sup>123</sup> I discuss what these semiotic markers of difference connote for the Sikh drivers themselves further below.

<sup>124</sup> It is certainly telling that Bill, for one, believes he should qualify his racializing talk with, "This might make me sound like a racist but." In so doing, he reveals that he understands these assertions to be founded on unfavorable assumptions. However, Jane Hill (1998) points out that such half-hearted metalinguistic reflexivity is all too common in the racist discourse of the post-Civil Rights era United States.

<sup>125</sup> Few are aware of the fact that trucks crossing the border from Canada may be x-rayed as they enter, so that any bodies or suspicious cases are easily spotted by the border patrol.

familiar take on life in everyday communicative practices and the specific interests and understandings that inform them. As a form of social poetics, the deliberate misconstrual of Sikh identity as “Arab” is a politically innovative form of racialization.<sup>126</sup> It is not to further an overtly racist agenda that Bill insists that Canadians with dark skin, long beards, and/or turbans are Arabs and implies, further, that this makes them potential terrorists. Rather, he does this out of a desire to use the cultural difference he perceives to attack Four Corners and, perhaps an even more important goal, to cement social relations with his fellow activists. Engaged in what many of their neighbors claim to be a hopeless cause, the Brandes activists needed to find ways to give substance to their grievances and purpose to their small group. When I pointed out the errors in their social poetics, I was undercutting the rhetorical threads that held their collective project together.<sup>127</sup>

Herzfeld and Urciuoli’s emphasis on the everyday practice of essentialism and its political ramifications call attention to the situatedness of ethno-racial identification. By calling on an “Arab” type marked as dangerous and polluting, critics of waste trafficking are not merely reproducing the racializing rhetoric of the Bush Administration’s “war on terror” in a top-down fashion. As Herzfeld argues, “the state’s ability to exercise... control through its agents depends on the selective manipulation of stereotypes already in popular circulation” (1997:29-30). Indeed, the practice of interpreting ethno-racial relations through the cultural figure of “the Arab

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<sup>126</sup> Urciuoli also refers to racializing talk as creative, building on Silverstein’s (1976) analysis of indexical signs as involving taken-for-granted presupposition and creative entailment. However, Herzfeld adds to her theory of linguistic innovation a greater appreciation for the wide range of political effects that these discursive constructions can have, beyond those of exclusion and discrimination. Essentialism, in its many forms, may serve to subvert existing power dynamics as well as reproduce them (Herzfeld 1997).

<sup>127</sup> In fact, the group did not last the summer, as some of the leading members investigated new routes of garnering public recognition and private reparation (see Chapter Seven).

immigrant” has been a fundamental part of social interaction in Southeastern Michigan for at least several decades (see Shryock and Howell 2003). Those who mistake Sikhs for Arabs are appealing to a social poetics that is as much local as it is national.

In his recent ethnography of white enclaves in inner city Detroit, John Hartigan argues that racial talk is often provisional and profoundly specific to the particular interpretive repertoires available in a given city or neighborhood (1999:14-15). These repertoires facilitate judgments and actions during social encounters, setting limits on the kinds of social categories and claims that are appropriate to specific places. In the greater Detroit area, for example, there is a considerable amount of effort put into negotiating the racialness of white/black relations, but these change depending on the history of the locale one is in. Whether or not there has ever been “race rioting” there and how much it has been shaped by “white flight” from the inner city, for example, will profoundly shape the way people interpret social relations or conflicts as they arise (Hartigan 1999:14-15).

In my fieldwork I have observed, in fact, a pervasive tendency in many parts of the Detroit area to identify all “white” immigrants of dark complexion as Arab. According to Andrew Shryock (personal communication, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007), this occurrence can be especially tense for Italians living in Dearborn, who are frequently mistaken for Arabs, in part because of the sizeable Middle Eastern population there. In Brandes, similarly, the employees and regulars at Lions Service speak a great deal about the purportedly “Italian” party store owner just down the road that competes with them. When they are not attacking his food and customer service, they accuse

him of hiding his “Arab” identity or using relatives to escape paying taxes. They have never offered evidence for their belief that he is Arab and don’t feel they need to precisely because it is based on their cumulative experiences with party store owners throughout the area, many of whom are Arab-American and some of whom choose to disguise this fact to avoid the negative connotations it may carry.<sup>128</sup>

Because misconstruals of ethnoracial identity are situated in local histories and relations, furthermore, they are not guaranteed to translate on a national or even statewide level. Perhaps it is for this reason that, despite his stated desire to do so, Bill has never brought his allegations that the waste trade constitutes a security threat to the attention of Fox News. He says he is convinced they would take up the story, but has never contacted them. It may be that even if he did the local specificity of his concerns would fail to elicit the desired reaction. The idea that Canada might house hidden cells of Islamic terrorists did, for a time, become a widespread national fantasy, but the localized notion that “Arab” should be the default identity for a wide range of immigrants did not. Would Sikh drivers really satisfy the national media’s current obsession with homeland security threats? Even if not, they clearly serve an important role for those who see the waste trade as a violation of national and local boundaries.

### Mobile Subjects of the Sikh Diaspora

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<sup>128</sup> It may be, in fact, that the party store owner outside of town that the people at Lions Service criticize is Arab, though I have never seen evidence of this. Another party store owner in Harrison, whom I referred to in Chapter Two tells people he is specifically Khaldian and not Arab, recognizing that the latter leads customers to mistakenly assume that he is also Muslim. I have heard similar insults used against him, that he uses relatives to avoid paying taxes, even from people he considers friends.

One afternoon at work, I was alarmed to notice a black SUV parked near the top of the southern slope, looking down on where I was cutting willow trees on the side of the road. My initial thought was that they were watching me and judging my work performance, trained as I was to treat those in vehicles perched above me with suspicion. Later I learned that it was a class of architectural students from the University of Toronto, whose professor was doing work for the landfill and taking them on tours to different waste sites in the area. As I was leaving for the day, I saw the SUV parked outside the landfill and so pulled over my car to introduce myself. I was a bit self-conscious, reeking of sweat and filth from a hard day of work, but the students were excited to talk about the places and things they'd seen that day. They encouraged me to see a dump farther north where they'd been that morning, which one characterized as "sublime," and were interested to hear about the results of "my research" so far. Their professor was young and spoke to me only once. I was explaining relationships between landfill workers and the people they took for "Arabic" truck drivers and was abruptly interrupted: "But they're Sikh!" he said with a wide grin, prompting his students to laugh.

His confident interpretation was based on the turbans that he'd seen some of the drivers wearing and their long, unshaven beards, signs of an ethnic type which both of us had learned at some point was stereotypical of all "Sikh." Indeed, this is precisely why those adorning themselves in this way chose to do so – to be seen by others and recognized as such. According to an image popularized by transnational textual forms, including books, newspapers, and websites, the Sikh subject is the man abroad, working hard in order to perpetuate the Sikh *panth* (or community) and the

*quam* (or nation). The “total body” of the *amritdhari* is the iconic embodiment of the global Sikh community and the fantasy of a coming national homeland: “This is a process of substitution... by which a body marked as male stands in for all Sikhs, male and female” (Axel 2001:150). In order to stand for an ideal standard of Sikh subjectivity, which some struggle to assume and defer to an indefinite future, the total body of the *amritdhari* is made an object of public surveillance; the rite which transforms one into a true Sikh involves “a series of techniques and enunciations that explicitly emphasize ‘the importance of a *visible* identity, one which makes it impossible for any Sikh to remain anonymous or concealed’” (Axel 2001:42; see also Fox 1985).

Ironically, then, in the context of the historical formation of the Sikh diaspora, male Sikh bodies are meant to be on display and fetishized through the adornment of *the Five K's* (Axel 2001:76-7). One could argue, therefore, that there is only a relative distinction to be made between identifying an unshaved man in a turban as “Arab” and identifying him as an exemplary Sikh – both involve taking his appearance as iconic of a transnational type. Rather than laugh at those who mistakenly label others “Arab” as ignorant racists and laud those who recognize these same men as *characteristically Sikh*, following Herzfeld (1997), they should be placed along a continuum of essentializing social poesis. It so happens that the latter interpretation is one that Sikh men actively cultivate after their initiation as *amritdhari*.

From the moment that Canadian waste loads have crossed the border from highways 401 and 402 in Ontario, the trucks are marked as vessels of cross-border

contamination. Many Michigan residents are aware of the waste trade and some clearly can identify waste haulers by the name of their companies and the foreign license plates of their rigs (one white truck driver joked that other motorists were constantly telling him he was “number one,” raising up a middle finger to me with a grin). This clearly impacts different drivers in different ways. Some that I spoke with claim that they are not bothered by this general animosity, while others speak about it angrily as a nuisance or expressed sympathy with the cause but felt unjustly targeted for trying to make a living.<sup>129</sup>

In addition to the public resentment they face for employment in the waste trade, Sikh drivers are likely to feel somewhat alienated by linguistic and cultural differences during the course of their journey, which forces them to leave the inner city ethnic enclaves with which they are more accustomed. However, those Sikh drivers I spoke with claim not to be particularly troubled by their misrepresentation and occasional mistreatment delivering to Four Corners.

The Sikh driver I came to know best was a thirty-something man named Bula who spoke better English than most of the other Canadian immigrants I met and was incredibly friendly and outgoing. I first encountered Bula in the hotbox, where trucks with frozen loads are sent in the winter to thaw. The hotbox was a simple operation, one landfill employee would guide the trucks into the large building, close the doors, and position and ignite four or five powerful propane heaters which spewed flames underneath the trailers for ten or fifteen minutes at a time. On very cold days, drivers would park in a line of ten to twelve trucks and some would come to talk to me as they waited their turn. Bula and I would talk as he waited in line or in the hotbox. He

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<sup>129</sup> As I mention in previous chapters, landfill workers at Four Corners feel much the same.

had an easy-going demeanor and would follow me around as I tinkered with the heaters or paced outside in the freezing weather to cool down from the overwhelming heat of the box.

One day, waiting for a friend of his to finish dumping up top, Bula and I spoke about being Sikh. “I am not a religious man,” he said, “it is too hard here.” He told me it was difficult to eat vegetarian in Toronto, or to know that dishes and types of food were kept separate during preparation. He explained to me the principle of *the Five K’s* which are the cumulative garments and bodily habits assumed by religious men, including some of his coworkers: uncut hair, a kirpan sword, an iron bracelet, a wooden comb, and a special undergarment. A friend of his had earlier pointed out to me that being “too religious” could get immigrants into trouble, explaining that the hauling company never hired Muslims because “they have names like Ali or Mohammed.” Bula hoped to become a true Sikh, an *amritdhari* committed to *the Five K’s* later in life, when it was not so complicated. He told me that it was more difficult at the border for “non-whites” than others because of their appearances and accents, but professed not to be bothered by this, “it is reasonable,” he would repeat.<sup>130</sup> In fact, Bula was not at all bothered by his experiences driving truck to and from Four Corners, which he felt was a good job. His biggest concern lay with his children, whom he wanted to teach to speak Punjabi, and his father, whom he wanted to support but who was increasingly restless being stuck at home all day and wanted to go back to Punjab.

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<sup>130</sup> It bears mentioning that just as I found him a pleasant person to speak to and a potentially valuable informant, his own opinions of me that shaped what he said during our brief conversations. It may be, therefore, that talking to a young, white American male led him to seem easier going or to downplay the racism he encountered while on the road or at Four Corners.

That these are Bula's most compelling concerns is in keeping with the historical formation of the Sikh diaspora and the predicaments it creates in terms of Sikh identification. In his father's restlessness and his own desire to care for his family the right way, he is expressing some of the core aspects of what Brian Axel (2001) calls the Sikh subject of diaspora. For those Sikh drivers who that adopt *the Five K's*, carrying representations of "the total body" across international borders realizes, in yet another vein, the circulation of the Sikh body as "a preeminently mobile sign" (Axel 2001:63). For those who do not, such as Bula, critical evaluation according to this standard is an assumed aspect of everyday life as a man failing, for the moment, to be a proper Sikh. Additional public surveillance and alienation hardly seem bothersome by comparison.<sup>131</sup>

#### Seeming Arab While Acting Sikh

As Herzfeld (1997) argues, acts of social poesis need not contribute to patterns of exclusion and prejudice, despite their essentialist character. One cannot assume, for example, that ethno-racial misidentification is always performed with the same political ends in mind. For example, the misconstrual of some Canadian waste haulers as "Arab" has very different consequences for social life at Four Corners, where truck drivers and Midwesterners commingle on a more intimate basis, than it does in the surrounding community. This does not mean that interethnic relations at the landfill involve more understanding or tolerance, but it does force us to

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<sup>131</sup> One could add that, given the trauma of racist riots and persecution in India from 1984 onward, prejudice and misunderstanding on the way to and at Four Corners must seem extremely mild by comparison.

acknowledge the different political ends for which essentialism is employed and the distinct ways in which the “problem” of border crossing is envisioned.

After they’ve entered the landfill, the presence of Canadian truck drivers is still objectionable to many within, but the ridicule and racism shared at their expense is more often circulated behind their backs. Whether this relative lack of open prejudice is a matter of politeness or an attempt to avoid conflict at the workplace, it clearly is not equivalent to acceptance or understanding. This became clear to me during a conversation with Tanya, Bob’s sister and the owner/operator of the local “snack shack” parked at the edge of the internal exit road of the landfill. The snack shack – or “roach coach” as most landfill workers refer to it – was initially purchased by Bob and his wife to make some extra money, but was sold to Tanya after a little over a year. I ate there frequently during my tenure as a laborer at Four Corners, using the opportunity to get to know the different personnel affiliated with the landfill, and later worked inside for a time in order to observe Tanya’s interactions with them.

One afternoon, a Canadian truck driver named Hasan approached the snack shack and insisted on buying me a coffee with what sounded like a South Asian accent. I agreed and we exchanged only a few words before Tanya jumped into the conversation, asking with a friendly grin, “*where* are you from?” “Trinidad,” Hasan replied. “India?” Tanya responded, substituting her own answer for one that didn’t register. I stepped in, “No, Trinidad,” and (as the self-appointed broker of cultural difference) tried to explain the distinction before I was cut off by an impatient Tanya – “I was never good at geography in school – I’m only interested in the future.”

Hasan went on to explain to me how Trinidad, the Trinidad he'd grown up with, was no longer a part of his future because it had changed so much and he had no desire to visit again. When Hasan left, leaving me with my free drink, Tanya informed me that he was a "nice guy" and a "good customer." Once he was out of sight she then remarked, laughing, "Do you think his wife has a jewel in her belly button?"

For Tanya, foreign identities tied to unfamiliar places are caught up in an exoticized past as opposed to "the future." But her refusal to hear an explanation of Hasan's background can also be seen as an attempt to reach out to him as a possible recurring customer, as if to say that for her his markedness is of no account. Unlike Donna, her predecessor at the snack shack and her sister-in-law, Tanya has tried to cultivate a diverse clientele.<sup>132</sup> She refers to two of her repeat Sikh customers as "the double doubles" – since they always appear together and routinely order two sugars and two milks for their tea, which they like to have served boiling hot. Like most customers Tanya's double-doubles tend to appear around the same time every day and, though they buy only tea, she is intent on making them feel welcome in her presence, despite significant barriers to mutual comprehension. Though Tanya mistakenly identified them to me as "Arabic" and "Muslim," she and they typically exchanged friendly glances with one another and, on one occasion, I witnessed them sharing a laugh when she pretended to put too much sugar in their tea.

Not surprisingly, given her obvious economic motive, landfill employees tend to be less accommodating to Sikh truck drivers than is Tanya. As I have already discussed in Chapter Four, landfills are not ideal sites for creating worker solidarity;

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<sup>132</sup> Donna told me that she had trouble being friendly with the Sikh drivers "because of everything going on in Iraq," referring to the occupation which was then just over a year old.

there exists a significant division of labor between the more skilled machine operators and mechanics and the slightly lower paid, easily replaceable truck drivers. Not only do the latter work for different companies, their jobs are more likely to put them at odds with landfill employees in the context of the workplace. Most truck drivers are motivated to come and go as quickly as possible in order to meet their deadlines, particularly if they are working in tandem with another driver who needs the truck back in Ontario by a specific time; and even those with time to spare do not wish to linger up top where they may get stuck or pop a tire. Landfill employees, on the other hand, are more interested in maintaining orderliness, avoiding accidents, and keeping a low profile while on site. Needless to say, these can result in occasional conflicts, with the landfill employees frequently complaining about “bad driving” and drivers accusing some operators and managers of being “bossy” or slow to get them down off the hill.

Partly for these reasons, more direct encounters between Canadian truck drivers and white Michiganders do not necessarily foster more understanding between them. Most landfill employees, all of whom were born in the U.S. and self-identify as “white,” characterize Punjabi and Trinidadian drivers as “Arab.” While I have heard some employees use the term “Pakis” or “Hindus” instead (most likely learned from relatively unmarked Canadians who use it more frequently) the former term is far more prevalent and those that use alternatives tend to do so when they are seeking to be more derogatory, not less. In truth, truck drivers are typically only referred to as Arab – or as many at the landfill pronounce it, “Ay-rab” – when the speaker wishes to single them out.

“Arab,” “nigger,” or “Canadian” are usually employed in those circumstances where Sikh, African-American, or otherwise foreign individuals figure prominently in workplace narratives. I became aware of this on one of the first occasions that I was sent alone to “pick paper” at the exit ramp, on the far side of the landfill. The ramp varies in length and location, but it is a relatively short path composed of dirt and stone, connecting the top of the landfill to ground level. As the landfill grows in height, the ramp has to be constructed at a somewhat higher angle; so when laborers are sent to pick there they must be attentive to vehicles as they suddenly appear at the top of the ramp and come down the makeshift road at different rates of speed. This can be especially difficult to get accustomed to, especially since picking involves lowering one’s head repeatedly to reach for debris on the ground.<sup>133</sup>

At the end of one of my first afternoon shifts spent picking the ramp alone, an operator pulled me aside to lecture me about remaining alert while picking garbage off of the ramp. He drove his point home by adding that “Some of these Ay-rabic truck drivers can’t hardly go in a straight line, let alone maintain control of their trucks.” I learned, in fact, that he’d actually stopped to talk to me because *he’d* lost control of his dozer on the exit ramp that morning and I hadn’t seen him; he was worried about hitting me and was using “Arabic truck drivers” to get through to me and shift attention away from his own bad driving that afternoon.

There are ways in which talk about “Arabs” can secure privilege. Before I began working at Four Corners, Big Daddy closed down the male restroom adjoining

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<sup>133</sup> The process of picking the ramp is also, I soon learned, effectively endless. Debris is constantly falling off of trucks as they leave the open cells and quickly begins to collect in areas that have just been cleared. One can spend hours and hours picking the ramp without seeing any substantial improvement to its appearance.

the maintenance building from public use. Some of the “Arabic” drivers, he said, left the place in such a mess that it had to be closed for repairs for over a week.<sup>134</sup> Fear of what disgusting things “they” might do next kept the public bathroom out of general use and allowed the boss, who many consider obsessive compulsive, exclusive access to his very own private restroom. The bathroom, a site of ritual pollution and purification, serves to conflate moral character and ethnic markedness, where “white” becomes “cleanliness” and “Arab” becomes “dirty.”<sup>135</sup> Yet it also stands as a form of class critique. A number of workers now jokingly call it “Big Daddy’s bathroom,” and express resentment that its not available for public use. The assumption is that he keeps it too clean, in contradistinction to its “dirtying” at the hands of the truck drivers, as if he is taking purification too far. Doing so has clear class connotations at such workplaces for the simple reason that labor requires one to get somewhat dirty.

The use of “Arab truck drivers” as a popular trope in workplace discourse is not exclusive to landfill workers. I have also heard truck drivers – American and Canadian alike – criticize the “Arabic” drivers or “turbans.” In general, this is typically done in the context of expressing frustration with drivers who seem poorly trained or are unfamiliar with the elaborate routines and signs used to maintain safety and orderliness “up top” around the exposed dumping face. In popular gossip about the “Arab” truck drivers, poor English skills are often mentioned alongside bad driving as the most significant barriers to “getting the job done.” Here many

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<sup>134</sup> Though it is difficult to confirm, it is possible that if Sikh men were really responsible for this act of sabotage they may have attempted to use the facility as a squat toilet, which is popular throughout South Asia. This would explain why a “mess” would have been made, from Big Daddy’s perspective, given the difficulty in using water from sinks or toilets to wash one’s backside when no other water source is available.

<sup>135</sup> Using pollution or pollutability as a way of producing hierarchies of ethno-racial types has a prominent place in the history of colonialism (see, for example, Anderson 2006 and Kupinse 2005).

unmarked Canadian drivers and landfill employees share a belief in the importance of plain speech and direct, referential meaning when exchanging signs up top. The tempo of work up top is structured by relatively brief exchanges over the CB radio. Machine operators use the CB to impart English directives to truck drivers when necessary in order to maintain a degree of orderliness and facilitate efficient and fast-paced disposal – orderly talk and an orderly workplace are ideologically interwoven.

Over the landfill’s CB channel, the tendency is for short bursts of communication, usually referencing event and activities that both participants can visualize from their vehicles, “You’re alright. You can get by, c’mon truck!” The number of participants is only limited by geographic range (sometimes people communicate from the highway that they are almost there), but often it is based on short exchanges between two or three people in the same vicinity, with a brief statement followed by a prompt reply:

“Hey, where we going with this?”  
“Put the garbage with the garbage, ten four.”

“Mike, Dave’s comin around to hold that up for ya.”  
“Alright.”

“Hey Tanya what’s your special today?”  
“Barbeque chicken on the grill or hamburger,  
macaroni salad baked beans.”

As a linguistic register, CB talk at Four Corners privileges direct, “literal” interpretations of speech acts, that is, “a reading (whether actually literal or not) that stresses what is taken to be the standard meaning of the sentence – its propositional content – and suppresses all other possibilities” (Goffman 1981:56). At the same

time, as people become regulars and grow more comfortable with the landfill they may extend CB talk beyond its typical propositional framing:

“[singing] Lonely Days! Lonely Nights! Where would I be without my woman!”

“Hey don’t give up your truck driving job!”

Even in such instances, however, talk remains close to the stereotypical form, i.e., short, dyadic exchanges, thus confirming adherence to the underlying speech register.

Like bodily adornment, CB talk is also involved in positioning speakers relative to one another as types of persons. Asif Agha argues that when people make use of linguistic registers they tend to index certain voices, or social personae in the process: “encounters with registers are...encounters in which individuals establish forms of footing and alignment with voices indexed by speech and thus with social types of persons, real or imagined, whose voices they take them to be” (2005:38). “Arab” or “Canadian” speakers on the CB are potentially marked, through their participation in these speech interactions, as certain kinds of personae set apart from the unmarked, American workers.

One obvious violation of CB interaction is to use a language that cannot be understood by everyone, or to be someone who does not understand the dominant language of the site, English. Sometimes, drivers of different backgrounds might be able to understand fragments of English, but cannot form a comprehensible and acceptable reply and are later characterized by landfill workers as being unable to speak English. Occasionally, truck drivers with difficulty comprehending or speaking this register of English will rely on a bilingual assistant who uses the CB to translate English orders into Punjabi, for example. Though this allows the landfill to operate

relatively free from complication, it raises the ire of some workers. It is not unheard of, for example, for someone to say over the CB, in a loud and irritable tone, “speak English!” though for the most part speech interactions over the CB and in person are relatively polite.<sup>136</sup> The assumption is that failure to use the CB in ways that allow for “simple” directives and responses that landfill workers can understand disturbs the labor process, aligning failure to get the job done with failure to “learn English.”

There are other ways in which language difficulties and social types are indexically linked to interrupting the flow of work. One American truck driver, working out of a company in Lakeside, argued that dependence on bilingual drivers leads to bad driving on site and on the highway. “Those Arabs drive in herds,” he told me, “so that they don’t lose sight of their leader, the one who speaks the most English.” This leads them to speed, drive too slowly, or pull over suddenly in order to keep pace with one another, he claimed. The assumption that proficient bilingualism confers a leadership status on Sikh drivers is debatable; it is certainly true that those without much competence with speaking English are somewhat dependent on those that do. Not surprisingly, Sikh drivers at Four Corners did tend to associate fairly closely together. However, “herding” was quite common among many of the truck drivers I observed coming and going: they stay in proximity to one another to chat on the CB during long hauls, meet together for lunch or coffee along the way, and give each other assistance in case of emergency – in fact, the man who informed me of the connection between herding behavior and linguistic incompetence was actually waiting for a friend to help him since his vehicle had broken down! Even where

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<sup>136</sup> It could be argued that dependence on a third person, acting as translator, adds another layer between operator and driver in what is supposed to be direct, unmediated talk, thereby threatening the operator’s authority over the dissemination of signs and, hence, the ordering of relations up top.

relatively marked drivers resemble their work associates, in others words, the tendency to label them as representatives of an unfamiliar social type – that of “the immigrant” or “the Arab” – seems to preclude the recognition of similarities between them.

### Conclusion: Visions of Terror

The cultural figure of the “Arab immigrant” – embodied by Sikh truck drivers from Toronto for people living and working around Four Corners Landfill – serves to organize transnational experiences and encounters in a county at war abroad and refining the parameters of a functioning security state at home. It has taken on central importance for a number of Michigan residents as their lives are being transformed through border violations, both material and symbolic.

In the context of the present war on terror, life “at home” is occasionally punctuated by panic over the latest security threat, but otherwise free from the everyday, traumatic violence characterized by what Michael Taussig calls *the nervous system*:

[S]uddenly an unanticipated event occurs, perhaps a dramatic or poignant or ugly one, and the normality of the abnormal is shown for what it is. Then it passes away, terror as usual, in a staggering of position that lends itself to survival as well as despair and macabre humor. [1992:18]

While the U.S. is far from such a model of “terror as usual,” at the same time the *possibility* of the unanticipated event, of another attack or unseen threat, has become part of national public and political culture. It is evident, I have argued, in the ways some Michigan residents misconstrue Canadian Sikhs as threatening “Arabs.” With some incidents of transnational encounter, however, the predicaments associated with

the waste trade are more readily identified with the war on terror and its social poetics within the American “homeland.”<sup>137</sup>

I met Sam, a thirty-five year old laborer for a construction company, while he was exiting the woods along the north side of the county road leading to the landfill, carrying a basket of morels he’s just picked from a wild patch deep in the forest. He’d lived just down the road until he’d had to move three years before, but still returned periodically to hunt and pick wild mushrooms where an old house had burnt down in the forest, providing nutrient-rich soil ideal for morels. He didn’t like to come back very often, I soon discovered, because his previous life had ended in front of his old house, where a Canadian truck driver had struck his fiancé’s car.

They had met while working construction and had gradually become inseparable over the years – buying a house in Florida together, skydiving, and spending all of their free time and extra money meticulously assembling a miniature house with expensive replica furniture and tiny appliances. In late March of 2003, on the day of the accident, he was playing with her five-year-old son and waiting for the school bus to pick up her ten-year-old. In a hurry to get to the landfill, a waste hauler clipped the side of her small sports car as she sat idle, waiting to pull into their driveway. She was severely injured and nearly paralyzed. According to Sam, “They called her a broken girl...She broke this arm, broke her femur right here at the ball,

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<sup>137</sup> In a recent essay, Catherine Lutz (2006) suggests that anthropologists turn their attention toward American communities as they are implicated in the project of American imperialism. Lutz advocates for a more thoroughgoing treatment of American empire “at home,” by which she does not mean a critique of so-called “internal colonialism,” per se, but an analysis of life in a nation whose imperial projects abroad are connected through multiple and tenuous threads back to everyday existence in the homeland (Lutz 2006:598; Stoler 2006).

tore this part of her face off, broken her jaw in four places,” but that wasn’t the worst part of the accident:

I think the mental state turned out to be the worst. Nobody’s ever the same after that, whole family’s out of control, everybody’s turning on everybody...and me being just the boyfriend, you know, I’m takin the heat of it.

For the first few months the boys had trouble with discipline, and would try to turn their mother’s family against Sam. The younger one began having bodily seizures, without warning. A big part of the problem was that “she wasn’t the same person anymore,” Sam says, constantly crying or lashing out unpredictably

Their relationship couldn’t recover from the accident. A big part of the problem, he says, was the daily truck traffic passing by their house, “Trucks are constantly goin by here, but once you get hit by one right in front of your house and you gotta sit and listen to it... its very stressful.” Sam admits this was a dark time for him, when he began to feel alienated from the woman he loved and her boys, who he’d once begun to think of as his own. As he listened to the truck traffic and relived the incident over and over again, he was taken back to the “Arab” who had struck his wife’s car and had smiled at him at the scene of the accident. That smile made Sam furious. “It was a grin,” he told me, “I almost went for his throat.”

Later, Sam learned that that same driver had had his license revoked when he’d struck another person. He began to suspect that the accident had been intentional:

I was thinking it was a conspiracy; I started thinking it was a part of terrorism, you know what I mean [nervous laughter] I was thinking it was a internal terrorism thing – they’re just goin round hittin people, just zoom into people.

During this time, Sam was taking time off of work and spending a lot of time at home. He began to look for proof of what he suspected – that the accident had been a terrorist attack, “I got to the point where I just sat there for hours and hours, videotaping trucks goin by all day and night, taillight after taillight after taillight.” He was looking for evidence against the landfill as well, of suspicious activity or broken rules to use in the event that they needed it for court. Mostly he was looking for some pattern behind the endless line of trucks, sometimes five hundred in one day, at the busiest times one passing by every five seconds.

Sam’s assumption that the driver was “Arab” is about more than possible misunderstanding, it offers him a way of interpreting the unreal trauma that befell his family, that he says ruined his life. And his short-lived obsession with videotaping the truck traffic, in order to capture some secret or discover a hidden plot, is an extreme version of the border anxieties that I have documented in this chapter. In their own ways, the residents of Brandes who criticize the waste trade are engaging in acts of surveillance and suspicion on behalf of a state which leaves the problem of waste importation to the invisible hand of the international market and, consequently, does not protect them. Landfill workers tend to racialize Sikh drivers as “Arab” to different effects, but continue to rely on a social poetics that links unwanted matter with unwanted people. Taken to its limit, as in the case of Sam and his personal tragedy, this creates a situation of resentment and deep paranoia, not only about what the truck drivers are hauling, but also about who they really are.

Sam’s obsession with videotaping reminded me of one of the favorite pastimes of a number of landfill employees, particularly in its tendency to frame

ethno-racial otherness in terms of surveillance and visibility. This is apparent, for example, in a popular game among landfill workers called “So Com.” After working together for ten or twelve hour shifts, several workers from Four Corners spend several more hours online playing a videogame. Logged in through their Play Stations, they join one another in the guise of foreign terrorists or American Navy Seals, staging covert operations in distant countries with bombed out landscapes. During the day, they struggle to communicate with the Canadian immigrants who haul waste into their state; throughout the night, they enact fantasy scenarios where they interact with spies, hostages, and enemies from distant countries in order to spread freedom and further U.S. security interests. As with Sam’s videotape of the passing trucks, playing So Com is part of a valorization of the visual sense to the exclusion of other, more engaged forms of sensory knowing (see Feldman 1996). In this way it seems to parallel the structure of distance built into work relations at the landfill: both close one off from having to directly confront otherness, whether that of a co-worker or a fantasized terrorist enemy.<sup>138</sup> Co-presence is heavily mediated by the game console or the machine one is encased in; communication is reduced to short bursts in “gamer” chat rooms or over the CB radio.

The connections I have laid out in this chapter between contemporary border concerns and the waste trade are in many ways like So Com, they involve Michigan residents encountering foreign interlocutors who are, in many ways, limited to figures of their own imaginations. They do so, moreover, without being forced to test their

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<sup>138</sup> Allen Feldman (1994) describes this form of sensory perception as “cultural anesthesia,” arguing that it distances the observer from the violence they witness. As with televised bombings, video game scenarios are structured in order to mimic the intimate experience of “really being there” while promoting indifference to the pain of the other, allowing one to casually enjoy playing a game or watching the news.

misinterpretations through more intimate social contact beyond that of surveillance at a distance.<sup>139</sup>

Of course, fantasies of the violated border have the potential to multiply beyond the limited confines within which they've been considered up this point. In the past few years, concerns about a terrorist threat originating from Canada have been followed by fears concerning the international spread of SARS and Avian Flu, as well as spirited debates concerning Americans purchasing prescription drugs across the northern border. September 11<sup>th</sup> did not force border considerations into a narrower discursive field, but rather enriched the polyvalent significance of concepts like "security," thereby adding new urgency to transboundary crossings which threaten to mix inside and outside, the national and the foreign, in potentially dangerous ways. What I have tried to argue is that, as these border anxieties find expression in new political risks, they will continue to shape social relations in various settings in new and unexpected ways, inflected by the political creativity and imaginations of those involved.

If perceptions of the North American transportation of waste have been influenced, in particular, by statewide opposition to Canadian waste importation into Michigan as I have suggested, it is also true that the same creative activists and traumatized roadside residents that use border-crossing to think about their current predicaments have attempted to alter their circumstances in many ways that do not

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<sup>139</sup> State institutions traffic in similar forms of social poetics which fixate on people of Arab identity as possible threats to security (see Shryock and Howell 2003). When one of the laborers at Four Corners was interrogated by FBI agents as part of a narcotics investigation, for example, they accused him of using Canadian truck drivers as suppliers for the ecstasy pills he was selling during his time off from the landfill. His actual supplier was a man from the metro area, but he was happy to let them continue believing that the waste trade was a front for international drug smuggling.

involve the strategic essentialism of social poetics. As I argue in the next chapter, the possible risks and actual harms of living in proximity to a dumping site provide opponents of Four Corners with alternative forums in which to change the course of the global waste trade, but only as victims of it.

## Chapter VII

### Risk and Recognition: Forms and Forums of Landfill Pollution

Some people are more affected than others by the distribution and growth of risks.  
- Ulrich Beck [1992:23]

The first time I met Maude, middle-aged mother and grandmother and ardent opponent of the local dump, she suggested that anyone who wanted to understand how Four Corners Landfill was impacting the people of Brandes and the surrounding area should test the ditches along the County Road. “Either that” she said, her voice rising in intensity, “or you should do a survey of the people who live around here and ask about their medical problems, because **a lot** of babies are being born with acid reflux.” When I told Maude of my intention to study the impact of Four Corners primarily through casual observation and interviews, she was clearly disappointed, but not dissuaded from her local ambitions. Over the course of our acquaintance she, her family and friends would continue searching for the right spokespersons to help politicize their grievances against the landfill. From frustrating encounters with government inspectors to strategic alliances with state politicians and environmental lawyers, they would experiment with new ways of representing themselves as victims and Four Corners as a menace.

Like many of the most committed opponents of Four Corners and Canadian waste importation, Maude grew up around Brandes. After living in army bases throughout the southern U.S. and Germany in the early years of her marriage, Maude

eventually settled back in the center of town with her family, right across the street from her sister Gwen's store where she, her daughter, her nephew and her sister's brother-in-law now work. Lions Service was a prominent grocery store, gas station and repair shop in Brandes decades before Gwen and her husband acquired it in 1990. There haven't been gas pumps out front in years, however, and today competition from purportedly "Arab" party stores outside of town has forced them to rely more heavily on the towing service they provide than on grocery sales. The auto repair shop is also gone; but the former garage is far more popular as a "coffee klatch," which serves as a local hangout for their close friends and regular customers. I was initially directed to Lions Service by five local men – Bill, Jacob, Brent, Roy and Jeff – engaging in their very first public demonstration against the landfill and the Canadian waste trade.<sup>140</sup> The store, they informed me, was the best place in town to hear local perspectives about the dump. They were right; Lions was a comfortable public space for people to share sentiments and strategy while sipping coffee and gossiping, reading newspapers, watching daytime television, eating entrées prepared in the slow cooker or sharing the occasional homemade dessert. The store provided something like an informal base of operations for local activism in the spring and summer of 2006, as it had fifteen years prior when the company that owned Four Corners attempted to site Four Corners in Brandes, across the street from Gwen and Maude's parent's home.

Maude was not the only person who hoped my project would in some way contribute to their own political agenda – because of the contentious situation surrounding Four Corners many people hold a stake in how the landfill and the

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<sup>140</sup> I discuss this demonstration and the people involved in it in more detail in the next chapter.

surrounding communities are represented – but her invocation of polluted ditches and diseased infants took me by surprise. While most of the criticisms of the landfill I had heard up to that point mentioned the increase in truck traffic and strong odors, Maude wanted me to consider (and to study) the hidden dangers such nuisances might entail. What was in the debris and dust that empty garbage trucks left along the roadside while departing for the highway? How might regular exposure to strong fumes affect the health of residents of Brandes?

These questions reveal a desire to discover the unknown hazards that substances alleged to be safe may secretly pose. Following the sociologist Ulrich Beck, Barbara Adam argues that environmental problems of the present day are so pernicious precisely because they remain imperceptible and dormant for extended periods of time before they become manifest as symptoms (1998:165-6; Beck 1992:21-3):

Whether we are encountering the impact of synthetic chemicals, ozone depletion, air and water pollution, radiation, or a new disease such as BSE, the defining features seem to be spatio-temporal unboundedness, non-proportionality, time-space distantiatio, contingency, and a high level of indeterminacy. [Adam 1998:81]

As a consequence, the relationship between an environmental problem and its original cause or causes is seldom transparent, but is framed instead by competing perceptions of risk and the real. Landfills, in a sense, are the obverse of the kind of secretive environmental threat Adam discusses – everyone knows they are filled with polluting substances that are potentially dangerous – but the possibility of their being additional, unknown dangers unseen by the state or the landfill attracts the imaginations of neighboring residents.

Why might Maude encourage me to imagine babies with digestive disorders and ditches filled with toxins when she could just as complain about declining land values or dangerous truck traffic? For one thing, her lack of trust in the landfill and the protection of the state lead her to believe that almost any environmental hazard is possible. But she also understands full well that only certain environmental harms are likely to attract public recognition and a proportionate response. Finally, her attempt to solicit my help in this matter reveals an intuitive sense that only certain kinds of expertise can successfully legitimate perceived threats to safety and health.

In previous chapters I discussed the socio-historical conditions that make possible the contemporary movement of waste within the Great Lakes region and the diverse spectrum of possibilities that face landfill workers and landfill host communities as a consequence, with my former coworkers at Four Corners and the host community of Harrison serving as primary examples. In this chapter I would like to discuss the different ways by which waste circulation is politicized and publicized through the partial recognition of socio-environmental harms. My account is informed less by Beck's approach to the industrial pollution of "risk societies" and more so by Elizabeth Povinelli's (2006) insight into the uneven distribution of risks in "liberal settler societies," such as the U.S. and Australia, and Wendy Brown's (1995) account of contemporary liberalism and its relation to the politicization of suffering.

Povinelli argues that the public acknowledgement of contaminated environments and bodies as unjust or in need of remedy is mediated by normative expectations concerning where certain forms of environmental degradation and physical harm belong and where they do not (2006:81). This means that contesting

the distribution of hazards involves the intervention of a politics of public recognition such that certain people are identified as “legitimate” victims. What follows below is not an account of grassroots activists per se, but one of collusion between people with different interests, affiliations and kinds of expertise. In particular, I focus on collaborative attempts to politicize and publicize within specific venues the affects of Four Corners on local bodies, experiences and surroundings. I call such venues “public forums” after Michel Callon and his colleagues (2002:195), who use them to describe sites that are at once political, economic, legal, moral and scientific and that bring together locals and outsiders, laypeople and experts in hybrid collaborations and conflicts. Similar to Beck’s (1992) characterization of the recursive constitution of techno-science by environmental critics and victims, Callon et al. (2002) argue that public forums are crucial sites for the reflexive co-creation of different markets by consumers and economists, among others. With respect to public forums on the distribution and disposal of waste, both market forms and techno-scientific knowledge are subject to reflexive critique and transformation.

This chapter is also about the limits of such “reflexivity,” not merely in terms of the unequal conditions associated with participation in such “forums” or in publics of any kind (see Fraser 1992, Warner 2002), but with respect to the differential subject positions they presuppose and entail. Rather than serve as a form of empowerment for the local residents involved, these forums tend to include them as political participants only insofar as they are *victims* of environmental harm. Following Brown (1995:66-76), I argue that this process engenders Nietzschean *ressentiment*, or a moralizing stance of impotent rancor that neither empowers local

actors, nor challenges conditions of socio-environmental inequality (cf. Douglas and Wildavsky 1982:190). Consequently, while changing the terms of regional market transactions in waste, Maude and her friends and family end up preserving the existing waste regime.

### Politicizing Odor

While it is the sheer size of Four Corners that first catches the attention of a first-time visitor, it is the unpleasant smells radiating from the site that most disturb the people to the northeast, in the direction of the prevailing winds. These include, most prominently, smells of rotting garbage, of sewage sludge, of smoldering compost and of methane gas.<sup>141</sup>



Figure 7.1: An odor control system releases perfume at the northern edge of Four Corners, J.Reno, 2005

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<sup>141</sup> Sewage sludge does not always smell, if sufficiently treated, but at the time of my research most of the sludge was untreated prior to burial at Four Corners. Strictly speaking, methane gas does not smell but is a main constituent of landfill gas which also includes hydrogen sulfide, a colorless gas with a rotten-egg smell. Landfill gas is commonly glossed, both by landfill employees and nearby residents, as “methane” so I use that name for it here.

Calvin Township, which includes the small villages of Brandes and Eatonville directly northeast of Four Corners, has been exposed to the majority of odor problems since the dump began operation in neighboring Harrison Township in 1991. While odor has plagued both Brandes residents and landfill managers since its opening, official complaints to the county and state environmental protection divisions increased dramatically in 2003 and 2004.<sup>142</sup> Most residents agree that landfill odors became much worse once Canadian garbage began coming to the landfill in the spring of 2001.

Maude, for example, believes that problems with Four Corners began to multiply when the landfill transferred in ownership from a local Michigan company to one of the big three transnational waste corporations. The new ownership, coupled with new Canadian trash imports, created a different landfill:

The traffic got worse, the smells got worse. [Before that] it was more rare, it was like once in a great while, but if you called the dump directly and said "man there's a smell over here" immediately they did something about it.

According to Maude, the landfill used to be more sensitive to community concerns. Indeed, it was integrated into the community of Brandes in a further sense since, at that time, employees of Four Corners came to the store on a regular basis and she could recognize some of them as "locals" similar to herself. Now more landfill business comes to Lions Service from tractor-trailers that break down on the way to and from the landfill, but she remembers not long ago when her encounters with

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<sup>142</sup> It remains unclear whether this indicates a definite increase in the intensity or frequency of odors, however. When Four Corners sought to vastly expand their available dumping space in 1994, state officials received a number of letters from local residents complaining about terrible smells. Odor problems in the area are a decade old at the very least.

landfill employees were more personal and the occasional stench was far less of a concern.<sup>143</sup>

In recent years, the smells have become much more frequent and much more intense, especially during the summers. Several times a week, early in the morning between 5:30 and 6AM, it is common to smell rotting garbage followed by the stench of sewage sludge. Maude, along with a few others, correctly attributes this regular succession of smells to the landfill operators digging new trenches into the hill (a process which stirs up old waste in the midst of decomposition) into which they then dump the sludge loads of the day. There is a similar problem related to the large compost piles accumulated for landscaping purposes on the western side of the landfill; when compost piles are regularly stirred to add oxygen to the batch of rotting plant material they release a noxious odor that some residents believe is worse than sludge. Methane, by contrast, tends to appear intermittently as the landfill exhales the gases produced by internal bioreaction. Additional smells originate from passing trucks carrying waste to the landfill, which are seldom washed or well maintained. Many sludge trucks, in particular, seem to have inadequate covering to prevent foul odors from escaping. With all of these possible sources of odor, it can seem as if smells follow you around wherever you go. According to Jerry, Gwen's brother-in-law and a driver for their towing operation, "On a bad smellin day you smell it everywhere! Sometimes it's so bad you think it's somethin you run over!"

Stories about particularly bad odors have become a type of speech genre all their own, a supplement to any local discussion of "the dump." In these speech acts,

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<sup>143</sup> The drop in landfill customers is no doubt partly attributable to the opening of the "Snack Shack" by the landfill manager's wife on the landfill property, which serves both truck drivers and landfill employees.

tales of olfactory sensation and their socio-physical responses are exaggerated somewhat to convey one's personal experience in a sufficiently dramatic fashion and to make an episode of visceral disgust a token of shared suffering. I have heard on more than one occasion that a particular landfill odor was so strong that it led to nausea or actual vomiting, but odor stories have obvious consequences beyond the merely physiological. In addition to making it difficult to get up and go to work in the morning, sometimes the smells from Four Corners force Maude and her coworkers to close the windows of the un-air conditioned store, making it very unpleasant on hot days. She and Gwen are also convinced that it hurts their walk-in business

As far as them coming into the store, if it smells bad I wouldn't come in. I would go down the street and get to another store before I would get out of my car... Who has an appetite when it smells like that? I mean they're not gonna come in and buy **food**.

Brandes residents in general complain most often about having to stay inside on beautiful days rather than have cookouts or play with their children. One woman conveyed to me her frustration and embarrassment at not being able to have an outdoor graduation party for her high schooler.

If such problems began when the Canadian trash imports started coming to Four Corners it either was not reported to the proper authorities at that time, or they were not nearly as severe as they are now. There is little record of local odor complaints until February of 2002, almost a year after Four Corners began to receive foreign waste, and they are not made consistently until the following year. It may be that complaints increased as local perceptions changed due to the increasing centrality of the foreign waste trade in the election campaigns of 2002. In that year, prominent

democratic senators running for reelection and then gubernatorial-hopeful Jennifer Granholm staged rallies near Four Corners promising to put a stop to the waste trade. Even the Kerry/Edwards campaign publicly promised to end Canadian trash imports through federal legislation. Even more importantly, perhaps, by 2002 and 2003 a considerable number of new residents had moved into expensive homes in a new subdivision called “Silent Pines” built within a mile northeast of the landfill. Many of the new homeowners in Silent Pines had been told that the landfill would close soon, only to discover later that it will likely be in operation after they enter retirement.

Associated with the intense political activity and demographic changes leading into 2003, some residents began to actively distribute the phone numbers of governmental officials and regulation agencies such as the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) and the County Department of the Environment (CDOE) to report odor. From that point on, but particularly during 2003 and 2004, a large number of residents began calling the MDEQ and CDOE offices regularly to complain about the constant odors coming from Four Corners Landfill. Though few locals themselves make this connection, it may be that the politicization of the waste trade and the broad base of opposition the practice generated among Michigan’s general public provided a sense that something could be done to change their everyday circumstances. This would also explain why, for many local residents, the local problems associated with Four Corners are inseparable from state-wide problem of foreign waste importation.

Maude first received the odor complaint numbers from Bill, a lifelong resident of Eatonville and one of the main organizers of the demonstrations against the landfill in the spring of 2006. Gwen and Maude displayed the numbers prominently on a sign clearly visible from the coffee klatch:

**ODOR PROBLEMS  
FROM  
FOUR CORNERS  
LANDFILL?????  
PLEASE CALL  
1-734-326-3939**

DURING THESE HOURS 7:30A.M. TO 4:30 P.M TO  
Department of Environment  
TELL THE OPERATOR THAT YOUR CALL IS REGARDING  
THE ODOR PROBLEM, THIS INFORMATION WILL DIRECT  
YOUR CALL TO THE RIGHT PERSON  
WHEN YOU CALL IN THE DEPARTMENT OF  
ENVIRONMENT WILL GO ON SITE TO VERIFY THIS ODOR.  
AFTER BUSINESS HOURS  
CALL THE OPERATOR AT 1-888-223-2363  
TELL THEM THIS IS REGARDING AN ODOR PROBLEM  
THEY WILL GET IN TOUCH WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF  
ENVIRONMENT , THEY WILL COME TO THE SITE TO  
VERIFY THE COMPLAINT

**CALL WHENEVER YOUR SMELL THE LANDFILL !!!!**

With its imperative mode of style, the sign attempts to bring into existence the politically motivated public that it addresses (see Warner 2002:67). In addition to posting the sign, Maude, Gwen and other employees at Lions take it upon themselves to involve customers and friends in the calling when the opportunity arises: “If people come in and say anything about the smell it’s automatic – ‘here’s the number to call, you’ve got to call.’” On one occasion, Bill began describing the awful smell near the wetland preserve and was immediately chastised by Maude for not having the number programmed into his cell phone so that he could call it in right away. At the start,

calling the MDEQ and CDOE was part of a larger change in strategy from dealing with odors as a problem to be solved directly by the landfill, to one that requires community effort to involve the proper authorities:

They're not gonna do something for one or two people. If one person calls in and says they smell this dump, they're gonna say "O.K. one person's smellin it." If you get fifty people callin and sayin they smell this dump, then they're gonna do something.

Residents had to stop thinking of phoning an odor in as something one person had to do to make the landfill personnel aware of the problem, Maude told me, and instead consider it a form of collective protest.

From the perspective of lifelong residents associated with Lions Service, newer residents living in the subdivisions seemed less likely to participate in these efforts. However, another group of Brandes residents from Silent Pines distributed the numbers amongst themselves as well. At that time, they shared with many longtime residents a conviction that the odor problems might be successfully resolved if left to the proper authorities, but this attitude soon changed as different locals throughout Brandes became frustrated with what they perceived as complacency or duplicity on the part of the MDEQ and CDOE.

Odors at a level of "2" or Higher

In part, local discontentment had to do with conflicts over the interpretation of odor and the way in which the bodily sensations of the public are translated by government inspectors into forms of state regulation. Odor problems like those associated with Four Corners fall under the Air Quality Management Ordinance of the County, in effect since 1998, which is administered by the MDEQ and the CDOE

as part of Part 115 of Michigan's Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act, signed into effect in 1994 to meet changing national standards with respect to waste management. According to the ordinance, landfills or other legal persons are in non-compliance with state rules if odors are detected at a level of "2" or higher along an Odor Intensity Scale ranging from zero to three. Along with a description of the "character" of the odor (as opposed to its perceived quality), its duration, time of occurrence and the general weather conditions observed when it occurs, odor intensity is intended as an "objective" measure of poor air quality in contrast to the "subjective" perceptions of "complainants," who may differ according to their personal thresholds for a given odor or their past experiences with it (McGinley and McGinley 2000). Inspectors from the county or state environmental regulation agencies receive special training which is meant to help them identify the specific characters (e.g. sludge, methane, garbage...) and quantifiable intensities of odors in a reliable and replicable fashion.

Because the "untrained" sensory perceptions of locals are deemed unreliable, they are necessary only to the extent that they alert the attention of accredited inspectors and draw them to an observable episode of landfill odor as acknowledged "complainants." As complainants represented by the state, they are limited to being potential victims and witnesses of malfeasance only. With discriminating noses educated through the resources of the state and the environmental science establishment, inspectors are empowered to translate the "subjective" suffering of individuals into non-compliance inspection reports, which in turn may lead to notices of violation (or NOV) and eventual punitive measures. In the process of translation,

bad smells become public nuisances for which landfills are legally responsible. If a landfill is found to be creating public odors of category “2” or higher on a consistent basis, as has happened to Four Corners on more than one occasion, an NOV is submitted to them in writing which stipulates a timeline in which they must correct the problem to avoid accumulating fees.

As with other forms of state “tunnel vision,” odor intensity scales “bring into sharp focus certain limited aspects of an otherwise far more complex and unwieldy reality” (Scott 1998:11). In doing so, however, they not only represent the socio-environmental pollution associated with landfills by way of manageable, decomposable units, but perform a structural “state effect” such that regulatory institutions and their judgments seem to transcend the local interests and personal biases in which they are inextricably embedded (see Mitchell 1991). Numerical assignment of odors gives the appearance of objective neutrality and technical precision that is meant to make the MDEQ and CDOE appear impartial and asocial, thereby granting legitimacy to their biopolitical management of citizens, corporations and their socio-natural surroundings.

However, because bureaucratic designs and legal enforcement must be implemented through living bureaucrats and inspectors, they are exposed to a level of contingency with respect to actual implementation that is, in turn, “legible” to governed publics (see Herzfeld 2005). It is well known among inspectors and regulators of the MDEQ and CDOE that odor interpretation is a heavily contested issue and that both locals and landfill workers often treat their own accounts with suspicion. One of the employees at the MDEQ informed me that many locals who

call the department feel an odor assigned an intensity of “1” or “1.5” is bad enough to warrant a violation. While he thinks that their perceptions are skewed by their dislike of the landfill, many residents of Brandes feel that anyone who doesn’t live in the vicinity of Four Corners is not qualified to judge the severity of the constant smells they are exposed to. A lack of familiarity with the local people and the problems they face makes the allegedly “objective” assessments of inspectors frustrating to those who call them. Moreover, the way they talk about these problems – as objectively verifiable and fixable incidents – and they are typically unwilling to seriously entertain the epidemiological theories of residents about the hidden dangers the landfill poses. As I will explain more below, this makes inspectors appear similar to certain landfill personnel, such as Corey, and makes their pronouncements seem suspect as a consequence.<sup>144</sup>

Interestingly, most landfill employees dislike inspectors as well. One in particular is intensely disliked at the landfill and has several derogatory nicknames among workers. For landfill employees, this is more often characterized in class terms. Inspectors, like Corey, are college educated and are typically dressed in casual attire when seen, a short sleeve polo shirt, clean jeans and sneakers, reminiscent of the landfill management that visit the site periodically as well. Like Corey and other people in his approximate class position, inspectors are assumed to lack practical know-how and are often mocked along these lines by landfill workers. Bob, the manager of operations at Four Corners told me of one time he was forced to escort

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<sup>144</sup> That “objectivity” becomes more suspect when one compares incident reports over the last several years. Timothy, one of the two primary county inspectors that have visited Four Corners regularly over the years was far more likely to issue non-compliances for odor than his coworker, who tended to give a value of less than “2” more often.

Timothy around the site for hours to locate a smell he insisted was being caused by the landfill. They searched throughout the property, Bob all the while insisting they were not the cause of the problem, until Timothy, certain he had located the source, came upon the carcass of a dead dog in the corner of the woods. In general, landfill employees feel that neither inspectors nor local residents are capable of distinguishing between landfill odor and other kinds of rural odors.

Maude and her coworkers agree that newer residents confuse the two, but in the opposite way. They argue that new residents, particularly those living in Silent Pines, often assume that smells coming from the dump are caused by the local sod farm or livestock. Since many of the regulars at Lions grew up in the country they feel qualified to make such distinctions. Maude is actually known for having an excellent sense of smell and a good memory for different odors. She finds the idea that she could confuse landfill smells with “smells from the country” absolutely ludicrous. Indeed, these smells never really bothered her growing up and many lifelong residents of the Brandes area feel the same. If, as Edward Casey argues (1996, 2000), senses of place are founded on embodied memories and, as is claimed by olfactory psychologists, odor and memory possess particularly strong associations (Engen 1991), it is not difficult to understand why the landfill seems to be such a disruptive influence on social life in and around Brandes. Being outside in the “fresh country air” is a large part of Gwen and Maude’s memories of the area. It is not that the past was odor-free, far from it, but whereas smells of horse manure or livestock are familiar ones linked to shared memories of place, landfill odor threatens to transform the community into an alien world.

Aside from the contentiousness of how given smells are interpreted, what is even more bothersome to residents of Calvin Township is the necessity of an inspector coming long distances to serve as the state's wandering nose. I heard countless complaints about inspectors who arrive far too late to assess odors when they were at their peak. This is a problem that the MDEQ inspectors fully admit to and cannot correct, since their offices are approximately fifty miles away by highway, but even the county inspectors, whose offices are less than twenty miles away, sometimes arrive too late to properly evaluate the source of the complaint. As one reads through the regular county and state complaint investigation reports this appears again and again:

**REMARKS:**

**WIND DIRECTION: SSW SPEED: 5-10 MPH**

Complaint:

*Two complaints were received at approx 12:55pm regarding odors coming from the landfill. Both complaints detected odors around their residences in Silent Pines Subdivision*

*Spoke with both complainants [sic] at their home and no odors were detected between 1:20 and 1:55pm. Complaints [sic] did not detect the odor at this time.*

- quoted from CDOE Inspection Report for 11/04/03

**REMARKS:**

*14:00 – [Air Quality Department] staff receives complaint on voicemail. County*

*Land Resources Division is contacted to see if someone is available to investigate. X said that no one was and asked that DEQ investigate.*

*14:50 – AQD staff arrives at complainant's residence, which is located approximately ½ mile north of South Brandes Rd. (This location places the complainant almost three miles north-northeast of the landfill.)*

*Wind – SSW @ 5 mph*

*Temp – 60 degrees F  
Sky – mostly cloudy*

*Since there was a dog on the front porch, AQD staff approached the side door. AQD staff knocked several times, and received no answer.*

*No odors were noted at the complainant's residence.*

- quoted from MDEQ Activity Report: Complaint Investigation on 03/14/ 06

In an apparent effort to solve this problem, in one 2006 letter, responding to a man representing the homeowners of Silent Pines subdivision, an analyst at the MDEQ concludes by suggesting that the resident keep a detailed “odor log”:

[I]t is useful for yourself (and any other residents noting odors) to keep an odor log, noting the date, time, duration, intensity and character of the odor, as well as the current weather conditions (temperature, wind direction, wind speed, and sky conditions). A complete and accurate odor log can lend a great deal of credibility to allegations of nuisance odors.

In a sense, he is asking the complainant to serve as an extension of the state's monitoring efforts, to help them make up for the permanent agent-in-the-field that they are lacking. While this suggestion may be intended to aid the investigation into Four Corners as well as give the residents of Silent Pines confidence that something will be done, it also provides them with more evidence that environmental protection agencies are incapable of handling the problem alone.

For many residents, calling the MDEQ and CDOE was and still is the first option for combating odors from Four Corners. But episodes such as those above frustrate Brandes residents and have led many to question whether available regulation agencies are actually willing or able to successfully intervene. The constant calling advocated by Maude did make regulators more and more a part of landfill affairs, in ways not always apparent to landfill opponents in Brandes (inspections and investigations increased dramatically after 2003), but it also served

to generate a sense that existing forms of regulation and remedy were ineffective. To this day, for many residents of Brandes each new odor represents the indifference and failure of the state and local government as much as the greed and disdain of the landfill owners.

One can easily discern the resulting frustration and desperation in one letter to the MDEQ dated 10/11/2004 from a resident of one of the local subdivisions:

I have sent several letters regarding this matter. I am being told over and over again that the odor at the landfill has been acknowledged and to expect improvement. The odor has only gotten worse. Today/night the smell was so bad that you could smell it in the closed house. My husband who has severe asthma is having trouble breathing. He had to use his breathing machine tonight and I am concerned that he may have to be taken to the hospital. The air is so bad I can hardly breath [sic]. If you go outside the odor is nauseating.

Here, the “complainant” does not merely criticize the position of environmental regulation agencies, which she deems overly optimistic if not complacent, but attempts to encourage their intervention by evoking a “lay epidemiology” concerning the hazards Four Corners poses (Brown and Mikkelsen 1990; Kroll-Smith, Brown and Gunter 2000). Like Maude, she wants to be heard by those empowered to change her circumstances and is looking for a way to voice environmental harms that will allow for this. Her lack of confidence in existing forms of protection against the landfill, moreover, leave her wondering what might be happening to her and her husband’s bodies that neither the landfill nor the state may anticipate or care to investigate. As with other members of the community, her sense of vulnerability to hidden dangers is exacerbated by a feeling of disenfranchisement.

In a reply to another letter from the same woman, the District Supervisor of the MDEQ addresses her medical concerns: “In your letter expressed concern about

the health risk associated with the odors. The odors are a nuisance but studies have not demonstrated a toxicological health risk associated with [them].” Here the local head of the MDEQ seeks to allay her fears; he does so not through further investigation of the matter but by undermining her confidence in the epidemiological links she feels to be true and believes she has observed in her everyday life. Bruno Latour (1987) has explained how certain forms of citation help to enshrine the conclusions of studies and experiments as scientific “facts,” rather than view them as elements of a social practice that produces contested knowledge through the work of situated actors. In this case, the MDEQ official references “studies” without further support or comment. This may be because he assumes that his audience will not have the background to contest his claim, though he may also be suitably convinced of it that he feels it requires no further substantiation.

In another letter to the MDEQ, a woman in the same subdivision included a copy of an op-ed from the Detroit Free Press which was written by a doctor who concludes that many forms of everyday air pollutions can be very harmful in the long term. An expert of sorts is thereby enlisted in the debate and the respondent must enroll his own techno-scientific support in order to legitimate the position of the MDEQ, while ostensibly quelling the anxiety of the resident. In his reply, the District Supervisor cites a study from a prominent medical journal that identifies landfill odors as generally harmless. In any event, he adds, the main odor associated with landfills – hydrogen sulfide – is not present on the list of harmful odors that the Detroit Free Press mentions. He thus identifies himself as a qualified spokesperson

for the odor (see Latour 1987:70-4), its real significance and socio-environmental impact, rather than a recipient of complaints and a champion of local interests.

Several years ago, he does not remember when, Bill experienced a similar rejection of his epidemiological claims, only they were refuted in person and by landfill employees. When the landfill still held local meetings to confer with residents about local problems, Bill attended only one and did so in order to question efforts to protect air quality in the area, “I said ‘I’m gonna tell you right now, almost everybody in Brandes and Eatonville has respiratory problems, breathing problems, asthma, little kids got reflux, little kids got this’...” Those present representing the landfill called his accusations “irresponsible” and asked him to leave. Here the possibility of competing knowledge is foreclosed outright, limiting the range of allowable dimensions of the real to those acceptable to the landfill, which is one of several reasons why these regular meetings eventually stopped and relations between Four Corners and the community worsened.

I would like to bracket these competing knowledge claims for the moment and return to them further below. What I want to foreground here is the emergence of a lay epidemiology used by different residents in Brandes to politicize the landfill’s affect on their lives. As earlier noted, Maude possesses similar fears and a similar strategy to the women above. When asked about her concerns with respect to the landfill’s impact on local health she responded:

You know, is it causing cancers? And I know people die from cancers but it’s been a lot [around here lately]. The acid reflux... every baby I can think has been born with it. Everyone is on medication for it. Anne’s grandson, Anne’s got it and Bill’s got it. I never did have [allergies] but you know now I do have problems with my sinus and **I never did have**. It’s probably within the last four years or so... all of a sudden I’m thinking, “my god this is terrible!”

To a certain extent, Maude and the letter-writers above are engaging in what Latour calls “counter-laboratories” on an everyday basis, proposing hypotheses for the unusual medical ailments they observe all around them (1987:79). At the same time, their lack of confidence in the protections offered by the landfill and the regulatory agents of the state lead them to consider Four Corners as a likely candidate for any health condition that seems out of the ordinary. The world around them is alive with signs of possible harm which seem to float in the air imperceptibly along with chemical compounds they cannot name.

Such mistrust and uncertainty has led a number of Brandes residents to question the effectiveness of the systems in place to monitor and insure their health and safety. Places like Lions Service, moreover, provide an intimate public venue in which to discuss shared disappointments with inspectors and debate other options for accomplishing positive change. At the store, people recognize their own frustration in the stories of others and come to understand their surroundings as afflicted by contamination *and* a lack of recognition. Remedying the first would mean mobilizing support for the second.

#### “I think we all have to die”: Wounded Attachments

In late February of 2006, shortly after I finished working as a laborer at Four Corners, a sludge tanker dumped several gallons of processed sewage from Toronto along the County Road linking the highway to the landfill. The road was shut down for the entire day and traffic to the landfill was rerouted through the middle of Brandes. This was not the first such incident to occur, but for some residents of

Brandes it was the most egregious offense in years. The incident also came merely weeks before the MDEQ would publish notices in several local newspapers of America Waste's intention to expand Four Corners into fifteen additional acres of woodland on their property, extending their already sizable dumping capacity by approximately 3.2 years.<sup>145</sup>

Several residents of Brandes – Bill, Brent, Jacob, Roy and Jeff – responded to this incident with one of a series of public demonstrations along the corner of Brandes Road and the County Road, where most live. The demonstrations were not the first to occur in the Brandes area against the waste industry; members of Maude and Gwen's family had joined with other local residents fifteen years prior to protest the landfill company's request to the state to site Four Corners in the "Spaceworld" property across from Maude and Gwen's childhood home. These efforts were only partly successful – while Four Corners did not end up in Brandes, it was sited in Harrison Township just three and a half miles down the road. However, these demonstrations clearly served as antecedents to the ones that occurred in the spring of 2006, not only due to their success but because they included many of the same people. I will discuss the demonstrations of 2006 in more detail in the next chapter, for now I just want to note that these new developments led a number of Brandes residents, many of them associated with Lions Service, to seek out new allies and new channels through which to alter their local circumstances.

Limited media coverage of the small protests along the County Road eventually attracted the attention of Michigan's Democratic Party, which had

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<sup>145</sup> As with many landfills throughout the state, the application for the planned expansion was submitted to the MDEQ at the very end of 2005, right before the legislated moratorium on landfill expansion came into effect.

organized local campaigns against Four Corners before, using it as an emblem of the Canadian waste trade during the previous gubernatorial election. With the pivotal Senate and House races of 2006, the plight of Brandes residents offered an opportunity to revisit a well-worn political issue that had a broad base of public support. From the perspective of the Democrats, these demonstrations meant that local residents might help to give the issue new political life. Brandes residents, particularly those affiliated with Lions Service, did not mind being used by politicians for this purpose since they felt strongly that the Canadian waste trade was largely responsible for their tribulations. While they were ambivalent about contributing to partisan election-year strategies – particularly given that most are ardent Republicans – they were certainly willing to use politicians as influential allies to help publicize their experiences of environmental harm.

This mutually beneficial collaboration led to two local rallies/press conferences and one political demonstration at the capital building in Lansing from March to mid-April. The first took place on March 27<sup>th</sup>, an impromptu political rally in the wetland preserve neighboring Four Corners. The rally was organized, as previous rallies in the preserve had been, by Michigan's Democratic Party. In particular, it was set up by the Democratic Committee on behalf of two representatives running for reelection in the state house. Congresswoman Paterno, the state representative for both Harrison and Brandes, had been a vocal opponent of the waste trade for years and had earned a great deal of support in her district as a consequence. She had been planning a town hall meeting at the Calvin Township senior center for the following week on April 3<sup>rd</sup>. Flyers for the event displayed her

name prominently, followed by the words “Stop Trash,” “fighting landfill expansion” and “dealing with offensive garbage odor.” Paterno’s colleague at the rallies, Representative Zimmerler, grew up not far south from Maude and Gwen’s childhood home and represents the districts southwest and west of Four Corners.

Ostensibly, the rally and the town hall meeting were meant to bolster support for measures in the legislature which would sustain the statewide moratorium on landfill expansion and discourage any further addition of “air space” from attracting more out-of-state waste. More importantly, the rally was meant to increase local involvement in the MDEQ hearing to be held at Brandes High School on April 19<sup>th</sup> to consider Four Corner’s proposal to expand into 15 additional acres of forest within their borders. The state representatives hoped that the rally and the town meeting would create momentum leading up to the local hearing, which would provide a large enough audience to attract the attention of state lawmakers and the MDEQ.



Figure 7.2: Brandes residents and state legislators hold a rally near Four Corners

The rally was supposed to occur at the entrance to the preserve at 8:30AM, as others had before it, in order to provide a stark contrast between protected wilderness and the polluted landscape in the distance. But the young aide to the congresswomen

directed us to the dirt road along the side of the landfill so that photographs would include “the steaming pile of garbage” in the background. “Actually, that’s compost,” I interjected. “Whatever,” she said and we moved. Along the road the landfill was clearly visible and the compost was somewhat pungent for much of the rally, which gave the participants something to discuss and recollect afterward with grins and grimaces.

When signs were distributed and people stopped arriving, the dozen or so protestors stood in one group and the two members of the press summoned to document the event stood in another. The structure of the rally was dominated by the representative of the local district, Paterno, who read off of a sheet of paper into a tape recorder at the front of the group. “This is about you,” she began, “I am here at Four Corners Landfill surrounded by four generations of a local family.” The family in question was that of Maude and Gwen, who had some of their children, a grandchild and their politically active parents in attendance, along with other residents of Brandes and employees and regulars of Lions. The symbolism of the rally was straightforward. It was addressed to a broad public, sympathetic to opponents of waste importation. The demonstrators were meant to stand in for the local community as victims of the landfill and Maude’s extended family was intended as a metonym for all the families of Brandes, of the district, or of Michigan as a whole depending on the eventual circulation of the press release.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> The element of theater sometimes involved in these public performances became clear to Bill when he asked Zimmler why he and his friends were not contacted by her office to attend another local press conference she had organized. She replied that press conferences were mere formalities for reporters and that it was not always necessary to have actual people present. This clearly bothered Bill, who responded that they might as well put up a backdrop of the dump in a room in Lansing and never even have to leave.

After Paterno's speech, Zimmer read hers. She too began by referring to the people gathered around, calling their struggle a "quality of life issue," that was being distorted by the political games of House Republicans and corporate greed. Like Paterno, Zimmer also supported the moratorium on landfill expansions, adding that "the financial playing field" also had to change, advocating the controversial measure that the cost of tipping fees on trash imports should be raised to further discourage the importation of out-of-state waste.

After her short speech, Jacob and Roy came forward, two of the men who were instrumental in organizing the small demonstrations along the County Road over the past month. They had prepared statements, which they read into the tape recorder held out in front of them, stating their grievances on behalf of the other demonstrators present and the larger community. Roy spoke about the terrible traffic problems and the "atrocious odor" and Jacob followed up as a local businessman who could not rent the apartments he owns along the County Road because of the landfill. Zimmer followed his plea for change with a spontaneous remark on behalf of a wider public, "Our residents deserve to have parks to go to, deserve to hunt and fish in a clean environment!" This inspired nods of agreement and vigorous clapping from the crowd, which encouraged Paterno to holler a rallying cry: "I want action, do you want action!" to which the crowd responded collectively, "Yea!"

After the rally was over and some words were exchanged between the Brandes residents and the politicians, I was invited to join the former group back at Lions for some cheesecake that Jerry had prepared. Back at the store, as everyone enjoyed dessert and sat back in the coffee klatch, some of their misgivings about

consorting with politicians were voiced. Bill was particularly vocal about his skepticism, as he ate cheesecake he knew would aggravate his acid reflux he argued that the whole press conference was “done to look good, for the re-election” and not for the residents in general. Many were uncomfortable with the partisan nature of the event, which they felt was counterproductive. There was general agreement that something had to be done to affect some kind of change, but Bill and Jerry argued wholeheartedly that all of them were helpless against the power of landfill wealth. They both argued that in a few years the landfill would encompass the wetland as well, despite my suggestion to the contrary. Few really believed that they could actually stop the landfill from expanding, moreover, even with the help of well-meaning (albeit Democratic) politicians. This did not change as those associated with Lions Service participated in more actions and meetings in the weeks leading up the April 19<sup>th</sup> hearing with the MDEQ.

Alongside the skepticism and political cynicism, the subject of death came up several times in discussions leading up to the expansion hearing. The morning of the rally, Maude and Gwen’s parents began to recount stories of the group they formed to oppose the landfill over a decade ago, which succeeded in preventing Four Corners from being sited across the street from their house. Maude brought up the fact that she was pregnant then and that her parents were planning to have her lie in the middle of the County Road in order to stop truck traffic. Everyone laughed, but the conversation quickly turned grim as her father went on to describe some of the mysterious deaths that occurred at that time. The landfill company, then owned by a Detroit businessman that many people believed to be a gangster, had warned one of

the protestors, a local politician from Brandes, not to interfere with their plans for development. According to Maude's father, some time later his wife was found dead having fallen down a flight of stairs. Not long after that, the politician himself died of a heart attack while driving. Maude's parents and their friends strongly believed that these two unfortunate deaths were meant to be a sign from the landfill owners.

Many of those present had heard this story before, so it was partly being retold for my benefit, but it is interesting that they found it pertinent for their present circumstances. In addition to depicting, in a more hopeful vein, the secret and corrupt power which they had faced once before and had defeated, discussion of remembered corpses and Maude's vulnerable, formerly pregnant body reflect the troubling position of politicized "victims" vis-à-vis the publics they try to address and the people they enlist to speak for them. The staged rally near the landfill depicted Brandes's residents as worth listening to, granted them a public voice on the foreign waste trade, only insofar as they were victims of environmental harm. Wendy Brown (1995) calls this form of identification within political liberalism "wounded attachment" because it achieves public recognition through investment in subjection and weakness. As a consequence, subjects thus politicized develop a sense of what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment* – "the moralizing revenge of the powerless" or "identity in reaction to power" (Brown 1995:66, my emphasis). Brown argues that *ressentiment* is the product of a tension between freedom and equality within political liberalism, what I want to emphasize here is that images of wounded bodies are related to a sense of embittered subjection, the logical outcome of achieving political capital as a suffering subject.

The notion of *ressentiment* also helps to explain why opposition to the landfill among Brandes residents so often takes the form of somewhat exaggerated claims about the conspiratorial power of landfill owners and the harm they have caused in the area. As Nietzsche writes, “[t]he suffering are one and all dreadfully eager and inventive in discovering occasions for painful affects; they enjoy being mistrustful and dwelling on nasty deeds and imaginary slights” (quoted in Brown 1995:73). Nietzsche’s scathing tone notwithstanding, I do not think it worth asking whether such deeds and slights are merely made up, but why they are found so compelling to begin with.

When I interviewed Bill at Lions Service a week after the rally, he told me about two of his plans to give opposition to the landfill more political clout (neither of which he would eventually pursue). The first was to attract Fox News to the story by characterizing “foreign” truck drivers coming in garbage trucks across the border as a legitimate homeland security threat. The second he described as a “quality of life” strategy, following the terms used at the rally, which was the same as Maude’s proposition at our first meeting: to organize a research study that would survey the local area for health problems. As we discussed how he might frame the issue so as to attract the right sort of public attention, Maude interjected, “I think we all have to die.” Bill smiled and began to explain what he had wanted to say to a state senator that he recently met:

I was gonna suggest, the other day we were out there in the rain, when Debbie Stabenow and her whole crony group came over there, I thought ‘you know what if you really want to help us one of you guys would swerve in front of one of those [Canadian garbage] trucks and wipe three or four of ya out. If you really want to take it for the team!’

This comment caused uproarious laughter, but it quickly ended when Maude mentioned the well-known local tragedy from a few years ago, when Sam's fiance was nearly paralyzed on the County Road. This strange exchange represents one of the tensions involved in achieving political recognition through subjection. Bill and his friends may amuse themselves by imagining the deaths of their ambiguous allies, but in doing so they also expose the inequalities that shape the distribution and recognition of social risks in the contemporary U.S. (Povinelli 2006). Just as only some people become subject to environmental hazards, not all victims are considered equal. I will turn to this in the next section.

#### Competing Victims and Fragile Alliances

Bill's joke about sacrificing politicians for the good of the local cause reminded me of another claim I had heard many times from him, Maude and others, that if politicians from Washington and Lansing had to live in Brandes then problems with the landfill would be taken care of immediately. Of course, this assumes that all those who *do* live in proximity to Four Corners share their political sentiments, homogenizing local residents into a "community" the likes of which was evoked during the rallies near the wetland preserve and in the political demonstration in Lansing two weeks later. But not all residents feel as the local demonstrators do, not even all of the regulars at Lions Service. I spoke with some local residents who live along the same roads, breathe the same air and witness the same conditionings and believe that nothing should be done or that trust the landfill company to protect them from harm. Some, in fact, would suffer were the landfill to close down.

One problem with recognition by way of victimization is that opposing representatives of “the local” can easily subvert ones seeming moral superiority by appearing more deserving of sympathy. At the first landfill rally, Roy, Jacob and the four generations of Maude’s family were staged as ideal representatives of all “local victims.” As Michael Warner (2002) argues, however, publics are always, in a sense, contested fictions. Other “counterpublics” can always subvert the ground that links a given speaker to the public they mean to address or represent. At the April 6<sup>th</sup> meeting that Paterno organized, for example, Jacob was publicly lambasted by other residents living along the County Road for placing large political signs in his front yard. He was, in fact, one of the only original demonstrators to remember to attend the meeting. Though many of the other residents in attendance were sympathetic to his cause, they argued that he was making it difficult for them to sell their property. Jacob searched the room of the senior center for allies but found none; later, he begrudgingly took the signs down.

This problem of competing victims, each vying for recognition and attempting to speak from a position of moral superiority, became particularly evident at the April 19<sup>th</sup> hearing which pitted Brandes opponents of the landfill against Harrison supporters and initiated a definitive break between those associated with Lions Service and Representative Paterno, eventually leading Maude and her friends to consider other spokespersons and other venues.

The hearing was conducted by the MDEQ as required by state law, which mandates that significant proposals changing the conditions of landfill permits must go through a period of public deliberation in order to provide the agency with

additional information for the construction permit process. The hearing was not the only way that public perspectives were received – many citizens and private businesses wrote letters or sent emails to the offices of the MDEQ, the Department of Natural Resources and state politicians as well. Ultimately, MDEQ personnel can only evaluate the proposal based on the specific range of stipulations included in Part 115 of Michigan’s environmental laws, but experiences of the general public may, in certain respects, be pertinent to this process. For example, I was told by the person in charge of the MDEQ’s evaluation of Four Corners’ proposal that the extensive documentation of verified and unverified complaints against the landfill played a large role in their assessment and some of the terms of the application’s evaluation.

Insofar as this process involves a distribution of decision-making to the general lay public, it resembles the sites of public debate and hybrid collaboration that Michel Callon calls *public forums*:

The forum creates an arena in which the great divide between specialists and laypersons is redistributed. It creates material conditions for co-operation between...research performed by experts and specialists, on the one hand, and research ‘in the wild’ that makes it possible for laypersons to be vigilant and sometimes prompts them to propose guidelines for new research. [Callon 2002:196]

Callon develops this concept to discuss the role of open debate in the organization of markets, which increasingly takes the form of the qualification of products or goods, but he purposefully leaves his analysis open to consideration of markets in “bads” as well (2002:214). The notion of public forums is applicable to the governance of landfills insofar as the object of such reflexive processes is a transformation of what Callon would call the *socio-technical capacity* of landfill services, or “human competencies and material devices that have been designed and arranged in a way in

which they can be mobilized in order to achieve desired results” (2002:208). As I demonstrated in Part One, every inspection and enforced regulation, every approved application or change in state policy has repercussions for the day to day operation of landfills, the landfill “tipping” fees charged to customers and the larger market in waste contracts. If Callon’s model is applied here, we can add that each resident’s phoned-in complaint or organized demonstration helps to determine the socio-technical capacities of the landfill industry as it is mediated through state regulation. Since available dumping space is a part of such capacity, expansion permits are a part of the qualification of waste as a circulated “bad.” Though hearings are the most obvious example of such public forums, press conferences and even friendly debates at Lions Service are, arguably, different sorts of relatively hybrid and open venues contributing in their own small way to the continual restructuring of the market in waste.<sup>147</sup>

True to the hybrid character that Callon attributes to public forums, the April 19<sup>th</sup> meeting included approximately one hundred people from Brandes and Harrison, along with various environmentalists, politicians, landfill and state employees from throughout southeastern Michigan. Most of the people were from Brandes and most, but not all, were opposed to the landfill expansion, though those that spoke publicly were evenly divided for and against. The meeting, a little over two hours in all, consisted of an overview of the proposed expansion and the application process by the head engineer at Four Corners and the MDEQ representative. Both were dressed

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<sup>147</sup> Additional evidence for this interpretation comes from the fact that the waste industry includes such variables in their decisions about where to site landfills and the projected cost of operation. Host fees, for example, represent how the potential impact of local residents on the waste market is transformed from an unpredictable externality to a calculable cost of doing business (see Callon 1998).

neatly and prepared with handouts and displays. They sat near one another at tables situated at the front of the room, facing the diverse audience. In part, their introductions were meant to ease public unrest and clarify common misconceptions about the issue. For example, the landfill engineer made clear that the changes would *not* expand the landfill past its existing boundary into hundreds of acres of additional wetlands to the north, as had become a widespread local rumor. After the presentations were complete, dozens of people waited patiently to make their comments, though not everyone at the public forum was given a chance, or equal time, to speak. The three dozen or so who did speak before those assembled included business associates of the landfill, politicians from Harrison and Brandes, representatives from Silent Pines subdivision, an environmental activist from the Ecology Center of Ann Arbor and state representative Paterno.

Their comments ranged from passionate diatribes against the landfill or the MDEQ to carefully delivered statements and short, straightforward questions. Those who defended the landfill's decision to expand tended to be businessmen who benefited from the landfill – such as a local gasoline supplier – or high-ranking members of Harrison's township government. Some of their comments were met with boos from the audience, which reflected not just difference of political opinion but a battle for local recognition. One of the people booed most strongly was a Harrison resident who demanded to know why the hearing was not taking place in her township, the actual site of the dump. These boos demonstrate, on the one hand, the fact that many of those in attendance resent Harrison for reaping the benefits of Four Corners while they incur the costs. At the same time they are indicative that a

struggle was underway concerning what sample of “the local” was the more legitimate partner of the MDEQ in their decision. Whose forum did it belong to?

Brandes was selected as the site of the hearing, the representative from the MDEQ argued, because they asked to host it. Of course, part of the agency’s decision to grant the township’s request was their conflation of “local interests” in the expansion with registered complaints, the vast majority of which come from Brandes. What so bothered the Harrison residents in attendance was that the people of Brandes were being granted a privileged voice as victims of the landfill. But, as Harrison’s supervisor informed the audience and as he had told Paterno on many occasions, his Township did not want the landfill either but was now dependent on it for sixty-five percent of their operating budget. They too were victims: a poor, rural town addicted to landfill money and now threatened by efforts to cut back or eliminate a harmful business that was nevertheless sustaining them. Some of those opposed to the expansion and to Four Corners’ out-of-state waste contracts took offense to what they described as “Harrison’s” position and its defense of a source of revenue that threatens the quality of life in Brandes. In response, another Harrison resident attacked new residents of the large subdivisions in Brandes who moved in after the landfill was built and now complain about the odor problems. Another woman from Harrison spoke out against the existing township leaders who would dare threaten “her family” with the landfill, revealing at the end of her diatribe that she planned to run against Harrison’s supervisor in the next election.

These exchanges demonstrate a contest over who is the real victim, who the villain and which “locals” are truly representative of the area. They not only disrupt

any attempt to enlist “the community” or “the area” as belonging to one group or one set of interests, they also make problematic any attempt to be a representative spokesperson of all groups. Such was the role of state representative Paterno, one of the first people to speak at the meeting. She began by thanking the MDEQ for their preparation and presentation, spoke briefly about the precise terms of the expansion and the landfill’s post-closure agreement and then promptly sat down. Bill, Jacob, Roy and other participants that had followed her from Brandes to Lansing in recent weeks were absolutely stunned. Where was the strong language of opposition to the foreign waste trade? Why was she not acting as the spokesperson for their plight as she had at recent political gatherings?

From the very beginning, the demonstrators affiliated with Lions Service felt stripped of a public voice at the hearing. They were told that their protest signs had to be left outside while, as they pointed out, the landfill was allowed their own props and signs supporting expansion. This perceived inequality structured the entire meeting from their standpoint. Maude felt that the people from the MDEQ and the landfill ought to respond to people’s concerns and accusations. As an information gathering forum and not a question and answer session, however, the purpose of the hearing was to let people speak so that their opinions on the matter could be recorded and reviewed. But for some of those present, this created a sense of speaking without being heard or properly recognized. Moreover, many felt that the MDEQ and Four Corners were acting as one, situated together at the front of the room, separate from the masses of people waiting to voice their questions and comments.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> In fact, I later learned that this was an intentional on the part of the landfill engineer, who wanted for people to identify Four Corners with the legitimacy of the MDEQ.

While those opponents of the landfill affiliated with Lions Service would see that hearing as a failure for a number of reasons, the “betrayal” by Paterno would be the most memorable occurrence of the night. In many ways her actions encapsulated their sense of complete disenfranchisement by the state regulatory agencies and their apparent complicity with the landfill company. “You could tell it was a done deal,” Maude, Bill, Jerry and others would tell me afterward. The public forum was merely a formality and everyone from the MDEQ specialist present to Paterno herself was accused of having been “paid off” to smooth the process over. In some ways, this sense of mistrust bordering on paranoia was under the surface in every encounter with Paterno and the other politicians with whom they interacted. They knew, of course, that they were being used, just as they were using her to gain more political capital in Lansing. But they fully expected her to represent their cause as its spokesperson, however suspect were her motives in doing so.

For her part, Paterno was disappointed in the hearing as well. Her aide later told me that she had hoped for five hundred or more residents to be in attendance and for more to speak out against the landfill and the expansion than did. Her decision to remain polite and conciliatory to the MDEQ and the landfill can be understood, in part, as an effort to carefully manage her representation of both Harrison and Brandes. While Paterno is a political representative in a formal sense, her ability to “speak for” her constituents with any kind of success relies on a strategic performance that elides the differences dividing its audience. In a town hall meeting in Harrison earlier that year, Paterno had been verbally attacked by politicians and residents for suggesting that the Canadian waste trade should be stopped without

offering practical ideas for how the Township would avoid going bankrupt. Her decision to remain somewhat neutral, while still selectively critical of the terms of the expansion, may reflect an effort to avoid becoming party to contentious local disagreements.

Paterno's actions were taken by the local demonstrators as a form of betrayal, a complete disavowal of the earlier vision of a unified community of protest that she had helped stage near the wetlands and elsewhere. In Bill's words, "she stabbed us right in the back." Days after the hearing, Jacob came across Paterno at a Big Boy's restaurant nearby Brandes and confronted her about her actions, "letting her have it" Bill told me, for letting them down. Jacob did not tell me this himself, perhaps because he was embarrassed. But he did tell me that his experience at the hearing and protesting in Lansing had dissuaded him from engaging in any more local demonstrations. He told me he feels used by the allies he made and that he cannot trust them anymore, "they say one thing to your face," he told me, "and then they laugh at you as you walk away." Representative Zimmer he still likes as a person, but is too disenchanted to continue fighting the landfill: "I want to forget all of it. I hate to say it, but I've given up."

Not everyone had hard feelings about their attempted alliance with the Lansing Democrats. Many of them recognize that it is the nature of politics to spin issues when they are popular and speak cautiously or risk losing elections and the power to do good. But at the same time, they are frustrated by this and find the partisanship that is rampant in state and national congress to be abhorrent. Bill told me he expressed this to Zimmer in a private conversation:

It's great that you guys come out here beatin your chest and say all these bills you introduce but the Republicans keep stonewallin me... and guess what? You're right! So you can introduce legislation till you're blue in the face and all it is is like kissin your sister cause it ain't goin through, but it looks good on a press release: 'Look what I'm trying to do for my constituency and these Republicans won't help me.'

Frustrated with the failure of bills and rallies to affect real change, Bill and his friends stopped demonstrating and stopped trusting their representatives to help them to solve their local dilemmas. Along the way, however, they were forced to debate the competing claims of others, including some residents of Harrison and business owners in Brandes, and their representation through forms of liberal governance. If the public forums hitherto available frustrated their political ambitions, therefore, it was because of their overly *inclusive* nature, not simply because of their exclusions.

#### Making Quality of Life Legal and Legible

The hearing in April had been, by all accounts, a disaster. Within a few months the expansion was approved, on condition that Four Corners make concerted efforts to curtail their odor problems. By May, Maude had a new plan. Along with another long-time resident and a newer homeowner from Silent Pines, she became one of the first to sign an agreement with a Detroit law firm filing a class action suit against Four Corners Landfill. The firm had been led to Maude and other outspoken opponents of the landfill by a well-known environmental organization. The stated objective of the firm was to sue Four Corners for their failure to protect local residents from odor and other impacts on their quality of life. According to a press release from May 30<sup>th</sup> which quoted one of the two main lawyers representing the case, "These residents are being forced to live with this putrid odor all for the sake of

profit. It's not even their own trash and yet it affects their quality of life and their property values. This lawsuit is their only recourse.”

Unlike the politicians and government agents with whom Maude had interacted prior to that, the lawyers were promising to attack the landfill directly and financially to force them to change their practices. This appealed to Maude and many of her fellow landfill opponents not simply because of the financial incentive, but because the foreign waste trade, the triumph of the landfill at the MDEQ hearing and the seeming inaction of the government agencies and officials were all thought to be about money, first and foremost. Finally they were operating on a terrain that she and others thought might exert some kind of influence over the landfill. But the attraction of lawyers to people in such a position is more than merely financial. All agreements between the firm of Dewey and Wilson began with the following passages, giving them both power and incentive to represent the odor complaints of residents from Brandes and elsewhere:

#### **CONTINGENT FEE AGREEMENT**

“THIS AGREEMENT, made this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 2006, by and between, \_\_\_\_\_ (hereinafter “Client”), and Dewey & Wilson, P.C. (hereinafter “ATTORNEYS”).

WHEREAS, Clients have, or may have, a claim and cause of action for odors emitted and/or originating from **Four Corners Landfill**, and desire to employ ATTORNEYS to prosecute said claim and cause of action.

NOW THEREFORE, Clients engage and employ ATTORNEYS to represent Clients and, if necessary, to prosecute the claim and cause of action, and if necessary, to institute and prosecute litigation. Attorneys are authorized to do anything, within their discretion, necessary to achieving that end.”

Unlike relationships they had formed previously with government agents and politicians, this agreement has the virtue of being entirely explicit with respect to the

form that representation will take (that of an aggressive suit against Four Corners) and the interests of the spokespersons in question (that of financial gain).

But class actions can only succeed if a sufficient number of people agree to be thus represented, and middle class, small town Americans are known to be critical of what they see as an excessively litigious society (see Greenhouse, Yngvesson and Engel 1994). It was to break down such resistance that in late May, crammed into the basement of the Eatonville Methodist Church, two lawyers from Dewey and Wilson attempted to convince fifty or so locals to join the class action, in addition to Maude and the two others who had already agreed to be represented. During the meeting they repeated over and over again that only hefty financial damages would force Four Corner's to change its ways and only legal action could exact such retribution on the behalf of Brandes residents.

During the question and answer session that followed, a number of residents expressed their concern about money issues and the firm's investment in the issue. The most commonly asked question was whether the suit was about money or encouraging local change, to which the lawyers unequivocally answered the latter. That the question was repeated several times demonstrates how unsatisfactory, or unconvincing, their response was. To prove their legitimate interest in expressing the voices of local victims of the landfill, the lawyers often suggested in reply to questions and concerns from the audience that they would uncover the environmental harms done to the community during the "process of discover" and would bring them to public light. This had obvious appeal to Maude, Bill and others, who were convinced such an investigation would yield evidence of landfill pollution of land and

bodies. But the promise of money brought with it other concerns as well, that a debt relationship of sorts would be established that somehow obliged those involved in the suit to surrender something to the landfill in return. Of particular concern for Maude, her friends and especially those in the area who refused to participate in the suit was that a financial award would foreclose the possibility of later complaints, demonstrations, or suits based on new evidence.

To respond to this concern, the lawyers promised, on the one hand, that any further impact on quality of life by the landfill after an agreement was reached would be in violation of the terms of the class action. Furthermore, they guaranteed that a thorough “process of discovery” would not exclude any legally viable effects of the landfill on the local population. To this end, they insisted that residents participating in the suit should carefully fill out the “Odor Survey” they were distributing at the front of the room. The form included questions such as “have you noticed any offensive odors from the Four Corners landfill at your home?” and asked that people to “please describe how the offensive odors affect your ability to use and/or enjoy your home.” Once again the odor survey offers *partial recognition* of local experiences of socio-environmental harm so that they can be successfully translated into legal representation and penalties. As one of the lawyers explained to me, their primary form of representing the damages wrought by Four Corners is in terms of property. It is far easier, he told me, to frame torts involving environmental nuisances according to the enjoyment of property. He agreed with Adam (1998) that, when it comes to environmental hazards, “the fallout you can’t see is worse than the one you can,” but argued that only objectively measurable impacts can be used to allege and

prove environmental negligence. Though the Odor Survey included a handwritten statement at the top to “write any health problems” on the back of the form, he informed me that to bring perceived health problems into the suit based on what he termed “conspiracy theories” placed the burden of proof on the firm to establish elusive epidemiological links, whereas simply proving the existence of a “low level physical manifestation” of odor in excess of regulated limits was enough to prove a nuisance to personal enjoyment of property.

The case was very different when that same firm had represented a community in Warren, Ohio against a construction and demolition landfill that was affecting their air quality. In that case, a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services known as the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) intervened to establish a connection between the levels of hydrogen sulfide in the air and the unusual prevalence of memory loss and cognitive impairment in the local community (see Colledge 2005). The class action lawsuit that they represented in Warren was successful, in large part, because of little known studies by Kaye Kilburn and his colleagues on the harmful effects of low-level, long term exposure to sulfur gases (see Kilburn 1997).

But the young lawyer from Dewey and Wilson who I interviewed did not seem to think that a similar strategy would work for the Four Corners case. In part, this was because the intervention of the ATSDR made the process of discovery and the establishment of epidemiological connections far easier. Moreover, many of the ailments and diseases frequently attributed to landfill odor in Brandes are not neurobehavioral but respiratory and gastrointestinal (e.g. asthma and acid reflux).

This is not to say that a possibility does not exist for such health effects to be traced to the landfill and substantiated with hard evidence. Through personal communication, Kilburn informed me that he believes low level exposure to sulfur gases can have respiratory effects and that, while hydrogen sulfide has no connection to gastrointestinal maladies that he knows of, ammonia, another common substance in landfill gas, does. However, since competing studies are the ones cited by the MDEQ, as we have already seen, Kilburn's work has not yet influenced state regulation of landfills in Michigan. Nor is the lay epidemiology of Brandes residents likely to be represented, according to their lawyers, in the suit against Four Corners. The "process of discovery" will ultimately be limited, therefore, to the symptoms of socio-environmental harm appropriate to a particular kind of legal discourse.

#### Conclusion: Limits to Reflexivity

The class action lawsuit against Four Corners offers some of the residents of Brandes an opportunity to effect some kind of control over a situation they have been unable to change significantly for over a decade. It is unclear, as of yet, whether the landfill will settle out of court, though the supervisor at Four Corners assures me that they will not, but at the very least the suit will make public, in yet another way, the dangers and harms that Brandes residents perceive as threatening their communities and homes.

This is made possible insofar as Maude and others have signed over defense of their right to life and property to specialists who act as their spokespersons before a new public venue. In this way, the harms impacting them are translated through Euro-American discourses of property and individual liberty, which elides the

challenge to equality involved in uneven exposure to such harms (see Brown 1995). As freedom from pollution becomes the focus, the conditions that maintain the circulation of bads remain unquestioned. The main recourse for future victims of environmental harm is to politicize their status as victims rather than interrogate the conditions that make such victimization possible.

Thus far, however, at least one victory for Brandes residents seems to have been achieved – an end to the sludge contracts with the cities of Detroit and Toronto – though it is unclear to what extent this development is related to the recent demonstrations and rallies involving those associated with Lions Service. It is no secret that this concession was made as part of Four Corners’ successful application for expansion. The MDEQ had been trying to eliminate their sludge contracts for several years, which they held responsible for non-compliance issues at Four Corners and other sites as well.<sup>149</sup> Still, if not for the hundreds of odor complaints amassed over the course of several years, the MDEQ would have had less leverage in the negotiation of Four Corners expansion. In this way, local residents have succeeded, through their reflexive “feedback” to state and county regulators, in reorganizing the waste trade.

At the basement meeting in Eatonville, the lawyers from Dewey and Wilson took some of the credit for stopping the sludge contracts, which had been announced the day before the church assembly. The reason that the landfill was now making concessions, they argued, was because of the financial threat that the class action represented. Four Corners hoped that people would give up on seeking damages of

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<sup>149</sup> Four Corners actually had planned to stop taking in sludge once before, in the face of incredible odor problems in the spring and summer of 2004, but eventually elected to keep the contracts when the situation began to improve and a new odor prevention plan was implemented.

the main source of their concerns were to stop. Many people, including Bill and Maude, found this claim convincing. Bill mentioned at the meeting that no one should be confident that the landfill will keep sludge out of the community, as he said “look at their track record,”<sup>150</sup> and that the community should maintain pressure on the landfill. As he concluded he bellowed “you can’t let up!” as others nodded agreement.

Bill is right to hold this conceit, to a degree. As I have discussed, local residents of Brandes did play a role in the transformation of the waste trade in this respect, though to what extent this is related to the lawsuit one cannot say for certain. But there are limits to such reflexivity insofar as many of the forums and spokespersons with which they collaborated relied on their identification as victims of the landfill. What I have tried to show is the variety of ways in which the hazards of Four Corners find expression in public forums and politicized forms. To the extent that bodies, ways of life or surroundings are successfully enlisted in struggles for recognition, landfill operations, regulations and markets are reflexively refashioned as a consequence.

This should not be confused with something like “local” empowerment, however. Just as it is possible to feel empowered and not be (Brown 1995:23), it is possible to feel relatively disenfranchised and still participate in changing one’s circumstances. If residents of Brandes are “empowered” by engaging in demonstrations, rallies, hearings and lawsuits they certainly do not *feel* that way. The

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<sup>150</sup> Bill was eventually proven correct. More recently, the landfill has begun taking sludge again, but now it is treated and, according to employees at least, does not smell. This did not stop the landfill operations manager from taking the opportunity to fire three operators he did not like in the interim period, however, using the lost contracts as the excuse.

enormity of what they cannot control and what they have not chosen for their lives or their communities confronts them on a daily basis. Yoking their ambitions to recognition as victims of the landfill, they remain committed to a view of their situation as something they cannot control except through the intervention of regulation agencies, of politicians and of the law, not as equal collaborators but as wounded subjects to be protected and defended. This may serve as an effective strategy, but it is one they employ only with extreme ambivalence and uncertainty.

## Chapter VIII

### Conclusion

One day, Four Corners Landfill will close and, at some point, the site will be officially turned over to or be “reclaimed” by Harrison Township. This has already happened with its first landfill, CSG, not far from where Four Corners sits today. Reclamation is a part of landfill-host community agreements. There is money set aside by landfill companies to prepare for the process, which may involve improvements to the site to make it safe and reusable for other activities. The idea of reclamation is not new. As I have said, the landfill design originally achieved popularity as a way of recovering unusable swampland for building (Rogers 2005: 89-94). Currently, prominent waste firms use this concept in an attempt to transform the popular conception of the landfill as a polluted, worthless landscape, harmful to communities and the environment. Waste Management, for example, the country’s leading waste disposal company, has several television commercials and newspaper ads that are meant to convey how landfill property can benefit people, by being turned into golf courses, baseball fields, or wetlands, for instance. One landfill in the southeastern Michigan area is shaping their slopes at angles that will make it a possible ski resort upon completion.

At CSG, currently, there are a number of ways in which the old landfill is being actively reclaimed by the community and its inhabitants. At one corner of the

site, at the end of a large clearing there is a thick pile of dirt that has been overgrown by vegetation. Since there is not much topography in southern Michigan, the dirt mound provides a useful place for a shooting range. The local police department frequently uses the site for these purposes and, more recently, it is said that its use has expanded to include special training operations for Detroit SWAT teams. Furthermore, every fall Harrison holds its annual “turkey shoot” at the shooting range and many families appear to fire at targets in order to win small prizes. The landfill’s size is useful for other purposes as well. The Harrison High Flyers Club meets on top of the landfill twice a month to fly remote control airplanes together. Finally, just as birds tend to adapt themselves to landfills in the midst of operations, CSG is periodically invaded by grazing cows that have wandered away from local farms. On one occasion, a landfill technician was called in because a cow damaged a gas well and the gas-to-energy plants instantly shut down to avoid an explosion from the oxygen intake.

In some ways, it is clear that people living in the vicinity of Four Corners or laboring upon it are engaged in their own forms of reclamation right now. I have already discussed how the landfill supplies workers with different ways of expressing autonomy from the indignities and injuries of class conflict and a variety of treasures that can be taken home and remade to earn status. There are other ways in which people neighboring the site make it meaningful, other than by engaging in political demonstrations and attempting to claim recognition as victims of environmental injustice. A former engineer from the site, and current engineer for a different one, now lives across the street with his family and the stray dogs they routinely find

caged in the back. He and his wife and child used to wander onto the site in the winter and explore the forest and wetlands; they had to stop once the fence was put up, however. In other ways, people from the area have claimed the landfill for their own against the will of the company, vandalizing signs and, in one instance, setting fire to two of the tippers. In a way, these acts are so transgressive because they constitute alternative claims to ownership of the site. Once landfill operations have ended it is certain more forms of reclamation will emerge among neighboring residents, trying to make the site their own.

But CSG and Four Corners are very different sites. The former has the appearance of a series of small hills, while the latter is far more impressive in size. By the time Four Corners is complete several decades from now, it will be over five hundred feet high and will almost fill the one square mile plat it is located on. After it is “capped,” or covered with sufficient soil, the only regular activity will be the people who mow the grass growing all along its slopes and the gas technicians monitoring the several power plants, which will operate for many years afterward as the waste putrefies within. Nearly the size of an average mountain, Four Corners will provide few of the same advantages to the community that its predecessor now does, it might even be closed to visitors. On the annual tour of the site, however, Bob remained confident that more uses could yet be found for it: “This is America,” he said, “we can do anything we put our minds to and someday we will find a purpose for all of this.” Others share his fantasy; a former investment banker has begun a company with patented shrink-wrap technology meant to preserve waste in large bales so that they can be stored until a future use is found for them, “Ultimately we’ll

be depositing it in our own landfills or in facilities that will be converting that garbage into useful products: biofuels, electricity, heat,” he said in a recent interview, “What you’d effectively create with these bale-fills would be energy reserves” (Gelfand 2007).

Such dreams about the untapped potential of waste are hardly new. Fellow exiles, Victor Hugo and Pierre Leroux were vocal proponents of the “circulus,” a vision of a socialist utopia where the sewers of Paris would be tapped as a vital resource (Reid 1991:54). Leroux developed this notion as a solution to the population crisis proposed by Malthus; if the circulus were adopted in Paris, he wrote, “Each would religiously gather his dung to it to the State, that is to say the tax-collector, in place of a tax or personal levy. Agricultural production would double immediately and poverty would disappear from the face of the earth” (quoted in Reid 1991:55). Hugo echoed his friend’s claims in an interesting passage in *Les Misérables*, where he extols the potential of the Paris sewer to save the poor of the city: “one can say that the great prodigality of Paris, its marvelous fete... its orgy, its gold flowing from full hands, its splendor, its luxury, its magnificence, is its sewer” (quoted in Reid 1991:55). The sewer’s existing design foreclosed the exploitation of this natural wealth and its benefit for the denizens of the city: “We believe we are purging the city; we are weakening the population” (quoted in Reid 1991:55).

Though Leroux’s theories were largely ignored at that time, in the nineteenth century the perceived value of utilizing waste products was widespread. Only six years prior to the publication of *Les Misérables*, the United States Congress passed the Guano Islands Act, which gave American citizens the right to claim islands under

no national jurisdiction as protectorates of the republic. This was done for the purpose of securing tropical bird feces, a highly valued fertilizer at the time, at cheaper prices than could be found through foreign markets. Between 1844 and 1851, over 66,000 tons of guano were imported into the U.S. from Peru, meant to rejuvenate eastern farmland that was dwindling in productivity and being out-competed for regional markets by newly acquired territories farther west (Skaggs 1994:1-9). By securing the islands on behalf of U.S. farmers, the American government began shaping economic policies that would later underwrite imperial expansion throughout the western hemisphere.

Of the sixty-six islands recognized by the U.S. government as “appurtenances” under its protection, nine are still in its possession (Skaggs 1994:199). One of them, Johnston Atoll located in the Pacific, was used in the sixties as a launch site for nuclear missile testing (Alcalay 1988). No longer a reserve for productive waste, it has become a preferred location for the most destructive waste known. The Atoll is the site of a government run landfill for radioactive waste and a disposal facility used to destroy chemical weapon stockpiles (Alcalay 1988; Noyes 1996). This historical turn of events is important to mention because it draws out the other side of waste-as-resource affirmation, the ever-present possibility of pollution. Just as Bob is confident that Four Corners will one day be put to better use, the people residing in neighboring Brandes wait for the landfill to reveal what hidden environmental dangers or health problems it is spreading throughout the area, unbeknownst to the government or the general public. Indeed, the lives of those working at or living around Four Corners continually demonstrate the possibility for

waste to turn into pollution in different forms, despite their best intentions. They are already engaged in struggles to make sense of the destructive and creative qualities that mass waste is imbued with. Of course, they must now do so largely according to the terms set by transnational waste firms, state environmental bureaucracies and neoliberal trade agreements, but this does not foreclose opportunities for strategic acts of reclamation, as the examples above demonstrate.

Still, as long as their lives remain unacknowledged by the unseen majority of waste producers, it is difficult to trace the predicaments and possibilities of landfilling to the more encompassing waste regime associated with consumer capitalism and mass production. The taken-for-granted, even naturalized reality of waste production that enlivens the economy seems divorced from the “problem” of waste disposal. Those concerned with the latter remain focused on how we should dispose of the things we discard, rather than why, to quote Bob the manager of operations once more, the waste keeps coming.

#### Dirt-Affirming and Dirt-Rejecting Philosophies

It is rarely mentioned that one of the subtexts of *Purity and Danger* ([1966] 1984) was an unabashed defense of the concept of “the primitive” in anthropological analysis. One of the reasons this is not often discussed, perhaps, is that even as Douglas explicitly endorses the validity of “the primitive” as a category, her analysis of western hygiene as being akin to religious ritual or dietary taboos provides reason to disavow such a notion (cf. Levi-Strauss 1968). Still, Douglas seemed to think that certain aspects of this distinction were worth preserving. For example, she writes in the middle of her book:

the primitives have the direct advantage over us in that they encounter economic reality direct, while we are always being deflected from our course by the complicated, unpredictable and independent behaviour of money. But on this basis, when it comes to the spiritual economy, we seem to have the advantage. For their relation to their external environment is mediated by demons and ghosts whose behavior is complicated and unpredictable, while we encounter our environment more simply and directly ([1966] 1984:94).

One can take issue with this statement on any number of levels. For one thing, as I argued in Chapter Three, the current form of the American sanitary landfill and its pursuit of environmental containment leads precisely to more entangled relations with other-than-human beings and material processes of different kinds, subjecting landfill planners and technicians to their at times complicated, unpredictable behavior. More generally, each of the preceding chapters has described different ways in which Northern American waste management and its relationship to the “external environment” is mediated by a wide assortment of social actors and institutions.

Douglas probably did not have in mind the waste industry when she described “our” relationship to the external environment as direct or simple. Regardless, I prefer to read the above paragraph as a wry critique of her society and its relative “advantage” over others. After all, it is those people in *Purity and Danger* whose interactions with the world are mediated by relationships with other-than-human persons that are praised for their “dirt-affirming” rather than “dirt-rejecting” philosophies ([1966] 1984:165-7). Douglas adapts this distinction (as well as her definition of dirt as matter out of place) from the American philosopher William James, who argues that more “complete” religions reincorporate the kinds of “evil” they reject ([1966] 1984:165).<sup>151</sup> Her main example of a “dirt-affirming philosophy”

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<sup>151</sup> James’ only example of a “healthy-minded” way of thinking in this regard is Christian Science (Douglas [1966] 1984:166).

comes from the central African Lele, the “primitive existentialists” with whom she conducted her fieldwork ([1966] 1984:179).<sup>152</sup> In their relationship to the pangolin she saw resemblance to Old Testament rites of sacrifice (perhaps leading her to consider the latter as an ethnographic document) and an effort to reincorporate rejected anomalies into ritual practice. Douglas describes the Lele as having a “composting religion” because that which they reject through taboos and various restrictions “is ploughed back for a renewal of life” ([1966] 1984:168). As a scaly mammal that bears only single offspring, the pangolin “contradicts all the most obvious animal categories” yet is thought to be a source of fertility for those that consume it as part of ritual initiation ([1966] 1984:170).

A pangolin may seem radically different from actual waste, but the possibility of dirt-affirmation is still present if we turn from anomalous animals to local dumps. Among the Pueblo of Jemez described by Elsie Clews Parsons, for example, dumping grounds are inhabited by a manifestation of the Supreme Being known as “Ash Boy” (Parsons ([1925] 1980). As the patron deity of the hearth and the home, Ash Boy is symbolized by the ash from fireplaces, which is regularly cast off at village dumps along with the other dust and debris swept out of living spaces. Ash Boy presides over cyclical ceremonies that re-dedicate sacred kiva rooms and also plays an important role in local mythology; not long ago, it is said that children once had ashes

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<sup>152</sup> Actually, she begins by describing the Lele as both dirt-rejecting and dirt-affirming, but her analysis seems to place them more in the latter category ([1966] 1984:172). It was her opinion that both philosophies could be found, in some form, among all peoples.

from the fireplace placed on their foreheads for his protection (Ellis 1952:4; see also Levi-Strauss 1955).<sup>153</sup>

On one level, from Douglas' perspective Four Corners Landfill would seem to fall short of the dirt-affirming ritual practices surrounding the Lele pangolin or the Pueblo dump. By removing discarded matter from sight and consigning it to the earth, ideally never to be encountered again, landfills seem to be the very epitome of a dirt-rejecting philosophy at work. For the Pueblo, arguably, it the connection of ash to the reproduction of the family through the hearth that lends dumps and Ash Boy their potency (see Carsten 1997). As I discussed in Chapter Five, however, the process of landfilling is meant to sunder the connections between waste producers and their waste by dissolving the identity of a piece of discard in the "mass of common rubbish." In a short story called "Landfill Meditation" in a book of the same name, Ojibwa poet and trickster storyteller Gerald Vizenor makes a related point. He introduces the reader to Martin Bear Charme, a man who made his fortune dumping waste into a worthless wetland, which he has now turned into a site of spiritual meditation meant to reconnect people to the earth. Landfill meditation restores this lost intimacy with the earth, Charme says, because it reconnects people with their abandoned waste: "We are the garbage, the waste, we make it and dump it, to be separated from it is a cancer-causing delusion" (Vizenor 1991:104).

Vizenor is playfully commenting on the complicated relationship between waste producers, or "refusers" as he calls them, and their refuse. In his story, garbage has been separated from us, but landfills offer a place to reaffirm a part of ourselves

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<sup>153</sup> The significance of Ash Boy was such that, at one time, archaeologists were forbidden from excavating Pueblo dumps (Ellis 1952:4).

we have cast aside. However, one could argue that landfills not only confirm the dirt-rejection of the people they serve, landfills themselves become further “dirt” to reject as a consequence of the waste that adheres to them. It is for this reason that the landscape of a landfill, crafted with so much precision and care by its designers and employees, can appear so alien and ominous to others.<sup>154</sup> Residents living in the vicinity of Four Corners are typically unfamiliar with how landfills are constructed or regulated, which is part of the reason they may come to see them as ominous threats to safety and security, as I described in Chapters Six and Seven. Rather than recognize the landfill’s growth as a product of human labor, to many it seems like the product of an indifferent, even inhuman corporation, an equally uncaring Canada, and “Arab” truck drivers.

If landfills profit from dirt-rejection and appear polluted because of it, in another sense landfill workers would seem to be dirt-affirming insofar as they frame their interactions with waste in such a way that it is “handled as a source of tremendous power” as are the pangolin and the ashen dumps described above ([1966] 1984:166). Following state regulations, the landfill company frames engagements with waste as if it were always a potentially dangerous substance, carefully shaping the landscape to contain any contaminating influence. Waste workers, similarly, are well aware of the potential for waste to adhere to their persons or the objects they scavenge, making both seem worthless – special procedures are followed so that waste does not come home with them, only recovered valuables and a weekly

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<sup>154</sup> It is also for this reason that journalists and garbologists have begun investigating landfills as a strange secret to be uncovered, whether criticized for their environmental degradation (Rogers 2005; Royte 2005) or revalorized as a source of knowledge and truth about capitalist society (Rathje and Murphy 2001).

paycheck. Precisely because it has been rejected, waste can be converted into a source of clean-burning energy, personal autonomy, or recovered value as the case may be.

On other hand, others find the power of waste adhering to them in other, less salubrious ways. Both Sikh waste haulers and local activists share a sense of being typed as villains or victims due to their association with waste. The former are seen, like other waste workers, as consubstantial with the waste they bring across the border, a violation of security and a potential threat to the health and well-being of Michigan residents insofar as they spread contamination; the latter are similarly reduced to victims of pollution and risk, incapable of voicing their own views or gaining public recognition because they are only of value to regulators, politicians, and lawyers insofar as they suffer from contamination. What these various groups of people show, in their different ways of relating to the wider waste regime generally operative in the U.S., is the generative and destructive capacities that inhere in mass waste. Even as this powerful substance shapes their lives, they struggle to harness its potential to their own ends, thereby affirming what others have rejected. In this respect, their actions point the way to how landfills, and the waste regime of which they form a crucial part, might yet be reimagined.

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