

Book Review

Reno, Joshua. 2016. *Waste Away: Working and Living with a North American Landfill*. University of California Press.

By Nicholas Caverly

At a time when waste studies are of increasing interest to anthropologists, Joshua Reno's *Waste Away* offers critical insights into how ever expanding landfills make life possible in the contemporary United States and Canada. For Reno, landfills are not agglomerations of inert matter. Rather, he explores how things that become "mass waste" – including dented coffee cans, condemned trailer homes, and other refuse – mark complex histories that are obscured as they are literally and figuratively compacted together. Using case studies from Four Corners, a landfill on the outskirts of Detroit, Michigan, Reno argues that rendering discarded things into landfills allows for the maintenance of what he calls "reproducible sameness" through new material goods. By following how the leftovers of production and consumption congeal, *Waste Away* identifies landfills as the material foundation of contemporary North American capitalism.

Waste Away builds from more than three years of fieldwork with waste workers, managers, and activists, weaving together a combination of fieldnotes, drawings, and analytic threads to convey the sensory experiences of mass waste. Chapter One demonstrates how sanitary landfills rely on human, technological, and microbial labors to inter tons of waste. Despite efforts by landfill laborers, managers, and environmental regulators, landfills are leaky entities, as sights, smells, and contaminants escape built environments designed to contain them. Four Corners remains in operation despite imperfect regulatory structures and environmental quality concerns because, in the words of one manager, "The garbage keeps coming."

Part of Reno's fieldwork was spent as a laborer at Four Corners, a job that allowed him to account for the people who make landfill operations possible. Chapter Two traces how landfills become a profitable investment, both for multinational firms who profit as they are filled and for laborers and managers who work in them. In particular, Reno explores how the stigma of waste work makes it a fraught proposition for the white, male laborers who are most exposed to the sensorial and corporeal effects of landfill waste. Still, as industrial manufacturing labor becomes increasingly precarious – particularly in Southeastern Michigan – ever increasing volumes of waste offer opportunities to maintain racialized and gendered aspirations to middle-class status. Further, Chapter Three examines how laborers and operators "salvaging" goods from Four Corners refigure ordinary logics of middle-class consumption. By recovering things from the waste stream, whether for momentary amusement or long-term use, they also call into question the limits of property claims granting multinational firms sole rights to own and profit from waste.

Waste Away pivots from the daily operations of Four Corners to discuss how the landfill came to be located in what Reno calls Harrison Township. In part, this results from what waste studies scholars have called a "path of least resistance" contoured by racialized inequalities. Chapter Four expands on this narrative through a historical consideration of how places taken to be "rural" are presumed to be empty spaces that can be filled up by trash. Reno highlights how such imaginaries resonate with frontier myths that elided the presence of native peoples for the benefit of white settlers. This insight dovetails with Chapter Five, which argues that waste economies are always already racial economies. Reno sketches how Four Corners, Harrison, and Michigan have been made through tensions between

white and black residents, complicating this picture with accounts of Sikh garbage haulers presumed to be “Arab” and First Nation appeals to environmental justice that resulted in Canadian trash being imported to Four Corners. In so doing, *Waste Away* attends to how landfills come to embody racialized anxieties and tensions between nation-states.

As Reno makes sense of the operations of Four Corners, he argues that waste work is an act of care for North American societies because the ability to make unwanted things go “away” is integral to the reproduction of capitalist logics. This said, the disposition of North Americans toward their waste only emerges in glimmers. Most of these glimpses are Reno’s own explicitly self-conscious reflections on his relationships with the things he throws away. While such reflections do give some color to a more general view, they sit in stark contrast with the rich descriptions of life and work around Four Corners. This is but a minor critique, and goes more to demonstrate the difficulty of investigating waste streams that span an entire continent than to any shortcoming of the book. To this end, *Waste Away* is an incisive account that sheds fresh light on uneven intersections of waste, work, value, and the environment, giving it relevance for scholars of North America and elsewhere.

Nicholas Caverly
University of Michigan
nickcav@umich.edu

Book Review

Greenbaum, Susan. 2015. *Blaming the Poor: The Long Shadow of the Moynihan Report on Cruel Images about Poverty*. Rutgers University Press.

By Tina Lee

Susan Greenbaum’s book examines the remarkable persistence of the idea that individual failures and “broken” families are to blame for African American poverty and how, despite convincing evidence that it is incorrect, it continues to shape proposed solutions to poverty in the U.S. Greenbaum takes a particularly influential example of this idea, the infamous “Moynihan Report” (“The Negro Family: A Case for National Action”), as her starting point. In it, Daniel Patrick Moynihan laid out the supposed evidence for his thesis that a “tangle of pathology” was the main way that poverty is perpetuated. Rather than providing a comprehensive assessment of the report, however, Greenbaum uses it as a trope to understand why the discourse on poor people as “a collection of individuals who are simply deficient competitors in an otherwise fair economy” has seen more success than explanations that point to unfair structural inequalities (13). The real strength of this well-written, cogently argued book is its focus on the report’s impact on poverty research and policy and her examination of the reasons for the reports’ influence.

In Chapter 2, Greenbaum reviews the evidence for Moynihan’s thesis, and, more importantly, delves into the politics of poverty research. Current defenders of Moynihan, she argues, continue to claim that culture is a factor in creating poverty while ignoring that this idea is generally unsupported by sound scholarship, a situation attributable to ideology and the policy implications of poverty research. As Greenbaum argues in the conclusion, the “bad idea” that poverty is caused by individual shortcomings is “hard to kill” because it serves powerful interests (134) and is comforting to many in U.S. society.

Chapter 3 tackles the connection between family structure and poverty, laying out the overwhelming evidence that, rather than being from “broken” and “disorganized” families, poor individuals draw on a dense network of extended family ties to pool resources, provide for children, and generally survive. To the