

Modernity and Waste
September 15, 2007
2:30 p.m.
The Philoctetes Center

Levy: Francis Levy
Nersessian: Edward Nersessian
Kupinse: William Kupinse
Gabrys: Jennifer Gabrys
Nagle: Robin Nagle
Royte: Elizabeth Royte
Strasser: Susan Strasser

Levy: I am now proud to introduce William—how do you pronounce your name?

Kupinse: Kah-pin-say.

Levy: Kah-pin-say. I've been working on this for a few weeks, but I had to have you here to actually get this correct. Dr. Kupinse is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Puget Sound. He has published essays on waste in the writing of H.G. Wells and James Joyce, as well as an essay on waste and Indian fiction, which appeared in the collection *Filth*. He is currently working on a book about literary modernism and waste, entitled *The Remains of Empire*—wonderful title—which brings together cultural studies and eco-critical approaches. His poems on environmental themes have appeared in *Green Letters*, *Cimarron Review*, and *Cumberland Poetry Review*. Dr. Kupinse will moderate today's panel and introduce the other panelists. We're very delighted to have a late addition to the panel due to some other factors beyond our control, and you'll have to explain that particular situation.

Kupinse: Sure. Thanks very much. It's my great honor to be here with such a wonderful array of writers and scholars—"scholars in dust," to quote a phrase of Charles Dickens from his novel *Our Mutual Friend*.

We did have a few unavoidable cancellations: Bill Rathje was unable to be here, as was John Scanlan, but I think you'll find that the panel that we've assembled today is really just a wonderfully rich resource of knowledge and scholarship and writing on the subject of waste. I'm just going to briefly introduce each of our panelists so that we can get on with the discussion. Jennifer Gabrys is Lecturer in Design at Goldsmiths College, University of London. She recently completed her PhD thesis, *The Natural History of Electronics*, which examines the global ecologies of electronic waste. Previously, she practiced landscape architecture and urban design in Los Angeles and Minneapolis. Jennifer's research and practice currently focus on design ecologies, communication technologies, and material culture.

Robin Nagle is anthropologist-in-residence for New York City's Department of Sanitation. She teaches anthropology and urban studies at New York University, where she also directs the Draper Interdisciplinary Master's Program in Humanities and Social Thought. Her research focuses on the anthropology of garbage, which includes labors of maintenance, landscapes of

waste and wealth, material culture, and “unmarked” processes of urban life. Her book about sanitation workers—with a great title—*Picking Up*, will be out next year from Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Elizabeth Royte is the author of *Garbage Land*, which, incidentally, I’m teaching on Tuesday in a class, so it’s particularly exciting that she was able to join us here. Jonathan Miles describes it as “falling somewhere between *Fast Food Nation* and *Silent Spring*.” Royte’s book traces the routes of contemporary culture’s waste to its final, sometimes unlikely, destinations. Royte is also the author of *The Tapir’s Morning Bath: Solving the Mysteries of the Tropical Rain Forest*. Her writings have appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Harper’s*, *National Geographic*, *Outside*, *Smithsonian*, and numerous other magazines. She is a former Alicia Patterson Foundation fellow.

And, last but not least, Susan Strasser is a historian of everyday life in American consumer society. Her interest in trash grew out of scholarly work on the history of American housework, another creation of the mass market for household products. She is the author of *Never Done: a History of American Housework*, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: the Making of the American Mass Market*, and, most relevant to our discussion today, *Waste and Want: a Social History of Trash*. Her current project—she explores many different fields—is about the culture and commerce of medicinal herbs.

I thought I would start out by asking everyone a question that I think each of you has probably been asked at some point before in your life, which is, out of the many things one can study in this world, how did you decide to focus on waste? Jennifer, would you like to start us off?

Gabrys: Well, probably most poignantly, it was when I was working as a landscape architect in Los Angeles for the firm Rios. We were asked to participate in the Fresh Kills Landfill Competition. So with the closure of Fresh Kills, as you all probably know, the intention was to recycle it into some sort of recreational landscape and environmental center. So I participated in that and was fortunate enough to actually come to Fresh Kills and have a tour of the site. And it really galvanized a lot of things, a lot of understandings about material culture and landscapes. And then I carried that over into a study of electronic waste, which I began when I was doing my Ph.D. I was really fascinated by the question of, if we live in such a dematerialized society, or dematerialized material culture, why is it that we still have so much garbage? And I think electronic waste really raised that most strongly.

Kupinse: Yes. Wonderful. And we’ll explore that in a number of different ways throughout the conversation. Elizabeth, how did you get started?

Royte: I’m not a life-long scholar of waste. I came to it pretty recently and only—I’ve usually read about science and the environment and I hadn’t really thought about writing about garbage until I was paddling in the Gowanus Canal, which many of you may know is a pretty disgusting industrial waterway in Brooklyn. And I was out with the Sierra Club and they were picking up trash and I had my young daughter with me and I was kind of narrating what we were seeing. And I was pointing out types of birds and plants and things like that, and then I started noticing household waste in the canal, organic material, things that should have been recycled, floating

human waste—it was after a big rainstorm so there was an overflow—and electronic waste, household hazardous waste. And I realized that this was all the stuff that I got rid of almost daily and I realized then—I had this vague idea about following trash, but I didn't know if it could really be a book. But it was then that I realized I could follow all these streams and it would take the form of “adventure travels.” So that's when I got—I realized maybe I actually could turn this into a book. [LAUGHS] So, I am new to it—trash studies.

Kupinse: I think that's one of the things that's very appealing about *Garbage Land*, the very authentic connection it draws between personal experience and the content of the book as well. Robin, how do you become someone who teaches and researches waste?

Nagle: Once upon a time, long ago, my father took me camping in the Adirondacks. It was around the time of the first Earth Day. And we were in this extraordinarily bucolic landscape that seemed untouched by anything human, ever. And we round a bend and there's a lean-to and behind the lean-to is a little dump. It's maybe the size of perhaps the area we describe here, and it smelled like a dump—dumps have this signature smell and I've learned since then that they smell the same way all over the world. There's a top-note that's sort of acidic and there's something funky that might be sour milk, but you don't really want to know.

But here we are in this paradise and there's trash. And I was outraged and very confused and my question then was why were the campers who preceded us comfortable to leave behind this debris and who was supposed to come and pick it up? What were they thinking about the next step? Obviously, aluminum foil and tin cans and worn-out sneakers are not going to decompose, so if you ask them, “Okay, you leave it. Who's coming for it,” what would their answer have been? So that question—it was planted then. And then, much later, it grew into the research project that I now am in the middle of with the Department of Sanitation, which is the same question but writ large: Who picks up after us? Who are they?

Kupinse: And a fascinating question, too, which we'll touch on, I think, in a lot of different ways. And Susan, how did you get involved in one of your many areas of study being trash?

Strasser: Well, my many areas of study are to me all one, in a way. It's different takes on the same set of questions and I kind of see my book on housework and my book on the mass market and my book on trash as a trilogy. One grew out of the other. I studied housework—I'm a historian—and in studying the history of housework, I realized pretty early that what I was studying was the creation of the market for consumer products, so I did that explicitly the second time and really did the research for that book in the early '80s. And along with everybody else, I was becoming more environmentally aware at that point. The garbage barge, the Mobro, was during the time I was doing that research, and Chernobyl, Bhopal—various environmental events—and I became more and more convinced that my next project should be about the environment. The first two projects had been about product introduction and I then wanted to go into what the environmental effects of that were.

Kupinse: Sure, so sort of looking at things at all of the stages of their trajectories throughout our lives.

Strasser: Right.

Kupinse: If it's not impolite to answer one's own question, I was interested in garbage for quite a while. I think I may have had one of those kind of formative moments you described, Robin. I recall going on vacation, or some sort of a version of that, with my family and picking up returnable cans in Vermont, which at that time, I think, was the only place around that you could do that—maybe New Hampshire and Maine, as well. I remember just thinking that it was sort of amazing that something that was discarded could have a kind of value. So I think that that was something that maybe triggered my initial interest.

Then as a graduate student, we spent a great deal of time studying that triumvirate of race, class, and gender. But eco-criticism, the study of the environment, wasn't really playing into graduate programs at the time I was studying, or it was just beginning to. So I think my own interest in ecology started to intersect with literary studies and I was just trying to feel my way around. I've developed that a bit; I've tried to incorporate it into my teaching and to make students very aware of waste. Next week we're going to be visiting some worm bins that we have on the campus of the University of Puget Sound that digest a lot of our food waste. This is a student project that they started on their own. But I have students do things like carry their garbage with them in a clear plastic bag for a week as a way of reflecting. It's great by the end. I tell them if they go to the library, their garbage goes to the library; if they go on a date, their garbage goes on a date, as well. I do it, too, which happened around the same time that I started composting because—

Strasser: And then do you all bring it together?

Kupinse: We bring it to class, we talk about it, we look at it, we write about it. I tell them nothing illegal and nothing sharp in there.

Well, maybe we should talk a little bit about what waste is. I think that sometimes the most seemingly obvious questions are actually the most interesting questions. It occurs to me that in each of our work, waste probably means something a little bit different to us. So I'd like to hear what it means. Maybe we don't have to necessarily always go in the same order, but if someone would just like to begin. I'm also curious, what is the difference between waste and garbage and trash and rubbish and detritus and filth and every other kind of word that we use for the things that we abject or we throw away? It's almost like the thirty different words for snow. We're a culture that's very rich in terms for the things that we discard.

Royte: Susan's written a bit about the difference between rubbish and garbage and the dry and the wet.

Strasser: Yes, I actually did research into the writings of the first people to be concerned with municipal solid waste. I decided to follow their lead, which was basically to use the word "garbage" for organic waste. The rest of the words I think I'm pretty—

Kupinse: Fluid with.

Strasser: Following the lead of people who've thought about it in a technical sense, and were more concerned about what to do with it than I was, I think that organic waste really is a different kind of thing.

Kupinse: Is the distinction between garbage and other forms of trash something that, for example, the New York City Department of Sanitation is interested in and aware of right now? This could be either for Elizabeth or for Robin.

Royte: Well, I'm thinking in the past when New York first separated garbage into three ash bins, which were—"rubbish" was dry; they used it for landfill, right? That was dry fill. Wet material was cooked into fertilizer, and it had a use, it had a value. But what's happening now in their categories?

Nagle: Well, now there are two lumps of recyclables: there's paper and then there's plastic, metal, and glass, which this city organizes in what's called a "single stream" recycling effort. And then there's garbage, which is everything else.

Royte: But they call it "collections."

Nagle: Yes, the truck is a "collection truck." The word "garbage" is actually rarely used in any sanitation context, in any kind of official way. When you're hired into the job and you go through training, it's mentioned really almost not at all during the weeks that you're learning the machinery and the protocols and whatnot.

Strasser: Because it's pejorative?

Nagle: No, it's almost like it's so central to what you're doing that you don't need to talk about it. It's like when you study anthropology, after the first introductory course, you never again talk about what culture is, or you rarely talk about what culture is. It's the stuff of your life on the job. They're called "commodities," so that garbage is a particular commodity; paper is a different commodity. In the paper work side of things, you code those differently in terms of what's being collected, which dump it's tipped at, how it's transported. Those things all have implications for the organization of the labor around it.

Royte: I was sharply rebuked, over and over, in reporting my book for using the word "garbage." People repeatedly said, "It's not garbage. It's waste."

Kupinse: Fascinating.

Nagle: I haven't encountered that.

Kupinse: Waste itself is interesting, though, and it refers both to an excess of something or a superabundance of something, but its etymology is also from an empty field, from land that is not fertile. So it's also an absence of the thing, as well. It's one of those weird words—I guess "cleave" maybe would be another—that means itself and the opposite. So I'm just fascinated when we talk about this, what exactly we're thinking of.

Gabrys: That's the thing that Michael Thompson captures in *Rubbish Theory* so well, that it is a dynamic and changeable category. Really, you can think about anything in this room being potentially waste, and then being potentially recovered. It's that moment when it's actually classified that it starts to have some utility, and that it can lapse in and out of that.

Royte: "Waste equals food," William McDonough says. Everything is a feed stock for something else. New things can't grow without the decay of microorganisms doing their work. Food waste is feeding the land to grow new things. The metal here can be recycled to grow whatever. There's no waste in nature.

Strasser: Not so true of plastics, though.

Kupinse: Yes, I wonder if there are some things that can't be recycled. You called plastic "Satan's resin" in your book.

Royte: Well, I was quoting the Berkeley Ecology Center; they called it that. But there could be new types of plastic that are food for other things.

Nagle: I teach a class called "Garbage in Gotham" and we have a similar exercise as your students have to go through with waste—it's a little different, but I'm going to actually imitate yours, I think.

Kupinse: I'm imitating someone else.

Royte: How are you going to change yours?

Nagle: Well, I have my students collect their waste for three days. If you can flush it, you don't bring it in. If you can recycle it, you don't bring it in. But otherwise, you hold onto it for three days and then bring it in and we excavate it. But that's voluntary because the excavations can be, as you know, extremely revealing and very personal. They don't have to tip it onto the table if they don't want to.

Gabrys: It's almost a rewriting of *Gulliver's Travels*, isn't it? Everybody had to carry the objects that they wanted to speak with. Here, everybody has to carry the decayed objects that they use in the process of their everyday life, and that tells a story about their everyday life.

Nagle: But I'm going to make them do it for a week now.

Strasser: And carry it everywhere—I like that.

Nagle: Yes, that sounds like the magic of that assignment. In that class one of the first things we read is John Locke—I forget which chapter of the *Second Treatise in Government*. But he talks about waste; he defines waste. He's referring basically to the American landscape, the American continent. To him, it's unworked land. It's such an interesting definition because you can carry it forward and speculate in all these creative ways about, if something is unworked, is it wasted?

Or is it wasteful to leave something untouched? Of course now we have wildly different definitions. Untouched wilderness is something to preserve and honor and maybe even stay out of, to just leave be. But the malleability of the definition, like what Thompson talks about, is part of the richness of the study of it. Your book documents that so well, across a 150 years of how that category changed.

Kupinse: Jennifer, would you like to talk a little bit about electronic waste, because it's a related category certainly, but there's something about the un-material quality of some of the information that we're so surrounded by—and perhaps overwhelmed by daily—that's ethereal and doesn't really exist in any one place. Then, as you pointed out, there's the material detritus of the machines that allow us to share that information.

Gabrys: That's the interesting thing, the sense that we're living in this information society, this information economy, that we're in a postindustrial era and perhaps we don't even really require materials in order to achieve profitability. It's quite a powerful mythology, so it's something I wanted to crack into. I thought electronic waste was actually a very good way to do that, because you have the remainders of something that's actually quite invisible, which is the whole manufacture, consumption and disposal of something that almost seems not to exist. I don't think we even notice most electronics, even though we're surrounded by devices that are potentially electronic waste. The volume, too—it's considered the fastest growing waste stream, although it's not the biggest in volume.

I think in the U.S. it's estimated that by 2010, there will be 3 billion consumer electronics that will be disposed of. Many of those are actually stockpiled. As much as 75% of electronics are actually kept in closets because people don't quite know what to do with them. A lot of people have two or three computers actually sitting in their closets. You know, it's one of these things we shuffle around and don't quite know what to do with. In each of those moments, each of those staging areas, you start to see a different relationship to the materiality of electronics that's really quite interesting.

Strasser: I think it sits in the closets also because it costs so much to begin with.

Royte: "I can't believe I'm going to throw this out."

Strasser: Yes, exactly. It's sort of through no doing of your own that they become obsolete. It's just Moore's Law: every 18 months—

Nagle: That's a good point. You didn't break it. You didn't decide it no longer works, but the platform you're using for the—

Strasser: Right, time for Windows Vista now.

Royte: Yes, that's interesting. That's why we hang on.

Gabrys: There are so many different ways in which your computer can become obsolete or your electronics can become obsolete, from the operating system to the hardware. Bruce Sterling

writes about this in his discussion of dead media, all of the ways in which the systems can fail and the hardware can fail.

Nagle: The school where I work, NYU, has a four-year cycle: every four years you get a new computer. So I got the email last week—you're due for a new computer. And I said, "Well, that's great, but I'm happy with my computer. Can we skip this? And if dies or breaks in a year or two, could I come to you then?" He said, "No. You're going to get a new computer now. Which kind do you want?" And then he reassured me that my perfectly good computer would not be thrown out; it would be donated, probably to some worthy cause. But I don't want a new computer and I am compelled to get a new computer.

Royte: Well, if you kept it and used it and then you wanted a new one, they would say you have to wait until your four-year cycle.

Strasser: Yes. The same thing happened to me this year.

Royte: And you can't guarantee yourself that you'll be okay for four years.

Nagle: Of course. Of course. I mean, by then it's an eight-year-old computer—isn't that awfully old? Isn't that due for a museum collection somewhere?

Kupinse: I also got a new computer this year. It's my fourth year at my university. I guess that's what they figured out. What the technician told me when he was installing it was that it would be used somewhere else, I think donated, but not actually to our institution because the older computers slowed the network down. So in fact there's a way that they need to be moved into a different place. I'd never heard this before either, so it was sort of interesting that they're almost a kind of impediment to speed in their own network. What's the ethical thing to do if they're too old to donate? I also have one in my basement that I know nobody wants—can we recycle these things? And if so, where would that happen?

Gabrys: Well, there's no easy solution to what the ethical practice is of what to do with your old computer and that's what's so tricky about it. You can recycle them, but that doesn't necessarily ensure that they're being recycled in the best of conditions. That doesn't ensure that they won't be sent eventually to China, which is where as much as 80% of first-world electronic waste ends up—in China, in India, where the raw materials markets are. Of course there are also donations to third world countries for their use of the computers, but that leaves them in the end with obsolete electronics that probably have a few extra years on them. Then they have to actually deal with the electronic waste.

Royte: And they have fewer environmental safeguards there.

Gabrys: Yes, they have improper processing for those at their end of life.

Royte: But there is a group that handles computer e-waste responsibly, I think. It's called the Basel Action Network and they have a list of e-waste recyclers who've signed what they call "The Pledge of True Stewardship," which they pledge not to export any material, not to use

prison labor, which is an important point, and not to landfill any hazardous material in this country or anywhere.

Nagle: And in the EU the laws are much more rigorous.

Royte: Right. Take-back.

Nagle: Yes. The manufacturer has to agree to take back the device, and when they send them overseas for recycling, the laws of the recycling country cannot be less stringent than those of the originating country. So if Belgium sends it to India, the rules governing the recycling and the dismantling have to meet Belgian and EU worker safety standards and environmental standards.

Gabrys: Those policies are in place, but it's actually quite tricky making sure that they're enforced. You hear about infractions all the time, about British computers turning up in Nigeria and people manage to get into the hard drive and get people's banking details. And it's sort of returning in this strange way to the UK again. The BBC did something on this. You do find out about the waste in these really off-the-wall ways.

Nagle: There was a proposal offered at the conference side of an event called Waste Expo. The year I heard this it was in Las Vegas. Waste Expo is a gathering of 10,000 or so waste industry professionals and it ranges from people who manage landfills and sell trucks to municipal solid waste managers to everybody else. They have a conference component to it, which is like any conference. So this fellow—I forget everything about him except his proposal, which was to take e-waste and put it into mines that have been tapped out. They're empty; they're unused. Just throw it in there and fill the mines up. Then mine the waste for the metals and the components that are re-useable. Copper, for instance—a huge percentage of global copper goes into the manufacture of electronics now. It's 100% recyclable. There's no loss of quality when you use it again and again. So we should ostensibly be able to simply not have to mine fresh copper. So this guy said just throw it into mines and when the mines fill, we'll go in after it. I was sure I misheard him because it just seemed absurd. So I leaned to the person next to me and I said, "Did he just say—?" And she said, "Yeah, that's what he just said." So it made some headlines in the trade waste newspapers and magazines and then nothing happened to it and I thought, "That's cracked." But then I began reading more about the problems of e-waste and I began to wonder if maybe it's not such a hare-brained idea. If you built in environmental safeguards that would prevent ground water from being further contaminated—those kinds of very serious questions—could you do it? I don't know. What we have so far doesn't work.

Gabrys: Well, the scale at which you'd be able to extract those metals—I mean, they said that if you could take all the gold out of the microchips that's left, you'd be a billionaire. Or even more. But actually, you have to process those in such a precise way. To think you'd be able to have this formless mass and just extract it is actually quite tricky. Then further to that, it actually ignores the kind of irreversible side effects that occur from the manufacturing of electronics. It's incredibly hazardous, as most people know. It involved countless chemicals and materials.

Kupinse: It involves dipping wires in acid and that sort of thing. This is someone who actually lives in the shadow of a former—or a current, I think—Superfund site, the ASARCO copper mill

in Washington. I know that even when it's done in the original form it's quite a toxic process. You'd have to weigh the mining and separating that out from what the kind of baseline extraction cost would be.

Royte: So why is HP de-manufacturing computers here in the U.S. and why is Sweden doing so much of this? They take a lot of e-waste and they get out the tiniest bits of wires and beryllium and all these heavy metals and things. Is it financially worth it to them, or is it because of environmental scrutiny? Because HP has a couple of these giant plants that are recovering all this stuff.

Gabrys: More and more companies do have take-back programs now and I think it's a response to the criticisms, the environmental criticisms. Also there probably is an opportunity there and not just in recovering raw materials, but I think in the end in thinking about how to redesign electronics so that they aren't so hazardous; so that they are more modular and perhaps can be adapted and upgraded without so much detrimental effect.

Royte: In Europe they passed the Restriction of Hazardous Substances Act, so they're cutting down on the number of toxic, hazardous things in computers. And Dell has a great take-back program and they're making a green computer now. So for anyone in this room who wants to know who has the best take-back program in this country, you can send back about 50 lbs. of e-waste to Dell, either for free or for ten dollars, I can't remember. They give you a box and you pack it up and UPS will come to your house and pick it up and send it to Dell, and it doesn't have to be Dell equipment.

Kupinse: Interesting.

Nagle: What's a green computer?

Royte: It has fewer toxic components and it's easier to take apart.

Gabrys: And Greenpeace has a guide to green electronics, too. People are interested in the whole sort of gamut of electronics and what's more hazardous and what's not.

Kupinse: Interesting. Since we often use these electronic devices for communication, for channeling our creativity in different ways, I wondered if we could talk a little bit about waste and the creative process. Whether that's your own creative process as it relates to the subject matter or whether it's the creativity and imagination of people that you've met during your research or your travels.

Strasser: Well, I have a third take on waste and the creative process, which is a really central point of my book about waste. To me one of the most interesting and challenging things that I came to as I was writing involves the fact that the period of time that I'm interested in is the transition from handwork to machine work, from pre-industrial to industrial society. I came to see that handwork involves or implies or comes along with an understanding of what to do with waste. If you know how to sew, you know how to fix clothing. If you know to knit, you know how to fix, how to mend something knitted. If you know how to do carpentry, you know how to

fix things. When we lost as a culture and as individuals within a culture that connection to handwork, we lost those skills for fixing.

Nagle: And for saving the materials.

Strasser: People saved materials because they might come in handy for fixing things. People saved materials because they might come in handy for making new things. Now, that kind of bricolage, to use a trendy word for it—although I want to use it in its most literal sense—really is considered something artists do rather than something everybody does. What I came to see as I was working on this topic was that it was something that virtually everybody used to do and was part of the culture, and it involves just a completely different kind of relationship to the material world.

Nagle: One of the many things that I find so rich about that book—all your work, but I won't gush about it right now—is that relationship to handwork and to tool use, and knowing how to use which tool for which job implies a very different kind of relationship to time. What you hear people say now is, "Oh, I don't have the time to fix, to sew, to mend, to guard, to nurture, to husband." All of those things imply a different pace of daily life. The disposability on which we rely, thinking in the morning, "Okay, it's still safe to throw out my coffee cup." We completely take for granted that perpetual shedding. I often say, "The only time we don't create trash is while we sleep." Even then you could argue, in some cases, babies do—you know, with diapers. That points to this very new and very hyper-fast pace of daily life. Who has time to knit, for heaven's sake? I happen to be a passionate knitter and people look at me a little askance, like, "You must be wasting your life if you have time to make a pair of socks."

Kupinse: Yes, it is interesting, that phrase "It's a waste of time." It's almost like those handicraft skills and the ability to use those tools absorb the category of waste so that it in fact doesn't exist in the same way.

Royte: Don't changing living patterns also have something to do with it—when people moved to cities and didn't have room to hold onto things?

Strasser: For sure. But that transition was all of a piece, really. It all happened in the United States during the same fifty years, between about 1870 and 1920.

Royte: There are lots of things I would love to save now and I might have time, but not the space to hold onto it.

Gabrys: Of course that raises the question about "older" technologies and the way in which those operate on matter. I mean, we were just talking about electronic waste, but really the whole set of industrial production in the commodity form and seriality really are part of the pattern of waste and the way that waste emerges with material culture, which I think you raise in your book. The way that you talk about it, too, the way that Baudelaire and Benjamin rag-pick through the debris of modern culture as a creative act, as a way to kind of capture the imaginative power of those commodities that are really lost. That's really strong.

Nagle: I'm teaching an undergraduate class right now called "The Invisible Metropolis." I've organized it around four different themes: nature, history, structure, and sensation, meaning, how do you interpret an urban space by its smell, by the gut level reaction you get from it? At the beginning of October, we're having a tour on the streets with some local Freegans. Freegans, as you may know, are people who have a very interesting and radical critique of capitalism that rejects the necessity of purchasing things new, and will use used clothing and used furniture. They're most famous for food that they find in dumpsters and in the trash. It's not quite as icky as it might seem because they tend to frequent the dumpsters outside of grocery stores and places like high-end delis, places that sell packaged goods. On the "best by" date—like let's say that ice cream is not supposed to be sold after September 15th—at close of business that ice cream will be thrown away. So the Freegans know, "All right, this is what time Gourmet Garage closes and its dumpsters are full and we're going to be there to forage and scavenge." And they're kind of reclaiming a much older practice. Throughout human history it's been a common way people have gleaned resources. My students are already very anxious about it. They can't wait. I'm waiting for their parents to contact the Dean and say, "I'm paying all this tuition and you're taking my children through the trash on the streets." One student said, "Do we actually have to get into the dumpster?" And I said, "No. If you don't want to, you don't have to." And she said, "Because there are going to be rats, aren't there?" And I said, "Well, we might see some rats." There are maggots and the frightening side of decay and rot and it's right there and we're going to get in there. But Freegans are very skilled at teaching their thought without frightening people. If any of you want to experience a Freegan tour, they give public tours. On some, the media are included. On others, the media are explicitly excluded. They're very savvy about how the media want to twist them into a kind of sensational, "People who go through trash and eat food, that's just disgusting!" Anyway, go on their website, freegans.org, and you'll find all the tour information.

Kupinse: I'm fascinated. That is quite a creative approach to thinking about our relationship to material culture. You can imagine that there are only certain parts of the world in which that would even be possible, that there would be that kind of excess. That makes me think a bit about the relationship between national identity—I don't want to leave the idea of creativity behind too quickly; maybe there's a way of segueing back into that—but it seems like our disposal patterns tell us a lot about who we are as Americans, as citizens of the developed world.

Nagle: Ask a sanitation worker which neighborhoods are best for *mongo*.

Royte: The wealthier. The rich people produce more trash.

Nagle: If you want to find really good stuff on the streets that you can take home and use, because it's not really that dented or broken—I passed on the way here the most beautiful butcher block on wheels. It was dusty, but otherwise it was fine. I almost—I was already late. In terms of the creative reuse of things that are otherwise categorized as waste, *mongo*, which is slang in New York and Boston—I don't think anywhere else and no one can tell me the root of the word, including editors of the American slang dictionary—but it just means things what you find as trash that you decide to redeem and keep, and it's no longer trash. It can be a noun or a verb. "Do you *mongo*?" "No, I *mongo*." "Oh look, there's *mongo*." This I think is very creative, and a little risky because there's a little bit of stigma, like, "You pick that up off the street?"

Kupinse: Sure. And that's something that I imagine sanitation workers engage in as well, that they get the first pick at this sort of thing.

Royte: But are they officially allowed to?

Nagle: No, it's illegal. Within department rules, it's illegal, but I asked the Commissioner about that long ago and he said that *mongo* is fine. You don't want to mess with *mongo*. If somebody is really messing up on the job and they want to get him and he does *mongo*, they'll get him for *mongo*. But it's a little bit of an arbitrary enforcement of the rules.

Kupinse: What about those who *mongo*—that's the first time I've used it—

Nagle: You did it just right. That was just right.

Kupinse: —and adapt or transform that mango, the way that we take raw materials of whatever kind and transform them into a creative process. I'm interested in visual art and literary art and all art forms that begin with waste as their raw material or their baseline substance, their media. Is that something anyone's worked with here?

Royte: You hear so much about artists working with recyclable materials. I don't know. I think it's fine, but I don't like it when the artists believe that they're doing the earth some good by making art out of used video tape cassettes or things like that. I mean, sure, they're keeping some things out of the landfill, but it's such a miniscule drop in the bucket. It's preventing them from buying other supplies, I suppose, like when our kids make art out of found objects. Then we don't have to go to the store to buy spools and dowels and things. But, I'm a little impatient with the idea of "garbage art." Does Meryl Ukeles call it that?

Nagle: Well, there is an Artist in Residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation, Meryl Latterman Ukeles. She's brilliant. She's been the Artist in Residence for 30 years this year. She doesn't call it "garbage art" because she's not working with garbage per se. Her first big project was called "Touch Sanitation." She went to every single sanitation garage in the city of New York—there are 59 of them. At the time there were 8,000 uniformed sanitation workers, and she spent two years shaking hands with every single one of them and saying, "Thank you for keeping New York City alive."

She then did a project where she took all their gloves—a pair of gloves from every worker—and she plasticized them and she created these amazing sort of sculptural forms with them. Her work has always been about the intersection of social practice, definitions of and understandings of waste, and the people who take it away—the labor required to keep the waste stream flowing. She doesn't use found objects that way, although she has a fantastic project now with Fresh Kills. Once the lawsuits are settled and it does move forward into its next iteration, her work I think could be a revolutionary contribution to Fresh Kills.

Kupinse: Interesting. I would guess that the sense is not that her use of found objects or her use of whatever materials she takes from the sites she's working with are going to make a difference, but it's the symbolic act itself that's really making a difference.

Nagle: She has a truck and she took it and paneled it with mirrors. It's a social sculpture. She calls landfills social sculptures—we all contributed to Fresh Kills. But when you see the truck in a parade, you see yourself on the side of the truck, and that's exactly her effort to make us understand our participation in the blatantly visible but "invisibilized" processes of waste.

Strasser: It's my impression—and I could easily be wrong about this—that Picasso and Braque, in making collages, were the first celebrated fine artists to use—

Kupinse: To play with that, sure.

Strasser: I guess I've always been struck by how that also came during that same transitional period, when it used to be something everybody did. You used found objects all the time. So during that transition, when people were not doing that so much, then it became elevated to something that artists did.

Kupinse: That's interesting, yes. My figures work around the same time period, roughly. But I think of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is a book that tries to represent the detritus of contemporary, or then-contemporary, consciousness. It's filled with garbage. There's trash that's circulated throughout the text, like a product called Plumtree's Potted Meat, which I guess is sort of the spam of the Edwardian period. It appears in a newspaper advertisement. The protagonist Leopold Bloom finds it in an obituary page and he thinks that it's an odd place to advertise it. But it comes to signify other things, like the affair that Bloom's wife is having with another man. There's another piece of garbage that's circulating through the text: it's a biscuit tin that gets thrown at Bloom by a hyper, sort of jingoistic character. And it's a biscuit tin from the Jacob's Biscuit Company that would have actually carried the British flag as its symbol on it, and Bloom is both Irish and Jewish, so he's sort of doubly mediated. The idea that this would somehow fill a work of high canonical modernist literature I think is something that really does represent a kind of transformation in the materials that are available to an artist and what they do with it as well.

I wonder if there's a risk, though, at aestheticizing waste—it figures into so many different poems and novels. Is the danger that we make it something that becomes beautiful solely as a kind of aesthetic experience? That we look upon a landfill and see a kind of "technological sublime." I think that even though we experience revulsion, art teaches us how to see the world and that that's at least a possibility worth considering.

Gabrys: Well, I think that's the question that Elizabeth raised when she was reacting to that kind of aestheticization of "garbage art," if I understood what she was saying correctly. The ways in which waste is transformed can raise all kinds of other social-ecological-political questions that are obscured in the commodity form. To just deal with found objects without unpacking those stories is perhaps a bit facile, which is what I think Benjamin does so well. Drawing on the Surrealists, he actually tried to recuperate that kind of "wish image" of the commodity that he said was expressed both upon its making, when it's novel, and upon its death, as kind of a last

sigh when something dies and you see that wish image. This is the kind of promise of commodities that you get with that reification. To not actually grapple with that—I think Ukeles does grapple with those social-political-ecological questions—is maybe to betray garbage, in a sense.

Kupinse: So it needs to sort of carry its effective trace for us to understand what its place is.

Gabrys: Perhaps in that transformation to be as rich as it could be.

Nagle: Every culture has definitions of things that are repulsive. Eating a tree slug in the Amazon forest would be a delicacy, but I would have a really hard time with it, even if I were in the Amazon forest. So definitions of revulsion, while every culture has them, are going to vary tremendously from one to another.

I've always been curious about how we have decided that our garbage is repellent to us, and continue to create it in such massive quantities with such speed and persistence. I mean, the lovely English construction—we “throw,” which is very emphatic, “away,” which is very vague, our trash. That's kind of charming and puzzling. Why have we decided that this category of object is just gross? Let's say that you know the litter basket on the corner is full of only dry waste; you're still going to be taken aback a little bit when you see someone going through it for the recyclable cans or for art supplies or something, because it's already been segregated as something you shouldn't touch. It seems to me that it points in part to the illusion of permanence and the simple fact that nothing lasts, and how terrifying that is to us as human beings. The imminence of death, all those kinds of big-ticket ideas that people in this audience grapple with, but generally, the public doesn't. Sanitation workers make real the lie of the “away,” and the lie of the disappearance, and the lie of the invisibility. So we don't like them. Let's say they worked in business suits and the truck was always pristine, we still wouldn't like them because of all that—we link them to all those big scary ideas. So it's always puzzling and very rich. Garbage is the best thing to study.

Gabrys: There's a city in Italo Calvino's *Invisible City*. It's called Laonia, which—

Royte: It's across the river. It's a real place.

Gabrys: Yes. I don't know if most people are familiar with the story, but it's a tale about a city that refreshes itself daily. So it starts with new things at the beginning of the day and it throws them away and they just go away. And that is the lurking question in this city that is constantly new and renewing itself is, “What is that ‘away’? Where is it, and how do things ‘go away’?”

Royte: And then the landfills that are created by this vomiting of stuff begin to grow between the towns so finally all you have is a little town surrounded by a vast landfill, with another little town over here surrounded by a vast landfill. Instead of a megalopolis of urban space, you have a mega-dump.

Gabrys: And it threatens to effectively slide over the entire city and cover it.

Royte: Like the novel *The Woman of the Dunes*, where the sand is perpetually swallowing up the homes.

Kupinse: I wonder if we could answer one more question and then open things up for questions from the audience. That seems like it might be a good rhythm. I was thinking about this when you were talking just now, Robin. You were talking about the big questions that waste causes us to ask ourselves, to think about permanence and impermanence, mortality. Perhaps the most physically revolting piece of waste, or troubling to all of us, would be a corpse, a dead human body, sort of the uncanny Other—death and life. I'm curious about the connection between waste and rubbish and the sacred, because if it represents the profane and what we want to keep away, there's a very short distance between that and what we find transcendent. I was just rereading Mary Douglas's book from the '60s, *Purity and Danger* the other day, and I was reminded in one of her early chapters that supposedly St. Catherine of Sienna was worried that fastidiousness would keep her from doing her good work, so she drank a bowl of pus to mortify herself. So I thought I'd end with that.

Strasser: Good for her.

Kupinse: Good for her!

Royte: More power to her.

Kupinse: Maybe we don't have to be quite that dramatic, but is there a way in which we could think about the relationship between things that seem to be filthy or distasteful and a kind of social sense-making or form-making that may have a transcendent spiritual, even religious, component to it. This is for anybody who wants to take it on.

Gabrys: Well, I don't know about the spiritual part, but certainly for the sense-making, the most compelling study I've read is Alain Corbin's *The Foul and the Fragrant*, where he studies the rise of the attention to odor as a way in which people would deal with miasmas and public health and pollution. To try avoid contamination effectively, people developed a whole set of sense-making practices, so they became more attentive to the way things smelled because they felt that if you could smell something decaying—and that came from the corpse, obviously, among other things—that was the source of contamination. Then there was the use of perfume for the plague and different practices that really galvanized a whole collection of imagery about sensation and pollution.

Nagle: If Bill Rathje were here, he might talk about the perfume of garbage. He wrote a paper by that title where he's arguing about the role of garbage in archaeological analysis and how it's been central to the discipline since its earliest days. Although, even now, archaeologists are hesitant to call the artifacts they find waste, or garbage, or rubbish. Of course, Bill's work was centered on contemporary household waste. He started excavating garbage bags off the curb in the early 1970s.

If you look where our culture places its value, we have sacralized our life of stuff to such a strange extreme. I mean, we're not building churches anymore; we're building malls. And it's

about buying a piece of the experience rather than just experiencing it. If you're a tourist, you have to bring home the trinket, the T-shirt, not just the postcard anymore. I'm not sure what the answer is in terms of the connection between waste and the spiritual, but it does seem a step we might think about or come to take, seeing how linked they are, in order to better understand how to change it.

Kupinse: It is a fascinating question: when did objects come to stand for us, to speak for us? I think we live with this idea often that the system that we exist within is infinite. There could always be this cycle of production with no sense of the byproducts, or at least we don't have to deal with the byproducts. At some point maybe there will be a different way that that cycle is affected. Anyone else?

Royte: What you just said about dealing with the byproducts—

Kupinse: I'm thinking particularly of consumerism—this idea that we purchase things that somehow speak for us and stand for us—the T-shirt from the vacation or the material things that we own or wear without having a real sense of the lifecycle of those objects. At some point that reality will be brought home to us just by the fact that we live on this planet and there's a limited amount of places to put these things.

Royte: Yes. I hope that's starting to change with the Global Warming Movement, as I call it now. People are really starting to connect the front end and the back end. And I guess I was thinking about this—our separation from the natural world, not really thinking about where things come from, when you're talking about the sacred and the profane.

Kupinse: Maybe we'll return to more of a connection with the natural world as we're forced to do that. One of my favorite nature writers is a man named Robert Michael Pyle, who writes about the Northwest U.S. He has a saying in one of his books that goes something like this: "Nature bats last." That in the end we'll all be environmentalists because we'll have no choice but to do that, and perhaps that's where we'll end up.

Nagle: There's a new book called *The World Without Us* that has a chapter called "The City Without Us," and it uses New York as the example. If all humans were suddenly not here, what would happen to the city? The subway shuts down within less than 48 hours because it's all below the water table and it would flood. But then how the buildings will slowly be reclaimed. Ann Matthews has a book called *Wild Nights: Nature Returns to the City*, which also talks about how the processes are insisting upon themselves, almost despite us.

Kupinse: Okay. This would be a good time to start taking questions, then.

Audience: There's such a contradiction—in a certain sense, with matter, nothing dies. On the other hand, everything dies. It's both. Nothing dies, and it's inevitable that waste will be and always will be. Spirituality comes from how you feel about that. But matter always *is*. That desk is going to die at some point.

Royte: But it can come back.

Audience: It can come back into something else.

Royte: Right. And it should. Waste is food for something else. You can't have life without decay. If you spend a lot of time in a rainforest, you notice there's a gazillion decomposers there—everything is rotting and it's smelly and it's wet and all around you is death, and that's the basis for new life. So it goes in the waste world, also—more so before, but I think we have to come back around to that and keep things cycling. That's this whole new movement.

Kupinse: I try to come to find that more and more reassuring, that biological processes offer their kind of model for some sense of peace or transcendence, but it's a tough thing to come to sometimes.

Royte: Well, what smells is food waste and organic material, and that is the best feedstock for new organic material.

Audience: Are Americans uniquely wasteful, and do you envision ways in which we could enhance our awareness of waste, perhaps through better education? If we are uniquely wasteful, how does that come about?

Strasser: Uniquely is a strong word, but I think yes. I mean, certainly as compared with Australia, maybe. I haven't been to Australia, but there is an industrialized country that has plenty of space. Most of the industrialized world hasn't had as much space as we have. Certainly Europe has gone through more wars and people—even middle class and upper class people—have had to fall back on those old-fashioned ways of mending and repairing and keeping things and making sure that they last. So it's a sort of complicated question on top of the reality that the United States, at least until recently, was the epicenter of the consumer culture world.

Nagle: You write about this in *Waste and Want* and some of your other work also, the way in which the new is so much more appealing than the traditional or the older, and that one of the marks of the new has been disposability as a way of guaranteeing greater hygiene, as a way of indicating that you are of the modern era. The United States has been seen in the past as this harbinger of this new way of being a country, and our materiality has reflected this. It used to be that you dried your hand on a roll of cloth and you find them now and then still, but that's kind of gross, right?

Royte: No.

Nagle: No, it's not, right? But some people would say that. The tin cup that you took out of the train and you sipped it and put it back—we would not do that today. So there are practices that also tie into definitions of public health—newness and freshness. We do generate more pounds of trash per capita than any other nation, by a rather remarkable stretch. I don't even know who is the second in that list, but we're so far ahead of them that it's—

Audience: China's coming.

Nagle: China's coming, I'm sure. Probably India also.

Audience: Is there a percentage?

Nagle: I don't remember off the top of my head. You can actually look it up on U.N. websites and some of the more statistically oriented environmental organizations will list those kinds of numbers. They're not hard to find.

Audience: When Robin just mentioned the connection between what we perceive as waste or garbage or trash, and how we as a society value different things, I see that as an absolutely solid continuum, where waste is at one end of the spectrum conceptually, and value is at the other. By better understanding that throughout all the elements of our society, it's going to be extremely helpful in all of us understanding what waste is, what it means to us, what it means to any individual, and how that ultimately is going to translate into the use, the re-use, or the appreciation of every characteristic that any item might have.

But I'm wondering if you have seen any elements of that in things that you've written, things that you're teaching, things that you've read—the concept of simply conceptually breaking items and assets down to their component parts and appreciating not only the assets themselves but the characteristics of those assets and how they may be thought of and perceived and used for different values and applications. Thank you.

Nagle: I'm not sure I understand the question.

Strasser: I'm not sure I do, either.

Nagle: Can you reframe that?

Nagle: Dumb it down for me because I didn't quite understand your logic.

Strasser: For starters, can you describe the continuum that you're talking about?

Audience: Sure. I believe the first gentleman who got up and spoke a minute ago basically said that there really is no such thing as waste, and I kind of agree with that. There's functionality to every single thing. There's potential value in every asset in the world. So who values it and why do they value it and what they value it for—what they see in it—may be completely different based on their orientation, their frame of reference, and their potential use.

In the book that I'm writing, I am listing thousands of different, seemingly stupid, everyday examples of things that typically people find incredibly resourceful uses for—common objects that get thrown away. Example: I grew up on Cape Cod; people use empty Clorox containers as buoys all the time for their boats, for lobster pots and that sort of thing. I mean, it's a great example because to one person that's complete trash, and for someone else it's a cherished asset.

Audience: *Mongo!*

Audience: Exactly. And *mongo*, in my mind, if you don't mind me saying, deserves to be considered not only as physical items but as conceptual thoughts.

Kupinse: Sure.

Audience: You may or may not know there's a concept and a product online called Animusic, which is just an amazing display of animated music that is digitized. One of the folks that I've interviewed in my book came up with an incredible way of using a characteristic of the data that comes from these digital things as. This is a way not to just digitize music but to drive the visual aspects of it, too. It's an interesting re-use of something that otherwise was not valued at all. So what I'm really getting at is, it's not just waste and what we toss out to the side, but rather doesn't everything really belong on a continuum of value, as perceived by one individual versus another individual?

Nagle: Jennifer mentioned early on a book by a guy named Michael Thompson called *Rubbish Theory*—I get lost in the mathematical chapters at the end.

Strasser: Yes, me too.

Nagle: He puts forth the idea that value is in fact, as you say, on a continuum. He puts it in a triangle of how things move from being valued to being rubbish to being in a transitional stage in between being worthless and being valuable. He talks about various examples of that with housing or with a folksy sort of art form, and this is central to thoughts about material culture in general. Certainly if you're going to define something as waste or as worth keeping or worth imbuing with time and with self—the other thing about John Locke's idea is that it's not just that a wasteland is un-worked, the labor that you invest in it is a part of a self that is invested in the thing or the place, which then changes the relationship of it to the individual or to the larger society. So there are lots of thick and interesting conversations about exactly that idea. Thompson would be a wonderful place to start. It's out of print, but I have some Xeroxes if you want a copy.

Audience: I just like to recycle as much as I can. The question of spirituality, where we waste things and how did it get to be such a nasty business—I think the puritanical aspect, you know, the “cleanliness is next to Godliness,” is sort of an American way. We shower more than other people. If you go to our bathrooms, everything in there is a fragrance to cover and replace our natural scents. So starting with the body. And then anything we deem to be discarded as waste is therefore no longer good, no longer holy. There's also in this country youth, newness, and so therefore death and aging is not a positive attribute. Even with furniture, you know. To make anything old-style, we have to call it retro—whether it's clothing or whatever. If it's not retro, then it's just an old dress, you know? As far as the gentleman writing the book, if he followed up with a website with all these things, that would be good, because the problem with the wonderful bleach bottle is finding the person who really needs it.

Nagle: Craigslist.

Royte: And Freecycle.

Kupinse: I was just going to say that, too.

Audience: Is it called a *mongolist*? In terms of *mongoism* in New York City, I can tell you, living in a high-rise, the doorman and the porters in my building have decorated their apartments with *mongo* before it gets to the trash. So it's happening really quickly. The idea of going to dumps and stuff—having visited third-world countries, they wouldn't consider it *mongo*. To them it's survival. The little kids going there and doing this, it's where they have to go, you know? It's not distasteful; it's what they. Maybe it's because of the odors and so on, but it's what they need to survive. Madison Avenue makes you have to buy everything new, so you can blame it on that, which is capitalism—the negative part of it. I'm concerned about the acceleration of this because of globalism. The fact that we can buy so many things now for so little money, via Wal-Mart, via China—it just accelerates. Poor people today have so much stuff that they used to not have fifty years ago because they were sewing on buttons and so on. Now they just discard it. This is continuing, and not only in this country, but in Europe. It's going to continue in China and India. I'm concerned about the future, not just the present, with this acceleration of the concept of “use and dispose.” So I wonder if you have any stats on that and actually, what is happening to all the e-waste? I'm really curious about that. Where is it all right now?

Kupinse: Did you want to tackle that part about e-waste? I actually have something to say to the first part of the question.

Gabrys: Well, it's being broken down all over the world. There's more and more recycling going on now in North America, as the Basel Action Network has documented. As much of 80% of America's e-waste and as much as 70% of Europe's e-waste is going to places like China, Nigeria, India, Pakistan, where children and poorly-paid workers generally break down the electronics for scrap.

Royte: Wearing no protective gear.

Gabrys: And in very unsafe conditions.

Royte: Cooking this stuff out on sidewalks, breathing in fumes.

Gabrys: You can go to the Basel Action Network website to find out more about specifically the kind of working conditions people do have to labor in to break down electronics there.

Kupinse: To answer the first part of the question, we were talking about Michael Thompson's *Rubbish Theory*, and I just wanted to recommend an elaboration on it, which is Jonathan Culler's *Framing the Sign*, which has a chapter that's in response to it. He sort of disputes it a bit but then does quite a lot with Thompson's categorization of objects as being either durable things, like diamonds or Old Master paintings that last forever and presumably become more valuable, and other objects that are transient, in that they become rubbish and then become recycled—things that are just trash, that are cast off. He actually suggests that maybe another way of thinking about economic class is, do you think of your objects as being primarily transient or do you think of the things that you own as being durable?

It occurs to me that there are a great number of people in the world who are coming into a kind of consumer culture and being encouraged to purchase transient things. And that it's a kind of global diffusing of our model of capitalism throughout the world.

Strasser: Yes, I would add to that the issue of change over time, and that more and more kinds of products become transient. When I was a child, furniture was not transient. Then IKEA showed up and it is. So that the whole concept of fashion—I mean, certainly there were styles of furniture, but this is a new thing.

Kupinse: Even televisions and radios—if you look at an old TV, it was a huge piece of furniture. It was beautiful. It was the centerpiece of the home and now we expect that these are going to turn over every five years or so.

Audience: I had a few thoughts and a question about the cycle of consumerism, to waste, to some form of renewal. One of the thoughts I had when someone asked about whether we're the most waste-producing culture in the world is that we certainly have the quickest turnover from consumerism to creating waste, I think, of any culture. I think we feel the hangover of buying something—some useless thing you buy on a vacation becomes trash in probably the least amount of time in any culture.

I was thinking of your comment about New York—if it were to flood, this kind of fulcrum of consumerism would become paralyzed. There was an interesting article in *Harper's* about Detroit—if there's any city in America that is experiencing the hangover of consumerism and experiencing the impact of becoming waste, it's Detroit. It's interesting because the process of Detroit becoming garbage now is actually becoming an advantage in terms of a city that could be survivable in any kind of disaster, because it's self-sufficient. They have farms; they're less dependent than New York on this kind of technological network that grows up out of consumerism. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about not just objects of waste but places that come to represent waste. In that hangover from consumerism, you can actually learn how to use the state of waste as an advantage, or as a stepping off point to some form of renewal.

Kupinse: That's a fascinating question.

Nagle: Fresh Kills.

Gabrys: Yes, absolutely, there are lots of examples. Fresh Kills would be one—the site that for many years was considered a real eyesore, a real albatross, particularly for the residents of Staten Island. Then it was closed and seen as a site of potential recuperation and value. But how you actually go about deciding what that recuperation is, who's involved, and how to revalue it, I think is a big question. And that article by Rebecca Solnit really raises some of those questions. Detroit is a waste city, but for whom? Maybe to white people in the suburbs it appears to be a waste, but maybe to the 80% black population living in the inner core, it's not. Maybe it's actually a really great place to be. So it appears to be a ruin maybe from certain value structures, but within others it's not. And so when you talk about recuperating it, well, who's recuperating it? Is it another sort of property speculation enterprise? Who's involved in the recuperation?

Nagle: If there were a way to see a city as kind of an organic entity, then the inputs that entity needs to survive—and then the outputs that are the waste and the sewerage and the detritus of the city—are all part of the whole. You can't segregate the waste from the vitality of it and think you have the whole city or the whole picture or the whole dynamic. If we were to expand our consciousness, or if we were to in some way re-conceptualize the entirety, I often think of it as having an infant. You don't *not* change the infant's diapers. You don't decide you don't love the infant because it poops. Its excretory processes are as inherent to its being as any other part of its physiological wellness. To use Elizabeth's examples from the jungle—the rot and decay is then also the spark of life and regeneration. If you segregate your love for the one, well then you aren't really loving the whole thing. We just don't love garbage. I hesitated all this afternoon to use the word “love,” but we have to throw it in here somewhere. Because that's part of this knot of questions, I think.

Gabrys: And that gets back to the first question that was asked. Everything becomes garbage, so perhaps it's time to reconcile with that, with the fact that everything does become waste or waste is bound up with everything, and actually address it and confront it and maybe even use it as a point of creation.

Royte: That's what Don DeLillo says in *The Wasteland*—is it *The Wasteland*?

Kupinse: *Underworld*.

Royte: He's a waste technician; he looks at everything before he buys it and imagines what kind of waste it will make, even before he decides to buy it.

Nagle: Hang out with sanitation workers and you start to see the whole world that way, too, very fast.

Royte: It's very useful to ask yourself, “Will it be toxic? When it breaks, am I going to be able to fix it?” Then you will reduce your impact if you start thinking ahead.

Nagle: I have an eight-year-old son and I bought him a sweatshirt at Target yesterday. I got him the size that fits him now. But it won't fit him probably by the spring. Today I said, “I should have bought you the next size up.” And he said right away, “Why? We can buy another one.” And I thought, “Oh my God, I'm failing already.”

Audience: I wanted to focus on one question, which Susan's comments really hit on. Maybe I should try to ask the question first and then tell you why I'm asking it. I assume that there are many psychoanalysts in this room. What does what you throw away say about you as a self. What kind of a self have you constructed? The reason I ask the question is because I was reminded of a book written by a friend of mine who's from Australia called *Blokes and Sheds*. The book is really about a cultural difference—I think it probably applies to Cuba as well—which is that in a society where you can't get replacements for things, people retain the tradition of using their hands to continue to make new things out of necessity. But it's also out of more

than necessity—it's out of the creation of a self-concept. That is, "I am the things that I can build and create with my own hands and my own mind."

I guess I'd like to hear more about that from you and the others as well. I also have a little comment about how we as a society got to be so good at throwing things away. That's kind of a bit of word-smithing, I think. In this culture, when we say "bright," we mean shiny rather than intelligent. When we say "brilliant," we don't really mean intelligent; we mean it's shiny, as well. I think that maybe one of the things in our culture that perhaps we ought to be working on as human beings is how to get people to take a more active role in creating a self out of doing things with their hands rather than simply farming it out to somebody who makes software that does stuff for you.

Strasser: Well, the question of the self and the trash, I think, comes in these assignments to the students that Bill and Robin are talking about. Robin said she doesn't necessarily make the students tip it on the table because it might be too self-revelatory. What we throw out gives a lot of hints about what kind of life we lead.

Royte: But is there also shame in it? Is anyone ashamed of their garbage?

Nagle: Well, the girl who tipped the table full of cigarette butts and empty beer bottles got a lot of ribbing from her classmates. She confessed that it was while she was writing her final papers; of course she was chain-smoking.

Royte: When I was going through my garbage for my book, I was ashamed about my garbage because everything in there represented some sort of failure—either the product failed or I failed to find another use for it. I had failed in buying it in the first place because it ended up here. So that was made manifest there. And all these little objects I was weighing and enumerating—

Strasser: I have never weighed and enumerated my trash in the process of thinking about it, but there's no question that when you become more and more conscious of it, it starts to change how you live your daily life. I don't use paper towels. There are paper towels in my house; every now and then people come and use them.

Royte: They just show up one day.

Strasser: I turn old things into rags and I use the rags and I wash the rags and there are still too many rags. I mean, that's one of the things that's really striking to me.

Royte: Yes, that's what I've found.

Audience: Another piece of the question that I was reminded about—

Strasser: The handwork question.

Audience: Yes. I was thinking about discovering that somebody tells you every four years that you're going to get a new computer. I'm wondering if you were an auto mechanic and you had a

wall full of wrenches and somebody came around and said, “We’re going to take your wrenches away,” what your reaction would be to that. It would be a very different one.

Strasser: I didn’t get a chance to tell my story about the new computer. I have a laptop from the university because they’ve configured the classrooms in such a way that we can’t just bring a flash drive; we have to bring a laptop. So any of us who use PowerPoint or whatever has to have a laptop from the university. It’s an expensive way to go. So my laptop will become a department laptop when it’s done. It’s not going to go off into a landfill, and it’s not going to be charity, either. It will be used by graduate students or people whose laptops aren’t working this week or whatever. But it’s precisely because it’s my tool and because we are at the point where we’re switching over to Windows Vista and they tell me my software isn’t going to work—there’s a huge learning curve. It’s a huge amount of work for me to switch this laptop—the laptop that I’ve now got configured perfectly happily—to whatever this next laptop is. So yes, it’s very much connected to my sense of self and my work and my priorities, and my general belief that I should be able to—as a college professor with a certain status—make my own priorities, rather than have the IT people tell me, “Now your priority is to spend your hours learning this new software.” No, thank you, I don’t want to do that. I am in fact considering asking them to downgrade this laptop that is sitting in a box in my office. To downgrade from Windows Vista to Windows XP so that I don’t have to do any work, so I can just move from the old laptop onto the new one.

Nagle: But that’s such an interesting example because you can’t master the new tool by yourself. They’re insisting on a new tool for you and it’s going to have a huge learning curve. The auto mechanic with his wrenches—he understands those wrenches. If you take away the steel wrench and you give him a copper wrench, it’s not going to work the same way, but he’ll be able to figure it out. The copper’s going to be softer and so it won’t be as practical, but the “wrenchness” of it will not elude him in its use as a tool. Whereas electronic technology, even for those of us who work in higher education—I’m going to have to have a guy come and reload things and upgrade and upload and press the buttons and make the sounds and I’m going to sit there like an absolute idiot and wait for him to finish and then show me how to make it go because I’m not conversant in that world. And everyone knows that and everyone knows there are now these guys, the computer guys that come around and do this for you. Why would you and I or any of us—oh dear, I was about to say “waste our time learning how to run the computers,” but that’s unfair to computer people. It’s just not my affinity or my talent. But I’m okay with a wrench.

Strasser: But I have a certain affinity and talent for it and I was pretty good at DOS. I really was. I really resisted moving to Windows because I understood my computer and I could see that I was being asked to take on—as the central tool for my work—something that I would no longer understand.

Audience: I’m an analyst, and here we are in the New York Psychoanalytic Institute and nobody has yet spoken about that earliest level, the anal phase, in which we deal with our own waste. It’s come up in a number of ways, for instance, the shame about what you’ve produced versus pride in what you’ve produced. I was particularly interested with the idea of the scale of value. Something is valued and something else is defined as waste. It’s really interesting to think about

how we can deal with the waste production so that instead of just saying to people, like you say to a little kid, “Oh, very nice!” when they actually move their bowels. The question of what work is entailed in making something and whether you value the result—I’m thinking of the fact that, interestingly enough, in New York about 20 years ago, a law was passed which said the dogs no longer go on the sidewalks. To everyone’s astonishment, there was a cultural change, an immediate cultural change, and everybody started cleaning up after their dogs, perhaps partly because of shame. You know, you don’t use—unless you’re in the psychotic realm—you don’t use the public streets as a place for yourself to go to the bathroom, and there’s a law against it, but it’s not so much the law that makes people comply.

So if we can have an influence on how people consider their waste, it can have a good effect. I’ll give one other slight example. My daughter gave me a fleece about 15 years ago or something. I was so astounded to hear that that came from old coke bottles and plastic of that type. So I valued it more because I knew what could happen to them. The whole question of the PR of waste, how it can change the way things are dealt with to our own benefit, is a very interesting area. You people know a lot about it, I’m sure.

Nagle: A fleece was once what you spun off of a sheep. It was not from oil—

Royte: A petroleum product.

Nagle: A petroleum-based thread, yes.

Kupinse: The comment strikes me as fascinating. I love the idea that we could potty-train society, that we’ve been telling it the wrong thing so far. I wish that there were that kind of progression. When I look at it in historical terms, I feel like we used to be potty-trained and we somehow lost that sense of things. H.G. Wells has a wonderful novel called *Tono-Bungay: a Medicine Scheme*, and it’s basically a book about unsustainable economics. It’s a very funny book, not a science fiction book. It was Wells when he was being a regular novelist. He basically is working through the anxiety of the idea that categories of waste and value have somehow become reversed in twentieth-century England. The book is remarkably prescient if you look at our own culture. At the end he thinks, “I’ve called this novel *Tono-Bungay*, but I should have called it *Waste*. It’s a society running to waste. We don’t save or have any sense of our own practices.”

Audience: Rikers Island has a program for rehabilitating prisoners, where they do waste recycling, and I don’t know if any of you have heard of it and what you think—

Nagle: Composting.

Audience: Yes, composting. How successful is it?

Nagle: It was started by a guy named Vito Turso, who is now the Deputy Commissioner of Public Information at the Department of Sanitation. He went from sanitation to Rikers and launched that program, then went back to sanitation. I’ve heard that it’s quite successful. I don’t know if I have the most recent news on it.

Royte: Yes, I don't either.

Nagle: Rikers itself is a built island; it was built by garbage and fill across the late 1880s into the early 1900s, and then stank so badly that when Robert Moses wanted to put the first World's Fair in Flushing, he had to have it re-excavated and barged elsewhere because the stench would have ruined the success of his efforts.

Royte: Do you know what they do with the compost?

Nagle: I don't.

Audience: This might be a question for Robin because I suppose it involves one possible definition of loving waste.

Nagle: I knew that would get me in trouble.

Audience: I'm trying to remember a museum exhibition—I can't remember where it was. It resulted in a catalogue with a title like—

Royte: "Garbage."

A: No, more interesting than that. Something like, "Sacred Waste." The premise of the exhibition, which involved a lot of performance pieces if I'm remembering correctly, was that for a quote-unquote progressive person who's sitting in this room at this moment, one of the last great taboos is to willfully, wantonly commit wasteful acts in public, especially with high-end kind of products. So people would be pouring bottles of Dom Perignon onto the floor rather than into glasses, or burning 100-dollar bills. I can imagine how cringe making it would be to watch such activities. I'm just curious, does anyone remember what I'm trying to recall, what the name of this was? I know I saw the catalogue at the Walker Art Center bookstore not too long ago.

Levy: Well, Hallie and I happened to see an exhibit in Vienna—it was a piece called "Cloaca".

Royte: Oh yeah.

Nagle: It was here.

Levy: Yes, the ultimate aesthetic piece of art—it made shit. And it may have smelled, too, didn't it?

Royte: Well, it had a smell. But they put a plexiglass box around the back end because the gallery-goers were offended. So to me, it lost half the meaning right there.

Audience: I'm going to ask my question and then sit down so I can take notes on your answers. I'm concerned about the ethics of throwing things away. I live here on the Upper East Side and I constantly see things—just last week, I was walking by a building next door and there were three

huge plastic bags of perfectly good clothing that had been just left on the street for trash. I realize recycling food is a bit more problematic, even though something like twenty percent of New York children goes to bed hungry or live below the poverty level. I just would like your reflections on the ethics of trying to recycle versus the practicality and whether that moral dimension enters the conversation very often.

Strasser: Well, I think there's a huge moral dimension and I also think that there's a kind of taboo about talking about moral things in general.

Kupinse: I think of it in terms of what would be called "source reduction," which at the most basic level is not preparing or taking more food than one needs. I mean, that is a kind of moral act but not one that we're always encouraged to think about in our culture.

Strasser: I should say, as a student more of consumer culture than of waste, per se, I find myself constantly struggling with my own moral sense about consumer culture and my sense that it's something that I shouldn't talk too much about. I guess what's striking to me is that in the end, the environmental argument—as you say, we can now call it the Global Warming Movement—is starting to look different than the environmental movement has for a long time. The environmental argument is the fundamental argument against consumer culture. So it may bring us out of the necessity to be talking about it in moral terms that people have a hard time listening to and have a hard time accepting.

Gabrys: Somebody who actually talks about the ethics of recycling in a kind of interesting way is Gay Hawkins, a waste scholar who's based in Australia. She actually examines the way in which post 1960s environmentalism became wrapped up with the practices of recycling, that maybe in some ways even obscured our relationship to waste, because it was so automatic and shameful. You know, you wash things, you sort them, you put them out for collection. It might even foreclose other ethical possibilities in relation to waste. So while this felt like an ethical practice, maybe there was more that we hadn't considered and maybe recycling even needed to be cracked open so that we could get at other possibilities. I find that an interesting argument because waste does so quickly get sort of collapsed into simply recycling.

Kupinse: Sure. I've heard the argument mad—and I think it's pretty convincing—that recycling at some level ends up serving as a justification for the perpetuation of the wasteful practices that we exist in. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't recycle, but if we think that that's absolving part of the problem—

Nagle: If I could ask one question of the last questioner? I just had a quick question for you. How did you know those bags were full of clothes?

Audience: They were clear plastic.

Nagle: Okay.

Audience: And there was already a homeless person who was going through it as I walked by, who said, "Would you like a leather coat?"

Royte: Would you have taken something?

Audience: Yeah.

Audience: I'm a psychoanalyst. Retired. You know, when I came, I thought waste and modernity was going to be about America being such a consumer society while the rest of the world is suffering from poverty and no drinkable water and other things. Because what is so terrible here is that this period has such a need to have possessions. It is a moral question that really is so terrible for me. I know that. I lived in Europe for six years, in Paris. I translated the Marshall Plan at the Embassy and people had very few toys for their children. I had very few—I had no toys because I grew up in the Depression. You know, we had sticks that made dolls. I came from a family that was workman-circle Jewish, you know, where you cared about poverty. You helped. There was an enormous amount of your money that went to helping other people. It wasn't that you had every bloody modern piece of everything. You know, teenagers now have their rooms piled like this with clothing. We don't care about the poverty. We don't use our money to help Africa not have starvation. There are so many thousands, millions of people dying of starvation and we have to have every bloody thing. I know my daughter gave away seven carloads of enormous hideous plastic things once her kids grew up because her mother-in-law, every week, had to buy another toy for her grandson. We've lost not only a sense of who we are but what we are as a nation—our decency, our caring about world issues. We have starvation in America; it's not only in Africa. So I don't know. I thought that was a little bit what we were going to talk about and so I was very glad when you raised that moral issue.

Strasser: I think it's behind everything we have talked about. Thank you for putting it so eloquently.

Audience: How do we cope with a capitalistic society which is forcing us into more consumerism and more waste? Everything we buy falls apart and has to be thrown out. So how do we deal with that and where do we go from here?

Gabrys: Do we start the revolution?

Royte: We connect in small communities. We go back to these values. We read Bill McKibben's new book *Deep Economy* about reconnecting communities. I'm sorry, I can't think of the subtitle. But it is about rejecting hyper individualization and relying on neighbors and buying locally and even having your own currency in your own community so that you keep your money within and you're supporting people in your neighborhood. And you ride the bus and you don't have your iPods in your ears and you listen to the same music whether you like it or not.

Kupinse: Just to play off the last comment, which I thought was so wonderful and passionate: instead of buying toys to tell people that we love them, telling them that we love them or making them something that tells them instead. Making gifts instead of buying them.

Royte: Right. He talks about that. He also quotes studies that say buying all this stuff is not making anyone any happier. We're not better off with all this stuff.

Nagle: And turning off the T.V. I think turning off the T.V. is huge.

Royte: Right, so we don't have the messages.

Nagle: Maybe even get rid of the T.V.

Audience: Couple of comments. One, I thought Sherwood Waldron would say something about this. You had mentioned that you don't understand why, when you walk towards the garbage, for example, you are not that eager to go into it and open it up. Well, the reason is because beginning when the child is about two or so, he or she wants to play with their own feces and what we do is we tell them it's disgusting and you shouldn't go near it. There are health reasons for that but it's also what we teach them and so that continues throughout your life. You make the same association every time you're near smelly garbage. It's inevitable. Now, when I went to medical school it was the pre-MRI period and at the tail end of the golden age of diagnosis, but we still had to learn to overcome that, because there is so much you can learn from smelling urine or from looking at feces for medical diagnostic purposes. That aside, I think the conversation is turning a little bit too much in a certain direction, which is "all bad." It's not all bad. I think there is a fantastic progress between DOS and whatever program it is I'm using now.

Nagle: Windows.

Audience: Windows. So there is a positive to the progress that we have technologically, scientifically, and so on. And there is a cost to it. So the problem is trying to figure out how we deal with the cost but not knock down the progress.

Audience: I have a couple of related questions. One follows up on the psychoanalytic remarks, which is that the people that have talked so far have dealt with the sort of superego aspect of it—the morality, the disgust. But the anal phase in analysis is also the period in which a child deals with his or her own power and powerlessness. More importantly perhaps, the boundaries between himself and what is not himself and the world. In thinking about how people are discussing this, the issues that are called up by the disgust of waste or by our desire to repress it in various ways seems a symptom almost of a failure to work through an existential state of powerlessness, or of where our boundaries are in the world.

I was also wondering what was said in the Bible about waste because it occurred to me that this is a very secular conversation that has to do very much with the accounts of waste. My own sense is that I would guess that it wasn't spoken of so much in the Bible and that it's something that—the movement of the thought, the interest in waste is something that we look at from a distance, and it's a particularly secular movement. There's a desire to be exterior from the things that are threatening to us that we think of as waste.

Royte: Aren't there good reasons for wanting to stay away from waste? The things that smell, the sulfurous and nitrogenous compounds, are from putrefying foods. The Freegans are eating

food that is really well wrapped up and they know that one of the benefits of—you know, they're critiquing society and our over-packaging and our obsession with hygiene and all this, but if this food wasn't so wrapped up, they wouldn't be gleaning it at night.

Nagle: Yes, they are aware of that, but perhaps there needn't be so much of it that never actually gets eaten. It's sort of the pornographic, overzealous production of it that is at the heart of what they—

Royte: Does the Bible talk about things being unclean?

Kupinse: Yes, I was thinking about Leviticus and Deuteronomy: those are the places that I think of waste being in the Bible.

Royte: It's for health reasons.

Kupinse: Well, it's actually not. I mean, Mary Douglas' argument in *Purity and Danger* is that people for a long time thought that it was for health reasons, that you get trichinosis or whatever from eating pork. But in fact if you start to look at prohibitions, they're really funny, too. Like, you're not supposed to eat things that have a cloven hoof. I think I'm going to get this wrong. I think they have to have a cloven hoof and chew a cud and if they don't do both of those, then it's a problem. So there are things like the rock badger that you're not supposed to eat—

Nagle: And locusts—you're allowed to eat the locust that crawls but not the one that flies. Or vice versa.

Kupinse: Swarming is bad.

Royte: So it's a control thing in the Bible?

Kupinse: No. I think it's how sacred meaning is made. You have these animals like the pig, for example, which has the cloven hoof but doesn't chew a cud, so it defies a category. Or you have things that wriggle like eels and they defy the category of fish, so they defy the sense that there are clean boundaries between things, that certain things are set apart. I believe the origin of the word that gets translated as "holy" actually means "set apart." So God says, "I am set apart and you shall be set apart as well." It's really a system of making social meaning and of ordering the world and of calling the sacred down more than anything. I mean, there may be some ancillary health effects that are good, but if you look at those prohibitions, they don't—I don't think that that's consistently why they're there.

Gabrys: But there are also different meanings of waste in the Bible. The waste of the wilderness that you go into for a certain kind of introspection and to move beyond the boundaries of the self and to deal with that powerlessness that you're talking about. So there are a lot of shifting meanings.

Kupinse: Yes, that would be waste as the uncultivated area versus pollution, which is really more what I was talking about with those codes.

Audience: The most problematic, as far as I'm concerned, is nuclear waste. I'm so curious why that hasn't come up. Is it just that no one comes in contact with it, so we don't know about it? Or is it just too new?

Strasser: Well, in fact we may be all coming into contact with it. I have a friend who works for the Nuclear Information and Resource Service (NIRS) who has been doing a lot of work about the reprocessing of nuclear waste, and apparently it's being put into consumer products.

Royte: Like what—smoke detectors?

Strasser: Well, there is the smoke detector.

Kupinse: I know it's reprocessed into munitions, actually. It gets used in armor-piercing weapons in Iraq, for example.

Audience: There's nuclear waste and also there's waste with all the medications that are now in the water, in the drinking water system.

Audience: You also have the nuclear power issue. I mean, they're putting it into mines and it lasts forever. It seems like that's the most hazardous waste we've got.

Nagle: Well the gap you've just identified points to the problem of talking about this subject inclusively in an afternoon. We haven't talked about agricultural waste. We haven't talked about mining waste. We haven't talked about hazardous household as a subcategory of household. This is just to say that, yes, nuclear waste is a huge scary problem and so are so many other categories and subcategories of waste and in one afternoon, particularly when linked with the title of modernity, which I took to be a little more high-falutin' and kind of theoretically tweaked. I'm grateful that we've gotten theoretical and very practical, which is nice. But yes, let's give it another two hours and we'll include nuclear waste.

Gabrys: Well, I think the interesting thing about nuclear waste too is the way in which nuclear power is posited as an alternative to our energy technologies that create certain kinds of atmospheric waste—carbon. So nuclear technology is seen as an alternative, but we haven't had to really confront that waste or we haven't confronted that waste, in a way. That would show what a problem that waste is, so it's kind of delaying and distancing it.

Kupinse: It really is its own special category. I mean, I don't think there's ever been any waste that we've created that has anything close to that kind of lifespan. I've heard the problem of what are you going to put as a sign on the repository where the waste is, whether it gets to the salt flats in the desert or elsewhere. I think it's something like 10,000 years—no human language has ever survived that long. It is a kind of a fascinating question that brings the realm of—at least from our perspective—the eternal into something that we think of as being quite temporal.