

RESEARCH

# Rummaging through the Attic of New England

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The concept of the circular economy has taken off, gaining momentum along with concerns about resource depletion, waste, and the impending 'end of cheap nature' (Moore 2014). Environmentalists and industrialists alike have promoted the benefits of reuse as a means toward improved efficiency and reduced resource pressure. Some have called for a new 'culture of reuse' (Botsman and Rogers 2010; Stokes et al. 2014). It is in this context that we explore repair, resale, and reuse as practices with deep historical precedent and contemporary continuity. Are there lessons to be learned from places that are already home to circular economies and strong cultures of reuse? And are there dangers inherent in a stronger, more formalized reuse sector? This paper draws on an historical and ethnographic analysis of vibrant reuse practices in the rural northeastern state of Maine. While there is a popular tendency to explain Maine's persistent reuse practices as a response to economic and geographic marginality, our empirical observations suggest that these explanations do not adequately capture the complexity of reuse markets, discount the power of human agency and sense of place, and preclude important lessons for reuse policy in other contexts. Insights from Maine suggest that any effort to promote reuse would benefit from looking beyond purely economic rationales to attend to matters of place, sociality, and market relationality.

**Keywords:** reuse; second-hand; markets; materials economies; Maine; environmental policy

## Introduction: Saving for Saving's Sake

'You know people save everything here. They save everything. We see it. It comes to us in boxes. They save everything. And I think it's great that there's an outlet for that here. That actually it can go somewhere, they saved it for a reason, now they can bring it somewhere. Before we were here they couldn't bring it anywhere, they were just saving it. They were just saving it for saving's sake' (Interview 2016).

In any ethnographic research project, some themes emerge quickly and persist throughout. In Maine, as we began a multi-year project designed to explore the social, economic and environmental implications of reuse markets, common proverbs quickly emerged. Some of these phrases are so commonly evoked that one begins to wonder if Mainers are somehow obliged to repeat them. 'You know what they say in Maine, right?... "Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without."' We also soon heard stories about the regional circulation of objects: 'You know what they say in Maine, right?... "there's nothing new here, only the same old stuff moving around from garage sale to garage sale.''

It is true that when passing through the state, whether making your way inland or traversing the rugged coastline, signs of Maine's vibrant reuse economy are hard to miss.

As soon as the snow melts in spring, yard sale signs seem to mushroom out of lawns, remaining until the fall frosts arrive. Flea markets and antique shops open for business and cater to visitors and tourists seeking lost treasures. Once winter has settled in, stacks of *Uncle Henry's* swap it or sell it guides are distributed in local shops across the state, a tradition that has flourished since 1970 and has led to popular programming that features the guides, like the Saturday radio show 'Uncle Henry's Talkin' Deals,' with its tagline, 'Buying, Selling, and Swapping on the air, Down Home Style!' and the reality television show *Downeast Dickerin'* which featured bargain hunters in Maine who used *Uncle Henry's* as a means to 'live on their own terms.'

This perception of Maine as a uniquely situated cache of treasures can also be found in the historical record. A 19<sup>th</sup> century newspaper article described visiting treasure hunters who traveled north from Boston looking for valuable collectors' items in the far reaches of Maine (New York Times 1894). Decades later, antiquarian Edwin Mitchell (1939) remarked that summers in Maine were amenable to frequenting antique markets and auction houses as a form of entertainment. He wrote that, 'It is the suggestion, the stirring of the imagination, that makes visiting antique shops worthwhile. And there is, of course, always the chance of finding some treasure' (1939: 80). Antiques specialist, Dean A. Fales, similarly observed, 'There is an old adage in the world of antiques that New England is the attic of America, and that, in turn, Maine is the attic of New England' (Tuck and Fales 2000: 141). Today this proverbial attic – Maine's reuse economy – encompasses a diverse



**Figure 1: Signs of Maine's vibrant reuse economy are hard to miss.** Photo: Ben Isenhour. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.

range of exchanges, from free *take-it* shops at waste transfer stations to architectural salvage, high-end antique stores, flea markets, community sharing initiatives, and web-mediated peer-to-peer sales. Isenhour, Crawley and colleagues have also documented the strong continuity of Maine's reuse economy relative to other states, through periods of economic expansion and decline, using spatial analysis of county level employment and establishment data (Isenhour et al. 2017).

Maine's vibrant culture of reuse might seem enviable to many policy makers who are increasingly focused on the environmental potential of reuse. The state of Oregon, for example, released a strategic plan on 'Reuse, Repair and Product Lifetime Extension' (ODEQ 2016). The United Nations Environment Program's second ten-year framework on Sustainable Consumption and Production targets 'Encouraging...the promotion of repair and maintenance work as an alternative to new products' (United Nations 2012) and Sweden now provides tax rebates for citizens who repair rather than replace goods (Orange 2016). Indeed, in an era of climate change, uneven development, resource depletion, and growing waste streams, reuse is being promoted as a key strategy for moving toward more efficient and sustainable circular economies that make full use of resources and goods already available. But there is also a rather large body of research which empirically documents the pitfalls of increased commodification and formalization of discard markets (Millar 2018, Reno 2015, Valenzuela and Bohm 2017).

It is in this context that we explore repair, resale, and reuse practices with deep historical precedent and contemporary cultural continuity. Are there lessons to be learned from places, like Maine, that are already home to

strong circular economic logics and cultures of reuse? And are there any dangers inherent in a stronger, more formalized reuse sector focused on environmental gains but without parallel attention to the potential social and economic impacts? We examine the historical construction and contemporary operation of these markets in Maine from multiple theoretical angles. While there is a popular tendency to explain persistent reuse practices as a function of economic and geographic marginality, we suggest that these explanations do not adequately capture the complexity of the sector, discount the power of human agency and connection to place, and preclude important lessons for reuse policy in other contexts. Insights from Maine suggest that efforts to promote reuse would benefit from looking not only at economic rationales, but also from attending to matters of place, sociality, and market relationality.

### **Methodology: 'Making Do' in Maine**

At a reuse shop along Maine's coastal Route 1, a rusted tool chest has become home to hundreds of screws, nuts, and door hinges. An old telephone, wire included, sits across the crowded aisle, foregrounding a large room of discarded, but still useful tools. The business owner admits that some people don't appreciate what he does; they only see junk as they pass by his lawn, crowded with everything from old doors and bathtubs to lobster buoys and used prop blades. While some view his business as an eyesore in the community, he feels he is doing society a great service, collecting and salvaging goods with value, because one never knows when they might be needed. Similarly, we find value in intellectual odds and ends in our effort to understand the historical construction, contemporary

meaning, potential value, and transferable lessons associated with Maine's deep and continuous tradition of reuse.

We draw on a range of methods to form an understanding of Maine's contemporary reuse economy, including a survey of reuse establishments (N = 72), semi-structured interviews with reuse business owners and managers in Maine (N = 6), as well as in-depth qualitative ethnographic research that includes participant observation with Mainers engaged in a wide variety of reuse exchanges. To understand the *historical* construction and emergence of reuse in Maine, we also rummage through the metaphorical attic of New England, using historical and archival documents, works of fiction, memoirs, diaries, and newsletters collected through an extensive literature review. Searches in online and print indexes guided this part of the project, with an emphasis on related terms that connected to Maine, like 'reuse,' 'thrift,' 'antiques,' 'second-hand,' 'used goods,' 'frugality,' 'austerity,' and 'auctions'. The authors also spent time scanning periodicals on rural Maine culture in the Special Collections department at the University of Maine. To make sense of this highly variegated material, we work 'through, and between, multiple theoretical paradigms' (Rogers 2012), assembling explanations using the intellectual materials at hand. Our qualitative and highly inductive approach (Bernard 2011) allows us to gather evidence from a wide range of sources and identify patterns across an under-explored area of study. This approach also makes space for difference within the reuse economy, for, as we shall see, reuse is a complex and variegated social practice that resists simple causal explanations.

For the purposes of this project we define reuse as the redistribution of previously owned material goods, *in*

*their original form*, from one agent to another through a transfer of ownership (sale, swap, barter, gift) or temporary use agreement (borrow, rental, lease, share, loan). We also include practices that extend product lifetimes such as restoration and repair. While often conflated with recycling, reuse is quite different. Recycling is important for recovering waste, but it takes a lot of energy and water to convert recovered goods back into component materials that can be used, once again, in the production process. Further, gains achieved by recycling have not kept pace with increased production, resulting in net growth in resource use. Reuse exchanges, on the other hand, have greater potential for material and energy savings because they recirculate goods in their original form and do not require additional inputs.

### Exploring Theoretical Alternatives: Odds & Ends in the Attic

We consider multiple theoretical frames relative to our research findings, and their ability to shed light on Maine's reuse markets. We start with the popular assumption that Maine's culture of reuse is a function of economic and geographic marginality before tinkering with other theoretical tools to broaden our understanding of Maine's culture of reuse.

#### a. Economic and geographic marginality

'After I was downsized ... I decided to go for it. I used my settlement monies for startup costs. Fortunately, the business took off and sales have increased every year since' (Reuse Organization Survey 2017).



**Figure 2: A landscape of reuse.** Photo: Ben Isenhour. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.

Located in the northeasternmost corner of the United States, Maine is known as a largely rural and geographically marginal state, with rugged coastlines and vast forested expanses. The recent decline of the forest products and ship-building industries in the state has left citizens and policy makers alike concerned about the future of Maine's rural economies. Post-industrial and post-extractive economies, in particular, have had a hard time bouncing back from the latest recession. There are many reasons for this, of course, but economic development specialists point to the idea that Maine's rural workers, trained for extractive or industrial jobs, have struggled to compete with low international wages and, due to historical patterns of production (Massey 1995), don't have the skills to compete in the emerging service- and knowledge-based post-industrial economy (MDF 2017). An emerging body of scholarship has described how these shifts have worked to produce 'depleted communities,' or areas where the economy is in decline and resources are perceived by the traditional logics of capital to be 'used up' (Johnstone and Lionais 2004: 218), making conventional routes of investment and economic growth unlikely.

It is in this context that one might view Maine's strong reuse sector as a response to economic and geographic marginalization. Isenhour and colleagues (2017) conducted an analysis of the relative strength of Maine's reuse economy relative to other states. Their analysis of formal reuse businesses measured the ratio of reuse establishments to other economic sectors, as well as the ratio of employment in the formal reuse sector compared to other types of employment. Their findings indicate that over the last two decades, Maine has a consistently strong reuse sector, relative to other states, one that grew in response to the latest recession (Isenhour et al. 2017). This certainly seems to suggest that reuse provides a valuable strategy for economic resilience during difficult economic times. This finding was also supported by a survey of reuse organizations, some of whom told us that part of their decision to start a reuse business or get involved with a non-profit was linked to the low cost of entry and ability to start a business with minimal investment, particularly in difficult economic times.

The recent recession is situated within Maine's long history of economic booms and busts. Elderly Mainers remember not only the Great Depression, but also the rise and subsequent decline of fishing, shoe and textile manufacturing, paper, and shipbuilding industries (Acheson and Acheson 2015). Historian Richard Judd's work in Maine extends the connection between economic/geographic marginality and contemporary culture further into the past, suggesting a deep, underlying ethos of 'intractable individualism' and a people of 'singular persistence' focused on self-sufficiency and survival. Judd argues that these traits, common among Mainers, reflect the nature and reality of the 'hinterland in which they live' (Judd and Beach 2003: 18). Other scholars of rurality have noted dominant values linked to independence, frugality and hard work (Flora, Flora & Gasteyer 2015) that also seem to be connected to reuse in Maine. These historians

describe people intent on making do with the things at hand, even in a harsh natural and economic environment.

Explanations linked to the values that emerge in economically and geographically marginalized rural places do seem to lend some insight into Maine's vibrant culture of reuse. Yet this economic and geographical determinism would seem to imply that reuse can only emerge as a passive response to a lack of economic alternatives or that citizens are little more than producers and consumers of increasingly commodified waste streams (Valenzuela & Böhm, 2017). Anthropologists have documented a wide array of cases in which people at the economic margins have come to creatively redefine 'resource,' 'value,' and 'waste' (e.g., Millar 2014; Nguyen 2016; Reno 2015) but none imply that poverty or geographic exclusion are preconditions for these conceptualizations of value, or for participation in reuse markets. Millar (2018) describes the work of collecting and redefining waste at a garbage dump in Rio de Janeiro as about much more than survival. Indeed, she finds that actors engaged in this work do so in a process of redefining 'the good life' and that the labor itself is a valued 'way of living' rather than simply a strategy to make ends meet in the face of economic hardship. Following Millar, if we attribute Maine's strong reuse culture to economic and geographic marginality alone, it robs Mainers and others interested in reuse of their human agency, just as it fails to impart lessons that might prove useful for understanding reuse as a strategy for sustainability and post-carbon transitions in Maine or beyond. While acknowledging the role of economic and geographic marginality in Maine's reuse economy, we also found evidence which suggests that other analytical frames might be necessary.

#### **b. Resistance and self-reliance**

'Butcher block. Good condition. Used in my grandfather's general store in the 1930s until the invasion of the shopping centers circa 1960. Come pick it up. \$300.00' (Uncle Henry's 2017).

Despite the popular tendency to associate reuse with economic and geographic marginality and a corresponding lack of alternatives, we suggest these explanations are far from complete. As Flora Flora and Gasteyer contend, 'rural residence (is) ... not enough to explain culture' (2015: 75). It is also worth noting that while Maine does indeed have large rural expanses and a historically precarious relationship with international markets, it is far from a homogeneous state economically or geographically (Acheson and Acheson 2015). Isenhour and colleagues' review of county-by-county employment statistics in Maine's reuse economy suggests that there are many densely populated and economically vibrant areas of the state that are also home to strong reuse economies (2017).

As we searched our theoretical and empirical cache for alternative explanations, we found evidence to suggest that Maine's culture of reuse is more than a passive reaction to marginality. It may also be understood as an intentional and active strategy focused on resistance to

consumer ideology as well as an interest in regional self-sufficiency. Griswold has observed that ‘Maine has always had a sharp sense of its distinctiveness’... that ‘came from the state’s history as the Massachusetts backwater – the state that didn’t gain statehood until some thirty years after the rest of the East Coast’ (2002: 78).<sup>1</sup> Historians have noted Mainer’s sense of betrayal and subsequent focus on independence and self-sufficiency when, during the Revolution, Massachusetts decided not to send troops north to help Mainer’s push the British out (Riordian 2018).

This colonial legacy has combined with a long history of economic booms and busts triggered by inconsistent access to external markets. While not unique to Maine, together these factors shape a distrust of outsiders ‘from away’ as well as a clearly documented preference for local ownership and self-sufficiency. Judd observes that, dating back to the New Deal, historians have noted Maine’s preference for localized economic development rather than integration into ‘vast impersonal markets’ (2003: 18). Today, Maine ranks 10th in the nation for the number of Small Business Administration loans per capita and has rates of occupational pluralism (multiple job holding) well above national averages (Campolongo 2017). Indeed, many Mainer’s piece together livelihoods with what is at hand: seasonal jobs, small businesses, and informal exchange networks. Of the 72 reuse organizations who completed our survey, 91% of them listed self-sufficiency as a primary motivation for starting their business.

From this perspective we might come to understand Maine’s strong reuse sector as more than a passive response to economic and geographic marginality. We might also, and perhaps more accurately, understand it as an active attempt to move away from a historically precarious dependency on external ‘first order’ markets (Yavas, Clabaugh Jr. & Riecken 2015). Indeed, there are examples scattered throughout the literary and historical records which suggest that many Mainer’s promote reuse as an alternative to consumer lifestyles that are seen as inefficient and wasteful. For example, Maine resident and self-described ‘frugal zealot’ Amy Dacyczyn began ‘promoting thrift as a viable alternative lifestyle’ in a widely popular newsletter, the *Tightwad Gazette*, in the 1990s (Dacyczyn 1998). She encouraged parsimony, stating, for example, ‘It takes 5 seconds to save a clean but used piece of aluminum foil’ (ibid: 104) and compiled a regular ‘What to do with...’ column that presented readers’ advice on how to reuse everything from plastic grocery bags and unflattering photographs to old refrigerator gaskets. Dacyczyn even had a column titled, ‘Is frugality bad for the economy?’ (ibid: 363) in which she argued that consumption spending was an enormous problem and frugality its antidote. In yet another Maine circular, Mitch Lansky (2004) satirically describes frugality as ‘a menace to society’ that threatens to overturn the capitalist cycle of work/purchase/discard.

By drawing attention to the potential for reuse to contribute to economic resilience and transgress or resist typical capitalist routes of production-consumption and disposal, this study of reuse cultures highlights the potential for reuse economies to contribute to alternative

economic arrangements, economic re/localization (Lockyer and Veteto 2013; Taylor et al. 2014) and sustainability transitions. From this perspective, localized reuse markets might be viewed as a space of resistance which allow participants to rethink dominant assumptions about economy on their own terms and even in opposition to or from within markets commonly assumed to be only capitalist (Fortun 2014; Gibson-Graham 2006). Even as we frame reuse as a space of resistance, we argue that this explanation, too, does not fully explain the persistence and vibrancy of Maine’s reuse economy. So, in an effort to ‘add depth, rigour, and multiplicity’ to our inquiry (Rogers 2012: 6), we continue, suggesting that, additionally, sociality and sense of place might have important roles to play.

### c. Producing sociality

‘Now that fellow there that just went by, I know that he restores bicycles and when we get a vintage bike in, I call him. He comes down and gets it, restores it, and helps with their income [...] so when people have a specific collection, or I know that they can use something, I call them’ (Interview 2016).

The suggestion that economic activity is fundamentally social is certainly nothing new. Scholars have long argued that the economy is ‘embedded’ in social relationships (Granovetter 1985), particularly in non-market societies (Polanyi 2001). We might consider sites of reuse to be ‘pericapitalist spaces’ (Tsing 2015), where materials are removed from capitalist production (Royte 2005), with the potential to re-embed exchange in localized social and economic logics. Indeed, responses to our survey and initial interviews show that Maine’s reuse economy is teeming with relationships. In many ways, reuse seems to produce and to be produced by sociality. These relationships may explain why reuse persists and grows throughout the state, even as other sectors struggle to find a foothold in Maine’s communities.

Social relationships are far from an ancillary benefit of reuse. In many cases, reuse stores and organizations intentionally cultivate community ties, sometimes as their primary goal. One store manager commented that her goal is for the store ‘to be a community space. A place where [...] anybody is welcome, you feel safe, you can ask questions’ (Interview 2016). Survey respondents noted that reuse ‘helps people’ and others cited the social benefits of making low-cost goods available to people in need. Many organizations seek strong connections with community members through volunteer programs, as explained here by a building supply organization manager:

‘Most of our volunteers are retired adults. Average age is probably like 65 for our volunteers [...] They have a really great time when they come here. That’s something that we provide. It’s like a social event for them [...] they love it. We love it’ (Interview 2016).

Non-profit and highly localized sites of reuse may allow for the accumulation of capital outside of the strictly economic definition. Indeed, in engaging volunteers, reuse organizations may serve as ‘platforms for social capital’ – meeting spaces that bring people together, allowing them to get to know each other and build community ties through shared work (Svendsen 2006). As James Coleman writes, social capital ‘inheres in the structure of relations between persons and among persons’ (1990: S98) – in other words, stocks of social capital are accumulated when people invest in relationships. We suggest, however, that reuse might produce relationships in other ways as well.

The objects exchanged in the reuse economy may have a role in producing social relationships. Gretchen Herrmann describes how used goods become ‘sticky with affect’ (Ahmed 2010; Herrmann 2015), maintaining connections to their former owners like trails of glue. Russell Belk discusses possessions as part of the ‘extended self’ (1988), where objects are imbued with the essence of their owners. In the ad below, posted in an Uncle Henry’s catalogue, we can see how used goods retain stories, becoming more alive through the act of exchange:

‘Mannequin, 5 foot 10 inches tall. I found female in a dirty frock, beach blond hair was falling out. Was leaning up against a wall smoking a cigarette. I paid the ransom of \$ 100 and brought her home. Several baths later, new clothes and some support, was able to stand on her own. She’s been working the last few years modelling necklaces for me, but it’s time she sought new adventures. She pivots at the waist and hip. She has arms (not on in picture) but both hands have one finger missing each. I think she’s a size 2. \$ 100.00 OBRO’ (Uncle Henry’s 2016: 33).

Objects accumulate histories in many contexts and become attached to people through exchange. Many business owners discuss their ‘love’ of objects, and particularly antiques, as a motivation for engaging in reuse. Perhaps this affect, emotion, and storied connection to goods creates connections between people as goods change hands, weaving webs of ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter 1973). Conceptualizing reuse as made up of more-than-human relations allows us to extend the sociality of this sector beyond those non-profit organizations dedicated to community building and development. If the very act of exchanging previously owned goods is associated with building social relationships, then the entire reuse economy – diverse and sprawling as it is – has the potential to connect people.

Reuse not only produces relationships – it is also *produced through* social interactions. In this way it is embedded in the fabric of communities, emerging from networks of family, friends, and peers. For some, leveraging existing relationships is a way to get a reuse store or organization off the ground, or keep it running during hard times. As one reuse organization manager described it:

‘I don’t want to say that I can hire family cheaper, because I don’t mean it that way, but they’ve been the ones that through thick and thin, you know, are still here. You know when I couldn’t make a payroll, they’re still here’ (Interview 2016).

Family ties are important for passing down knowledge and traditions, which several survey respondents indicated were critical to learning the antiques trade. Another manager described the importance of ‘becoming allies’ with other store owners to stay afloat in the reuse economy. These ideas situate reuse outside of a purely capitalist logic, suggesting, as they do, the importance of collaboration and community support for the reproduction of this sector. Reuse practices are relational – connecting people to each other, and to objects – yet, as we shall explore, reuse is also linked to a social production of place – the connection of people to geography, history, and identity.

#### ***d. Cultivating thrift & the social production of place***

‘The piece I considered a very good specimen of early American-made furniture. I found it in a second-hand shop in Portland, Maine, paying \$75.00 for it. I didn’t have to do any repairing or restoring as the piece was in very good general condition. I priced it at \$ 150.00. There was considerable interest in the piece, but as I remember, most of the people who looked at it thought it was of foreign make, so they didn’t care to purchase it’ (Tuck and Fales 2000: 53).

In the late 19th century, the self-proclaimed first antiques dealer in Maine, Fred Bishop Tuck, set up shop in Kennebunkport. Over time, he contributed to the ‘old adage’ about Maine as the proverbial attic of New England. According to cultural historian Briann Greenfield, Tuck ‘conscientiously cultivated regional associations’ with the goods in his shop (2009: 49). Tuck described how a customer justified buying an ordinary table at his store simply because of its connection to Maine, saying ‘I can buy a better table than that in New York City auction rooms, but I thought I should enjoy using a table that was purchased at the first antique shop in Maine’ (Tuck and Fales 2000: 39). The formation of a connection between reuse and New England seems to have been an active process, where residents ‘scrounged dusty attics, investigated old barns, and knocked on farmhouse doors, all in an effort to bring more wares to market’ thereby ‘enhancing the region’s reputation as a historic place’ (Greenfield 2009: 49–50). This process aligns with what Griswold terms the ‘social production of place’ in which place both exerts influence on ‘behavior, thought, and feeling’ and is socially constructed by the differentiation of one place from others in its vicinity (2008: 4).

The associations between Maine and reuse remain strong today, where, as one reuse store owner put it, Maine markets ‘the lure of the find’ – a place where, as a marketing effort claims, ‘Captain’s homes, barns, and homesteads that sprawl across acres of land provide the source

for antique stores and markets that are always brimming with discoveries' (Visit Portland 2018). Stirring the imagination has long been the work of local businesses trying to tempt customers into their stores. In Maine, such images typically center on notions of the state's authenticity, simplicity, history, and timelessness (Lewis 1993). Business owners participating in our survey noted the marketing strategies they use to attract customers. The most common response, far more commonly mentioned than environmental or economic marketing messages (14% and 54% of respondents respectively), were those linked to the idea of finding 'unique treasures' (74% of respondents).

The image of Maine as a place where thrift and frugality are valued is not only an historical remnant of economy, but a conscious strategy through which identity and a sense of place have been intentionally produced and reproduced. Conceptualizing reuse as an act of production rather than a passive response to economic and geographic marginality allows us to see this reuse as a social and economic process through which Mainers not only produce value, but also a sense of place, belonging, and regional identity. Signs of a deep culture and regional identity associated with frugality, thrift, and reuse abound. They are present in the literature about and by Mainers, such as historian Mimi Killinger's biography of noted back-to-the-lander and Maine transplant Helen Nearing, whose lifestyle she describes as an 'extraordinarily austere, frugal, out-Yankeeing-the-Yankee existence' (Killinger 2007: 49).

This culture of reuse even extends into and is reproduced in the fictional realm, reflecting what sociologist Wendy Griswold referred to as Maine's 'unusually strong cultural regionalism, often referred to as "a sense of place"' (2002: 77). Reuse practices are featured in Maine novels from across different genres and time periods, suggesting a widespread acceptance of a link between reuse and Maine. What can a demonic character who runs a second-hand store in a fictional town in Maine (King 1991), a pawn shop owner in Maine who solved mysteries (Dobbs 2013), and the crime-solving adventures of a young antique shop owner in a fictional seaside town in Maine (Ryan 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017) tell us about Maine's culture of reuse? In their focus on boundaries – between the sacred and the profane, legality and illegality, and even life and death – these stories suggest that sites of reuse are liminal spaces, full of potential and uncertainty. They link second-hand exchange to the transgressive, presenting the act of reuse as of two worlds, crossing uncomfortable and uncanny divisions. These stories also link reuse to the mundane, evincing a connection between the reuse economy and those living (and making a living) in Maine. In so doing, they reproduce and perpetuate a perception of reuse as a part of Maine's cultural identity. Griswold refers to this relationship, writing that 'For any place-based culture to persist, whether in traditional or newly crafted forms, there has to be people who know it, produce it, respond to it, and pass it along' (Griswold 2008: 17).

As anthropologists have long observed, material goods have a vibrancy and social life of their own (Appadurai 1988; Bennett 2010). Many objects carry with them

meanings and affect often linked to place and people that are 'inalienable' (Mauss 1990; Weiner 1992), and reuse practices themselves are value-laden (Houston et al. 2016). Taking this into mind, we suggest that Mainers participating in the reuse economy have harnessed the semiotic and agentive power of material culture to help reproduce a regional identity, a pride in the past and place – a sense of belonging.

While recognizing the importance of place, history, and identity, we also acknowledge the 'plurality of complexities' (Rogers 2012: 6) within the reuse economy. Indeed, the social production of place we describe is not articulated by Mainers alone, but instead in dialogue or opposition with outsiders. The image of Maine as a treasure trove of used goods, home to thrifty, independent residents is co-constructed and is in many ways maintained by people 'from away' – the term Mainers use to describe outsiders. In Maine, to be 'from away' is more than a geographic descriptor, it is a marker of difference, often with political, ideological, and class associations. As one reuse organization manager framed it:

'The thing about a place like this - they don't like outsiders. You know? Coming in and tell us "oh look what I've done for you poor people." Uh uh. You don't do that. That's not well-received anywhere. The Red Cross came up here when we had a flood. They were not well-received. Because they weren't nice. They were on a mission. They look like they know more than you do, or something. They toss you aside. People didn't like it. Yes, we want help, but we don't need it. We can get it from each other. We don't need you to come up here. Especially with your fricking away attitudes' (Interview 2016).

While marginality, resistance, sociality, and sense of place can help us make sense of Maine's reuse sector, the internal and external complexities and dissonances within the reuse economy articulate the importance of considering market relationality. Maine may be situated at the economic and geographic margins of the United States, but its role in a global economy places reuse practices in a relationship to larger markets. This relationality has implications for the future of this complex and heterogeneous sector.

### **'They Come from Away': Commoditization and Economic Relationality**

'If she passes a house that looks as if it were old and had a fairly well-to-do but not modern appearance, she drives up to it, and asks for a glass of water. Her husband is usually made to perform that task and to take a look around. If the house looks promising, she alights, and it takes but little manoeuvring to get inside the house and once there to discover if there are any treasures... in the backwoods of Maine the knowledge that old furniture is valuable has not penetrated...' (New York Times 1894).

While 'uninformed' Mainers were perhaps more aware of the value of their possessions than they let on so long ago, this early example from the New York Times paints a picture of value being usurped from rural areas toward central markets like Boston and New York. Further illustrating this historical phenomenon, Maine's first antique dealer, Fred Tuck, recorded a trip to an antique store in the south in his diary. His entry details how the dealer told him 'that he could not keep many good pieces, as he was constantly shipping his best pieces to New York City' (Tuck and Fales 2000: 71). Similarly, J. Herbert Smythe Jr., the editor of *Antiques Dealer*, wrote in 1951:

'There is something fascinating and at the same time bewildering about the movement of antiques... We recently saw a van load of antiques in a small cross-roads town in Georgia on its way south or west. The trailer truck carried Massachusetts license plates. We witnessed the unloading of another van load of antiques in the Pennsylvania Dutch country, and learned that these are items that had been purchased in Maine and Vermont, and that they would ultimately be bought by dealers in New York, Philadelphia, Washington and Richmond' (cited in Greenfield 2009: 53).

What are we to make of the salvaged chairs, records, and hose spigots that make their way from Maine to urban economic centers where, by virtue of geography and market access, all sorts of non-capitalist values are salvaged for capitalist accumulation? We might see the movement of used goods from rural peripheries to urban centers (Wallerstein 1974) as the extraction of diverse forms of value embodied in both the materials and the sociocultural relations of exchange. Although the movement of used goods has historical precedent in Maine, the introduction of circular economic logics has the potential to exacerbate this extractive process. Indeed, we worry that the imagined novelty of the circular economy might work, unintentionally, to reproduce spatial patterns of inequality.

While reuse markets have long been global in nature (Gregson and Crewe 2003; Hansen 2000), today they are increasingly digitized and formalized on multiple scales, drawing our attention to processes of commodification and the increasingly corporate and international character of the discard trade (Reno 2015). Eriksen and Schober argue that 'ever new terrains have been affected by commodification and processes of financialisation' in our global, capitalist system (2017: 284). What, for example, are we to make of the fact that large reuse organizations in the US make most of their income from shipping second-hand goods overseas (Hansen 2000), often disrupting local markets and externalizing the costs of disposal in the name of economic assistance? Further, signals of the commodification and privatization of waste and reuse practices also raise important questions about the potential exclusion of those who have long seen value in reuse rather than disposal (Gille 2007). These questions and others draw our attention to the relationality of reuse to

emerging capitalist logics and markets centered on the 'new commodity frontier' of discards (Medina 2007).

This critical perspective on Maine's reuse economy raises the important question, *reuse for whom?* It also forces us to eschew perspectives that might see Maine's reuse economy as, in any way, monolithic. Reuse economies are, like the goods that circulate within them, full of oddities, perplexities and variegation. It is no surprise, then, that there are internal contradictions and competing claims about what constitutes the value in reuse economies and who reuse should benefit. Even as Maine's socially-produced identity as a 'treasure trove' draws in tourists and outsiders, our research suggests that the competition for scarce goods, with the coming 'end of cheap nature' (Moore 2014) as well as an increased emphasis on circular economies may foreclose opportunities for locals who have long seen the value of discarded goods, and relied upon them to make a living.

One survey respondent spoke to this, saying, there are too many people 'trying to make a living as bottom feeders' suggesting that the competition for resources and customers was only getting fiercer. Markets are sparse in rural areas, according to several respondents, and they find that the only way to get their goods to the urban markets where they might find a buyer is to sell them below cost to an intermediary, one of the growing number of people, like the 'American Pickers' who travel to 'treasure troves' like Maine to seek out and resurrect the value of the abandoned. Yet, ironically, some rural families, who have long contributed to reuse and are economically dependent on their efforts to gather, glean, and salvage materials are at risk of being 'pinched' out by the market as resources are increasingly captured by external institutions in the interest of building a more circular economy.

If we perceive reuse economies as born of necessity, lack, and scarcity, our approach toward policy will necessarily be different than if we understand reuse as a social and cultural process that is generated by all sorts of competing motivations, ranging from resistance to sociality. These cultures of reuse are not equally compatible with notions of a more circular economy, which prioritizes environmental outcomes. Indeed, some of these explanations for Maine's culture of reuse track more closely toward notions of degrowth, complete with requisite changes in economic and social systems (Latouche 2010).

## Conclusions

Our exploratory research mirrors, in many ways, the work of those within the reuse economy who construct value from discards and mismatched odds and ends. The patchwork quilt we have assembled here shows a sector that resists easy definition. We argue, however, that if policy makers are to support reuse in an effort to achieve positive environmental outcomes, understanding this complex and contradictory sector is essential. If we are to reap the myriad benefits of reuse and simultaneously avoid reproducing inequality, it is critical to see reuse as not just a result of economic and geographic marginality *or* an effort of progressive urban environmentalism, but rather as a contextual and layered social process.





**Figure 3: Salvaging value from the abandoned.** Photo: Ben Isenhour. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.

Indeed, while these perspectives on reuse add nuance and complexity, we argue that they also provide useful insight for those working to encourage reuse in other locales. For example, even if many Mainers' support for second-hand markets can be explained, in part, by a history of marginalization and resistance to full market integration and preference for regional economic development, it is nonetheless a form of resistance to systems of production-consumption-disposal that are now understood to be environmentally damaging and economically irrational. Public polling suggests that these sentiments are found far beyond Maine (New Dream 2014) and a growing number of projects centered on sharing, collaborative consumption, and reuse demonstrate a growing concern not only with environmental issues, but also with eroding local economies in an era of Walmart, Amazon and other new product corporate retailers that, on balance, funnel income out of local communities. Contrary to dominant ideology in the United States, economic and environmental interests are not mutually exclusive. Those interested in promoting reuse might do well, therefore, to think about how concern for regional economic resilience might also help to make a case for using what is already at hand to construct more resilient economic and environmental systems.

Recognizing Maine's vibrant reuse culture as a cultural construction based not only on economic rationales but also pieced together in ways that produce and reproduce a sense of place, would seem to suggest that other locales could also leverage the power of place-based narrative to foster reuse. Johannisson (1990) reminds us that localities are not merely silos of production and consumption, but areas of meaningful social life. Despite the challenging

economic conditions in many 'depleted' communities – like some struggling in rural Maine – there is evidence to suggest they have the latent capacity to leverage local social and cultural resources including, perhaps, relatively strong place-based identities and reuse economies (Johnstone 2013). Johnstone and Lionais (2004) provide several case studies which suggest that the concept of community, in this case conceived of as localized networks of social relations (Parsons 1960), can act as a powerful tool for place-based development. Similarly, Bristow and Healy (2014) argue that place and context-based development is increasingly important in post-industrial regional economic resilience. If social relations and a sense of place can be leveraged, these authors assert that development initiatives can be responsive to economic, social *and* environmental goals.

Finally, those who are inclined to promote reuse as a strategy for ecological sustainability may not be similarly inclined to consider the social and economic dimensions of the sector. But all too many case studies have already illustrated how even the best-intentioned environmental and sustainability programs have exacerbated social or economic inequalities (Checker 2011; Isenhour, McDonogh, and Checker 2015). It is therefore essential that the current emphasis on circular economy and reuse does not work to exacerbate already strong urban and rural divides or to disadvantage those communities in desperate need of local economic development.

The history and practices of Maine's reuse economy are rich with social significance, but also with potential lessons for policy makers. The moniker so often associated with Maine – the proverbial attic of New England – conjures notions of dusty, inaccessible spaces filled with

everything from clutter to seasonal clothing to treasures yet-to-be discovered. Yet as we have seen from our own intellectual rummaging in this proverbial attic, there is much to be learned from those places at the periphery that have long demonstrated vibrant and persistent cultures of reuse.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> We can see in Maine what Griswold refers to as 'regionalism' – strong identification with place – a feature that, she argues, flourishes 'when the state or region is on the national periphery [...] when a place regards itself as separate from, even in opposition to the national culture' (2002: 78–79).

## Ethics and Consent

This study has been reviewed and approved for research with human subjects (University of Maine Internal Review Board – Isenhour 20180108).

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## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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