WORLDWIDE WASTE
JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

Moreno-Tejada, J. 2020. Editorial Introduction to the Special Collection 'Dirty Places, Geographies of Waste'. *Worldwide Waste: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies,* 3(1): 7, 1–3. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/wwwj.70

RESEARCH

Editorial Introduction to the Special Collection 'Dirty Places, Geographies of Waste'

Jaime Moreno-Tejada

This editorial introduces the special collection 'Dirty Places, Geographies of Waste'.

Keywords: class; common sense; culture; dirt; ideology; place; waste

There are geographies of waste management, and then there are geographies of dirt (Moore 2012). Our main concern is the 'where' of waste but only inasmuch as the pairing is deemed offensive. This special collection sheds light on corners that are contrary to ethics, taste, profit and health. The expression Dirty Places is intended to attract critical reflection. If waste is 'material we failed to use' (Gille 2018), a dirty place is a space we failed to clean. Using failure as a point of departure is in itself questionable. Or, to put it differently, a dirty place is something of a moral minefield. The closest I can think of to a global standard of cleanliness is the Environmental Performance Index (EPI 2020), published every two years by Yale and Columbia University and backed by the Geneva-based World Economic Forum. Cleaning and developing go hand in hand, then. Of course 'development' is not a neutral term; it was once called 'civilization'. The concept may have been decentered and refined, but the agenda remains the same.

Dirty places look messy. They also look wasteful, as in unproductive. Time spent outside the reach of a 'smart' object is now considered unaccountable user behavior, or 'data exhaust'; the algorithm is a waste collector (Zuboff 2019). The nation-state has historically faced the same challenge: wastelands are uncharted, invisible to the public, the police, the teacher and the tax bureau. In the midst of the Ecuadorian rainforest, the vegetable gardens of the Huaorani are only apparent to the trained eye. Chaos here is fruitful: there is no better way to grow food sustainably in the paper-thin soil of the Upper Amazon. Development involves losing sight of, and losing touch with, the messy realities of dirt. Not many of us would be happy to dine on freshly grown produce fertilized with our own excrement, but that is just what real recycling entails. Sorting out trash into color-coded bins feels like a children's game, like we are being taken for a ride (Checker 2020).

The global, or rather globalizing, theory of dirt (what qualifies as clean in the eyes of the UN, for instance) is but one of many coexisting meanings of the term. Regardless of what science says, the mind has its own agenda, set by traumas, phobias and the like. The senses receive filtered information. Disposable income shapes our perception of reality. George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1958 [1937]) is a study of bourgeois disgust, geographically grounded. And so is Luis Buñuel's surrealist documentary *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan* (1933). Beyond class prejudice, dirt is cultural in the anthropological sense of the word (Douglas 1966). Some attitudes are new, others are rooted in deep time. Following Marshall Sahlins, and his later rebuke of Gananath Obeyesekere, we could say that dirty places are islands of history. Note however how Sahlins utilized the work of Ralph N. Bulmer and others among the Kalam people of Papua New Guinea in order to make the case for 'the cultural organization of empirical objectivity' (1995: 160):

> The lower and "cultural" spheres, in and around the household where life is lived out, are in that capacity spaces of degeneration. Here are entropic sites marked by the wastes of human existence: excrements, food refuse, menstrual "dirt," and rotting corpses (kept above ground near the houses until the flesh decays). However, just as the dead are progressively moved outward and upward as the perishable parts of the body rot away – until the clear bones are finally deposited in a tree at the forest edge – so higher and more distant reaches of the Kalam world acquire a positive and regenerative value.

The implication of the above quote is that in the Kalam symbolic universe the home—lower, cultural, degenerating—is the dirtiest space. Sahlins' lasting body of work serves as a reminder of the need to engage with radical diversity. But to side with him, to the exclusion of common sense, would be unwise. The ethnographic Kalam throw their trash in and around the house, much like we do. Surely they too have designated areas, located at a healthy distance, where waste may be disposed of. The reasons behind this coincidence are practical knowledge

LNU MSU, CN
jmt77@missouristate.edu

and convenience. Their dead, like ours, are a type of waste. The forest is cleaner (i.e., more natural) than the house is. The higher we climb toward the treetops, the purer the air. Again, this is obvious. Many traditional societies, Western and otherwise, have 'protected' the kitchen from the polluting powers of menstruating women. To reduce the Kalam household to a site of 'degeneration' seems overstating the case. It makes perfect sense, though, that rainforest peoples do not recognize value in floors free of bacteria, or not the way city dwellers do.

Obeyesekere and Sahlins accused each other of the same ideological bias. The former was said to be projecting Western rationality (common sense, empiricism) onto ultimately untranslatable native worldviews. The latter was said to be the proverbial anthropologist, an apologist of imperialism in the most oblique way imaginable. Sahlins was perhaps the more persuasive writer, but Obeyesekere was not wrong. Ideology forms a meta layer of analysis, overarching class, culture and common sense. Ideologies are theories of everything. Animated by the vision of an imminent utopia, they exist for the sole purpose of eliminating difference (let us call it 'waste') from the communal grounds. People need convincing, which explains both the mass media and politics, or 'the constant search for words that do not appear to be slurs' (Stanley 2015: 155). Waste lends itself to myriad euphemisms; these are often charged with biological connotations. Full-fledged racial stereotyping is only a short distance away.

The first two essays in this special collection highlight ideology's extraordinary power to rearrange and redefine waste across physical space. The ideology at work is modernity, set in both cases in the Eastern Mediterranean and broken up respectively into the sub-categories of imperialism and capitalism.

Betz-Heinemann and Tzanopoulos write a compelling piece on the management of hunting spaces in Northern Cyprus, during and after British administration. Drawing on the narrative that Mediterranean landscapes look degraded, always through the prism of a maritime climate, the British inculcated an alien set of ideas concerning the proper and improper exploitation of landscapes. The centerpiece of this effort, which involved the introduction of hunting as a regulated hobby, and the hijacking of the historical commons, was 'the cleaning of corvids as administratively recorded waste'. These ideas remain deeply ingrained in the island's psyche to this day. Inefficient as it demonstrably is, the culling of crows is nonetheless a 'key component of maintaining the simulation of a productive landscape'. Crows are the material expression of 'waste,' a broad semantic field in which other primal stereotypes, such as the 'laziness' of the 'hirsute' locals, have also had a defining role. Betz-Heinemann and Tzanopoulos add regional color to Philippe Descola's important critique of the nature/culture binary opposition. Descola's theory emerged out of extensive ethnographic fieldwork, done precisely in the Ecuadorian Amazon (e.g., 1986).

Lycourghiotis' insightful essay explores the short life of a refugee camp in the port city of Patras, Greece. For a number of years, the camp was busy with Middle Eastern migrants hoping to make the jump to the Italian side of the Adriatic Sea. The author introduces the concept of trashification: 'a process during which the object loses (rapidly or gradually) its commercial/exchange value, but not necessarily its use value'. The refugees built a temporary urban structure using pallets, cardboard and plastics scavenged from a nearby construction site. As the camp, with NGO assistance, grew into a functioning heterotopia, the public discourse shifted. Matter-of-fact definitions of waste gave way to a morally charged picture of an undesirable trash pile, encompassing not only building materials but also the refugees themselves. Part of the problem was that these destitute migrants occupied prime real estate, polluting the neighborhood (i.e., lowering prices) with their mere presence. It was also becoming clear that many of the luxury apartments overlooking the camp were never going to be sold. The Patras refugee camp, along with the global housing market, went up in flames in 2009.

Worldwide Waste aims to expand this special collection with new critical explorations of dirt and the geographies of waste. Geography is broadly understood rather than being restricted to one discipline. The collection does seek, though, to put place and space at the center of the debate.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Checker, M. 2020. *The Sustainability Myth: Environmental Gentrification and the Politics of Justice*. New York: NYU Press.

Descola, P. 1986. *La Nature domestique: Symbolisme et praxis dans l'écologie des Achuar*. Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme.

Douglas, M. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London and New York: Routledge.

Environmental Performance Index. 2020. Available at https://epi.yale.edu/ [Last accessed 15 October 2020].

Gille, Z. 2018. Of Fish Feces, Shamanic Bowls and Chimpanzee Scraps: Extension vs Precision in the Concept of Waste. *Worldwide Waste: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 1(1): 2. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/wwwj.22

Las Hurdes: tierra sin pan. 1933. Directed by Luis Buñuel [Film]. Produced by Ramón Acín.

Moore, SA. 2012. Garbage Matters: Concepts in New Geographies of Waste. *Progress in Human Geography*, 36(6): 780–799. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512437077

Orwell, G. 1958 [1937]. *The Road to Wigan Pier*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

Sahlins, M. 1995. *How 'Natives' Think: About Captain Cook, for Example*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226733715.001.0001

Stanley, J. 2015. *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400865802

Zuboff, S. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs.

How to cite this article: Moreno-Tejada, J. 2020. Editorial Introduction to the Special Collection 'Dirty Places, Geographies of Waste'. *Worldwide Waste: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies,* 3(1): 7, 1–3. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/wwwj.70

Submitted: 26 October 2020 **Accepted:** 27 October 2020 **Published:** 17 November 2020

]u[*Worldwide Waste: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS