

Rachel Carson Center

Perspectives

How to cite:

Assmann, David-Christopher. “Stubborn Stuff: Translating Rubbish.” In: “Storytelling and Environmental History: Experiences from Germany and Italy” edited by Roberta Biasillo and Claudio de Majo, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2020, no. 2, 93–100.
doi.org/10.5282/rcc/9128.

RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society is an open-access publication. It is available online at www.environmentandsociety.org/perspectives. Articles may be downloaded, copied, and redistributed free of charge and the text may be reprinted, provided that the author and source are attributed. Please include this cover sheet when redistributing the article.

To learn more about the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, please visit www.rachelcarsoncenter.org.

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society
Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN (print) 2190-5088
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

© Copyright of the text is held by the Rachel Carson Center CC-BY.

Image copyright is retained by the individual artists; their permission may be required in case of reproduction.

SPONSORED BY THE



Federal Ministry
of Education
and Research

Deutsches Museum 



David-Christopher Assmann

Stubborn Stuff: Translating Rubbish

The steaming hills never end, and I can barely see the horizon.¹ The terrain is extensive and somehow unreal. Somewhere far ahead, on another hill, William is trudging through the masses of piled-up material that surrounds us. I can only guess at his gray contours, far in the muddy distance. Dawn wraps everything in a warm, dirty yellow, the hills stinking of sulfuric acid, rotten food scraps, animal carcasses, and oil. The toxic air stands still making it hard to breathe, while the rubbish sticks to my shoes, dirtying my pants. Faraway, I hear the uncanny noise of incredibly big excavators and dozens of trucks bringing evermore material: broken mirrors, car tires, phone books, used toothbrushes, flowerpots, ripped jeans, lost cell phones, broken glasses, rotten shoes, discarded plastic, and paper bags. There seems to be nothing one cannot find here. The garbage dump devours everything our daily routine leaves behind. Every year, every one of us in Germany and Italy disposes of nearly 500 kilograms of material²—things that we no longer need, or that we do not like or use anymore because they no longer work or are out of fashion, or just because they bother us or others. However, these things do not disappear once we have thrown them in the rubbish bin. A large amount is stored in landfill—a technique that goes back to the Stone Age when humans kept their “kitchen waste” in places outside of their living quarters. Nevertheless, landfill, as we know it today, only gained relevance from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. Industrialization has made it necessary to find new, technologically advanced practices for dealing with our mountains of discarded waste.³

Garbage workers seem to be continually rearranging the piled-up material, creating ever new and higher heaps. Birds—gulls, pigeons, and ravens—are circling

1 I would like to thank Barbara Pisanu and Kristy Henderson for their helpful comments on previous versions of this essay.

2 According to the German Federal Statistical Office, in 2015 an average of 455 kilograms of household waste per inhabitant was produced. See table “Aufkommen an Haushaltsabfällen: Deutschland, Jahre, Abfallarten” (Code: 32121), <https://www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/Datenbanken/Datenbanken.html>. See the figures for Italy for 2014 (488 kilograms) of the Istituto Superiore per la Protezione e la Ricerca Ambientale: *Rapporto Rifiuti Urbani*. Edizione, 2016, 5, <http://www.isprambiente.gov.it/it/pubblicazioni/rapporti/rapporto-rifiuti-urbani-edizione-2016>.

3 Martin V. Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform, and the Environment*, revised edition (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).

above the gigantic piles and cannot wait for the arrival of a new truck of rubbish. For months, William had repeatedly asked the authorities for a knowledgeable employee who could guide us through the unclear terrain of the landfill, which had turned out to be an apparently difficult task of translation between disciplines, professions, and habitats. “All we need is for someone to show us the landfill for half an hour, answer a few questions about the technological processes used, and explain the sort of materials that pile up. We would like to prepare our research,” William explained. Yet research about landfill must have sounded too absurd to the personnel whose business it is to cope with all of the discarded material every day. Why analyze garbage, worthless stuff by definition? Finally, after several e-mails and a number of forceful phone calls, we found someone who was willing to take a step out of the sticky trash for a moment and show us the facility—its rotten secrets and dirty treasures. At the official entrance of the disposal site, William announced our visit, promptly setting out together with one of the workers, seemingly completely forgetting about his actual research companion.

I have invented this scene. Yet William is not just a figure of a fictional narrative but rather William Rathje, an American researcher who established the archaeology of garbage as an academic discipline. In the 1970s, together with his research group at the University of Arizona, he founded what has since been called “Garbology.” Together with journalist Cullen Murphy, Rathje wrote a popular non-fiction book on his adventures with landfills, garbage, and garbage workers. I stumbled upon *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage* (1992) when I became interested in garbage as a cultural and literary phenomenon and was looking for some theoretical perspectives on the topic. Indeed, *Rubbish!* not only offers insights into the world of discarded materials but also translates them into a readable narrative. The book addresses nearly every topic related to garbage in the United States, including what and how much garbage is thrown away, where and how it is dumped, the types of materials most commonly disposed of and the degree of toxicity and danger associated with them, and how garbage can be scientifically studied so as to help in the development of ecological solutions.

Climbing up the massive hills of the garbage dump, the two of us try to answer at least some of these questions. However, you might ask why an archaeologist like William Rathje would allow someone like me—a literary scholar—take part in his research

project. Certainly, we discuss the topic repeatedly, even as we are making our way through the dump. Still, Rathje is unconvinced by my approach. “William, I’m interested in how rubbish is translated into texts, articles, books—just like the one you wrote with Murphy,” I explain, once again trying to make my point clear. But, somehow, we seem to be forever lost in translation. “These are two completely different things,” he shouts from the other side of the garbage heap, almost falling over. “Do not mix up real rubbish with rubbish in fictional worlds.” In some way, he is right, of course. Textual rubbish does not stink; it does not cause dust; and it is not harmful to the environment or hazardous to health. Therefore, we cannot or must not eliminate, sort, or recycle discarded things in (literary, journalistic, and scientific) texts. Yet, the distinction between real rubbish (such as that which surrounds us, as we are walking through the dump) and textual rubbish (the subject of this text) is far more hybrid than William assumes. Immaterial rubbish includes semantics, discourses, and practices of coping with discarded things. As Serenella Iovino would put it, rubbish is “a mesh of agencies that are both material, industrial, political, chemical, geological, biological, and narrative.”⁴ Whatever the term “garbology” defines, in the end it also describes practices of translation. Doing “garbology” means classifying, sorting, ordering, and—if you like—reading discarded things. William takes the stuff he finds on the dump as a meaningful resource. Indeed, his trips to landfills serve to gather significant information. In this sense, practicing garbology means to translate so-called “raw” data into “useful” information. Garbology is the practice of translating discarded material into text. William’s “Garbage Project” deals with discarded things—and not with things that are stored in official archives, collections, or libraries—because it assumes that rubbish, once translated into readable texts, gives us “better” or more “authentic” information about our daily life (and its secrets). “Waste does not lie,” William says ever so often.

In a certain sense, the concept of the “Wasteocene” points in the same direction,⁵ only the perspective is slightly different. At the same time as landfills are supposed to conceal things that we have thrown away, they bring them back into sight, with discarded materials ever more frequently reentering our daily lives. More precisely, such materials have in fact never been away, with waste defining our contempo-

4 Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, “Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19, no. 3 (2012): 456.

5 Marco Armiero and Massimo De Angelis, “Anthropocene: Victims, Narrators, and Revolutionaries,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 2 (2017): 347–362.



Figure 1
Information sign on
a Sardinian beach:
Micro Isola Ecologica,
2019 (Source: Author)

rary epoch. There is no such thing as eliminated materiality. Our world is the dump—even in the most beautiful places. Take for example the Sardinian information sign that I saw only days before I went to the garbage dump with William. The sign indicates the importance of waste collection and separation on the beach (fig. 1). The result of a school project, the installation called *Micro Isola Ecologica* (Micro Waste Depot) clarifies in four languages (Italian, English, French, and German) that visitors should leave the beach clean and put their rubbish (“plastic,” “glass and cans,” “paper,” and “nonrecyclable”) in one of the four dustbins. The sign reminds us that the beach is not a dump. It changes or, if you want, translates our perception of the beach into a certain kind of image that connects

with our nature-culture experience and knowledge.

The installation closes with the demand “*Porta via i ricordi della vacanza ... lascia solo le tue impronte sulla sabbia*” (Please, take nothing but memories ... leave nothing but footprints in the sand⁶). Paradoxically, this phrase integrates ecological consciousness with capitalist tourist marketing. Indeed, the sentence is not a unique selling point of the Sardinian beach. It is part of a paradigm of mass consumption concerning the world’s most beautiful places. The well-traveled tourist will find it elsewhere and is, therefore, able to interpret the beach he or she is visiting as being equal to the places that are worth leaving untouched. Take a photograph, quote the phrase, and post it on Instagram: #nothingbutfootprints. However, it is not just marketing that translates the discarded materials on the beach into something that

6 Author’s own translation.

disturbs your vacation. The sign has even deeper roots, with the phrase “footprints in the sand” linking my summery scenery with the history of English literature and Daniel Defoe’s 1719 novel *Robinson Crusoe*, in which the phrase originated. With a kind of strangely twisted allegorical drift, the image of a *Micro Isola Ecologica* places me in the role of Robinson Crusoe and Sardinia as an ecological (“macro”) island, which—just like every other beach—should be left as untouched as possible. To convince visitors to think and act ecologically, the sign thus uses quite poetic language, with a prosaic dustbin becoming an “island.” The image of the *Micro Isola Ecologica* adopts a cultural framework that everybody knows and that presents islands and beaches as untouched nature. The appeal to keep the beach “clean” inscribes itself into the romantic idea of idyllic places distant from any civilization and pollution, only temporarily occupied by human beings.

Still, the sign and its practice of translation are rather one-sided. As we know from (literary) history, an important element of idylls is that they are threatened. Indeed, it is more than a footnote to say that the Mediterranean Sea is also a huge garbage dump. One can study the effect of illegal, ignorant, and naïve dumping practices, which see discarded materials left on beaches right around the world. Sooner or later, the waves wash up all sorts of material—especially plastics—that have been discarded in other places, or by ships and boats at sea. Discarded materials are not only difficult to translate into useful information; they also resist discursive orders and practices. This is what I argue with William. I am interested in how, under what premise, to what extent, and with what effects, this material stubbornness is translated into (literary) texts.

Material resistance—or stubbornness—such as that shown in the garbage dump and the Mediterranean Sea is what Jane Bennett observes when she speaks of “thing-power.” I am not sure whether William is familiar with this theoretical concept—I cannot ask him; he is already too far away from me—but reading Bennett’s study *Vibrant Matter* helped me understand what discarded things really do—and what I would like to add to her perspective. From my point of view, what is missing in Bennett’s philosophical perspective is a sense of textual translation, of what garbage does in and with texts. In the first chapter, for example, she refers to a passage from Robert Sullivan’s *The Meadowlands: Wilderness Adventures at the Edge of a City* (1998). Bennett quotes a passage in detail in which the autodiegetic narrator

visits a garbage dump:

The ... garbage hills are alive ... there are billions of microscopic organisms thriving underground in dark, oxygen-free communities. ... After having ingested the tiniest portion of leftover New Jersey or New York, these cells then exhale huge underground plumes of carbon dioxide and of warm moist methane, giant stillborn tropical winds that seep through the ground to feed the Meadowlands' [sic] fires, or creep up into the atmosphere, where they eat away at the ... ozone. ... One afternoon I ... walked along the edge of a garbage hill, a forty-foot drumlin [sic] of compacted trash that owed its topography to the waste of the city of Newark. ... There had been rain the night before, so it wasn't long before I found a little leachate seep, a black ooze trickling down the slope of the hill, an espresso of refuse. In a few hours, this stream would find its way down into the ... groundwater of the Meadowlands; it would mingle with toxic streams. ... But in this moment, here at its birth, ... this little seep was pure pollution, a pristine stew of oil and grease, of cyanide and arsenic, of cadmium, chromium, copper, lead, nickel, silver, mercury, and zinc. I touched this fluid – my fingertip was a bluish caramel color – and it was warm and fresh. A few yards away, where the stream collected into a benzene-scented pool, a mallard swam alone.⁷

Although I tried to imitate Sullivan's narrative approach in the introduction to this text, Sullivan is, as you can see, a much better writer of textual garbage dumps than I am. Maybe that is why Bennett uses this passage to introduce her concept of "thing-power." She writes, "Sullivan reminds us that a vital materiality can never really be thrown 'away,' for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity."⁸ Even or especially when they are to be disposed of, "vibrant things" attract attention and elude their status as passive objects, as their agential powers, their "activities," can neither be switched off nor negated.

As plausible and ecocritically insightful as the observation of "vital materiality" in Sullivan's book may be, Bennett uses this passage merely to illustrate her argument. There is nothing wrong with that. From the perspective of literary criticism, however,

7 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010): 6.

8 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 6.

it is noticeable that the form of presenting the discarded materiality (its translation into text) is completely ignored. To put it more sharply, Bennett is so caught up in the “vital materiality” of the narrated world that she misses the “vibrant matter” of the passage itself. Indeed, the purpose of the passage in Sullivan’s book is far less clear than Bennett would let us believe. The passage presents the garbage dump that exists of “billions of microscopic organisms” as an agentic and vivid materiality (“The ... garbage hills are alive,” “ingest,” “exhale,” “eat away,” “birth,” etc.). However, the associated environmental impact and consequences for the city and its human inhabitants, such as the pollution of groundwater, are only briefly touched upon. At the center of the passage lies something different, with the metaphor “espresso of refuse” naming the reverse side of consumption, illustrating the narrator’s specific attention. His heightened visual and tactile sensibility (“I touched this fluid”) transforms the garbage dump into an aesthetic object which, as such, owes itself to the perspective of the narrator. At the same time, the narrator only realizes this in the moment *hic et nunc* (“here,” “in this moment”), and is thus deprived of human control. At the end of the passage, the equally melancholy and apocalyptic image of a lonely (and thus anthropomorphized) floating bird (“a mallard swam alone”) indicates the artificial and yet fragile nature of Sullivan’s idyllic scenery.

The latter is strangely twisted, as just as the passage stages a temporal (“One afternoon,” “the night before,” “In a few hours”) and spatial (“along the edge of a garbage hill”) turn, which—once again—is tied to the narrator but also emancipated from him, it performs an ambivalent, if not also twisted, form of “nature writing.” The reader is not confronted with a transfigured image of untouched nature but with an image of unspoiled, pure garbage, as it were. The *contradictio in adjecto* “pure pollution,” framed by the semantics of “pristine stew,” “birth,” and “warm and fresh,” represents its linguistic emblem. Neither does the asyndetically organized *accumulatio* that follows point the reader to the enumerated substances. Rather, the absence of a verb partially creates an accumulation of signifiants, emancipating themselves in their detailed abundance from their *signifiés*, thus suggesting that the “vital materiality” of the garbage dump has inscribed itself into the technique of the text. And, indeed, as condensed in the term “pure pollution,” the passage emphasizes alliterations (“cadmium, chromium, copper,” “caramel color”) and assonances (“a mallard swam alone”), hence making the material of signs sound. The text draws attention to its own material. Not only is the materiality of the garbage dump in the foreground of the passage, it

is also tied to the materiality of the text.

However, in another respect, the passage also illustrates that these effects occur involuntarily and are to be thought of independently of the author's intention. Bennett does not fully quote the passage from *Meadowlands*. For pragmatic reasons, she cuts the passage from Sullivan's book several times and marks the omissions with suspension points. As much as Bennett makes the passage an object in this way, the text nevertheless escapes its intended function. The effect of the omissions, which are intended to shorten the passage, is not necessarily reader-friendliness. Rather, their accumulation (ten digits) and their sometimes intrusive position (partly between article and noun) disturb and interrupt the flow of reading. As with the *accumulatio* and the alliterations and assonances, the visual omissions transform the passage into "vibrant matter," an aesthetic but stubborn object.

"Stubbornness"—maybe that is the word that also best characterizes William. In the meantime, this text and I have completely lost sight of him.

Further Reading

Armiero, Marco, and Massimo De Angelis. "Anthropocene: Victims, Narrators, and Revolutionaries." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 2 (2017): 347–362.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010.

Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann. "Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19, no. 3 (2012): 448–475.

Melosi, Martin V. *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform, and the Environment*. Revised Edition. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005.

Rathje, William, and Gullan Murphy. *Rubbish! The Archeology of Garbage*. New York: University of Arizona Press, 1992.