

Talking Trash: Cultural Uses of Waste

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Maite Zubiaurre's book *Talking Trash: Cultural Uses of Waste* is the winner of the 2020 Norman L. and Roselea J. Goldberg Prize from Vanderbilt University Press. Zubiarre's book, divided in four chapters, focuses on trash as a reflection of humans, humanity and the complex dynamics between them. The word "trash" has a negative connotation, it is dirty and worthless, and we do not want it. The title of her book, *Talking Trash*, is a word play through which she deconstructs and resignifies the meaning of trash. Therefore, talking *about* trash is not a waste of time, but rather a serious matter. Trash is not to be discarded and forgotten about since it has the "ability to eloquently and compassionately speak about the human condition" (4). The writer's analysis of the cultural uses of waste draws from a wide range of theories such as hermeneutics, psychogeography, phenomenology, situationism, art and "its ways of seeing" (Berger) and "rubbish theory" (2).

The first chapter, "Sentient Filth: The Motions and Emotions of Garbage," explores litter (small trash) within city bounds as an entity that not only moves in time and space (motion) but also moves us (emotion). Garbologists study, among other aspects, the usage of trash and trashcans, and how trash intertwines with the everyday life of people and places. Daily, trash is moved out from the city in order to keep it hidden, out of our sights. According to Zubiaurre, the rebellious litter, an inert object that never makes it to the landfill, wanders around the cities adding movement to the urban landscape and life. The uses and the purpose of "lifeless" objects is different for people who are homeless than it is for artists. For the former it could mean a "roof" over their heads, for the latter it could inspire them to create art. In both cases, it is a metaphor of life and death. Some street artists animate waste via anthropomorphization to highlight its "moving" and human nature. They make trash stare at us to remind us of our responsibility as trash creators, trash's devastating environmental impact, and social inequity, all consequences of capitalism.

Chapter 2, "Litterscapes: Topographies and Archives of Waste," examines the power of garbage to transform different spaces. While people often feel threatened by trash, some artists conceive of trash as the creator of landscapes and study its ontology and taxonomy creating archives (urban trash) and "anti-archives" (border trash) of waste. In the cities some litter, like chewing gum and receipts, fossilize into the pavements and becomes a permanent trait of the cities landscape. Street artists search, observe, collect, classify and systematize trash refuse through an interdisciplinary approach. This ethnographic and archeological process leads to the creation of an archive that brings back to the collective memory the trash that we eagerly want to ignore. It also reveals people's behavioral patterns of consumption, a sense of community in shared spaces, and social inequality. Far from the city in the desert, pseudo-environmentalist xenophobes see undocumented immigrants and their discarded belongings pejoratively as "trash." On the other hand, activists (activist artists) recover and document border trash to create "anti-archives" as a counter narrative that sheds light upon the traumatic U.S.-Mexico border-crossing experience. Activists disinter the belongings labeled as "unessential" by coyotes and border patrol agents as the silent witnesses of the abuse and personal tragedies of disenfranchised humans.

The third chapter, "Dumpesterology: A Cultural History of the Trash Container," deals with the origins of urban trash containers and their cultural connotations. Dumpsters were created by the Dempster brothers and successfully advertised as sealed containers in the 1940s to maintain urban sanitation and hygiene. They are the site "where trash is allowed to 'rest' and linger before its final journey to the sanitary landfill" (127) located out of sight, and they are a reminder that everything that was once alive will be, sooner or later, discarded. In contrast to closed trash bins, we find the current image of an open dumpster with overflowing trash that attracts scavengers, dumpster divers and street artists. Many artists denounce this wastefulness as a capitalistic trait and advocate for urban scavenging as a way of life. Zubiaurre points out a problematic double-standard in the dumpster diving literature: urban scavenging done by white males is labeled as an adventurous sport, whereas dumpster diving is considered delinquent if the subject is a man of color. Diving literature and the Dempster brothers, perpetuated binary gender roles in their narrative where men are the divers and take the trash out (outside/public) while women created trash in the kitchen and sorted the food brought by the diver (inside/private). C. Finely, a female artist, decorates dumpsters with wallpaper to instill in them femininity and beauty and to question the traditional image of objectified women as compulsive consumers who feels comfortable around trash.

The last chapter, "Dirty Innocence: Childhood, Gender and Muck," delves into the Western enchantment with cleanliness fueled by sexism, classism and racism. Developed countries measure their morality, healthiness, and power in regard to women's "purity" and children's' cleanliness; both subjects are usually linked to dirt. Thus, our impassivity when we see the recurrent images of kids from developing countries in e-waste dumps and garbage pits. Zubiaurre states that "to be clean means that some entity has exerted its 'cleansing' and 'civilizing' power on us" (162). This idea is supported by the emergence of three subcategories of trash narratives. The first one is the "daughter of a hoarder" that depicts mothers as irrational and chaotic hoarders who traumatize their daughters. The second subcategory is the "trash hero" adventure that portrays males in a landfill that

they will conquer and where they will discover themselves while girls are seen as empathy triggers. The third one is “sanitation narratives” in which the main landscapes, far away from reality, are spotless American suburban streets where white males operate automatic garbage trucks making the streets of these neighborhoods safe. One would think that the main topic of these narratives is trash, however, trash is absent. In reality, it is all about highlighting authority and technology as the principles of cleanliness, safety and happiness.

Zubiaurre masterfully presents the complex dynamics between trash, humans and humanity. In this book she brings to the forefront the hypocrisy and double standards that humans have regarding trash. In the Western world we are as quick to create trash, as we are to discard it, see it disappear and forget that it exists. However, the implication that trash has goes beyond the savage consumerism dictated by our capitalist culture. When humans discard other humans, trash becomes a matter of social justice that feeds on sexism, racism and classism, affecting in the worst ways the historically marginalized groups.