

1-2019

On Materiality and Meaning: Ethnographic Engagements with Reuse, Repair & Care

Cindy Isenhour

University of Maine, Department of Anthropology, cynthia.isenhour@maine.edu

Joshua Reno

Binghamton University--SUNY, Department of Anthropology, jreno@binghamton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/ant_facpub

Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Isenhour, Cindy and Reno, Joshua, "On Materiality and Meaning: Ethnographic Engagements with Reuse, Repair & Care" (2019). *Anthropology Faculty Scholarship*. 39.

https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/ant_facpub/39

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

EDITORIAL

On Materiality and Meaning: Ethnographic Engagements with Reuse, Repair & Care

Cindy Isenhour* and Joshua Reno†

The reimagination and revaluation of discarded goods, through repair and reuse is, for many, a quotidian and mundane element of everyday life. These practices are the historical precedent and continue to be the stuff of common sense for a significant portion of human society. And yet, reuse, repair and other elements of a ‘circular economy’ have recently emerged as a significant focus in environmental and economic policy. Proponents claim that reuse practices represent a potentially radical alternative to mainstream consumer culture and a form of carework that generates new social possibilities and personal affects. This essay explores the myriad dimensions of reuse as care, relational practice and as consumer alternative by examining these practices in their social context, lived experience *and* as embedded within larger political and economic structures of capitalist accumulation and abandonment. We argue that the study of reuse, in old and new forms, takes on added political significance in an era of environmental and economic crises, especially as a critical part of state-based approaches toward the circular economy that attempt to appropriate carework in new forms of value generation.

Keywords: reuse; second-hand; circular economy; waste; salvage

Introduction: Reuse & Repair in the Age of Ecological Crises and Circular Economy

In a time of acceleration, over-production and hyper-consumption (Crocker and Chiveralls, 2018; Lipovetsky, 2011; Schor, 1998) reuse represents an obstacle, or perhaps a countervailing tendency: to slow things down, to reassess what has been cast aside, to go back rather than forward. This is something the world’s scavengers and charity shops have long understood (Larsen, 2018; Medina, 2007), but the focus on and importance of reuse would seem to be growing, as products and buildings composed entirely from virgin materials are scrutinized and on the decline— in an era of environmental concern (Urry 2010). At the same time, discussions of reuse and repair have simultaneously become attractive notions for scholars across disciplines (Alexander and Reno, 2012; Cooper and Gutowski, 2015), all of whom share an interest in revaluation as a way to expose the shaky foundations of the monstrous web of life and death that Jason Moore (2017) dubs ‘the Capitalocene.’

According to Crocker and Chiveralls: ‘reuse can be understood as a deliberative project of value transformation that challenges dominant paradigms and cultural constructions while building alternative social and physical

structures from the ‘ruins of modernity’” (2018: 5). In this collection, contributors illustrate that reuse involves deliberate acts of revaluation and care which recall and build upon embedded meaning, affect, social histories and the properties of materials. However, we also suggest here, that these acts do not necessarily challenge paradigms nor offer alternatives—in all cases. If reuse and repair are familiar, even quotidian practices, they have also gained currency as the object and objective of new mutations in liberal eco-governance. Characteristic in this regard is the international focus on circular economies, which endeavor to reimagine discarded goods as a resource rather than a market externality or a pollutant, thereby contributing to resource conservation, climate change mitigation and environmental protection in one fell swoop (Velis, 2015; Webster, 2015).

There are clearly positive aspects to these developments. When, for instance, the Scottish government supports small shops in Edinburgh to help locals repair and extend the life of their small electronics, this would seem to benefit everyone (except, that is, tech companies deprived of further profit). And yet, there are at least two concerns that can be raised with respect to the current emphasis on circular economies. For one thing, ambitions to completely ‘close loops’ or reduce waste to ‘zero’ not only fail to materialize in practice but can serve to conceal forms of excess they continue to dispose of (Fletcher and Rammelt, 2017). Another problem, and one with which this special issue is more closely aligned, is that the embodied carework of tinkering, repairing and tending to materials,

* Department of Anthropology/Climate Change Institute, University of Maine, Orono, Maine, US

† Department of Anthropology, Binghamton University, Binghamton, New York, US

Corresponding author: Cindy Isenhour (cindy.isenhour@maine.edu)

upon which the formal politics of economic circularity depend, is only alluded to, at best, in contemporary formations of circular economy. The resulting tension can mean that this material carework is not recognized, even as discards are increasingly commodified. The contributions of these laborers to social life and its political significance is lost—even while the value generated is appropriated.

The accelerated interest in reuse, as circular economic ideologies are mainstreamed among policy makers, industry and citizens, deserves renewed attention at this moment when long-standing reuse and repair practices are increasingly being rationalized, formalized and institutionalized. The contributors to this special issue engage with those who tinker, scavenge, save, buy used and give away to examine these practices in social context, lived experience and as embedded within larger political and economic structures of capitalist accumulation and abandonment. Our ethnographic approach, based on qualitative engagement, enables a rich examination of meaning and experience, but also leads us to question how these practices are linked to and arise from the conditions of modernity. While the recent focus on circular economy certainly emerges from crises of overproduction, economic inefficiencies and growing concerns about climatic change and resource depletion—ethnographic engagements with waste, repair and reuse raise questions about the novelty and efficacy of the circular economy concept. Indeed, numerous ethnographies have already illustrated the deeply relational, situated and cultural entanglements implied in the determination of ‘resource’ ‘value’ and ‘waste’ among a wide variety of communities for whom the concept of circular economy is considered common sense. From ethnographies featuring innovative reuse among resource-strapped communities (Nguyen, 2016) and garbage pickers on the margins of Brazilian society (Millar, 2018) to sanitary workers in New York City (Nagle, 2014), or among connoisseurs of thrift shops and vintage goods (Appelgren and Bohlin, 2015; Isenhour, 2012), these studies have long demonstrated the not-so-novel concept of informal circular economies in action.

This special issue builds upon our understanding of these practices, both old and new, not only as an expression of care (for history, for the future, for others) but also within the context of a rapidly transforming global resource landscape. We ask questions about how people who have long been practicing reuse come to understand their own engagement as well as their relations to larger political and economic structures—particularly as the logics and methods of circular economy gain momentum. We also pay attention to interactions with materials and the generative capacity of ‘abandoned things’ (Reno, 2015, 2016) as they fundamentally shape social relations, our collective sense of memory and heritage, as well as human and non-human nature.

Themes and Theory: Reuse as Revaluation, Resistance, Care, Relations and Reproduction

Before turning to a summary of the articles included in the special issue, we briefly review several themes and theoretical frames that link these contributions and the broader literature on repair and reuse—revaluation, resistance,

care, relationality and reproduction. We follow this with a discussion of the global implications of reuse, for people on the margins and for all of us at this time in history.

Revaluation: (Re)defining waste and value

According to Eriksen and Schober (2017: 286), waste ‘must be seen simultaneously as a material reality with implications for inequality, health, global “overheating” and the environmental contradictions of global capitalism and as an indispensable element in a symbolic grammar of order and chaos, exclusion and inclusion.’ In other words, waste is both material and ideal (Gille, 2007), it is a name for real processes, entropy, decay, pollution and for what is left over from the creation of order (Millar, 2018: 30) in culturally and historically specific ways (Wilk, 2014). The reuse of materials provides an excellent example of both dimensions to ‘the epistemologically unfixed and slippery nature of things and people that end up labelled as “waste”’ (Erikson and Schober 2017: 286).

Capitalist or socialist, throwaway or circular economies may possess distinct and dominant ‘waste regimes’ (Gille, 2007), but ultimately all consist of a hybrid of ‘diverse economies’ at their root that cut across the traditional divides these totalities presume (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Liboiron, 2018: 5). Where acts of reuse exist in capitalist economies, they stand out in marked contrast to the ordinary patterns of consumption and production. In her ethnography of sanitation workers in New York City, Nagle shows how they reclaim treasures from the trash of a personal and general nature, also known as ‘mongo’ (2013: 65). Vaughan and colleagues document how households engage in reuse of objects, like bottles, which they characterize as a form of resistance against supermarkets and part of identity construction (2007: 120). As both note, acts of reuse take on a distinct form because they involve processes of revaluation; of renewed care and attention to material qualities and human enskilment.

Reuse as resistance: Rejecting wastefulness, commodification and excess

Mending a shirt, buying a used television or donating an old sofa to a charity shop, mundane as these actions are, can also constitute a form of environmental politics (Crocker & Chiveralls, 2018), a ‘creative transgression’ (Reno 2016: 102) or intentional resistance to capitalist markets (Albinsson and Perera, 2012). As several contributors to this issue point out (e.g. Berry, Hermann) participation in reuse practices is often intended as a form of moral and consumptive restraint that runs counter the normative expectations of consumer culture (Evans, 2011). Reuse, through this frame, provides a means of critique and resistance to wastefulness, hyper-materialism and excess (Vaughan et al., 2007). Those concerned with the social, economic and ecological implications of contemporary consumption norms have contributed to an array of alternatives enacted across scales, ranging from individuals shopping at yard sales or the organization of alternative networks among friends and family, to community-sponsored public sharing events (e.g. Albinsson & Perera 2012) and state sponsored materials exchanges (Isenhour et al., 2016; US EPA, 2015). While these actions are often highly individualized, some scholars have

argued that, in aggregate, they comprise a new form of environmental politics and an attempt to re-embed economic activities into social and moral logics (Carrier and Luetchford, 2012). Echoing Polanyi (1944), many scholars suggest that these practices are much more than isolated individual transgressions, but rather mark an emerging and 'deliberative project of value transformation' (Crocker and Chiveralls 2018: 5) aimed at building socially embedded alternatives to the ruin generated by liberal logics and contemporary consumer culture (Evans, 2011). Similarly, Martínez—writing specifically about repair—argues that these practices challenge the 'economic reasoning of accelerated cycles of production-consumption-disposal' through an alternative 'ecology of care' which attributes value to materials and illustrates that 'waste' and 'brokenness' are never final (2017: 349).

Care: Repair for reuse

To characterize repair and reuse as a form of carework, means recognizing these activities as fundamentally ethical and not only material. Drawing on ethnography with Canadian Inuit, Lisa Stevenson argues that caring for people involves an 'ethics of attending to the other who matters' (2014: 11). Caring for objects, similarly, could be said to involve both attention to a thing's material qualities, as well as a concern for why and for whom they matter. Arguably, all consumers relate to the things they purchase with more or less care in the latter sense, in terms of their importance or value for the buyer and beyond. Daniel Miller (1998) ethnographically illustrates how shopping practices in London often involve relationships of care for family members, as objects become integrated into daily life in the home (see also Kopytoff, 1986; Sayer, 2003; Hudson, 2004). Albinson and Perera (2012: 304) draw on Sheth and colleagues' concept of *mindful consumption* which is based on 'consciousness in thought and behavior about consequences of consumption' (2011: 27). Mindful consumption, in this context, implies care not only for the ecological, but also the social consequences (for marginalized and temporally distant peoples), and thus invokes a morally driven moderation of consumption behaviors. Through participation in alternative markets, Albinson and Perera (2012) argue that buyers, sellers, fixers, scavengers, swapper and gifters hope to contribute to both social change and community well-being. But there are limits to how consumers relate to objects insofar as they are caught up in 'the dreamlike, phantasmic ways in which subjects and objects ordinarily relate to each other within consumer capitalism' (Reno 2016: 102). To reuse may mean attending to objects in terms of what they are composed of and what else they can be made to accomplish, that is, shifting from being a mere consumer to being a producer. According to Vaughan et al. (2007: 128), reuse means attachment to an object that exceeds conventional use, requiring additional stewardship (Strasser, 1999; Cooper and Salvia 2018).

Beyond the boundaries of conventional use, repairing and reusing objects can pose risks and generate additional moral concerns and ethical challenges. This also involves considerations of why and for whom they matter as part of the 'ethics of attending,' but it is shaped in practice

through more in-depth interaction with material qualities and object histories, with potentially hazardous consequences. Houston and Jackson, for example, highlight the role of care in the repair of information and communication technology in the Global South, where 'the materiality of technologies becomes visible in new ways' (2017: 201). But care for and attention to things may mean neglecting people: 'Plastics, glass, metals and minerals (sometimes extracted under unethical circumstances) are broken down, repurposed and discarded prompting a wide range of social and environmental justice concerns' (ibid.). In other words, care for things and people can work in concert, as with the repair of a family heirloom, or in opposition, as with electronic and electrical repair and reuse.

Relationality: Materials and affect

When we claim that reuse and repair are not *only material*, this is in response to the fact that materiality, as normally conceived, is rather limiting, as if what matter is and what matters to people were utterly ontologically distinct. Various posthumanist approaches have attempted to adjust for this limiting conception of matter and being. The approach most influential among contributions to this issue develop the idea of affect. Affect could be seen as the dialectical counterpoint to materiality, insofar as the former tends to suggest bodies and beings and the latter processes and things. What affect does, for the contributions to this issue, is suggest a level of relational connection between subjects and objects, so that remaking used up materials also means remaking the self. Person and thing are not ontologically opposed but, following Edensor, hang together through 'different configurations of objects, technologies, and (human and nonhuman) bodies' that 'come together to form different capacities and experiences of relationality' (Edensor, 2012: 1105). In fact, affects are shaped by waste even when it is fundamentally non-relational, that is, when waste removal and disposal are focused on separating bodies from troublesome substances. Put differently, 'while absence is matter out of place, it is still placed through matter' (Meyer, 2012: 109). In this way, objects are capable of 'generat[ing] social effects not just in their preservation and persistence, but in their destruction and disposal' (DeSilvey, 2007: 324). Losing material is not only found in formal waste management, in this sense, but in people moving into a new house, managing belongings of relationships that have ended (with the dead or with exes), or even weight loss (Larsen, 2018).

Waste in its many forms has 'plasticity' in Millar's words, because it is generative of social possibilities; it has 'vitality' because it is 'both toxic and life-giving' (Millar 2018: 32; Bennett, 2010). Reuse raises the possibility of developing such plasticity and vitality in unexpected directions, where people are affected by and affect the world around them through transformative relationships with waste. Albinson and Perera (2012) argue that changing how people relate to consumption can become the basis for reforming life and relationships more broadly. Consider the effect of leaving a milk bottle, now empty, outside one's home to be recovered and reused; according to Vaughan (2007: 132) this creates a relationship of reciprocity or gift-giving with unseen others, rather than

compounding the alienation associated with the life and death of commodities. In a different context, post-Oslo Agreement Palestine, Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins (2015) has described a similar gift-like and moral quality to the widespread practice of leaving discarded bread out in common spaces for reuse. In all of these cases, there are ways that using and reusing offer affordances for becoming kinds of people and for shaping social relations far beyond consumer identities. Since waste practices extend social relations either way, reuse in however humble a form gives consumers more of a role in shaping the fate of discards, and thus shaping themselves.

Reproduction: Reuse on the margins & commodification at the 'end of cheap nature'

These explorations of reuse as engagements of care, linking human and non-human worlds, certainly make it clear that reuse cannot be reduced to any sort of straightforward economic calculus. Kathleen Millar (2018) details the lives of garbage pickers in what was once the world's largest garbage dump, persuasively countering the dominant assumption that those who reclaim the discarded are, like the objects they collect—wasted—and thus acting out of economic necessity alone. While not disputing the limited options of the urban poor, Millar draws our attention to the highly social forms of living made possible by the flexibility of working in a largely unregulated space, free of many of the constraints of formal wage labor. Among the discarded, garbage pickers in Rio use materials to help construct alternative social and economic networks, more responsive to their needs.

Despite the creative labor invested in the resurrection of value, it is also true that those who work with discards are often stigmatized for working with materials considered to be dangerous or dirty, rather than celebrated for their labor creating and redistributing value (Erikson and Schober 2017). Contemporary economic logics, mirroring linear production-consumption-disposal systems, assign primary value to productive processes which are seen as the genesis of value (Isenhour et al., 2017). These logics simultaneously neglect consideration of value generated in other locations, including distribution and disposal. James Ferguson (2015) has recently argued that this economic logic proceeds even as a growing number of people are excluded from wage labor. Indeed, even as economies of abandonment (Povinelli, 2011) broaden, production and wage labor continue to be imagined as the source of productive value even as distributive work, like that involved in reuse and second-hand economies, takes on a 'new centrality' and makes up an increasingly large segment of economic activity (Ferguson 2015: 19). Ethnographic engagements with the economy, however, have long provided insight into the value of distributive labor, which we understand is just as much about the movement as resources as it is the construction of moral (Scott, 1976), human (Hart et al., 2010) or peopled (Gudeman and Löfving, 2005) economies.

But perhaps the recent interest in circular economies marks a reconsideration of value in economic processes? This could certainly be positive, but others have also

raised the concern that what is perhaps new about today's circular economy imaginaries is that they signal the growing commodification and formalization of waste materials and reuse practices, raising important questions about the potential gentrification of reuse, and potential exclusion, as well as the shifting relationality of reuse to capitalist markets at the 'end of cheap nature' (Liboiron and Demaria, 2016; Moore, 2015). Indeed, the ethnographic literature is well stocked with examples of increasingly rationalized and formalized practice at the end of the commodity chain. Millar (2018) details attempts to rationalize, formalize and regulate the work of picking in Rio's Jardim Gramacho dump while Trang Ta (2017) outlines processes through which the 'adaptive laborers' that compose informal second hand markets in Hong Kong's public spaces are being increasingly excluded and criminalized. As the logics of the circular economy place increased value on discards and come to understand how salvage is 'integral to the formalized economies of production and consumption' (ibid: 120), many fear that the formalization of these processes will only further exclude the marginalized or wrap them more tightly into dependency and capitalist reproduction (ibid: 122).

Indeed, with multiple crises of modernity (e.g. climate change, resource depletion, economic erosion, inequality), many have pointed to the promises of economic circularity as a means for climate mitigation, waste reduction and economic savings. And yet as these concerns for long-term sustainability refocus our attention on all sorts of value – thermodynamic, nutritive, and durable – we wonder how practices of salvage, saving, repairing and reuse, so long and usefully performed by the socially and economically marginal, are being appropriated as the practices and property of the environmentally-enlightened and economically affluent. Ta (2017) reminds us that discards have surplus value and that there is a significant potential for private profit associated with their capture and management. In light of a deepening crises of capital commodification and financialization have been expanded into new realms (Erikson & Schober 2017: 284), including discards.

Contributions & Organization of the Collection

This special issue critically and productively engages with long-standing and emergent efforts to prevent waste through repair, care and reuse. Contributors engage many of the theories reviewed above, with the benefit of ethnographic detail, to address a variety of questions including: How are waste and residual value variously and situationally determined; How do discarded goods or 'abandoned things' circulate in space and across scales; How can posthumanist perspectives provide novel ways of conceptualizing human-object relations in the contexts of reuse; What is the generative capacity of reuse to shape/reshape livelihoods, waste infrastructures and materials markets; How can we best understand everyday practices of maintenance, repair and care among diverse groups of people; and What is the potential for reuse markets and practices to bring transformative change (or variously, reproduce individualist and niche market-based environmental movements)?

While we did not seek out papers for this collection based on their geographical location, by sheer coincidence the contributions that made it into this issue incorporate research from one of two national settings: the United States and Sweden. Accidental though this was, and despite its limited geographical and cultural scope, it does offer a suggestive contrast when it comes to waste management strategy, practice and policy. As Reno (2016: 213–4) argues, Sweden and the US offer counterexamples to one another in terms of their approach to mass waste discard. More specifically, Sweden is notable for its pledge to achieve ‘zero waste’ landfilled, which has meant relying largely on energy-generating incinerators. Sweden is also leading the world in landfill mining to recover usable resources that have been discarded. The US, by contrast, is deservedly infamous for its dependence on landfilling and reduced use of incineration. Other research suggests that Swedes also perceive that their environment, their air and water, is cleaner than American counterparts, so it is not only that there are explicit pledges to reduce landfilled waste, but citizens actually tend to believe, either that environmental protections are effective, or that pollution is minimal.¹

As Lucy Siegle writes, ‘It’s impossible not to feel a bit envious of Nordic nations. Norway, Denmark and Sweden were so accomplished at recycling that by 2014 they had no need for landfill. Just like Nordic prisons, the landfills are empty. Now Denmark even has *hygge*, a system for living that combines cosiness and chunky knits with sustainability, and an enviable design aesthetic. What’s not to like?’ (Siegle, 2016: 1). While all the Nordic nations are enviable, Sweden ‘normally gets the gold star’ due to significant investments in decarbonization and more recently a strong focus on reducing total consumption through, in part, tax incentives for repair and reuse.

These contrasts between the US and Sweden are not fully explored here, as they are beyond the scope of this introduction or this special issue. That said, the articles included—two from Sweden and three from the United States—do provide an interesting focus on similarity and difference across space as well as conceptual and policy-based contexts.

Starting in Sweden, working collaboratively with people and materials in a re-design studio, **Staffan Appelgren** invites readers to consider the simultaneously social and material entanglements inherent in the practice of reusing materials. While the now dominant imagination of circular economy views resources through the lens of efficiency—subordinating them to the rational logics of productive processes—Appelgren and his colleagues in the design studio illustrate the necessity for redesigners to collaborate *with* and respond *to* the properties and traits of the materials at hand. This dialog between designer and materials pays respect to the properties of the objects as well as the energy already embodied within them as they extend and assign new value. Demonstrating a different mentality than dominant circular economic logics which subordinate materials to the need for efficiency, Appelgren and his colleagues have learned to ‘cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality’ (Bennett

2010: 14). In this mutual process of becoming, redesigners have learned to ‘renounce human authority... to form caring relationships to growing and transforming materials’ (Appelgren, this issue).

But if we understand reuse, in part, as an expression of care for the meaning and materials embodied in goods, what happens when people decide to part with objects of affection? Does the act of ‘letting go’ signify the termination of care? Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork tracing circuits of second-hand acquisition and divestment in Sweden, **Anna Bohlin** argues that the acts of caring for and letting go of objects are not necessarily contradictory. Contrary to Bauman’s observation that contemporary consumption is fleeting, ambivalent, and as short lived as our shifting identities, Bohlin observes that many people come to understand second hand objects as things-in-motion—and perform care as they pass them on for reuse, rather than disposal. Indeed, many of the interlocutors participating in Bohlin’s study were fundamentally concerned with the wastefulness of contemporary consumption and had thus come to see the ongoing circulation of objects as a fundamental moral concern. Their commitment to these objects is therefore a particular expression of ‘serial care’ extended over time and through networks of reuse. As Bohlin writes, ‘by dispersing the care for objects across a series of imagined owners, the concern with the longevity of objects can be combined with benefits of transience for the individual owner’ (Bohlin, this issue).

Drawing from decades of ethnographic research and participant observation at garage sales across the United States, **Gretchen Herrmann** builds on our understanding of objects in motion as she explores both reminiscence and recompense in second hand sales. While the economic benefits associated with the sale or purchase of second-hand goods is popularly understood, Herrmann argues that both buyers and sellers also derive recompense through the creation of a moral identity. Ecological virtue is derived from shoppers’ and sellers’ efforts to prevent perfectly good things from going to the landfill. But beyond that, Herrmann argues that many buyers and sellers take a more active role, not just to prevent waste, but to ‘save’ objects with stories, history and reminiscences from erasure. Inspired by Sara Ahmed’s (2004) observation that many second-hand goods are ‘sticky’ with affect, Herrmann illustrates how garage sale transactions, as powerful sites for the exchange of emotion, can resemble human adoptions, as sellers seek good homes for their things and buyers willingly ‘save’ these treasured items from the landfill.

Shannon McMullen, Laura Zanotti and Kory Cooper also explore the concept of ‘saving’ but in another context entirely. In the ‘Junk Drawer Project’, researchers and students reflect on the storage spaces where old electronic devices are saved, rather than discarded. Looking at this under-researched interstitial stage, between use and discard, the authors examine the surprising complexities associated with the categorization of waste. By centering the oral histories of liminal electronic devices that are neither used nor discarded (old iPads, gaming consoles, e-readers and cameras), McMullen and her colleagues counter representations of wasted objects as abject.

Instead they argue that personal attachments to these obsolete electronics often prevent their disposal. Some affective associations are so strong that participants intend to save these devices to share them with future generations – as historical artifacts of ancestry and relationality. While e-waste often evokes negative connotations of toxic body burdens, planned obsolescence or the inconvenience of responsible disposal, McMullen and colleagues focus on electronics not yet discarded as ‘happy objects’ (Ahmed 2004) to which positive associations are attached (time spent with a sibling on a gaming system, an iPod with a coming of age playlist) and thus ‘operate as boundary transgressors that serve as mnemonic and physical bridges to important transitional moments in their owners’ lives’ (McMullen, Zanotti and Cooper, this issue).

Finally, **Brienne Berry, Jennifer Bonnet and Cindy Isenhour** turn their attention to the northeastern US state of Maine where a vibrant culture of reuse has long been noted by historians, cultural commentators and tourists alike. Given the recent policy focus on ‘creating a culture of reuse’ as a means to reduce waste, resource depletion and mitigate climate change, the authors root their analysis in a place where a vibrant reuse culture already exists. Counter to the popular assumption that strong reuse practices are rooted in economic necessity, Berry and colleagues argue that these explanations fail to capture the complexity of Maine’s reuse markets which are consistently vibrant, even during periods of economic expansion. Instead, they argue, those looking to understand reuse markets—or to support their emergence elsewhere—should also attend to matters of place, sociality and market relationality.

Conclusion

As we hope the contributions to this special issue make clear, reuse and repair are about much more than economic efficiency. The recent emergence of advocacy for reuse marks a significant improvement upon our shockingly wasteful linear production-consumption system and makes a lot of sense in the context of simultaneous economic and environmental crises of modernity. But, we ought not to forget that reuse is also fundamentally about care and the investment of human labor and affective energy in the redefinition of value, not just attached to objects but also to social relations. While these practices are old, contemporary circular economy logics so heavily trained on calculations of energy and materials efficiencies, risk missing this important element of value and, without more reflection, subordinate societal interests to the logic of the market, rather than the inverse.

Note

¹ This contrast has further significance, at least for contemporary Americans, a portion of whom routinely refer to Sweden as a country with more inclusive, social democratic values that the US should emulate or avoid. It is not hard to find blog posts and memes contrasting Swedish and American governance, particularly since President Donald Trump continually referred to Sweden throughout 2017, on Twitter and at public rallies, and an unspecified violent incident allegedly caused by immigration. This baffled Swedish

officials and is partly blamed for what is claimed to be a record disapproval rating of the president among Swedes (at 80%).

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the authors represented in this special issue for their contributions and extend sincere thanks to Kasia Cwierka and the anonymous reviewers to offered constructive suggestions on the articles contained herein.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

References

- Ahmed, S.** 2004. Affective Economies. *Social Text*, 22: 117–139. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-117
- Albinsson, PA and Yasanthi Perera, B.** 2012. Alternative marketplaces in the 21st century: Building community through sharing events: Alternative marketplaces in the 21st century. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 11: 303–315. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1389>
- Alexander, C and Reno, J.** 2012. Economies of Recycling: The Global Transformation of Materials, Values and Social Relations. Zed Books, London, UNITED KINGDOM.
- Appelgren, S and Bohlin, A.** 2015. Growing in Motion: The Circulation of Used Things on Second-hand Markets. *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, 7: 143–168. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.1571143>
- Bennett, J.** 2010. Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things. Duke University Press.
- Carrier, J and Luetchford, P.** 2012. Ethical Consumption: Social Value and Economic Practice. Berghahn Books.
- Cooper, DR and Gutowski, TG.** 2015. The Environmental Impacts of Reuse: A Review. *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, 21: 38–56. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jiec.12388>
- Crocker, R and Chiveralls, K.** 2018. Subverting Consumerism: Reuse in an Accelerated World, Antinomies. Routledge, New York, NY. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315641812>
- DeSilvey, C.** 2007. Salvage memory: Constellating material histories on a hardscrabble homestead. *Cultural geographies*, 14: 401–424. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474007078206>
- Edensor, T.** 2012. Illuminated Atmospheres: Anticipating and Reproducing the Flow of Affective Experience in Blackpool. *Environ Plan D*, 30: 1103–1122. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1068/d12211>
- Eriksen, TH and Schober, E.** 2017. Waste and the superfluous: An introduction. *Social Anthropology*, 25: 282–287. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12422>
- Ferguson, J.** 2015. Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution. Duke University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822375524>

- Fletcher, R** and **Rammelt, C.** 2017. Decoupling: A Key Fantasy of the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda. *Globalizations*, 14: 450–467. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2016.1263077>
- Gibson-Graham, JK, Gibson, K** and **Graham, J.** 1996. The end of capitalism (as we knew it): A feminist critique of political economy. Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge, Mass.
- Gille, Z.** 2007. From the cult of waste to the trash heap of history: The politics of waste in socialist and postsocialist Hungary, annotated edition. ed. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Gudeman, SF** and **Löfving, S.** 2005. Peopled Economies: Conversations with Stephen Gudeman. Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden.
- Hart, K, Laville, J-L** and **Cattani, AD.** 2010. The Human Economy, 1 edition. ed. Polity, Cambridge.
- Houston, L** and **Jackson, S.** 2017. Caring for the “Next Billion” Mobile Handsets: Proprietary Closures and the Work of Repair. *Information Technologies and International Development*, 13: 200–214.
- Hudson, R.** 2004. Conceptualizing economies and their geographies: Spaces, flows and circuits. *Progress in Human Geography*, 28: 447–471. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132504ph497oa>
- Isenhour, C.** 2012. On the challenges of signalling ethics without all the stuff: Tales of conspicuous green consumption. In: *Ethical Consumption: Social Value and Economic Practice*. Berghahn Books.
- Isenhour, C, Blackmer, T, Wagner, T, Silka, L, Peckenham, J, Hart, D** and **MacRae, J.** 2016. Moving up the Waste Hierarchy in Maine: Learning from “Best Practice” State-Level Policy for Waste Reduction and Recovery. *Maine Policy Review*, 25: 15–29.
- Isenhour, C, Crawley, A, Berry, B** and **Bonnet, J.** 2017. Maine’s Culture of Reuse and Its Potential to Advance Environmental and Economic Policy Objectives. *Maine Policy Review*, 26: 36–46.
- Kopytoff, I.** 1986. The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process. In: *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Appadurai, A (ed.). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819582.004>
- Larsen, F.** 2018. Valuation in action: Ethnography of an American thrift store. *Business History*, 1–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2017.1418330>
- Liboiron, M.** 2018. Using art to research diverse economies: Social experiments in re-valuing waste. In: Crocker, R and Chiveralls, K (eds.), *Subverting Consumerism: Reuse in an Accelerated World, Antinomies*, 37–52. Routledge, New York. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315641812-3>
- Liboiron, M** and **Demaria, F.** 2016. CFP: Beyond the ‘end of Cheap Nature’: The production of waste-based commodity frontiers (AAG) [WWW Document]. *Discard Studies*. URL: <https://discardstudies.com/2016/09/26/cfp-beyond-the-end-of-cheap-nature-the-production-of-waste-based-commodity-frontiers-aag/> (accessed 12.20.18).
- Lipovetsky, G.** 2011. The Hyper-consumption Society. In: *Beyond the Consumption Bubble*, Ekström, KM and Glans, B (eds.), 25–36. Routledge, London.
- Martínez, F.** 2017. Waste is not the end. For an anthropology of care, maintenance and repair. *Social Anthropology*, 25: 346–350. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12436>
- Medina, M.** 2007. The World’s Scavengers: Salvaging for Sustainable Consumption and Production. AltaMira Press, Lanham.
- Meyer, M.** 2012. Placing and tracing absence: A material culture of the immaterial. *Journal of Material Culture*, 17: 103–110. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183511433259>
- Millar, KM.** 2018. Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio’s Garbage Dump. Duke University Press Books, Durham; London.
- Miller, D.** 1998. A Theory of Shopping. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.
- Moore, JW.** 2015. Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital. Verso, New York.
- Moore, JW.** 2017. The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44: 594–630. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036>
- Nagle, R.** 2014. Picking Up: On the Streets and Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, NY.
- Nguyen, MTN.** 2016. Trading in broken things: Gendered performances and spatial practices in a northern Vietnamese rural-urban waste economy: Trading in broken things. *American Ethnologist*, 43: 116–129. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12267>
- Povinelli, EA.** 2011. Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism. Duke University Press, North Carolina, UNITED STATES. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394570>
- Reno, J.** 2015. Waste and Waste Management. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 44: 557–572. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102214-014146>
- Reno, JO.** 2016. Waste Away: Working and Living with a North American Landfill, Reprint edition. ed. University of California Press, Oakland, California. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520288935.001.0001>
- Sayer, A.** 2003. (De)commodification, Consumer Culture, and Moral Economy. *Environ Plan D*, 21: 341–357. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1068/d353>
- Schor, JB.** 1998. The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer. Basic Books, New York.
- Scott, J.** 1976. The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia.
- Sheth, JN, Sethia, NK** and **Srinivas, S.** 2011. Mindful consumption: A customer-centric approach to sustainability. *J. of the Acad. Mark. Sci.*, 39: 21–39. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-010-0216-3>
- Siegle, L.** 2016. The ethical guide to the not-so green Swedes. The Guardian.
- Stamatopoulou-Robbins, SC.** 2015. Waste and the Phantom State: The Emergence of the Environment

- in Post-Oslo Palestine. Columbia University. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8XS5TTX>
- Stevenson, L.** 2014. *Life Beside Itself*. University of California Press.
- Strasser, S.** 1999. *Waste and want: A social history of trash*. Metropolitan Books, New York.
- Ta, TX.** 2017. A space for secondhand goods: Trading the remnants of material life in Hong Kong. *Economic Anthropology*, 4: 120–131. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/sea2.12077>
- Urry, J.** 2010. Consuming the Planet to Excess. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27: 191–212. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409355999>
- US EPA.** 2015. *Managing and Transforming Waste Streams-A Tool for Communities*.
- Vaughan, P, Cook, M and Trawick, P.** 2007. A Sociology of Reuse: Deconstructing the Milk Bottle. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 47: 120–134. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9523.2007.00432.x>
- Velis, C.** 2015. Circular economy and global secondary material supply chains. *Waste Manag Res*, 33: 389–391. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734242X15587641>
- Webster, K.** 2015. *The Circular Economy: A wealth offflows*. Ellen Macarthur Foundation, Isle of Wight.
- Wilk, R.** 2014. Waste that Matters. In: *Waste Management and Sustainable Consumption: Reflections on Consumer Waste*, Ekström, KM (ed.). Routledge, London.

How to cite this article: Isenhour, C and Reno, J. 2019. On Materiality and Meaning: Ethnographic Engagements with Reuse, Repair & Care. *Worldwide Waste: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 2(1): 1, 1–8. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/wwwj.27>

Submitted: 02 January 2019

Accepted: 02 January 2019

Published: 25 January 2019

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

]u[

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

OPEN ACCESS 