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Materiality and the Recovery of Discarded Materials in aBuenos Aires Cartonero Cooperative

Sebastián Carenzo

We are currently witnessing an interesting paradox in the social categorization of“waste.” Until about a decade ago, this term designated a vast and heterogeneous assortment of discarded materials that embodied the representation of anti-value: objects depleted ofall use and/or exchange value. Today, however, few would hesitate to consider wastean unmistakable source of emerging value; some would even view waste materialsas a kind of Holy Grail. These contemporary viewshave been stimulated by a variety of contributions ranging from theoretical conceptions of softcore capitalism—such as calls for a "green economy"and/or a "circular economy"[1]—to the guidelines condensed in the new Integrated Solid Waste Management (ISWM) technocratic paradigm, which has become a dominant reference for governments, private companies, and NGOs.[2]

One phenomenon that distinguishes the discussion of waste management in the large urban centers of the global South is the existence of sizeable population groups devoted to the collection and sorting of recyclable materials as a livelihood. In Argentina, a vast body of literature is devoted to the work of the so-called cartoneros (waste pickers),[3]addressing their work of collection and recycling as well as the formal

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[1] See Michael Jacobs, The Green Economy: Environment, Sustainable Development and the Politics Of the Future (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993) and Ken Webster, The Circular Economy: A Wealth of Flows (Cowes: Ellen MacArthur Foundation Publishing, 2015).

[2] McDougall, Forbes R., Peter R. White,Marina Franke and Peter Hindle, Integrated Solid Waste Management: A Life Cycle Inventory, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Science Ltd., 2008).

[3] In the context of the 2001 economic and social crisis in Argentina, the term cartoneros was widely used by the media to describe the growing number of individuals who worked on the streets collecting paper and cardboard (along with other waste materials) for their subsequent recycling and marketing, thereby ensuring a minimal economic subsistence in the absence of other employment opportunities. In the case of the cooperative that I work with, the term has been reclaimed as a criterion of self-identification.

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and informal commercial circuitsdriven by their activity.[4]Although these circuits constitute another instance of the age-oldlinkage between"things and people," it is striking how seldom studies of material culture have inspired treatments of this topic at the local level.

In this article I will explore this topic focusing on the specific production of a material culture associated with the disposal, collection, sorting, packaging, and recycling of waste materials. I will ethnographically analyze the relational fabric that linksresidentsof a middle class neighborhood with cartoneros from a cooperative based in a nearby shanty town.[5]My analysis focuses on the moral disputes that arise in and through the trafficking of objects that are discarded as "trash" by middle-class residents and then recuperated as materials by the cartoneros. I argue that in the course ofthese objects' itinerary, they do not simply pass "from one hand to another," but traverse what Zsuzsa Gille has referred to as"waste regimes,"thereby acquiring and embodying different, and often contradictory, values and meanings.[6] I particularly seek to account for the way in which the distinctions that mark the transition from one regime to another are constructed (from trash to value). These distinctions, which are expressed in the types and qualities of objects that pass through different circuits, have profound

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[4]Pablo Schamber, "A Historical and Structural Approach To the Cartonero Phenomenon In Buenos Aires: Continuity And New Opportunities In Waste Management and the Recycling Industry," International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development 2, vol.1-2 (2010): 6-23; Natalia Cosacov and Mariano Perelman, "Struggles over the Use of Public Space: Exploring Moralities and Narratives of Inequality. Cartoneros and Vecinos in Buenos Aires," Journal of Latin American Studies 47, vol. 3 (2015): 1-22. Rather than presenting an exhaustive list of this literature on the cartoneros in Spanish, I consider it more relevant to indicate texts of noted local authors that are available in English.
[5]The ethnographic material that I analyze is the result of collaborative research initially developed at the Centro de Estudios Laborales (CEIL-CONICET) with a cartonero cooperative that calls itself Reciclando Sueños (Recycling Dreams), located in the municipality of La Matanza.
[6]Szuzsa Gille, "Actor Networks, Modes Of Production, and Waste Regimes: Reassembling the Macro-Social," Environment and Planning 42 (2010): 1049-1064. To summarize Gille's argument, a regime of waste materials involves questions related to material production (what social relationships produce this particular materiality), social representation (how that materiality is defined and perceived, as well as what kind of bodies of knowledge and expertise it mobilizes); and finally politics (what measures are implemented and for whom—i.e., what agents are considered legitimate—and what issues enter public debate and which do not).

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implications for the individuals and groups who handlethose objects andconduct transactions with them,because they contribute to the moral definition of the individuals involved in these multiple acts of transfer.

I would therefore argue that analyzing the materiality of "trash"involves much more than objectifyingand tracing the itineraries of the "things" that circulate. It also involves provoking the formulation of new questions, a task to which this article seeks tocontribute:in what way do the materialities associated with "trash"play a role in constructingthe mediations (the distribution of knowledge, power, legitimacy, and identities) that organize the relational plot woven around the handling of waste materials? Responding to this questioninvolves, for example, not only accounting for the dozens of classifications and types of materials that the cartoneros recuperate, classify, and in some cases process, but also paying serious attention to the role that this materiality plays in the construction of interpersonal bonds.

The (De)fetishization of Waste as a Practice of Valuation

The Reciclando Sueños [Recycling Dreams] Cooperative was started by a group of unemployed men most of whom had no prior experience working in associations or partnerships. Although the group was formed in late 2003, its initiative began to gain importance in the field of waste management when,toward the end of 2006,it launched the program,"Reciclando Basura, Recuperamos Trabajo" [By Recycling Trash, We Recuperate Jobs], aimed at promoting separation at source and separate collection of waste in an areaconsisting of about 100 blocks in Aldo Bonzi,a middle class neighborhood located inthe municipality (partido) of La Matanza[7] in Greater Buenos Aires.[8] The cooperativeset uphouse-to-house collection rounds, a task that until that

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[7]Covering an area of 325.71 square kilometers and with a population of 1,772,130, La Matanza is the most populated district of Greater Buenos Aires (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos [INDEC], Encuesta Permanente de Hogares: Mercado de trabajo, principales indicadores (Buenos Aires: INDEC, 2010). According to this INDEC source, 11.9 percent of households in La Matanza had basic unsatisfied needs and the unemployment rate was 5.4 percent.

[8] This initiative, carried out until 2010, was based on building relationships between residents and cartoneros. The former classified recyclables in their homes and/or businesses, and twice a week the members of the cooperative collected them on a "door to door" basis. This program enjoyed a basic level of support from the local municipality but over time it acquired new sources of support and became a "model

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time had been reserved for private collection companies contracted by the municipality. These roundsrequired getting residents involved in a recycling task: separating organic from inorganic waste inside the home and subsequently giving the latter to the cooperative's collectors.

My work with the Reciclando Sueños Cooperative began in 2004 as part of a project designed with a Participatory Action Research (PAR)frameworkthat provided assistance and support for the design and implementation of the "Reciclando Basura, Recuperamos Trabajo" program.We employed a methodologythat combinedapproachesfrom popular education and ethnographic practice. Using a participatory workshop format, we developed a space for collective reflection on varioustopicsarising from self-analysis that members of the cooperative carried out with regard to their own daily practices.[9] Much of the discussion during these workshops was devoted to the socio-political contextualization and historicization of members' work of collection and classification of waste materials. One of the most interesting results in this regard was provided by our analysis of the economic dynamics of the two wastemanagement systemsthat coexist in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. Theofficial circuit corresponds to asystem that manages more than 17 billion metric tons of waste produced daily in Greater Buenos Aires. This circuit was implemented in 1977 under the last civil-military dictatorship (1976-1983),based on a model that sought to emulate the London "Green Belt"by creating a landfill system designed for subsequent conversion into green areas for recreation and leisure. To achieve this goal, a public-private joint venture was set upto conduct waste management in themetropolitan area. Simultaneously, the logistics of collection and transport were privatized: reassigned to private companies that were contracted to provide this public service. Rules were also enactedthat forced municipalities to participate in the system. In contrast, the unofficial circuit[10]of waste management emerged with the cartonero phenomenon following the

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project" with the aim of its replication in other districts of the municipality. However the lack of systematic financial support prevented its subsequent development. Currently, the work of the cooperative is limited to the separate collection of waste materials in neighborhoods near its location.

[9]María Inés Fernández Alvarez and Sebastián Carenzo, "Ellos son los compañeros del CONICET: el vínculo con organizaciones sociales como desafío etnográfico," Publicar en Antropología y Ciencias Sociales 10 (2012): 9-33.

[10]Unlike the literature that proposes distinguishing between a "formal circuit" and an "informal" one, it seems more appropriate to use the term "official/unofficial"distinction, making it clear that the difference has more to do with a

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2001 crisis. In contrast to the official circuit, the unofficial circuit never received government sanction, whether in the form of support through systematic public policy or via specific legal and regulatory frameworks. Instead, the unofficial circuit developed in the interstices and gaps of the "official" system. In addition to the cartoneros themselves, this circuit involves a network of small and large collectors that purchase material from the cartoneros and then resell it to local industries and/or exporters; in turn, the latterare linked to global networks that supply factories with recycled input, located mainly in countries such as Brazil, Italy, India, and especially China.

An analysis of both of the aforementioned circuits will allow me to highlight two issues that are central to the argument I am developing.First, each circuit can be read as a waste regime that promotes a specific form of realizing the economic value of "trash." It is commonly assumed that the creation of economic value from waste is intrinsically linked to its recycling potential (for which reason discussions tend to focus on who benefits from this activity) and, in contrast, that the management of the non-recyclable portion of waste is no more than a negative externality (consequently, discussions are aimed at defining who bears the cost of this service). However, the analysis conducted in the workshops at the Cooperativeallowed us to see that in Buenos Aires exactly the opposite occurs: the private companies charged with the logistics of transport and burial in landfills not only create value, but operate in an environment of high profitability even whentheir practices are associated with environmental contamination. By contrast, the cartoneros whoassist in improving the quality of our environment only manage to generate enough income to survive. How is this possible? I offer some clarification. The official waste management regime is operated by private urban sanitationcompanies under the modality of a public service.[11]Value is derived from the fungibility of garbage, and therealization of that value is guaranteed by the creation of

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question of policy and legal regulations (and therefore of what actors are considered legitimate to operate waste management) than with a distinction in terms of what economic links are at stake.

[11]Municipalities are required by law to operate this system. The municipality of La Matanza is representative of a generalized situation for the remaining 27 jurisdictions. In 2009 it spent more than $25 million in this category, or over 16 percent of its total annual budget, a figure that exceeds expenditures devoted to health and education combined (Conurbanos, "Los números de la basura en el conurbano bonaerense," Buenos Aires, Nov. 2009. <http://conurbanos.blogspot.com/2009/11/los-numeros-de-la-basura-en-el.htmlhttp://conurbanos.blogspot.com/2009/11/los-numeros-de-la-basura-en-el.html >. Accessed Feb. 3, 2011).

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stock through mass burial in landfills. The unit of measure that organizes this system is weight (kilos transported and buried), and therefore the more trash that is buried, the more value is generated. In the unofficial circuit, by contrast, the production of economic value is the result of the (re)commodification ofmaterial in highly concentrated markets, with no state intervention involved. The realization of value thus depends more on flow than on stock because once the material has been sorted and conditioned, itfollows various routes, as manufacturing inputs,through both local and global circuits. However, even when the cartonerosmanage to increase the exchange value of the discarded materials (kilos reincorporated to productive processes), the profit margin in such inequitable markets results in extremely low levels of profitability.

A second question allows one to move from a notion of value in a strictly economic sense tothe incorporation of other analytical dimensions. For this purpose, I draw on the work of David Graeber,who argues for an anthropological perspective on value that looks beyond the static assessment ofresults toward recognizing the characteristics of what is produced (the value of "things" as a reflection of these characteristics). Graeberthus suggests thinking about value in terms of socially generative actions and practices; not as flat value but as a dynamics of valorization through which human actions become meaningful when linked to wider social totalities. These dynamics are modeled by political, aesthetic, and moral content from which we socially define that whichcan be regarded as necessary, important, meaningful, and/or beautiful.[12] Of course, the dynamics in question are neitherconstructed nor exercised in the absence of tensions, conflicts, and power relations; rather the opposite. These two notions of value are expressed by the official and unofficial circuits of waste management in Buenos Aires, where the two systems overlap and confront one another.

I nowpropose that we travel mentally to the streets of Aldo Bonzi where the members of the Recycling Dreams Cooperative ring the doorbells of homes, inviting residents to participate in the separate collection initiative. The following story, shared by Cooperative member Ramón during a workshop, recounts an exchange he had with a resident shortly after the program was implemented. One afternoon he was examining some garbage bags deposited in a metal basket in front of a charming neighborhood home when he was suddenly surprised by the sharp voice of a 70-year-old woman on the porch:"Don't touch my trash!" Surprised and intimidated, Ramónmanaged to respondin a broken voice: "It's not garbage, ma'am. . . . For me it's material; we work

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[12]David Graeber, Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin Of Our Own Dreams (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

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with this."The twoproceeded to converse in a friendlier tone. Ramón took the opportunity to explain the work that the cooperative was doing in the neighborhood, highlighting its social and environmental benefits. Then the woman asked: "What daysdo you come through here?" To which Ramón replied: "Wednesdays and Saturdays."Ever since, the woman has been one of "my most loyal customers," he recounts with pride.

This dialogue, reconstructed from my field notes, allows us to stress a key distinction between "trash" and "material."The sensitive and everyday experience embodied in Ramón's work illuminates this heterogeneous class of "things" that remain obscurely subsumed under terms such as "garbage,""trash,""waste," and/or "urban solid waste." In this sense, the distinction between waste and material is a practical category, linked to action. In its putting into play as part of a verbal confrontation, the distinctiontakes on an indexical role, insofar as it permits one to metonymically identify, orfigure, the existence of two competing waste regimes. But in addition, as a category of practice, the distinction also incites activism with regard to the overlapping and interwoven nature of the two regimes. Precisely therein lays its interpolative power. The members of the Cooperative assumed—as indeed happened with the resident who spoke with Ramón—that theirgreatest challenge was to"win over residents";in other words, to commit those residents to separation at source and to establish and consolidate interpersonal connections withthe Cooperative's project. However, achieving this goal was not an easy task. The cartoneros were from"other" neighborhoods considered "precarious" and "dangerous,"labels that resonated strongly in a social world traversed by the media discourse of insecurity and fear. Therefore, they (and we) had to work hard to undo prejudice and ignorance and to reinterpret the work of the cartoneros in terms of labor, effort, and sacrifice (the holy trinity of the moral repertory of the Buenos Aires middle class).

In this sense, the program developed in Aldo Bonzi far exceeded the mere implementation of recycling logistics. The daily work carried out by the Cooperative's cartoneros consisted essentially of constructing the material and symbolic means by which "trash" (to be buried) could be converted into"material" (to be recovered); or,in other words, to effect the passage—or the<u>diversion</u>, following Arjun Appadurai—from one system of waste to the other.[13]

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[13]Arjun Appadurai, <u>The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective</u> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

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However, carrying out this diversion was not easy. First,due tothe privatization of waste collection service during the dictatorship, any practice that involved handling waste on public streets came to be formally prohibited. Once a garbage bagwas deposited on the street, it was considered the property of the municipality, which in turn transferred the responsibility for its handling to the private companies contractedfor this service. Therefore, anyone else who might pick up material from garbage could well be arrested and imprisoned. The first cartoneros who began working on the streets at the start of the 2001 crisisdirectly experienced abuse and persecution from the police. Then, in late 2007 the regulation establishing this private right of ownership over garbage (restrictingthe enterprise tobusinesses) was finally repealed thanks to the struggle of cartonero organizations and human rights groups.

Nonetheless, from the point of view of the members of the Cooperative, their relationship with the police and the law, from the very start of the program,was never more than a background issue. By contrast, what did constitutea daily concern was their interpersonal relationship with residents and businesses, which is not surprising given thatthe fate of the entire program depended on the amount of materials that could be recovered and this in turn was predicated on the ability of the cartoneros to get commitments fromthe greatest number of homes and businesses in the circuits of separate collection. In order to “win over residents,” it was necessary to enforce the deviation from one regime to another. The main obstacle in this regard was the hard work of changing old routines that hadsedimented into habits and that structured the everyday relationship of these residents with the official and dominant waste management regime. In order to achieve this change, members had to continually ring the doorbells of neighbors who insisted they were not interested or who threatened to call the police; or who showed more banal, yet equally effective, modes of resistance such as refusing to answer the door and pretending they weren’t home.

This brings us back to the scene between Ramón and the elderly female resident. The latter’s warning, “Don’t touch my trash,”had an explicit objective (that of maintaining cleanliness around the garbage bin on her sidewalk), and she therefore sought to castigateRamón when she saw him inspecting the trash bags. But at the same time, herwarning embodied a deeper, implicit, and unreflexive meaning whose unintentional consequence was to reproduce the status quo at the level of the waste management system as a whole. The woman interpellatedRamónbecause, from her point of view, the only legitimate agents forhandling the trash bags in her bin were the operators of the accredited trash collection businesses. Her responsibility as a resident was to place the bags in the bin on the sidewalkfor collection by agents of the official waste regime, and

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therefore she took pride in keeping her bin as clean as possible. Paradoxically, her responsibilitywould end at this point of deposit in the bin, even if the bags contained a mixture of"garbage"and"material."For as is generally the case with the population of Buenos Aires, the woman had no idea where and how the garbage bags she placed in thebin would conclude their social life. The very design of the official waste regime contributed toward crystallizing this ignorance and abdication of responsibility. For example, starting with the privatization of 1977, trash collection began to be carried out at night, and thus the vehicles and laborers involved became much less visible in public space. We, the residents of Greater Buenos Aires,began to discipline our urban sanitation habits in accordance with these regulations; we would take out the trash at night and by the following morning the bags would magically be gone. Thus, not only did the nightly trash deposits sediment into a regular routine, but residents also ceased to think about their relationship with the entire process. Thanks to this routine,the social invisibility of the subsequent transit and destination of trash became crystallized.

The break with this crystallized and unreflexiveconceptionoccurredrelatively recently with the emergence of the cartonero phenomenon. Theovert, daily presence of the cartoneros on the streets of Buenos Aires forced us to rethink the relationship between consumption and the production/disposal of waste. This particular reflexivity is whatRamónprovokedin his dispute with the resident:reclaiming the waste/material distinction in order to instruct her in the deep meaning of his practice("For me it's material, we work with this"),he then proceeds to contextualizehis practice within a broader socio-political context, emphasizing its social and environmental benefits. I would also underline here the performative value of this story when Ramón shared it with his colleagues in the workshop, not only insofar as he hadmanaged to resist the moral sanction imposed on him by the elderly resident, but primarily because he had managed to reverse the situation and finally "win over the neighbor."He thereby socialized the resident into a new regime of waste disposal, demonstrating that if she allowed him to "touch her bags,"the "trash" she had just deposited in them could be resuscitated in social life by being converted into "materials."As Daniel Miller would put it, the work of Ramón and his colleagues **objectifies**; that is, it gives material basis to a cognitive transformation that is key to problematizing the irreflexive attitude of non-responsibility regarding discarded material.[14]The deviation from one waste regime to another is mediated through this process of objectification. The very"things" (papers, packaging, unused objects, etc.) categorized by the resident as "garbage" are cognitively reworked into"materials"by means of Ramón's intervention and thus become inscribed

[14]Daniel Miller, Material Culture and Mass Consumption (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

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in another network of social relations and productive cycles. As "materials," they challenge theunproblematized assumption that "disappearance" is an ontological property of material categorized as "rubbish."Of course, in a thermodynamic sense we know that things irreversibly tend toward deterioration. However, what is less clear is that given the current level of production and consumption in a megalopolis like Buenos Aires, it is not possible to carry out or accelerate the process of the degradation of discarded things without involving huge amounts of human labor.

The performative power of the work of Ramón and his colleagues lies in the effective communication of this problematic. The construction of a material culture linked to dynamics of recovery based on reuse and recycling isproduced not only in the sheds where members of Recycling Dreams use theiracute classificatory expertise to the physical transformation of "garbage"into "materials,"[15]but also, and primarily,onthe streets, porches, and sidewalks where theyencounterresidents using language as theirprincipal tool—in other words, where they defetishize the discarded material each time they manage to inscribe a face, a body, and a story onto the socially necessary labor through which discarded materialscan be reused or recycled.

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[15]This transformation requires the implementation of a dedicated expertise to identify, classify, and condition different types of paper, cardboard, glass packaging, metals and plastics from separate collection. The development of these skills sends a process of "sensory-affective-motor integration" on the part of these subjects in a "material culture in action" (Marie-Pierre Julien and Céline Rosselin, "Introduction" in *Le sujet contre les objets… tout contre: Ethnographies de cultures matérielles*, ed. Marie-Pierre Julien and Céline Rosselin, 9-17 [París: C.T.H.S., 2009]). A good example is given by certain abilities that require complex training that not everyone can master. The recovered plastic objects can be made of more than a dozen different substances. Some are similar in appearance, since their physico-chemical properties are so different that it makes it impossible to recycle them if they are mixed. To do this the cartoneros have developed various practical methods to identify indicators of the type of substances used in their manufacture. Pieces are subjected to mechanical stress, looking for indicators of different resistances such as changes in brightness or break line patterns. The laborer can also appeal to the ear, as some plastics emit a particular sound when struck (similar to glass). Finally, the piece can be subjected to heat in order to view its behavior (whether it becomes deformed or burns) or smell might be used to identify different aromas given off when burning, similar to the work of a sommelier with a glass of good wine.

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The (Re)fetishization of Materials and Collective Political Practice

In this section I propose incorporating into my analysis another class of objects whose circulation among members of the cooperative became as frequent as it was unexpected. Prior to the implementation of differentiated recycling collection, the main obstacle foreseen by the Cooperative's members had to do with the "insecurity" and potential reluctance on the part of residents to engage in daily interaction with these strangers who wouldbe knocking on their doors every week. However, beyond some minor incidents, local participation grew steadily from the start of the collection rounds. It was thus surprising that when residents became actively involved instead of showing reluctance, this very involvement came to constitute a potential threat to the continuity of the experience. The following field record references this issue:

> Through separate collection each member receives "material" and also a huge variety of "special items" ranging from food and clothing to appliances, ornaments, etc. Possession/ownership of these objects has led to some of the most serious disputes between members. The items are deposited in a small room in the [Cooperative's]shed, kept under key and separate from other materials. They make up a large reservein which they are stacked haphazardly (January 25, 2007 Recycling Dreams meeting)

As shown in the record, what made these items"special" was their indetermination vis-à-vis the waste/material distinction. They were not "trash,"insofar as they had been effectively deviated from the official system of waste management, but nor were they"material" in the strict sense. Basically, the items in question were shoes, clothing, small appliances, toys, and mattresses that could be reused as "things" rather than as recyclable "material." As evidenced by the record, this uncertainty put the trajectory of these objects into temporary suspension. Instead of feeding the flow of recoveryassociated with recycling, this heterogeneous collection of things ended up locked in a small room. This factor—segregation and securing—indicated that the things in question were both "special" and problematic.

In fact, these"special items" evidence an unresolved tension at the level of the collective. Their indetermination with regard to the waste/material distinction presented an uncomfortable question regarding the potential disposal of this particular material: who were the rightful owners of these"special things": the cartoneros who had knocked on the doors where they were collected, or the Cooperative as a whole, as was the case with all other recyclable materials recovered?Reconstructing adeep conflict that

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rupturedwithin the daily life of the Cooperative in early 2007 and that lasted for several weeks will allow us to make more tangiblethe debate formulated in this question. Of all the members of the Cooperative, Enrique and Ariel stood out as cartonero partners who had collected the greatest quantity of materials,a distinction they had achievedby strengthening their relationship with various"clients" based on sympathy and respect.[16] One December morning, as customary, they presented themselves at the door of"Doña Inés," who in addition to handing them a pile of old newspapers and a bag of crushed bottles, gave them a tempting offer: an old radio and radio recorder that Doña Inés had never before wanted to throw outeven though she had replaced the two items with more modern equipment. But in the framework of the relationship she had forged with Enrique and Ariel, Doña Inésfinally felt it was time to part with these objects. The two grateful cooperative members told her that they would return the following day after finishing their work, which they planned to dowithout alerting the rest of their companions. The next day,Enrique was surprised when his partner failed to show up for work, but he completed his usual collection rounds and the subsequent labor of classifying the collected materials at the Cooperative's shed, after which he returned to the neighborhood, picked up the radio equipment from the home of Doña Inés and finally returned home. That same afternoon, Ariel also visited Doña Inés, but he soon discovered that his partner had gotten there first and had also failed to visit him to share the spoils. Offended by the "betrayal" of his partner, Ariel did not go into work all week. Marcelo,[17] who organized the daily collection rounds,was concerned

[16] The term "clients" refers to individuals, households and/or businesses with which the collector maintains a tacit agreement of exclusivity for the removal of materials. A cartonero's repetition of his route and a predisposition to order and hygiene are crucial elements for "making customers." As Sabina Dimarco and Mariano Perelman have observed, the term's use is widespread among cartoneros in the metropolitan area. Interestingly, the use of the category was maintained even in the new context of collective work management. See Sabina Dimarco, "¿Podremos mirar más allá de la basura? Raneros, cirujas y cartoneros: Historias detrás de la basura," Papeles del CEIC1, vol. 33 (2007): 1-29; and Mariano Perelman, "De la vida en la Quema al trabajo en las calles: El cirujeo en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires," Avá 12 (2008): 117-136.

[17] One of the founders and leaders of the cooperative, Marcelo was in charge of multilevel management, from the daily organization of the logistics of the collection rounds of each cooperative member in the neighborhood, to negotiations with officials and technicians from the government and NGOs.

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aboutAriel's absence, since he considered him"one of the most responsible" workers. A few days later, Marcelo heard via a local resident that Ariel "had gone back to his cart" (to conduct his cartonero activitieson his own) and that he did not plan to return to the Cooperative due to his conflict with Enrique over the radios. One afternoon, after returning from Aldo Bonzi, Marcelo asked Enrique to join him in the truck cabin and told him he was concerned about a resident's call to the municipality to report that they had seen a "young man from the Cooperative carrying a couple of radios outside of work hours." The phone call had in fact never taken place, but the trick had itsexpected effect: Enrique was speechless and, as Marcelo remarked, his face"said everything." The following morning he came to the shed before any of his companions, gave Marcelo the radios, and took responsibility for his involvement in the matter, not without stressing the complicity of Ariel.

Figure 1: The workshop of the"two stars." Photo: Mauro Oliver.

The image in Figure 1 shows an extraordinary workshop conducted in mid-January 2007, coinciding with the"payday"following Enrique's"confession." In fact, it was Marcelo who proposed holding a workshop on the day when members realize their biweekly withdrawals, as this was a way of ensuring "full attendance," including that ofEnrique and Ariel. Marcelo was especially interested in strong attendancefor the particular workshop he was proposing, which he calleda "workshop on neoliberalism" and whichfeatured in leading roles—as seen in the image—"las dos vedettes"("the two stars),"[18]an ironic allusion to the old radio and tape recorder. The title was closely related to Marcelo's main argument during the debate. From his point of view, more than an interpersonal conflict between colleagues, the radio equipment affair evidenced a pressing moral dilemma involving the cooperative as a whole. "This conflict reveals how far we have gone within neoliberalism," he declared, proceeding to elaborate an argument that neoliberalism was embodied in a specific practice that had been widespread since they had begun the program in Aldo Bonzi: the private appropriation of objects that circulated through the Cooperative's separate collection circuit. He specified that what ensured the arrival of the "special items"at the shed along with the "material"—that is, to be shared amongall members—was precisely the Cooperative as

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[18] The term *vedette* comes from the "teatro de revistas," a popular theatrical genre in Buenos Aires that began in the late nineteenth century, and whose expansion was consolidated since the 1920s. Its leading figures are comedians (always male) called *capo cómicos* and the—always exuberant—*vedettes* ("stars") who embody the popular representation of female desire and attraction.

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a whole;that is,the group's work as a cooperative was what had transformed residents' relationship with waste materials and caused them to reflect on the very act of discarding material objects in general. What they were doing cooperatively in Aldo Bonzi, he continued, could be considered a "public service"that lacked financial support from the state (whether provincial or municipal) and therefore needed to be fed by the marketing flow of all kinds of recyclable materials and objects that could contribute to financially support the group's experience. In this sense, he argued, not only the "material," but also the "special items" should be regarded ascompensation contributed by residents to facilitate the"environmental service"provided by the group.[19] Hence the importance of this workshop, he concluded; it was notbeing held for the purpose of outlining a possible punishment for Ariel and/or Enrique, but because it posed an opportunity to discuss and collectively address these incidents—true "legacies of neoliberalism"—that represented one of the greatest challenges the group needed to confront, both individually and collectively.

In turn, Enrique acknowledged that he had "done wrong" and apologized to his teammates while clarifying that he had not been solely responsible. Meanwhile, Arielsought to distance himself from the problem, blaming Enrique. This triggered a heated debate during which suspension began to be increasingly raised as an option, as voiced by arguments condemning "selfishness" and noting the damage to the rest of the group. However when Enrique's fate seemed definitively cast, two interventions took place that reversed the decision for suspension. While agreeing with the sanction, Hernán also pointed out that Enrique"needs to work, like all of us" and that in this context "it's very fucked up to explain to your family that you're not working because you got suspended." Beto then remarked,"I don't understand why he would be suspended, since the customer definitely gave them to him." The debate continued without achieving a unified position, until it was decided to annul the suspension,given Enrique's commitment to showing a "change of attitude" in the future.

The scene just recounted demonstrates the way in which material forms can objectify—and communicate—a wide range of social categories. This plasticity is anchored in the physical and technological properties of objects, properties that exceed their

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[19] Indeed, the local perception in Aldo Bonzi regarding the performance of the program was very positive. Neighbors indicated that the streets were cleaner, but also indicated that through this experience they had come to realize that they were contributing to minimize the volume of waste buried in landfills and that this represented a broader and delocalized contribution to improving the environment.

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conventional attributes and allow their circulation through multiple uses and transfers.[20] The example of the old radio is illustrative. One imagines that this device had been purchased by Doña Inés out of her attraction for the innovations featured by the"Tonomac Super Platinum"model in question(compact design, telescopic antenna, and tuning buttons). At the time, these characteristics constituted markers of status that today—in the era of digital sound—would be unthinkable to revalidate. However, what remained intact was the device's ability to tune in radio programs and play sounds. Precisely the durability of these material properties fed intothe object's present uncertain status with regard to the waste/material distinction and therefore with regard tothe routes and waste regimes associated with that distinction. First, the objects were not "trash,"insofar as Doña Inés continued to exclude themfrom the circulation itinerary of the official waste management regime. However, they likewise did not constitute"material" in the strict sense, since unlikeobjects that are routinely transferred (newspapers, plastic bottles and so on), Doña Inés prioritized these objects by "offering" them to Enrique and Ariel. Thus, in the transfer of the items the involvement of the logic of the Maussian gift becomes explicit: an individual had come to objectify her empathy with the two cartoneros and/or with the entirecartonero initiative, inscribing that empathy in a gift. For their part, neither Enrique nor Ariel codifiedthe radios as"material,"beyond the fact that they could have dismantled them to recover metals and plastics from them. For these two cartoneros, the radios that were offered to them in some way objectified a recognition fortheir abilities in carrying out this new job (separate collection) as well as access to a sign of comfort—as basic as it may seem—on the level of their daily lives.

The material properties of the radios enabled their circulation through a route different from that established by both the "official"waste circuit as well as the waste circuit promoted by the cooperative. The value of the two objects was not given in the possibility of their transformation as material, but in their durability, in the same way that the realization of this value was associated more with individual ownership than

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[20] Webb Keane, "Money Is No Object: Materiality, Desire and Modernity in Indonesian Society" in The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture, ed. Fred Myers, 65-90 (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2001). The category of transfer (and circulation) refers to the existence of a change in the possession of objects; the concepts of commercial transaction and circulation of gifts refer to levels of interpretation regarding the meaning and logic of this change. The symbolic and moral representations of gifts refer to the universe of goods—and vice versa—in such a way that makes it impossible to think of a transfer without referring to the other.

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with collective ownership. Hence the problematic character that their circulation acquired in the context of the cooperative, insofar as they constituted attractive things that could be once again diverted (this time from the recyclingroute) and subject to individual appropriation. This had been acutely notedby Marcelo, who mobilized a strong staging for the workshop, exposing the radios and taking recourse to an iconographic language anchored in the attraction and desire to name the objects in question ("the two stars"). Similarly, he sought to focus the debate on values substantial to the cooperative experience and that were currently under threat (seeking to replace individualism with fellowship, and selfishness with generosity), rather than directing the discussion toward the motivations and responsibilities of its protagonists.

However, Marcelo'seffortto turn the meeting into a "neoliberal workshop"was only partially achieved, insofar as the topic of sanctions was raised. Nonetheless, a close reading of the discussion demonstrates that the debate ended up illuminating with greater precision the foundations of the problem envisioned by Marcelo. Beto's intervention provides a valuable key in this regard, insofar as it disputes the merits of the sanction by pointing out that the radios were a"gift"from a"client." Recourse to the semantics of gifts (as opposed to goods) is invoked by Beto to mark the pertinence of these objects, their mode of transfer, and the individuals they put into relation, to a logic different from that which was promoted by the Cooperative. This logic was expressed in terms of a tension regarding the alienability/inalienability of things that circulatethanks tothe personal bondsthat sustain cooperative members in the course of their daily practice. "Materials"as objects of subsequentrecommodification are alienable things, whereas"gifts" subject to subsequent reuse should be considered inalienable things. Following Annette Weiner, we could emphasize that the alienability/inalienability of objects does not depend so much on the types of things in circulation (garbage, materials, and special objects), but more on the different qualities present within each of these classes of objects.[21] Thus, if the stack of newspapers offered by Doña Inés had been wet and mixed with organic waste, it would have ended up as"garbage" and not "material." Something similar had occurred with another,corroded and dilapidated, radio that the Cooperativehad subsequently destined for the recycling of its"material" rather than qualifying it as a"special object." Following Beto's reasoning, the inalienability of the radios given to him by Doña Inéshad to do with their non-ordinary character and the quality and/or durability of their material components, and insofar as these aspects proved significant to both the "collector" and

[21]Annette, Weiner, Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

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his“client,”the transfer had been provoked by an interpersonal relation and the depth of the bond that had been achieved between them. Following this interpretation,whereas Ariel and Enriquereceived “material” (newspapers and bottles) as agents representing the cooperative and its project, they had received the radios insofar as they were“Enrique” and “Ariel” and not others.

Indeed, the case of the “two stars”exposed the tension between two counterposed but co-existing moral codes that bound members of the cooperative. The first of these codes was based on collective values and practices, such as “sharing in solidarity,” while the latter justified acts of private appropriation by highlighting the attributes and personal conditions of certain members. The way of confronting this tension was given by the construction of a mechanism for addressing these “special items”within the framework of collective experience.

As a result of the treatment of tensions and conflicts such as those exemplified in the affair of the “two radios” in the collective reflection workshops, weproceeded to elaborate criteria for the circulation and distribution of this special class of materials that resist classification in terms of the two existingwaste regimes. First, it was necessary to dissolve the inalienable character that each of these “special items” had for each cartonero member of the Cooperative and to replace that character with a collective moral sense based on a notion of the common ownership of the items in question. Second, it was necessary to erase the differences between “material” and “special items”by treating them symmetrically as commodities, since both categories of things were obtained from source separation and separate collectionfor subsequentclassification and commercialization. However, this effort to transform the inalienability of “special items”needed to be circumscribed within the limits imposed by the collective experience as a moral project. This meant that the goal of the commercializationwas not aimed merely at realizing a profit through the sale to third parties of “special items,” but essentially to transform their (re)commercialization into a mechanismof internal distribution. The following excerpt from one of the workshop sessions can account for this particular sense:

> Marcelo: I think we have to understand this . . . What comes in as appliances . . .clothes . . . shoes . . . isn’t being separated from everything else!. . .It has to go into the samepile. . . because that’s where we get the money to guarantee the $20, $21, $40 . . . or whatever we can make. Mario told me he needed a washing machine . . . and so if we say that the washing machine is worth . . . I don’t know,

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> . . . $20, … well, … instead of taking your [earnings of] $120 for the week, you get $100 and the washing machine. That's what I think . . . no?
>
> Coordinator: So the first thing we have to know is . . . an idea of price, right? To know how much will be deducted . . .
>
> Marcelo: I don't know how much a washing machine is worth, but if it's for usit would have to be . . . To give it, let's say, a social value,. . . if Bonzi brings a washing machine that you can get for $200 in the neighborhood, well then you would get $20, . . . ten percent, right? (Recycling Dreams Workshop February 21, 2007)

Marcelo's intervention emphasizesthat the category of "social price"he is proposing does not refer to the pursuit of profit, but is designed as a way to meet Mario's"need" and at the same time to strengthen his membership in the Cooperative. Similarly, his price is fixed arbitrarily (10 percent),taking as reference the value of a similar product available on the local market for used washing machines.[22]Accordingly, a few weeks later the Cooperative established a"Feria Social" [Social Fair]to be heldin the group's shedevery second Saturday (on payday), during which"special items" were released from confinement in the "little room"to be exhibited and offered for "sale" within the Cooperative.

Figure 2: Flipchart of the "Special Items" Fair. Photo: Sebastian Carenzo

The picture shows one of the flipcharts indicating to what member and at what priceeach of the items "on sale" was offered. The chart illustrates some interesting aspects of this practice. First, both the local market reference price ("precio propuesto," the proposed price) as well as the value by which theitem is effectively acquired ("precio acordado," the agreed price) are negotiated collectively. Similarly, since an item offered during the fair might fail to function, the buyer would assume responsibility for refurbishing it in exchange for a reduction of the agreed price (10 percent of the reference value if it works and 5 percent if it does not). Finally, in relation tohigh-demand items (such as mattresses and large appliances like washing machines, stoves, and refrigerators), an ad hoc basisis established to organize the distribution:if

[22] In the shantytowns where the cooperative is located there are numerous outlets where all types of used objects are sold at very affordable prices. Sometimes fairs are organized in public space, but they more often are set up in homes.

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more than one member showsan interest in the same subject, a lottery is set up to award the item. Those who fail to win the lottery are given priority for new items that“emerge” (that is, arrive at the cooperative) for distribution at subsequent fairs.

Nonetheless, this process revealed many ups and downs insofar as the idea of the alienability of ”special items” was still disputed and contested. However, over the course of ensuing workshops and fairs, the legitimacy of the commodity form as distribution mechanism began to stabilize. Thus, during the workshops punishments began to take hold for small incidents of individual appropriation that occasioned conflicts among members, as noted in Alberto’s eloquent testimony:

> Alberto: If you take something. . . you have to go . . .One person,because he went looking for a cooler one afternoon . . . after the collection round. . .another because he hid shoes in a bag and threw it into the disposalto later return for it. . . Things become known . . . and then what happens: I get into a fight with him. . .[then] he fights with someone else. . . and goodbye . . .the Cooperative disappears. The colleague who comes to us to steal. . .has to go,. . . because he’s stealing from all of us (Recycling Dreams Workshop August 28, 2007)

In Alberto’s words, the diversion of the itemsin question not only complicates relations among colleagues, but also represents a threat to the Cooperative as a whole. Thus, in the debate on the special items, the collective emerges as a moral value in a way that was unthinkable in workshops held just a few months prior. The sense of inalienability that previously characterized the cartoneros’ relation to “special items”had now virtually dissolved. The same items that once represented small personal trophies now objectified the specific importanceacquired by the collective. These items have thus become (re)fetishized merchandise, insofar as their marks of specific personal connection to the individual who originated their transfer and facilitated their transport to the Cooperative’s shed have now been erased. Or, in other words, those erased markshave been super-imposed with the mould of social relation that defines the items as an associative experience linking “collectors” with “residents.” For example, a pair of shoes that Victor purchases at a modest“social price” may have been the result of the social bondsthat John, Enrique, Pino, Hugo or any of their companions forged with their respective“clients.”That bond longer figures into the status or valuation of the items; any member can purchase any of those items thanks merely to the fact that he belongs to the cooperative.

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This final example emphasizes what I believe to be one of the most important lessons from the experience analyzed. Instead of sedimenting an "antisocial"stance generally linked to the practice ofcommercialization, the (re)fetishization ofthe "special items"wastransformed into a mechanism that was instrumentalfor producing a set of collective moral values that strengthened the association's experience. The resale of donated goods acquired a performative significancewithin the heart of theCooperative, since it instructed its members in these collective values not from abstract principles but from theirown pragmatic experience as "prosumers"who collectively produce what they end upindividually consuming.

Final Reflections

In this article I have analyzed disputes both between residents and Cooperative members as well asamong the latter, in the context of the categorization and management of waste. I argue thatthese disputes are evidence of the vibrant semiotic plasticity that characterizes our relationship with discarded materials:a plasticity that takes on relevance and expression when these materials pass through different regimes and thus come to embody different values and meanings for those involved in their transfer. In this regard, it is useful to recall Fred Myer's emphasis on the importance of considering the social dynamics surrounding"things"rather than focusing on the more static moments in which theytend to be defined and classified: they are"things-in-motion," and viewed as such, they allow us to recover a breadth of meanings that ultimately point to nothing less than different ways of thinking and producing goods in contemporary capitalism.[23]

On this point, I also follow Anstett Elisabeth and Nathalie Ortar's callfor an ethnographic recoveryof the *second life of things*, out of an approach energized by the intersection between material culture and moral economy. Their analysis of practices of *disqualification*(the useful/valuable becoming useless) and *requalification* (the useless becoming valuable/necessary) of material generates valuable analytical insights for addressing the production of cultural distinctions that shape the universe of things-and-

[23]Fred Myers, "Introduction: The Empire of Things" in *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, ed. Fred Myers, 3-64 (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2001).

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people-in-motion;[24]for example, for showing the way in which ordinary objects (and even their fragments and degraded forms) embody social properties. Matter discarded as "rubbish"is transformed into"materials"subject to reuse and/or recycling, and this legitimizes not only their handling and processing, but also the entire circuit through which their transfers occur. Meanwhile, other kinds of discarded material, such as "special items,"the discarding of which is organized explicitly on a gift register, becomemorally qualified material whose private appropriationruns the risk of strong repudiation, just as, conversely, their collective socialization is affirmed. In both cases, this qualification that is initially crystallized materially in objects quickly overflows that physical, evident, object, limit in the modeling of specific subjects (Enrique and Ariel) as well as forms of subjectivity (neoliberal persons).

In this sense, and following studies of material culture by authors such as Jean-Pierre Warnier and Celine Rosselin, I understand that these processes involve a mutual subject-object construction whereby the incorporationof material objects in a sensorimotor corporeal schemaleads to the elaboration of a particular expertise.[25]Knowing how to classify"materials" not only creates an identity or a set of meanings about the world, but also produces a particular skill, a set of habits, corporeal dispositions, routines, knowledge, and gestures that make up what I have come to refer to as a "profession-in-a-process-of-becoming."[26] But at the same time, materiality itself—for example, the durability of the components of the radios that keep intact their ability to play sounds beyond one's desire or will to discard them, or the plasticity of objects made from high densitypolyethylene that enables them to assume new forms and become integrated into new processes—imposes certain conditions on the process of producing categories and developing frameworks of shared signification. In this way,

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[24]Elisabeth Anstett and Nathalie Orthar, "Introduction: Qu'est-ce que récupérer?" in La deuxième vie des objets: Recyclage et récuperation dans les sociétés contemporaines, ed. Elisabeth Anstett and Nathalie Orthar, 7-14 (París: Ed. Petra, 2015), 10.

[25]Jean-Pierre Warnier, "A Praxeological Approach To Subjetivation In a Material World," Journal of Material Culture 6, no. 1 (2001): 5-24; Céline Rosselin, "Conclusion" in Le sujet contre les objets… tout contre: Ethnographies de cultures matérielles, ed. Marie-Pierre Julien and Céline Rosselin, 291-300 (París: C.T.H.S., 2009).

[26] I develop this notion in an article forthcoming from the Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology. By way of reference, it should be noted that in some districts of Greater Buenos Aires the work of "sorting" or "recovery" is already mentioned as a frequent occupation, just as decades ago men reported professions such as masonry and women domestic service.

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the materiality of a pair of radio devices defines the scope or boundaries of the gift effected by Doña Inés. The fact that both devices still work givesthem an uncomfortable materiality that provokes their exclusion not only from the disposal route established by the official waste management regime but also from the waste regime conducted by the Cooperative.

The reflection that I am sharing hereseeks to cast a critical analysis on our current enchantment with waste recycling practices, an analysis less focused on the economic value of materials (value-added approach, etc.) and more interested in the dynamics of valorization; that is, I seek to explore how and why in our contemporary societies certain objects, subjects, and actions (including discarded materials) are increasingly appreciated and legitimized while others are not. Our social relationship with waste is a good example of howrapid and contradictory this process can be:over the course of just ten years,waste went from being considered the restrictive embodiment of the useless to beingexalted asa new panacea in the context of proposals for"green"and/or"circular" economies.The ethnographic reflections I have shared here can likewise be read as one more element in these dynamics of valorization, in this case focusing on the substantive contribution of cartonerosin relation to our society. Of course, this contribution far exceeds the importance of the percentage of waste that cartoneros recover on a daily basis and thereby prevent from being sent landfills (estimated at 15 percent of 17,000 metric tons per day). Their greatest contribution is paradoxically the least recognized: that ofhelping to put into relationindividualsfrom social worlds considered hostile to one another and thereby effect a profound destabilization of thecrystalized routines thatconstitute our relationship with waste.