

**HHE 171.001: Rubbish!**

**Fall 2011**

**Wednesdays, 6-8:30 p.m. Pratt Rm. 319**

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## **SYLLABUS**

### **Course Description and Goals**

Americans would rather not think about what we throw away. Once something goes in the bin and out to the curb, it vanishes from our consciousness. But the matter we discard is at once incredibly intimate and of global significance. By considering the social, political, ethical, and cultural significance of trash, students and instructor will explore systems of production, consumption, and waste in order to understand our feelings and beliefs about dirt and our role in the global system of garbage.

We begin by considering what constitutes trash. How is garbage defined and distinguished from other matter? Is dirt simply “matter out of place”? Is it true that, as anthropologist Robin Nagle asserts, “Every single thing you see is future trash”? What cultural associations do we make with “dirty” states of being? How are these associations pegged to what is considered “clean” or “pure”?

Next we will look at garbage in its economic and environmental reality. What happens to things we throw away? What is the end of the line for all the stuff in the world? Is there an end of the line? If we think of living creatures in terms of food chains and webs, is there an analogous model for waste?

Because trash transcends political boundaries, we will consider the ways it circulates globally and its social and political significance. Is trash the final product of global capitalism? What kind of problem is “environmental injustice”?

Finally, we return to contemporary cultural aspects of trash. Why does collage emerge as a modernist art form at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Why is hoarding now included in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*? How does the gospel of recycling intersect with the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) movement?

In addition to the course content, students will continue to develop important skills: they will use archival and library material to pose and answer research questions; they will read carefully and critically material from different disciplines; and they will write short reflections and longer, sustained writing on course materials and experiences. Ideally, students will take away from the course an enduring intellectual curiosity and the skills to pursue questions about the world around them.

### **“Students and Faculty in the Archives” (SAFA)**

Fall 2011 is the first semester in a 3-year partnership between LIU (as well as St. Francis College and City Tech) and the Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS). This project was initiated by the BHS and is supported with a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The goal is to let undergraduates experience working

with archival material, that is “stuff” someone decided was worth saving and preserving for the future (i.e. you). In planning this course, I have worked closely with BHS librarians and archivists to develop an assignment based on a visit the Brooklyn Historical Society (Oct. 26) to examine material related to the history of sanitation in Brooklyn. During the visit, with the guidance and expertise of BHS staff, we will closely examine photos, pamphlets, letters, and other documents. Based on our hands-on observations, we will pose questions about the material and begin to develop interpretations of their historical significance.

### **Course Materials**

Students will encounter a wide range of sources: documents from the BHS archive, readings from various theorists of material culture, recent books and articles about garbage and waste, and blogs and websites devoted to trash. We will also screen two documentaries: *Never Enough* (2010), a profile of several hoarders, and *Waste Land* (2010), about the people who scavenge the world’s largest landfill in Rio de Janeiro.

#### *Required Texts:*

- Frost, Randy O. and Gail Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2010.
- Strasser, Susan. *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*. New York: Holt 1999.
- Packet of photocopied readings, to be supplied by the instructor.

#### *Other Requirements:*

- Up-to-date **library barcode** to access databases off campus
- Activated **campus email address** for access to **Blackboard**, which we will use to communicate with each other and which will house many of the course readings and assignments.

### **Assignments**

#### *Research project:*

Because trash can be studied from many disciplinary perspectives, I encourage students to pursue research projects that align with their interests or majors. Research questions should raise political, ethical, cultural, and environmental issues.

The form the project takes can vary. For example, a research essay (8-10 pages) could explore the “life cycle” of a certain kind of object or look at the chemistry or biology behind sewage treatment in New York. Or the project may develop out of the documents you worked with at the Brooklyn Historical Society. Students may also do visual projects, such as photo essays or videos. Another option would be to create a work of art using mungo (repurposed trash).

All projects must include a **bibliography** citing research sources; creative or visual pieces must also include a short **reflective writing** about the project.

### *Response papers:*

Students will write **weekly** reflections on the readings and class activities.

### *Presentations:*

Students collect their trash for three days and bring it to class to analyze.

**Format for all written assignments:** Papers should be typed in 12 pt. Times Roman typeface, double-spaced, with 1-inch margins all around. Pages should be numbered, and the heading of the first page should include your name, the date, the course, and a title.

### **Course website**

As part of our partnership with the Brooklyn Historical Society, we will be building a website reflecting our work and discoveries during the course. An important aim of the website will be to connect our work with archival material to “digital literacy.” Think of it as a digital exhibition about our class. Students will post their written assignments and final projects.

Details about constructing the website to come in a separate handout.

### **Grading**

***Class participation and attendance (20%):*** you will receive a grade on your participation, preparedness, and attendance. Being prepared means coming to every class on time, having done all the reading and completed the day’s writing assignment. Remember to bring the assigned texts to every class meeting. I will run the class like a seminar: sometimes I will give brief lectures, but most of the time we will discuss the texts together and in small groups. We may also do in-class writings as a way to enrich discussions. Therefore, the success of the course will depend on how committed each of us is to it. If everyone contributes by being prepared and participating in class discussions, this should be a fruitful, rewarding experience.

***Attendance policy:*** If you miss two class meetings, you will receive an F in class participation. Being late to class counts ½ absence. If you are absent, it is your responsibility to get the next week’s assignment from me or another student.

***Weekly response papers (40%):*** Generally, these should be 2-3 pages typed and should record your responses to the texts. Sometimes I will give you topics or questions to write on; sometimes you can write an “open” response about what comes to mind when you read. Each response will receive a letter grade. **NO LATE RESPONSE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED.**

***Research project (40%):*** see above.

### **Plagiarism**

The Council of Writing Program Administrators defines plagiarism thus: “In an instructional setting, plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else’s language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without

acknowledging its source" ([www.wpacouncil.org](http://www.wpacouncil.org)). *If the idea and/or the writing is not your own, you need to document it; if you are not sure, document to be safe.*

Plagiarism is theft and can lead to failing the class and even to suspension. If I find that you have plagiarized writing in this course, the plagiarized paper will be graded F. If you do it again, you will fail the course, and I will submit a report to the Chair of the English Department, who will report your name to the Dean.

**Please note: Turn OFF cell phones and all other electronic devices while in class. There is no texting allowed in class. Please do not eat in class. Drinks are fine.**

## COURSE SCHEDULE

Date	In Class	Reading	Writing Due
Sept. 7 <b>Defining Dirt</b>	Make introductions; Screen lecture by Robin Nagle, DSNY anthropologist-in-residence.		
Sept. 14		Selections from Douglas, <i>Purity and Danger</i> ; Appadurai and Kopytoff, <i>The Social Life of Things</i> *	Response Paper 1
Sept. 21 <b>Personal Waste</b>	Examine 3 days of trash.	Selections from Thompson, <i>Rubbish Theory</i> *	Bring 3 days' worth of your own trash to class.
Sept. 28		Strasser, <i>Waste and Want</i>	Reflection on personal waste.
Oct. 5		Strasser, <i>Waste and Want</i>	Response Paper 2
Oct. 12 <b>Urban Sanitation</b>		Selections from Miller, <i>Fat of the Land</i> *	Response Paper 3
Oct. 19		Selections from Royte, <i>Garbage Land</i> *	Response Paper 4
Oct. 26	Class meets at the Brooklyn Historical Society.	Selections from Rathje and Murphy, <i>Rubbish!</i> *	Response Paper 5
Nov. 2 <b>Global Garbage</b>	Screen "60 Minutes" stories on ship breaking in Bangladesh and computer salvage in China.	N. Gregson, et al. "Following things of rubbish value..."§ E. Grossman, "Where Computers Go To Die"§	Reflection on workshop at BHS.
Nov. 9	Screen <i>Waste Land</i> .	M. Liboiron, "Defunct Models of Pollution"§	Response Paper 6
Nov. 16 <b>Mongo</b>		Dada, Merz, collage	Response Paper 7

Nov. 23	NO CLASS. HAPPY THANKSGIVING!		
Nov. 30	Recycled Art/craft; DIY		Response Paper 8
Dec. 7 <b><i>Hoarding</i></b>	Screen <i>Never Enough.</i>	Frost and Steketee, <i>Stuff</i>	Final project uploaded to course website.
Dec. 14		Frost and Steketee, <i>Stuff</i>	

**\*Readings in photocopied course packet.**

**§Readings uploaded to HHE 171 Blackboard page.**