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Day to Day Change Making: The Transformative Potential of Dumpster Diving

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INTRODUCTION

I never knew where the dumpster was until I dove into it.

My revelation came on a quiet Tuesday night in the middle of September 2011, when I accompanied a group of five Pitzer students, members of the local Food Not Bombs (FNB) chapter, on their first dumpster dive of the semester. Although I had been to Trader Joe's at least 20 times before, I didn't have any idea where their dumpster might be. I was curious to find out where it was located and also interested to see if we would actually find any food. Excited by what felt like a grand adventure, I eagerly peppered my new FNB friends with questions during the short car ride between Pitzer and the TJ's store.

When we pulled in to Trader Joe's a little after midnight, the parking lot was deserted. The calculated white lines of parking spaces, normally obscured by the edges of cars, were highlighted by the brimming amber glow that emanated from the electric lights high above our heads. Hazy green light from the intersection filtered through the silhouette of tree branches at the edge of the lot. Cars passed by intermittently. It didn't feel quite like night because everything was so bright.

I figured the dumpster would be in the back of the store or in an alley, so was surprised when my companions told me to park right there in the Trader Joe's lot.

Before exiting the car, Michael, one of the leaders of FNB and a veteran dumpster diver, told us that it was important that we keep our voices low and not make a lot of noise. Slightly confused, and wondering if there were perhaps more legal issues involved in dumpster diving than I had realized, I followed the rest of the group to the low stucco corral that stood at the west end of the parking lot. It was only when I pushed my

shoulders between the corrugated metal doors that led into the corral that I realized *this* was the dumpster. Or rather, dumpster*s*. Dark, hulking receptacles, at least five feet tall, constructed of metal and plastic, their esthetic spoke of efficiency and utility. Standing in the narrow area between the edge of the dumpsters and the stucco walls, I watched as two of my companions pushed open the plastic lids, climbed over the side of the container and hopped inside.

The dumpster was full enough that their torsos remained above the edge of the bin, making it easy for them to hand recovered items to those of us standing at the side of the container. While they started rummaging amongst the bags of trash, I peered cautiously over the lip of the metal side to see what was inside. Preparing myself for the worst – visions of reeking bags of rotting food, excrement and blood swam to the surface of my imagination – I was surprised to find a mound of innocuous looking plastic bags, most of them filled only part-way, piled on top of each other amongst worn cardboard boxes. A random detritus of vegetables, flowers and plastic gloves lay scattered amongst the bags.

Systematically, my companions pulled up bags that looked promising, tore them open, and extracted their still-edible contents. Trying to mimic the attitude of nonchalance the veteran divers displayed, I helped place the rescued food in the cardboard box at my feet. Over the next twenty minutes, we found: four packages of Peanut Butter Double Decker Cookies, three packages of chocolate covered Belgian Butter Thins, one package of Cranberry Scones, one maple sugar bundt cake, two fruit pies, three bags of candied walnuts, two bags of cereal, a bag of Masala Tandoori Naan, five loaves of Ciabatta bread, a package of four Apple Bran muffins, two bags of

chocolate chip cookies, over twenty loaves of sliced bread, ten bell peppers, six apples, three containers of unopened organic hummus, at least ten cucumbers and six bags of packaged lettuce. With the exception of the bell peppers, apples and cucumbers, everything we found was still encased within its original plastic packaging and looked like it had come off the shelf rather than out of a dumpster. In all, I estimated that we found at least 150 dollars worth of food from Trader Joe's that night.

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I wouldn't understand until much later the myriad reasons why edible food is regularly thrown out by grocery stores across the country. There are 35,000 grocery stores in the United States; together, they throw out 30 million pounds of food every day (Bloom, 150). This estimate does not include the food waste generated by the 13,000 small grocery stores in the country (220) nor does it include estimates of food waste from "big box" stores such as Wal-Mart, which account for one third of all food purchases in the U.S. (150). When I asked Michael why all this food had ended up in the trash, he told me that it had to do with expiration dates and overstocking. My suspicion was that there was more to it than that. What I didn't know then was just how much more.

As I later learned, expiration dates, an increase in (more perishable) prepared foods and shopper expectations for well-stocked shelves and perfect produce are just some of the reasons why supermarkets toss so much food in the dumpster (Bloom, 65). Other factors include employee misordering, fears about bad press from donating expired food, and the hierarchical structure of many big grocery stores that mandates employees follow company policy on food waste rather than attempting to find an alternative to tossing it in the dumpster (Bloom, 158; 168; 179; 222). These are merely symptoms,

however, of a wider cultural context in which food has no scarcity value, excess has become normalized, and individuals have lost the food knowledge their grandparents relied upon to judge whether or not food has gone bad (59). As I hope to show in this thesis, the story of dumpster diving is one that implicates our system of food production, cultural values, and our entire way of life in the United States and highlights the need for change.

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After loading up the trunk of my car with our rescued food, we drove on to Sprouts, where we found two watermelons. Again, despite having shopped at Sprouts on many occasions throughout my four years at Pomona, I never knew or thought to find out where its' dumpsters were located. Like Trader Joe's, Sprouts places their dumpsters well out of sight of its customers. They go one step further than Trader Joe's, however, by erecting a ten-foot fence around the entire back area of the store, which includes the dumpsters. With some careful maneuvering, we made it over the fence and onto the other side. I learned that Sprouts is more dangerous to dive at because there are often employees who work nights and are thus able to hear when people are going through their dumpster, presenting the risk that they might ask divers to leave on the grounds that they are trespassing. We made sure to be especially quiet as we sorted through the material in the bins and then gingerly passed our salvaged watermelons over the fence to those waiting on the other side.

Our third and final stop of the night was a donut shop on Arrow Route, where we recovered an industrial-sized bag that was halfway full of unsold donuts. Oblong, round, broken, crushed, frosted and glazed, the donuts comingled freely in the bag, distinctions

between flavors no longer important now that their value as saleable items had expired. Right there in the parking lot, we took turns hunching over the bag to excavate our desired treat from amongst the layers of fried dough. I smiled as another first-time diver exclaimed, "I want to go dumpster diving every week!" I couldn't say that my feelings at that moment were any different, particularly as I savored the warm sweetness of the glazed donut I had chosen from the bag.

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Although I didn't love the hours – midnight to 2:30 am on Tuesday night – every item pulled out of the dumpster made my sacrifice of sleep and homework time worth it. More than just the illicit thrill of treasure hunting in the dead of night and recovering a surprisingly abundant bounty, my first foray into the world of dumpster diving left me with some questions. I kept thinking about the idea of responsibility as each perfectly edible item was retrieved from the dumpster and quietly passed from hand to hand to box. I began to feel that what we were doing was not only necessary in a moral sense, but that it was merely the starting point on a very long journey toward addressing the true causes of this extravagant waste. My frame of mind began to shift – rather than wondering if it was legal for us to be dumpstering, I began to wonder how could it *not* be legal for us to dumpster?[1]

In the hours and days following my first dive, more questions arose: If we weren't recovering this food, would anyone? What about all the other dumpsters in Claremont and other cities around the country where edible food languishes until it is picked up and driven to the landfill? Why don't we know about the integral role waste plays in our food

[1] As I learned on my first dumpster diving trip, "To dumpster" is a colloquial term used by dumpster divers that refers to the act of dumpster diving.

supply chain? What happens at the landfill once the food starts to decompose? Starting at the other end of the system, I wondered what quantities of fossil fuel had been used to grow that food, wash it, package it, transport it to the wholesalers, refrigerate it, drive it to a store like Trader Joe's, refrigerate it while in the store, and then transport it to the landfill. What kind of system do we have where food like this is going into the trash? How do grocery store managers rationalize this amount of wasted product? Are they doing anything to reduce how much they throw out?

While I suspect that while there are a substantial number of people who would see these questions as a call to immediate action, there is likely another group of people who might respond to my indignant rhetoric with the simple explanation that, while regrettable, this is how the system works. As a wealthy country, we can afford to produce excess food. So long as most of us get enough to eat – or at least we aren't aware of those who don't get enough to eat and aren't affected ourselves by the environmental and social costs of throwing away almost half our food every day – what's the big deal?[2] Jonathan Bloom notes, "I have yet to meet somebody who is pro-food waste, but many aren't convinced that it's important" (xvi). Moreover, what's really important is that "a good number of people, regardless of how they respond, don't *behave* as if it matters much" (xvi). For proof, just look inside any dumpster.

There is probably another segment of the population who would acknowledge the seriousness of the environmental and social problems associated with food waste, but disagree that food waste should be placed at the forefront of the political agenda because

[2] In his book, *American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half of Its Food (and What We Can Do About It)* Jonathan Bloom writes that while there is generally limited data on food waste, two separate sources have concluded that "America wastes roughly half of its food" (Bloom, 10).

there are so many other more pressing problems that require immediate attention, such as global climate change, economic recession, poverty, pollution, drought and famine.

While I am not prepared to argue that food waste become the leading environmental cause of our day, I do believe that food waste, as well as all other forms of "waste" generated by our society, must be taken much more seriously than they currently are by individuals and elected officials alike. Broadly speaking, there are two reasons why we cannot afford to ignore food waste. First, food waste is inextricably linked to many of the most pressing social and environmental issues of our time, including climate change, hunger, food insecurity, soil fertility, water scarcity, and air and water pollution. Eliminating food waste will directly and indirectly contribute to the solutions to these other larger issues, because none of these problems exist in a vacuum – they are all interconnected. As Bloom writes,

> We're wasting resources by growing too much stuff, which causes soil depletion, which in turn requires us to use more fertilizers (and fossil-fuel resources) to maintain yields. Meanwhile, we're speeding up erosion and using up our precious aquifers. There are newer seeds that don't require as much water or fertilizer, but for the most part, the cycle continues. The better we understand this scenario, the less likely we are to squander food (22).

Not only will eliminating food waste will help us conserve our dwindling fresh water resources, reduce our dependence on non-renewable energy, and revitalize local economies, it has the possibility to foster a zero-waste society where every*one* and every*thing* is valued. As I will discuss in subsequent chapters, dumpster diving that is undertaken as part of the direct action social movement known as freeganism has the

potential to transform cultural perceptions of waste, value and economy, planting the seeds for a person-centered, waste-free society.[3]

The second reason food waste should not be ignored is because it is such a low hanging fruit relative to other environmental problems. Compared to international treaties on emissions caps, transitioning to completely renewable energy sources or dismantling the industrial food system, reducing the amount of food that is wasted is a relatively straightforward problem that both normal people and policy makers can begin solving today – or tonight, if they're going dumpstering! Food waste deserves our attention as an eminently solvable problem with a high impact solution.

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Before going further, I want to explain the motivations I have for studying this topic, so as to make clear my biases and positionality. My own interest in waste began in fifth grade, when I performed an archaeological excavation of my family's trash for a school project. Since then, I've become increasingly conscious of the ways in which we see – and more often don't see – waste. In college, my intellectual interest in trash began when I took "Greening the Campus Waste Stream," a class organized by SIO (Sustainability Integration Office) Director Bowen Close and Environmental Analysis Professor Char Miller in the spring of 2010. Together, Bowen, Char, and we five students conducted a waste audit of Pomona's landfill-bound trash. The results were staggering: we found that only 18 percent of the landfill bound waste was actually trash (Close and

[3] Freeganism is a direct action social movement that is both a response to and rejection of capitalist excess and waste. Freegans seek to minimize their participation in this system by not buying anything. They call attention to the wasteful excess of capitalism through dumpster diving. Freegans and freeganism will be addressed in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

Miller, 2011)[4]. The study concluded that 77 percent of what we found in Pomona's trash bins wasn't actually *trash*. The experience of finding so much stuff that shouldn't have been on its way to the landfill surprised and saddened me. It was disheartening to discover that Pomona College, the site of my revelatory introduction to the existence of social and environmental injustice, was operating as if what I had learned in the classroom didn't matter. I was surprised that in a place where people are generally intelligent, curious and conscious of the world around them, so many people were paying so little attention to what they were putting in the trash can.

Following the waste audit, I found myself more aware of how my peers treated trash. Every night at "Snack", the light meal that is served at Frary dining hall from 10:30 to 11:30 every weeknight, I witnessed people using disposable bowls and spoons to eat their cereal and then, five minutes later, throwing them in the trashcan without a second thought. Working for the SIO for two semesters as the person in charge of turning the compost in the bins around campus, I've gotten another look at how Pomona students view waste receptacles. In the compost bins outside the dorms, I've found beer cans, Yogurtland spoons and containers, menstrual pads, candy wrappers, pizza boxes and plastic cups. While some bins are better than others in terms of attention to what should actually be in there, the existence of (what to me) are so clearly non-compostable items in the compost bins suggests that they are not widely seen as intermediate containers for

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[4] This statistic is slightly misleading, however, given that we included theoretically compostable material (i.e. material that could be composted with specialized facilities that Pomona does not have) as non-trash even though at the time the audit was conducted, there were no existing facilities to compost this food waste. However, even taking this into account and classifying theoretically compostable material as trash, we still found that only 23.5 percent of the material in the trash was actually trash, leaving a staggering 77.5 percent that was not.

organic waste that will eventually return to and fertilize the soil, but rather as the most convenient way to discard whatever "trash" someone wants to rid themselves of at that moment.

For a long time, I thought that if more students were to pay attention to what they could recycle, that would solve much of the problem. This was based on my conviction that recycling was almost as good as not throwing anything away at all because it ensured that valuable materials were returned to productive use. That was until I went on the field trip to the Grand Central Recycling Center in the City of Industry, where Pomona sends it's recycling.

Operating as both a recycling and trash processing facility, the company has a viewing room with glass-paneled walls where guests can peer out onto the floor below and see the process by which recyclables are sorted. On the field trip, we observed eight workers standing on both sides of a moving conveyor belt, each one assigned to a particular type of item to grab and put in the bin behind them (e.g. #1 plastic, #2 plastic, etc.). As they pulled selected items off the belt, the rest of the material moved steadily toward the end of the belt and fell into a large bin. When someone on our tour asked what happens to all of the recyclables that end up in that bin, the tour guide answered matter-of-factly that everything in the bin ends up in the landfill. This news infuriated me, given that at least *half* of the items on the conveyor belt ended up in the bin. The alarming conclusion was that more than half of the materials that were sent to be recycled on a given day actually ended up in the landfill. I don't recall ever receiving an explanation for this spectacular inefficiency. I came away from the trip with the new conviction that recycling was only marginally better than putting something in the trash can.

While recycling is a clearly a vastly superior option to sending items to the landfill, this experience made me realize that recycling is by no means the guilt-free option for materials-disposal I had previously thought it might be. I realized, reluctantly, that for all of my conscientious work to put almost all the trash I produced in the recycling bin, what really mattered was not producing any trash in the first place.

Studying abroad in Buenos Aires, Argentina during the spring of my junior year introduced me to another culture's perspective on waste. The streets in the capital are filled with trash. I found a certain irony in this, because rather than fostering an increased awareness of trash, it seemed to me many *porteños* were even *less* conscious of their waste stream than many Americans.[5] On multiple occasions, I observed people throwing cans and Kleenex out of the windows of buses without a second thought. There is no formal recycling system in Buenos Aires, which has to do with the fact that the main elected official of Buenos Aires is also the owner of the largest trash company.

The closest thing the city has to a formal recycling program are the *cartoneros*, people who roam the streets of Buenos Aires looking for discarded recyclable materials that can be exchanged for money. There was surge in the number of *cartoneros* after the economic crisis of 2001, which left a quarter of the population out of work. Many of those who had recently lost their jobs turned to scavenging because it was their only option for survival. For my anthropology class at the University of Buenos Aires, I investigated the *cartoneros* as a marginalized group in the city. My research suggested that they are largely invisible subjects in the urban ecology of Buenos Aires because of their low socioeconomic status and their association with trash. My experience living in

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[5] *Porteños* are inhabitants of the city of Buenos Aires. The word literally means 'people of the port' and refers to Buenos Aires' location as a port city.

Buenos Aires for five months led me to the conclusion that Americans are not unique in their aversion to dealing with or thinking about trash. Similarly, Argentines want as little to do with trash, and those who sort through it, as possible.

In terms of food waste, the corollary issue is that of food distribution, which is directly related to hunger. In the United States, more than 49 million Americans do not get enough to eat (Bloom, 43). During the spring of my sophomore year, I worked as a volunteer at the Beta Center, a food distribution center in the city of Pomona, California. Every Wednesday afternoon, I worked at the intake desk, where I interviewed clients and input their information into the computer so that they could receive their monthly allotment of food. When things were slow, I helped unload USDA shipments of canned food onto the pantry shelves. Talking to the people who came into the Beta Center left me with a lasting impression of the injustice of our current economic and social system. Many of the people I met had health problems and weren't receiving proper medical care. Others had been searching for a job for months without success. Most had young children who waited with wide eyes while their parents quietly voiced their urgent need for food.

Clients at the Beta Center are eligible for food once a month. It was not unusual for clients to ask if they could get their food allowance a week early because they had run out of food. While regrettable, it was not surprising that that this happened, considering that that Beta Center only provided them with enough food for a week, and only then if it was rationed carefully. Most of the packages they received consisted of canned food purchased by the USDA. Bread and fresh fruit only came from donations, which were sporadic. When there was bread, it went quickly, meaning that those who came later in the day didn't get any.

My experience at the Beta Center led me to the conclusion that food-distribution programs are at best stop-gap solutions that provide families with a semi-regular and limited supply of nutritionally marginal food; at worst, they are bureaucratically controlled institutions that perpetuate systemic injustice by letting the government abdicate real responsibility for the problem of hunger. While I realize that food distribution is a complex and intricate issue with no easy solution, one thing I know for certain is the food we pulled out of the Trader Joe's dumpster would have been very much appreciated by a lot of people at the Beta Center.

The same semester I volunteered at the Beta Center, I also participated in a survey of food insecurity in the Inland Valley, which was part of an application filed by a local non-profit organization to receive USDA funding for a community garden that would provide employment and healthy food to low-income residents. One of the criteria for the grant was to evaluate the levels of food insecurity in the area. In Montclair, Upland and Pomona, we sought out community members outside of Costco, Target, at bus stops, Laundromats and in parking lots. From these conversations we learned that food insecurity was very much a reality in the lives of many residents in the area.

The final results, calculated by Sam Hanft for his senior thesis in Sociology showed that over 60 percent of the residents of Pomona were food insecure, defined by the Economic Research Service as "a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food" (McCoy, 2010). Nationwide, 22 percent of children live in food insecure homes (Bloom, 43). Moreover, it is estimated that roughly half of all children in the United States live in a household that will use food stamps at least once (43). As evidenced by these statistics, while the rate of food insecurity in

Pomona was above the national average, food insecurity is by no means isolated to one part of the country. Even after being made aware of the existence of hunger by my time at the Beta Center, I was surprised by how high the rate of food insecurity in Pomona was. It left me with an unresolved frustration at the stunning disparity between how much the residents of Claremont (myself included) had to eat compared to how much many people in Pomona were getting to eat.

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These varied experiences – studying the *cartoneros* of Buenos Aires, helping conduct the campus waste audit, turning the compost every week, visiting the recycling center, volunteering at the Beta Center, participating in the food security survey, and most recently, dumpster diving – have afforded me the opportunity to think seriously about the shortcomings of our current system of food distribution and waste management from a variety of perspectives. I've also thought more critically about the logic that informs our system of profligate consumption. On a personal level, as I've searched for ways to reduce my own consumption and work for social justice, I have been confronted with a series of challenging questions: What can one person do to solve systemic problems? What alternatives to the status quo exist? Can these alternatives be incorporated into the mainstream as a means of fostering broader change?[6] To what extent is it possible to extricate oneself from these destructive systems? To what extent is such extrication from the system alienating such that it keeps one from being an agent of change? How do cultural notions of waste stymie efforts for change?

[6] I am grateful to Heather Williams for helping me articulate many of these overarching research questions.

Finding answers to these questions and others like them is the motivation for writing this thesis. It is my hope that by investigating dumpster diving as a critical response to our current systems of waste management, food production, and globalized trade, I will gain an understanding of how these systems operate. I also hope to understand dumpster diving in the context of freeganism, a direct action movement that uses dumpster diving as a tactic to bring attention to the excesses of capitalism.

As a practice located at the intersection of issues involving food justice, social justice, environmental contamination, consumerism, capitalism, cultural perceptions of waste, invisibility, criminality and marginalization, dumpster diving offers a fruitful case study for understanding how each of these issues informs the other and how they can be addressed effectively. As a practice that occurs on the margins, an analysis of dumpster diving provides insight into not only the margins but also the mainstream. In this sense, I see dumpster diving as an analytical vehicle by which to understand the shortcomings of our current system, the alternatives to that system and how to begin to locate a movement for change.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I explain what dumpster diving is and who participates in it by drawing upon my own dumpster diving experiences as well as the experiences of other divers as articulated in interviews, articles, books and documentaries. After distinguishing between the various types of dumpster diving, I focus the remainder of my analysis upon freegan dumpster diving. In light of my desire to understand the transformative potential of dumpster diving, the freegan movement, as a direct action movement for social change, is the most relevant case study.

In the second chapter I contextualize dumpster diving in relation to consumerism, waste, and environmental justice. In this section I argue that dumpster diving presents an novel way to analyze our connection to the environment in reverse – by unearthing a dumpster's contents, we learn about the values by which our system operates, and how these discarded materials reflect our connections to the Earth as well as our disregard for its value.

Chapter Three discusses criticisms of the freegan movement and its viability for social change. In the conclusion, I draw upon this analysis to evaluate the extent to which dumpster diving and freeganism can bring us closer to a post-capitalist world, highlighting both the possibilities and pitfalls of the movement. I briefly discuss the possibilities for institutional change, but focus mostly on how freegan tactics can foster this change. Ultimately, I seek to understand if dumpster diving is a transformative practice with the promise of bringing about meaningful change. As I shall argue in subsequent chapters, I believe that it is.

CHAPTER ONE: THE LANDSCAPE OF DUMPSTER DIVING

To climb inside a Dumpster is to do more than force oneself inside a big trash can. It is to enter a hidden world, an alternative universe of trash, a big box of surprises sitting in the middle of the city - and, believe it or not, surprises more often exciting, even pleasant, than repugnant.

– John Hoffman, *The Art and Science of Dumpster Diving*

It was dark, of course, when I pulled my car onto the sloping street in an obscure part of northeastern Los Angeles. I was learning that most dumpster diving-related activities take place at night. I glanced down to re-check the address I had scrawled onto a scrap of paper before leaving Claremont, and then peered out of the window of my car at the indistinct row of houses that lined the street. Thoughts swam through my head as I turned the key to the left and cut the engine. *Was I really doing this? What kind of people show up to this kind of thing? I suppose whatever happens it will be a good story for my thesis.... If it gets weird I suppose I can just leave*. Bracing myself mentally, I gathered my notebook, wallet, and pomegranates that I had gleaned a few hours earlier from the trees outside the Sontag dorms at Pomona into my bag. The fruit was my contribution to the communal potluck that was scheduled to take place prior to the bicycle dumpster diving tour. Perhaps it was all the reading I had been doing about freeganism, but when the moment arrived to decide what to bring for the potluck, it seemed more logical to pick the fruit from the trees outside my dorm (fruit that, as far as I could tell, had not been slated for any other use) than to spend money on a packaged food item that had been trucked in from a far away place. I hoped my hosts would see my gleaned fruit in the same light, rather than as a sign of me being cheap.

As I walked from my car in the general direction of the address, I noticed two other women who were also crossing the street. Just as I was about to ask if they knew where number 429 was, the older of the two asked me if I was here for the dumpster diving "Meetup."[7] Flooded with relief that I was indeed in the right place and that there were other people going to the same event – who were also arriving an hour late! – I affirmed that yes, I was here for the dumpster "Meetup." A smile broke over their faces when I explained that I was actually here because I was writing my thesis about dumpster diving. They told me that they were also there for investigative purposes – they both worked for SoCal Connected, a public TV station, and they were at the "Meetup" to investigate the possibility of doing a story on dumpster diving. It was clear, from our overly bright voices and stiffly-held shoulders that we were all a little self-conscious about being at a freegan event; none of us identified as freegans and weren't sure if we would be judged by the rest of the group for our seeming imposter hood. Added to the sense of self-consciousness was the surreal nature of being in a situation that I had absolutely no frame of reference for – I had never been to a freegan house before, and I was pretty sure they hadn't either.

In the same way that strangers who encounter each other in a foreign country become instant friends upon recognizing their shared national origin, the three of us shared a sense of alliance. Whatever the freegans were like, we had each other's back. Moving as a unit, we pushed open the waist-high wrought iron gate that delineated the boundary between the house and the sidewalk. We looked around the dark front yard for clues that this was the Raga Jazz Freegan house, our appointed meeting place. Although

[7] "Meetup" refers to the website through which the event was organized, meetup.com.

it was hard to see very well, the amber streetlights provided enough illumination to get the impression of an airy, two-story stucco house with vines running up the sides. On the second floor there was a balcony, which overlooked the rose bushes planted in the front yard. Following the light that emanated from the door at the top of the steps, we gingerly mounted the steps that led to the second-floor entrance. Upon reaching the top, we took off our shoes, assuming this was the appropriate thing to do, given that there was a pile of assorted shoes on the ground outside the door. We acted nonchalant, as if taking off our shoes before we went into a house was something we did all the time. Still unsure if we were in the right place, we stepped inside.

My first impression of the freegan house was of cleanliness and order, which surprised me. I'm not sure what I had been expecting, but it certainly wasn't what I saw. The main room was large and roomy. Most of the objects in the room looked like they had come from different countries – African drums, a sheet of glass that rested upon a tree trunk and served as a coffee table, a wooden guitar with black designs painted up and down the sides, a large stereo, a bookcase filled with smaller musical instruments and books, and a colorfully patterned rug filled the otherwise uncluttered space. A mirror with a sun design had been strategically placed in the middle of the wall opposite the door, making the room seem bigger than it was. The assembly of objects and décor gave the impression of a tribal, new Age-y feel.

Before I could continue my observations, a tall effeminate man with a wide stomach emerged from the kitchen, which was adjacent to the main living room. He introduced himself as Michele. He had an accent I didn't recognize. He ushered us into the kitchen, where five people were seated around a table. None of them got up to greet

us. Awkwardly we each introduced ourselves. The SoCal reporters explained that they had come in the hopes of doing a story about the group, and they wanted to be sure that everyone knew who they were from the outset, in the interest of full disclosure. I talked briefly about being a student at Pomona and writing my thesis about freeganism, an explanation, I noted, that did not elicit nearly as much interest or curiosity from this group as it had in other circles. We remained standing until Michele – who seemed to be in charge of the cooking and hospitality portion of the evening – pulled up chairs to the corners of the table. Over the next three hours, we chatted and made small talk as the other participants of the "Freegan Meal and Dumpster Tour" slowly trickled in.

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Two weeks before, I had begun my investigation into the world of dumpster diving in typical 21st century fashion: with a Google search. Searching "Dumpster diving Los Angeles" returned 142,000 results. At the top of the list was the L.A. dumpster diving Meetup group, which listed the "Freegan Meal and Dumpster Tour" as a monthly activity open to everyone who wished to learn more about dumpster diving. Listed on the Meetup.com website, the description of the event read: "Join us for a dumpster bike tour in North East Los Angeles! It's a chance for exercise, food rescuing and fun. We will gather the discarded goodies for personal redistribution. We usually have two or three stops and ride about 5-10 miles long. Please bring panniers or a trailer on your bike, if possible. Otherwise, bring bags and/or a backpack to carry food home. We generally have one or two cars tagging along to help with cargo space and to accommodate those who are not riding bikes" ("Los Angeles Dumpster Diving Meetup Group," 2011). An addendum was added to the end: "Unlike previous tours, we'll be starting off with a

potluck, and leaving for a bicycle dumpster tour at around 11:00 PM." Eager to immerse myself in the world of dumpster diving beyond Claremont, I clicked "attending" on the event page for the September 24 tour.

However, finding myself sitting in the kitchen of the Raga Jazz Freegan House, making uncomfortable small talk with a bunch of strangers, I wondered if this was still such a brilliant plan. The people who had arrived so far were a mixed group. Of the several people who fit the typical hippie stereotype, the most notable was Eric, the organizer of the event, who sported a tie-dye shirt. About half of the group looked relatively indistinguishable from anyone else walking around Los Angeles.

In addition to myself, the attendees of the Meetup event that night included: the two journalists from public TV; a community college student; a self-identified DIY (Do-It-Yourself) musician who was part of FMLY, a DIY arts collective that he described as "a collection of people who never grew out of the idea that we could save the world and party all the time"; a physics student from ULCA; Eric, the organizer of the event and resident of the freegan house; Michele, another resident of the freegan house and long-time diver who moved to the U.S. from France; a woman who hoped to start her own non-profit organization involving a solar powered food truck that would provide fresh food to residents in low-income neighborhoods in L.A.; her middle-aged male friend who was married and had left a wedding early to come to the meetup (a decision, he told us, that his wife was less than pleased about); and another college student who was writing a paper about subcultures for her sociology class and had elected to write about dumpster diving; and her husband. In all, there were twelve of us who participated in the dumpster tour that evening.

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To most people, the fact that twelve strangers would come together to spend their Saturday night digging through dumpsters would seem puzzling, if not downright ridiculous or repulsive. How to explain such behavior? In addition to questions about the inherent appeal of dumpster diving, the dumpster diving Meetup event brings up other questions about the scope, legality, goals, history and effects of dumpster diving. Who does it, why do they do it, what do they find, where does it take place and how do they avoid getting caught, were just some of the questions I sought to answer when I began this research. I will address these issues in the first and second chapters.

I should note that the universe of dumpster diving is immense and by no means do pretend that I can offer a comprehensive picture of the landscape of dumpster diving. Rather, I present my findings and insights about the sub-culture of dumpster based on what I gleaned from interviews, reading, documentaries and my own experiences diving. I highlight the different motivations for diving, which range from economic to personal to political reasons. In this thesis, I focus on dumpster diving that is undertaken as a freegan tactic that simultaneously raises awareness about waste and helps sustain a non-capitalist lifestyle. By investigating freegan dumpster divers, I hope to begin to answer my larger question about the efficacy of dumpster diving as a tactic for social change.

Global Waste Recovery

Broadly defined, dumpster diving is a form of urban waste recovery. Also known as urban scavenging, waste picking, recycling, rag picking, salvaging, binning, reclaiming, informal resource recovery, and poaching, urban waste recovery is practiced throughout the world (Srinivas, 2007). There is some controversy about the terminology

that should be used to describe the people who engage in this practice: some argue that the term "scavenger" is demeaning because of its association with animal behavior ("Waste Pickers"). For the purposes of this thesis, I will refer to the people who participate in dumpster diving as "divers," and those who partake in other forms of waste recovery as "reclaimers."

Wherever there is waste, there are those who make a living from it. By recovering recyclables and other items of value from the trash, people in places as diverse as the Cote d'Ivoire, Buenos Aires, Cairo, Paris, and Victoria, B.C. make a living by recovering usable materials from the trash ("Waste Pickers"; Ernst, 7). Indeed, it is estimated that up to two percent of the urban population in developing countries make a living by scavenging, which is about 64 million people (Medina, vii). Indeed, "scavenging makes up a significant portion of the world's growing informal economic sector" (Medina, vii). In places like Tijuana and Thailand, reclaimers live and work in the dumps while there are others who live in the urban environment and collect discarded goods from dumpsters, streets and other marginal spaces within the city (Urrea, 1993).

Gleaners are a particular category of urban foragers whose recovery efforts focus specifically on food. Traditionally, the verb to glean means "to gather after the harvest" (Varda, 2000). Not surprisingly, gleaning has existed as long as agriculture has been around. In fact, in France there are documents dating back to 1554 that sanction the practice of gleaning for "the poor, the wretched, and the hungry," so long as it occurs after harvest and between sunrise and sunset (Varda, 2000). Gleaning is still practiced all over the world today. In the 21st century, gleaners collect fallen, excess or leftover food from fields, trees, streets and yards (Varda, 2000). For those who are keen on specific

classification, gleaning is technically the recovery of food that sprouts, while picking is the collection of food that hangs (Varda, 2000). However, in the colloquial use of the term, gleaning refers to any recovery of food from crops or orchards.

While waste recovery is occurring all over the globe, dumpster diving is limited to urban areas that utilize dumpsters in their system of waste management.[8] Dumpster divers are one sub-group in the global legion of waste reclaimers.

Dumpster diving defined

Alternately known as "dumpstering", "trashing", "binning", "skip-dipping," "scabbing" or "bin raiding", dumpster diving is a practice that has "existed for as long as there have been dumpsters and excessive waste" (Edwards and Mercer, 282). Simply put, dumpster diving is the practice of recovering usable materials, including but not limited to food, clothing, books, construction supplies, antiques, and organic material, from dumpsters.

The act of dumpster diving transgresses physically constructed boundaries – fences, private property signs – as well as culturally constructed boundaries that define what is public and private space, clean and dirty, valuable and trash. This transgression contributes to the sense of solidarity amongst dumpster divers; operating on the literal and figurative margins of conventional society, people who dumpster dive share a mutual respect and affinity for each other. While most affinity groups have a high level of solidarity and connection to each other, as a result of the similar world-view of most

[8] This is not to say that rural dumpster diving does not or cannot exist, but rather that urban diving is much more common and widely practiced, as a result of the concentration of space, waste and population inherent in urban environments. It has been suggested that a future study on rural dumpster diving would be a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge about dumpster diving (Ernst, 11/1/11).

members, I would argue that dumpster divers have an especially strong sub-cultural bond as a result of the subversive nature of the activity.

In what can only be seen as a reflection of the increasing popularity and acceptance of dumpster diving, the term itself has entered the cultural lexicon. In fact, one can find a definition of "dumpster diving" in most online dictionaries. For instance, Oxford Dictionaries defines dumpster diving as "the practice of raiding dumpsters to find discarded items that are still useful, can be recycled, and have value." The World English Dictionary defines dumpster diving as "the practice of searching through dustbins for discarded but still usable or valuable objects such as food or clothes." It's interesting to note that there is little difference between these definitions and the definition offered by the freegan website Freegan.info, which describes dumpster diving as "[a] technique that involves rummaging through the garbage of retailers, residences, offices, and other facilities for useful goods." While there are widely divergent opinions about the efficacy of dumpster diving, these three definitions suggest at least a common understanding about what it *is*.

Dumpster diving - where did it come from?

The origin of the term "dumpster diving" is uncertain, although it has been hypothesized that it derives from a reference to the ideal body position for recovering material from a dumpster. As John Hoffman, lifelong dumpster diver and author of *The Art and Science of Dumpster Diving* explains, the phrase "dumpster diving" "probably came about because of… the 'classic pose' of a professional dumpster diver" which is "leaning in to the dumpster, with upper body leaning forward into the dumpster, pivoting below the navel, with your legs hanging out" (47). He explains that the advantage of this "diving" position is that it "allows you to toss out dozens of light, non-fragile items

without the need to reposition yourself" (47). However, he cautions, "you do need to practice a bit, or you'll fall into a dark, uncharted dumpster headfirst" (47).

In my experience dumpster diving, I never saw anyone do a "dive."[9] Rather, the braver members of the group would clamber over the sides of the dumpster and stand in the midst of the trash bags (after making sure their feet were securely positioned) so that they could sort through the trash and hand what they found to the rest of the group, who stood around the bin. I'm not complaining about the misnomer, however – there is no doubt that the term "dumpster diving" is infinitely sexier than "urban scavenging" or simply describing the activity literally, which would mean that it would be referred to as "searching around in the trash for useful objects." Unlike the literal description, "dumpster diving" implies action and adventure. Equally important, it doesn't explicitly mention trash, a term that carries associations of disgust, dirt and repulsion (see Chapter Two for a more detailed analysis of cultural associations with waste).

It's important to note that the spirit of freegan dumpster diving is by no means new. As Kelly Ernst, who wrote her Ph.D. dissertation about the freegan movement in New York City explained, "throughout the ages there've been groups that have challenged the distribution of resources, property rights and food" (11/1/11). In her dissertation, Ernst lists some of these groups, some of which include: the consumer food movements in the 1900s that were led by women of color (11/1/11); the "counter cuisine" food movement of the 1960s (Ernst, 67); and various feminist movements (67). The

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[9] Although anyone who has seen the documentary *Dive!* will recall Jeremy Seifert's dramatic stunt in which, clad in nothing more than a Speedo and swimming Goggles, he jumped from a ledge into a dumpster full of food. A photo from this spectacle was used for the cover of the DVD, suggesting that this was a publicity stunt rather than an actual dumpster diving technique.

"Diggers," a group of actors based in San Francisco in the 1960s, are the most direct precursor to the contemporary freegan movement (67). In 1966, they established a free store, organized clothing donations and distributed pamphlets espousing back-to-the-land ideals and the rejection of consumerism (67). Although the movement only lasted a few years, it is important to acknowledge the way in which the Diggers and various other counter-cultural movements have shaped the contemporary context in which the modern freegan movement is unfolding.

Motivations for Dumpster Diving

Moving beyond semantics and history, the question that arises for most people who seek to understand dumpster diving is simply, "why?" While it is impossible to fully explicate the myriad and overlapping motivations someone might have for climbing into a dumpster, for the sake of clarity, I divide dumpster divers into three general categories, based on their reasons for diving.

First, there are the people who scavenge for food in the dumpster out of financial necessity. These people are generally very low-income and often homeless. The second category of dumpster diver are those who can afford to purchase food and other items, but choose to dumpster dive for some other reason. These reasons are varied, but some of the most common are to save money, to reduce environmental degradation, or to have fun.

Finally, there is the category of freegan dumpster divers who are the subject of this thesis. Unlike the first two groups, freegans seek to make their dumpster diving visible in order to communicate a message about the wasteful excesses of capitalism. In addition, getting food from the dumpster provides them with an alternative to buying

food, which allows them to abstain from economic consumption and thereby live out their vision of a post-capitalist world. For these freegan dumpster divers, "there's a message behind the lack of spending" (Bloom, 255). Alternately described as "political gleaning" (Edwards and Mercer, 282) and a mix of "urban scrounging and an oppositional politics of cultural transformation" (Ferrell, 170), this third category of dumpster diving is intended to send a message.

Others have highlighted this distinction further: freegan diving is distinct from other forms of urban foraging in that it is undertaken as "a symbolic, political act against capitalist overproduction and waste [that] contrasts with the foraging of wild foods… the scavenging of recyclable materials, or food scavenging as practiced by the homeless" (Mercer and Edwards, 282). Said another way, "[this type of] dumpster diving is not just about need. It is often about a political impulse to liberate the excesses of the rich for the poor. It is part of a larger ideology of radical non-consumption" (Essig, 2002). Simply put, as a dumpster diver from Princeton University commented, "What makes it truly freegan is that you're doing it for a reason. We're trying to devise and implement practices that create a more egalitarian world" (YouTube, 2009).

Thus, distinguished by their different motivations, the three general categories of dumpster divers are those who dive because of financial necessity, various personal reasons, or a desire for social change. It's important to highlight that only the people in the second category are not dumpster diving out of some type of necessity, whether perceived or real; those in the first category rely upon dumpstering for sustenance, while freegans depend upon dumpster diving as a source of food *and* a tactic for bringing about social change.

It's simple… Dumpster diving is fun!

Regardless of one's motivations for dumpster diving, anyone who has done it can attest that one of its major attractions is that it's fulfilling. This usually comes as a surprise to someone who has never dumpster dived. As Joshua Reno explains, there is the "widespread assumption behind negative appraisals of scavenging…that it is degrading and dirty [and thus there exists the idea that] people would not do it unless they had to satisfy basic needs" (6). He continues, explaining that this is not the case:

> However, for scavengers discarded wastes are neither simple utilities nor necessarily polluting, but complex and potentially enriching materials. To say that scavenging waste is about possibility rather than necessity, about what people make of waste rather than what they must do with it, is not to deny the very real constraints and indignities often associated with the practice… Rather, it is to recognize the agency and creativity of scavengers (6).

Reno makes the important point that just because scavenging is potentially fulfilling does not mean it is necessarily without indignity. However, his larger point is that scavenging provides the opportunity for agency, creativity and enrichment. He adds, "the desire that motivates those who dispose of things" is the same that motivates "those who sift them from rubbish: to start anew" (23).

Reno's analysis explains why one of the most common explanations recreational dumpster divers give for what they do is that it's fun. As one reporter pointed out, **"**the process of diverting the waste stream is a politically ethical stand that also happens to be fun" (Essig, 2002). Most of the dumpster divers I spoke with and read about mentioned this idea. For instance, Laura Pritchett, editor of the anthology *Going Green: True Tales from Gleaners, Scavengers and Dumpster Divers*, has been diving ever since she was a child. She explains that in addition to wanting to save money and reduce environmental harm, she and her friend dive because "we simply love to find things," and "we have fun,

unbelievable fun" (110).

There are many types of fun. Part of the reason why dumpster diving is fun is because it is subversive. Reno recalls this about his time as an employee working at Four Corners, one of the largest landfills in the U.S.: "At Four Corners, the pleasure that comes with successful salvaging has partly to do with the exhilaration of sneaking around behind the boss' back while 'on the clock.' This explains why the stories so often repeated about object recovery involve a degree of bravado" (19). Similarly, many accounts of dumpster diving are told with pride. I certainly know that in my experience diving, there was a definite thrill that accompanied the knowledge we were doing something illegal, which is perhaps part of the reason why I was compelled to relate my own adventures with a hint of boasting.

Moreover, "In the telling of the story, the spectacular find is made that much more significant because of the simultaneous violation of different barriers and rules of conduct, governmental, managerial and bodily" (Reno, 20). Dumpster divers, like the landfill scavengers Reno describes, violate legal rules about trespassing and private property as well as cultural rules about where food should come from. It is the subversion of these deeply ingrained norms – and the proof that they are perhaps less logical than originally assumed – that makes dumpster diving so fascinating.

In addition to the fun inherent in getting away with rule breaking and the sense of fulfillment dumpster diving offers, there is something uniquely appealing about recovering *food* from the dumpster. As Reno explains, "There is a special pleasure in the scavenging of items that have been consumed… such as drugs, food, or drink, which involve a deeper embodiment of the scavenged object and a more radical mixture of

waste and person" (20). Food is more interesting and also has a greater immediate value than most other items one might find in the dumpster. It's also a lot tastier. I will discuss the differences between dumpster diving for food versus other materials later on in this chapter.

So who are these freegan dumpster divers, anyway?

As previously explained, freeganism is about opting out of the capitalist system of buying things and building an alternative lifestyle based on reciprocity, community and self-sufficiency. The term "freegan" is a play on the word "vegan," which refers to someone who abstains from eating any animal products. "Freegans go farther than vegans by choosing to monetarily consume nothing so as to give no economic power to the capitalist consumer machine" (Ferrell, 170).

The history of the contemporary freegan movement goes back to the mid 1990s when freeganism began as "an offshoot of the anti-globalization and environmental movements" (Gross, 69). Since then, "freegan" has generally been understood to apply to people who "prefer to opt out of the economic system entirely, living 'in the cracks of society' as they say, consuming only what society throws away, or what they can gather in other people's gardens, along roads, or in the wild" (69). Ernst gives a concise definition of freeganism: "Alternately defined as an anti-globalization, global justice or primitivist movement, I argue that freeganism is an example of contemporary radical politics; it is a direct action movement based on anarchist principles" (14).

While Ernst sticks to the definition of freeganism as a movement for social change, Adam Weissman, one of the originators of the freegan movement in New York City, includes in his definition a vision of what freeganism seeks to accomplish. He states,

> Freeganism is about minimizing participation in capitalism. It's about meeting our individual and community needs while modeling an alternative to an exploitative economic and social system. Freeganism is a set of beliefs based on recognition of the violence and oppression inherent in capitalist production and the constant complicity of consumers within the capitalist system (Ernst, 1).

In addition to a critique of consumerism, "concerns about the earth, animals and human potential undergird freegan rhetoric and actions" (Ernst, 23).

Completely withdrawing from, or even minimizing one's participation in, capitalism is no small task. The means by which freegans work to realize their vision are varied. Tactics include free markets, bicycle workshops, urban foraging, community meals, squatting, and of course, dumpster diving. Jeff Ferrell eloquently describes the fundamental importance of dumpster diving to the freegan movement in his book, *The Empire of Scrounge*. He writes, "Freegans…quite consciously withdraw from a global economy founded on the twin demands of alienated work and ongoing consumption, and try to invent an everyday politics of survival that can undermine these foundations one Dumpster at a time" (170).

One dumpster at a time. Ferrell's description highlights that dumpster diving is one of the most distinguishing features of the freegan movement. Indeed, Ernst defines dumpster diving in terms of freeganism, underscoring the central role of dumpster diving in the freegan movement. She writes, "Dumpster diving is a freegan tactic aimed at public outreach and education; it is also a non-violent direct action aimed at social change" (5). She touches upon the previously discussed distinction between dumpster diving as a means to a political end versus as a means to a personal end, explaining, "whereas dumpster diving, scrounging and gleaning are usually practiced as individual modes of survival, freegans were using the tactic to critique conspicuous consumption"

(5).

It is important to note that the freegan movement in New York City is not the only site of freegan activity. In my research, I learned about freegan groups in Australia, Oregon, Claremont, Los Angeles, Seattle and Texas. I also found anecdotal evidence of dumpster diving in the United Kingdom, Ohio, Washington, D.C., San Diego and San Francisco.

All of these freegan groups operate differently. In some places freegan activity is limited to sporadic dumpster diving by isolated groups (Botha, 89). In others, DIY (Do It Yourself) collectives coalesce around freegan ideals and offer workshops on dumpster diving and self sufficiency (Benji and Kaylan, 2010). Because freeganism is an affinity movement not an identity movement (Ernst, 107), anyone who identifies with freegan goals such as anti-capitalism, self-sufficiency and sustainability, and participates in freegan activities like dumpster diving or DIY workshops with the aim of realizing these goals could be considered part of the movement.

As a result, it is difficult to quantify the extent of the movement, especially because some individuals actively deny that they are part of any broader movement. For example, there is a group of young people from Austin, Texas who lead a seemingly freegan lifestyle. Ted Botha interviewed them for his book *Mongo: Adventures in Trash*. In spite of their lifestyle that is based on a rejection of capitalism by dumpster diving, they reject any category or suggestion that they are part of a movement (Botha, 94). As one of the interviewees, a young woman named Flo, stated, “It’s not like we’ve gotten together and said this is our philosophy. We all have our own personal philosophy” (94). However, as evidenced in a song that they wrote together about their lifestyle, their ideals

are quite similar to those of many self-proclaimed freegans in New York City. Their song is sung to the tune of, "Solidarity Forever" (Botha, 100). The lyrics are as follows:

> Is there ought we have in common with the greedy parasites
> Besides that we eat out of their Dumpster every night?
> Is there anything left for us?
> Open the lid and take a bite
> For the doughnuts make us strong.
>
> Chorus: Dumpster diving forever, dumpster diving forever
> Dumpster diving forever. For the doughnuts make us strong.
>
> They have wasted untold millions and they waste more every day
> While the workers keep producing they keep throwing it away
> But the freegans are united and we vow to never pay
> For the doughnuts make us strong
>
> We may be industry-dependent, hypocritical leeches
> But while you work to buy carob organic brownies, we'll be swimming at the beaches
> And when 'green' consumerism dies we'll be making freegan speeches
> For the doughnuts make us sick (Botha, 100).

The multiple references to their collective identity as freegans as well as the expression of anti-capitalist sentiments suggest that this group is perhaps taking part in the larger freegan movement by spreading these values and living the freegan lifestyle. At the same time, however, the vehement rejection of those who remain within the system – e.g. those who "work to buy carob organic brownies" – contrasts with the NYC freegan attitude of awareness-raising and coalition building.

This suggests that there are various levels within the global freegan movement: there are people who are actively reaching out to raise awareness about waste amongst non-freegans while there are others who are content to live the freegan lifestyle and condemn everyone else who is not doing the same. As with all large groups of people, it is almost impossible to make any general statements about attitudes because there are

often exceptions. In this case, it seems safe to say that there are many people who are participating in freegan activities like dumpster diving, although they may not necessarily be doing it as part of an explicitly-stated social movement, which is what the freegans in New York City are doing.

Unlike the diverse attitudes of individual dumpster divers, people who participate in Food Not Bombs (FNB) all generally dumpster dive in accordance with the same overarching principles. Founded in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1980 by anti-nuclear activists, Food Not Bombs recovers food that would otherwise go unused ("The Story of Food Not Bombs"). Typically, this means that the food comes from dumpsters although it is sometimes also donated from supermarkets. FNB then uses the food to cook vegan meals, which are served to people in public spaces.

Jennifer Roach, one of the most active members of the Pitzer Food Not Bombs chapter, outlined some of the overarching principles of the organization in an interview, stating, "Food Not Bombs is for everyone to eat. [It's] founded on the belief that food is a right and not a privilege" (9/28/11). Interestingly, although the people who eat the FNB meals are often homeless, that's not always the case. As Roach explained, "It really doesn't just mean we're going to feed the homeless. Not everyone we feed is homeless. That's also why we don't feed through shelters. We serve in public places partly because what we're doing is handing out literature and being a public presence…. But also because it's really about everyone being able to eat. So we all sit down together and share food." As an afterthought, she added, "And not everyone who's hungry is homeless either" (9/28/11).

FNB is completely volunteer-driven and operates using a non-hierarchical

organizational structure and a collective decision-making process ("The Story of Food Not Bombs"). According to their website, there are hundreds of autonomous chapters across North and South America, the Middle East, Asia, Australia and Europe. In addition to ending hunger, FNB is also dedicated to stopping the globalization of the economy, the restriction of the movements of people and the exploitation of the Earth ("The Story of Food Not Bombs").

Food Not Bombs is an example of how dumpster diving can be an essential component in a direct action movement for social change. Jennifer Roach put it beautifully when she said, "People are hungry because there are systems in place that keep food away from people and [Food Not Bombs] is a connecting thread between what is wasted and who really deserves it" (9/28/11). Dumpster diving is an essential part of their strategy for meaningful social justice work.

What's in the dumpster?

Now that the various motivations for dumpster diving have been addressed, we can move to an assessment of what is actually in the dumpster. And just as there are diverse motivations for diving, there are is a diversity of preference for the material people seek to recover. There are those who recover any sort of discarded material that might be of value, while others focus solely on food.

Those in the first category are part of the global group of urban reclaimers who look for whatever might be of value from the trash. Jeff Ferrell, a sociology professor who spent eight months living as an urban scavenger in Fort Worth, Texas falls into this category. In his search for discarded material, Ferrell did not limit himself just to dumpsters – rather he gleaned items from residential trashcans, streets, alleyways and

basically everywhere his daily ramblings took him. In *Empire of Scrounge*, the fascinating account of his experience living on the streets, he reflects on the enormous quantity and variety of discarded materials he came across during his project:

> The discovery that first and most strikingly emerged from the trash piles and Dumpsters I investigated [was the] overwhelming, inundating surplus of objects and materials, the majority of them not 'trash' in any conventional sense, but useful, functional, desirable, many times unused and unmarred (17).

He continues, describing how "so overwhelming, so magnificent was this eruption of scrounged objects from trash bins, trash piles, and city streets that I'm tempted, in hopes of communicating its magnitude and variety, to report it as one long list, one long stream-of-consciousness epic beat poem of waste and discovery, spanning the next fifty pages of so" (17). His shortened list includes: "hammered aluminum serving trays, sterling silver baby cups, clock radios, golf clubs, old lamps and new, video cameras, video tapes, pornography, piles of CDs and cassette tapes…" (17). The inventory continues for the majority of a page, a torrent of words that reflects an impulse to convey the immense quantity of discarded goods, born of a reaction to respond proactively before the sheer quantity of material overtakes him. As discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter, I discovered from my own experience and that of other urban reclaimers that Ferrell's urge to catalogue recovered items was a common response to the often overwhelming quantity of items recovered from the garbage.

Contrary to what is represented by the media coverage of groups like freegans and Food Not Bombs, who generally only dive for food, there are is a wealth of valuable non-food material to be found in dumpsters. John Hoffman, author of *The Art and Science of Dumpster Diving*, a comprehensive manual about the practical aspects of dumpster diving, summarizes what a "likely haul, conservatively" would be on a "good, that is, less

than great" day dumpster diving: in terms of food, one would find enough for one meal serving six people; the food would likely include slightly bruised fruits and vegetables, expired dairy products, frozen foods, bread, and baked goods (14).

In addition to this food, one would likely find: aluminum cans; firewood; magazines; newspapers; books; construction material e.g. plywood planks, a "trade" or "use" item e.g. an expensive article of clothing or discarded antique; and animal feed and composting material (14).[10] As Hoffman highlights, there is such a quantity of valuable items that it's often hard to choose between them. As Milton Saier, a professor who has been dumpster diving for 32 years writes, "Virtually everything you can get when you go to the front door [of the grocery store you can get] from the dumpster, only a little riper" (Saier, 2006: 42).

In terms of food, this is generally true, although there are some items that are much more readily available than others. Fruits and vegetables of all sorts are some of the most common dumpster finds, because of their relatively short shelf life. In his summary of the food he typically finds when he dives, Milton Saier lists apples, oranges, bananas and peaches as the most commonly found fruits (as a result of the fact they are often overstocked because of high demand). More exotic fruits such as "kiwis, pomelos, avocados, guavas, papayas, mangos, [and] cheramoias" also turn up, although with less frequency than the more common fruits (42).

Vegetables are also extremely common, especially bags of salad, which often are

[10] Given that recycling rates have increased since Hoffman's book was published in 1993, it is unlikely that aluminum cans, magazines and paper would be found in such great quantity in dumpsters these days ("Waste and Recycling"). However, recycling rates vary widely by state and city, which means that in a city with an inefficient or nonexistent recycling program, the discovery of recyclable materials might be just as common in 2011 as it was in 1993.

thrown out because of expiration dates. Of veggies, Saier writes, “I get ‘em all, often in tremendous quantity – ochra, Chinese peas, winter and summer vegetables, clean packaged spinach, peas, carrots, and salads” (42).

During my research, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to speak with Nina Bosken, a friend of a friend who started dumpster diving after college to save money on food. She told me, “There’s always certain foods you always seem to be able to find a lot of. Potatoes were a big one – you seem to always find potatoes” (9/19/11). She also recalled finding lots of lettuce, zucchini, eggplants and cucumbers at the Whole Foods dumpsters.

Besides fruits and vegetables, bread is found in the greatest quantities from the dumpster. As Saier puts it, “I get enough bread to feed the whole barnyard – and the family – and the students in my lab at UCSD” (42). While slightly less common, dairy products are by no means absent from the typical dumpster haul. Saier describes finding “dozens of cartons of milk: whole milk, nonfat milk, condensed milk, buttermilk, chocolate milk, fruit-flavored milk, lactose-free milk, even goat’s milk and soy milk” as well as “unopened containers of yogurt, cottage cheese, creamed cheese, butter and margarine [as well as]… every kind of exotic cheese” (42).

Meat, “still frozen, or cooked (fried, baked or roasted) – and still warm!” in the form of “packaged turkeys or chickens, hams, steaks, hot dogs, bacon, sausages” can also be found relatively frequently in dumpsters, as well as unopened cans and any type of dented box (Saier, 42). Eggs are also fairly common to find in dumpsters, especially because if one egg is broken, the entire package is thrown out. Finding flowers and houseplants is also customary: “to get 100 beautiful bouquets of flowers in one trip is not

unusual" (Saier, 43). On the first night I went diving, we found six bouquets of semi-wilted flowers. If they hadn't smelled like fish, they would have been perfect!

When I asked Nina Bosken if someone could live off the food they found in the dumpster, she replied:

> I think that somebody could live off it, it just depends on how picky you are and what food you want. Like we never really found grains in the dumpster and we like to cook with rice a lot and we like to cook with pasta and we never really found pasta in the dumpster. And eggs are kind of questionable. Things like flour and sugar we never really found. We never found quinoa in the dumpster. (9/19/11)

She explained that because they were saving money by getting food from the dumpster, she and her housemates were able to rationalize the purchase of more expensive staple items like quinoa and grains. She continued, concluding that besides staples like flour, sugar and grains,

> I think outside of that you could live on dumpstering. You get a lot of good veggies and fruits and bread. Meat if you want it, tofu, cheese sometimes. At least 80 percent of my diet could be found in the dumpster (9/19/11).

Bosken estimated that going dumpster diving every two weeks would be enough to feed oneself and ensure a healthy diet of fresh fruits and vegetables.

However, some might wonder if it is truly possible to ensure adequate nutrition by eating food from the dumpster. Yet, at least one study found that freegans had more nutritionally sound eating habits than low-income residents who did not dumpster dive for food (Gross, 73). The study compared the diets of freegans in rural Oregon with those of low-income residents in the same area. Of their findings, the researchers reported, "Dual parents working for minimum wage, usually in fast food restaurants, ate both less nutritious and less enjoyable meals than the freegans" (73). While freegan participants also acknowledged that "sometimes they had to fill themselves up with non-nutritious

food" (73), this study suggests that at least for low-income people, dumpster diving might be the means to a more balanced diet than they might otherwise be able to afford. However, there are a host of factors that might make it impossible for low-income people to dumpster dive, including but not limited to unwanted social stigma, fears of police and inadequate resources. I address the privilege inherent in being able to dumpster diving more extensively in Chapter Three.

Nutrition aside, it seems clear that it is possible to survive by eating only food from a dumpster. In fact, Jeremy Seifert, writer and director of *Dive!*, a documentary about dumpster diving that has won "21 awards in festivals worldwide" since it came out in 2010, feeds his family almost exclusively with food from the dumpster. In fact, he had to find a freezer in order to store all of the food he was recovering from dumpsters. Given the amount of high quality food that languishes in dumpsters around the world every night, I have no doubt that anyone who was so inclined (and has a certain degree of social privilege and ability) could survive by eating food exclusively from the dumpsters.

Best dumpster finds

One of my favorite questions to ask dumpster divers was about their best dumpster find. Their responses reflect the endless mystery and wonderful serendipity of dumpster diving. For the sake of comparison, I list interviewees by first name and the city where they did their diving. If no name is available, I just list the location.

- **Nina, Washington, D.C. and Kentucky**
    - "A good deal of hummus."
    - "One time we found 9 packages of tofu."
    - "One time there was this recipe I wanted to try that was a soup with pears

and peppers and my housemate ended up dumpstering pears and peppers and it was funny because I was craving it." (Bosken, 9/19/11)

- **Jennifer, Connecticut and Claremont**
  - "If you're ever looking for a treat, dumpster at Dunkin Donuts. They're still wrapped in paper."
  - "The coolest thing I've ever dumpster dived is hair dye from a Super Cuts. We dyed my friend's hair with it. That was a lot of fun."
  - She told me stories she's heard from other divers about dumpstering an entire case of wine and finding a whole dumpster of kid's history books at a library (it had rained so they were pretty stuck together which meant a catastrophic loss of probably 1000 books) (Roach, 9/28/11)
- **Milton, San Diego**
  - $600 worth of towels, potholders and dolls, all with Christmas designs
  - A purse with $300 in twenty dollar bills (which he then returned to the owner because her name was in the wallet)
  - Valuable antique dolls
  - An unopened bottled of Vodka (Saier, 2006)
- **Andy, Los Angeles**
  - A case of truffle oil worth $360
- **Princeton, New Jersey**
  - 75 bags of organic coffee (Youtube, 2010).
- According to trashwiki, an online forum created by dumpster divers, recyclers and others who recuperate materials from the trash, there was even an instance of

someone recovering 55 Oscars that had been reported stolen from a dumpster in Los Angeles. Willie Fulgear, 61, received a $50,000 for returning the stolen Oscars, and received two tickets to the Oscars as a token of gratitude for his help. ("Dumpster Diving," 2011).

"There's too much"

While the fun and adventure of dumpster diving is undoubtedly what attracts many people to the activity in the first place, there is a sobering reality that underlies all this fun: if divers weren't recovering it, all of this valuable food, money and material would be heading to the landfill to languish for years before eventually deteriorating – at least partially – and producing methane emissions.

Landfills accounted for 23 percent of methane emissions in the United States in 2007 (Bloom, 16). While there have been some efforts to recapture these emissions as a source of renewable energy, landfills remain the "second leading source of human-related methane emissions in the United States" (16). Throwing away any item that still has value is a bad idea from almost every standpoint, but throwing away food is the worst bad idea we have had, given that "of all materials, food has the highest rate of methane yield" (16). In light of our continually warming planet and the lack of political action being taken to reduce human green house gas emissions, sending valuable goods, especially food, to the landfill is not only stupid and shortsighted, it is also threatening the future of human existence on this planet.

Another aspect of the sobering reality of examining our throw-away system is the sheer volume of valuable material that is being discarded. Almost everyone who has written about dumpster diving includes a laundry list of the food recovered from a dive

when they describe the experience. I was no exception to this pattern (see Introduction). What underlies this impulse, it seems to me, is the need to validate a material reality that is so contrary to the fundamental belief that no one would intentionally waste so much edible food. While I can't remember someone ever explicitly telling me that good food is not thrown in dumpsters, because I never had reason to believe otherwise, I suppose it just never crossed my mind that something so confusing would occur on a daily basis in every urban area in the United States and most of the rest of the Global North.

But just because stores don't advertise that they waste edible food doesn't mean they don't do it. Pictures of dumpster hauls are scattered across the Internet on the various freegan and dumpster diving blogs that have spawned in recent years. I believe this photographic documentation is inspired by the same impulse as the list-making – to prove to others a reality that one wouldn't have believed if they hadn't seen it with their own eyes: *that all of this good food was intentionally thrown away*.

The lists abound. For instance, of her first dumpster dive in New York City, Kelly Ernst reflected on the staggering, literally unbelievable quantity of food they found in the dumpsters:

> Even with all the research I'd been doing, I was blown away by the amount and quality of food we found: kale, pineapple, watermelon, bananas, enough lettuce to eat a salad with every meal, bags of perfectly soft breads, bagels, donuts, soymilk, dairy milk, yogurt (soy and not), butter, sandwiches, muffins, tortillas, jalapenos, chives, lemon juice, candy bars, bubble gum, mushrooms, zucchini, eggs upon eggs upon eggs. Reading statistics on waste [an estimated $20 billion worth of food is thrown away by supermarkets each year], catalogs of items found from other dumpster divers and scroungers, [and] all the prep work I had done before… was no substitute for being face to face with a knee-high mound of food on the sidewalk. (Ernst, 77)

I had a similar reaction when I went on my first dumpster dive. The waste of so much perfect food is literally incomprehensible – or at least unbelievable – until one is able to

touch, smell and see the mounds of food that are unearthed from dumpsters engorged with tossed food, and at least start believing it is real, even if one can't comprehend the reasons behind it. Jennifer Roach recalled a similar wonderment during her first dives:

> It was kind of amazing those first few times. You just see like, 200 peppers, just chillin' in a dumpster, that were fine…It was just really incredible, how much perfectly good food went to waste. People think about dumpster diving… I don't know, I used to picture people eating rotten food or like squishy brown bananas or the one inch slice of apple that's not rotten. And that's not it. There's a lot of perfectly good food. (9/28/11)

Stories about the sheer quantities of food that end up in dumpsters are everywhere. Everyone I talked to mentioned the vast amounts of food, with varying degrees of excitement and frustration, or sometimes a combination of both. Milton Saier spoke about how he fills the entire back seat of his car to the ceiling with food from the dumpster every single time he dives. Commenting on the quantity of food in dumpsters in the documentary *Dive!*, writer and director Jeremy Seifert sums it up simply: "There's too much." To illustrate his point, he relates how he and his friends recovered a year's supply of meat in just one week of dumpster diving. Another diver who goes by "Chubba" was interviewed for an article about dumpster diving in *Salon Magazine*. He too talked about the enormous quantities of food that divers find:

> The excess is not just a pear here and a case of tomato sauce there. It is more food than you and your 20 friends know what to do with. I have had to solve such problems as: What do we do with seven cases of wrapped chocolate? Is there a recipe that calls for 100 red bell peppers? How many ice cream sandwiches does it take to give you a stomach ache or how many grilled cheese sandwiches will 15 loaves of bread, 30 tomatoes and 40 pounds of extra sharp Grafton cheese make? (Essig, 2002)

The freegans from Austin recount that they have found "whole crates of soy milk and a load of maple syrup and waffle mix. Whole crates!" (Botha, 79). They also recall how

"we fed a crew of fifty people out of the Dumpsters," concluding, "Austin is the best place in the world for Dumpster diving" (79).

But is Austin really the only place with great dumpsters? From the tales I've heard of dumpster diving in New York City, Claremont, Los Angeles, San Diego and the outskirts of D.C., finding staggering quantities of wasted food in dumpsters seems to be the norm, rather than the exception.

The Rules and Secrets of Dumpster Diving

Because there are few dumpster divers, relative to the total population, those who dive have extensive liberty to represent the activity as they choose. The result is a fascinating constellation of guidelines and "secrets" about dumpster diving. Different divers emphasize different things. In general, however, advice about dumpster diving is either about diving etiquette or practical advice on how to dive.

Etiquette

In terms of etiquette, I found that there is a general code of ethics that many serious divers adhere to. The zine entitled "Dumpster Dive: A zine guide to doing it and doing it well," by the Seattle DIY Collective, contains some general rules for diving. The first one is the only rule in all caps: "CLEAN UP YOUR MESS!" (Benji and Kaylan, 2). As if that wasn't clear enough, they explain further:

> Many stores and employees at stores don't mind dumpster divers (many employees dive themselves), but they'll start to mind if divers make a huge mess….Think of it this way: if you leave a mess, it's fairly likely that the business will start to lock their dumpster, which will greatly suck for you and anybody else who uses it. Leave it as nice or nicer than you found it. (2)

I will always remember this first and most important lesson thanks to the visceral memory, from my first dive, of several long minutes spent scraping up a pinkish yellow

chunky food substance that had spilled on the asphalt next to the dumpster. The gunk resembled vomit in almost every way, and the cardboard box flap we were using to scrape it off the uneven pavement was not the ideal tool for such a messy job. Still, the people I was with were adamant that we clean up whatever mess we had made. Even if we hadn't made the mess, I learned, we still were responsible for cleaning it up.

Jeremy Seifert has three rules for dumpster divers which echo many of the guidelines in the Seattle zine. This similarity suggests a common code of ethics. Seifert's rules are: "Never take more than you need, unless you find it a good home"; "The first one to the dumpster has first dibs, but you always gotta share"; "Leave it cleaner than you found it" (Seifert, 2010).

This ethos of community is evident in the writing of many a dumpster diver. For instance, Natalya Savka, a former Sierra Club intern and frequent dumpster diver, published an article about dumpster diving in the September/October 2011 issue of Sierra magazine. According to her, there are three secrets to dumpster diving. The first two are practical advice, while "The third and final secret to dumpster diving is to eat, together, like there's no tomorrow. Because it's all crazy, and maybe all we've got is this" (Savka, 2011). Further substantiating Seifert's, Savka's and the Seattle DIY collective's testimony, I noted this ethos of cooperation throughout much of the dumpster diving community, from Pitzer Food Not Bombs to the L.A. Meetup group potluck to the NYC freegan feasts.

The idea of sharing with other people is based on the vision of a better world that many freegan dumpster divers imagine – by living more connected lives with fewer things and more human relationships, they argue, we will be happier. Sharing a meal

together after collaboratively recovering food fosters connections in a non-hierarchical way at the same time as it connects everyone to the source of their food. As Ernst explains, sharing is an essential element of freeganism:

> Freegans place a major emphasis on sharing, both as a means to reduce consumption but also to strengthen community. Many critics of market capitalism argue that its emphasis on individuality and competition extends from the financial into the social realm, privileging selfishness over cooperation and community and blaming individual shortcomings for structural inequalities. (48)

Similar to the expectation that all divers will share the bounty and clean up after themselves is the rule, "Don't spoil sites" (Benji and Kaylan, 2). This means that a dumpster diver must practice discretion when discussing where they dive. As the authors of the Seattle zine write,

> We don't want to bring unwanted attention to dumpsters. The more people you tell, the more likely it is that someone will go there and fuck things up. Use discretion when telling people about the places you frequent, and if you tell people who are new to dumpstering, be sure to tell them about good dumpster etiquette. (2)

This rule is embedded in the same notion of mutual respect upon which the other etiquette guidelines are founded. As the zine authors makes clear, the dumpsters are shared by all who dive, and especially in cities with many dumpster divers like Seattle, one dumpster diver's lack of respect could ruin it for many others.

Practical Advice

Besides being respectful – by not making a mess, practicing discretion, sharing with others and not taking more than one needs – there aren't too many guidelines for how to go about dumpster diving. However, there is a lot of practical *advice* that is useful for first-time divers to know before they go. From my own experience, there are several useful tips, the first of which is:

Go after midnight. As Eric, the organizer of the dumpster diving Meetup group

explained to me, “You don’t want to go during the day. It wouldn’t be good for anybody,” alluding to the conflicts that occur between store managers and divers. Although I encountered many stories of sympathetic and even supportive grocery store employees who would set food aside for the dumpster divers rather than put it in the dumpster, for every sympathetic store manager, there is a story of an antagonistic manager who will call the police when divers show up.

Another advantage of going at night is that it allows divers to avoid the potential complications that might arise from the presence of curious daytime shoppers who would at best hinder the efficiency of the divers, and at worst report them to the managers or the police. Equally important, it seems to me that going at night is an integral part of the subversive fun of dumpster diving – moving under the cover of darkness, knowing that most people are asleep at that hour, is part of the excitement of the whole experience.

If possible, take a car. Having a car makes everything much easier – it allows one to take more food and it takes less time to go between dumpsters, allowing the group to cover more dumpsters in one night. Although the Meetup event was billed as a bicycle tour, we still took two cars. We ended up filling the cars with so much food that I found myself sitting in a pungent and humid backseat on the way home, holding a damp cardboard box on my lap and trying to keep the overwhelming quantities of packaged salad, apples, pears and laundry detergent from falling completely onto my already-full lap. There is no way that the bicycle panniers could have held even a tenth of the material we recovered. The difficulty of carrying out dumpster diving efficiently and productively without a car highlights issues of privilege and class – the person who is most likely in need of food is the one with the least likelihood of having the means to access that food

efficiently. The issue of class, race and privilege will be addressed more thoroughly in Chapter Three.

If someone asks you to leave, do it. When I went diving with the Meetup group in L.A., the police showed up just as we were leaving the second dive site. While they eventually let us leave without too much trouble, the incident highlighted the potential for unpleasant encounters with law enforcement officers.[11] The authors of the Seattle zine suggest that it's important to have an escape route in case one needs to leave quickly, in the event of store workers or cops arriving on the scene (Benji and Kaylan, 3). They note that if the cops do show up, it's best not to run, because that will make it more suspicious (3). They write,

> Dumpster diving at most is a trespassing charge, which is a misdemeanor (i.e. not a big deal), but they probably won't even charge you with that. It's good to also prepare an excuse why you're there. Running is more likely to lead to a charge, potentially not only with a trespassing charge, but also with obstruction of justice (3).

Laura Pritchett, a lifelong diver, offers this advice:

> There are certain guidelines to be followed while diving. Wear gloves and old clothing that covers, bring a small stepladder, look for moving vans... bring a ski pole to use as a stick to bring things up or poke through bags,... recycle what can be recycled, winter is better than summer simply because of the smell. Leave anything with someone's identification... Understand that ninety percent of the world's population would love to have this stuff... And mostly, try not to get depressed. So many beautiful things get thrown away (Pritchett, 112).

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[11] The legality of dumpster diving generally depends on context. The Supreme Court ruled in *California v. Greenwood (1988)* that citizens may not reasonably expect their trashcans to be private because legally the boundaries of the household do not extend to the trash cans which means that police officers may search trash cans without obtaining a warrant (Strasser, 7). For commercial dumpsters, the case is less clear. In addition, dumpster diving often occurs on private property, which means that it is often considered trespassing. However, there is no federal law the prohibits dumpster diving explicitly and thus the law generally depends on state or city ordinances.

In addition to knowing what to wear and what tools to bring, it is important to be safe. This means going with a group, being careful of sharp objects, and being smart about what food they take. In general, it is recommended that if an item looks rotten or if it has been opened, it's best to leave it. As for meat, eggs and dairy, it's up to the individual diver, but the Seattle zine advises that all divers research the temperature at which these items must be cooked to kill bacteria if they decide to eat them. As Jennifer Roach said, "don't be stupid about it" (9/28/11).

Finally, to have a successful dive it's important to be creative. For instance, the Seattle DIY collective suggests that one way to be creative with dumpster diving locations is to pay attention to store news – "if a cooler breaks down at Safeway, they'll throw things away in their coolers" (4). In the end though, respect, cooperation, preparation and good sense are the most important essentials to keep in mind for anyone thinking of embarking on a dumpster dive.

At a tipping point?

Fifteen years ago, it is unlikely that twelve strangers would have come together to spend their Saturday night digging through dumpsters. In 1993, John Hoffman wrote in *The Art and Science of Dumpster Diving*: "Dumpster diving is one of the great American taboos. It's so taboo that there aren't even organized groups fighting against it – yet" (13). While dumpster diving is still a marginal activity in 2011, I would not characterize it as "one of the great American taboos." While culturally constructed perceptions of waste, scavenging and trash foster a mainstream wariness toward dumpster diving, there is also an attitude of curiosity. For instance, when I spoke with Milton Saier, I asked him if he had noticed an increasing interest in dumpster diving in recent years. His response

was unequivocal: **"**Oh definitely. There's certainly been more interest especially amongst college students" (10/4/11). When I asked him how recently he's noticed this increased interest, he replied, "Very recently, like within the last year or two. I have frequent requests from students who want to go out with me" (10/4/11). While Saier fails to speculate on the reasons for this increased interest, it is likely that the economic recession that began in 2008 has increased the legions of people who are open to dumpster diving.

Although Saier refers mostly to increasing interest amongst college students, dumpster diving has become an object of curiosity for the mainstream media as well, especially in recent years. The fact that one third of the people at the dumpster diving Meetup were there in a journalistic capacity – myself included – reflects a burgeoning curiosity about the topic. As one of the reporters from SoCal Connected told me, "People have been doing this for a long time, it's only now that people are taking interest" (Pandya, 9/24/11). She's not the only one who thinks so. Another participant at the freegan bike tour declared to the group that dumpster diving is "on the precipice, mark my words." As proof, he cited the documentary *Dive!* as an example of the increasing interest of mainstream media in this marginal activity.

Researchers in Australia have also noted that divers have been on the receiving end of more media attention: "One interesting recent development has been heightened media interest in Dumpster Divers, in particular. What until recently was an activity known to relatively few has now become much more widely discussed in the print and electronic media…" (Edwards and Mercer, 293). According to Kelly Ernst, the media interest in the freegan movement, particularly the freegans in New York City, has gone global. She writes,

> Not just local, but national and international outlets were interested in covering the freegans. Articles have appeared in the Boston Globe, LA Times, in newspapers and magazines in Georgia, Oklahoma and Florida. The freegans have gained international attention, as well. Reporters from Telemundo interviewed Janet [a NYC freegan] and followed her around for a "Day-in-the-life-of" piece. A television segment on freeganism featuring Janet and Christian ran in Japan. There have been stories about the freeganism in the Dutch, German, Irish and Spanish press. Freegans showed up on the cover of The New York Times, in a story on Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report* and several freegans were interviewed for 20/20. The freegans are all over the Internet. Articles ran in Salon.com, CNN.com, and AlterNet; Newsweek ran a story supplemented by a reporters' blog about her one month experiment into freeganism. (112)

Although Ernst goes on to note that freegan stories were often more spectacle than substance. However, the fact that they were a source of media interest suggests at the very least an increased curiosity about freeganism. The same investigation of dumpster divers and freegans in Australia noted that concerns about food miles, climate change and global hunger are increasingly making their way into mainstream consciousness (Edwards and Mercer, 280). It does not require a great feat of the imagination to connect concerns about pollution, food quality, global climate change and waste to a growing curiosity and openness to dumpster diving.

Some go so far as to assert this recent interest is part of a bigger shift in cultural consciousness. Madeline Nelson, a 54-year-old freegan from New York City told a reporter, "I think we're in the midst of a paradigm shift. More and more of us are starting to question the system from within" (Persson, 2011). Indeed, in light of the analysis of social theorist Alberto Melucci, it seems that freeganism announces a cultural change that is already present. Melucci writes,

> Movements in complex societies are disenchanted prophets… Like the prophets, the movements 'speak before': they announce what is taking shape even before its direction and content has become clear. The inertia of the old categories may prevent us from hearing the message and from deciding, consciously and responsibly, what action to take in light of it… Contemporary movements possess

> not the force of the apparatus but the power of the world… They speak a language that seems to be entirely their own, but they say something that transcends their particularity and speaks to us all (Melucci, 1996: 1).

In this case, freegan dumpster divers announce a shift away from a system driven by capitalist ideals and toward the ideals of self-sufficiency, human fulfillment, resource stewardship and sustainability.

Moreover, as feminist geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham note in the 2006 edition of their joint work, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It),* there has been an increasing interest in capitalist alternatives in the decade since their book was first published. They write, "Alternatives, whatever that disputed term might be taken to mean, are no longer simply jottings in the margins of a central text about global neoliberalization; they are to be considered in their own right" (viii).

In some ways, freeganism is evidence of this gradual change. Analyzed in the context of Melucci's analysis of social movements as prophets of imminent change, it seems that freeganism is the manifestation of a widely felt dissatisfaction with our current way of life and the desire for fundamental change. In light of Gibson-Graham's comments about the increasing interest in alternative economic structures since 1996, freeganism seems not only logical but perhaps even expected. In addition, the Occupy movements that have sprung up around the world since September 2011 suggest that the frustrations freegans voice about the current economic and political system are widely felt. It also suggests that there is an increasing willingness to mobilize for change. This is essential to keep in mind as we work to assess the transformative potential of the freegan movement. In light of this brief analysis, it seems the contemporary moment is ripe for

change. However, various aspects of freeganism must be assessed further before substantive conclusions can be reached.

CHAPTER TWO: PLACING DUMPSTER DIVING WITHIN THE BROADER CONTEXT OF CONSUMERISM, HISTORY AND EXCESS

Consumption lies at the heart of American life and economic health, and intrinsic to consumption is garbage.

- Heather Rogers, *Gone Tomorrow*

Consume or die. That's the mandate of the culture. And it all ends up in the dump. We make stupendous amounts of garbage, then we react to it, not only technologically but in our hearts and minds. We let it shape us. We let it control our thinking. Garbage comes first, then we build a system to deal with it.

- Don DeLillo, *Underworld*

Literally and figuratively, dumpster diving brings to light that which is hidden from plain view. In a very concrete sense, the act of dumpster diving is about bringing items buried at the bottom of a dumpster to the surface so that their unfulfilled utility may be realized. In a more abstract sense, dumpster diving reveals a secret part of the system that produces the materials most Americans rely upon for sustenance, clothing, entertainment, transportation and personal grooming. Simply put, garbage is about a lot more than what is in the dumpster. Indeed, as William Rathje, director of the Garbage Project has suggested, "garbage gives us 'insight into the long-term values of civilization'" (Popson, 2002).[12]

To understand what the contents of our dumpsters reflect about the values of contemporary American civilization entails an investigation of the origins of consumerism and cultural notions of trash. It also demands an interrogation of the logic that dictates our easy acceptance of this massively wasteful system. In this chapter, I will

[12] The Garbage Project was a 30 year long study of American trash habits. Conducted at the University of Arizona, researchers took an archaeological approach to the analysis of household garbage in U.S. cities (Bloom, xvi). Amongst other conclusions, one of the main findings of the study was that people under-report the amount and types of garbage they generate.

explore these issues by discussing the invisibility of waste, the environmental and social problems associated with it, and the rise of consumer culture. I will end by situating dumpster diving within this historical and social context, and by suggesting that by transcending established rules about waste, dumpster diving opens a world of possibilities for transforming our current waste-based system into something that is more equitable, sustainable and sensible.

"As inseparable an American cultural practice as roping cattle"

Invisibility of the connections to our stuff, and where it eventually ends up, is one of the defining characteristics of 21st-century life in the United States. This invisibility is one of the things that makes the study of trash and dumpster diving so fascinating. By literally diving (or at least stepping!) into a dumpster, a space that we learn almost from *infancy* should not be transgressed, divers shed light on the consequences of consumption, most of which are deliberately hidden from the public eye. As John Hoffman explains in *The Art and Science of Dumpster Diving*, "Dumpster diving is a brutally real way of examining the world" (31). He equates looking at a store's dumpster after browsing inside a store to "seeing your favorite actress without her makeup, wearing torn blue jeans and eating fast food" (31).

By making visible that which was previously invisible, dumpster diving highlights how waste is such an ingrained part of our daily lives that it is often hard to even recognize. In his book *Rubbish Values: The Political Economy of Waste*, Martin O'Brien reflects on this reality:

> There are some things in our lives so obvious, so glaringly, manifestly and ubiquitously essential to carrying on in the world that we often fail to take note of them. Their facticity is so apparent that, whilst they do not escape our

> consciousness entirely, they seem to be beyond question, beyond analysis and reflection. One clear example is the process and activity of wasting (269).

Louis Althusser talks about the "false obviousness of everyday practices" of which trash is one of the best examples because it is so fundamental to our consumptive lifestyle, but also so removed from our collective consciousness (Althusser and Balibar, 1968). In *Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash*, Elizabeth Royte writes about how waste seems benign – and remains invisible – because it is such a fleeting part of our physical reality: "Somehow our unwanted stuff keeps disappearing. It moves away from us in pieces – truck by truck, barge by barge – in a process that is as constant as it is invisible" (4). Susan Strasser, author of *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*, also emphasizes the invisibility of waste: "The topic of waste is central to our lives yet generally silenced or ignored" (18).

My own experience resonates with these critiques – it has only been in the process of doing research for this thesis that I have become aware of the extent to which throwing things away was for so long a "ubiquitously essential," unconscious and un-interrogated part of my life. I am shocked by how dramatically my consciousness about trash has shifted since embarking on this project, a shift that is more indicative of how little I thought about it before, rather than how much I think about it now.

A big part of the reason why the act of discard is so unconscious is because waste is embedded into our culture, economy and every day life. The place where this waste becomes not only consciously recognized but actively sought after is in the dumpster. The contents of the dumpster reflect our unconscious actions. As Jeff Ferrell explains,

> America's engorged Dumpsters confirm what many already suspect: the culture and economy of consumption runs on waste. It promotes not only endless acquisition, but the steady disposal of yesterday's purchases by consumers who,

> awash in their own impatient insatiability, must make room for tomorrow's next round of consumption. As a result, it spawns closed communities of privileged consumers who waste every day what might sustain others for a lifetime, and landfills that clog and overflow with barely used goods, growing as big as the shopping malls from which their content not so long ago came (Ferrell, 28).

Evasion, an anonymous account of dumpster diving, offers insight into the systemic nature of this problem. As the main character wanders the United States, "diving from one Dumpster to the next, moving among a 'renegade faction of society living and prospering on what we throw away' he realize[s] that 'throwing edible food in a Dumpster was as inseparable an American cultural practice as roping cattle,'" a fact which was "a guarded secret" (Ferrell, 16).[13] It's not just food that's wasted either – almost all of the materials that we purchase eventually end up in the dumpster. As Susan Strasser reports, "Everything that comes into the end-of-the-millennium home –every toaster, pair of trousers and ounce of soda pop, and every box and bag and bottle they arrive in – eventually requires a decision: keep it or toss it" (5).

But why is this the case? Is garbage inevitable? Was there ever another alternative to the culture of consumption in which we now live? Those who have studied the history of trash in the United States have found that our current consumerism was by no means inevitable. David Orr, a professor at Oberlin College, sums up the crucial factors that created our consumer-based system and the forces that perpetuate it:

> The emergence of the consumer society was neither inevitable nor accidental. Rather, it resulted from the convergence of four forces: a body of ideas saying that the earth is ours for the taking; the rise of modern capitalism; technological

[13] It's interesting to note that Ferrell capitalizes "Dumpster." This capitalization seems to suggest that the dumpsters were landmarks in this character's journey across the U.S. While more conventional travelers might mark their progress by motels they've stayed at or roads they've driven upon, the character Ferrell describes inhabits a world in which dumpsters are central because they serve as an important source of sustenance and as well as a community with like-minded travelers.

> cleverness; and the extraordinary bounty of North America, where the model of mass consumption first took root. More directly, our consumptive behavior is the result of seductive advertising, entrapment by easy credit, ignorance about the hazardous content of much of what we consume, the breakdown of community, a disregard for the future, political corruption and the atrophy of alternative means by which we might provision ourselves (cited by Leonard, 155).

Orr highlights the wide array of factors – economic, cultural, environmental, political and social – that have created our current system, underscoring just how enmeshed consumption is in, well, just about everything. He also highlights how the United States' large land mass and abundant natural resources were a contributing factor in our unique brand of overconsumption. The result is that "at the turn of the century, Americans know only a well-developed consumer culture, based on a continual influx of new products" (Strasser, 16).

Consumption: invisible and pervasive

De-naturalizing consumption is a massive undertaking because the scope of consumptive practices and influences in the 21st century is so vast. Juliana Mansvelt, a New Zealand cultural geographer and author of *Geographies of Consumption*, explains,

> Consumption is so integral to the constitution of contemporary society that it is almost impossible to avoid in capitalist social formations (Bocock, 1993). In fact, there are 'few areas of everyday life not affected by or linked to practices of consumption' (Edwards, 2000: 5), and being, working and living in the developing world are dominated by individuals' relationships with consumer goods (Miles, 1998a; Ritzer, 1999). (Mansvelt, 1)

To analyze consumption it is helpful to begin with some definitions. We hear them all the time, but what do all of these nicely alliterative "c" words – consumption, consumerism, and commodities – really mean? Mansvelt defines "consumption" as "the complex sphere of social relations and discourses which centre on the sale, purchase and use of commodities" (6). However, she notes that because "the spheres of production and consumption are interdependent…consumption is not simply about the using up of

things, but also involves the production of meaning, experience, knowledge or objects – the outcome of which may or may not take the commodity form" (7). Simply put, consumption is about how we construct meaning and value in relation to the objects, information and experiences that we encounter in our daily lives.

Before going any further, it is important to distinguish between consumption and overconsumption. As Annie Leonard, author of *The Story of Stuff*: *How Our Obsession With Stuff is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health – and a Vision for Change* explains, "Consumption means acquiring and using goods and services to meet one's needs" whereas "overconsumption is when we take more resources than we need and than the planet can sustain, as is the case in most of the United States as well as a growing number of other countries" (145). As the tremendous quantities of valuable material recovered by dumpster divers suggests, we are clearly living in a society based on *over*consumption.

While consumption and consumerism are often used interchangeably, there is a big difference between the two terms. Unlike the consumption of food, water and other resources necessary for our survival, "consumerism" is "the particular relationship to consumption in which we seek to define and demonstrate our self-worth through the Stuff we own" (Leonard, 145).[14] Mansvelt defines "consumerism" as the phenomenon

[14] I credit Annie Leonard for her useful definition of the term "Stuff," which I use throughout this chapter. She defines "Stuff" as "manufactured or mass-produced goods, including packaging, iPods, clothes, shoes, cars, toasters, marshmallow shooters (this last from the SkyMall catalog)" (xxxiii). She notes that she does not "extend the meaning to include resources, like logs and barrels of oil." Rather, the term refers to things that "we buy, maintain, lose, break, replace, stress about, and with which we confuse our personal self-worth." The traditional term for Leonard's concept of Stuff has been "goods," but, as she explains, "since goods are so often about anything but good – i.e., excessively

"whereby individuals (both producers and consumers) become enmeshed in the process of acquiring commodities, and formulate their goals in life in relation to the acquisition of commodities" (2). She continues, noting that consumerism "is argued to be so ubiquitous in contemporary societies that it has become 'a way of life'" (2). So while "consumption" refers to all types of resource use, consumerism is a specific type of consumption that has to do with consuming more than we actually need to survive.

But what about commodities, the stuff we're consuming so much of? While the colloquial significance of the term "commodity" often implies a material good, "Commodities are more than just objects; they are shifting assemblages of social relations, which take place and assume form and meaning in time and space…" (Mansvelt, 1). Indeed, as the lived experiences of most people in the Global North suggest, the consumption of commodities has come to be a defining feature of daily life.[15] Mansvelt confirms this reality, noting how "for many individuals, consumption is both a visible and pervasive part of everyday life in contemporary society" (1). Although "a trip to a market, a store, a fast food restaurant, the movies or a local trader may be a taken-for-granted aspect of everyday life, for many… these actions play a critical role in the meaningful creation and expression of place" (1). As a result, "consumption has become 'one of the grand narratives of the second half of the twentieth century'" (1).

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packaged, toxics laden, unnecessary, and destructive of the planet – I don't like to use that term" (Leonard, xxxiii).

[15] I use the terms "Global North" and "Global South" to refer to varying levels of economic development in the world. The Global North refers to the 57 countries in the world with a Human Development Index (HDI) above .8; most of these countries are located in the Northern Hemisphere. The remaining 133 countries in the world constitute the Global South, countries mostly located in the Southern Hemisphere with a low or medium HDI (Damerow, 2007).

It is important to note that even though consumerism is mainly located in the Global North, consumption also influences people who live in the Global South because the construction of need, desire, abundance or lack are influenced by the fluid and changing meaning of consumption in the rest of the world (Mansvelt, 4). Moreover, the 21st century globalized economy means that that production of need and desire in the Global North is more likely than ever before to affect someone in the Global South. The inhabitants of countries in the Global South are also affected by consumption because they are often the recipients of material waste from the Global North (5).

The case of electronic waste is a prime example of this – in spite the international Basel Convention that prohibits the export of hazardous waste from various wealthy countries, the U.S. is the primary exporter of e-waste to China (Mansvelt, 5).[16] In Guangdong Province, an estimated 100,000 people scavenge through e-waste, and in the process are exposed to chemicals such as lead, cadmium, mercury and beryllium that are the result from the process of burning of the electronics to extract materials (5). This is just one example of many that illustrate how the consequences of global consumption are very serious, and often fatal (5).

Mansvelt's analysis makes it clear that consumption is a global phenomenon that influences every person on the planet. As a result, we find ourselves living in a contemporary moment in which "commodities are assumed to have a more significant role in mediating social life than was previously the case" (Mansvelt, 2). In fact, the postmodern epoch in which we live has been described in terms of the various facets of

[16] Although China is rapidly industrializing, it still has a middle human development index (HDI), which places it, at least according to one analysis, in the group of countries that are considered the Global South (Damerow, 2007).

consumerism: “the increasing volume, variety and incursion of commodities of everyday life, growing commodification, greater social division and self-reflexivity have been associated with a hypothesized postmodern condition” (2).

Once consumerism is de-naturalized, it’s easy to see its influence everywhere. For my part, I am reminded of my pre-teen years when going to the mall was my favorite social activity and most of my Christmas wish list included clothing from what I considered trendy stores, like Limited Too and PacSun. Even as I’ve become more aware of the impacts of buying Stuff, I’ve noticed how abstract reflections about consumerism and its inherent waste provoke strong reactions from my peers and family.

The most memorable example of this in recent memory is from a family dinner this past summer. While my mother was scraping her half-eaten plate of food into the trash at the end of the meal, I was inspired to share an interesting fact I’d recently read, about how almost half of the food produced in the United States each year is wasted. While my timing was clearly inopportune because it came off as a personal attack, what I really meant to do was provoke a discussion about the pervasiveness of waste in our society. However, instead of inspiring reflection about waste (and/or its evil twin, consumerism), my comment was ignored and the topic was quickly changed.

While it is certainly possible to have a productive discussion about these issues, I learned from this experience that there is a lot more entailed in talking about systemic change than there is in a discussion about the weather; we have been taught to consume needlessly and to question that fundamental principal is to question an entire way of life. Even for those who are willing to call consumerism into question, and have the financial and social privilege to do so, there are few alternative narratives that provide a vision of

another way of life (freeganism is one of the very few). Because of this, conversations that critique the status quo can be challenging and confusing rather than empowering. We are in desperate need of alternative narratives that could provide answers to urgent questions such as, if we aren't going to buy Stuff, how will we express our identity, furnish our homes, give gifts, be respected by our peers and be good citizens?

How did we get here?

If they are to be found anywhere, the tools for writing an opposing narrative to capitalist consumption can be found by analyzing the history of consumerism. Although trash has been a facet of almost every human civilization, trash in the 21st century looks a lot different than trash from 1000 years ago ("Consumerism," 2011). As Susan Strasser, author of *Waste and Want* explains, "Although people have always thrown things out, trash has not always been the same" (17), implying that both the types of materials that are discarded as well as attitudes toward waste have changed significantly. For instance, plastic, which is now so prevalent in the waste stream as well as the environment, didn't exist 100 years ago.

In their respective books, *Garbage Land* and *Waste and Want*, Elizabeth Royte and Susan Strasser both offer excellent summaries of the history of waste disposal in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For 21st century readers, the most striking aspect of 19th century waste disposal is the lack of a kitchen trash can (Rotye, 16). It was not until the late 1880s that municipal trash collections were organized; prior to that time, "the stove was the primary means of disposal" (Royte, 16). However, as Royte points out, "the oven door wasn't opening and closing all day long, like a kitchen trash can" because there was simply not as much waste being generated as there is today (16). The waste that *was* generated was minimized or reused:

> Food scraps went to farm animals. Individually packaged consumer goods were rare and expensive. Tin cans were saved for storage or scoops, jars for preserving food. Old clothes were repaired, made over into new clothes, or used for quilting, mattress stuffing, rugs, or rags. Plastic was unknown. (Royte, 16)

What Royte's analysis highlights is how reducing, reusing and recycling were not just poster campaigns, as they often are today, but rather a way of life. Limited resources and a system that made it possible to exchange used goods meant that it was in everyone's best interest to reduce and reuse as much as possible.

Susan Strasser paints a similar picture of waste management in pre-industrial U.S. cities. She describes a system where most goods were sold in bulk, leftover food scraps were fed to domestic animals or incorporated into stews, material goods were generally durable and when they did break, were either dismantled so that usable parts could be extracted, or sold to a rag picker, who would then sell it back to the manufacturer (Strasser, 12).

Poor children, known as swill children, were essential to this system, as they were often the ones who scavenged for rags, bottles, bones, metal and paper that had been discarded (12). By selling these materials to the local rag picker, they could provide additional income for their family (13). While from a functional perspective swill children were essential to this system of recycling, it's also important to emphasize the wretchedness of a system in which small children had to leave their homes to scavenge for discarded items on the streets. To imagine the public outcry if a similar system were enacted today illustrates just how draconian this scheme really was.

In spite of the conditions in which they labored, child rag pickers were crucial in facilitating the exchange of unwanted material from the consumer back to the manufacturer: people from the middle and lower classes exchanged used rags, bones,

bottles, paper and old iron for tea kettles or buttons, which pickers then sold back to manufacturers, who used these raw materials to manufacture their goods (Strasser, 13). For instance, rags were in high demand for paper making and recycled cloth production (13). Strasser concludes by noting, "This trade in used goods amounted to a system for reuse and recycling that provided crucial domestic sources of raw materials for early industrialism" (13).

Strasser draws the analogy between pre-industrial cities and a closed-loop ecological system in that materials that today would be considered trash – bottles, rags, bones, paper and bottles – were re-integrated into the economy rather than ending up in a landfill (15). She makes the important point that the success of this system was that "waste products were important to economic growth because they served as raw materials for other industrial processes" (15). While this system was by no means completely environmentally benign – it created a great deal of air pollution and contamination – the integration of scrap material into the mechanism of production greatly reduced waste (15).

However, "toward the end of the nineteenth century, disposal became separate from production, and Americans' relationship to waste was fundamentally transformed. Trash and trashmaking became integral to the economy in a wholly new way: the growth of markets for new products came to depend in part on the continuous disposal of old things" (Strasser, 15). The processes of industrialization, urbanization and economic growth that occurred at the end of the 19th century were key factors in the rise of disposable production; as a result, people began to "buy more and mend less," which further perpetuated the trend toward increased consumption of disposable goods (Ernst,

31).

As Martin Melosi notes in *The Sanitary City*, around the turn of the century, "population growth, greater consumption and more efficient [trash] collection" resulted in dramatic increases in the amount of trash in U.S. cities (115). For example, between 1903 and 1907, the inhabitants of Pittsburgh increased their trash production by a staggering forty three percent (114). Several other cities increased their trash output by twenty to thirty percent around the same time (115).

What happened is that "industrialization broke the cycle" that had existed in 19th century cities between consumers, rag pickers and manufacturers; the result was the beginning of the "open system" of production, consumption and disposal that we know today (Strasser, 14). In stark contrast to the 19th century city, "the late-twentieth-century household takes in most of what it uses by truck and train and airplane, and flushes its waste into landfills, sewage treatment plants, and toxic dumps" (15).

Not only did the 20th century usher in a broken system of waste management, the sheer amount of waste produced by this system has been steadily increasing ever since. Elizabeth Royte reports that U.S. garbage production has been increasing since the end of WWII such that the nation's municipal waste stream has nearly tripled since 1960 (11). While some of this increase is due to population growth, most of it is due to "the habits of the average residents, who now throw out, says the EPA, 4.3 pounds of garbage per person per day - 1.6 more pounds than thirty years ago" (11). And that's just municipal trash, which accounts for only 2.5 percent of the gross national trash output in the United States every year (Makower, 2009; Leonard, 186). Construction and demolition account

for 3.5 percent, special waste is 18 percent, and the remaining 76 percent is waste generated by industry (Leonard, 186).[17]

The huge proportion of industrial trash is surprising until one realizes just how much waste is generated in the production of items such as laptops, cars and phones that we use every day. Elizabeth Royte references Paul Hawken's finding, as stated in his book, *Natural Capitalism*, that "for every 100 pounds of product that's made – product that hits the store shelves – at least 3,200 pounds of waste are generated" (Royte, 239).

The fact that industry is responsible for the majority of solid waste production can make it seem like focusing on municipal trash production is pointless. If industry produces over seventy five percent of all solid waste, the argument goes, what's the point of individuals trying to change their behaviors? It is arguable that because of their greater waste production, industrial operations have a proportionally larger responsibility to reform their waste production habits than individuals. However, if individuals were not creating a demand for the products that industry produces – and that generate so much waste – then industrial production would not be so high. It's important to remember that all parts of this wasteful system are interrelated, and that, as the freegans demonstrate, consumers have the ability to express their beliefs through their choices about consumption.

The other important point to make about industrial waste is that precisely *because* industry's contribution is so staggeringly high, there is tremendous potential for significant resource savings and waste reduction. Even if industry only reduces its waste by one or two percent, the resource savings and landfill diversion would be substantial,

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[17] "Special waste" refers to "waste from mining, fuel production, and metals processing." As Leonard puts it, "in other words, it's more industrial waste" (Leonard, 186).

given the large proportion of waste industry currently generates (Beavan, 68). Either way, just because industry creates the majority of our national waste stream doesn't mean they are not going to change their habits, at least not without consumer pressure. Like it or not, the impetus for waste reduction must come from consumers, which is one of the reasons that freeganism – as a movement of concerned individuals working for systemic change – is so promising.

Landfills: A "Stone Age Solution"

Given that a waste-based system is neither innovative nor forward-thinking, it is not surprising that current and historical methods for waste disposal in the United States are similarly unimpressive. Jonathan Bloom put it well when he wrote: "In a nation with robotic vacuums and phones that can give us directions, we're essentially using a Stone Age solution – digging a hole in the ground and dumping stuff in it – to handle our waste" (18).

Elizabeth Royte eloquently sums up the past 200 years of solid waste disposal practices in the United States:

> Since the nineteenth century, Americans haven't had too many bright ideas about waste disposal. Trash was disposed in low-value land - often swamps - throughout the nineteenth century. Digging holes in the ground and incineration were other approaches that were tried before the introduction of the "sanitary landfill," which was widely adopted in the 1950s. The new landfill featured a layer of dirt between successive batches of trash, which were each compacted, with the intention of keeping vermin out and the smell down (Royte, 51).

While sanitary landfills have been heralded as a solution to waste management, they are nothing more than a temporary and ineffective means of containing a growing problem. Given that the average American produces about 4.5 pounds of garbage per day (compared to .7 pounds produced by the average Chinese person per day), a lot of material ends up in the ground (Leonard, 191). And while it's easy to assume that one's

own garbage will forever remain in the quietly benign state it maintained when it was inside the home, this is simply not the case. As Colin Beavan, author of *No Impact Man* and the star of a documentary of the same name explains,[18]

> Now that I've put the trash in the hall… it is no longer an 'I' problem. It's a 'we' problem. Something we will deal with together. We will together injure our lungs as we inhale the diesel particulates produced as American trucks drive literally millions of miles to move our waste. We will together drink the water laced with battery acid that has leaked from landfills. We will together suffer the greater chance of cancer as we breathe in the dioxins produced by incinerators. Now that I've disposed of my throwaway products, you see, my convenience has become the entire race's inconvenience (47).

As Beavan suggests, the hazardous environmental effects of landfills have been well documented: the toxic chemicals from heavy metals, pesticides, oven cleaners, nail polish remover, and other items in the landfill leach into and contaminate the groundwater (Leonard, 208). Even apparently benign substances like plastic contain toxic heavy metals and other toxic chemicals, which means that despite EPA classifications, *all* landfills are toxic (Leonard, 208). The decomposition of organic matter in landfills produces methane, a gas that contributes to the warming of the climate and the carbon emitted to transport trash to the landfill pollutes our air and contributes to climate change (Leonard, 208).

Not only do landfills pollute the air, soil and water, they do so unevenly. Landfills are often sited in low-income communities of color that are more economically vulnerable and less politically powerful than wealthier communities. As Royte explains,

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[18] The subject of Beavan's book and documentary are the "No Impact Project," a project that Beavan and his family undertook for a year in which they attempted to live in a way that had no net impact on the environment. This meant producing no trash, eating food only from the farmer's market, using no electricity, traveling solely by bicycle or on foot, and not purchasing anything new.

"Garbage follows a strict class topography. It concentrates on the margins, and it tumbles downhill to settle in places of least resistance, among the poor and disenfranchised" (40).

The pattern of landfill siting in low-income communities of color has been well-documented over the years. In 1987, a study conducted by the Commission for Racial Justice found that "three of the five largest waste facilities dealing with hazardous materials in the United States are located in poor black communities" (Dosomething.org). The study also found that three out of every five African American and Latinos live in areas near toxic waste sites, as well as areas where the levels of poverty are well above the national average (Dosomething.org). More recently, studies have shown that of the people who live within 1.8 miles of the nation's hazardous waste facilities, the majority are people of color (Dosomething.org). In addition, it has been proven that African Americans are 79 percent more likely to live in a neighborhood with industrial pollution than whites (Dosomething.org). Regardless of the specific statistic used to illustrate the point, it is clear that the most marginalized groups bear the brunt of the costs produced by our wasteful system.

Tullytown, Pennsylvania and Lee County, South Carolina (one of the poorest counties in South Carolina) are two examples of marginalized towns that receive trash from bigger metropolises, such as New York and New Jersey, in return for financial compensation (Royte, 43). Over the course of 15 years, Tullytown, Pennsylvania received 45 million dollars in exchange for burying 15 millions tons of trash, most of which came from New York and New Jersey (Royte, 43). In addition to money, Tullytown received new municipal facilities such as sports fields, schools, community centers, parks, and of course, free trash pickup, for allowing the construction of landfills

that would store trash from cities thousands of miles away (Royte, 43).

As Royte explains, while the short-term financial benefits and material improvements to city infrastructure seem fair – and potentially lucrative – it is truly an unfair trade in the long run. For long after the infusions of cash have an effect, these communities will be stuck with the environmental and social implications of the landfill and its accompanying "truck traffic, air and water pollution, birds, and degraded property values" (Royte, 42). This is an especially raw deal for neighboring towns, who get stuck with all the negative impacts of the landfill but receive no financial compensation whatsoever (Royte, 42).

In addition to the aforementioned consequences, communities where landfills are sited are subjected to the highly toxic particulate matter that trash trucks produce, which is why rates of asthma are so high at waste transfer sites (Royte, 44). In fact, the trucks that transport trash to landfills are some of the highest polluting vehicles on the road. According to a study conducted by an independent research firm called Inform, "although garbage 'packer' trucks account for .06 percent of the vehicles on U.S. roads... they consume more fuel annually – and discharge more pollution than any vehicles other than tractor-trailers and transit buses" (43). Their heavy environmental impact is the result of their extremely low fuel-efficiency (less than 3 miles per gallon!) and long distances traveled (43). Egregious as these examples of environmental injustice are, however, it is important to remember that landfills aren't the real problem. They are merely a symptom of the problem, which is an economic system that equates waste with economic growth.

It is important to remember that as flawed as our current system is, it has not always been this way. Reading about the history of waste disposal in the nineteenth

century, it is obvious why people did not throw things out – it made financial sense to preserve them for as long as possible, and exchange them for something else when possible. So why don't we do this anymore? Why is it cheaper and easier to throw something out than it is to repair and reuse it? As with most complex questions, there is no simple answer. Inklings of an answer may be found in an investigation of the constructed connection between consumerism and American patriotism, the psychology of throwing things out, the rise of a market based economy, the acceptance of excess as a cultural norm and an emphasis on the pursuit of individual happiness. By analyzing the intersection of these various factors, I hope to arrive at a clearer understanding of our current situation, and how dumpster diving fits into the formula for much-needed change.

Consumerism & Obsolescence

Unpacking consumerism highlights just how tightly the ethos of consumption has been woven into the fabric of our culture (Mansvelt, 2). As Ernst explains, "Consumption has always been more than just about sustenance or need; not just practical or economic, but ideological—a value tied to our ideas about what it means to be a citizen, an American" (32).

Thornstein Veblen was one of the first scholars to call attention to the link between consumption and ideology. In his book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, published in 1899, he observed how the consumption of Stuff communicates information about one's social class (Ernst, 32). In the same work, Veblen famously coined the term "conspicuous consumption" to describe the way in which people show off their social status by excessively consuming commodities (Ernst, 32).

Since 1899, as industrialization and urbanization have increased, Veblen's observations about consuming conspicuously have become ever more relevant. Indeed,

the kind of clothes someone wears, their primary means of transportation and what they eat are all social signifiers that people use – whether consciously or unconsciously – to evaluate themselves in relation to others. As Mansvelt explains, what we buy is about far more than the act of purchase: "Consumption practices and preferences are… instrumental in identity formation, self-expression and the development of lifestyle cultures built around such things as diet, fashion, music and leisure tastes" (3).

Since the beginning of the 20th century, consumption has been equated with economic growth, and by extension, patriotism. Christine Frederick, an advertising consultant and popular domestic writer in the 1920s, expressed the changing cultural norms surrounding consumption in a magazine article she wrote in 1929, in which she refers to "progressive obsolescence" as "the source of America's economic achievement" (Strasser, 16). She reminds readers that "Buying plenty of new goods before the old wears out increases the general income…. Mrs. Consumer has billions to spend –the greatest surplus money value ever given to woman to spend in all history" (Strasser, 16). Appealing to gendered notions of citizenship, Frederick articulates the message that was becoming increasingly accepted in the early half of the 20th century – to spend freely is to do one's duty as a good American.

Ernst highlights how this connection between spending and citizenship persists today and has been especially emphasized during times of national crisis. She cites George W. Bush's speech following the 9/11 attacks, in which he called for "'continued participation and confidence in the American economy,' which, he repeated in his 2002 State of the Union address, 'would be greatly appreciated'" (66). Colin Beavan

has also noted the unquestioned connection between patriotism and consumption. Of his research for the No Impact Project, he writes,

> While I begin to research ideas and options, I keep coming up against the idea that, here in the United States, to be a good citizen is to be an aggressive consumer. To be patriotic is to shop. To bury ourselves in credit-card debt is to do our part to keep the economy going (141).

He continues, turning this conventionally accepted wisdom upside down: "But here's what I don't get: Why are we supposed to be of service to the economy? I thought the economy was supposed to be of service to us" (141).

Beavan's question about the role of the economy in our democracy brings up questions about the history of consumerism and citizenship, a story that begins in the 1920s, when the effect of unprecedented levels of consumption rippled out to the political and social sphere (Leonard, 161). It was around the time of the New Deal that consumers came to be seen as an interest group unto themselves, on par with business and labor interests (Ernst, 65). Following World War II, the understanding of consumption shifted again, from a view of consumption based on the public good to one that emphasized the survival of the marketplace (Ernst, 64-65). Over the course of several decades,

> The market replaced the government as the arbiter of freedom and democracy. It shifted the onus of democracy from the citizen to the consumer... Rather than relying on the government to ensure democracy through policies and laws, or on people joined together as communities, the success of the United States was now reliant on the market (Ernst, 64).

This new view of the market as the arbiter of the common good was reflected in the neoliberal policies of the 1970s, which encouraged privatization and minimal government services (Ernst, 65). Today, we find ourselves in a situation in which

> the importance of the market to the survival of the nation has become naturalized to such a degree that is seen not as a world-view but rather as the way the world works. Thus, to question the market now, particularly to question capitalism, is

> seen as un-American, so tied is our understanding of consumption to our sense of nation and self. Those who do tend to remain on the fringes of the cultural and political radar (Ernst, 66).

This analysis highlights some of the central challenges that dumpster divers and freegans face in their quest to bring about social change – is it possible that the unapologetic honesty, contagious fun and social justice mission of dumpster diving can help freegan dumpster divers overcome their potentially marginalized position as critics of mainstream capitalism? To answer this, we must analyze capitalism as our dominant economic system.

Obsolescence as an engine of economic growth

While the traditional account of American economic growth is not usually recounted in terms of trash, the truth is that "Economic growth during the twentieth century has been fueled by waste – the trash created by packaging and disposables and the constant technological and stylistic change that has made 'perfectly good' objects obsolete and created markets for replacements" (Strasser, 15). This view of economic growth alludes to the idea of obsolescence, of which there are two types – planned and perceived (Leonard, 161).

"Planned obsolescence" is a term coined in the 1950s by the American industrial designer Brooks Stevens (Leonard, 161). It is defined as "instilling in the buyer the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary" (Leonard, 161). More cynically, planned obsolescence has been described as "another name for 'designed for the dump'" (Leonard, 161). The actual adoption of planned obsolescence as a strategy of industry began in the 1920s when government officials and business people realized that industry was producing more Stuff than people wanted to buy (Leonard, 161). In response, producers started designing Stuff that was less durable and would

break down sooner; the lifespan of manufactured goods decreased to the point that items intended for a single use – the precursors of our modern disposable products such as toothbrushes, utensils, cups, plates and tissues – became commonplace (Leonard, 161).

While consumers purchased these items for convenience – "in order to save the chore of washing or refilling something" – the more powerful psychological appeal of disposability was and continues to be "its ability to make people feel rich: with throwaway products, they [can] obtain levels of cleanliness and convenience once available only to people with many servants" (Strasser, 9). Contrary to how it is sometimes discussed in environmental circles today, planned obsolescence was clearly not merely a covert strategy on the part of industrialists. Rather, as Christine Frederick's column illustrates, it was celebrated as the engine of the American economy as well as a progressive step toward increased convenience and sanitation.

"Perceived obsolescence" refers to the disposal of old goods that are believed to be out-of-style or old-fashioned in order to make room for the consumption of newer items (Leonard, 162). As Strasser explains, "changing fashions and technologies mean that clothes, household goods and technological appliances become outdated and culturally obsolete over time, rendering these objects less valuable" (16). What this creates is a culture that puts a premium on novelty by eschewing that which is used. Strasser writes, "These habits of disposing of out-of-style clothes and outmoded equipment promote a veneration of newness not widespread before the twentieth century, filling Dumpsters with 'perfectly good stuff' that is simply not new anymore, stuff the owner is tired of" (5). As Strasser makes clear, the idealization of newness produces unprecedented levels of waste.

In “Excess: An Obituary,” scholar Zygmunt Bauman explains that this veneration of newness is related to an “ideology of happiness” that equates individual fulfillment with endless choice, resulting in a culture where excess has become the norm (87-88). Bauman contrasts the modern emphasis on happiness with former societies that prized survival, rather than happiness, as their highest ideal (89). In these societies, the highest principles were of “abstention and self-restraint” which were values needed to maintain the equilibrium and stability necessary for survival (89). In contrast, modern consumer society is based on individual gratification, which is defined in terms of the “sensations, perceptions, emotions [and] desires of the individual” and equates happiness with the constant availability of choices and options for fulfillment (87). As a result, “the desire for happiness may resent bounds and limits” (87). As Bauman explains,

> In the case of happiness, long-term is an abomination. Durability of things, and even more the durability of attachment to things, turns out to be the true waste, the sole waste that genuinely frightens and repels: waste of opportunities, and above all of the yet-unexplored and un-imagined opportunities. Transience of things and commitments is the asset; long-term engagement is a liability. And if this is the case, excess is an empty notion. Nothing is ‘too much’, except resentment of ‘too much.’ (91)

Bauman’s analysis illustrates how the cultural definition of happiness idealizes disposability and transience, while simultaneously invalidating values such as sustainability, longevity, and durability. The emphasis on individual gratification has spawned a culture of excess in which we are overwhelmed by choices – which highway to take, which car to buy, which radio station to listen to, which food to consume – to the point that “fear and anguish are nowadays the ‘essential characteristics of the ‘Western man’, as they are rooted in the ‘impossibility to reflect on such an enormous multiplicity of options’” (Jacques Ellul, cited in Bauman, 89). The ultimate irony of this whole

situation is that in our constant search for satisfaction, we will never reach our goal, because our vision of happiness is defined in terms of the potential for transience and choice, rather than any stable sense of fulfillment (Bauman, 88).

Bauman explains that the result of this desire for endless choice is that modern consumer society is based on excess. What's more, the prevalence of mega-mansions, mega-churches and mega-waistlines makes it hard to even find a relative standard of comparison by which to define what is actually excessive. One need only stroll the aisles of their local Costco to realize that there is a striking disparity between the production of goods (e.g. one package containing 50 rolls of toilet paper or four one-gallon cartons of juice) and the actual human needs they are designed to meet, suggesting a norm based on excess rather than need.

The real kicker is that the only reason this system functions is because individuals accept the act of disposal. All of this excess is really waste. The waste needs to go somewhere, and so long as individuals remain complicit in the system of consumption and disposal, the culture of excess can continue, at least until we exhaust all the Earth's resources. As Bauman explains, not only is the act of disposal acceptable, it is seen as affirmational and wise:

> Throwing things out confirms retrospectively the wisdom of excess: it helps build confidence and reaffirms the link between self-assertion and wastefulness. Things thrown away are therefore promptly replaced by another, yet greater, 'spare potential,' the 'just in case' surplus over and above the conceivable potential of consumption. The act of consumption marks the end of the road, while the trick is to keep forever on the move. Throwing things out reassures that one can go a long way yet and that one has enough, more than enough resources to negotiate it (91).

Bauman's analysis sheds light onto the subconscious desires and beliefs that inform our system of profligate consumption and waste. His analysis supports freegan claims that

modern consumerism is unsustainable and is failing to meet individual's needs for happiness and fulfillment. By critically interrogating the logic of "throwing things out," Bauman also implies that by refusing to be complicit in the creation of more material waste, freegans are putting pressure on the weakest link in the chain.

The Market Logic of Waste

Another reason we waste without a second thought is because the economic incentives to repair or reuse an item do not exist. In almost every case, the cheapest and easiest choice for dealing with an item one no longer wants is to toss it in the trash. As Wendell Berry wrote in 1987: "Our economy is such that we cannot 'afford' to take care of things; labor is expensive, time is expensive, money is expensive, but materials – the stuff of creation – are so cheap that we cannot afford to take care of them" (Royte, 238).

Jonathan Bloom's investigation of food waste in the United States, documented in his book *American Wasteland*, illustrates Berry's argument that our economic system discourages any alternative value to materials besides a market value. For example, Bloom found that one of the main reasons almost half of the food produced in the U.S. is wasted is because disposal is cheaper than recovery. For supermarket managers, it's easier to toss food that has been damaged or is expired into the dumpster than to arrange for someone to come recover it, because the time commitment necessary to arrange food recovery is not justified by their minimum wage salary (Bloom, 148). For farmers, when market prices for certain crops fall, crops are left to rot in the fields because it would be more expensive to harvest them (110). For Ocean Spray, a company which sells bags of pre-cut lettuce, among other products, multiple bags of lettuce are often discarded

because they get stuck together in the assembly line – "given the speed of the operation and the labor costs, it's cheaper to toss both bags than to cut them by hand" (115).

All of these examples illustrate Berry's point that an economic system that assigns value only in terms of the market is limiting in that it ignores alternative planet-, people- or quality-based systems of value. As the previous examples highlight, this attitude is epitomized by the industrial food system, of which Bloom writes, "what's planted isn't food, it's a source of income" (65). It is this narrow definition of value that contributes to such egregious waste.

Marx is famous for his critique of capitalism as a system that too narrowly defines value. He argued that by placing a premium on production, capitalism ignores other values like human wellbeing. He wrote about how capitalism produces alienation and estrangement from oneself, one's labor, the products of labor and from each other (Marx, 1844). Joan Gross references Marx in her study of freegans in Oregon, writing, "Marx distinguished between the kind of labor in which humans feel productive and part of nature and wage labor in which work is not an end in itself, but rather a servant of the wage" (Gross, 75).

This is one of the central ideas animating the freegan movement – freegans seek to reduce their participation in the capitalist economy by working less and spending less, actions that they believe give them more control over their own lives. Freegans "resist the commodification of time, choosing to spend a good share of their time in unremunerated activities pertaining to food" (Mercer and Edwards, 282). They believe that people can be happier by living with less Stuff and working fewer hours, which is a rejection of fundamental capitalist values.

By withdrawing from capitalism, freegans are rejecting a pervasive and deeply ingrained narrative about the connection between consumption and individual liberty. As Juliana Mansvelt writes, "Commodities and commodity relations are promoted in popular culture and media as offering libratory, hedonistic and narcissistic possibilities – being keys to self-realization, happiness and fulfillment" (7). Like the ideal of happiness that Bauman discuses, this idea of freedom through purchasing is constructed around the experience of the individual.

Herbert Marcuse, a social theorist, makes a similar observation about the perceived link between liberty and consumer power. His particular criticism of capitalism is that "liberty is determined to be the freedom to consume" and that "'false needs are constructed as a means to "deceptively placate the masses while distracting their subjugation through consumption" (Ernst, 143; Marcuse, 220-227). Marcuse goes further, arguing that "capitalist 'free choice' is an instrument of domination, a form of social control which busies us with choosing between gadgets and brands while distancing ourselves from our real desires" (Marcuse, 220-227).

Annie Leonard also has commented on this false idea of capitalist free choice. In *The Story of Stuff*, she outlines the five stages – from cradle to grave – that the typical mass produced good created for consumer production goes through. The process includes extraction, production, distribution, consumption and disposal (xxv). As she notes, consumers only see one part of this open system chain, a system she calls "the deadly take-make-waste machine" (xxvi). She writes, "Walk into any supermarket these days, and what do we see: choice, or actually, the *appearance* of choice" (169). She notes that while we may choose between "grande, venti, single, double, tall, short, skim, soy, decaf,

etc." when we purchase a drink at Starbucks, we have less capacity to choose the fundamental characteristics about the product we are purchasing, such as where the coffee came from, how it was grown, if the farmers who grew it were fairly compensated or if the international laws governing the sale of coffee are fair. While it is possible to buy fair trade coffee, not all coffee vendors carry "socially responsible" brands. Moreover, the point that Leonard seeks to make is that the myth that individual liberty can be achieved through buying stuff distracts consumers from the fact that they are operating within a predefined capitalist economic system in which they lack complete control. While it is true that consumers have an increasing variety of choices by which they can express their political and environmental preferences, freegans argue that it is possible to have even more freedom – and perhaps a truer sense of freedom – by living completely outside of capitalism.

So what then does true freedom really mean? Are we stuck within this system? Aren't most people happy enough in the current system? Current research suggests that they're not. As Bauman argues, "The paradox of happiness as a life strategy is that this idea of ultimate satisfaction breeds perpetual disaffection with any 'has been' and constant rebellion against status quo (87). The truth of this paradox is reflected in the experience of most Americans living in the 21st century: we are constantly told to strive for more, because, we are told, that is what will make us happy. We receive this message from the constant stream of advertisements from TV, movies, internet, newspapers, magazines, and email that promise happiness through the consumption of a certain product or service. Various estimates suggest that the average American is exposed to 3000 advertisements per day (Leonard, 168). We receive a similar message from parents,

friends and counselors to "do what makes you happy," "pursue a career that makes you happy," and to "do what you want, just as long as you're happy."

The irony of this is that in spite of all this emphasis on happiness, we are less happy than we were fifty years ago (McKibben, 10/27/11). In a talk he gave at Pomona in the fall of 2011, Bill McKibben – preeminent environmental activist, author of over a dozen books about climate change and the founder of the climate action organization 350.org – explained that in spite of the conventionally accepted notion that money buys happiness, there has been a gradual and growing realization that this is not the case. He referenced surveys that found that the average American has half as many close friends, and eats half as many meals with other people as the average American living in 1950. While he did not cite the actual surveys, a similar survey conducted by the *American Sociological Review* in 2006 supports these claims. The survey found that in 1985, "the average American had three people in whom to confide matters that were important to them," whereas in 2006, the number dropped to two (Kornblum, 2006). The researchers also found that one in four Americans in 2006 had no close confidants at all (Kornblum, 2006).

Like McKibben, Annie Leonard notes that indices of well-being are down. She writes, "Even though we're consuming way more resources like energy, paper, minerals and more manufactured Stuff than most other countries, the United States scores lower on many indices of well-being" (151). For instance, the United Nation's Development Programme's Human Poverty Index, which examines factors such as poverty, longevity and social inclusion, ranked the United States *last* among industrial countries (151). The

2009 Happy Planet Index, which combines life expectancy and life satisfaction to measure a nation's overall happiness, ranked the U.S. 114 out of 143 (151).

All of these findings disprove the basic and previously unquestioned assumption that utility = happiness (Leonard, 151). In fact, "what we're finding out is that past a certain point, affluence and happiness are inversely correlated" (McKibben, 10/24/11). While the link between the search for well-being and extrication from capitalism will be explored more extensively in Chapter 3, it is worth noting here that freegan arguments that the current system is making people unhappy are supported by significant evidence.

Whatever one's opinion of capitalism, there is no denying that industrial production over the past 100 years has afforded many Americans the opportunity to experience unprecedented material wealth. In the end, assessing the viability of capitalism as an economic system comes down to a series of trade-offs that require us to evaluate what is more important: equity or wealth, free time or profit, consumption or waste?

The case of waste versus consumption is the most relevant to this study of dumpster diving. The trade-off between the two is clear – waste is what makes our system of conspicuous consumption possible. Indeed, "without waste, consumer capitalism cannot charge for the luxury of the flawless tomato or the freshly baked bagel... In other words, without waste, conspicuous consumption becomes far less conspicuous" (Essig, 2002). Are we willing to live with less Stuff, that might not look as nice, if it means that we are producing less material waste, conserving more natural resources and reducing cases of environmental injustice?

The psychology of throwing Stuff away

Every single day, the average American produces an average of 4.5 pounds of trash (Leonard, 191). While municipal household waste constitutes a tiny fraction of gross national trash production, the attitudes of individual trash makers – which is *all* of us – are worth examining because of what we can learn about the psychology involved in the act of discard.

The verbs associated with trash all reflect the impulse to discard: "to get rid of," "throw out," and "take away" all imply the ridding of an offensive object from one's space. It is the act of placing something in the trash can that makes it trash. As Susan Strasser points out, "nothing is inherently trash," rather, it is the act of sorting that creates trash (5).

Mary Douglas, author of *Purity and Danger*, an anthropological study of cultural perceptions of cleanliness, agrees that trash, and specifically dirt, is relative. She explains that when we talk about dirt we are actually talking about disorder (2). She writes: "There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder" (2). We understand what is dirty based on context: shoes are not inherently dirty, but they become dirty if placed on the kitchen table; food is not dirty, but placing used kitchen utensils in the bedroom would be; underwear is not unclean by nature, but to wear it over other clothing would be a sign of disorder and disruption (Strasser, 5).

If dirt is disorder, then cleanliness means order, which is created by sorting and organizing. As Douglas explains, "Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment" (2). She writes,

> I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and

> without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (4)

To varying degrees, each of us seeks to create order within the spaces we inhabit. When my parents would tell me to clean my room when I was growing up, they didn't mean that I should vacuum and sweep, but rather organize the materials within the space to make it more orderly, which usually meant picking up the clothes from the floor so that one could walk without stepping on them. Putting used and non-valuable items in the trash is one of the most common means of positively ordering our environment. Elizabeth Royte reflects, "Transferring objects - whether food scraps, the daily newspaper, or a lamp - from my house to the street made me feel lighter and cleaner... Everything I subtracted gave me more of what I craved: emptiness" (39). I know that whenever I clean my room, I experience a similar feeling of lightness – after ordering the materials in my physical environment, I find that my mental and emotional space is cleared as well.

Royte and I are not alone in our experience of cathartic cleaning. In a 1993 essay, Italo Calvino writes about the daily act of transferring his trash from his house to the street trash can, reflecting,

> Through this daily gesture I confirm the need to separate myself from a part of what was once mine, the slough or chrysalis or squeezed lemon of living, so that its substance might remain, so that tomorrow I can identify completely (without residues) with what I am and have (Royte, 39).

As Royte states, Calvino "equated his satisfaction with tossing things away to his satisfaction with defecation, 'the sensation at least for a moment that my body contains nothing but myself'" (39). This experience of lightness, emptiness and catharsis that we have when we throw things away helps explain why the actual act of trashmaking is not

generally questioned or challenged – in fact, it is implicitly understood to be an essential part of creating a livable and pleasant space.

However, organization is not the only purpose that trash production serves. Throwing things away is also a reflection of deeply ingrained cultural values about hygiene. As Douglas puts it, "our idea of dirt is compounded of two things, care for hygiene and respect for conventions" (7). Cultural norms about waste and hygiene dictate that bodily wastes, spoiled food and other refuse that might cause disease are disposed of. There is plenty of nasty stuff that ends up in the trash, and for good reason.

In addition to everyday practices of household trash making, our cultural understandings of hygiene are reflected in regulations governing food safety. While these regulations – such as expiration dates – often result in the waste of great quantities of food, they also help prevent the recurrence of cases like the Food Lion scandal of 1992. Food Lion is a large supermarket chain based in Salisbury, North Carolina ("Food Lion," 2011). In 1992, an ABC news crew posed as employees of Food Lion to document allegations of unsanitary meat preparation ("Food Lion," 2011). The resulting footage showed workers soaking rotted meat and fish in bleach so that it wouldn't smell and could still be sold, repackaging meat that was beyond its expiration date, and using nail polish remover to erase the expiration dates for dairy packages ("Food Lion," 2011).

While this case underscores the importance of cultural and legal standards for determining what should be thrown away, it is important to keep in mind that such rules are also often the cause of needless food waste. It is unequal media coverage of cases like the Food Lion scandal that foster what Royte calls the "hysteria of hygiene" (123) that is

responsible for the senseless disposal of items that are feared to be contaminated but are just as likely completely safe to consume.

Although conventional wisdom dictates that one should never eat anything from a dumpster, fears about sickness from eating dumpster diving prove to be largely unfounded. I only came across one story of someone getting sick from eating dumpstered food: humorously, rather than becoming ill from spoiled food, they got sick because they had eaten too many doughnuts (Gross, 70). Contrary to the notion that dumpster food is unsafe to eat, more than one person I met attributed their good health to eating food from the dumpster because they believed it increases their immunity (Saier, 2006: 43; Varda, 2000). While it's possible that divers might not be as forthcoming about incidents of illness if they wanted to portray dumpster diving in a positive light, the degree to which informants were forthcoming about other aspects of dumpster diving – both positive and negative – leads me to doubts that this was not the case. Either way, as the authors of the Seattle zine on dumpster diving explain,

> Simply existing within a dumpster doesn't make something automatically filthy. Plus, even if it is filthy, you can always (and always should) clean it off. A dumpster in reality is probably more clean and sanitary than a dollar bill, or a door handle to a restaurant bathroom (Benji and Kaylan, 4).

Dumpster diving disrupts conventional ideas about cleanliness. It effectively weakens the argument that an item must necessarily be discarded because it is dirty, or the reverse, that a discarded item cannot be consumed because it has been in a waste receptacle. By complicating ideas about what is clean and dirty, dumpster diving destabilizes the previously impenetrable logic of throwing something in the trash, calling the entire system of consumerism into question.

While hygiene and orderliness are two important reasons why people throw things away, social class is a third. As Veblen's observations about conspicuous consumption highlight, consumption practices are often used to indicate social class. Because consumption and waste are two sides of the same coin, what people throw away says as much about them as what they purchase. The difference is that the act of disposal is far less conspicuous than the act of consumption. For those who study trash, however, garbage yields a great deal of information about social class and identity. As Susan Strasser explains, "sorting [trash] is an issue of class: trashmaking both underscores and creates social differences based on economic status" (9). What this means is that wealthier people can afford to waste more, while poorer folks tend to waste less in the first place, and also are more likely to scavenge for usable materials that have been discarded (9).

Over the past 100 years, as the level of consumption has increased, the practices of reusing and recycling have become increasingly important signifiers of social class (Ernst, 33). While reusing old items was a common practice in the 19th century, it became less common over the course of the 20th century. As a result, over time, being thrifty and reusing old items "gained negative class connotations" (Ernst, 33). This trend has continued so that, "in many ways, rescuing and reusing has become an ideological tool that promotes racial, class and gendered distinctions. Who 'gets' to reuse as an aspect of identity or who 'has' to in order to survive tells us a lot about our society" (Ernst, 33). Kevin Lynch, an urban planner, confirms the idea that garbage is an ideological tool (Strasser, 9). He has observed that in societies "where material shortage is the norm, discarding things is notorious way of demonstrating power" (Strasser, 9). This tells us a

great deal about why dumpster divers face possible stigmatization. The stigmatizing association with trash is perfectly captured in Calvino's statement about his own trash making: "For one more day I have been a producer of detritus and not detritus myself" (Royte, 39). The negative stigma associated with trash and all those who engage with it will be discussed more extensively in Chapter Three.

Returning to dumpster diving

In this chapter, we have examined the invisible and pervasive nature of trash in our daily lives, the history of trash-making and consumerism, the environmental implications of trash, in particular the environmental justice issues associated in landfill siting and the market-based logic of capitalism. We've also looked at the idealization of individual gratification that produces endless choices and as a result, endless excess. In addition, we considered evidence that indicates Americans are increasingly unhappy with the status quo. Finally, we considered cultural notions of purity and pollution.

The analysis in this chapter suggests that the effects of capitalist consumption are so pervasive and so damaging that anyone who considers this issue with an honest heart and open mind will conclude that to be a consumer is to be complicit in an unjust, unsustainable and unhealthy system. As a result, while the freegan movement might seem extreme to some, it seems to present one of the only alternatives to complicity in environmental destruction and social injustice.

Consumerism is deeply ingrained in our culture. Freegans suggest that the system itself is so diseased that the only way to cure it is to withdraw from it, and work to build an alternative. As Bauman notes, waste is synonymous with excess – so long as we live

in a culture that defines individual fulfillment as the endless capacity for choice, rather than a fixed and stable state of being, edible food will continue ending up in dumpsters. Even for those who argue that this system may have worked once, it is no longer viable if one is concerned about the potential for current and future generations to live healthy, fulfilled and peaceful lives.

Dumpster diving has the potential to disabuse us of the assumption that a waste-based system is either logical or benign. We base our acceptance of trash on beliefs about capitalism as a source of individual freedom (which has been proven to be a shaky connection, at best) and the idea that we are living with the best possible system (which is clearly not the case). We continue throwing things away because of fears about sickness and disease (which, while sometimes valid, are generally blown out of proportion), and the idea that endless choice brings endless fulfillment (which is also been proven to not be true). Dumpster diving de-naturalizes waste and consumerism and forces us to consider our own complicity in this flawed system.

Moreover, unearthing the contents of a dumpster helps us understand our connection to the natural world, which is the source of everything that sustains us. As part of her investigation of trash for her book *Garbage Land*, Elizabeth Royte sorted and catalogued her family's trash for eight months. Reflecting on the experience, she suggested that there is a certain irony to the fact that we know about where our stuff comes from – or at least that there is a relative and burgeoning interest in the sources of our stuff, particularly our food – but that we know hardly anything about where our stuff goes after we throw it "away." While there is a growing interest amongst those who can afford it to purchase goods that are "environmentally friendly", such as FSC (Forest

Stewardship Council) certified wood or MSC (Marine Seafood Council) certified seafood, Royte out the hypocrisy in this type of thinking. She states, "It wasn't fair, I reasoned, to feel connected to the rest of the world only on the front end, to the waving fields of grain and the sparkling mountain streams. We needed to cop to a downstream connection as well" (19). It seems to me that dumpster diving is a way to begin to start copping to this downstream connection.

Dumpster diving offers the potential for a sort of environmental analysis in reverse – rather than considering the lifecycle of a product from its origin, we should design resources with their ultimate end in mind. Such an approach could foster zero-waste designs by engineers and producers.[19] It could also foster a system in which manufacturers, rather than consumers, are ultimately responsible for the whole lifecycle of their products.

To opt out of capitalism entirely is a daunting undertaking. Dumpster diving is the first step in a long journey, but a crucial step nonetheless. By challenging cultural rules about trash and cleanliness, dumpster diving shocks us into considering the flawed logic of throwing things away. By sorting through the detritus of our excessive consumption, dumpster divers suggest that perhaps, by starting at the end, we can make our way slowly back to the beginning.

[19] I am grateful to Heather Williams for her comments on this topic.

CHAPTER THREE: EVALUATING CRITIQUES OF FREEGANISM AND DUMPSTER DIVING

The preceding chapters have laid the groundwork for understanding the cultural and historical context in which dumpster diving occurs. In this chapter, I will evaluate the transformative potential of dumpster diving as a direct action movement for social change in light of critiques that have been made about the practice. Is it truly the counter-hegemonic act that the freegans in New York City make it out to be, or is it a quaint eco hobby like growing chia seeds? Can dumpster diving break open our flawed and dangerous system of resource consumption and in it's place foster a cradle-to-grave system that would make waste obsolete? Could it be that my generation will come to think of waste the way our grandparents who grew up in the Great Depression do – as socially unacceptable and morally offensive?[20]

In order to effectively answer these questions, we must first address the many questions have been raised about the accessibility, inclusivity, efficacy and appeal of freegan dumpster diving. In particular, we must address the idea that freeganism is not an effective way to bring about social change, which is at the crux of the matter. Within this central issue, there are many sub-themes: freegans are not contributing their time and talents to society in the most effective way; freeganism is too radical for 99 percent of the population to even consider taking part in; opting out of the capitalist system is limiting rather than empowering. Each of these critiques warrants critical evaluation before any final analysis of freeganism's transformative potential can take place.

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[20] I am grateful to Heather Williams for her help in articulating these overarching themes.

Race, Class and Dumpster Diving

While no one debates that dumpster diving calls attention to the problem of food waste, one of the central concerns about the practice is that it is only accessible to people of a certain race and class. It is important to assess the validity of this criticism in order to evaluate the extent to which dumpster diving can be transformative.

To begin, it's important to understand at who *can* dumpster dive and who *does* dumpster dive. Technically, it's not usually legal for *anyone* to do it because if the dumpster is on private property, diving is considered trespassing. In practice, however, people do it. But who are these people? A study of dumpster divers and Food Not Bombs participants in Australia found that most participants were males in their mid- twenties who were well-educated and came from middle-class backgrounds (Mercer and Edwards, 283). In a study of non-capitalist foodways in rural Oregon, all the freegans interviewed were in their twenties (Gross, 59). Most of the freegans who were active in the New York City group were "middle-to-upper class white people" (Ernst, 83). The four divers I interviewed were all white and college educated and two of the four had advanced degrees. Not surprisingly, none of them were dumpster diving out of financial necessity. While one of the people I interviewed pointed out that they've had "all kinds of people be interested in dumpster diving," including a seventy year old Catholic nun (Bosken, 9/19/11), current research suggests that the individuals who engage in freegan dumpster diving are predominantly white, middle-to-upper class, and college-educated. Is the pattern of more privileged individuals being the only ones to dumpster dive a coincidence or a reflection of something else?

Based on my research, I argue that the race and class of freegan dumpster divers is a direct reflection of systemic oppression. Systemic oppression operates in myriad

ways. In this instance, I use it to refer to ideas about who is part of mainstream society – and thus who has the ability to opt out – as well as the laws and regulations that disproportionately disadvantage certain groups.

First, dumpster diving necessitates a certain degree of privilege because association with trash and waste is threatening. As Joshua Reno explains in a piece about his time as an employee at one of the largest landfills in North America, sanitation workers face social stigma because their livelihoods bring them into close contact with trash. Reno describes the perceptions sanitation workers had of themselves: "It is as if landfill workers exchange substance with the material with which they work and become waste themselves – worthless and without potential" (17). The fact that most kids don't dream of becoming garbage collectors when they grow up is just one example of how association with trash and waste is socially stigmatizing. Clambering into a dumpster is to risk social stigmatization, which is particularly threatening for individuals who come from historically disadvantaged groups.

Similarly, as discussed in the Chapter Two, perceptions about recycling, reusing and scavenging are perceived in relation to one's social class – there is stigma attached to scavenging because it implies that one is poor because they do not have money to purchase new items. Recycling has become a positive aspect of identity for wealthier people who consume many resources and thus aren't worried about being perceived as poor when they recycle, while for people whose income is limited so that they have no choice but to reuse, their act of recycling or reusing has negative social stigma attached to it (Ernst33). This explains why many dumpster divers recall feelings of embarrassment the first time they tried recovering items from a dumpster (Pritchett, 36).

Another reason why dumpster diving has social stigma attached to it is that it disrupts deeply-rooted cultural notions about food, hygiene and humanity: "To eat "trash" is to go against our cultural consciousness, which imagines that food can be "tossed" from the realm of what can be safely seen and discussed into an abject state of invisibility and taboo. To consume the abject trash is to risk contamination and status as a fully civil human" (Essig, 2002). Analyzed in this light, it is understandable why all the dumpster divers I came into contact with – people who felt comfortable talking about their diving or taking me on a trash tour with them – were from privileged backgrounds. To dive into a dumpster is to risk not only stigmatization but also one's status as a respectable person. Generally it is only white, well-educated and young (i.e. non-parents) people who have the social capital necessary to risk their humanity and social standing by diving into a dumpster.

Moreover, the act of dumpster diving (like other freegan activities) assumes that one has the privilege to decide whether or not to remain in the capitalist system. However, this is not the case for many individuals. As Kelly Ernst explains,

> Freeganism, as a lifestyle, identity or set of practices, operates under the assumption that it is a choice, that we are not conspicuous consumers by nature. And if you have a choice to not operate within a system of traditional wealth and achievement, then that implies you at least in some way have access to that system, which isn't always the case… For some people who have historically been denied inclusion into the American ideal, who have had to eat out of the garbage by necessity or denied a home-loan because of their skin color, participating in freeganism carries an entirely different set of implications and issues. (135)

Ernst points out that in our society "the mythologized 'American' is white, middle (to upper-middle) class, speaks standard American English, and glorifies capitalist consumption" (136). Because of this cultural standard, for people who have struggled to

achieve social acceptance, whether because of their race, class, gender, ethnicity, immigration status or national origin, participation in freeganism likely would threaten whatever acceptance they had worked to achieve. As Ernst puts it, "to give up that normalcy means a lot more than to folks to whom it comes naturally and unquestionably" (136).

Moreover, for individuals who are faced with the demands of feeding and housing themselves and their families, making a statement about capitalist wastefulness by dumpster diving can seem irrelevant to their immediate needs, if not a sheer waste of valuable time and energy. As Michael, one of the members of the New York City freegan movement explains,

> [Freeganism] is so many steps removed from the problem that people of color have more immediately in front of them, which is, put it this way… Maybe I can make a statement about waste or consumption and reduce demand. Or, I can put my time into getting a grocery store in my neighborhood because I don't have one. Or maybe make sure there's always a fruit stand on the corner (Ernst, 125).

The allegation that freeganism is only a movement available to people with privilege is substantiated by the mostly white, wealthy demographic of the freegan movement. However, it's important to keep in mind that many people at the lowest end of the socioeconomic spectrum participate in freeganesque activities like gleaning and scavenging, albeit without the media attention and political message. The fact that these two groups, from opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum, are engaging in many of the same activities suggests that there is the potential for coalition building around these activities. As Ernst explains, "The homogeneity, or lack of diversity within the group, is an example of the classed and raced nature of conspicuous consumption and could be an important point of connection with communities of color and the poor" (138). I will

discuss the importance of coalition building between marginal and privileged social groups in more detail later on.

The evidence thus far suggests that freeganism is currently only available to individuals with a certain degree of social privilege because of the negative social stigma associated with trash. However, this is not the only reason why freegan dumpster divers are predominantly wealthy and white. Discrimination by law enforcement officers, which occurs within a racist society, is a second important reason. Simply put, the fact that white college kids can dumpster dive while Mexican day laborers cannot has to do with the fact that the criminal justice system disproportionately disadvantages people of color.

In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander argues that we are living in a society with a new racial caste system (16). Like the Jim Crow laws enacted in Southern states following the Civil War, the contemporary criminal justice system disproportionately discriminates against and disadvantages African American men (16). Alexander writes,

> The fact that more than half of the young black men in any large American city are currently under the control of the criminal justice system (or saddled with criminal records) is not – as many argue – just a symptom of poverty or poor choices, but rather evidence of a new racial caste system at work (16).

As Alexander points out, there are people who might argue that electing a black President proves the United States has moved beyond the racism that perpetuated slavery and Jim Crow. However, although important progress has been made in terms of civil rights, African Americans are still subject to a system that dramatically decreases their capacity to succeed economically and socially (Alexander, 18). In fact, "today, more African American adults are under correctional control – in prison or jail, on probation or parole – than were enslaved in 1850" (Alexander, 170). We live in a society that

professes to be colorblind at the same time as it disproportionately incarcerates people of color. Alexander explains that the reason this blatant injustice has continued is because mass incarceration of black and brown people has become normalized in the popular consciousness. She states,

> Today most Americans know and don't know the truth about mass incarceration. For more than three decades, images of black men in handcuffs have been a regular staple of the evening news. We know that large numbers of black men have been locked in cages. In fact it is precisely because we know that black and brown people are far more likely to be imprisoned that we, as a nation, have not cared too much about it. We tell ourselves they 'deserve' their fate, even though we know – and don't know – that whites are just as likely to commit many crimes, especially drug crimes (177).

Alexander's argument that a race-based caste system disproportionately imprisons people of color highlights one of the aspects of the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC), a term used to describe "the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems" (Dee, 2011). As this definition suggests, the PIC is partly manifested in the actions of law enforcement officers in that racial profiling by police occurs on a regular basis. Not only do black and brown people receive more negative attention from the police, they are targets of police violence at much higher rates than white people (Ritchie, 2006). In fact, police violence against black and Latina women has increased over the past two decades (Richie, 2006).

In the context of race-based police profiling and a society that encourages everyone to think of black people as criminals, it is no wonder that most dumpster divers are white. In light of the "new racial caste system" and the incredibly tense political climate surrounding immigration, it would be downright naïve to expect that law enforcement officers would treat a group of Mexican immigrant dumpster divers the

same way they would treat a group of white college students. As the media stories following Hurricane Katrina illustrated, in practice, the difference between resourcefulness and looting often comes down to the color of one's skin. The reality is that certain people – i.e. people with non-white skin – generally cannot forage without it being a criminal act.[21]

Further, my experiences as a food bank volunteer and a dumpster diver suggest that the socially acceptable way to get free food is dictated by the color of one's skin.[22] In the current system, non-white people are channeled toward food distribution centers, where they are humiliated in their request for free food, and scorned by conservative politicians for needing "handouts." At the same time, college students – whose education is paid for by their parents or their college's financial aid program – can dumpster dive without worrying about getting into serious legal trouble. Rather than being humiliated for seeking free food, they are praised by their peers for partaking in an activity that is regarded as trendy, resourceful and rebellious. As these examples suggest, it is important to keep in mind how broader social structures and expectations make dumpster diving available to a very specific sector of the population.

The relatively narrow demographic of dumpster divers has been noted by researchers. Perhaps more important to look at, however, is if dumpster divers recognize their own privilege. As with most large groups of people, it is impossible to generalize the extent to which freegans recognize their privileged positionality. However, at least in the New York City freegan movement, there were a fair number of active members who

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[21] I am grateful to Heather Williams for her incredible insight and original contributions to this section about dumpster diving and the New Jim Crow.

[22] Heather Williams also deserves the credit for this insightful idea and the subsequent analysis contained in this paragraph.

had some sense of the privilege inherent in their decision to withdraw from the system of conspicuous consumption. For instance, an NYU student who was actively involved in the freegan group in New York City stated, "There is a privilege in taking the time to dumpster dive… Poor people have always learned how to take care of themselves because they didn't have options. They've always sewed their own clothes and fixed their own stuff" (Ernst, 82). Another member of the NYC freegan movement recognized that coming from a stable economic background is what had allowed her to become a freegan, saying, "It's easier to not want if you don't need. I was lucky. I wasn't rich but there was never hunger and there was never a question of whether I was going to get clothes" (Ernst, 45).

The zine created by a Seattle DIY (Do-It-Yourself) collective entitled "Dumpster Dive: A zine guide to doing it and doing it well" includes various acknowledgements of the privilege inherent in being able to dumpster dive. On the back of the zine is a graphic that depicts a dumpster sitting atop a metal tower, the bottom of which is surrounded by a fence and barbed wire. The dumpster is overflowing with a bounty of fruit and vegetables. From within the dumpster, two large hands reach out toward the night sky in the background. On the side of the dumpster are the words: "Eat well and consider the system of privilege that sustains your lifestyle" (Benji and Kaylan, 2010).

Inside the zine, the authors write, "Just as dumpster diving has its legions of adherents, so does it have a healthy set of detractors. Not everyone has the privilege to adopt this lifestyle, not should they be expected to." This comment suggests that like some of the NYC freegans, members of the Seattle DIY dumpster diving sect possess at least a basic awareness of their own advantaged status. Again, at the risk of painting too

broad a stroke, I would argue that given the activist background of the majority of the freegan dumpster divers I researched, it's likely that most freegans have at least a basic understanding of their privilege in being able to dumpster dive as well as a general understanding of social inequality.

However, I also found that the freegans I met and studied had not intensively investigated the politics of color and class that allowed them to engage in dumpster diving. In particular, it seemed to me that most divers failed to recognize ways in which racial privilege – the result of the racial caste system that marginalizes people of color – protected them from police intervention while they were scavenging. For instance, the (white) hosts of the dumpster diving Meetup event in Los Angeles boasted that in all their years of dumpster diving, they had only been detained once on trespassing charges. Like the Food Not Bombs students I went dumpster diving with, they treated the possibility of police intervention as a potential inconvenience, rather than as a serious threat.

The fact that most freegans have not seriously interrogated their own privilege has serious implications for the transformative potential of the movement. As Ernst highlights,

> Freeganism aims to find ways to live sustainably outside of capitalism, but without interrogating what living *inside* capitalism means for those who are usually denied full access to it, can it every truly be a transgressive social justice movement? (130)

The answer to this question bears important weight on the transformative potential of the freegan movement as a whole. Of the freegan groups I studied in Seattle, Australia, Oregon, Los Angeles, New York City, and Texas, none of them had critically interrogated their own privileged position that allowed them to abstain from economic consumption. This lack of interrogation and subsequent lack of coalition building with

marginalized groups is problematic because one of the goals of the freegan movement is to act in solidarity with "groups that suffer most from capitalism" (Ernst, 82). This brings up the tricky issue of authenticity – are freegans trying to speak for those who are most exploited by capitalism, rather than letting them speak for themselves?

When I brought this up in a phone interview with Kelly Ernst, she told me the NYC freegan movement is "walking the line" in terms of speaking for a community that they're not necessarily a part of, and working to bring about positive change in that community (11/1/11). As one member of the NYC movement remarked, "I'm not a poor black person. I'm upper middle class. I know some very poor people, and I listen carefully, but I can only feel tangentially, somewhat so, the immense discomfort, pressure, and difficulty it is to live not having a grocery store in your neighborhood" (Ernst, 125). This language of "walking the line" implies that it is unclear whether or not freegans are helping or hurting the most disadvantaged social groups they are claiming to help – and thus, entirely possible that they are doing more harm than good.

This brings up what is perhaps the most important critique of freeganism – to what extent is the freegan movement viable if the very people it aims to help are not directly involved in the movement? Paulo Friere writes in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that to be truly libratory, all movements for social change must come from the people who bear the brunt of the systems of oppression (Freire, 1970). He writes,

> The revolutionary leaders must realize that their own conviction of the necessity for struggle (an indispensable dimension of revolutionary wisdom) was not given to them by anyone else - if it is authentic. This conviction cannot be packaged and sold; it is reached, rather, by means of a totality of reflection and action. Only the leaders' own involvement in reality, within an historical situation, led them to criticize this situation and to wish to change it (49).

Analyzed in this light, the freegan movement in New York City – and the various other dumpster divers who are motivated by freegan ideals – are, at best, not living up to their potential and at worst, critically flawed. At least in New York City, freegans seek to improve the situations of the marginalized people – "the oppressed," to use Freire's terminology – but are not actually engaging with them to build coalitions and work collaboratively toward a post-capitalist future.[23] While "arguably [the NYC freegan movement is] trying to help everyone as far as the environmental impact," there is much work to be done in terms of building alliances with marginalized groups (Ernst, 1/11/11).

Indeed, in light of Freire's idea that liberation must come from the people who are oppressed, I asked Kelly Ernst if the freegan movement lacks the transformative potential of other direct action movements like the Civil Rights movement because it's not led by the people who are most exploited by the capitalist system. In response, she stated, **"**I think that that's a huge hurdle and I think that there's the crisis of representation for them [that] also includes this glaring omission of people of color, of truly homeless and low-income people" (1/11/11).

She continued, explaining that the coalition building tactics of the freegans in New York City, at the time she was there, were "not very strong." She described how she organized a meeting for the NYC freegans to discuss whiteness, privilege and positionality and not a single person showed up. In spite of her efforts to continue the discussion over email, there was little engagement with the issue. In some ways, it's

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[23] I reference the New York City movement heavily both because it has been the most thoroughly studied and also because it is one of the largest, most well-organized, and cohesive freegan movements that currently exist. When I refer to the NYC movement, I make sure that the suggestions I make are not disproven by any of the other freegan movements and thus could likely be applied to other freegan groups.

completely understandable that NYC freegans did not want to engage with what might seem like a highly theoretical topic, especially while they are busy trying to organize trash tours, workshops and communicate their message to the wider public. However, at the root of the issue, it seems that there was a lack of desire to critically engage with their privilege. Engaging with more marginal groups was not a priority for the NYC freegan movement, as evidenced by the fact that the outreach events that did happen were held in predominantly white spaces, such as the NYU campus, rather than public libraries or parks where the freegans might have been able to recruit a more diverse group (Ernst, 11/1/11).

It is clear that the homogeneity and lack of meaningful outreach to marginalized groups seriously jeopardizes the efficacy of the freegan movement. However, it's also important to remember that the predominantly white demographic of most freegan movements does not *inherently* limit its transformative potential. Nor does it mean that freeganism is unique compared to other alternative food practices. As Rachel Slocum observed from her study of efforts to increase food security and farmer's markets in Minnesota, "Whiteness is an organizing feature of alternative food practices" (Slocum, 2006). Slocum notes that race is a cultural construct rather than a biological fact and thus "whiteness, capable of endlessly transforming itself, can change its tendency to reproduce and enforce racial oppression" (Slocum, 2006).

This means that just because most freegans are white doesn't necessarily mean that their movement replicates systemic oppression. However, in order to avoid this, it is imperative that freegans interrogate their own whiteness in order to realize the importance of reaching out to non-white groups so that they can build a diverse coalition.

Slocum's analysis emphasizes how the relative homogeneity of the freegan movement in 2011 does not completely invalidate its potential – while freeganism must include a more diverse constituency to make a bigger change, "there is no utility to advocacy that dismisses whiteness and what it brings. What white farmers, feminists and foodies bring to writing, companion species, foodways, land care, regionalism and farmers' markets is imperfect and inarticulate but also productive and part of ethical relating" (Slocum, 2006). Freeganism is an imperfect project, but nonetheless one that should be acknowledged for what it is right now, which is an important first step in the long journey to a post-capitalist future.

From the preceding analysis, it is clear that "for freegans concerned with social justice, equality and ending oppression, engagement in critical whiteness is imperative" (Ernst, 138). Although the adoption of "anti-racist" practices probably won't solve systemic inequality, it is crucial because it "would begin to address some of the discontinuities between freegan rhetoric and action" (Ernst, 138). Freegan groups all over the world must critically assess their own positionality as well as the status of their alliances with people of color and low-income communities. This is only in this way that the freegan movement will be able to grow to affect change in the lives of the people who are most exploited by capitalism.

Freegans and homelessness

Beyond a general lack of acknowledgement of privilege, freegan dumpster divers have also been criticized for taking away food from people who are homeless. While there are few serious academic investigations of freeganism, even less research has been done on the connection between freegan dumpster divers and homelessness. This is not

necessarily surprising because, as Susan Strasser notes, "Marginal people leave few records, and scholars who study them often find that the most accessible sources – the writings and records of elites *about* marginal groups – offer more enlightenment about the writers than dependable analysis of their subjects" (8). While this helps explain the lack of in-depth information on this topic, it means that I have had to rely exclusively upon my own my experience with the Pitzer Food Not Bombs group and interviews I conducted to investigate how people who are homeless are affected by freegan dumpster divers.

To begin my investigation, I asked most of the people I interviewed if they had ever seen people who looked homeless while they had been dumpster diving. One respondent told me that although she had seen destitute individuals going through residential and restaurant trash, she hadn't encountered any of them trying to recover large quantities of food from supermarket dumpsters, which is what she and her friends did when they dumpster dove. Based on her previous job experience working with homeless people, this respondent speculated that it was unlikely most homeless people would be organized enough to coordinate a dumpster run, explaining,

> I just feel like homeless people have so many other things that they're worrying about at the time that to coordinate a dumpster run, one when you're trying to eat a lot of food…I'm sure it happens, but at least the way we do it you have to coordinate it and have a plan in place. I dunno, people who are homeless are just trying to figure out what's next, like where they're going to get the next meal from. (Bosken, 9/19/2011.

While this person's experience working with homeless people makes her a credible source on the issue, it's hard to draw definite conclusions based on her testimony alone. However, she does make the important point it is much easier to dumpster dive with a car, as opposed to on foot or with a bicycle. With a car, it's possible to cover more

dumpsters in the same amount of time. In addition, a car provides extra storage capacity, allowing the diver to take more food from the dumpster than they would be able to if they were traveling on foot or by bike. As a result, her suggestion that most homeless people don't systematically go from one grocery store to the next to collect large quantities of food makes sense. Moreover, the one person I spoke with who did not have a home mentioned dumpster diving at only one store, which further confirms the hypothesis that homeless people do *not* dumpster dive for food as systematically or as rigorously as those with more financial resources.

Milton Saier, a professor who has been dumpster diving for 32 years, has written about the wide variety of people he has encountered at the dumpster: an elderly couple who had only spent forty dollars on food in the past year; a "drug-addicted young boy who'd been addicted in the womb"; a man who had escaped from prison by stealing a car; and a "brilliant, homeless Harvard Ph.D. graduate who had worked with several Nobel Prize winners [who] was schizophrenic and enjoyed his delusions more than his medication" (Saier, 2006: 45). In addition, he writes that the other people he encountered "have been alcoholics, drug users, or just down on their luck" (44).

While low-income people cannot reach as many dumpsters as people with more material and social resources, Saier's experience suggests that folks from all sectors of the socio-economic spectrum dumpster dive for food. Thus, it is seems likely that at least some homeless people depend on dumpstered food to survive. Just because people with more privilege can access more dumpsters and recover greater amounts of food doesn't meant that there aren't many other people who rely on dumpster diving as a source of sustenance.

Which brings up another important question about privilege: are privileged freegan dumpster divers taking food away from homeless people who need it most? When I asked my respondent this question, she told me, "that whole argument gets on my nerves" because it is the responsibility of the supermarket or business that is tossing the food to make sure it gets to the people who need it most, rather than the dumpster divers (Bosken, 9/19/11). She concluded by stating "if that business really wanted to [help the homeless], they could find a way… if they want to help the homeless, donate to a homeless shelter" (Bosken, 9/19/11).

While increasing supermarket donations to food banks is undoubtedly important, her response sidesteps any analysis of the effects of her own actions on homeless individuals. This is important to note in light of the various criticisms that have been issued accusing freegans of robbing marginalized people of resources. For example, many members of the "elder generation of squatters" in New York City are "distrustful of the freegans" (Ernst, 83). As one member articulated, "Freegans are very vocal, very visible… they're turning it into a political ideology, when it used to be survival. They're taking food out of the mouths of people who really need it… I don't think they're thinking it through all the way" (Ernst, 83). The person who made this comment spoke from the experience of being homeless on and off for the past seven years, meaning she had "a working knowledge of homelessness and diving in the city" (Ernst, 103), which suggests that she is probably a more credible source than most on the issue.

My own conversations with people who are homeless in Pomona, California complicated my understanding of the ways in which freegan activity might be affecting the diving of more marginal people. I had the opportunity to converse with several people

who were homeless when I accompanied the Pitzer Food Not Bombs group on their weekly outing to serve food to outside Pomona City Hall.

One man I spoke with described how he used to dumpster dive at the Trader Joe's in Claremont, where he found an enormous quantity of food (FNB, 11/30/11). He talked about his dumpster diving as if he was one of the pioneers, remarking that he had gotten food from the Trader Joe's dumpster for years, long before it became popular. (As discussed in Chapter One, various sources support the claim that the incidence of dumpster diving has increased substantially in recent years). However, he did not comment as to whether or not the increased popularity of dumpster diving in recent years had resulted in increased competition. However, he did tell me that he no longer dives at that particular store, which means that increased competition may have been the reason he left. This would also mean that the diving of groups such as Food Not Bombs – who frequent the Trader Joe's dumpster – was the impetus for his switch. A much more thorough study of homeless people in Claremont and Pomona would be necessary in order to draw any broad conclusions about the effects of FNB dumpster diving on the homeless population, but his statements at the very least do nothing to disprove the allegation that freegans are negatively affecting people who are homeless (although it should also be noted that it was precisely *because* of FNB dumpster diving that this man was eating a free and nutritious meal that evening).

However, it is also important to note that just because this man stopped dumpstering at Trader Joe's doesn't mean that he was going hungry as a result. He confirmed that he had at least some variety of food choice when he told me how a Trader Joe's employee would often give him bags of food that were going to be tossed but that

because he "didn't like the food" that she gave him, he now tried to avoid her when he saw her (FNB, 12/1/11). This story implies that he was able to find adequate food from other sources. Keeping in mind the highly informal nature of this field research, the experience of the man I spoke with leaves open the possibility that freegan dumpster diving may have driven him away from at least this particular dumpster as a food source. However our conversation also suggests that he had located adequate alternative sources of food, making it impossible to draw any clear conclusions about the extent to which freegan activity may have reduced his accessibility to food.

Thus, the allegation remains on the table. When I broached the topic with Kelly Ernst, I asked her, "Is it the case that perhaps the freegans *are* taking from more marginalized people?" Basing her response on the NYC freegan movement, she responded,

> I think it's possible but from what I saw of the trash tours, which they do once a week, and they hit up five or six grocery stores and not everything from each place was taken. I think with all of the resources I don't legitimately think that they're taking anything away… (11/1/11)

Ernst referred to the quantity of food waste as a justification for the freegan activities, implying that there is such a huge volume of wasted food that there is enough for everyone. Milton Saier also emphasized the sheer amount of food in the dumpsters, further validating Ernst's claim. Saier told me,

> They throw away so much, and almost nothing is taken. I only go once a week and I still can't take everything they throw away that could be of use to me or my animals or my students or my family or the neighbors in our group. I just can't take it all, I can't use it all. So I leave tons there. And I can tell there's not that many people who do it. I mean, there's quite a number of students who do, but when it comes to any one store, I don't think they take but a tiny fraction of the total (10/4/11).

In light of the fact that the average supermarket in the U.S. discards 700 to 800 pounds of food every day, it seems safe to conclude that anyone who is determined will be able to find some sort of edible food in the dumpster (Bloom, 220). So it's unlikely that freegans are responsible for other people going hungry. However, there are many other ways in which freegan dumpster diving might diminish the accessibility of dumpster diving for lower-income people: they not want to approach a dumpster that is surrounded by college kids, the selection of quality-food-items might be diminished, or freegans might make a mess that could attract store managers and lead to the dumpster being locked, thereby making the dumpster inaccessible for everyone.

While Ernst did note that sometimes people who looked homeless would dive alongside the NYC freegans, this was the only account of side-by-side diving I encountered (11/1/11). Thus, although it is unlikely that freegan activity is resulting in anyone going hungry, doubt still exists about the extent to which freegans are alienating people who dumpster dive out of necessity. As Ernst explained to me,

> I don't think that they're probably taking that many food resources out of circulation just because there's so much out there, but I think that the fact that they're not doing that, it's easy to argue that they are. Saying it looks bad is pretty basic but it can look bad. (11/1/11)

As Ernst suggests, the criticism that freegans are taking food from the homeless cannot be completely disproven. Moreover, there is the possibility that freegan actions are indirectly diminishing dumpster access and making it harder for homeless people to dive. As a result, we must conclude that until the freegan movement reaches out to homeless people and builds lasting alliances with them, this critique will probably have some validity. This further highlights how important it is that freegans build connections with disadvantaged groups.

My experience speaking with homeless people in Pomona at the FNB serving sheds some light on how freegans might go about building these alliances. I learned that many of the people who come to the FNB serving in Pomona are veterans of the Vietnam War.[24] One of the veterans told me that he "hate[d] all Americans" because they had turned their back on him when he got back from the war, in spite of the courageous sacrifices he had made as an American soldier fighting for his country (FNB, 11/30/11). His resentment toward "all Americans" suggests that freegan groups that seek to align with people who are homeless – and veterans in particular – need to focus on building trust above anything else. Psychological trauma from war, combined with a deep-rooted sense of rejection mean that it might be hard initially to build trust with veterans who are homeless, and that it might take a long time to build such trust, if it's possible at all. However, it seems that *if* freegans can foster a meaningful connection based on mutual trust, there is a tremendous potential for the freegan movement to serve as a way to re-create a sense of connectedness in the lives of these people who feel betrayed by their country. Moreover, freegans might be able to build a connection around the anti-American, anti-military sentiment that is shared by many war veterans and is espoused by some freegans as well.

However, there aren't currently many ways for marginalized people to be involved in the movement, as discussed previously at some length. In particular in the case of homeless individuals, public dumpster diving as exemplified in the freegan trash tours held in New York City (which often attracted media) is dangerous because of the

[24] American involvement in the Vietnam War lasted from 1954 to 1973, during which time more than 3 million Americans served in the war. The Veteran's Administration estimates that 830,000 Vietnam veterans suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. ("The War's Costs," 2008)

potential for arrest. As another person at the FNB serving told me he had been kicked out of the abandoned building he had been sleeping in earlier that day by the cops. He was incensed, recalling how they "stepped all over my blankets" and now he didn't have any place to stay that night (FNB, 11/30/11). This anecdote illustrates the antagonism between the most impoverished people in our society and law enforcement officers. And while the anti-establishment attitude this person expressed aligns with the anarchist principles that undergird freegan philosophy, it will be extremely challenging to build a movement amongst individuals with such different degrees of privilege and such distinct life experiences. This example further underscores the need for meaningful network building amongst marginal individuals, non-profits working for radical social change, the freegan movement and other activist groups that seek to radically transform the current system. It also highlights the very real challenges of building a diverse coalition amongst people with such different life experiences, attitudes and social advantage.

Freegans: not contributing?

The final major criticism of freeganism that must be addressed is that freeganism is not an effective way to bring about social change. As noted at the outset, there are many assumptions embedded in this idea, all of which have to do with notions of contribution as well as relative conceptions of what is radical.

First, there exists the idea that by spending their time dumpster diving and hosting DIY workshops, freegans are not contributing to society or to effective social change. Murray Butchkin articulates this idea in *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm*, which is re-printed in the aforementioned Seattle DIY zine. In the

section entitled "A Critique of Dumpster Diving: Privilege, Class Struggle, and the Limitations of Lifestyle Changes in Creating Change," Butckin's words are re-printed:

> Shoplifting, dumpster diving, quitting work are all put forward as revolutionary ways to live outside the system but amount to nothing more than a parasitic way of life which depends on capitalism without providing any real challenge. The arrogance of middle class kids (just like the hippies) supposing to change the world by roughing it as 'poor' people for a few years is captured perfectly in the quote on the back cover of their book *Evasion*: 'Poverty, unemployment, homelessness - if you're not having fun, you're not doing it right![25]

Butchkin is critical of what he sees as a self-congratulatory lifestyle politics that doesn't take into account systems of privilege and comes at the expense of the possibility for true social change. While Butchkin's critique that freegans are not aware of their own privilege is true to a certain extent, his argument that freeganism is parasitic signals a fundamental misunderstanding of the movement. Unfortunately this is a common perception. Newsweek contributing editor Jerry Adler describes freegans as "romantic rebels" who espouse a utopian ideal rather than a viable solution for remedying social ills (Adler, 2007; Ernst, 105). He writes how most freegans "are educated and capable of contributing to the economy" and yet are choosing not to (Adler, 2007).

Both Adler and Butchkin's critiques rest upon a notion of contribution solely in economic terms (Ernst, 105). Given the persistent narrative that equates patriotism with participation in the economy, it is understandable that this would be a common criticism of the freegan movement. However, to focus exclusively on economic contributions – at the same time as to naturalize such contributions as the only viable way to add anything to society – is to take an extremely limited view. There are many ways that individuals can contribute to society that are not economic in nature. For example, they can work to

[25] *Evasion* is an anonymous account of dumpster diving and petty theft that was published in 2003 by Crimethinc, an anarchist collective.

improve environmental health, foster positive cultural change, institute political reform, or grow their own food. Each of these examples is also the type of contribution that freeganism seeks to offer. Understandings of contribution are relative, not absolute. In this case, which freegans are not contributing to the economy, they are instead devoting their energy toward fostering cultural change by articulating an alternative to the status quo and living out that alternative.

While Butchkin and Adler criticize freegans for not contributing to the economy, there are others who condemn freeganism for not contributing to a revolutionary movement for social change because it is not based in class struggle (Ernst, 107). However, the idea that class struggle is the only means by which to bring about revolutionary change is grounded in a neoliberal framework that assumes class distinctions (Ernst, 107). Indeed, "the discourse around social movements since the 1970s has been mired in the rhetoric of neoliberal consumption" (Ernst, 107).

As feminist geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham explain, "what is interesting is that both the positioning of a transformative class politics in opposition to a politics of social democratic reform, and of (re)distribution in opposition to economic growth, draw upon the same centered vision of the economic totality" (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 175). They suggest that if we can divorce our notions of systemic transformation from class-based visions, "we may be able to envision local and proximate socialisms" (264). Gibson-Graham seek to de-naturalize the notion upon which critics like Butchkin base their argument – that social change necessarily comes from class-based struggle. Like other direct action movements, freeganism "view[s] class as one, not *the* one, organizational strategy and rejects the use of violence as necessary for revolution" (Ernst, 73).

In addition to broadening our view of contribution to understand the significance of the freegan movement, it is important to highlight that there are varying degrees of participation in the freegan movement. While the overarching goal of the movement is extrication from capitalism, "there is no escaping the webs of capitalism. Freegans… generally cannot sustain themselves without the overproduction of the industrialized agrifood system that ends up both in dumpsters and in the emergency food system" (Gross, 74). Not only are freegans dependent on wasted food to survive (although there would be no need for the freegan movement if the wasted food did not exist), they are also faced with the challenge of providing for themselves while still existing within a predominantly capitalist system. This often proves extremely difficult, which is why in practice, most freegans work toward the goal of *minimizing* their participation in capitalism. This explains why many freegans, including those who hosted the L.A. dumpster diving Meetup I attended, have jobs and pay rent.

It's true that these freegans are still participating in the capitalist system. But that's not the point. Indeed, as one back-to-the-lander informant stated, "Of course we're not self-sufficient. Economic self-sufficiency is a myth. We just don't want to be trapped by a system that makes you try to meet a standard of living that's too high; makes you eat food that's too rich; live in a house that's overheated in the winter and air-conditioned in the summer" (Houriet, 1971: 38; Gross, 63).[26]

Houriet's informant highlights one of the central motivations behind the freegan movement, which is the desire for more autonomy over one's life. As one freegan in

[26] "Back-to-the-lander" is a movement that was popularized in the U.S. in the early 20th century. The goal of the movement is complete self-sufficiency, achieved by growing food on a small scale. It has been described as an attempt to find a "third way" between capitalism and socialism. ("Back-to-the-Land Movement, 2011)

Oregon explained, "he turned to this lifestyle because he wanted to feel something" (Gross, 75). This is a common motivating principle amongst freegans. For example, the freegan website Freegan.info states, "How much of our lives do we sacrifice to pay bills and buy more stuff? For most of us, work means sacrificing our freedom to take orders from someone else, stress, boredom, monotony, and in many cases risks to our physical and psychological well-being" (Freegan.info, 2008). It is the desire to have more time to do what they want that motivates many people to "downshift" from a lifestyle that's based on making money in order to acquire more possessions in the endless search for fulfillment.[27] As Mercer and Edwards explain, many freegans choose "to work as little as possible in low-paying, low-skilled employment, preferring to spend their time on activities that they personally value, such as activist campaigns, creative projects or social occasions. This chosen time allocation parallels a preference for a 'slow' lifestyle, reconstructing temporality to their personal values rather than endorsing capitalist values of modernisation and speed (see Parkins 2004)" (Mercer and Edwards, 292).

As discussed in Chapter Two, this reconstruction of values is what makes freeganism seem so radical in many ways. Many freegans report that by reducing their patterns of consumption, they experience a greater sense of freedom. For instance, Tammy, a freegan from Oregon, owns 100 personal items (Dickison, 2011). Of her lifestyle, she explains, "For me, scaling back my life and living with less isn't really about austerity, it's about really getting connected to the outside world and I think that's a

[27] "Downshifting," alternately referred to as "enough-ism" or "voluntary simplicity" refers to a movement of people who have chosen to opt out of the "relentless treadmill" of consumption. In lieu of acquiring more material goods by working longer hours, they seek to live a life of greater purpose and fulfillment by working less and spending less (Leonard, 158-159).

lot easier when you're not constrained by debt and stress and all these things that can stop people from really doing what they love" (Dickison, 2011). With impressive brevity, Tammy articulates one of the core values of the freegan movement: the idea that by extricating oneself from a system that is centered around the false prophet of commercialism that promotes material acquisition as the key to happiness, individuals can focus on what will truly make them happy.

This ethic of reclaiming one's life is embodied in the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) ethos of many freegan groups. DIY activities include squatting, scavenging and making homemade clothing and music (Mercer and Edwards, 283). This is appealing because it allows people to exact more control and creativity over their life. As one Food Not Bombs participant from Australia related,

> DIY is taking something into your own hands and out of other peoples' hands... With dumpster diving you're taking that back in your own hands, your own life back in your own hands. That's your DIY: if I do it myself and spend less, essentially the more of my life I'm able spend doing what I'd love to do . . . Stuff that's beneficial to myself and to the community . . . It could be about putting out a record that's not a label . . . I would really like to try and get my own sustainable veggie garden. (Mercer and Edwards, 283)

The idea of having more time to dedicate to what one truly wants to do is a recurring theme amongst freegans. However, it brings up the important question about the extent to which living outside of the system actually leads to greater autonomy. I spoke with a graduate student in New York City who started dumpster diving in college about this issue and she provided some important experience-based insight.

Together with her boyfriend, she spent the year after college traveling across the United States in a school bus that they had converted to run on biodiesel. The goal of the project was to live for an entire year without having to pay for rent, food or gas.

However, they quickly realized that even though they weren't paying for food, gas or rent, they still had a lot of expenses (Lee, 9/24/11). She explained, "You realize pretty quickly that you have to pay for stuff, and if you don't have money you're really limited, and that's no fun." What she emphasized about the bus project was that in spite of her desire to "live outside of the system," she quickly realized there were only "short parts where it works."

Like many freegans, she expressed a desire to "have as much free time as possible so I could paint and climb and do the things I wanted to do but I found that working at jobs [in manual labor] exhausts you... you just don't have as much energy left over to do the things that you like to do and stay." After spending five years working jobs in manual labor, her idealistic goals for how to live outside of the system shifted to a form of shrewd pragmatism. She decided to go back to school to study painting, her true passion, after coming to terms with the fact that "clearly I [was] going to have to spend 90 percent of my life working like everybody else in the world so I'd better have a job that I like because I'm sick of spending every day at a job that I hate…like standing around in a retail store selling sports bras is really boring."

While her decision to return to complicity within the economic system was voluntary, it was based on five years of experience living outside of the system. When comparing her story to the freegan movement, it is important to highlight that Lee's decision to extricate herself from the economy was not based on any larger goal of bringing about social change. Rather, it was a personal decision based on the desire to live a more meaningful life. However, there are obvious parallels between her experience and that of many freegans. What she ultimately concluded was that living outside of the

system was more limiting than freeing. Reflecting on her bus adventure, she stated,

> You can spend an afternoon getting vegetable oil, finding a Chinese restaurant, talking to the restaurant owners, pumping the oil into the barrel, filtering it, pumping it into the gas tank, changing the filters [and] it's like if you pay yourself by the hour, that adds up, and how much would it cost to just buy the gas or biodiesel. When right now my time is so precious… I feel like sometimes I would rather pay somebody to do a task for me than have to do it myself because I have more important stuff to do.

She continued, explaining that when people take an economic point of view, freeganism makes less and less sense. She explained that one's decision to abstain from capitalism all comes down to one's priorities:

> I know lots of people who are happy wearing raggedy old clothes and living in a hippie commune and throwing food together or dumpster diving together, but you're limited. Those people are fine with it because that's their thing. It depends what your priorities are in life… It seems like most people have different priorities [like] family or financial security so that means that they would rather do what they need to do to have family and financial security [than become a freegan].

Of freeganism in particular she concluded that freegans are limited in terms of their upward mobility. She viewed it as "something that's fun for college kids to do" but something that people grow out of.

As she suggests, freeganism is less a question of freedom and more a question of priorities. If it is a priority for someone that they have as much autonomy over their time as possible, obtaining food from the dumpster and participating in DIY projects might justify the corresponding loss of potential for social advancement in the current economic system. However, like Adler and Butchkin, Lee only frames the question in terms of economic contribution. She also completely ignores the goal of the freegan movement, which is to bring about transformative social change. It might be that for many freegans, their commitment to living out their vision of a post capitalist world supersedes any

considerations of social standing or status.

Lee's comments are well taken, however. It is true that for the majority of people, freeganism is neither accessible nor desirable as a lifestyle either because of the privilege required to participate, the tremendous commitment it necessitates or the radical political stance inherent in the movement. I do not wish to overlook the importance of this point. However, it is equally important to highlight that freeganism is a movement that is defined more by *possibility* than by current realities. Although the impetus for the movement is a response to current realities, the vision for change is based on imagining what is possible. We desperately need people like the freegans who are willing and able to keep imagining, and continue inhabiting, this alternative vision. As Ernst writes, "The imagination plays a central role both as an avenue of hope, allowing people to imagine a globalization of people and ideas rather than finance capital, and a tool for creative, non-violent forms of protest" (18). As Karl Marx wrote in *Das Kapital*, "we erect our structure in imagination before we erect it in reality" (Marx,1867). I believe that it is in the presentation of an alternative to the status quo, and the encouragement to imagine and begin living out such an alternative that freeganism has the greatest transformative potential.

CONCLUSION: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF DUMPSTER DIVING

Coming at us like this - in waves, massed … knowledge becomes symbolic of our disempowerment - it becomes bad knowledge - so we deny it, riding its crest until it subsides from consciousness. I would like to think of my 'ignorance' less as a personal failing and more as a massive cultural trend, an example of doubling, of psychic numbing, that characterizes the end of the millennium. If we can't act on knowledge, then we can't survive without ignorance. So we cultivate the ignorance, go to great lengths to celebrate it, even. The faux-dumb aesthetic that dominates TV and Hollywood must be about this... We are paralyzed by bad knowledge, from which the only escape is playing dumb. Ignorance becomes empowering because it enables people to live. Stupidity becomes proactive, a political statement, our collective norm…In this root sense, ignorance is an act of will, a choice one makes over and over again, especially when information overwhelms and knowledge has become synonymous with impotence.

- Ruth L. Ozeki, *My Year of Meats*, 334

The bulk of this thesis has been devoted to analyzing what is wrong with our current system. However, I am hopeful about the future. History shows us that a system based on capitalist excess was no means inevitable, suggesting that it can be changed yet again into something better. Freeganism is an embodiment of this search for a better alternative. Freegans envision a society in which communities are vital, people, animals and resources are all treated with respect, moderation is the norm, and individuals have agency over their own lives.

While it is might be tempting to dismiss freeganism as a fringe movement, as I hope my investigation shows, it is much more than that. I agree with Kelly Ernst, who describes freeganism as "a postmodern response to capitalist consumerism that offers hope" (Ernst, 189). While some detractors of freeganism argue that it lacks the potential to bring about institutional change, even these detractors agree that freeganism has the capacity to de-naturalize waste through dumpster diving. In this way, freegan dumpster divers challenge previously accepted norms concerning waste, excess and consumerism.

As Chapter Two highlights, examining our connection to the resources that sustain us by beginning in the dumpster is a sort of environmental analysis in reverse that has great potential to spur us toward a zero-waste society.

While freeganism has the potential to change our acceptance of waste, it is currently not a movement that is available to everyone, which is the greatest obstacle that the movement faces in fostering broader change. As discussed in Chapter Three, it is imperative that freegans reach out to marginalized groups to build alliances around a shared vision of justice, sustainability and community. However, as my interviews with people who are homeless highlight, the challenge of building connections between disparate social groups is immense. It will require patience, dedication and trust from all parties. However, such coalition building is absolutely essential, both for the future viability of the movement as well as to ensure that freegans are not taking resources from more marginal individuals.

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Freegans suggest that we must build a society where nothing and no one is wasted. As dumpster diving highlights, the waste, poverty, injustice and excess created by the current system are both illogical and dangerous. As Paul Hawken writes in *Blessed Unrest*, "No academic yet has satisfactorily explained the wisdom of an economic system that marginalizes human beings. A zero-waste society means wasting nothing, and foremost among these resources are people, especially children. If we are to care for our children, then we must address the needs of their mothers and fathers" (183).

The journey to achieve this vision of a zero-waste society will undoubtedly be long and indirect. Freeganism by no means offers a complete solution, either. There is no

doubt that institutional changes are important as well. For instance, the appointment of a federal "food waste czar" to oversee federal food waste reduction (Bloom, 292), landfill taxes that make trash prohibitively expensive and alternatives such as reusing or composting more appealing, and programs that encourage manufacturer responsibility for the entire lifecycle of its products are all essential to the realization of the freegan vision. It is inspiring to note that nations such as Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and Scotland have already adopted zero-waste targets, showing that they are leading the way in this transition (Royte, 254).

However, just because institutions must change does not mean that individuals are must not also be part of this change. Yet, this is not often a popular notion. As Ruth Ozeki highlights, the dire state of the world is often overwhelming such that we feel there's nothing we can do to change it, so we adopt an attitude of ignorance and indifference. We receive the message that unless we are willing to quit our jobs and devote our entire lives to saving the world, there's not very much we can do to make a difference. Sure, we can donate to charities and be good to our neighbors, but lasting, systemic change doesn't happen overnight, nor does it happen just because we get upset after watching some documentary. We learn that the system is too big, the corporations are too powerful, and our physical landscape is too permanent to really make lasting change.

Moreover, as Colin Beavan notes in *No Impact Man*, it's hard to motivate oneself to do anything knowing that we as individuals are not solely responsible for the problem. We are all inherently good people who largely inherited this mess, so why do we have to clean it up? As Beavan explains,

> However much my grandparents' ghosts might cluck their tongues at my way of life, it is not that my family alone had turned into some sort of monstrous, garbage-making machine. It's not that I'm a marred human being who took a wrong turn… It's not that I'm the lazy ingrate I thought I was. But it may be that, as a member of the crew of the huge steamship that is our culture, I had acquiesced to some decisions that caused the whole boat to take a wrong turn, and possibly sink. (40)

Beavan suggests that while we are not wholly responsible for the state of our culture, we are complicit in the perpetuation of its harms. Evidence of social isolation, poverty, environmental destruction and basic inequality is all around us, if we're willing to acknowledge it. (By "we" I really mean the people who have the privilege to not be constantly reminded every day of these inequalities). What it comes down to is the fact that regardless of our individual power to change the system, or the extent to which we as individuals created these problems, it's up to individuals to plant the seeds of change. As Colin Beavan wrote of his No Impact Project,

> I find myself reminded that the whole project is about not waiting around to see what might help. It is about stumbling forward and beginning to try to make a difference, rather than sitting around wondering if I can make a difference… So whether it's human nature of industrial systems that need to change, when it comes to saving the world, the real question is not whether I can make a difference. The real question is whether I am willing to try (68).

If someone decides that they want to try to make a difference, dumpster diving has the potential to reconnect them with their innate power to create change. For me, this is where the greatest potential of freeganism lies – in the fact that anyone who identifies with the freegan vision of a zero-waste, community-based, self-sustaining society can be part of the movement. As Kelly Ernst notes, freeganism is about affinity, not identity (107). This means that one does not need to quit their job or eat from a dumpster in order to be part of the freegan movement. Freegans are individual people who have decided they are willing to try to make a change by living out the alternative world they wish to

inhabit while simultaneously calling attention to the broken nature of the current one. They offer an example for the rest of us that, although it's easy to get stuck wondering if one will make a difference, what matters most is one's willingness to try. Above all, freeganism invites everyone to exercise their capacity for change-making.[28]

And I really do mean everyone. Just because one isn't marching in the streets or joining Greenpeace doesn't mean they cannot meaningfully contribute to this movement for change. What's important is that individuals recognize that there is no single type of person who can mobilize around these issues, but rather that everyone can contribute in their own way. As Kelly Ernst told me,

> "I think that activism is scary for people who've never done it before, or it's something that people say 'I'm not really an activist, I can't do that' and you're like, well yeah you can. Community gardening is in some ways a form of activism. And I think if people look at it that way, and they're like, 'Alright, I do have power to change this, I do have the ability to make different choices.'" (11/1/11)

Freeganism encourages us to all pick an issue we care about, be it schools or sea otters, and devote a small amount of time each week to becoming involved in it. This might mean contacting a local organization that is involved with the issue or simply talking about it with one's neighbors. The roots of change are individual people starting to believe in their capacity to affect the world around them. Moreover, as noted in Chapter One, the contemporary moment is ripe for change, a hopeful context in which to start taking action.

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[28] It was in fact this spirit of change that inspired the title of this thesis. It's called "Day to Day Change Making" because that was how Jennifer Roach described dumpster diving in an interview. This struck me as a wonderful way to describe the spirit of action and change that defines the freegan movement. (Roach, 9/28/11)

If one is inspired by the freegan vision, there are many freegan activities that individuals can undertake that are generally available to everyone regardless of race or class. I offer here a non-exhaustive list: Volunteer with a gleaning organization that picks fruit that would otherwise go to waste. Declare a "buy nothing day" by abstaining from purchasing anything, driving anywhere, or using any electronics (Beavan, 2008). Treat food for what it is – life – and make sure to only take what you can eat (Bloom, 2010). Join a community gardening organization, or plant your own garden (Ernst, 11/1/11). Learn a skill that increases self-sufficiency. Pick up trash. Find a local organization that is working on issues that you care about. Participate in the No Impact Project (Noimpactproject.org).

The list of actions that can be taken on an individual basis is endless. What's important, as Beavan highlights, is that we try. Together, inspired by the freegan vision, we can work to build the world that we envision for ourselves and for our children – one community potluck, one garden, one friendship and one Dumpster at a time.

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