Culture and Waste

The Creation and Destruction of Value

Edited by
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In *Flash of the Spirit* Robert Farris-Thompson talks about the quirky sculptures that adorn Henry Dorsey’s Kentucky home—its moving surfaces composed of other people’s throwaway objects. A stonemason, Dorsey used crazy materials—industrial rubbish, plastic dolls, an old washing machine agitator—to create a playful world of apparitions in motion; moving tableaux that offered “visual glossolalia, a galaxy of points indicating spiritual encounter and enlightenment.”1 We have grown accustomed to reading rubbish as glossolalia within the genre of “outsider” art; we celebrate the outsider artist’s rambunctious speaking in tongues. But the surprise of this essay is that the luminousness of junk—the transformation of debris into something wild and sweet—is also at play in American fiction across a wide range of ethnicities. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is obsessed with junk. While Henry Dorsey’s confabulations evoke the personal objects that collect at the surface of African American grave sites (broken cups or pottery; an offering of the last object to be touched by the dead), *Invisible Man* does not begin outside the grave, but inside, deep in the traumatic remnants of New York’s slave history, “in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten in the nineteenth century” and is now filled with illuminating debris: “In my hole in the basement there are exactly 1,369 lights. I’ve wired the entire ceiling, every inch of it. . . . An act of sabotage, you know. I’ve already begun to wire the wall. A junk man I know, a man of vision has supplied me with wire and sockets.”2 What makes the junk man so important in illuminating trauma? Invisible Man’s journey into his own unexamined past begins with the portrait of a junk man who totes a cart full of unusable blueprints and who makes riddles about the southern blues—the very songs Invisible Man has thrown away in order to join the talented tenth.
What is the social life of rubbish in modern and postmodern American fiction? What kind of archive does it provide? Trying to create a genealogy or archive of trash, two recent news stories caught my attention. The first is a piece about the British installation artist Michael Landy, who rented an empty store on Oxford Street in London:

My goal is to destroy all my possessions. I have been making an inventory of everything I own, and it comes to 7,006 items, from televisions to reading material to records to old love letters to my Saab 900. These are the things I have accumulated in the thirty-seven years of my life. Some of them are hard to part with, like my father's sheepskin coat, which he gave to me many years ago. But I have made a conceptual decision as an artist to shred and granulate everything.3

The installation neatly reverses the assembly line methods of Fordism:

"I have twelve people working for me with saws and hammers to take the objects apart. Everything I own is being broken down over a fourteen-day period; everything will be turned into . . . a granulated material that looks like pebbles. If it's a book, we take off the binding and shred the pages. If it's a stereo, we unscrew it. If it's a shirt, we take the buttons off and then the sleeves. You destroy a record with a hammer."4

Of course, Landy's attempt to escape commodification, to make a "brand" of protest art that cannot be sold, is also made possible by the very seriality—the acts of serial consumption—that the assembly line works to produce. "In the future, of course I will consume again. I live in a developed country. You can't avoid consumerism and consumption. I will have to buy toothpaste again. I will have to buy clothing. It's unavoidable.5 But Landy's project is also an attack on environmental racism. Instead of creating a new dump in a slum or outsourcing his trash to Nigeria, Landy wants to bury this debris on the site where much of it was purchased: underneath a shopping mall.

The project of making trash out of art and art out of trash has a long pedigree. In the recent past artists like Jackson Pollack and Claes Oldenburg have constructed art out of entropy or formlessness. Robert Rauschenberg's Gold Paintings use gold leaf to cover newspaper and other detritus, suggesting another form of the Invisible Man's starry junk: a political aesthetic that devolves from a desire to mess up classical forms, to soil Western systems of classification. A second news story captures this political use of trash more pointedly. In October 2000 crowds gathered outside the presidential palace in Lima, Peru to protest the dirty election of Alberto Fujimori. While one group of protestors laundered the national flag and hung it up to dry, "another was putting out the garbage." Huge piles of black plastic bags decorated with the faces of Fujimori and Montesinos, his disgraced security advi-
or, were flung outside the presidential palace and then spread to the doorsteps of Fujimori's military and congressional supporters with the slogan: "Put the garbage in the garbage." Again, this deployment of trash in service of political soiling has a long pedigree, but what is most striking about this story is the way in which the politics of trashing conspired with Fujimori's own love of the throwaway. Fujimori's sister ran a charity that collected secondhand clothes from Japan's middle class to distribute to the Peruvian poor. "The garments were kept in the basement of the palace, and the family squabbled over the better items." Fujimori announced one Christmas that he had a present for one of his colonels, who was then "taken down to the basement and invited to pick out an item of secondhand clothing." In March 1992 a radio station broadcast a report that the clothes that did emerge from the basement "were in such lamentable condition that even the poor did not want them."  

In Landy's installation, goods are made into trash as a paean to the futility and inescapability of consumerism. The political protest against the Fujimori regime uses trash to mirror and protest a corrupt political system. But in this third example, rubbish has a life of its own outside the economy that created it. And this liveliness also has a long pedigree. Among the poor, within developing countries, you make things out of whatever is available, and often what is available is what has been thrown away. Whole economies—both formal and informal—have been built around someone else's castaways. Here the found object is not the royal road to the unconscious (as with the surrealists) but the footpath to survival.  

To these public uses of trash I want to add another meditation on the uses of rubbish as archive or catalogue of trauma, this time from Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon. Here debris is a painful source of vision, as in Rauschenberg's Gold Paintings, but the vision suggests an economy so violent that it cannot be covered with art:

Every night now Guitar was seeing little scraps of Sunday dresses—white and purple, powder blue, pink and white lace and voile, velvet and silk, cotton and satin, eyelet and grosgrain. The scraps stayed with him all night and he remembered... [his sister] bending in the wind to catch the heart-red pieces of velvet that had floated under the gaze of Mr. Robert Smith. Only Guitar's scraps were different. The bits of Sunday dresses that he saw did not fly; they hung in the air quietly, like the whole notes in the last measure on an Easter hymn.

Four little colored girls had been blown out of a church, and his mission was to approximate as best he could a similar death of four little girls some Sunday, since he was the Sunday man. He couldn't do it with a piece of wire, or a switchblade. For this he needed explosives, or guns, or hand grenades. And that would take money. He knew that the assignments of the Days would more and
The violence behind this passage is unspeakable. Scraps of cloth in the air turn, under Guitar's gaze, into bodies exploded, mutilated, thrown away—an obscenely monitory act of white southern culture. But Morrison's retelling of the bombing of the four little girls in the Birmingham church in 1963 also suggests an alternative vision of history and what it demands. There is something in the air—debris, fragility, pieces of mutilated, once-beautiful selves that remain in the air, not the earth—whose lives cannot be encrypted or made epistemological. Debris as vision, as violence, and as an alternate site of reading history and what it demands becomes a surprisingly constant theme in postmodern American literature. Before exploring a series of repetitions of trauma in the air—of rubbish as floating crypt—I want to marvel at the sheer volume of trash, often coupled with trauma or loss, in contemporary American literature: in Chicana, Jewish American, Asian American, and African American fictions. Why do we find this fascination with the textures of trash across such a wide range of ethnicities?

In Helena Maria Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus* everyone succumbs to these scraps. Viramontes describes a Mexican American family who can barely scrape by. When Estrella (an adolescent field laborer worker whose family is slipping swiftly into starvation) climbs to the top of a dilapidated barn, the detritus that surrounds her family and marks their poverty devolves into a startling language, into a vision of trash as celestial debris: "The wood above her croaked and cracked slightly from her weight. Bits of splinter wood and dust as fine as ash showered on her and she closed her eyes before it was too late. . . . The taste of soil rolled in her mouth, and a speck watered her eyes and she spit." All the dirt this family has had to eat, the dirt that is both their torture and livelihood, turns trash into angry words, a voice from the whirlwind: "She turned and pushed with her hands and the door swung open against the roof and the swallows flew out from under eaves of the cedar shakes like angry words spewing out of a mouth. . . . stars cut the night . . . The birds pumped their wings in the skies furiously like debris whirling in a tornado, and it amazed her that they never once collided with one another."

In another register, Myla Goldberg's *Bee Season* describes the bizarre lives of a Jewish family whose kabalistic practices include the ecstasies of Hare Krishna and the covert discovery of the Anglo dictionary as another form of Torah. This family barely attends to the comings and goings of Miriam, a dully hyper-rational and kleptomaniac lawyer-mother who sneaks into other people's homes to take their most mundane objects. When she is arrested—caught in the act of lifting some unwanted, nondescript thing from another family's home, her own family discovers that she has not just stolen and
chunked these objects in a U-Store-It, but created a fantasia, in a rented storage bin, out of stolen objects from department stores and other people's rummage:

The sergeant shrugs, reaches inside, and flicks a switch. White light floods a storage room the size of a small gym. The silence is immense.

"It's beautiful," Saul finally says very softly, in the kind of cautious voice reserved for libraries, museums, and cathedrals. "What is it . . . all?"

It's impossible to walk without treading on something. The most easily negotiable floor sections are . . . given over to . . . pearl buttons of various colors [dotting] spaces between larger buttons of complimentary shapes and hues, grouped together in vague stepping stone arrangements which, when taken together, remind Saul of pictures he's seen of the circulatory system. The button paths are only wide enough for one. . . . The perimeter is composed of glasses lying lengthwise on the floor, but with the aid of marbles, beads, and shot glasses, the line arches upward in a graceful curve to join a column of stacked wineglasses, brandy snifters, and champagne flutes reaching higher than Saul's head. . . . Occasional colors in the stems . . . catch and clarify the room's light. . . . Beads and earrings, cuff links and stickpins create their own immaculate order, establish worlds. . . . Gloves and scarves become an ocean of texture and color in which Saul . . . [recognizes] something lost, the room a return to a state of grace he had not known he remembered.11

Trying to retrieve his body from this wilderness of sensations, Miriam's husband Saul looks up and discovers "silverware, hatpins, and peacock feathers, silk cravats, plastic figurines, and artificial flowers" arranged to stammer at "the slightest wind current. Looking back the way he came, Saul sees a swath of motion carved by his path, innumerable objects twisting and twirling in response to his passage through the room. . . . Every person who steps inside becomes an object in its perfect order, associating with it in infinite, beautifully balanced ways."12 The exodus away from Miriam's family's past in Eastern Europe creates kleptomania as a bizarre form of surrogacy. She collects histories at random; lacking one of her own, she makes use of other people's pasts.

While Henry Dorsey as outsider artist and the Invisible Man as thinker-tinker join an informal economy where useless objects are made not just usable, but visionary, and while Viramontes' heroine takes trash into her body, breathing in detritus that emerges with an apocalyptic roar, in Goldberg's Bee Season, affluence is no protection from emptiness; objects get lifted from their place within serial consumption and are given back an aura. This aura grows even more numinous in Through the Arc of the Rain Forest, Karen Tei Yamashita's Japanese American novel about the multinational peoples and corporations who meet on the Matacao, a fictional space in the midst of the Brazilian rainforest made out of secretions of "nonbiodegradable garbage."13 Here serial consumption reaches apocalyptic heights in a cemetery of jeeps
and used cars melting into a primordial ooze that reeks of napalm. Nature has evolved to feed upon trash: “The entomologists were shocked to discover that their rare butterfly only nested in the vinyl seats of Fords and Chevrolets and that their exquisite reddish coloring was actually due to a steady diet of hydrated ferric oxide, or rusty water.” 14 In Yamashita’s fantasy “enormous landfills . . . buried under nearly every part of the earth had undergone tremendous pressure” and, prodded into the foundations of earth’s mantle had been “squeezed through underground veins to virgin areas of the Earth.” 15 The plot of Through the Arc of the Rain Forest emanates from trash, as do a wild assortment of its characters’ visions, from the corporate to the religious.

To give a final example of the ways in which trash traffics with trauma, Orson Welles’ Citizen Kane ends as the protagonist dies and the camera sweeps over Kane’s massive collection of art. This is a collection unsorted, in ruins, compressing high art and debris. As the camera pans vertiginously over item after item, the viewer is seized; a workman grasps a piece of the debris and flings it into a fiery incinerator. It is an old wooden sled, and as we watch, the furnace consumes the writing on this object, creating another piece of luminous junk. As the letters grow alive and visionary, the sled itself burns; it winks out the half-lost name: “Rosebud.” If what is thrown away becomes, for the viewer, the source of all this wasted cultural booty, if Citizen Kane presents other culture’s trophies as American trash, the film also redeploy the image we’ve also seen in Morrison of trauma in the air. In the fragment-filled snow globe that Kane caresses and breaks, the air is filled with unspoken mourning, with ungrieved grief for a lost world of childhood poverty and maternal care.

Why do trash and trauma press so closely together? Let me suggest a rough set of categories for sorting out what we see when we scour recent American fictions and attempt to create an anatomy of scatteration and waste. First, we find stories that center on the remnant or fragment—an emblem of selves socially and economically shattered. In Louise Erdrich’s “The Shawl,” a little girl who has been torn to pieces by hungry wolves is refigured through her chewed-up shawl, a vehicle for redefinition, for crypt made into flight. The shawl reappears at the end of Silko’s short story when a son beats up his alcoholic father (the left-behind brother of that dead little girl) and, cleaning his father’s wounds, brings the tattered rag of a shawl to his face. Gently, the father holds the son’s wrist, then “crumpled [his lost sister’s shawl] and held it to the middle of his forehead. It was as if he were praying, as if he were having thoughts he wanted to collect in that piece of cloth.” 16

The power of the remnant as site of recollection is matched by a second category, by stories that focus on junk as a site or act of inundation—an upsurge or profusion of waste. We have visited these sites in Bee Season and in the persona of the blueprint accumulator from Invisible Man. Here the text
threatens to capsize under the weight of catalogue as it encounters the engulfing abjection of waste as enigma:

“I asked the man why they getting rid of all this stuff and he said they get in the way so every once in a while they have to throw ‘em out to make place for the new plans. Plenty of these ain’t never been used, you know.”

“You have quite a lot,” I said.

“Yeah, this ain’t all neither. I got a coupla loads. There’s a day’s work right here in this stuff. Folks is always making plans and changing ‘em.”

“Yes that’s right . . . but that’s a mistake. You have to stick to the plan.”

He looked at me, suddenly grave. “You kinda young, daddy-o,” he said.17

Here serial consumption (the need for endless blueprints for endless construction sites) runs into the blues as a belabored site of profusion, irony, and anomy. But proliferation can dart another way. Third, the image of starry rubbish can emerge as entropy or formlessness, like the impenetrable mass of the Mataaco in Through the Arc of the Rainforest or the paranoid mystery of W.A.S.T.E. that misshapes Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49. Fourth, we find debris that refuses to settle to earth, that hovers in the air; floating pollution or trauma that marks the weird atmospheric of novels like Song of Solomon or the wasted flour that covers everything in Willa Cather’s Sapphira and the Slave Girl. Fifth, we encounter images of environmental racism, of racial sacrifice zones and toxic dumping sites that can be located anywhere but in the white suburbs—fields of force that are deadly, but hardly visible, killing fields that are all powerful but almost not there: like the radioactive mine in Silko’s Ceremony or the pesticides that sicken Alejo in Viramontes’ Under the Feet of Jesus, or the overflow ditches that drown African American children in Alice Walker’s Meridian. Finally, in a world where hoarding other people’s throwaways can offer an appalling remediation for poverty, for a life beyond the domain of serial consumption—trash turns into an instrument for refashioning or rediscovering an unassimilable past; it becomes an archive or instrument of historical reinscription. This is the category I want to explore within three quite dissimilar texts: Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony, and Fae Ng’s Bone. In these African American, Native American, and Chinese American texts we find similar figures of thought—suggestions that captive migrant, indigenous, and immigrant peoples share a preoccupation with the literary stain, with detritus made luminous. Descended from people who have been marginalized (defined as throwaways, treated as trash), these writers of color grant the trash in their fictions a surprising incandescence. In these texts trash trickles up as well as down; waste turns into a substance vital as blood whose very disorganization sponsors new questions: how do you reorganize a past that has been marginalized, buried, or bestowed by state formations not your own?
Invisible Man begins in a crypt: in a basement shut off and forgotten during the last century of U. S. slavery. In 1952 this basement is also a labyrinth for tracing the contradictions of slavery that were salted away in the twentieth century’s hurry toward racial uplift. The narrator fills this crypt with starry junk, with cast-off wires and light bulbs, as if trying to bring to light what has been walled off. In this basement he descends to still deeper sepulchers caught in memory or imagination: dream zones resounding with incomplete, disconnected spirituals—with stories that can’t be worked through. In this prologue, Ellison sets forth the problem of his book as the problem of incompleteness and the throwaway—the grief of unworked-through trauma and racial melancholia. “What did I do / To be so black / And blue?” Louis Armstrong wails in the background.\(^\text{18}\) After a series of accelerating traumas—the Battle Royal, the white paint factory, ostracism, homelessness, and electroshock—the Invisible Man (like Tayo in Ceremony, like Leon in Bone) finally begins to find a public voice to address these crypts (psychic containers for trauma that is housed but inert, outside everyday symbol systems). In a scene of discardedness, he witnesses what he and the crowd of black men and women in Harlem do “not wish to see”: the eviction of a helpless elderly couple from their apartment. He wants to leave this “dark, rising whirlpool of emotion,” but the growing clutter of household objects piled on the sidewalk draws him in.\(^\text{19}\) Enfolded by bits and pieces of these old people’s lives that are falling into the street (“knocking bones,” a straightening comb, switches of false hair, a small Ethiopian flag, “the smiling image of a Hollywood star torn from a magazine, cracked china, a plate from the St. Louis World’s fair”), he gazes on “an old folded lace fan studded with jet and mother of pearl.” Slowly, what is shameful, piecemeal, trashy, becomes luminous; what is folded unfolds. But this archive of the detritus of ordinary lives mingled with trauma also becomes nauseating:

I turned away, bending and searching the dirty snow for anything missed by my eyes, and my fingers closed upon something resting in a frozen footstep: a fragile paper, coming apart with age, written in black ink grown yellow. I read: \textit{FREE PAPERS. Be it known to all men that my negro, Primus Provo, has been freed by me this sixth day of August, 1859. . . .} I folded it quickly, blotting out the single drop of melted snow which glistened on the yellowed page, and dropped it back into the drawer. My hands were trembling, my breath rasping as if I had run a long distance or come upon a coiled snake in a busy street. \textit{It has been longer than that, further removed in time}, I told myself, and yet I knew that it hadn’t been. I replaced the drawer in the chest and pushed drunkenly to the curb.\(^\text{20}\)

This is, for the Invisible Man, an archive of something that is not yet narratable. He describes what he finds as a “jumble,” as shabby junk that throbs “within me with more meaning than there should have been. . . . Why were [these things] causing me discomfort so far beyond their intrinsic meaning
Rubbish becomes an archive for something that is not yet a story, but it is also, as for Viramontes' Estrella, the source for angry words. Even as he totters "on the edge of a great dark hole," the Invisible Man uses these objects to rebalance his emotions, to recover the past, and to push forward and urge the crowd toward political praxis. His listeners rally; they are moved by his words to take this rubbish, these priceless possessions, back into the old people's apartment.

In *Ceremony* trash is also the site of self-healing. Old Betonie's cave is above the dump in Gallup, where the Indians are "kept." Once again Silko details the history of people of color who are turned to detritus; once again we see rubbish turn luminous as the sun glints off tin cans and broken glass, "blinding reflections from the chrome of wrecked cars." Like the Invisible Man, Tayo also finds Betonie's possessions nauseating:

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Tayo sat down, but he didn't take his eyes off the cardboard boxes that filled the big room; the sides of some boxes were broken down, sagging over with old clothing and rags spilling out; others were jammed with the antennas of dry roots and reddish willow twigs tied in neat bundles with old cotton strings.

He could see bundles of newspapers, their edges curled stiff and brown, barricading piles of telephone books with the years scattered among cities—St. Louis, Seattle, New York, Oakland—and he began to feel another dimension to the old man's room. His heart beat faster and he felt the blood draining from his legs. He knew the answer before he could shape the question.

... Light from the door worked paths through the thick bluish green glass of the Coke bottles; his eyes followed the light until he was dizzy and sick. He wanted to dismiss all of it as an old man's rubbish, debris that had fallen out of the years, but the boxes and trunks, the bundles and stacks were plainly part of the pattern: they followed the concentric shadows of the room.

The old man smiled. ... "[D]on't try to see everything all at once." He laughed. "We've been gathering these things for a longtime—hundreds of years. . . ."

Tayo nodded, but now his eyes were on the ceiling logs where pouches and bags dangled from wooden pegs and square-headed nails. Hard shrunk skin pouches and black leather purses trimmed with hammered silver buttons were things he could understand. They were a medicine man's paraphernalia, laid beside the painted gourd rattles and deer-hoof clackers of the ceremony. But with this old man it did not end there; under the medicine bags and bundles of rawhide on the walls, he saw layers of old calendars, the sequences of years confused and lost.

Betonie reverses the meaning of rubbish ("this hogan was here first, it is that town which is out of place and not this old medicine man"). His collection also evokes Native American histories not constructed by a linear modernity, but by cycles of loss and debris. When history is not linear, or not even available, what sorts of things get piled up—what kind of archive does one construct?
Lyotard suggests that in a piece of crumpled paper, writing that had been extended in space becomes a compressed lump. Dispersed parts of speech "go into hiding behind others." As in Freud's dreamwork, some parts of the document remain intelligible, though in fragments, as the unconscious preselects what matters and what does not. I would argue that this preselection doesn't work in quite the same way in ethnic texts about unassimilated rubbish. In trash everything mutates; we see the transformation of oblivion where what has been forgotten mingle with other forms, producing strange new products, changed compounds. And so in Fae Ng's Bone, the heroine, searching through the trash of her stepfather's apartment for the piece of paper that will allow him to become a legal American citizen (since years ago he purchased the name "Leong" and memorized a dead man's history to get through Angel Island), feels disgust, an overwhelming desuetude: remembering her people's cast-asidedness, their uncivic past, she rediscovers the nausea of Tayo and Invisible Man:

I lifted the suitcase up on to the kitchen table and opened it. The past came up: a moldy, water-damaged paper smell and a parchment texture. The letters were stacked by year and rubberbanded into decades. I only had to open the first few to know the story: "We Don't Want You."

A rejection from the army: unfit.
A job rejection: unskilled.
An apartment: unavailable.

Like Leon's apartment, what Leila finds in the suitcase seems useless, self-canceling. But this trash is not dead matter; it is matter curled with life. When Leila finally finds the paper she needs in the detritus Leon has collected from his own and other people's lives she thinks: "Leon was right to save everything. For a paper son, paper is blood." Once furious at Leon for not knowing the right codes to make his way through the labyrinths of white America, Leila realizes Leon has made an archive that refuses to distinguish what is valuable from what is not because—in a paper economy—how is one to know? The only way to win is to collect everything—to keep, and jumble, all the codes.

I could go on with this legend of detritus as an archive where someone begins to feel "another dimension to the old man's room," where the bizarre pattern of an unattended-to history, of space outside the Cartesian cogito starts to open up. We encounter these moments in text after text. In the cinematic version of Sherman Alexie's "Smoke Signals" Thomas envisions his uncle in flight: "He flew like an indigenous angel with frozen dinner trays for wings." Once again trash takes to the air, and when Victor gives his cousin Thomas the ashes from Victor's father's cremation, Thomas turns visionary; he recycles Victor's paternal memories: "I will travel to Spokane Falls one more time and your father's spirit will rise like a salmon, it will rise." Stung by this vision
Victor, the dead man's son, replies: "I never thought of my father as a salmon. I thought it would be like cleaning out the attic and throwing things away when they have no more use." If trash is coupled with trauma—if it hurts to be defined as a throwaway, trash also offers a bizarre space of transformation, a site of crumpling or tearing where TV dinner trays turn into salmon wings. In an era when we are so careful to distinguish among races and ethnicities, when we insist on the diverse materiality, the separate museums and historical sites, the cultural specificity of each racial or ethnic group's imbroglio with America, why does starry junk, luminous debris, trash as archive, cross borders so readily? Is it the force of garbage imperialism, of the dawning recognition that people who have been forced to live on other people's dumps and within other people's environmental sacrifice zones pay an extraordinary price? Or do these images tell us about what one throws away in order to assimilate—but hoards or archives nevertheless?

If trash becomes a site for hoarding or archiving trauma, what kind of archive does trash produce? First, these discrete forms of "trash" work to preserve particular ethnic histories only because they create such unorthodox ledgers: spaces where part-bodies and part-cultures mingle perversely—where rejection letters fuse with "a tradition of honoring paper" that must be collected and then burned "in a special temple . . . the sacred ashes . . . discarded in a secret spot." Second, the trash heap makes the labor of trauma—the cost of enduring trauma—visible. The discarded object can reassemble the pangs of history in an oddly resilient form. As a recent essay on the science of crumpling explains, "[A] sheet of paper, flimsy when flat, gains surprising strength as it crumples . . . 'At the end, you realize most of what you've got in your hand is 75 percent air. . . . This tiny sheet of paper, which has not much strength at all, is able to resist your squeezing very, very well. Why is it as strong as it is?'" We could ask the same question about the throwaway objects that recur in texts by Ellison, Silko, and Ng. Why are these epistemologies of trash so resilient, so recurrent, so illuminating?

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Old Betonie describes an archive constructed from objects that Tayo sees as trash. Silko, the author of Ceremony, invents this strange archive to insist that trash can also represent a deliberate indwelling, ingathering, or collecting of pain—a site where pain becomes epistemological, a source of perverse enlightenment. She also suggests this enlightenment can change with the
wind—that one man's trash can be another's thesaurus. As the editors of this collection remind us, any attempt to contain our ideas about trash within a singular economy is bound to fail. Although a passel of cultural critics from Barbara Herrnstein Smith to Frederic Jameson remind us that every stain left by a counterculture, from graffiti to grunge, exists "in a state of constant vulnerability to recuperation" (as something that will be recouped and exchanged by the art or fashion industry to make more sweatshops or profits), the texts we have examined do not resurrect the trash heap of history as the site of commodification, but of recurrent crumpling: a space that resists our "squeezing very, very well." In a trajectory that becomes both nauseating and proliferating, history is no longer a trash heap we are trying to escape, but a trash heap that reeks: a mess with a message.

NOTES

10. Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus, 175.
12. Goldberg, Bee Season, 225
17. Ellison, Invisible Man, 175.
18. Ellison, Invisible Man, 12.
24. Silko, Ceremony, 118.

27. Ng, *Bone*, 61.


