

Landfill

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The sun falls unjudging on all things alike.¹

Apex Landfill. Las Vegas, Nevada. 2021.

A rotted head of lettuce. Flies and larva. An old leather couch. Cowskin withered in the desert sun. Razors, rubber duckies, nickel-cadmium batteries, toenail clippings, old receipts, scraps of bone, a toothbrush. This admixture of humanity's health and decrepitude, its aspirations and miseries, its kindnesses and crimes, tossed together without distinction under the fat heat of a Nevada summer.

All things mingled in the garbage heap — rich and poor, high and low, garish and austere. Yet solarity shines even here without pretense.

To understand this.

To penetrate this secret.

This mountain... unconcealed...

unique cultural deposit,

¹ Jane Bennett, "The Solar Judgment of Whitman," in *A Political Companion to Whitman*, ed. John E. Seery (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 132.

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*fifty million tons...
carved and modeled.²*

This euphemism for the stinking remains of ourselves, for the discarded externalities of life, for the wreckage of material circulation and accumulation, the landfill is the proper place to begin an Elemental Solarity. For here in Nevada, outside of Las Vegas, we look out on the world's largest landfill by size, 2200 acres, 50 million tons of garbage, 9000 more tons with each cycle of the sun, being *tiered and layered like a sheet cake*,³ this vast repository of capital's drive, its expenditure and its exhaustion, its excess that can't be contained, bound, or narrated within modernity's oily terms. Here, looking out on this gargantuan sacrifice zone, capital's empty claims to its ascendance over the natural world and liberalism's paeons to itself unravel like the spooling yarns they are.

*How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of heaven
That has expelled us and our images.⁴*

The landfill returns us, in other words, to a bold facticity, to sights, smells, and sounds that restore the senses, to the physicality of the real in full exposure, unsorted again, sprawled out in the rays of the sun without symbolic cover. At least for a moment nothing is concealed from us. At least for a moment, before the bulldozer arrives to cover it up again with autofluff, the sort of linguistic and literal incinerators we depend upon to sanitize the world are held at bay and the dwarf stars we orbit around — a constellation of false consciousness that speaks in free market exigencies, merit societies, austerity programs, eco-

² Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 185.

³ Stephanie Tavares, "Mountains of Garbage," *Las Vegas Sun*, December 7, 2009, <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2009/dec/07/mountains-garbage/>.

⁴ Wallace Stevens, "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," in *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 329.

conomic externalities, liberalism, and enlightenment — these dim solar pretenders get blanched out in the incandescence of the sun.

There is no gaslighting in the landfill. Only sunlight.

So why an Elemental Solarity? And wherefore the landfill?

First, the analytic.

Elemental Solarity is a project of radical simplicity. The adjective in the phrase, *elemental*, refers us to the basic building blocks of life, to the objects around us, to the thingness of things, that is, both to the irreducible chemical elements that comprise life and to the social mattering of that life. In this respect, it points us to a new materialism that is more honest about the relationship between words and things, a materialism that better reckons with what Jennifer Gabrys calls the two classic directions of epistemology: knowledge as it derives from engagement with matter and matter as it is molded by engagement with knowledge regimes.⁵ To be elemental is, in short, to see, touch, and feel the object-world anew and to pause before we start to speak again. As for the noun in the phrase, *solarity* implies a radical *exposure* to the thingness of this world, to its materiality, out of shadow, where we appear with our eyes wide open to see commingled together not only the exhilarating *jouissance* that characterizes some people's lives today but also the terrifying wreckage that others experience in this thoroughly capitalized and commercialized way of living. In this second sense, the solar analytic gestures towards restoring solidarities to each other, to nature, and ultimately to the facts around us. But to get there, it first must expose liberalism's failed epistemologies by candidly confronting its refuse, its redacted realities, its deferred limits, and its dead ends. Only then can we return to a solar economy that was there in the beginning and that is still waiting to be put to new purposes and to new ends.

The landfill is the obvious place to begin this analytical work of recovery. It is what Joshua Reno calls the "constitutive

⁵ Jennifer Gabrys, Gay Hawkins, and Mike Michael, *Accumulation: The Material Politics of Plastic* (London: Routledge, 2015), 7.

absence” of modernity — the gap, the lacuna, the interstice, the repressed ID — where the modern world appears for a minute unnatural, unfamiliar, strange, and new again, before the work of narrative erasure begins.⁶ The landfill is, in other words, the place where the energopower of modern life turns back on itself, to quote Dominic Boyer, where the unceasing drive to bring fossil fuels to bear on work, to absorb all life into the logic of commercialized production and consumption, spins out into undifferentiated waste, inefficiency, and renewed possibility.⁷ To really see, smell, touch, and hear without defense or preoccupation — to be present here for a moment — is to come to know ourselves outside the circuitry of market exchanges, outside the platitudes of liberal political economy, and outside the murmurings from the husks of hollow men who speak only of progress, growth, and the satisfaction of yielding to capital.

To be present here is to expose the quandaries of a lazy liberalism that falsifies reality and keeps us in shadow.

Quandary 1: Objects

The landfill does liberalism’s work by concealing the detritus of fossil capital, shuttling away the sinister material entropy that liberalism seeks to give ideological cover to. Solarity, in contrast, returns our attention to these discards, to the margins, the misfits, and the anomalies that keep piling up, waiting to be reintegrated into our world.

Let us be proper about the phrasing.

The *sanitary* landfill, for that is its euphemism, performs the work of erasure, repression, and denial. It tidies up the messy material world of unregulated fossil capital by performing four key functions that make its dominant ideology appear palatable to us. It functions to *spatially* relocate the offal that capital gen-

6 Joshua Reno, *Waste Away: Working and Living with a North American Landfill* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 7.

7 Dominic Boyer, *Energopolitics: Wind and Power in the Anthropocene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 5.

erates offsite, to socially remove capital's uncomfortable smells and textures beyond the senses of the world's privileged actors, to *psychologically* bury capital's most traumatic residue in an unreachable unconscious, and to symbolically render what we so generously call fossil capital's externalities unavailable to us for narration.⁸

But to arrive here by way of an Elemental Solarity is something quite different.

Solarity recovers the thingness of these many discarded things that can still be seen, touched, and smelled but that resurface in this other place outside of ideology. Splayed out in the sun, we see here *every kind of used and lost and eroded object of desire*⁹ resisting the script that capital initially intended. Beyond the official chain of circulation, these objects no longer appear as fetishized commodities meant to string us along in this oily system but rather as the be-slimed and fractured traces of a system of maldistributed joys and pains that even seventy years later we still struggle to properly name. The plushness of a teddy bear tossed into the trash bin, its fluffy acrylic polymers still intact, juxtaposed now to this hypodermic needle with its residue of opioid, factory-produced steel and polymer palliative — these physical testaments to both lost innocence and human traumas generated by a system that does not live up to its promises. Is this the material evidence of a just process of circulation, of a righteous system of extraction, production, distribution, and political economy that doles out joy and effort in fair shares, that answers to who we really are? Or are they signs of something else?

The landfill, in other words, performs the messy removals needed to uphold the impression that everything is as it should be, that everything is in its place. It gives to the bourgeoisie's project the appearance of plausibility. But under the exposure of the sun, all of these little fractured objects reemerge as what

⁸ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1986), 3.

⁹ DeLillo, *Underworld*, 185.

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they are, that is, the entropy of human ecstasy, injury, and waste generated by the fracking of life under this oily form of late capital.

Quandary 2: Time

The landfill performs a second function by subsuming history into the homogeneous time of late capital, by compressing the past, present, and future into a liberal timeline that always already relates the same story of a world moving forward with opportunities limitlessly expanding and with eyes always focused on the future, oblivious to what has been left in the wake. Solarity sees something different in these traces of the past. It sees the “polychronic nature” of time, in Reno’s apt phrasing, the multitude of temporalities, human and nonhuman, that have been tossed aside in order to keep the story straight.¹⁰

The landfill works, that is, like a perpetual motion machine, to bury deep in the ground not only objects but also the discarded vestiges of time. It operates, quite literally, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year to redact our history and to persuade us into believing that life under capital proceeds neatly as if by nature through one timeless process beginning in extraction with mining and tilling the earth and proceeding through production, growth, and consumption only to end in a final and tidy burial as refuse. But this temporal work of the landfill is just a Herculean project aimed at containing what Walter Benjamin once called the *catastrophe of time, the piling wreckage, historical debris growing skyward* that capital has left behind, sometimes in objects, for us to sort through.¹¹ To the extent that the landfill serves to facilitate the impression of homogeneous time, it reinforces what petrogeographer Matthew Huber calls the subsumption of life under capital, reducing

¹⁰ Joshua Reno, “The Time of Landfills,” *Discard Studies*, September 25, 2015, <https://discardstudies.com/2015/09/25/the-time-of-landfills/>.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257.

even our history to something that merely reflects its transactional nature.¹²

Solarity, when it shines upon the landfill, sees instead a reservoir of alternative genealogies that are always resurfacing like the proverbial rubber tire that keeps the sanitary engineer awake at night. Solarity awakens the dead. It exposes, unburies, and emancipates again these lost timelines, both human and nonhuman. A stool with a leg gone missing that stinks of cheap bourbon, a stained apron from the local diner, and a splintered police baton with scratches and residual DNA. These radiate into the future the collective and individual human histories that were never really contained by capital and never merely transactional in the first place. They are a material resource that speaks to the experiential time of real people, of personal histories, and of collective stories that can't be contained by liberalism's script. These objects when exposed to the sun no longer promote the claim that we are being emancipated through free markets and private property. But so too this debris carries with it "natural" histories beyond people's cognizance, nonhuman histories tied up in biology, chemistry, and ecology that can't be subsumed by capital either. This bread festering in the sun with flies propagating, maggots growing and proteins, lipids, and polysaccharides breaking into their constituent chemical parts on nature's own timeline. When tuned to the solar analytic, we learn to watch more patiently as these things get reanimated by unplanned agents, by atmospheric, lithospheric, and ecological pressures that have as many designs for them as does capital.¹³ For here the world's elements are not really being put to rest so much as they are being reassembled on new timelines in this unlikely place of propagation, where cadmium, carbon, and nickel get layered into the ground, where plastic bags get carried off by crows, where decomposition gives way to methane, and where

¹² Matthew Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Material Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), xix.

¹³ Reno, "The Time of Landfills."

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things sit under the sun decomposing and rebirthing oblivious to bourgeois time.

The landfill might try to police the temporal borders of the liberal project by ensuring that time's evidence stays within the proper plastic lining, but the sun relentlessly exposes its well-kept secret that capitalism does not know where it comes from and cannot tell us where it is going.

Quandary 3: Society

The landfill serves a third, and obviously related, function by erasing the evidence of social stratification which the liberal paradigm intentionally or unconsciously blinds itself to. By reducing all things to sameness, by reclassifying everything as either valuable commodity or worthless junk, the landfill operates much like liberal ideology to neutralize the uneven histories of systemic class, racial, and gender inequality that, in this case, are still being carried forward in these objects spread around us. The solar analytic by contrast sees in the landfill not so much garbage as a macabre mausoleum dedicated to the stratification of life under late capital.

The landfill operates by abstraction, by flattening the language we have for recognizing difference. In this case, everything becomes just trash to us, garbage headed into a common pit, the end point of a life immersed in capital where all things can only be either this or that and nothing in between. But the garbage that is heaping upwards and sinking downwards in the sun is a reflection of society. It is heterogeneous, stratified, and incommensurate. Just as a used battery tossed into the pit bears little resemblance to the tamale husk that sits beside it and just as the high-priced lobster tail has a different genealogy than the lowly potato, these artifacts of inequality and degradation are always being reduced in the landfill to this one terminal and muted thing we call waste, thus silencing the social life of these objects that were never adequately measured in capital's universal currency.

But solarify restores to the world the difference and differentiation that can be seen in these objects. It looks out not merely on trash but on the vestiges of human lives produced and spit out by late capital. This tarnished hubcap from a Mercedes Benz next to this sooty lawnmower are not merely garbage in the sun but the relics of gated communities and manual laborers, of racial powers and racial servitudes, of class protections and class exposures to the sun: these are the remnants of capital's logic of extraction and accumulation. Or perhaps it is this KFC wrapper next to this discarded and now-rotting remains of a sea bass, imported, filleted, and stripped to the bone for paying tourists in this city, a small reminder of those who labor and those who get to consume the fruits of that labor. Perhaps solarify even shines down on this discarded condom, drying up in the sun, a withered prophylactic that could mean so many different things in this commercialized city of easy marriage and prostitution where even bodies are used as commodities. And, yet, if the landfill, like its liberal owners, works by airbrushing and scenting the unwanted objects of misery and discord around us, solarify demystifies these mystifications, shining light back on the lost signifiers once ejected from the language of the bourgeoisie but still here to be reckoned with.

That is to say, the landfill transmutes into trash the traces of class crimes, racial abuses, and gender inequalities, but these overflowing bins of waste and shame wait to be dug up, uncovered, unearthed, and brought back under solar management. Resilient, they persist as the resources for something new, horizontal, and nonviolent when the sun is once again permitted to shine on them.

Quandary 4: Nature

Lastly, the landfill upholds liberalism's foundational, and most problematic, claim, its grandest gesture that says man stands in ascent over nature looking down on these things beneath us. The landfill materializes an enlightenment mythology that would have us somehow extracted from this object-world laid

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out before us. But the solar analytic sees in these discarded “things” not the rent fabric of life nor does it accept a lazy dialectic that would split the world between us and our objects, between humans and nature. Rather it sees spread out before us this colorful tapestry of neglected kinships, discarded alliances, and excommunicated identities that bring us down to earth, that offer up new resources, and that take us out of the shadow we labor in.

For some time now, the landfill, not only this one but every other one, has waylaid life’s generative chaos by enabling a thick, if false, claim that we stand above the fray of the world, that human Reason and Capital *act upon* this world rather than *through* it. The landfill’s omissions, erasures, and removals on behalf of late capital function to promote a prevailing belief that we are realigning nature, as if by an invisible hand, into something better. But the comfort we get in that faith comes with strict prohibitions and taboos that distort what we see here and deny what we are. If there is one thing the landfill demands of us, it is that we repudiate this junk as not being part of ourselves, that we deny in an infinite number of refusals during every minute of every day the reality staring back at us here that the iron in this tossed-out, cast-iron skillet is the same iron in our blood, that the sucrose dripping from this bottle of Pepsi is already in our veins, that the carbon dioxide released from this decaying carcass is soon to be part of the plants we ingest, and that this methane drifting into the atmosphere is the composition of the air we breathe. Is it really possible, as we have been told, that this landfill will take whatever we choose to eject from our lives, whatever we rend from the fabric of life to call contamination, for 300 more years?

Solarity proposes something different. It refuses to see this garbage as *other*, instead reclaiming these lost objects of our desire and distaste for their reintegration back into our life both literally and figuratively. It understands that bourgeois Reason can only work when it is able to cast out of itself what it can’t understand, only when it is able to reclassify as pollution what-

ever resists its models.¹⁴ But solarity knows that sooner or later everything returns to its original contamination and that these provisional containers always break down sooner or later, that the plastic lining degrades, that the leachate seeps back into the ground, and that the sun resumes its business of decomposing the lines we have drawn around life. Solarity knows, in other words, that the landfill is an instrument of political ontology, that it takes its name and purpose after the Latin verb *disponere*, which announces that the business of the disposal site is “to divide,” “to arrange,” and “to place” life into acceptable categories for this oily form of capitalism and its ideologues. But is this how we want to say *I exist*?

The landfill, like the bourgeois project, supposes that sentience puts us beyond the laws of nature, but an Elemental Solarity knows that a true materialism cannot cast things beyond the logic of the sun.

For now, however...

*the garbage keeps coming, the garbage keeps coming.*¹⁵

¹⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1984).

¹⁵ Reno, *Waste Away*, 5.

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The Solar Grid (excerpt)

Ganzeer