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A Topography of Refuse: Waste, the Suburb, and Pynchon's "Low-lands"

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The great growth of the middle class in the post-World-War-II United States was reflected in an immense proliferation of suburbs. Affordable home ownership without the experience of congested urban centres appealed to a great many US citizens who, with the economy booming, had access to their own real estate on the outskirts of cities. The image of the post-war suburb was in stark contrast to that of the inner city: the former was mass-produced as a standardised, orderly, internally homogenous and clean environment, whereas the latter had long been associated with messy crowds, disorder and diversity (see Sennett, esp. 68–72). In many areas, the acquisition of a standard-sized lot of land, with a house in the middle, became synonymous with entry into the well-off middle class, and arguably the adoption of its value systems (Beuka 65–76). This development, and the cultural association of the type of housing with a specific moral order, is the significant background of the American-style notion of the suburb and its derivative words (suburban, suburbia) as they evolved in the post-war decades, and as they are used in this chapter. It is only in the last ten years that these equations between class, values and suburban place have been thoroughly challenged (see Leinberger).

Post-war affluence was emphatically manifested in the practices of modern consumerism. Tellingly, statistics show that the nationwide number of shopping centres –

typically places for the residents of suburbs to purchase their domestic goods – increased from eight in 1945 to 3,840 in 1960 (Parson). One consequence of such high material consumption was a massive amount of household waste and other refuse, which had to be collected to centralized dump sites (previously much of it was burned in either open-burning dumps or backyard incinerators, a practice gradually banned in the 1950s to improve air quality [Hickman 424]). In this period, the amount of household waste is estimated to have increased five times faster than the US population (Gandy 1).

Building on such a socio-historical background and a theorisation of prime and marginal urban spaces, this chapter focuses on the repercussions of the post-war economic boom and conspicuous consumption as manifested in a city dump, an ultimate peripheral space within the urban system. I will introduce one perspective into the cultural symbiosis between suburbia and waste management by way of a literary example that may at first seem an unlikely choice for this purpose: a story by Thomas Pynchon. The author of *Gravity's Rainbow* may not possess a reputation as a chronicler of suburban discontent in the manner of John Cheever or John Updike, but in fact the theme is no mere footnote to Pynchon's oeuvre. For a prominent example, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), a story typically seen as assuming the form of an impossible quest for the main character Oedipa Maas, begins with housewife Oedipa dissatisfied at her suburban home, just back from a Tupperware party, surrounded by the material prerequisites of middle-class domesticity. Logically, then, the departure that follows could just as well be seen as an *escape* from those circumstances as figured exclusively through the quest motif. The story examined in this chapter, "Low-lands," published originally in 1960, may in fact help illuminate that aspect of the later text, though such an explication is beyond the scope of this essay.

Pynchon scholarship – the massive body of work known as "the Pyndustry" (see e.g. Tabbi; Dalsgaard et al 1–2) – decades ago outgrew the bounds of easy definability. Yet it seems legitimate to say that, with the notable exception of "Entropy," the early short stories later collected in the volume *Slow Learner* (1984) have received much less academic attention than the novels. There are good reasons for this fact: Pynchon's own statement in the introduction to the collection that the stories are "illustrative of typical problems in entry-level fiction" is perhaps exaggerated but not entirely false (Pynchon, Introduction 4). That the evidence of the writer's apprenticeship is not without its benefits, I would argue, is largely due to the ability of the stories to provide "the sense of . . . a particular time and place," as one reviewer put it (Wood). Pynchon's more extensive, academic and experimental fictions such as *Gravity's Rainbow* resist the sense of geographical rootedness by the very breadth of their encyclopaedic and apocalyptic vision. Moreover, the postmodernist textuality of which his celebrated novels have long been seen as prime examples has understandably not encouraged the investigation of referentiality in any sense that hints at direct mimetic assumptions. In contrast to the "sprawling geographical landscape[s]" of the novels (Duyfhuizen 81), the settings sketched through the short story format – a peripheral genre within the Pynchon canon – not only enable but also encourage to an extent the consideration of local and specific, comprehensible real-world geographies. Indeed, each of the stories in *The Slow Learner* provides an image of a single, identified locality, from hurricane-ravaged Louisiana ("The Small Rain") and a small town in Massachusetts ("The Secret Integration") to Cairo ("Under the Rose") and a Washington D.C. apartment building ("Entropy"). However, in my view the story that best illustrates the concern with particular spatial relationships and emerging post-industrial landscapes is "Low-lands," which moves beyond the simple dichotomy of urban versus non-urban by

locating itself at the edge of New York City's immediate influence in suburban Long Island. The primary setting of the story is a dump site surrounded by "that part of the Island which is nothing but housing developments and shopping centers and various small, light-industrial factories" (Pynchon, "Low-lands" 63; henceforth LL) – a landscape of production and consumption at the urban fringe, with no real sense of centre except for the somewhat distant, hovering presence of New York City.

Identifying the Dump

Several characteristics define "Low-lands" as a story fundamentally about urban peripheries, in the multiple meanings of the term addressed by this volume. Themes of displacement, alienation and waste are immediately evoked by a series of allusions to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (for a detailed list of these allusions, see Slade 73–76). The particularity of the city dump as a location becomes clear through a kind of social and geographical triangulation within the text: an implicit contrast is created with several other places that play a secondary role. The first and most significant of these is the Flange house, a "curious moss-thatched, almost organic mound" by Long Island Sound (LL 56), where the one-day story begins with main character Dennis Flange shirking from his job and entertaining Rocco Squarcione, a garbage man, while drinking homemade muscatel. Rocco's occupation is significant, as it makes visible the link between suburban life and the accumulation of waste whose consequences are illustrated in the town dump. The appearance of Flange's Navy buddy Pig Bodine, "an ape in a naval uniform" familiar from subsequent fictions by Pynchon (LL 60), seems to mark the end of Flange's marriage: his wife Cindy throws all the men out. The men then head for a rubbish dump where Rocco's friend Bolingbroke – "a fat Negro with a pork-pie hat" (LL 63) – works and, strangely, lives. In a development towards a drunken

fantasy, Flange meditates at length on the spatial arrangement of the dump, which is shaped like a downward spiral. The men fall asleep in Bolingbroke's makeshift hut, but only after Bolingbroke has warned the others that the place has a population he calls "the gypsies" (LL 71). At night, Flange is lured out of the hut by a girl's soft voice, and in the final scene a diminutive girl named Nerissa leads him to her abode deep within a tunnel system below the surface of the dump, where he seems to find a measure of comfort.

The Flange house serves as the point of departure and, despite its notable idiosyncrasies, clearly as the site of middle-class (feminine) propriety and suburban materialism: for example, there is "a $1,000 stereo outfit that Cindy had made him buy but which she had never used . . . for anything but a place to put hors d'oeuvre dishes or cocktail trays" (LL 55). Among other things, the spatial organization of the interior is interesting in that it anticipates the obsession with tunnels and passageways evident in some of Pynchon's subsequent works:

> Inside were priest-holes and concealed passageways and oddly angled rooms; and in the cellar, leading from the rumpus room, innumerable tunnels, which writhed away radically like the tentacles of a spastic octopus into dead ends, storm drains, abandoned sewers and occasionally a secret wine cellar. (LL 56)

As a suburban abode, the house is spatially unique in fantastical ways and thus resists the idea of standardization so central to the American stereotype of suburbia (see Beuka 6–7). The emphasis on concealment and secrecy, however, resonates with one of the chief suburban values, the availability of privacy; Flange feels like "a mole within a burrow" (LL 57). In fact, the description foreshadows in many ways the later representation of the dump, which also has a system of tunnels and is figured as a maze. Fittingly, the cellar is the realm of Flange and what Cindy calls his "weird crew" (LL 56), while she spends her time upstairs,

occupying a higher position spatially and socially. Of equal importance is the fact that both these tunnel networks have been originally built for illegal operations – the one in the house by "an Episcopal minister who ran bootleg stuff in from Canada" (LL 56) and the one in the dump by "a terrorist group called the Sons of the Red Apocalypse" (LL 75). Flange's rejection of middle-class propriety thus seems consistent with the kind of spaces to which he is drawn, spaces immune to forces of standardisation that can be appropriated for clandestine, subterranean existence. One equivalent of such interiors within the urban system is the dump, whose environs, in contrast, constitute a kind of essential late capitalist trinity. As quoted previously, the area consists of "nothing but" – note the negation, which perhaps implies the lack of a sense of community – housing (venues of consumption), shopping (venues of exchange), and light industry (venues of production).

The unorthodox house does not disguise the fact that Flange's life has come to resemble the lives of millions of others in emergent American suburbia. Many markers of suburban life make their way into the story as if by proxy, including a city-centre job (which Flange explicitly denounces at the very beginning, thereby rejecting the idea of a work-based daily regularity) and a description of rush-hour commuter traffic at Manhasset, a station on the Long Island Rail Road. Pig Bodine, absent without leave from the Navy, reluctantly joins the crowd at the station as a kind of parody of a regular and decent commuter, "propelled by briefcases and folded copies of the *Times*," stealing a car to continue his journey (LL 61). The explicit illegality of Pig's actions is further evidence of the "weird crew's" position outside the moral order of the city and the suburb, and it is later mirrored in the mention of the dump inhabitants' nocturnal raids for supplies.

Another location used as a foil is the city centre, represented by Flange's workplace as well as a psychoanalyst's office on Manhattan's Park Avenue, which Flange visits primarily to

get away from “the relentless rationality of that womb [i.e. the house] and that wife” (LL 58). The “insane” shrink Geronimo Diaz offers a welcome diversion from the world of neat, rational domesticity at the core of stereotypical suburban life. A comparable sense of vanity and pretentiousness is attached to Park Avenue, where money means everything (only Cindy’s wealth enables the expensive sessions), and “pedigreed dog[s]” roam the avenue (LL 57).

It is thus made clear that neither the suburban house nor the urban centre meets Flange’s (perhaps juvenile) criteria for a desirable location. Both represent middle-class materialism in ways that mark them as *prime* space as opposed to *marginal* space, according to the division originally introduced by the geographer James S. Duncan in his analysis of street people’s spatial strategies. The sociologists John A. Snow and Leon Anderson define the distinction in their study of the homeless, suggesting that

> space can slide on a continuum ranging from prime to marginal. Prime space can be defined as space that is either being used routinely by domiciled citizens for residential, commercial, recreational, or navigational purposes or has symbolic significance. Marginal space, by contrast, is of little value to regular citizens. (103)

The crux of the argument is that only the urban areas on which the upper and middle classes turn their backs are available for occupation and appropriation by vagrants and other marginal figures. This conceptualisation of spaces associated with the people (or characters) occupying them helps explain the divisions immediately evident in “Low-lands.” Rather than as a simple dichotomy, the distinction should be read as a series of gradations between the two poles of prime and marginal, the definitions of which keep being adjusted according to existing social conditions. Nevertheless, the division that emerges in the Flange house seems

clear-cut enough: it is because of the apparent marginal status of the garbage man – who has an orange peel and coffee grounds on him as evidence of physical contact with household waste – and Pig Bodine – whose name alone signifies animality and dirt – that Cindy cannot tolerate their presence. The domiciled citizen's sense of order, which is connected to "the largely middle class moral order of the city as a whole" (Duncan 227), requires the banishment of the men to marginal space.

That boundary crossing from prime to marginal space is also an exit from the sanitized suburban world of cleanliness to the realm of refuse: from the perspective of prime space, marginal space is by definition dirty, unhygienic. What is more, if the moral order of the city at large is based on the protection of private property, as Duncan argues (227), denouncing the significance of property seems a method of signing out from that order:

> "You can have the Volkswagen," Cindy said, "and take some shaving gear and a clean shirt."
>
> "No," Flange said, opening the door for Rocco, who had been hulking in the background with the wine bottle, "no, I'll ride with Rocco in the truck." Cindy shrugged. "And grow a beard," he added vaguely. (LL 62)

It is noteworthy that Cindy offers to her husband what would have typically been the secondary car for a well-off suburban family (the primary one being large and American-made). Flange's own reaction after this – appropriately, as he has just symbolically rejected both property and middle-class hygiene, and made himself homeless – is slight nausea (LL 63). While simple, mildly rebellious choices like intoxication and letting one's beard grow could also be seen as foreshadowing the countercultural movements of the 1960s, the context in the passage reveals that their purpose here is the subversion of Cindy's sanitary standards, which are based on middle-class propriety and consistent with suburban moral

normativity. Flange is not on an explicit quest, but it is made clear that his is a tentative escape from the fixedness and sterility of life in the prime space of suburbia. The dump, then, intuitively understood as the periphery that offers an alternative to such boring propriety, becomes an appropriate destination for the journey.

The original purpose of the theorization of prime and marginal space by Duncan, Snow and Anderson, and other urban sociologists was to make sense of vagrants' spatial strategies within the limited mobility allowed to them. A subtle social cartography consistent with such analytical treatments emerges in "Low-lands." To the extent that the story presents a social critique, the rest of the narrative events can be seen to focus on the creative ways in which characters definable as marginal make use of the spaces available to them, shadowed by the moral order of urban society. Even the embedded narratives (or "sea stories") that the men tell each other at the dump are essentially stories of transgression and moral violation. The same subversion of middle-class decency and monogamous propriety is implied in many of the men's lines. Bolingbroke's comment about wives ("a nuisance sometimes") illustrates this tendency: "I got three or four scattered around the country and glad to be rid of them all. Somehow you never seem to learn" (LL 64). Undoubtedly it is because of lines like this that Pynchon himself later condemned the story as "racist, sexist and proto-Fascist" (Introduction 11). However, it might be argued that its emphasis on anti-middle-class sentiment and the resistance to values associated with suburban morality make politically incorrect language here a practical necessity. The men's crude sexism as well can be seen as consistent with their status outside dominant moral codes, and with the overall social vision of the text.

In its ideological, particularly American meaning – which remains, however, dependent on a specific kind of middle-class residential landscape and the proximity of the city – we

could say that the word *suburban* is associated with all the big concepts and abstractions shunned by Flange: domesticity, femininity, sobriety, long-term commitment, private property, the logic of the market, strict organization, and ideological standardization. Flange's anxiety was a familiar phenomenon in real life in the late twentieth century, and as Robert Beuka demonstrates in his book on suburban fictions, it has characterised writings and cinematic depictions of suburbia from the very beginning. "Almost without fail," Beuka writes, "the major novels, stories, and films chronicling suburban life [since the 1950s] have envisioned suburbia as a contrived, dispiriting, and alienating place" (228). The singular use of the word *place* to refer to suburbs nationwide is a choice clearly indicative of the assumption that all suburbs are the same. This is not the literal truth, of course, but it became a culturally pervasive and influential notion by the latter half of the twentieth century, especially when presented in this negative guise (Jurca 166–7). As new, quickly constructed suburbs were mushrooming all over the United States, the promise of home ownership and the positive idea of a lush middle landscape gave way in cultural representations to an image of the suburb as a dystopia. Literary texts, films, and sociological studies all contributed to this development, which illustrates in a wonderful way the interconnections between space and identity, or space and ideology. For the standard lots of land in fast-built residential areas implied a standardization of lives, which in turn made the individual inhabitant look like a unit in the capitalist machine of production and, in particular, consumption (Beuka 67).

A geographically interesting fact is that if we superimpose the fictional setting of "Low-lands" on the map of Long Island, the dump in question might be located very close to Levittown, the prototype of all standardized, culturally homogenous, pre-planned American suburbs, founded in 1947 (see Gans; Jackson 231–45). Pynchon, who grew up in Long Island,

must have been well aware of such developments and their cultural repercussions. And as writers like Cheever (in short stories such as “The Swimmer” and “The Worm in the Apple”) and Richard Yates (most famously in *Revolutionary Road*) also suggested through their fictions, strict social hierarchy and intolerance of difference were an essential part of the mindset associated with suburban life. This is the cultural moment during which the young Pynchon wrote “Low-lands,” and it manifests itself in the narrative of escape that unfolds. We see something like a rejection of both the city and its suburban co-universe, for largely the same reasons.

Theorizing the Dump

It should be noted that the urban and cultural significance of the city dump, its inhabitants and their peripherality could be analysed fruitfully through a number of well-established theoretical approaches. My emphasis on waste as the surplus and by-product of suburban life is complementary rather than alternative to several other conceptual frameworks, some of which I will evoke here briefly because, ultimately, they contribute to my general argument. Firstly, the dump itself is an alternative community that could well be analysed in terms of the Foucauldian notion of heterotopia, containing a peculiar topography and reflecting, in a hallucinatory way, communities outside its boundaries. It is “an island or enclave in the dreary country around it, a discrete kingdom” (LL 66) in which the rest of society is “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 24). The dump’s basic purpose shows emphatically how, within the city and society at large, “space takes . . . the form of relations among sites,” and in a number of ways, in terms of society’s prime functions, the destination of waste is a place “outside of all places” (Foucault 23, 24). In fact, each of the five principles that Foucault presents in his essay on heterotopias resonates

quite strongly with the idea of the city dump as a kind of institution. Principally, considering its human community, one would have to think of Pynchon's dump as what Foucault calls a heterotopia of deviation, but fascinating parallels also arise from Foucault's prominent examples of cemeteries (in terms of "waste disposal" and the idea of contagion, which gradually led to locations far from city centres), libraries and museums. In these heterotopias of "indefinitely accumulating time . . . time never stops building up and topping its own summit" (Foucault 26). The landfill in "Low-lands" is figured similarly, "sunk fifty feet below the streets," its floor raised "a tiny fraction of an inch every day" as if it were carried by "some maddeningly slow elevator" (LL 64). This comparison renders visible the fact that waste accumulates as a vast cultural repository, a part of our heritage that is buried, potentially, to be rediscovered and interpreted by future urban archaeologists.

In its ready applicability to a range of phenomena (which has, arguably, damaged its genuine analytical potential), the notion of heterotopia resembles that of the abject, developed by Julia Kristeva. The latter, marking the second alternative approach worth mentioning here, encapsulates in many ways the principles of exclusion on which Pynchon's narrative is implicitly founded. Along with Mary Douglas's pioneering anthropology of waste, Kristeva's conception seems the favourite theory of scholars examining the theme of dirt in the city (for several examples, see Campkin and Cox; Cohen and Johnson). It emphasizes the female abject but can well be applied at a broader cultural level to mark the basic "alternative to the empire of the sign" – that which is banished, jettisoned or rejected as unclean by the "clean new world" of the simulacrum in post-industrial societies (Lloyd-Smith 194). The "logic of excluding filth" sees waste as an abomination (Kristeva 65). Within this framework, the significance of the threshold between the hygienic and the unhygienic is clarified, and a large-scale societal phenomenon, perhaps emerging postmodernity itself, is

revealed as the main source of Flange's domestic frustration. As I have implied, middle-class life in American suburbs is in cultural representations regularly associated with the realm of the simulacrum – if this Baudrillardian concept is understood as indicating clean, detached, and ultimately inauthentic, even dehumanising, experience.

Third, if we assume a level of serious referentiality in Pynchon's depiction of characters, an examination of marginality utilising the viewpoint of the postcolonial condition is informative when it comes to the inhabitants of the city dump. The white middle class residing in the suburban home finds its counterparts here, in deepening levels of marginality and otherness reminiscent of the way the road spirals down towards the centre of the dump. First we have Bolingbroke, an African-American man; secondly, in the form of the girl Nerissa, a female representing a thoroughly marginalised ethnic minority; and third, offering a kind of comic relief in the final scene, an emotional grey rat called Hyacinth. Three different kinds of culturally marginal figures are introduced, and Flange can be seen to accept and metaphorically embrace these alternative identities – he even attempts to pet the rat – all against the background of his departure from within the upper-middle-class white suburban realm. When it comes to the dispossessed, nocturnal minority population of the dump site, the "gypsies," Nerissa is in fact the only member of that community making a proper appearance in the story; the rest of them remain fully peripheral to the text itself, barely discernible as silhouettes or audible in the distance, "shapes [that] hovered and flitted in the darkness" (LL 74). In no way does the text unravel their otherness.

This minority-oriented approach, which could be taken much beyond this superficial descriptive level, enables a convenient return to the issue of society's surplus matter, since postcolonial society is also the significant context for the phenomenon known as "human waste," analysed at length by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. Bauman's argument in

Wasted Lives (2004), focused on the twenty-first century but, applicable to earlier social conditions as well, is based on the idea of social redundancy:

> To be declared redundant means to have been disposed of *because of being disposable* – just like the empty and non-refundable plastic bottle or once-used syringe, an unattractive commodity with no buyers, or a substandard or stained product without use thrown off the assembly line by the quality inspectors. 'Redundancy' shares its semantic space with 'rejects', 'wastrels', 'garbage', 'refuse' – with *waste*. The destination of the unemployed, of the 'reserve army of labour', was to be called back into active service. The destination of waste is the waste-yard, the rubbish heap. (12; emphases original)

In societal terms, this equation between discarded material and redundant human beings makes sense, for the act of exclusion (or abjection) often follows the same pattern. As far as the inhabitants of cities are concerned, it is the homeless – those without property, as Duncan puts it – that are officially classified as redundant and metaphorically placed in the rubbish heap. The inhabitants of Pynchon's dump in "Low-lands" are therefore a kind of literalised metaphor, with the professional gate-keeper figures of Bolingbroke and Rocco controlling the threshold between prime space and the world of junk.

The societal perspective that accompanies the study of prime and marginal space in the city would assume that no domiciled citizen would willingly choose the latter, and no person in their right mind would willingly become a "wasted life." However, in "Low-lands" a seeming awareness of social realities is intertwined with the kind of bohemian romanticism familiar from numerous American narratives focused on freedom from the treadmill. The

placement of this sentiment on the urban periphery is evident in Flange's attitude to the population of the dump:

> All right, there were gypsies around. He remembered back in his childhood thet [sic] they used to camp out on the deserted areas of beach along the north shore. He thought by now they had all gone; somehow he was glad they had not. It suited some half-felt sense of fitness; it was right that there should be gypsies living in the dump . . . Not to mention that young, rogue male Flange, from whom he occasionally felt the Flange of today had suffered a sea change into something not so rare or strange. (LL 71–2)

This kind of romantic nostalgia could hardly accompany imagery from the upper echelons of urban class structure. The gypsies' occupation of the landscape of refuse is appropriate ("it was right") simply because of their traditional marginality as a group. Without any true knowledge of these cultural outcasts, Flange perceives them as something like late modern, urban noble savages. Their survival means that a drop of subversive potential of the sort Flange may have possessed in the past remains in this pocket of resistance against what Allan Lloyd-Smith terms the mainstream's "cultural pursuit of the clean" (200). The late capitalist tendency towards smooth uniformity ("not so rare or strange") has hampered Flange's capacity for irresponsible self-realisation, and the opportunity to rediscover that capacity draws him away from the sphere of suburban domesticity.

Imagining the Dump

The ending of the passage quoted in the previous paragraph – one among the story's many allusions to Shakespeare – spells out how the magical and provocative image of a drowned, "rich and strange" body in *The Tempest* (1.2.479) is negated by the regularity of middle-class

life in “Low-lands.” This contrast may be self-evident, but the fact that the original image (from Ariel’s song about Alonso) is one of a decomposing corpse at the bottom of the sea is worth noting. The richness, rarity and strangeness are associated with an extreme type of waste, a dead human being, and its location on the seabed, “full fathom five” below the surface (*Tmp*. 1.2.474). This is a precursor for the kind of late modern underworld, or low-land, in which filth may begin to acquire positive – even magical – value.

“To imagine waste . . . is fundamentally to imagine the intersections between morality and society,” writes Martin O’Brien in his analysis of “rubbish society” (36). Similarly, William Cohen emphasizes the meaning of waste and filth as a traditional foundation of moral and other divisions in society. In a discussion of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s work, Cohen concludes that the “low” – as expressed in subcategories like the “filthy” – is “crucial to culture’s self-constitution” (xvi). Understandably, then, all kinds of debris and detritus have cluttered the pages of urban stories for ages. Late-twentieth-century developments include the increasing prominence of the themes of waste and the abject in American narratives (see e.g. Lloyd-Smith 196–200).

Perhaps the zenith in that postmodern interest in society’s leftovers is the strikingly wide-ranging narrative of waste in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997). A one-sentence description of a latter-day dump site, seen and interpreted here by the character Brian Glassic, will serve to demonstrate the idea of rubbish as the symptomatic but normally invisible outcome of late-twentieth-century life:

> The mountain was here, unconcealed, but no one saw it or thought about it, no one knew it existed except the engineers and teamsters and local residents, a unique cultural deposit, fifty million tons by the time they top it off, carved and modeled, and no one talked about it but the men and women

> who tried to manage it, . . . they were adepts and seers, crafting the future, the city planners, the waste managers, the compost technicians, the landscapers who would build hanging gardens here, make a park one day out of every kind of used and lost and eroded object of desire. (DeLillo 185)

In DeLillo's characteristic aura-building language, this passage first illustrates the identity of the landfill as the site of extreme marginality, a "secret" lurking outside the bounds of society's known spatial realms despite its location in suburban Staten Island (this is Fresh Kills, once reputedly the largest landfill in the world). However, everything is planned and controlled, or at least such control is *attempted* – they "tried to manage it" – as if in a mirror image of the effective but ultimately vulnerable machinery of production in society. Representing a post-industrial "regulated sanitary landfill" to be distinguished from "the dump" it evolved from (see Hickman 10), this huge heap of matter is now an aesthetic, "carved and modeled" entity, a stage which anticipates its final dissolution into a pleasant, ecological whole, a re-creation for suburbanites' recreation. The prognosis thus also exemplifies the transformation of marginal space back into prime space, a process to some extent comparable with gentrification. In Allan Lloyd-Smith's terms, this final stage would be an example of the cleaned-up empire of the sign conquering territory back from abjection.

Even if one ignores the site's inhabitants, such high-tech developments are nearly unthinkable in Pynchon's 1950s dump, which is dominated visually by a towering incinerator "designed and built back in the '30's by some mad WPA architect" (LL 63). Instead, the Long Island location offers an early version of the same, a starting point of sorts in the post-war story of refuse that emerged from the post-industrial culture of high consumption in both cities and, increasingly, suburbs. The description of the dump in "Low-lands" takes steps toward the kind of reification evident in DeLillo's representation. The vocabulary is that of

sublime natural landscapes: there is, for example, a "narrow ravine . . . steep-sided and tortuous, . . . open[ing] out on a small valley" (LL 67). A sense of an extraordinary spectacle emerges as discarded objects are listed in detail, and the men's search for mattresses leads them to choose among thousands in "the biggest bed in the world" (LL 66). Furthermore, the fantastical final scene contributes to the construction of a place with an aura by revealing the existence of the dump's secret history.

The reification of waste itself is wholly consistent with the ultimate marginality of the site of its collection, as Todd McGowan has pointed out:

> Garbage achieves this status [of a sacred object] because, within the structure of global capitalism, it is the only thing that exists outside of the commodification process. Garbage is what does not fit. Within an economy of global capitalism, everything becomes commodified . . . Garbage, however, remains outside, even though it is a production of capital itself. (136)

Although the commodification of many kinds of waste seems plausible in the twenty-first century, in the suburbs of the late 1950s such prospects were much less obvious. Refuse was largely outside the system while being produced by it; more important, the improvement of waste management technologies was gradually making it possible to keep most rubbish out of sight from the perspective of the city's prime spaces and suburban homes (for the whole narrative of this technical improvement, see Hickman). In other words, the immediate post-war decades are significant as a kind of dividing stage between the period when a high "natural" visibility of waste was part of the average urban dweller's everyday life, and the ecologically aware period that began slowly during the next decades and has been turning the basic knowledge and private management of waste and recycling into an essential (sub)urban skill. Circumstances in which the leftovers of material life have – comparatively

speaking – limited everyday visibility seem conducive to a kind of mystification of waste as the cultural Other within the urban area. The more completely waste is "underground," the stronger the fascination it exerts. In this "psychoanalytic logic" that characterises attitudes to filth, "repulsion and attraction unconsciously converge" (Cohen x).

Appropriately for a narrative centred on waste, "Low-lands" foregrounds the psychoanalytic logic explicitly by introducing Freudian analysis as a theme. Flange's apparent attraction to Nerissa, then, stems from two sources: the antithesis she provides to suburban middle-class economies (providing escape), and her association with the landscape of refuse (with a "rare or strange" appeal of its own). As McGowan concludes in his analysis of DeLillo, precisely because of its extraordinary status outside the production and consumption of commodities, waste "becomes the only thing capable of inciting desire" (139). This is the postmodern condition Flange, as a character, is approaching. His cognitive map – that is, his idea of his own spatialized social condition (see Jameson) – has evolved into an itinerary pointing metaphorically downward to the underworld of waste, the one place whose status as an urban periphery seems secure. The way in which the titles of Pynchon's story and DeLillo's novel reflect each other is informative: the world of discarded things, despite its aura or deep allure in times of postmodernity, belongs consistently on the lowest tier of urban socio-spatial hierarchies. In emphasising and subtly mythologising the subterranean, the clandestine, the alternative and the illegal, the text of "Low-lands," in all its playfulness, also activates most of the meanings suggested by the word "underworld" and attaches to them positive value *because* (not *although*) they signify the social periphery.

Just as the centre presumes a periphery, (sub)urban modernity, when examined as a system of material production, has its side effects and residual elements, its refuse. Whatever the precise object of Flange's uncertain desire, it seems clear from the

unflattering vocabulary used to describe Cindy and her preferences that what Flange runs away from is the materialism represented by his wife, and a central narrative function of the Long Island rubbish dump is to pose an alternative to middle-class suburban domesticity. In addition, the detailed topography of refuse in "Low-lands," with its slopes, tunnels, towers, dunes and pinnacles, entails an enduring and evolving *social* topography of waste that extends beyond the perimeter of the dump to the whole urban system. The list of junk reflects the central material content of suburban households: the "half an acre of abandoned refrigerators, bicycles, baby carriages, washing machines, sinks, toilets, bedsprings, TV sets, pots and pans and stoves and airconditioners" have been elsewhere, in prime space, in their previous lives (LL 66). The reader becomes acutely aware of the material residue of twentieth-century domestic life. In this respect, the story shares its perspective with another DeLillo novel, *White Noise* (1985), with its in-depth treatment of American consumerism. It is, however, worth noting that the lists of objects in Pynchon's story consist almost exclusively of *junk* rather than *filth*: they are dry, intact materials that offer no immediate threat of contamination or defilement. Instead of representing household waste in all its rank, liquid and repellent varieties, their aestheticised formations ("a tall tower of bank run" [LL 66]) have the cleanness of architecture, or metaphor. In Cohen's terms, they exemplify *reusable* rather than *polluting* waste, "the discarded sources in which riches may lie" (x). This can be seen as suggesting the regenerative function of this urban periphery for the main character.

In accordance with Pynchon's politics of individuality in the postmodern world, I have been referring to the city as "the urban system." The fate of those left in the margins of dominant systems is one of the author's constant themes. Flange and his buddies are a fully-fledged example of these "preterites" who, in Robert J. Lacey's words, have been

"disinherited or passed over" but, as "the forgotten refuse of society, are the fortunate few who have received a kind of grace." Their invisibility affords them "a modicum of freedom in late modernity. They find freedom by eluding the clutches of the system, by effectively disappearing" (Lacey). The system, in this case, is capitalism itself, from which a quiet withdrawal still seems at least momentarily possible, if only through a dose of fantasy.

In conclusion, the elaborate catalogue of discarded things and materials may be the most concrete way in which Pynchon's text represents suburban realities. As a specific type of spatial formation, the fictional city dump invites comparisons with both urban and natural environments. Described through Flange's perception, its topography is at times oddly similar to the "manufactured landscapes" recently associated with Edward Burtynsky's photography, for example his images of imposing piles of tires (see Burtynsky). This link may in fact reveal part of the essence of waste collection sites as peripheral, heterotopic urban locations that tell a kind of truth about the city as a whole. The message of Burtynsky's photographs is complicated, but they certainly testify to the (eco)logical impossibility of a continuous way of life based on middle-class consumerism in densely populated areas. The purpose of this essay is not to turn Pynchon into some sort of green paragon; instead I wish to suggest that the choice of setting in "Low-lands" reveals something significant about how cities, suburbs, and western societies in general function – and certainly functioned in the 1950s. More specifically, the rubbish tip exemplifies the importance of peripheries for both the practical management and the self-definitions of urban communities. By definition unclean but essential for the city as a system, dump sites represent the absolute margin, both offering and provoking evidence of class divisions and moral discontents within the urban environment. It is in these contexts of unsustainability, the ideology of consumption

and the moral order associated with the suburb that Pynchon's story can, and perhaps should, be read.

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