

# RADICAL TEACHER

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## The Weight of Trash: Teaching Sustainability and Ecofeminism by Asking Undergraduates to Carry Around Their Own Garbage

by Breanne Fahs



EDWARD HUMES'S *GARBOLOGY*

## Introduction

The university classroom presents unique opportunities to engage in daring, creative, politically engaged, and experiential learning. As a platform for students to explore, refine, and transform their political beliefs, women's studies courses in particular have sought to shed light on gender roles, patriarchal power, the inequalities that drive social relationships, and the importance of progressive social change. As a professor of women and gender studies, my assignments push the edges of the traditional classroom and showcase the importance of *doing* and *engaging* rather than more passively learning. For example, I have asked women students to grow out their body hair for extra credit and to write about their experiences, and men to shave (Fahs 2014), and I have assigned groups of students to engage in menstrual activism. Students in my courses have designed interventions to redistribute resources away from the wealthy and have written (and sometimes performed) their own political manifestos. These assignments prioritized action and activism, progressive political thought, and community building.

This essay outlines a recent assignment I designed for an upper-division cross-listed women and gender studies/social justice and human rights course called Trash, Freaks, and SCUM. In the context of the students reading Edward Humes's *Garbology* (2012), the assignment asked that students carry around their trash for two 48-hour periods and present it to the class. This assignment aims to make trash visible and to help students learn about climate change, sustainability, and how their individual carbon footprint contributes to the "big picture" of environmental strain. I describe this assignment and its goals in this essay, followed by an assessment of its role in teaching about social justice, in order to underscore the importance of experiential learning with trash and to highlight how this assignment fits the mission of my courses on feminism and social justice.

## Trash, Freaks, and SCUM

Ecofeminism has as a key goal the development of politically engaged students who will extend their efforts beyond the classroom by fighting for environmental causes and critically assessing their own behaviors (Russell & Bell, 1996). As such, feminist classrooms must also become key sites of challenging climate change, urban sprawl, compromised water, and ever-growing garbage dumps (Gardner & Riley, 2007; Somerville, 2008). The feminist classroom should map the ways that individual students and small communities can address seemingly overwhelming environmental problems. My new course at Arizona State University, Trash, Freaks, and SCUM, includes the trash assignment alongside readings about garbage and the production of trash. This course focuses on "theorizing from the gutter," that is, looking at the world not from a lofty "Ivory Tower" but from the slime, the muck, the dumpster, the trash heap, the wasteland, the discarded, and the downtrodden. Its inspirations include the radical 1960s *SCUM Manifesto* (Solanas, 1968)

and the French feminist Julia Kristeva, who theorized the abject as a relationship with the grotesque that reveals the deep-seated fear of death. In short, the course uses these two positions—different from each other in tone, affect, and style, but similar in the central principles—to examine trash abstractly and literally. Students work through a variety of concepts, ranging from actual trash—garbage, waste, toxic sludge, pollution, and dirt—to more abstract notions of trash: knowledge produced on the fringe in circuses, amusement parks, "trailer trash" zones, freak shows, and the bodies of those marked as "Other" or different. The reading list includes work that builds upon Solanas and Kristeva: James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Dorothy Allison's *Trash*, Rachel Adams's *Sideshow U.S.A.*, Edward Humes's *Garbology*, Andrew Ross's *Bird on Fire*, and a wide variety of supplemental texts, such as Jennifer Nash's "Black Anality," and Marie-Monique Robin's work on dioxins and rBST.

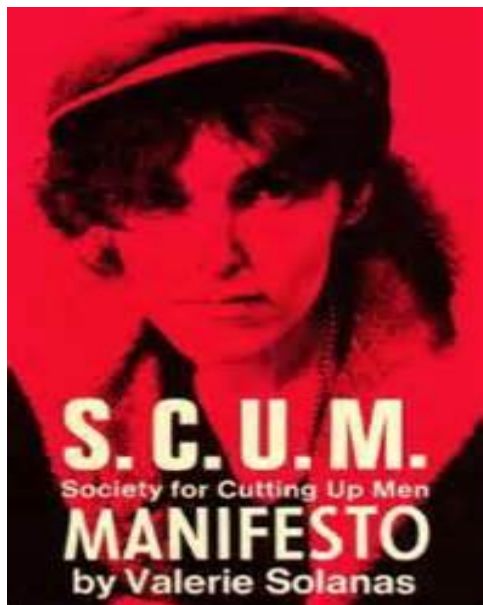
***Ecofeminism has as a key goal the development of politically engaged students who will extend their efforts beyond the classroom by fighting for environmental causes and critically assessing their own behaviors.***

The primary goal of Trash, Freaks, and SCUM is to understand the sorts of knowledges—of one's self and of the world—that can be produced from and within trash. This course asks: If, as Valerie Solanas suggests, SCUM is for "whores, dykes, criminals, and homicidal maniacs" and is largely aversive to polite society, what can be learned, seen, and experienced from that subjective position? Amidst trashy bodies, trashy words, trashy thoughts, and trashy sexualities, how are the self and the "Other" produced or demarcated? How is trash something that informs the core of race relations, gender relations, and the production of "freaky" bodies and "freaky" sexualities? How do we *know* something is of "trash," and how are we *made* trashy as we occupy the fringe of society? What is at stake in examining trash from a "non-trashy" place such as academia? What sorts of energies do we expend avoiding the label of "trash" and how does this relate to our literal production of actual trash? Going beyond simplistic notions of "sustainability," how might the project of understanding trash undermine, reinforce, and resituate our self-understanding as students and scholars?

## The Assignment

Students in this course have diverse backgrounds in feminist and sustainability issues; most have had some coursework in feminist or critical studies material, but few have had exposure to ecofeminist or sustainability material. My campus, Arizona State University's West campus, attracts many students who work full-time or have family commitments; some are the first generation in their families to attend college. Many self-identify as "liberals," and most have an interest in activism but only

about a third have ever engaged in activism prior to entering the course. Most of my courses have 30-50 percent students of color, and women outnumber men roughly three to one. On the first day of class, I distribute the trash-bag assignment, which asks that students collect the trash that they personally produce for two periods of two days each and carry the bag of trash with them at all times for those 48-hour periods. This assignment emphasizes the importance of thinking about trash as a social and political pathology. With the exception of used toilet paper, students must carry all of their garbage, including product wrappers (e.g., tampon wrappers, granola bar wrappers), anything produced as a result of the food they eat in and out of the home, and all personal trash items including cups, lids, straws, plastic bags, containers, cans, bottles, gum wrappers, Ziploc bags, magazines, tissues, napkins, paper towels, and any and all other items they produced during the 48-hour period. Further, students are required to carry their trash to social events, work, other classes, and throughout the house as they move from room to room. Students should not leave the house without their bag of trash for each 48-hour period.



I ask the students to set different goals and guidelines for each of the two 48-hour periods. For the first, students should collect the normal amount of trash they produce and should not try to minimize their trash output. For the second, students should try consciously to produce as little trash as possible. I advise students that this may take some preparation so that they have reusable items on hand. At the end of each two-day period, students bring their trash to class and present it, showing others the items they produced and discussing what surprised them (e.g., items they did not realize they produced, or produced so much of, trash they never thought about, the volume of trash involved in processed food, and so on).

Finally, students are asked to write a paper about these two occasions of “excavating” and to explore the predictable, surprising, and challenging aspects of the assignment. I ask them: What sorts of trash were you

conscious of producing and what sorts of trash were hidden or obscured? What trash did you feel the most shame or embarrassment about? What trash did you expect to produce more of? Less of? How does your production of trash map onto others’ production? And, finally, identify at least *three lifestyle changes* you would like to make to produce less trash in your life. As sustainable living and the recognition of (and reduction of) global warming will become more important over time, what specific changes do you anticipate making? What could you reuse or make non-disposable? What could you consume less of or go without? How could you rearrange your habits or sense of your needs? How could you personally impact climate change and global warming by consuming less?

## Goals of the Assignment

This assignment has three primary goals: 1) To move our personal production of trash from a largely invisible and unconscious problem to a visible and more conscious problem that connects to broader issues of climate change and the irresponsible behaviors of corporations and governments; 2) To encourage students to discuss trash and the production of trash with others, particularly in contexts outside of academia (I call this “ripple effect pedagogies”); and 3) To focus students’ attention on the relationship between their own personal behaviors and choices and broader issues, like climate change, toxic dumps, the great ocean garbage patch (now more than a patch), and the increasing number of endangered species. The assignment is designed to push students beyond thinking about their own individual role in climate change, and instead imagine their own thought processes and pathologies around trash to reflect similar processes and pathologies seen in corporations, governments, and polluters worldwide.

This assignment draws upon the principles of early radical feminist consciousness-raising as well, in that the phrase “the personal is political” applies also to the production of trash. Seeing the routine minutiae of trash creation—straws and straw wrappers, plastic bags, cups and lids, packaging of food, take-out containers, and so on—as connected to larger political struggles plays an essential role in changing attitudes and behaviors. Further, by utilizing “ripple effect pedagogies” where students are encouraged to discuss their trash openly with others inside and outside of the classroom, the potential impact of uniting the personal and political can also expand outward into students’ social circles. They may, for example, have a conversation about trash with a coworker, a sibling, a roommate, a boyfriend/girlfriend, or with a parent. Trash, then, moves from invisible and largely unacknowledged to visible not only for the students themselves but also for people in their social networks and circles.

## Trash, Feminism, Race/Class, and Social Justice

The results of the assignment often vividly show the links between trash, feminism, race/class, and social

justice. Students present their trash to the class often with a deep sense of self-consciousness and, at times, embarrassment. (As the professor, I, too, participate in this assignment and consider it a powerful reminder of how far I have to go with my own relationship to trash.) For example, one student last semester realized only when presenting his trash that he had consumed roughly ten bottles of coconut water per day and had produced an enormous amount of trash as a result of this habit. Another student realized that, by not using reusable menstrual products, her trash production for tampons, tampon packages, and tampon applicators was sizeable; doing this assignment made her switch to reusable menstrual pads immediately. Still another student, conscious of the number of diapers she threw away while raising her new baby, felt alarmed by her trash output related to caretaking and caregiving. Nearly all students felt alarmed by how much trash they produced in a mere two days, even for students who engage in recycling and sustainable practices already.

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Students also became more conscious about the politics of food and what they put into their bodies. The amount of food packaging from frozen pizzas, soda, bags of chips, candy, containers of nuts, and similar items, presented an overwhelming picture of their largely unhealthy food choices. Along these lines, many students realized how little they actually cooked for themselves and how much they relied upon women to cook for them, whether in restaurants, at home, or with roommates/mothers/sisters; this realization about the sexist division of labor permeated student narratives. The links between food and social justice became vivid, as students recommitted to doing more cooking with actual food and healthy ingredients, and as they recognized the costs of having others cook for them, freeing up their time but burdening other women with the responsibilities of cooking.

Issues of race, class, and “respectability” also appeared during this assignment, as students reflected on how their trash made them feel self-conscious because of their racial identity or class identity. Not being able to afford certain items, or eating differently than other students, appeared in some students’ response papers. For example, one student ate frozen pizzas each night and described feeling embarrassed that she could not afford to eat better food. Further, after students saw the practices of their classmates, the divide between the eating and trash habits of the more privileged white students and the less privileged students of color also appeared strongly in the response papers. While white students often had some

“training” from parents or mentors in how to eat more healthy foods or why they should go to farmer’s markets, many students of color described how they did not have such backgrounds and did not know how to prepare many raw or healthy foods. The “whiteness” of sustainability culture appeared in students’ narratives and revealed that they connected trash production with intersections of race and class as well.

Further, the social class divides, often compounded with race, were clearly visible in how students discussed trash and their relationship to it. For those who had grown up without as much money and had to learn to reuse clothing or conserve money or reduce waste, the trash assignment felt like a familiar problem. “Doing more with less” represented a common reality for students with less money (even if that did not always translate into healthier food practices). For those who had never had to worry about waste, and who frequently purchased whatever they wanted, the assignment raised their consciousness in different ways. In this way, privileged students had to confront their wasteful habits, often related to consumption, and had to work to become more efficient and less wasteful. Making matters more complicated, students reflected on how expensive it is to be poor; for example, during one class discussion after the presentation of the trash, some female students balked at the upfront costs of buying a DivaCup or Lunapads instead of conventional tampons or pads even though these options cost more in the long run. Ultimately, social class and its many intricacies played a major role in reflecting on this assignment and its meaning.

## Teaching about Climate Change and Sustainability

Ultimately, the trash assignment sought to teach students about sustainability and the relationship between their personal choices and larger social problems like environmental degradation and climate change. This framing is *not* meant to suggest that individual lifestyle adjustments are “the answer,” but rather, to push students to imagine their own relationship to trash (e.g., denial, silences, invisibility, lying to themselves, pushing away larger conversations about abuse of the environment) as a microcosm of the sorts of decisions and priorities that occur within institutions, corporations, governments, and industrial organizations. In their reflection papers students were asked to discuss how they could consume less and how they could personally affect climate change; these conversations prompted students to imagine themselves as complicit in more systematic problems around waste, environmental destruction, and carelessness/invisibility. This sort of thinking required a radical reframing of the links between consumption, success, and wealth. Many students wrote that they equated having a job and income with the need to consume, and that consumption became, in part, the *reason* they worked at all. In short, students admitted that they wanted “something to show for all the work I do” at their underpaid (and often dull) jobs. Consumption became the way that they justified putting in long hours of doing terrible work, mirroring the problem of

conspicuous consumption, as people show their social class status by buying things they do not need. The trash assignment asked that they rethink these assumptions and reimagine their consumption habits.

Throughout the course of this assignment, I worked with students to detach consumption from notions of "success." I posed to them a challenge to consume nearly nothing, reminding them that if they did not consume as much, they would not need to work as much. Related to this discussion, we explored the connection between overconsumption and climate change. Specifically, we discussed overconsumption of one-use items like plastic bags and the impact of plastics on the health of the oceans. Students expressed a clear commitment to reducing the number of things they consume, specifically for items they use only once (e.g., bottles, coffee cups, forks, napkins, tissues, straws, food containers, etc.). This serves the dual purpose of helping the environment and allowing them to better detach consumption patterns from their low-paid work. It also pushes them to critically examine consumption as a cultural priority and what the (over)valuing of consumption does on a mass scale (e.g., gas-guzzling cars; fracking; fossil fuels, etc.).

At its core, global warming is a problem of consuming more resources than we can sustainably create; this lesson is essential for college students, who often take out massive student loans, work low wage jobs, and consume mindlessly. Critically examining this mindset—especially as students look at corporations like Monsanto and governmental choices like pipelines and fracking—connects their own lives to broader contexts of consumption and global warming. I also find it essential to explore and discuss the ironies of doing an assignment about consumption and trash in the context of universities, as college campuses often consume vast resources, rarely employ ethical and sustainable practices, and encourage students to live beyond their means and acquire debt. (The recent push toward elaborate gyms, fitness centers, and water parks on campus that students must pay millions of dollars for speaks to universities' lack of concern for operating sustainably.) Directing a critical eye toward the irony of examining trash in such a space of upward mobility and exclusion is a key task. This assignment represents a small step toward helping students reimagine a different future, one in which personal accountability and individual change matter, but also one in which they can critically question ideas about success, money, happiness, consumption, and sustainability for themselves and their social world.

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