

Trash and the Coming Community: Portrayals of Trash and Trash Workers in Argentina and Brazil

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One of the central questions with which Gisela Heffes grapples in her 2013 book *Políticas de la destrucción / Poéticas de la preservación* is that of developing a theoretical framework for interpreting what she calls “todo un fenómeno latinoamericano” (a full-blown Latin American phenomenon) of artistic, literary, and cinematic artifacts that engage with issues of ecological importance, especially ones dealing with trash and the sociocultural practices surrounding disposal and waste management (20). Throughout the book, she interrogates the limits of ecocritical paradigms of literary analysis (originating, in her telling, mainly in North American and British university settings and informed by and large by Anglophone literary traditions) in dealing with the specificity of Latin American cultural production, all the while hinting at the fact that a new and different interpretive apparatus is needed in order to account for the representation of trash in a large and varied corpus of texts. For Heffes, this representational phenomenon in Latin America is the basis of “una nueva praxis de reflexión epistemológica” (69) (a new praxis of epistemological reflection). While she discusses this need for a new critical episteme toward the beginning of her book, it is not until she reaches the conclusion that she takes a step toward defining what it might be: “una episteme crítica nueva que combine una ecocrítica y una biocrítica y que . . . tentativamente, voy a definir como una bioecocrítica” (329) (a new critical episteme that would combine ecocriticism and biocriticism and that . . . tentatively, I will define as bioecocriticism).

Heffes’s intuition about the limits of Northern ecocritical discourse in conceptualizing Southern environmental problems that are interwoven with the marginalization of the urban poor is an astute one. Even though she does not unpack the term *biocrítica*, I take it to be—at least in part—an allusion to a critical stance informed by biopolitics since she adopts such a stance in

her analysis of the trash dump as a figuration of what she calls “biopolítica global” (75–147) (global biopolitics). As such, the *bio* in what she calls *bio-ecocrítica* contains a reference to biopolitics, and while I am not interested in adopting her idea of a “nueva episteme crítica” wholesale, I would like to take up her tentative and somewhat indirect suggestion to look for the places where biopolitics and ecocriticism intersect in Latin American literary and cultural production.

If biopolitics can be thought of as the materialization of knowledge, power, and action in and through the body—bodies of individuals and, by extension, the social body—then any examination of biopolitical discourse must consider the ways in which the material world constrains and facilitates the exercise of power. In this sense, the foregrounding of materiality made evident by biopolitics allows us to move beyond some of the debates surrounding organicist versus constructivist views of nature and culture that characterize what Lawrence Buell identifies as the first and second waves of ecocriticism (21–22). Instead, establishing a dialogue between ecocritical and biopolitical thinking is part of an overarching trend developing within ecocritical circles, which “explores all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint” (Adamson and Slovic 7). This is, in other words, a critical shift toward a multifaceted consideration of the complex ways in which environment and culture are mutually imbricated, which is precisely the terrain that this volume on environmental cultural studies explores.

The facet of human experience that concerns me here is the relationship between people and trash and how that relationship is portrayed in two works of nonfiction from Latin America: Eduardo Coutinho’s documentary film *Boca de Lixo* (Brazil, 1993) and Alicia Dujovne Ortiz’s book *¿Quién mató a Diego Duarte? Crónicas de la basura* (Argentina, 2010). Both texts portray the lives of people who make a living by working with trash, live in and around garbage dumps, and are treated like refuse; they contend with what it means to be human in an era in which the trash we make seems to occupy a central role in our interaction with each other and with the environments that we inhabit. In other words, these texts help us discern a discourse on the human in which human subjectivity is neither the center of all things nor a totally outmoded and irrelevant construct, but rather an essential component in mediating the way that the material world constitutes meaning and enables the emergence of human and nonhuman socialities (Appadurai 228).

This focus on humans as both part of a material network and mediators within that network is key to understanding the socialities that emerge through the material convergence of people and trash. And it is through the lens of biopolitics that the contours of those socialities come into sharper focus. My aim here is to consider the way that the connections between people and trash are

represented in Coutinho's film and Dujovne Ortiz's book in light of Giorgio Agamben's concept of the threshold.

For Agamben, the threshold is a key textual and conceptual device that signals the potentiality of a limit, whether positive or negative (McLoughlin 189). In *The Coming Community*, Agamben clearly identifies the basic logic of linkage inherent to the concept of the threshold (in this case referring to the notion of "the outside" of something): "The *outside* is not another space that resides beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives it access" (68). In this sense, the threshold, which marks the limit between two things, is not "another thing with respect to the limit; it is, so to speak, the experience of the limit itself" (68). He furthers his conceptualization of the threshold in *Homo Sacer*, where he examines the limit zone between political life and biological life or *bare life*, as he calls it. This zone is the domain of sovereign power, a threshold whose logic "is not one of opposition, but of abandonment, in which the outside is included through its exclusion. This means that the threshold is a space in which inside and outside enter into a zone of indistinction" (McLoughlin 191).

I submit that trash is a material manifestation of the threshold. The logic of the threshold is strikingly similar to systems that we use in our attempts to distinguish between useful and useless material objects, or rather, things worth keeping and things that are trash. The words Agamben uses to denote the actions that constitute the threshold—abandonment and exclusion—resonate with the gesture that turns a thing into trash: disposal. What is more, the threshold underscores the fundamental connection between things that seem to be disconnected because they are opposed to one another but are in fact intimately related to one another via the act of exclusion itself. In other words, the concept of the threshold serves to remind us that things do not fall into one category or another because of their inherent qualities; rather, the categories in which they are included (or from which they are excluded) are a function of the ceaselessly updated mechanism of exclusion. In the same vein, the production of trash is an effect of dynamic, open-ended, always-emerging processes of classification (Hawkins 2–3). Furthermore, as McLoughlin notes, for Agamben, the threshold is a zone of indistinction, a space in which the difference between things (inside and outside or political life and bare life, for example) is impossible to identify (191). Indeterminacy is a key characteristic of trash as well. On a material level, processes like putrefaction and corrosion can make it hard to tell what a discarded object is or once was, a difficulty that is compounded by garbage dumps, which group together discards into a "mountain of indistinguishable stuff that is in its own way affirmed by a resolute dismissal" (Scanlan 14). Yet, at the same time, the material specificity of objects in the dump belies the homogeniz-

ing label of “indistinguishable stuff.” Ontologically, trash is simultaneously general and specific, homogenous and heterogeneous. It is the material manifestation of the indistinction of the threshold, the in-between that signals the experience of the limit itself.

The modern states of exception toward which Agamben’s thinking on biopolitics gravitates—the Nazi regime or the post-9/11 world order, for instance—are shot through with violence and exclusion. They are examples of the destructive nature of power as it is unevenly distributed through economic, social, and material networks. But do Agamben’s concept of the threshold and trash, its material manifestation, offer the possibility of something other than violence and exclusion? Does bare life (and, more to my point, bare life as it manifests itself in the threshold zone of garbage) offer the possibility of creating new forms of collective life?

I think that we can find at least the beginning of an answer to these questions in Agamben’s *The Coming Community*. There, Agamben explores the possibility of thinking about community in a way that refuses criteria of belonging based on preconceived notions of identity or essence. Reflecting on Baruch Spinoza’s conceptualization of the common, Agamben says

All bodies . . . have it in common to express the divine attribute of extension. . . . And yet what is common cannot in any case constitute the essence of the single case. . . . Decisive here is the idea of an *inessential* commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence. *Taking-place, the communication of singularities in the attribute of extension, does not unite them in essence, but scatters them in existence.* (18–19)

A key aspect to understand this concept of a community of scattered existence instead of bound essence is the enigmatic opening sentence of the book: “The coming being is whatever being” (1). Michael Hardt, the book’s translator, glosses his translation of the Italian *qualunque* as “whatever,” noting that the term presents a difficulty because it can be rendered as both “particular” and “general” depending on the context; he affirms, however, that for Agamben, “‘whatever’ (*qualunque* or *quelconque*) refers precisely to that which is neither particular nor general, neither individual nor generic” (107). As Jenny Edkins affirms, “Whatever being is being *such as it is*, with all its properties. In other words . . . it is immaterial whether whatever being is human or inhuman, politically qualified or excluded” (73). So here we find ourselves once again on the threshold, a state defined as being neither one thing nor the other, a space that is not beyond another space, but rather a passage and “the

experience of the limit itself” (Agamben 68). The ambiguous space of the threshold and those who occupy it find their materialization in trash and the “wasted lives” of the people whose bodies are caught up in waste flows (Bauman). Trash is a substance that always finds itself in flux, neither completely worthless nor valuable, neither fully disintegrated nor whole. It is material with no essence, for it is always defined in terms of its relationships to other things. In what follows, I would like to consider the way that Alicia Dujovne Ortiz’s book *¿Quién mató a Diego Duarte? Crónicas de la basura* and Eduardo Coutinho’s documentary *Boca de Lixo* open themselves up to a reading grounded in Agamben’s reflections on community. What I am proposing is not an exhaustive reading of these two works, but rather a concentrated look at the suggestive connections between them and Agamben’s theorization of a transformative power that exceeds the constituted order, which is to say that it is defined in terms of excess, just like trash.

Dujovne Ortiz’s book tells the story of the author’s investigation of the case of Diego Duarte, a fifteen-year-old boy who disappeared while scavenging recyclables from trash in a CEAMSE (Coordinación Ecológica Área Metropolitana Sociedad del Estado, the state-owned enterprise that manages Buenos Aires’s solid waste) landfill in the Buenos Aires suburb José León Suárez in 2004. When police patrolling the area saw him, they ordered a sanitation worker operating a bulldozer to unload hundreds of pounds of compacted trash on the spot where the boy was hiding.¹ Duarte’s body has never been found, and no one has faced charges for his death. Dujovne Ortiz, whose initial thought was to write a book about *cartoneros* in Buenos Aires and only happened upon Diego’s story as it was mentioned to her by different trash workers in the city, develops a particularly close relationship with Diego’s older sister Alicia, who faces seemingly insurmountable odds in her attempts to find justice for her brother in a context in which police regularly exercise violence against marginalized *cirujas* and *cartoneros* with impunity to the extent that, as Dujovne Ortiz puts it, “más allá del Buen Ayre, los derechos humanos quedan en suspenso” (183) (beyond the Buen Ayre Highway, human rights are suspended).²

Coutinho’s film is a documentary about *catadores* in the Itaoca garbage dump in the municipality of São Gonçalo, about 40 km from Rio de Janeiro.³ As he and his film crew interview people who work and live in and around the dump, a relationship of trust and mutual understanding seems to develop, an arc that Coutinho elegantly summarizes with a brief montage right after the film’s title sequence. At first, the *catadores* shy away from the camera: we see a series of several people turning their faces away or covering them up, shooing the camera away with their arms, and even trying to escape the camera’s gaze by running away from it; however, the last person in this sequence stares

into the camera with her face covered, hesitates for a moment while glancing at something out of frame, then removes the rag covering her face and smiles into the camera. The rest of the film could be seen as an unpacking of that montage. Coutinho and his crew interview several *catadores*, asking them open-ended questions about how they manage their lives and what it is like to work in this place. The workers speak at length about their lives, what they do in the dump, and their relationships with one another, and the camera registers the domestic and social lives that unfold amidst mountains of trash with no voice-over narration and only the slightest bit of contextualization.⁴ The film ends with a sequence in which the *catadores* watch videotaped footage of themselves in the dump.

Both Dujovne Ortiz and Coutinho portray communities of people who, due to a complex web of social and economic factors, find themselves depending on the waste of consumer societies for their livelihood and sustenance and who, because of this dependence on trash, are marginalized to the point of near invisibility.⁵ But the stories they tell are not satisfied with simply turning our gaze toward the margins. Dujovne Ortiz and Coutinho are also concerned with the part that they themselves have to play in the representations they produce. In this sense, they both manage to register not only the socialities that emerge within marginalized groups of people who work in and with garbage, but also those that develop between themselves and the trash workers. To my mind, this explicit foregrounding of the way that these two members of a privileged class (economically privileged, without a doubt, but more important, epistemologically privileged) are embedded in the socialities of their supposed objects of representation is a fundamental element in the stance that they both take with regard to the radical alterity of the people they portray in their texts. In other words, Dujovne Ortiz and Coutinho grapple with the difficult task of how to be together with people who are radically different. This is where Agamben proves to be particularly illuminating as a guide through certain key aspects of *¿Quién mató a Diego Duarte?* and *Boca de Lixo*, so now I turn to his reflections on community as they relate to both texts.

First, there is the matter of the threshold, which is a key conceptual element in Agamben's thinking. There is no denying the fact that Agamben anchors this concept in spatial terms. The terminology he invokes in his reflection on the threshold is rooted in physical space: *outside, door, space, passage, house* (68). In this sense, I think it is appropriate to imagine the threshold in terms of space. Similar to the way in which I have contended that the idea of the threshold can be manifested materially in garbage, we can think of the landfill—the predominant setting in both of these works—as a spatial translation of Agamben's concept of the threshold. The question, then, is how Dujovne Ortiz and Coutinho approach this setting.

In the case of *¿Quién mató a Diego Duarte?*, there are few key passages that give the sense that the trash that dominates the book's setting is not defined by "a determinate concept or some actual property . . . but *only by means of this bordering*" (Agamben 67). Upon reading a conference presentation on solid waste management given by Alexandre Roig, a researcher with CONICET, Dujovne Ortiz offers the following reflection:

Paradojas, paradojas. . . . Basura-mierda, basura-tesoro, basura-cadáver: es como para preguntarse si cada cual no fantasea con su propio desecho, si no entabla una relación personal con lo que se sacude de encima, lleno de sentimientos ambiguos: ¿darle vuelta la cara, horrorizado, o volverse a mirarlo con una suerte de nostalgia? (109–10)

(Paradoxes, paradoxes. . . . Trash-shit, trash-treasure, trash-cadaver: it's enough to make you wonder whether we all fantasize about our own waste, whether we establish a personal relationship with what we get rid of, full of ambiguous feelings: do we turn away with horror, or look back at it with some kind of nostalgia?)

And toward the beginning of the book, she wonders at the way that trash slips between determinacy and indeterminacy: when items that have been deemed no longer useful are thrown "en la bolsa mezclándolas entre sí," they become "lo desechable . . . una masa indiscernible [y] desdeñable" (in the bag all mixed together [they become] disposable . . . an indiscernible [and] detestable mass), but they are at the same time concrete, particular items, "fragmentos de algo que ya había servido, que podía volver a servir y que no se llamaba desperdicios sino botella, caja de zapatos, envase de yogur" (13–14) (fragments of something that had been useful, that could be become useful once more and that wasn't called waste but rather bottle, shoebox, yogurt container). And this ambiguous, borderline material is, quite literally, the foundation of the community of trash workers in José León Suárez with which she comes into contact. This is true not only in the sense that the livelihoods of Lalo, Lorena, Raúl, Alicia, and the other *suarenses* she meets in the process of writing her book depend on trash, but also, as Dujovne Ortiz reminds the reader time and again, because "José León Suárez fue construido sobre un basural" (20) (José León Suárez was built on a garbage dump). In an interview with Lorena, a woman who runs a recycling center in the CEAMSE facility, she learns that the low-lying part of the Río Reconquista watershed where most of the gar-

bage workers live served historically as a trash dump and, despite inhabitants' best efforts to cover the dump with soil, the periodic floods to which the area is prone tend to unearth buried trash all around people's homes (65–73). As Dujovne Ortiz quips after traversing the rough, uneven ground of a neighborhood in José León Suárez with some difficulty, “rellenar un basural con tierra no asegura el pulido, la lisura, el acabado final” (75) (filling in a dump with soil doesn't guarantee a polished, smooth, finished surface). Taken as a whole, these passages underscore the way that Dujovne Ortiz characterizes the trash that imbues the setting of her book: it is not simply expelled material, but rather a site of ambiguity, unstable identity, and undecidability.

Boca de Lixo also highlights the threshold quality of the trash that serves as the film's setting, principally through the way that the Itaoca garbage dump is shot. As David William Foster has noted, the importance of trash in *Boca de Lixo*

is reinforced by the production decision to make use of expensive photographic resources to capture it in high-definition color. There is here none of the distancing effect of traditional black and white and often grainy documentary filmmaking, a distancing effect commonly driven by the fact that the viewers are presumed not to be sharing the social subjectivity of what is being documented. (160)

This full-color depiction of the dump is put to good use from the very beginning of the documentary. The first shot is a close-up of trash, but it is not taken by a stationary camera that would allow us to take in and process what we are seeing; instead, this opening shot has been edited in such a way that it begins with the camera already in motion. So before the viewer has the chance to digest the first frame, the camera has moved on to another piece of the garbage patchwork. Coutinho returns to this type of shot a few more times during the documentary, and the effect is always the same: it is jarring and disorienting. Despite the fact that we have realized that we are looking at trash, the vertiginous movements of the camera do not allow us to identify any particular item, which reinforces the impression that trash is an amorphous, generalized substance.

On the other hand, there are moments during the film when the movement of camera is slower as it records various pieces of trash in the landfill. These sequences are much more contemplative and static, and they lack the frenetic quality of the shots described above. During these moments, the camera lingers on certain items, inviting us to contemplate them in their particularity. We see, for instance, an assortment of shoes, a rotten chicken swarming with flies,

a squished globe, and used syringes. These two ways of filming the trash in the dump are best understood in dialogue with each other, for, taken together, they assert that trash—and by extension the setting of the landfill—does not hold predetermined definitory properties. It is not a general, amorphous mass or collection of particular things with their own inherent identity; rather, it seems to be neither of those things and both of them at the same time.

The next feature of the coming community that Agamben contemplates is its irreducibility to fixed identities based on a binary of inclusion/exclusion. As Agamben puts it, the community of whatever beings “is mediated not by any condition of belonging (being red, being Italian, being Communist) nor by the simple absence of conditions . . . but by belonging itself” (85). This is, in other words, “the idea of community that is based on the notion of belonging without identity. This is a community of singularities, fragments” (Devadas and Mummery). Agamben’s idea of belonging without identity means that community is not a previously constituted social arrangement in which people passively participate, but rather it is constantly elaborated through activity:

As an activity, community calls for the opening up of other possible and potential networks of relations, of living and being with others. In that sense, as activity, community can be conceived as process, a battle or struggle to establish linkages, connections and relations even though the very impossibility of categorisation, of communities, continues to haunt the activity of community. (Devadas and Mummery)

The idea of “community without community” (to use Devadas and Mummery’s turn of phrase) is one in which categories of identity matter less than contingent couplings, and the work of figuring out how to be together, how to make community, is the stuff of community itself.

For her part, Dujovne Ortiz fashions a discourse that chips away at the notion of preestablished, reified forms of community in favor of exploring solidarity among more contingent groupings of people. From the outset of her book, she foregrounds the strangeness of her establishing ties with the *cartoneros* and *cirujas*. Reflecting on an initial meeting with the core group of *suarenses* who would lead her down the path of investigating Diego Duarte’s disappearance, she says,

Después me confesaron que todos se habían preguntado lo mismo: “¿Y esta mina de dónde sale?”. El interrogante se comprende, no tengo as-

pecto de militante setentista ni de ONG alemana ni de evangelista carismática ni de hermanita del Sagrado Corazón de nadie ni de señora bien. En el peor de los casos, lo inclasificable suscita desconfianza, y en el mejor, perplejidad. (12)

(Later they confessed that they had all asked themselves the same thing: “What’s this lady’s angle?” An understandable question, since I don’t have the look of an activist from the seventies, or somebody from a German NGO, or an evangelical church member, or a Sister of the Sacred Heart, or a rich lady. In the worst case, the unclassifiable arouses mistrust, and in the best case, bewilderment.)

This “no tener aspecto de”—or as she puts it elsewhere in the book, “no dar el perfil de”—is very suggestive in terms of the way that it recognizes traditional forms of community that engage with the poor and marginalized (religious or political organizations, NGOs, good-hearted wealthy people) while dismissing them as the foundation for the relationship that Dujovne Ortiz hopes to establish with the people she meets from José León Suárez. Instead, that relationship is one that arises out of contingency and a desire to establish linkages across the divide of traditional class identities. In this sense, Dujovne Ortiz’s own reflection on her initial idea of the project that would eventually turn into *¿Quién mató a Diego Duarte?* is enlightening. In her telling, the idea dates back to the 1990s, when she first happened to see *cartoneros* collecting trash in the streets of Buenos Aires. She tells of her desire to talk to them and ask them about their lives; however, this initial encounter was frustrated:

Al menos por el momento, con ellos mismos parecía imposible detenerse a echar un parrafito: mi timidez inmigratoria—ese convencimiento de ser sapo de otro pozo en todo sitio y país—y su concentración en la tarea nos volvían mutuamente inabordables. Por pudor, por respeto, por cobardía, imité su actitud y miré hacia otro lado. Puesto que ellos empujaban sus carros y revolvían en la basura sin levantar la vista, como si anduvieran por adentro de un túnel que los volviera inexistentes a ojos de los demás, deduje que no querían ser mirados. El tabique invisible entre “ellos” y “nosotros”—su mera presencia en la calle nos oponía—estaba hecho de párpados. (13)

(For the time being at least, it seemed impossible to stop and exchange a few words with them: my immigrant's timidity—that conviction of being a fish out of water in any place or country—and their focus on their work made us mutually unapproachable. Out of shyness, out of respect, out of cowardice, I imitated their behavior and looked away. Since they were pushing their carts and digging through the trash without looking up, as if walking through a tunnel that made them cease to exist in the eyes of others, I supposed they didn't want to be looked at. The invisible partition between "them" and "us"—their mere presence in the street resisted us—was made of eyelids.)

Despite this initial failure at establishing a dialogue, the question of what connected her to the people who handled her garbage remained with Dujovne Ortiz and eventually compelled her to step through that "tabique hecho de párpados" and connect with a *cartonero* she saw on the street. This conversation and the ones that followed it over the span of almost ten years eventually led to the meeting with members of different *cartonera* cooperatives with which the book opens (Dujovne Ortiz 14–16). And it was only through the series of people she met and the connections that they formed that she even found out about Diego Duarte, as she mentions various times in the book (11, 34).

In addition to the way that Dujovne Ortiz highlights the contingency that grounds her interactions with the community of trash workers in José León Suárez, she also captures several moments of the process of making community that Devadas and Mummery identify as central to Agamben's thinking, two of which I will mention here. The first comes when she is spending the afternoon in the home of Alicia, Diego's sister. The two are about to drink *yerba mate*, and Dujovne Ortiz writes, "Sólo cuando [Alicia] me ceba el mate me doy cuenta cabal: estamos encima de la basura y cerca del [Río] Reconquista mezclado con el juguito de CEAMSE que contamina la napa. Pero si hay algo sagrado, es que el agua del mate no debe hervir. Me entrego" (79) (Only when [Alicia] steeps the *mate* for me do I realize it: we're on top of trash and close to the Reconquista [River], mixed with the juices from CEAMSE that contaminate the groundwater. But if anything is sacred, it's that water for *mate* must not reach the boiling point. I give in). What is interesting about this moment is the way that it manages to blur the lines between a traditional sense of community and one based on contingency and the act of being together. On the one hand, the two women seem to be affirming the idea of belonging to an imagined community that employs strict ritualistic practices (steeping *mate* in water that has been heated to a temperature short of the boiling point, for instance) to define the core of national identity. However, the scene also stages

the way in which this sacred ritual of *argentinidad* is effectively trashed by the specific circumstances of this instantiation. When Dujovne Ortiz realizes that the unboiled water used to steep the tea she is about to drink is contaminated by the trash that surrounds the home in which she is sitting, the *cebada de mate* becomes less linked to Argentine identity and is instead reconfigured as an encounter between two women who are engaged in the work of forging a connection grounded in the circumstances in which they find themselves.

The other instance of the process of making community that I will briefly mention here appears toward the end of the book. Lalo, a third-generation *ciruja* and one of Dujovne Ortiz's first friends in José León Suárez, invites her to participate in a literary workshop that inmates at the San Martín Prison in the Buenos Aires suburb want to get off the ground. Dujovne Ortiz dedicates an entire chapter to retelling her visits to the prison and her interactions with the more than ninety inmates participating in the workshop. They tell her their stories, share their poetry, and collectively make *cartonera* books with the works they have written. Dujovne Ortiz includes fragments of a number of the inmates' poems (along with the full name of each author) in her own book and comments on the literary community that these men have cobbled together. This community's ethos is perhaps best summed up by Mosquito, one of the writers, whom Dujovne Ortiz quotes talking about the reasoning behind the workshop's name, *la flor del loto*: "“Todo esto es barro y basura. Suárez siempre fue un basural, acá tiraron a los fusilados del '56, acá la gente come las sobras de los demás. La cárcel también está hecha sobre la basura, y nuestras vidas son igual, basura. Pero como la flor del loto crece en el barro . . . por eso digo”" (158) (All this is muck and trash. Suárez was always a trash dump, the ones who were executed in '56 got thrown away here, here people eat everyone else's scraps. The jail's also built on the trash, and our lives are the same thing, trash. But just like the lotus flower that grows in the muck . . . that's what I mean). Once again, this focus on the intersection of contingent belonging (exemplified by the haphazard intersection of the life trajectories of people who occupy space together in a prison), actively forging connections (in this case, ones that arise from artistic expression), and trash (in both metaphorical and literal terms) provides an evocative reflection on the stance toward community evident in the pages of Dujovne Ortiz's book.

Boca de Lixo exhibits a similar perspective regarding community as arising from a shared effort to be together instead of static, reified notions of identity. First, the documentary registers the way that the people who work in the dump, much like the trash that seems to end up there without rhyme or reason, arrive at that destination as a result of the vagaries of life and not some overarching manifestation of teleology. On the one hand, there is a man who explains that his time working in the landfill is highly sporadic and con-

tingent upon other employment opportunities, so he may be absent from the dump for weeks or months at a time; on the other hand, there are people who have lived and worked in the dump since they were children. There are even Jurema and Flávio, a couple who met working in the dump and are happily raising their family of seven children on the living they make scavenging. Overall, Coutinho's documentary transmits the sense that the *catadores* find dignity in the activities that bring them together and that help them provide a life for themselves, their families, and their loved ones. Woven into the interviews that structure the film is footage of these people engaged in the everyday activities that link people to one another. Along with the work of scavenging and sorting trash, we see people preparing and eating food in groups, men and women in conversation, a man and a boy playing soccer, and an adolescent girl singing *sertaneja* music along with the radio, all in the middle of a landfill. These are activities that do not ever seem to begin or end, nor do they respond to a purpose other than to find a way of making community in the midst of mountains of detritus. When Coutinho asks Enock, an older *catador*, whether trash has a role to play in the rhythm of life, he responds, "Faz parte da vida. É o final do serviço o lixo. É ali o final e é dali que começa. . . . O final do serviço é que é a limpeza da casa e se joga fora o que desprezou, reciclou, findou ali mas ele continua ali. E dali sai para continuar e continuar mais longe ainda" (*Boca de Lixo*) (It's part of life. It's the end of usefulness, trash is. It's the end and it's where it starts. . . . The end of usefulness is when the house gets cleaned and you throw out what got ignored, recycled, finished, but it continues there. And from there it goes on to continue and continue even further). The rootless, continuous movement of trash that Enock describes is also mapped onto life and sociality, and Coutinho's camera manages to capture both the beauty and difficulty of that movement.

What is more, Coutinho conceives of his own connection to this community of *catadores* as one that "is mediated . . . by belonging itself" (Agamben 85). In a conference he gave on alterity and documentary filmmaking, Coutinho made the following remarks about his work on *Boca de Lixo*, among other films:

Tento ser digno da confiança que essa comunidade depositou em mim, quer dizer, eu me sinto responsável diante dessa comunidade e não diante da classe camponesa, da classe dos favelados, etc. É evidente que me sinto responsável por aquela favela, por aquelas pessoas do lixo que filmei. Obviamente se é uma imagem decente que eu transmito deles, suponho que vou ser fiel também a uma relação com os favelados em geral, com as

peessoas do lixo em geral, etc., mas o importante são aquelas pessoas que têm nome; não é uma confiança de classe desencarnada, é encarnada em pessoas que foram gentis comigo. (“O Cinema” 170)

(I try to be worthy of the trust that that community put in me, that is, I feel a responsibility toward that community, not to the peasant class, the *favela* class, etc. Clearly, I feel a responsibility toward that *favela*, toward the people in the garbage dump I filmed. Obviously, if the image of them that I transmit is a decent one, I suppose I’m being faithful to a commitment to people from *favelas* in general, to people in garbage dumps in general, etc., but what’s important are the people who have names; it’s not a disembodied kind of trust, it’s embodied in people who have been kind to me.)

What Coutinho is talking about here is a clear distillation of Agamben’s thinking: a community that is not based on preconceived general identity categories arises from relationships that find embodiment in expressions of solidarity among people who happen to find themselves together.

The final aspect of Agamben’s coming community that I want to highlight is that it is “without either representation or possible description”; in other words, it is “an absolutely unrepresentable community” (24–25). Perhaps it seems strange, and even paradoxical, to analyze Dujovne Ortiz’s and Coutinho’s works, which are quite obviously representations of communities, within the framework of Agamben’s thought if, for him, community-without-identity is “absolutely unrepresentable.” But just as paradox cuts both ways (it can be either a seemingly sound proposition that leads to a self-contradiction or a seemingly self-contradictory proposition that is actually well founded), I would argue that it is possible to talk about the representation of this unrepresentable form of community. In order to do so, I should be clear about what I mean by “representation.” As I just mentioned, *¿Quién mató a Diego Duarte?* and *Boca de Lixo* are unavoidably descriptions or representations in that they portray communities of people who work with trash outside of Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro, respectively, as well as the relationships between those communities and the author and director who portray them. It is precisely in the way that Dujovne Ortiz and Coutinho handle the latter dynamic—their own involvement in the representational process—that they manage to problematize the assumption that the communities they attempt to represent in their works are transparent objects of representation. In other words, if we take “representation” to mean not only the portrayal of, but also the act of standing or

speaking for the *cartoneros*, *cirujas*, and *catadores* in these two texts, then both Dujovne Ortiz and Coutinho deploy techniques that point up the ultimate impossibility of representing the communities with which they engage.

With regard to *¿Quién mató a Diego Duarte?*, Dujovne Ortiz frustrates the facile, unreflecting brand of representation in which a book about marginalized populations who scavenge trash in landfills could easily engage. This is particularly evident in the way she writes about Alicia González, Diego's sister and the person with whom she develops the closest relationship in the process of investigating Diego's disappearance and writing her book. A moderately attentive reader would quickly realize that they share the same first name, and since Alicia González ends up being a central character in Alicia Dujovne Ortiz's book, it certainly would not be too outlandish to imagine the author using this coincidence as a way to bolster her own authority to represent Alicia González (and, by extension, her story and those that have a stake in it) textually. In other words, although it is obvious that they are two different people, the fact that they share a name could act as a subtle suggestion that Alicia the author is in a position to *stand for* or *speak for* Alicia the character. At times, it seems like Dujovne Ortiz does just that, but she ultimately undermines this gesture in order to highlight her fundamental inability to reduce Alicia and the other *suarenses* she writes about to a textual representation.

A clear example of this feigned gesture toward transparent representation comes when Dujovne Ortiz accepts an invitation from Alicia to attend a neighborhood *asado* to celebrate May Day. Dujovne Ortiz notes that in Costa Esperanza, where Alicia lives, “[h]ace más calor que en Buenos Aires” (it's hotter than in Buenos Aires) and that the sweater and boots she is wearing were a foolish choice (75). Alicia lends her a t-shirt and sandals so she will be more comfortable, and Dujovne's narrative voice takes stock of Alicia's house: “La casa se compone del dormitorio de Alicia, *donde me visto de ella*, y de una cocina” (75–76, emphasis added) (The house is made up of Alicia's bedroom, *where I dress up as her*, and a kitchen). After dressing as Alicia, Dujovne Ortiz notices a paper pinned to the wall:

Pinchados con dos chinches, un par de versos:

Que brille el entendimiento,

la justicia y la razón.

Que las pague el que las hizo,

también quien lo permitió.

La firma, Francisco Urondo, me hace dar un respingo.

“¡Paco!” exclamo. “Éramos amigos, bueno, lo conocía, lo mataron, ¿de dónde sacaste ese poema?”

“No sé, lo vi por ahí y me gustó.” (76)

(Pinned up with two tacks, a couple lines of poetry:

*May understanding shine forth,
and justice and reason.*

*May he who made them pay for it,
as well as he who allowed it.*

The author's name, Francisco Urondo, made me jump.

"Paco!" I exclaim. "We were friends, well, I knew him, he was killed.

Where did you get that poem?"

"I don't know. I saw it somewhere and liked it.")

Here we see two moments in which it could be said that Dujovne Ortiz is trying to emphasize that the similarities between the two Alicias are more than mere coincidence: she does not simply wear Alicia's clothes, *she dresses up as Alicia*; and the poem on the wall seems to be presented as an uncanny connection between the two. However, this gesture is undercut in several ways. Despite the apparent connection that Francisco Urondo's poem establishes between the two, their exchange regarding the text underscores an irreducible difference: for Alicia Dujovne, the poem is linked to its author and her friendship with him. Alicia González, on the other hand, pays no heed to the authorial position from which the poem is uttered; rather, its importance lies in the fact that she happened to find it somewhere and she liked it. The suggestion that the similarities between the two women authorize Dujovne Ortiz to speak for González erodes further when Alicia and Alicia go to the *asado*. Dujovne Ortiz is overtaken by "una timidez paralizante" (77) (a paralyzing shyness) and begins to feel acutely that, despite wearing Alicia's t-shirt, she is very different from Diego's sister, who takes charge of organizing a bingo to raise funds for the cooperative she runs with verve and joy: "se goza su papel, ejerce la monarquía con bondad" (79) (she enjoys her role, she practices monarchy with kindness). Finally, any lingering notion that Dujovne Ortiz is leveraging coincidences between her and Alicia González like the ones mentioned above is done away with completely when she is reading through some files associated with Diego's case: "Víctima o denunciante: Duarte Diego Miguel, González Carmen Alicia—la condición especular me anonada: yo me llamo al revés, Alicia Carmen" (116) (Victim or accuser: Duarte Diego Miguel, González Carmen Alicia—the mirror image stuns me: I have the same name, only the other way around, Alicia Carmen). This astonishing specularity is, ultimately, just an *espejismo*, a mirage that troubles Dujovne Ortiz's ability to represent Alicia, Diego's case, and the community with which she connects because from this point on, the book focuses on trying to figure out what happened to Diego that night in the CEAMSE facility, which proves to be as impossible to reduce to narrative prose as it is to find the body of a boy who was thrown out with the trash.

If Dujovne Ortiz resorts to foregrounding the false specularity at play in her work, in *Boca de Lixo*, Coutinho and his film crew use their own presence and the presence of their filming equipment to call into question their ability to represent the community of *catadores* in Itaoca. Throughout the documentary, the presence of the film crew is felt in that they are both seen and heard, whether it be Coutinho's voice coming from out of frame to ask questions of the scavengers, a boom mic dipping into view, or footage of members of the crew following people around and trying to film them as they pick through the trash. Regarding the metafilmic impact of such moments in *Boca de Lixo*, Foster argues that

what is important is that, in order for the spectator to see Coutinho's assistants doing their best to jockey themselves into an advantageous position to report the operations of the dump, it is necessary to have yet another crew filming the first crew. . . . Such a practice has a double effect. On the one hand, it affords the viewers the impression that . . . they stand in direct relationship to the scene itself, as though they were standing next to the director himself rather than watching a projection screen. Yet paradoxically, it is as though the foregrounded crew were there to remind viewers that what they are seeing is, if not a staged reality, a reality mediated by the presence of the film crew, which vies with the scavengers for access to a front-row position with the object of attention of both groups, the garbage that has just been dumped out before them. (159)

So, the intermittent presence of the film crew onscreen serves to foreground the act of representation that is taking place, which in turn causes the viewer to reflect on the fact that, despite Coutinho's best efforts, he is unable to represent the actual lived reality of the socialities that emerge from the threshold zone of the landfill.

This foregrounding of the representational process that serves to question that very process is on display in a different form at the end of the film. One of the last scenes we see is of the *catadores* gathered around television monitors in the landfill viewing segments of the film that we have just seen. They see themselves portrayed onscreen in the very setting that they occupy as viewers. Both Coutinho himself (170) and Foster (164) emphasize the ethical dimensions of this gesture: allowing the *catadores* to see the way that the camera has captured them amounts to involving them in the process of documenting their lives. While I agree that there is a strong ethical element in

this gesture of returning the image to the subjects of the documentary, I would like to move beyond that recognition and argue that this gesture also contains a commentary on the limits of representation. As the scavengers watch the footage, shots of their faces gazing into the monitors are cross cut with shots of the monitors displaying faces of *catadores* looking directly into the camera. This editing choice creates a vertiginous *mise en abîme* of spectating, of consuming filmic representation in which we as the viewers might end up questioning who is viewing whom, the people in the landfill, or their filmed images peering out from the monitors' screens. To my mind, this moment of hyperreflexivity simultaneously succeeds and fails. That is to say, it succeeds at signaling Coutinho's failure, his inability to truly represent the community that is the subject of his documentary.

In the end, both *¿Quién mató a Diego Duarte?* and *Boca de Lixo* exhibit the same brand of successful failure. Dujovne Ortiz and Coutinho turn their attention toward the threshold zone of the landfill and the lives of those who inhabit it in an attempt to portray them not as social outcasts or pathetic victims, but rather as people who struggle to make community. But both of them also foreground their own contingent entanglements with these communities, signaling the representational limits of their art forms *vis-à-vis* the socialities that emerge from the dump. Those limits, I think, are a point of entry for a reflection on what it means to be human in the context of a world irrevocably marked by the trash that we produce.

I began this essay with the suggestion that looking for the points where ecocriticism and biopolitics intersect is a crucial part of highlighting the importance of materiality in the way that we think about our interactions with the environment. After seeing those points of contact in the works that I have discussed here, I would add that this type of analysis also serves as a call to reflect on how to include radical difference as a part of the way we think about what it means to be human. Serenella Iovino has argued that an ecocritical humanism would be an ethical vision of culture that explores the "wilderness zones" that are traditionally held to be *opposed to* the human as elements that are really *part of* human experience (54–55). Trash, a substance that we so often send away from ourselves with little or no thought, is, in this sense, an integral part of humanity.

Notes

1. Dujovne Ortiz, a journalist, biographer, and novelist who splits her time between Paris and her native Buenos Aires, is perhaps best known for her books *Maradona soy yo*

- (1994) and *Eva Perón, la biografía* (1996). For more on her literary trajectory, see Glickman and Díaz. For a detailed history of solid waste practices in Buenos Aires, including an explanation of the workings of CEAMSE, see Prignano, esp. pp. 321–27.
2. *Ciruja* and *cartonero* are terms used in Argentina for people who make a living salvaging recyclable materials from the garbage. *Catador* is the equivalent in Brazilian Portuguese.
 3. Coutinho, who died in 2014, was Brazil's preeminent documentary filmmaker. In addition to making a dozen feature-length documentaries on subjects such as slavery and black identity in Brazil (*O fio da memória*, 1991) and the lives of the inhabitants of an old apartment building in Rio (*Edifício Master*, 2002), he filmed several documentary shorts and medium-length documentaries (of which *Boca de Lixo* is one). For more on Coutinho's films, see Lins. For an analysis of *Boca de Lixo* in the context of depictions of the urban poor in recent Brazilian cultural production, see Peixoto, esp. pp. 176–78.
 4. Just before the end credits roll, the following text appears on-screen: "Filmado no vazadouro de Itaoca, no município de São Gonçalo, a 40 Km do Rio de Janeiro. No Brasil, existem centenas de vazadouros como este, onde trabalham dezenas de milhares de catadores" (Filmed in the Itaoca garbage dump, municipality of São Gonçalo, 40 km from Rio de Janeiro. In Brazil, there are hundreds of dumps like this one, where tens of thousands of *catadores* work).
 5. See Bauman for a pointed analysis of the social and economic factors that give rise to social phenomena like Argentina's *cartoneras* and *cirujas* or Brazil's *catadores*. For Bauman, modernity's impulse toward order and progress leaves an inevitable wake of what he calls "human waste," a polysemous term that means both waste produced by humans and humans as waste material. With the globalization of modern habits of production and consumption, erstwhile peripheral zones—where "wasted lives" were kept in check—rival traditional centers of modernity in the production of human waste.

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