

# Waste Management in La-la Land: An Analysis of the Loaded Words Surrounding Sanitation in the City of Angels

Jessica Grosh

Reminiscing about Los Angeles's past might make one conjure up idyllic images of sunshine, beaches, palm tree-lined streets, celebrities in sunglasses and sunhats, and other cinema-like scenes for which the county is known. And yet, Los Angeles is a microcosm that has a complex and conflicted history, and when we use a proverbial magnifying glass to examine this city, we discover details and secrets about the community that has been rapidly growing since 1850, when it was incorporated as a municipality of California. There are innumerable factors that keep a city productive and functioning, and not least of all is something we'd rather ignore: the management of waste and trash. According to various city websites<sup>1</sup>, LA seems to have this management of waste all under control in its current state. Trash is collected and dealt with, sewage is treated and disposed of, storm drains carry water to the ocean (and preferably not other hazardous materials), and there are numerous recycling programs. This well-oiled machine of waste management in LA County went through a process that took many decades to reform and perfect, with the guidance and efforts of many citizens and city planners. It's not presumptuous to assume that many LA residents are unfamiliar with the county's history surrounding waste management and sanitation, either because it's something they'd rather not think about, or because the system seems function smoothly and, therefore, doesn't require their attention. The latter is something we take for granted, as early LA residents were often plagued by the faulty sewer or sanitation systems or in some cases, the lack thereof. When famous author and philosopher Aldous Huxley toured an LA beach in the early 1900s<sup>2</sup>, the scene he and his friends found was a far cry from what we experience today. For one, he describes the beach as free from children and sunbathers, a fact that Huxley feels to be

a “blissful surprise!” (149). But this idyllic scene soon turns sour by his sudden realization:

At our feet, and as far as the eye could reach in all directions, the sand was covered in small whitish objects, like dead caterpillars. Recognition dawned. The dead caterpillars were made of rubber and had once been contraceptives. . . . But we were in California, not the Lake District. The scale was American, the figures astronomical. Ten million saw I at a glance. Ten million emblems and mementos of Modern Love. (149-50)

It didn't take long before Huxley and his companions discovered a smell that explained the strange contents on the beach: “Offshore from this noble beach was the outfall through which Los Angeles discharged, raw and untreated, the contents of its sewers” (150). These excerpts, from Huxley's 1952 essay “Hyperion to a Satyr,” induct us not only to the changing nature of waste and sanitation within LA County, but also to the discussion of filth and dirt that often arises with the topic. As we shall see, Huxley's ideas offer readers a springboard on the topic of waste and dirt. While this topic led Huxley to write about the differing historical notions of dirt, the essay brings us closer to discovering the specific connotations and implications behind the language of waste management in Los Angeles.

As a physical and social body, Los Angeles is extremely complex, and not only for the fact that it stretches across 4,000 square miles and includes over nine million residents<sup>3</sup>. Its literal and figurative constructions are varied and convoluted. The physical aspects of removing waste has included building sewers, transporting trash, and instituting recycling. As waste management changed over the decades, LA was also busy building a reputation as a place of opportunity and wealth, while simultaneously having impoverished areas like Skid Row. It has been lovingly referred to as The City of Angels, but has also been called La-la Land<sup>4</sup> and HellA. La-la Land in particular creates the notion that residents, corporations or businesses, and tourists of LA have their head in the clouds. In fact, in 2011 the *Oxford English Dictionary* directly linked the phrase with LA: with capital letters the word refers to Los Angeles, and frequently has overtones of a “state of being out of touch with reality; a (notional) place

characterized by blissful unawareness, self-absorption, fantasy, etc.” (oed.com). All too often the residents of LA have chosen to be unaware about the story of waste control within LA county—that is, until a specific concern assaults their senses. My brief review of the evolution of waste management will touch on this fact and detail the different phases of waste management that Los Angeles has gone through. I will then go on to analyze the language that frames the implementation of waste management practices in the city, some of the newspaper headlines that have led up to these changes, and the signs that remind and reprimand citizens after certain laws have been passed. All of these factors make the discussion of waste digestible and palatable to residents, who are ultimately the ones in charge of approving city funding and actions. I argue that by using the language of purity, fear or danger, as well as the discourse of education and science, LA impels its residents to be responsible for the waste they leave behind.

In practice, making residents deal with their trash and bodily waste proves to be a formidable challenge. There are numerous reasons for why this may be, such as personal disgust or laziness, and the reasons vary from person to person. But in the literature of waste management, whether tangible and technical or theoretical in nature, we see a strong human reaction of aversion to waste. The desire to ignore what is right before us because of its unsavory nature has been discussed by scholars and theorists for centuries, and more recently has been given a specific name: the abject. Julia Kristeva is perhaps the most well-known modern critic of the concept of the abject, and in her 1980 work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva asserts that the abject is a subversive force: "The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them" (15). According to Dino Felluga, the abject "refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other." This reaction can be caused by viewing extreme or subtle things, like an injury or a corpse, like shit or sewage, or even the "skin that forms on the surface of warm milk" (Felluga). Being confronted with our own waste breaks down the separation we like to keep from it, and challenges the assumption that we as individuals

are clean and healthy, infallible and invulnerable, living and not dying. Author Pamela K. Gilbert argues that the notion of filth produced by the human body “always evokes death,” which explains our severe reaction to it (qtd. in Cohen 82). While this sentiment is reductive and doesn't allow room for simple disgust unrelated to death, it does hold merit in the sphere of waste management. For example, when food rots and becomes inedible, it is undergoing a change similar to death. When humans “use the facilities,” the waste produced can lead to sickness or death if not properly purged. And we cannot escape the fact that a landfill represents a kind of grave, in the sense that waste is buried with the intention of being entombed forever. Trash and waste has the power to horrify people or subconsciously evoke thoughts of death; therefore, a city must work hard to get residents to confront their waste and deal with it.

We can understand why humans react negatively to dirt and filth, but we should also address how and why we deal with them despite our feelings of abjection. The work of author and social anthropologist Mary Douglas sheds a great deal of light on this inquiry. Her book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* situates the idea of dirt and filth within the context of society and its need for classifications. As a structuralist, Douglas believes that a concept must be understood in relation to the larger scheme of things, and this provides an appropriate backdrop for viewing waste management in LA. After all, the change and growth of a more effective waste management system is all about the structuring and restructuring of landscapes and mindsets, and the connections in between. In her introduction, Douglas discusses primitive cultures and their ideas of hygiene and dirt, and asserts that our concepts of purity must be informed in part by the study of comparative religions. While much of the book discusses bodily pollution and defilement<sup>5</sup>, her insight is easily applied to urban and environmental pollution, and the concept of filth in general. She explains, “As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder . . . Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment” (2). In the last one hundred years alone, LA County's ideals about cleanliness and filth have changed, and very different ideas about appropriate and inappropriate ways of dealing with waste have

existed. We can therefore see waste management as not just a reaction to filth that is inherently dangerous and disease-causing, but also a way to create order in a disorganized mass of people. Kristeva's ideas about the abject also overlap into this idea of order and organization: it “represents the threat that meaning is breaking down . . . The abject has to do with 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules’” (Felluga). Since filth disrupts our notions of order, we must work hard to reestablish a system of control—the result is an elaborate waste management system. Douglas believes that “ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience” (4). Waste management, then, has the larger task of imposing a system on Los Angeles, which would otherwise be an “untidy experience.” More specifically, Douglas's words directly relate to the intricate aspects of waste management. As residents, we must *separate* our trash between yard waste, recycling, and regular trash. We *purify* our homes and our streets from sewage and refuse that would otherwise remain in our backyards or homes. All items that can be recycled are *demarcated* by special codes and signs so that we know how to deal with them. And finally, residents are punished if they do not adhere to the laws of the county or state. Residents are not only punished legally, but may also be considered a pariah if they refuse to deal with waste in a socially acceptable manner. In this case, the human desire to uphold the social norm (and shun those who do not) further facilitates the existence and efficacy of waste management in a city.

But the social norm has never been a static idea, and both Douglas and Huxley discuss how notions of dirt and cleanliness have changed over time. Huxley explains that, during the Middle Ages, dirt “seemed natural and proper,” and “in fact was everywhere” (154). As was commonly the mindset of Christian societies, humans were considered filthy by nature and born into sin, and so attempting to be clean would almost be blasphemous (Huxley 153). In modern society we consider dirt to be an unnatural problem or at least a flaw that must be remedied, but this has not always been the case. Douglas sees this shift and connects it to religion and science: “There are two notable differences between our contemporary European ideas of defilement and those,

say, of primitive cultures. One is that dirt avoidance for us is a matter of hygiene or aesthetics and is not related to our religion. . . . The second difference is that our idea of dirt is dominated by the knowledge of pathogenic organisms” (35). This excerpt sheds light on the history of sanitation in Los Angeles and other modern cities. In the past, sewage was drained into ditches or holes and often lingered in the street. But as our scientific understanding of diseases grew, we came to recognize that proper sanitation must be implemented for our own safety. Thanks to scientific knowledge and modern facilities like waste treatment plants, humans can now rise above notions of inherited filth, whether they be religious or scientific in nature.

Before I address the historical specifics of trash and sanitation in LA, I want to mention some of its predecessors and some of the factors that make the city unique. Waste management is, of course, not exclusive to LA County. By the time the city had a need for better sewers and trash removal, there were other major cities that had been dealing with waste management for decades, and these cities helped set a precedence for LA. In the United States, New York was one of these cities, with major reforms in street clean up and sewers beginning in the 1890s (Humes 37). Paris and London were building elaborate sewer systems by the 1840s, although both began building sewers long before that period (Sklar 15). Predating both of these cities, Rome constructed the first sewer systems, dating back to 500 B.C. (Sklar 14). Despite this available wealth of knowledge, Los Angeles took years to implement and then perfect a sewer system and waste management solution (it wasn't until the 1950s that the faulty sewer system was fixed). There are several factors that complicated the implementation of waste management: specifically, LA's rapid growth, its extensive urban sprawl, its location along the Pacific Ocean, and its various environmental problems (like drought, flash floods, and earthquakes). The population of LA doubled between 1930 and 1960, from one million to over two million residents (dof.ca.gov). For any city to deal with this influx of humans and their waste would be a challenge. Additionally, LA is noticeably spread out and disjointed. This is partially due to extensive farm lands in the county being converted into housing developments over the years. New York City has a much larger population, but their streets and buildings are right on top of each other, facilitating

sewer connections that are closer and easier to manage. LA is quite the opposite; over the years, sewer systems had to be extended miles to link up different communities, and then the city had to find somewhere to deposit the waste. It is common that cities near bodies of water dump their sewage into them. While land-locked cities more often use processed sewage for fertilizer or irrigation, cities like LA, Chicago, and Cleveland have dumped their waste into rivers, lakes, and oceans in the hope that currents will whisk waste away. For decades, the Thames River in London was rendered undrinkable and an assault on the senses due to the untreated waste dumped into it. LA's solution was to utilize the LA River for a short time; after that, waste was dumped directly into the Pacific Ocean. The ocean is one geographical factor that influences the city's waste management, and other environmental factors play a role as well. While dry weather poses its own set of problems, in the past, winter-time flash floods often overwhelmed drains and pipes. And while it is not often mentioned in history books, the numerous earthquakes in Southern California certainly affect sewer pipes, causing damages and breaks in the lines. In the midst of these factors that caused ongoing concerns about the city's filth, LA has been known to the world as the glamorous location of Tinseltown. New residents flooded the city while tourists wished they were residents, all while LA struggled to deal with their consumer trash, food remnants, and bodily waste. The following explains this history and addresses the question—how do we see fear and loathing (and often times their opposites) transposed onto the language of waste management?

Since there have been many different phases of waste management in Los Angeles County, I find it easiest to address each shift in turn, while simultaneously analyzing the language that surrounds the particular change. In all, there are seven major shifts in the treatment of waste in LA, which I address as follows: cesspools, early sewers, Hyperion and treatment, incinerators, landfills, environmentalism and recycling, and zero waste. These span almost 150 years of history, as cesspools were primarily used in the late 1800s, while the concept of zero waste is still being discussed and addressed today in 2015. The following details the history of these different phases, and considers the language used to affect change along the way.

### **Dealing with Bodily Waste in the Early Years: Cesspools and Sewage Pipes**

The first two phases of waste management in LA are closely related, as they often existed simultaneously, and so I address them together. In general, sewage had been plaguing the city since it was a small village with only sixteen hundred residents (Sklar 19). Anna Sklar's book *Brown Acres* details the years between 1850 and 2008, and describes how LA residents reluctantly but eventually implemented better methods to deal with what happens after we flush our toilets. Her book's subtitle, "An Intimate History of the Los Angeles Sewers," gently reminds and teases readers that their waste is something they'd rather not discuss. On one level, her book is an "intimate history" because it describes in detail the troubles of the "privy" that residents and city officials had to endure before they had good sewer systems. But her book is also "intimate" because it deals with the waste that occurs behind closed and locked doors. It is private and personal, and even in today's world of exposés and the acceptance of individuals who flaunt a tell-all lifestyle, our waste is something that most people are reluctant to discuss.

Late in the nineteenth century, waste from homes was often drained into cesspools or septic tanks, and occasionally siphoned into ditches or the LA River. The latter two methods were not seen as proper or advantageous specifically because they made sickness and foul odors more common. Returning bodily waste to the earth seems natural and simple, especially when it's being buried underground and out of sight, which is why so many homes used cesspools for so long. Unfortunately, even well-made cesspools often emanated bad smells, and occasionally they leaked and contaminated water supplies. Other methods were desired to rid communities of bodily waste, not first of which were sewer pipes. Many planners and citizens preferred that waste be diverted to farms for irrigation and fertilizer, as this seemed like a more resourceful and natural method. In fact, an 1888 guidebook for Southern California "cast a rosy glow on the city's sewage disposal" and explained that the sewage is taken to orchards, gardens, or vineyards where it is "plowed under and thus covered in earth, the best-known disinfectant" (29). In this excerpt we see a threefold desire for waste



management that reflected sentiments of the time—to bury and ignore, to repurpose, and to purify. Tilling waste into soil fulfills our desire to bury our filth, so we are able to forget it ever existed. But this act also repurposes our waste into something useful and better—fertilizer that nurtures the crops we eat that in turn help us thrive. Lastly, the act of returning waste to the soil disinfects it, and so ultimately our waste is rendered pure and useful, while still being conveniently hidden or transformed. The method of using wastewater for crop irrigation makes sense for a region that is often plagued by drought, but it proved to be an overly simplistic remedy that never became truly popular. Considering what we now know about contamination and diseases, we're probably better off not using this method. Initially, cesspools and farm irrigation seemed like natural solutions for the abundance of LA's waste, but these remedies couldn't accommodate the growing city.

While some sewers pipes did exist, storm drains were more common in the city, although these were easily overloaded during rainstorms in the winter. In 1886 the city council requested a “combined sewage outfall,” which would drain storm water and sewage directly into the ocean (Sklar 24). The word *outfall* would be used for decades to describe the sewage that was dumped untreated into the Pacific Ocean, and the use of this word reveals the attempt to sanitize the name and real nature of what sewage pipes contain. This solution was not a popular one, as people feared that beaches would be contaminated; it was, however, the best solution that could be found at the time. Unfortunately, when sewer pipes were first built, they were constructed of wood and brick that had very short lives before becoming damaged and leaking into streets. This wasn't the only problem—*Brown Acres* reveals the ongoing tug-of-war battle between LA residents who could not be bothered by waste management and the city officials who so desperately tried to create a better system. Because residents refused to spend money on sewer pipes and treatment plants, LA County had to get creative. What resulted were public notifications like signs, newspaper articles, and even a movie.

In the early twentieth century, dealing with waste became a public and social issue, and people were motivated to act to avoid health related and fiscal

consequences. LA residents needed to be prodded to take responsibility for their own waste, whether that meant voting for funding, or more personal responsibilities like cleaning up litter. These pleas often came in the form of newspaper articles or public postings, and early sewage was so problematic that the city even felt the need to make a film. *Brown Acres* mentions this gem called “The Film with an Odor” which was produced by the motion picture industry in an attempt to get Angelenos to vote for “a new outfall and treatment plant” (Sklar 64). Sadly, this film from 1922 does not seem to exist any longer, but an advertisement for it from the *Holly Leaves* magazine does. The creation of this film, which showed images of sewage spilling onto streets, forever links Hollywood to the waste created by its residents. One could even say, whether in reference to movies containing lewd topics or that of waste management, all manner of *filth* comes out of Hollywood.

The magazine advertisement for “The Film with an Odor” is perhaps the best example of how differing concepts of purity and disease converge in the literature of waste management. The film attempted to get Angelenos to vote for sewer funding, and played in local theaters and even at the Hollywood Bowl. The following is an excerpt of what was printed on a full-page ad of the magazine:

### **Health vs. Dollars**

Authorities fear epidemic from dangerous sewage condition.

**New Sewage Disposal Plan** approved by world's most expert sanitary authorities and engineers.

**Vote “YES”**

On the \$12,000,000 Bond Issue at  
PRIMARY ELECTION, AUG. 29

Plan for sewage disposal provides for future growth of city.

Los Angeles has made ample provisions for water, power and transportation.

### **Why Not for Sewage?**

Sewage runs KNEE DEEP in some CITY STREETS in winter

The city's health and prosperity are at stake

**Vote “YES”**

See that film—

**“The Film With an Odor”**

It exposes the terrible menace. It explains the plan. It's showing at local theaters.

*New Sewage Disposal Plan Is a City-Wide Project*

Indorsed and supported by—

The Community Development Association . . .

Many other organizations know the danger must be conquered

**Vote “YES”**

AT PRIMARY ELECTION, AUG 29

**SAVE LOS ANGELES**

This ad makes use of a large bold font to emphasize what was most important for residents to notice and remember. Immediately we see that *health* should take precedence over money—this was the main issue, as residents were reluctant to vote for fear of an increase in taxes. The ad then details specifically what will be done, and asks why LA has neglected dealing with its sewage. Presumably, this question makes residents feel guilt for their ignorance in the past, or at least makes them question why something was not done sooner. The ad also instills fear into residents with visuals like sewage running “knee deep” in the streets, which is a “terrible menace.” Finally, the ad attempts to uplift residents, directly implying that their actions to vote “yes” can “save Los Angeles.” With this implication, residents can become at least a socially conscious community, and individually, a savior or hero figure. In this ad, representatives of LA used a variety of strategies—educating and informing its audience, threatening the reader with the danger of disease, and finally foregrounding uplifting imagery to compel residents to vote. Thanks to their efforts the Bond was passed, but it would take many similar campaigns to motivate taxpayers to spend their money on sanitation in the future.

Very often, the officials imply that if the public does not tend to its waste, they must bear the dangerous consequence: the literal threat of disease. Because danger is a concept that is often tied to a sense of timeliness or immediacy, the signs that imply danger or fear are often simple and short, in order to better facilitate comprehension and

action. Using a variety of media—such as newspapers, billboards or bus stop advertisements, and posted signs—officials often communicated a heightened sense of danger to control the community’s behavior. While some newspaper headlines and government sign postings are simply informational, there are many others that invoke threat by their words or implications. In the 1940s and 1950s when sewage was spilling onto beaches, the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* ran articles entitled “SEWER SCOURGE MAY CLOSE CITY BEACHES” and “Beach Quarantine Extended Into Santa Monica City Area” (*Los Angeles Times Archives*<sup>6</sup>). At the time, government-issued signs were posted on beaches, reading:

CAUTION  
This Water is RAW SEWAGE  
and DANGEROUS To Health  
STAY AWAY FROM SAME  
AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

and also:

DANGER  
IT IS UNLAWFUL TO  
SWIM OR BATHE IN THESE SEWAGE  
CONTAMINATED WATERS  
BY ORDER OF HEALTH COMM. (Sklar 164-165)

Note the use of capital letters in the first sign that emphasize the most important aspects of the message. Both signs use the word danger (or *dangerous*) in an attempt to scare potential beach-goers away. Even when residents are not in immediate danger of disease, government postings reveal what should or should not be done about waste. On many open country roads in the county, the government posts “No dumping” signs in an attempt to curb littering. Because landfills charge people to deposit waste in them, many people, ignoring their social responsibility, leave trash on the sides of the road. Near drains and manhole covers can be seen the reminders that these pipes lead to the ocean.



*Photo courtesy of Jessica Grosh*

Some of these paintings include pictures of dolphins, but in this particular image we see the skeleton of a fish, implying their death if we dump hazardous waste into drains. These signs serve not only as reminders that our actions have long term effects on the environment, but in some cases warn us that legal action can be taken against us if we dispose of waste improperly. Another example are signs on LA highways that warn about littering fines, which can range from \$100 to \$1000. Because people may throw trash out of their car windows, legal and monetary threat is necessary to motivate them to responsibly deal with their trash.

### **Treatment of Waste: The Hyperion Plant**

While the extensive sewers that were being built across Los Angeles relieved many local and county-wide waste issues, a new problem was becoming apparent. Angelenos were dumping raw sewage into the ocean, making beaches odoriferous and sometimes unusable. Some people regarded this action as acceptable practice, while others felt that it might still be done without any consequences. One engineering expert urged that sewage simply be released at high tide because “foul waters are taken out by the receding tide and so thoroughly dispersed and diluted, that they soon become unnoticeable” (Sklar 28). But city planners had no intention (nor the ability) to hold back

waste to be released only at certain times of day, and most agreed that something must be done to process the waste before it was drained into the ocean. It wasn't until 1925 that the Hyperion Treatment Plant was opened on the coast of the Santa Monica Bay, and initially the plant simply “screened” the waste (Sklar 2). This might sound more elaborate than it really was—in reality the waste was passed through large pipes with screens over them, and solid wastes were buried under sand dunes on site while the rest was dumped directly into the ocean. This process was an improvement in sewage treatment at the time, but quite obviously the oceans and beaches were still being noticeably polluted. Sanitation treatment plants, more tastefully dubbed “wastewater facilities” or “water reclamation plants” are much more common now, and in Los Angeles there are currently four such facilities. These plants serve as LA's kidneys, rigorously processing waste before it is disposed.

When the language of fear or danger is not utilized, the words chosen to describe the processes and tools used in waste management as well as the result of these efforts are often uplifting and positive, inspiring visions of perfection and cleanliness. Officials carefully choose names, as names help residents disassociate services from their real duties. In Huxley's essay, he discusses and commends the “Hyperion Activated Sludge Plant” (151), known to us today simply as the Hyperion Treatment Plant. This name change must have been intentional, and provides a perfect example of “blanding,” a word I use to reflect the attempt to neutralize filthy services and objects. Even the original name of the Plant contained phrasing that euphemistically glossed over the truth. Sludge may be defined as dirt or mud, but at Hyperion, it literally referred to the feces, urine, and other unmentionables or objects that came down the drains to their plant. In *Brown Acres*, Sklar discusses the name of the plant, and specifically its mythological origins: Hyperion was the Greek god who was “father to the sun and moon” (48). This lofty image is subverted by the fact that Hyperion was the son of Uranus, which is “an unfortunate—but humorously appropriate—homonym of 'urine' and 'anus’” (Sklar 49). Referencing Greek mythology continues to be a popular choice for those in the business of filth, and during the spring of 2015 I spotted a dump truck bearing the logo “Athens Services” just a few blocks from California State University,

Northridge. With these words one imagines a dump truck that flies off to Athens, the city named for Athena and home to Greek mythology, cleanly deposits its contents and then proceeds to relax on Mount Olympus with the gods. I'm embellishing a bit, to be sure, but it's no exaggeration to say that those in charge of marketing waste management want their product to be seen as clean and beneficial.

The Hyperion Treatment Plant was the solution for waste disposal that the city wanted, but it took many years to improve and perfect the work they did there. After years of faulty sewers and problems, the *LA Times* posted the following on its front page in 1949: "HUGE HYPERION SEWER LINE IN SERVICE AT LAST" (LATA). The fact that this line was improved "at last" reveals the frustration and struggle that occurred before it was fixed. And, truth be told, untreated waste was occasionally dumped into the ocean well into the 1980s, due to problems like plant shutdowns or broken pipes. It took the diligent work of Dorothy Green and her organization Heal the Bay to bring this issue to light and fight for the polluted beaches and diseased marine life (Sklar 172). Thanks to Heal the Bay, residents were made aware of ongoing pollution, and as a result, Hyperion was impelled to deal with its negligence. Because of the cooperation of community activists and modern facilities like the Hyperion Treatment Plant, Angelenos can "effectively modify the abjection of [their] predestined condition," and rise above notions of filth and disease (Huxley 163).

### **Taking out the Trash: Our Desire to Burn or Bury**

We have not yet discussed the other main function of waste management: how the city deals with common objects like paper, clothing, and food remnants that residents deem unnecessary and must subsequently be discarded. On this topic of trash I'm indebted to Edward Humes's history of waste and garbage in the book *Garbology*. He references Los Angeles many times throughout this book and extensively in the chapter entitled "Piggeries and Burn Piles: An American Trash Genesis." In New York and the East Coast in general, turning trash into pork was extremely popular before dump trucks became the norm. Trash would be taken to pig farms on the outskirts of town, and the resulting pork would later be sold within the city.

It sounds like a fairly reasonable solution, but piggeries waned in popularity once more was learned about disease and food contamination. Piggeries never gained popularity in LA which, as Humes states, “became more enamored of trash incineration than almost any city in America” (41). Residents, businesses, and factories burned most of their trash, which led to a terrible smog that predated the pollution caused by the exhaust from cars and industrial fumes. In 1903 the “choking haze” was becoming a problem, and yet Angelenos continued to burn their trash during WWII and up into the 1950s (Humes 48). Incinerators themselves were dubbed “Smokey Joe,” a quaint name that anthropomorphized trash bins. Trash burning is dirty, smelly, and dangerous, and since residents were encouraged by the government to do so for many decades, it makes sense that the receptacle for burning was given an unassuming and almost benevolent name.

In the language of waste management we have seen ties to purity and perfection in regards to bodily waste, but this is also the case with incineration. Sludge came to be known as “wastewater,” another example of naming that attempts to neutralize its abject nature. When “wastewater” came to be processed and reused rather than draining it directly into the ocean, the city officials dubbed the facilities “purification plants” (Sklar 56). Purification has a long history of connection to both inanimate objects as well as human beings. Suggesting perfection and ideal goodness, the word, in regards to waste treatment, implies that the purified waste would be clean or even potable. The act of burning consumes and transforms complex objects into simple ash, which is free of foul odors and easier to manage. Even though fires give off smoke, the implication of purity must have still been forefront in the minds of residents and city officials, as fire has longstanding significance. In the Old and New Testament, fire is a powerful and recurring image that refines and purifies. In mythology, the phoenix is reborn and lives again after it is consumed in fire. And perhaps because of these archetypal associations regarding fire, Angelenos believed for decades that incineration was the easiest and purest way to get rid of bothersome and disgusting trash. When smoke and smog became ever-present in the city, the government was forced to find another solution for trash. In 1954 the *Times* declared “BACK-YARD INCINERATOR BAN DECREED BY



COUNTY,” but it took many years for the ban to really become effective. Landfills, dumps, and hauling services grew out of the ashes of incineration, as it were.

In April of 1957, after numerous false starts and delays, trash burning was banned in LA County and the *Times* notified residents with the headline: “City Rubbish Collection to Start Monday” (LATA). Curbside trash collection slowly replaced incineration, but the city struggled to contend with all the trash that had been previously burned up by businesses and residents<sup>7</sup>. Many small dumps existed around the city, but as the city grew officials had to find distant locations or better methods of compacting trash to accommodate the growing population. Puente Hills, located in East Los Angeles, is the landfill that Humes spends much of his time discussing. Since its creation in the 1950s, Puente Hills Landfill has taken in 130 million tons of trash (Humes 20). Due to neighborhood complaints and its near-full capacity, Puente Hills was supposed to be shut down in 1993 and again in 2003, and was not closed until 2013 (Humes 91). Eventually, Puente Hills will be repurposed into roadways or natural preserves, but it must always be maintained to some extent. As landfills are filled, pipes are connected and laid within the trash to let gases escape, and these pipes must be maintained indefinitely. Despite the illusion that trash within the ground is cleaner and leads to actual decomposition, in actuality “landfills are forever” (Humes 94).

When addressing the linguistic nature of the word *landfill*, we see a simple compound word that means *to fill up the land*. But as I mentioned earlier, there are deeper implications associated with burying trash. The act of burying trash within the ground is strikingly similar to how many humans deal with their dead. The difference is that we do not love our trash, while we supposedly do love the people we bury. The symbolic act may be similar though—once individuals entomb their trash or loved ones, many assume they are *done* with them, and they cease to be involved in their lives. This is, of course, a simplification, as many loved ones affect those that survive them long after their deaths. As I noted earlier, the act of burial may be emblematic, as Douglas suggests, of the need to control and to re-establish order, burying and repressing “death” and the “abject.” In order to neutralize the notion of filth that surrounds landfills, these locations often have innocuous names. Many bear the name of the street or

canyon they reside on, like the Lopez Canyon Landfill. Other names attempt to invoke natural symbols of renewal, like the Sunshine Canyon Landfill in Sylmar, where one imagines the hills are filled with light and sunshine, and not garbage. As space for trash became more limited and we realized the finite nature of our resources, Angelenos began to show concern for the environment and our wastefulness. This ushered in a new phase of waste management in LA County.

### **Looking to the Future: Recycling and Zero Waste**

We cannot look at the history of waste management in Los Angeles without addressing recycling, though it is a facet that is still undergoing development. Although it might seem like a recent trend, recycling is by no means a modern concept. Long ago, rags and worn fishing nets were combined with natural items and other components to make paper (Strong 28). In 1904 aluminum cans were recycled in some large cities, and yet it wasn't until 1970 that the first "Earth Day" introduced America to the necessity of recycling. In the 1980s individual cities and states began to implement specific laws about recycling. In California, plastic bag thickness is regulated, newsprint must contain a percentage of recycled paper, and every county is responsible for creating a "task force at five-year intervals to assist in the development of community source reduction and recycling" (Strong 111). As was the case with sewer pipes, the development of recycling has been complicated by urban sprawl. There is no single company that serves the LA County; many different companies provide trash pick-up for various neighborhoods, and each company has their own set of regulations for what can be discarded or recycled.

In the 1970s and '80s the nation was acknowledging the ways we were being wasteful and destructive, and we considered what our future might look like if we continued to squander our resources. During this time, there were many headlines about the environment and what reforms were needed in order to protect it, and yet a search for recycling in the *Times* database yields few results. In 1984 the headline "EPA Proposes New Rules for Recycled Waste" declares that the community was thinking about recycling, and that the government was attempting to regulate it. While sewage

problems and trash burning tangibly (and negatively) affect the environment of Los Angeles, LA residents may regard the incentive to recycle as less perceptible and immediate to their everyday lives. Due to this fact, recycling has not garnered as much attention as other waste management issues in LA County.

When viewed as a whole body or organism, LA seems to have conflicting opinions about recycling. While LA County has numerous recycling centers, individual recycling plans vary from street to street, and even lot to lot. Most single-family homes are now provided with street-side recycling pick-up, but this has been slow to come and didn't take place everywhere at once. Some apartment complexes provide recycle bins, while many do not. Some businesses in LA County recycle their wasted glass and plastic, but most do not. All this to say that, while other cities like San Francisco or Portland have forced their residents to be conscious of their trash and waste, LA is content to make mandates haphazardly, depending on the individual community and their sentiments. The plastic bag ban is an example of this. LA County has made it clear that reusable bags are better for the environment, but as of 2015, only thirteen cities within the county have any bag restrictions in place ([dpw.lacounty.gov](http://dpw.lacounty.gov)). If San Francisco and Portland had a slogan that reflected their waste management mentality it would probably be "Take care of your shit!" while LA's would be more like "Don't make waves man—recycle if it's convenient for you."

Recycling, repurposing, and reusing are acts that ultimately will influence Los Angeles's future. Angelenos are often motivated to recycle by the fear that we will use up the earth's resources and then simply throw the remnants away in landfills, which are already inundated with trash. LA views recycling as a necessary act and has used two main methods to encourage residents to recycle, attempting to socialize the community. First, the county has installed receptacles for recycling at many public and private locations and signs that identify these bins. Second, LA has used many kid-friendly recycling campaigns; this method makes recycling an approachable and accessible topic for children and adults alike. Since the 1980s the topic of recycling has been seen on many kid-friendly shows, from cartoons to mega-hits like *Full House*. The federal government has instituted such campaigns as Keep America Beautiful, which appeals

to the language of patriotism and nationalism, and the even the socially conscious mascot Woodsy the Owl encourages children to “Give a hoot—don't pollute!” Both of these campaigns utilize imperatives that do more than encourage readers to be mindful of the environment, for they claim “this must be done!” In Los Angeles we see similar methods that encourage recycling. At the LA Zoo many of the trash cans bear a cute painting of a raccoon that implores, “Please recycle.” Since 2003, Mr. Recycle and Robo Blue have been mascots of the Los Angeles Bureau of Sanitation. Both are blue robots (Robo Blue is basically a waste bin with a face put on it) that can be seen on city websites or at the Bureau's functions or open houses. Mr. Recycle urges, “Don't just stand there; recycle something” ([lacitysan.org](http://lacitysan.org)). This statement promotes a pro-active mentality, while also insinuating that residents that fail to recycle are lazy. The benefit of kid-friendly advertising is threefold: it provides an enjoyable diversion for children at events, it encourages the younger generation to be environmentally responsible (perhaps more-so than their parents), and it reminds parents and adults about recycling in a non-threatening way.

If being irresponsible with waste warrants moral judgment, then being responsible for waste may warrant praise and acceptance. According to Humes, recycling “has long served as a balm and a penance—a way of making it ok to waste” (139). Here, recycling is equated to a healing substance that covers and calms a wound, while “penance” has religious connotations that imply self-punishment and repentance. These words reveal the deeper emotional connection that humans have to recycling. It is not enough to recognize that recycling exists, and then to do it. Instead, there are feelings of guilt or shame tied to recycling, and perhaps these are the emotions that compel some people to recycle at all.

Los Angeles County is actively encouraging residents to reduce, reuse, and recycle, but it doesn't end there. The County is currently entertaining a Zero Waste plan that would eliminate the need to use landfills altogether. In 2013, a Zero Waste Progress Report was created by the UCLA Engineering Extension; the report proposes to achieve zero waste in landfills by 2025. As the report explains:

Waste policy in California has been landfill-centric for many years. Growing concerns about the environment and conservation, however, have led to seeking policies that divert some, and eventually all, waste away from landfills. The State of California's Integrated Waste Management Act of 1989 mandated that each city achieve a 25% diversion rate of waste from landfill by the year 1995 and a 50% diversion rate by the year 2000. Waste can be diverted from a landfill through waste reduction, recycling, composting, and other technologies that beneficially use the materials found in solid waste. . . . [T]he City adopted a new goal of "Zero Waste" by the year 2025. (forester.net 7)

This will be a formidable task to achieve in LA, especially considering that the few cities with long-standing waste reform, which are close to achieving zero waste, still struggle to do so. While a zero waste policy is a commendable goal that reduces physical waste, it has deeper implications that relate to the human desire for control and purity. The concept of zero waste is an attempt not only to erase the trash and filth that surrounds us, but also to neutralize what we wish to ignore, to repress the abject. Looking back at the phases of waste management in LA, we can surmise that the shift from dumping raw sewage to treating it shows an effort to purify the oceans, while the banning of incinerators also demonstrate the desire to purify the air that was choked with smog and smoke. Recycling and zero waste are still in progress, and these methods symbolize the desire to purify the land and control what goes into it and what comes out of it. Both acts look to the future of the County and its residents and attempt to rein in the waste and negligence that occurs in such a vast city. If zero waste is someday realized, LA will be seen as a forward-looking city that has managed to control and purify the environment, and, symbolically, the people inside of it.

The study of waste management in Los Angeles County reveals an underlying contradiction—the sentiments presented by language are sometimes at odds with reality. It is true that, thanks to modern sanitation, we now live in a city where “practically everybody can afford the luxury of not being disgusting” (Huxley 159). However, this is not because we are in actuality not disgusting, but because the implementation of

sanitation has cleanly removed our waste from our sphere of recognition. As I have mentioned, this erasure is both a physical and discursive act, for the language—especially the use of names—surrounding waste management attempts to metaphorically expunge the very filth that disturbs us. In addressing this issue of naming, I am reminded of a certain playwright and poet who said, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” This Shakespearian reference suggests that the name of something is an artificial convention that does not alter what it references. This is true not only of a fragrant rose, but also of other *fragrant* but less appealing things. A landfill by any other name is still a landfill, and still smells like the decaying refuse found within. By any other name, waste management still represents the trash and bodily waste that must be dealt with within a city, and yet the language surrounding waste management and its documents seem to imply the opposite. Waste treatment plants or landfills are named to imply beauty, sunshine, and cleanliness in an attempt to make waste management palatable to residents. Other times, the imagery of disease and the language of fear are used in the rhetoric of waste management to impel residents to act. But once votes are in and bonds are passed, LA would like us to believe that our “shit don’t stank.” To put it another way, I reference the words of archeologist turned modern trash excavator William Rathje: “People forget, they cover, they kid themselves, they lie. But their trash always tells the truth” (qtd. In Humes 129). When placed before us, our trash does tell the truth about what we consume, what we value, and what we waste—and yet our trash and waste are so rarely exposed before us. In summation, our trash may tell the truth, but the discourse and rhetoric around it obfuscates the processes and the results of waste management.

## Notes

1. To name a few, there is the LA City Sanitation website ([san.lacity.org](http://san.lacity.org)), [LASewers.org](http://LASewers.org), and the Department of Water and Power website ([dpw.lacounty.gov](http://dpw.lacounty.gov)). All of these sites present a professional and informative look that implies or outright states that the organizations are capable and responsible for their department within the city.
2. There is no way to know the exact date of Huxley's stroll along the beach. The essay was published in 1952, but the article was published many years after the incident. The year can be estimated to be 1939, since it was "[a] few months before the outbreak of the Second World War" (149).
3. These figures are for LA County specifically.
4. The phrase has also been written as Lalaland, or La-La Land, with possible other permutations.
5. Her book discusses not just religious defilement, but secular defilement as well.
6. Though less common today, some homes in LA County still use septic tanks. It wasn't until 1990 that my own grandparents (residents of the County) hooked their house up to the sewer line and had their septic tank filled in.
7. From here on, I will refer to this citation as LATA.
8. In 1959, two years after the incineration ban, the *Times* ran the headline "Rubbish Disposal Becomes Major Issue In Los Angeles."

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