

From Production to Destruction to Recovery: Freeganism's Redefinition of Food Value and Circulation

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Introduction

Waste reclamation, a term most commonly associated with waste management companies, is also a useful conceptual idea to consider a broader set of practices. More specifically, these practices encompass a wide variety of activities by which individuals utilize garbage for various re-purposes and which fundamentally address the North American lifestyle rooted in a consumer culture. One method of waste reclamation is dumpster dining, where discarded food (found primarily in supermarket dumpsters) is reclaimed for sustenance to counter the processes by which it has become both a tool of power and a commodity to be discarded. Dumpster dining, as it will be discussed in this paper, is a restructuring of the location from which edible food can be procured and, further, an examination of how consumer culture can be countered through radical practice. One of the primary philosophies framing dumpster dining is Freeganism, an overarching lifestyle of chosen simplicity lived to various extremes in Western cities.

As with all radical lifestyles, Freeganism emerges from a complex social history including, but not necessarily limited to, anti-capitalism, anti-consumerism and countercultural movements. While this article cannot address this entire

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history, it is useful to make a connection to and, subsequently define, anarcho-punk—the anarchistic, politically active punk culture that grew from early 1970s punk roots. As Craig O’Hara points out, “the Punk movement was originally formed in nations holding capitalist, pseudo-democratic policies. Because of this, capitalism and its problems became the first target of political Punks” (74). As an extension of this earlier incarnation, anarcho-punk dumpster dining challenges corporate capitalism and engages in direct action to counter its subsequent impact on individual lives (Clark). Freeganism has built upon this intention and taken up the broad strategies of opting out (including, but not limited to, dumpster dining) to be included under a coherent lifestyle that, as much as possible, lives on the remnants of consumer and capitalist culture. The name itself is most telling of this history: a merging of the words Free and Vegan (though veganism in practice no longer defines all Freegans) to encompass and signify a lifestyle that seeks to exist without newly produced or purchased consumer goods and to further draw attention to the possibility of living well off of other people’s waste. While it is clear that anarcho-punk and Freegan dumpster dining are similar in practice, the two are at once interrelated and conflicting.

This paper will discuss this lifestyle practice as it engages with food to both problematize and critique the reality of dumpster dining. To this purpose, *Freegan.info*, *Evasion*, and three dumpster dining YouTube videos will be analyzed to understand first how the practice of dumpster dining inherently changes the spaces within which it occurs and second to consider the impact, or lack thereof, this lifestyle has on capitalism. *Freegan.info* has been built by a group of Freegans in New York City and includes extensive discussions regarding both Freegan behavior and Freegan philosophy as a way of communicating the movement to a larger public. *Evasion* (2003), published by the anarchist organization CrimethInc., is a biography of an (anonymous) anarcho-punk life. The text also provides detailed instructions on how to live comfortably without a job and without money through dumpster diving, squatting, train hopping, and criminal behavior. Finally, the YouTube videos discussed here are broadly tagged as ‘Freegan’ and all serve as guides for dumpster dining. The three that will be detailed here are titled *What Is a Freegan?* (2007), *Freegans: A Trash Tour and a Dinner* (2007) and *Dumpster Diving Guided Tour: Mega Loadin’* (2008).

Dumpster dining as a broad practice offers the opportunity to consider how this human action redefines the space and meaning of waste itself. By shifting spatial meanings culturally associated with garbage and food, dumpster dining forces us to confront the arbitrary cultural meanings that support a system that allows useable food to be discarded. Further, by comparing approaches to, and representations of, dumpster dining, it is possible to build an understanding of Freegan philosophy and how it is distinct from its anarcho-punk roots. However, despite this distinction, Freeganism’s continued radicalism and remaining connections to punk culture will ultimately prove to ensure it remains as a small-scale response to large-scale problems.

Waste Culture: Classification, Expertise and Labor

Recounting Mary Douglas' work on classification systems in connection to dirt and purity, we are reminded that:

Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systemic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity. (36)

The alternative that dumpster dining suggests is thus significant in highlighting the ramifications of a classification system that determines what is edible and how we can appropriately garner our nutritional needs by placing limitations on when, how and who has access to sustenance. This disruption of the system has led to an increase in mass media attention, yet a rise in coverage does not necessarily signal a shift in North American consciousness to waste and food. Instead, the circulation of food through the city into the trash becomes a contested intersection between dominant categories, symbolic value, and the potential for large-scale change. The intersection of value and potential for change expresses a specific power framework that both allows and limits personal action in response to waste. Most specifically to dumpster dining, Douglas' work reminds us that waste is always a part of a classification system that arbitrarily designates what is pure and impure and, subsequently, when food can be safely consumed through systems of best before dates and associated eating practices.

The Freegan movement seeks to directly counter this system of categorization by interchanging the meaning of waste and food through both practice and the use of expert recommendations. Freegan.info responds to classifications of safe food through the use of expert Dr. Michael Greger to clarify that:

“Sell by” or “use by” dates are NOT safety dates. They tend to denote either how long a product can remain on store shelves or when they are recommended to be eaten for best flavor or quality. Properly stored, unopened packaged foods can typically be eaten safely for days after these dates have passed. (Freegan.info, *Health and Safety*)

Underlying this recommendation is the cloaked dilemma faced by consumers—our purchasing decisions are determined not in the best interest of our health, but rather to serve the profit motives of food businesses. In this way, we become trapped in a discourse that unambiguously requires our participation in the system Freeganism counters. However, this is not to say that consumers are somehow dupes, as knowledge of the purpose of best before dates does exist outside the Freegan movement. Many lay consumers engage with practices similar to those recommended on the website, including cutting mold off of hard food products (such as cheese) or common ‘sniff’ tests. Further, the inclusion of this expertise signals the broad readership expected for the website, rather than being directed at those who dumpster dine on a regular basis. It is further possible that this discussion of best before dates serves to obscure deeper cultural concerns regarding the dirtiness that re-

sults not from past dates, but rather the relocation of food into the dumpster.

Evasion's narrator explicitly points out:

Preaching salvation through trash, I was up against a lifetime of upper-middle-class conditioning. "You'll get sick and die eating that food," they said. The living-dead of the "work force" giving health advice. By what logic was food deadly the moment it entered a trash bag, or passed through the back door? Food that had been on the shelf hours prior. It was a naïve faith in the purity of store-bought food, and a staunch sureness of trash as poison. (65)

Key to the use of garbage as food is a reworking of our categories of dirt and of food hygiene where a consideration of the contradictions in consumer culture and its use of space is interrogated. If the garbage is the "wrong" place to find food, then the store becomes, dichotomously, the "right" place. This is obviously not based on proof, but rather an unquestioned faith in location, one that is reflected in the use of partially arbitrary dates to "prove" the respatialization of food and that this respatialization automatically equals a complete degradation of quality. While Dr. Greger's recommendations are a useful step in countering the classification of both food and waste, *Evasion's* understanding is further supported in a number of YouTube Freegan videos. In these videos, dates cannot always be used as a reason for discarding food and supermarket practices are clearer.

Videod Freegans are shown finding still frozen meat, days away from expiry, or almost full cartons of eggs, weeks away from expiry, from various dumpsters. In this sense, the expertise offered on the website becomes nothing more than an abstract consideration to allay fears around potential health hazards that are quite quickly dealt with when entering the dumpster itself. In this sense, then, the dumpster displays more regarding the impartiality of supermarkets towards use value, than a traditional, obviously wasteful, commodity chain within corporate markets. The choice by supermarkets, for example, to discard food stuffs based on seemingly unnecessary and arbitrary date standards further contributes to creating a specific meaning for the dumpster—that of a space categorized as a place for garbage, not for food. However, this designation reminds us of Gay Hawkins' understanding of

waste as a flexible category grounded in social relations. A category that acquires its meanings according to the different contexts and ways in which it has been historically put to work. (ix)

These social relationships designate that the symbolic intersection with the spatial determines the cultural meaning of the dumpster. Thus the meaning of waste is not set, but rather subject to adjustment according to human practice and subsequent shifts in symbolic meaning. However, the history of demarcating certain foods as waste is not one that can be undercut simply through a personal, or even group, decision to refute the classification of the dumpster.

When looking then to the medical expertise provided to defend the use of discarded food and its relationship to the Freegan philosophy, de Certeau's practice as language reminds us that human use defines space. Specifically:

If it is true that *forests of gestures* are manifest in the streets,

their movement cannot be captured in a picture, nor can the meaning of their movements be circumscribed in a text. Their rhetorical transplantation carries away and displaces the analytical, coherent proper meanings of urbanism; it constitutes a “wandering of the semantic” produced by masses that make some parts of the city disappear and exaggerate others, distorting it, fragmenting it, and diverting it from its immobile order. (102)

This wandering semantic further allows for the multiple ways of understanding waste introduced here. Garbage translated into food is simultaneously made possible and hindered by the contested and contradictory nature of (urban) space. The dumpster is symbolically defined as dirty and thus its contents unconsumable, but this symbolic meaning can also be temporarily reclassified through use by divers. The dumpster exists on the periphery of cultural meaning – often unseen or ignored based on long-standing cultural practices of distancing humans from the waste we create – and is therefore open through its own periphery to new versions of knowledge. Here, then, garbage picking becomes a language whereby Freegans translate the liminal and the flexible into a concrete source of sustenance.

However, despite this flexibility, Freeganism continues to be defined through its relationship to capitalism itself. The Freegan movement distinguishes itself from capitalist economies in a binary relationship that highlights the negative drawbacks of capitalism in contrast to explicit lifestyle environmentalism and anarchism. However, this binary serves to oversimplify how the Freegan act engages with waste systems in North America. Rather than being simplistically structured against, its actual strength seems to lie in taking advantage of Hawkins’ sense of the liminality of waste – a liminality that provides the possibility to rework relationships and understandings of human relationships to trash.

Additionally, the introduction to Freegan practice provides an opportunity to self-define Freegans as

people who practice strategies for everyday living based on sharing resources, minimizing the detrimental impact of our consumption, and reducing and recovering waste and independence from the profit-driven economy. Freegans are dismayed by the social and ecological costs of an economic model where only profit is valued, at the expense of the environment [...] and human and animal rights. (Freegan.info, *What is a Freegan?*)

This presentation of the Freegan philosophy discusses the movement in terms designed to counter dominant capitalistic practices. The framing of the movement becomes a way of separating the movement from larger practices and introduces Freeganism as a response to a moral dilemma. Specifically, by utilizing terms such as *detrimental*, *dismayed*, and *rights*, the website makes clear that the intention of the movement is separate from a dominant framework that is discursively framed as destructive through this dualistic pairing. This framing is shared in the definition presented in the YouTube video, *What is a Freegan?*:

A Freegan is somebody who tries to live simply, reclaiming their freedom from this crazy consumer driven society, opting out of always trying to hunger for the latest gadget, trend and

fad sold to us by the High Street advertisers and marketeers. Instead, a Freegan lives simply, trying to live trying to use their time to help society [...] not demanding payment for things [...] but just really leading by example by giving their time trying to inspire, and we find that along the way everything that we need gets provided for. Not necessarily when we want it, but when we need it. (Alf, *What is a Freegan?*)

Here, the definition of Freeganism is again set against capitalism, but further moralized in the attempt to “lead by example.” This dialectical structuring is made more explicit later in the Freegan.info philosophy page when the message becomes:

Freeegans also believe that people have a right and responsibility to take back control of our time. In a society where many of us work as indentured servants in service to our debts, working multiple jobs to make ends meet, advertisers tell us that we can't be happy or successful without buying the latest consumer goods, Freeegans believe in repairing and maintaining the goods that we already have, and refusing to buy things we don't really need, and acquiring the things we really do need whenever possible without spending money. In the process we dramatically reduce our financial needs, allowing us to work less and devote our time to our families, service to our communities, activism for social change, or simply to enjoying life. (Freegan.info, *What is a Freegan?*)

Between the two definitions of Freeganism outlined here, there is a clear, if simplified, Marxist influence to disengaging from the capitalist structure. Of particular interest at this point is the obvious connection, and perhaps dependence, that Freeganism has on the functioning of capitalism itself. It is clear that the waste system that horrifies the Freegan has also become the sustenance upon which she depends.

Further, this structuring of the movement also creates complications in the social situation Freeegans are taking up. Clearly, dominant society is defined by the Freegan philosophy through its relationship to consumerism, where consumerism is defined by “[buying] things we don't really need,” Freeegans live on goods procured “[not] when we want [them], but when we need [them].” Within this complication is the challenge that Freeganism defines mainstream society as at once homogenous and uniform, without determining what need and want actually mean. The sources drawn on here define need within the Freegan philosophy as all that is not garnered through capitalist means. However, the key to determining the difference between need and desire also comes from temporal, as well as physical, placement. With such a wide variety of goods, both physical requirements (food) and pleasurable options (electronic goods) are available in dumpsters, it is easy to conceptualize need and want differently. *Evasion* reminds us that within dumpster diving want is reset against availability:

Odd, it seemed, that dumpster diving was viewed as a habit of poverty, used as a last recourse of the desperate to provide just enough to scrape by. If people were starving or just scraping by on trash, they weren't dumpster diving in my town. As a

dumpster diver – with so much food, and the race to eat it all before spoilage – I’ve gained weight. It was, in fact, easier to get carried away with excessive materialistic pursuits as a dumpster diver than as a paying consumer. (69)

When time is freed from labor and consumption from payment, it is possible to devote far more time to consumer behavior, of a sort, than otherwise possible. In this sense, the distinction between the explicitly Freegan and CrimethInc. anarchopunk begins to appear. Clearly, not all dumpster divers are attempting to actively change the world as Freegan.info and *What is a Freegan?* propose. In *Evasion*, the intention is an occasionally playful, anarchistic disruption and opting out of any connections to the capitalist system and its associated labor. This lack of specificity becomes a challenge in determining the categories that are being responded to and further who can determine the meaning of need.

This is made clearer by returning to the importance of classification within definitions of waste. While Douglas’ work makes clear that symbolic practices do determine what can be consumed by human beings, her classification system does not elucidate the transient nature of dumpster dining activity. Here, classification becomes a multi-layered approach that redefines not only waste, but also spatial physicality and lifestyle requirements. The importance of need as discussed by Freegan philosophy requires a deeper consideration of where dominant presumptions of need become superfluous and therefore subject to a new version of practice.

Freegan practices counter economic needs required by the capitalist structure with time investment. Instead of working to garner the financial means to buy unnecessary goods, Freeganism seeks to utilize time gained through opting out of the system to forage necessary goods. The lifestyle is subsequently defined not only through its relationship to waste, but also its relationship to labor, highlighting Jean Baudrillard’s conception that

the system of political economy does not produce only the individual as labor power that is sold and exchanged: it produces the very conception of labor power as the fundamental human potential. [...] In a work, man is not only quantitatively exploited as a productive force by the *system* of capitalist political economy, but is also metaphysically overdetermined as a producer by the *code* of political economy. (31)

The nature of the Freegan lifestyle requires time to engage in gathering food and goods, as opposed to the wage labor required for money exchange. The Freegan is required to devote significant amounts of time to search through multiple trash bins and dumpsters followed by the further work required to re-wash goods and food, for example, for safe use. Beyond this practical view of the labor involved in Freeganism is a direct philosophical confrontation with traditional labor through voluntary joblessness:

By accounting for the basic necessities of food, clothing, housing, furniture, and transportation without spending a dime, [F]reegans are able to greatly reduce or altogether eliminate the need to constantly be employed. We can instead devote our time to caring for our families, volunteering in our communi-

ties, and joining activist groups to fight the practices of the corporations who would otherwise be bossing us around at work. For some, total unemployment isn't an option—it's far harder to find free dental surgery than a free bookcase on the curb—but by limiting our financial needs, even those of us who need to work can place conscious limits on how much we work, take control of our lives, and escape the constant pressure to make ends meet. But even if we must work, we need not cede total control to the bosses. (Freegan.info, *What is a Freegan?*)

Here, time devoted to "not spending a dime" is labor reconfiguring the traditional sense of exchange value. The connection becomes one where labor itself is spatially designated and the work that Freegans engage in changes the liminal dumpster to a workplace, one that circumvents wage labor and money exchange to direct access to needed goods. However, this direct access also obscures the categories that are not traditionally or generally associated with labor. Inherent in these discussions is clearly a claiming of autonomy that disconnects labor from a sense of "work." When labor is no longer sold, but rather utilized for the direct procurement of sustenance, the capitalist structure is undercut through individual autonomy.

By not selling their labor, Freegans make a choice to invest their time in a way that is framed through personal control, but the price paid for this autonomy comes with its own limitations for participation. The movement focuses on reducing financial needs as a means of reducing work requirements, but does not address the multiple levels of financial need that cannot be satisfied through recovering waste. They point to dental work, but not to other mainstream financial commitments, such as mortgages, debt repayment, or the costs of schooling or child rearing. In this context, then, to be a Freegan implies the ability to opt out of consumption on multiple levels and engage in shifting personal practices over years to ensure that these financial needs do not exist. Without an ability to compliment personal choices of waste reclamation with a disengagement from financial ties to the capitalist world, being a Freegan is impossible. This may explain why so many of the people mentioned in *Evasion* or seen in YouTube videos tend to be younger and have therefore spent far less time becoming entangled in the debt structure of capitalism.

This challenge also leads us to a consideration of the ideal time to opt out of engaging with capitalism. In *Evasion*, whenever a "punk" character's age is mentioned, it places them in their teens or twenties. In chapter four, which deals most explicitly with dumpster dining, the narrator is twenty-four and makes reference to a long-standing lifestyle that prevented the complications of opting out of direct engagement with capital. The youthfulness of the punk movement is clear when references to the suburbs and parents come up:

Nonbelievers had to be dealt with militantly—like my parents. I would offer them food without revealing its source. Or sneakily cook them entire dumpster meals, in violation of the "no dumpstered food in the kitchen" rule. They would eat with cheer, praising my culinary skills, unknowingly defeating their own arguments as they ate "garbage" ... and loved it. (66)

Here, the importance of dealing with parents and their representation of power is made clear. Rather than constructing an argument for dumpster dining rooted in expertise, as above, in this incarnation the implicit advice is to trick the adults into facing their own conditioning. Where the Freegan philosophy draws on numbers, research, and expertise, *Evasion* is more focused on trickery to undercut middle-class training. While *Evasion* is clearly speaking to a specific audience and details a biography that should not be utilized to define the entire anarcho-punk movement, it is worthwhile considering the distinction in approaches here. While Freeganism could be viewed as the adult version of *Evasion's* youthful antics, it is more useful to consider the differential relationship to mainstream styles of discussion and argumentation. *Evasion's* trickery counters Freegan.info's research and expertise and may in fact be expressing a certain cynicism or unwillingness to share the lifestyle dumpster dining offers. Central to this text is an individual experience where Freegan.info or other Freegan discussions of philosophy seek to invite in all who wish to join.

Circulatory City: Transitions Through Space

Freeganism not only exists in lived experience, but is also implicated in and responding to the intersection of the global and the local, or more useful to this discussion, through Henri Lefebvre's social space. Edward W. Soja (1996) notes that with social space, Lefebvre is advancing his less detailed lived space and in our discussion, the social space where the diver and food waste meet creates a new kind of relationship to sustenance. However, this lived space is also an unending spiral of moments where, despite the connections made across time and space through the (discarded) commodity, the meaning of these moments and locations are never exactly the same. Instead, Lefebvre reminds us that:

It is not the work of a moment for a society to generate (produce) an appropriated social space in which it can achieve a form by means of self-presentation and self-representation – a social space to which that society is not identical, and which indeed is its tomb as well as its cradle. This act of creation is, in fact, a *process*. (34)

This spatial process is also the process by which waste moves through city systems. The dumpster is reconfigured through multiple levels and the dumpster diner subsequently exists as both a theoretical conundrum and a human being restructuring the tension between official, expected practice and disruptive lived practice. This theoretical conundrum is that of discourses and circulation of food and waste, where the spatial container (both in the specific dumpster and the city) becomes embedded in how meaning is made and re-made.

Our understanding of the movement of food goods from global distance to waste spaces can be further refined through Erik Swyngedouw's history of metaphors of circulation and metabolism. The challenges of naturalizing city space Swyngedouw points to complicate how Freegan politics attempt to live in, and through, space with naturalized concepts of foraging and explicit environmentalism. The disruption of the circulation of foods through their presumed commodity chain is then also an attempt to disconnect naturalized foraging from

constructed passages of movement. The spatial physicality of food – its location in a supermarket, en route, in a dumpster, or on the home dining table is already structured through global processes of transport and symbolic meaning making, but these meanings are not necessarily permanent. The perceived and conceived aspects of space do not exist independently and instead serve to define each other through their relationship and circulation, which can be redirected for new purposes.

The food space is thus redefined through Freegan practice and subsequently the circulation of food from global to local to waste can be seen as directly linked to the circulatory city Swyngedouw details. The production of urban space becomes a complex intersection with global and local pressures and disruptions that refute the possibility of singular, homogenous meaning. In this sense, Freeganism has become a part of the fabric of the spaces it engages with and subsequently this redefinition of space exists also as a redefinition of circulation. For example:

Groups like Food Not Bombs recover wasted foods and prepare warm meals that they serve on the streets to hungry people to challenge a society that always has money for war but never enough to ensure that all are fed. In New York City, Freegan.info runs group tours of retail waste with a focus on food. Participants take goods both for their own consumption and to redistribute to hungry people on the streets. (Freegan.info, *Urban Foraging*)

Freidmann (1996) connects food as product to power and nation building in a way that clarifies the connections to power that sustenance has. When food is understood as economic power (249), the Freegan movement has the potential to disrupt not only classifications of what is consumable, but also how economic structures are enacted in lived spaces. It is not simply a response to economic processes in the Freegan case, however, and directed, collaborative urban foraging serves to shift circulation patterns through a process of redistribution. As noted in CrimethInc.'s *Recipes for Disaster*:

Food Not Bombs is not a soup kitchen; it's not a family; it's not even a revolution. But when it works, when it is at its best, Food Not Bombs is a place where people can be their best selves to themselves and to others, where there is always room for surprise. (255)

In the process of disrupting circulation, it becomes possible to understand food reclamation as an opportunity to be filled with the surprise CrimethInc. argues for, or at its most limited, the surprise that power structures are disrupted as circulation is opposed. Food as power is reclaimed to ensure that actual sustenance is met for a larger number of people and the process of circulation from saleable food to waste product is revealed. As Swyngedouw further challenges:

The phantasmagorical (spectacular) commodity-form that most socio-natural assemblages take not only permits and facilitates a certain discourse and practice of metabolism, but also, perhaps more importantly, "naturalize" the production of particular socio-environmental conditions and relations. (36)

Food reclamation, as seen through dumpster dining, questions not only the naturalized nature of the circulation of the city, but also food as product. However, it is not merely a disruption of the circulation of food through the city, but also the food consumer through the city.

Evasion shows us that the pathways taken to procure food need not be set by capitalist constraints. Rather, the informal maps of the city are those of alleyways learned not through address books or official maps, but from informal movements through unauthorized spaces. Frequently throughout the narrative, specific locations are recounted as part of the process of resetting the meaning of the city, where train yards are gateways to travel, libraries and rooftops are sleeping spaces, and dumpsters are spaces for gathering sustenance of all kinds. Further, by directly engaging with this circulation, the nature of space itself is questioned as Freegan practice redefines the lived spaces of North American cities.

This disruption is perhaps clearer in video examples of Freeganism where grocery “shopping” is redefined through the act of reclamation. As Alf points out, “a Freegan, rather than going through the front of the supermarket, will venture round the back of the supermarkets and forage around for the things that they need.” This is then displayed visually by MovingUpp’s *Dumpster Diving Guided Tour: Mega Loadin’ (1 of 2)* where the process of shopping in a Trader Joe’s dumpster is demonstrated. The opening shot of the section devoted to diving has three people, dressed in black, walking from their car across the parking lot, with one heard saying, “Welcome to the dumpster. Here we are, approaching Trader Joe’s, going to get some groceries.” While it is obvious from the title and introduction that this will not be a mainstream shopping trip, the process by which the store is approached is only distinguishable when the divers hop the wall surrounding the dumpster, located in the store parking lot. At this point, foraging begins and we are instructed on how to go about “dumpstering,” rather than “buying,” food. From inside the dumpster, the diversity of quality food and the potential for recipes (references to stir-fries and barbeques stand out) connect this process back to the inside of the store. Here, the process of gathering food mimics the process of shopping, right down to the loading of the procured groceries into the back of a car.

While the location is shifted, the process of grocery gathering remains and the distinctions between inside and outside are blurred through a patterned set of behaviors. This is further reinforced by the ability of the divers to choose what they would like to take with them. Rather than being based on an abject need model so common to mainstream understandings of dumpster dining, these divers are able to throw back an open package of cookies and comment on not taking ‘dumpster crack’—a term referring to packaged, nutritionally lacking goods frequently discarded. Here, then, nutrition and quality is discussed in a way that counters presumptions around what it means to eat garbage. “It might be free, but we eat healthily [...] most of the time. We’ve got all the choices in the world. We can eat whatever [...] we want.” Later in the video, a cereal box is pulled and one diver asks if it’s any good (the response is yes) and it is further clear that not only can divers be

selective, but they are also able to have preferences in a way linked to the importance placed on nutritional eating. The parallels to grocery shopping do not end at practices and selection, but also extend to a certain kind of community developed in retail spaces. This is explicitly commented on in *Freegans: A Trash Tour and A Dinner* when one of the divers comments that “there are people that go and they’re not really affiliated with us but they know us and it’s like going grocery shopping.”

Circulation, both of people through the city and food through the commodity chain, is something to be disrupted and Freegan action directly confronts the complex relationships that feed the circulation of goods through consumer lives:

Freegans [... recognize] that in a complex, industrial, mass-production economy driven by profit, abuses of humans, animals, and the earth abound at all levels of production (from acquisition to raw materials to production to transportation) and in just about every product we buy. (Freegan.info, *What is a Freegan?*)

The intention is then not only to disrupt localized good circulation, but rather to disrupt this circulation as a way of responding to the reification of consumer products. This reintroduces a level of consciousness to subsistence practices lost by a system that obscures processes of production and distribution. Freeganism engages with capitalism in a way that counters conceived space in order to provide options for lived practice that are not intended by capitalist structures.

Alternatively Lived: Confronting Power Structures

Central to Freeganism’s disruption of waste processes is a consideration of power as enacted through the relegation of still edible food to disposable commodity. Foucault conceives of power as “not something that is acquired, seized or shared [...] power is exercised from innumerable points” (94). Foucault’s non-centralized approach provides a way of conceiving of shifts in discourse as examples of shifting power. Drawing on Hawkins and underlying the discussion thus far, waste is a unique cultural moment that demonstrates and draws upon dispersed locations and experiences of power. In this sense, the dumpsters’ liminality as neither private through its periphery nor public through legal controls ensures that Freegans can respond effectively to circulations of food power they could not otherwise access.

The power that Freeganism enacts is one that questions and directly challenges categories of consumption and related spatial use. The lived aspect of space Lefebvre discusses is then reworked through practices seeking to rewrite the language of waste itself. However, the movement is also temporally connected to anarcho-punk responses to waste. As Clark’s discussion of Seattle’s (anarcho-punk) Black Cat Café makes clear, waste reclamation undercuts corporate production practices that epitomized Levi-Strauss’ acceptable “cooked” version of food. For the punk movement:

A host of foods become rotten in corporate-capitalist food production: food with an advanced expiration date, cosmetically damaged produce, food in dented packaging, day-old baked

goods, and the like. As punks saw it, people were hungry in Seattle, in America, and around the world. To punks it was obscene that businesses were trashing good food. (Clark 27)

By rooting Freeganism in this earlier incarnation it is evident how a specific knowledge passed down has ensured that the more developed understanding of dumpster dining represented today specifies a unique relationship to how food itself is defined. This connection also clarifies how more explicit details of Freeganism (that which encompasses an almost sacrificial lifestyle) connects with CrimethInc.'s anarchistic criminality and work avoidance.

This history also allows a consideration of how the Freegan philosophy of food has shifted, and developed, from the Black Cat Café. Where Clark understands dumpster dining through a rejection of cooked food—a distinction that Levi-Strauss saw as delineating humans from animals (Clark 19)—waste reclamation in contemporary Freeganism is also internally linked to an explicit environmentalism working towards more sustainable cultures. However, in contrast to the Black Cat Café example, where mainstream people were often actively excluded, Freegan politics are available to anyone who wishes to read the website, join a Food Not Bombs group, or save money on their groceries. In fact, it may be the shift away from the explicit identification with a broadly recognized subculture that has aided Freeganism's growth and its significance in shifting spatial and discursive categories. While those internal to the group and familiar with punk politics would likely automatically see the connections, Freeganism has been, at least partially, sanitized from the threat and danger associated with early punk movements in dominant cultural arenas.

This is not to say, however, that Freeganism now exists as a viable option for behavior in contemporary culture, but rather that the movement is clearly more attune to methods of transmitting its lifestyle that may limit the cultural fear its practices evoke. Where Freegan.info is an intensive, extensive discussion of the movement's philosophies, what remains central to the movement is its shocking relationship to food. When food is central to economic control and linked so directly with appropriate classification, Freeganism holds great potential for disrupting traditional senses of these areas. The power here is found in shifting the circulation of goods from the trajectory of the traditional commodity by creating a second life through reclamation. However, this disruption is further complicated by how the spatial category of the dumpster is practiced. While clearly the dumpster is redefined as an appropriate space for consumption, the category of trash is not completely destroyed in this action. Instead, only certain foods are recovered and they are, most significantly, not ingested at the site itself. The dumpster is not redesignated as a space for eating, but rather for recovery and the food itself is taken to commonly appropriate eating areas. This classification then remains consistent even as Freeganism counters categories of appropriate consumption. The dumpster is still not a place for (hygienic) eating which requires more private spaces where the Freegan can:

Wash hands thoroughly (lather with antibacterial soap for a full 20 seconds and rinse under warm running water) after touching any sort of raw meat (including all seafood) [...] all raw fruits and vegetables should be scrubbed under running water. (Freegan.info, *Health and Safety*)

The irony of recommending anti-bacterial soap to a group invested in recommending such extreme behavior also serves to highlight the limitations of dispersed power. While certain categories can be disrupted, Freegan power still reflects a social history of hygiene and classification of space, where running water and appropriate eating places remain pertinent and unchallenged. Even within *Evasion*, which obviously addresses a very different presumed audience, location is central. The narrator's parents do not allow dumpstered food in the kitchen, so the narrator secretly cooks there, to his great pleasure.

Further examples of designated eating areas are seen in *Freegans: A Trash Tour and A Dinner* where the dinner portion of the film takes place in a very clean, middle class kitchen, with included dishwasher, and mounds of food displayed during preparation. It becomes clear that the dining table remains the appropriate place for consumption, the kitchen for preparation, and ultimately, eating garbage depends upon changing the meaning of garbage through the preparation process. This key difference ensures that the commodity cycle is not completely disrupted, though. In the same way that divers discussed earlier loaded groceries into their cars, the divers in this film enact a specific community kitchen where eating is separated from procurement.

The sole significant, and telling, example of eating from the dumpster itself takes place in *Trader Joe's* when the cereal discussed earlier is opened for a quick snack. Counter to the wisdom and advice displayed and discussed in every other source discussed in this paper, eating occurs, casually, directly in the dumpster. This moment also serves as an opportunity to consider how power might be differentially enacted in response to categories of dirt and appropriate consumption behavior. The woman who eats the cereal, and the gendering of this behavior, which deserves a much more detailed consideration in another discussion, is a break in the attempt at mainstreaming Freegan identity represented in other examples. Rather, her behavior links her more directly with the narrator of *Evasion* and the members of Black Cat Café. If it is clear in this discussion that food can be reclaimed not only through the act of diving for it, but also by its removal to a sanitary (read appropriate) kitchen, then at the moment that this box of cereal is opened, it is possible to imagine that temporarily waste comes to mean something quite different. At this point the distinction between the consumer space of the supermarket and the claimed consumer space of the dumpster is temporarily erased.

This expansion of alternatives to eating and consumer spaces again brings us back to the reworking of the circulation of the city. Freeganism is rooted in finding ways to live in urban environments in a way that reduces human impact on the planet and its residents. As John Frow notes, "Waste is the degree zero of value, or it is the opposite of value, or it is whatever stands in

excess of value systems in use” (25). Through reclamation, value is reworked beyond the end result of the capitalist system. The (imposed) choice to discard edible food or useable consumer goods is questioned at the root of what constitutes value. As a result of being removed from the value system through discard and subsequent existence outside of the classification system, Freegans can be seen as creating a system of use value separate from the symbolic system rooting capitalism.

Conclusion

This opportunity to understand power and responses to global capitalism is not without its own challenges. At the same time that food circulation is disrupted at the Freegan dumpster and categories of safe consumption are challenged, the Freegan movement continues to engage with specific legal structures that serve to enhance the symbolic meaning of trash. Despite the opportunity for challenges to the system and disruptions of appropriate consumption, Freeganism remains bounded by a cultural system that is deeply conflicted over the meaning of trash. The fragmentation and liminality of waste leaves it in a contradictory position when considering the case of Freeganism. The liminality of waste, and the spaces it occupies, leaves the opportunity for redefinition open, but at the same time ensures that those redefinitions are predisposed to stay at the margins.

Further limiting the potential of Freeganism and various other kinds of dumpster dining are internal contradictions around the behavior itself. If Freeganism is an attempt to mainstream concepts of opting out, *Evasion* and *CrimethInc.* have a much more complex relationship to the mainstream. It is perhaps necessary to understand Freeganism as a potential move forward for anarcho-punk dumpster dining, one that engages with mainstream consumption through respecting, and in fact maintaining, clear versions of categories of waste. Clear in the pleasure taken through disruption in *Evasion*, dumpster dining is part of a larger pleasure in disrupting the system that does not depend upon large-scale social change. This is not to say that anarcho-punks are not engaged in organized approaches to social change (O’Hara and *Recipes for Disaster* are good examples), but rather that the form of engagement sets up a more antagonistic relationship to mainstream culture.

The discussion of Freeganism as both potential and limitation also has implications for the direction the movement may take in the future. While new relationships to waste are being developed, the commitment to procuring goods through waste reclamation is also another form of self-regulation, one that replaces paid labor with foraging labor. Further, dumpster-dining does not simply challenge the system as Clark’s anarcho-punks may have intended. Rather than proving the system can be usurped, increasing public attention and interest may be paid to Freeganism because the extremity of its disregard for deeply embedded cultural practices and standards serves to pre-contain its own threat. The continued dirtiness of waste reclamation protects our symbolic system, so despite moves into new concepts of waste, Freeganism may also reduce its own capacity for large-scale change through its own, partially, radical behavior. Where

anarcho-punks relish in this radical behavior as radical, Freeganism has taken up the challenging task of making radical relations to garbage mainstream.

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