

Not Letting Go: Toil and Salvage within Waste Underflows

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Abstract: Disappearance of waste is a magical illusion that is both imperfect and reversible. Waste crosses boundaries, both imaginative and physical, and reappears always ready to engage in new relations. This paper focuses on the inner workings of Czech waste management, which is underpinned by the belief that waste should vanish. An ethnographic immersion in the lives of landfill workers, waste pickers, incinerator employees, company managers, as well as other organisms thriving on garbage, offers a glimpse into waste underflows full of unexpected consequences and creativity. The author provides a critique of the desire for disappearance and demonstrates that it is possible to live meaningful lives in the presence of waste. By demonstrating the salvaging potential of these underflows, the author challenges the normative assumptions about market-based solutions and techno-optimism in waste management.

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