

**Stefania Gallini**

### **Doña Juana's Ancestors: A History of Waste in Bogotá, Columbia, 1880s-1950s**

Everyone in Bogotá knows *Doña Juana*. She is not a merry old lady from popular culture, but a 22-year-old landfill. In 2009, she received some 6,000 tons of solid waste daily from the over seven million inhabitants of Colombia's capital city.

This research project started as a question about waste as an environmental problem in urban history. How did waste become such a gigantic concern for big cities, and especially for a Latin American megalopolis like Bogotá? When, by whom, and under what circumstances was waste materially produced, transformed, perceived, and disposed of? Could historical knowledge help us imagine an environmental future different from our environmental past?

These types of enquires have inspired literature that is growing almost as quickly as the research topic itself. Since Melosi's and Tarr's pioneering contributions (Melosi 1981, Tarr 1996), environmental humanities scholars have been expanding the range, conceptual frame, and focus of their research to the extent that a new research area, sometimes referred to as "discard studies," seems to be emerging. Such authors use waste as a platform to contemplate the social history of consumption and reuse (Strasser 2000), the aesthetic and metaphorical terrain of garbage (Scanlan 2005), the history of urban sanitary services (Melosi 2000), the urban metabolism of modern city (Barles 2005), the social theory of modern societies (Gille 2007), the changing patterns of modes of production and distribution (Sori 1999), the role of war in accelerating social change (Cooper 2008), the modern history of pollution (McNeill 2000), and generally the history of resource use and conservation in urban societies (Schott, Luckin, Massard-Guilbaud 2005).

My primary interest does not lie in adding an exotic case study to this mainly North American and European body of work. I am also not interested in addressing the environment as a victim of human disturbance, or in portraying waste as just a pollutant. Instead, I argue that waste is a kaleidoscope that can be used to investigate how nature cooperates in the construction of human history, even in cities, or "built environments."

In reviewing primary sources for this project, I was struck by the recurrent, yet hardly acknowledged presence of a plethora of non-human actors intervening in waste production, circulation, and disposal. Such non-human actors include wind, which disperses ashes collecting in the city; the steepness of many streets; horses as transporters of waste carriages; the warm climate; mosquitoes; the chemical process of garbage putrefaction; pigs as the end of the waste cycle, as recipients of final, then still entirely organic waste; domestic animals (such as horses and mules) who produce waste with their excrement and dead bodies; water, which influences the lifespan of some technological designs, such as the colonial V streets where waste flows down to the main rivers; rain, which moves the refuse flow; fire and the burning of garbage in the poorest neighborhoods; and soil, which receives and sometimes rejects waste, such as in the disastrous collapse in 1997 of a section of the *Doña Juana* landfill.

The striking presence of nature in the city and refuse cycle leads me to suggest that waste crises could be seen as indicators of socio-metabolic changes, that is, the moment when the whole material and symbolic relationship between the city and the environment is reshaped. This perspective may challenge traditional chronology, actors, and readings of urban history, encouraging a new understanding of the city and its surroundings.

My research concerns solid waste history in Bogotá from the sanitary crisis of the 1880s to the end of the 1950s, when the urban population reached one million and a municipal public institution for waste collection and disposal (EDIS) was created (Mejía Pabón 1999, Palacio-Castañeda and Rouillón-Acosta 2008). I see these two chronological end points as encompassing the “modern waste history” of Bogotá—that is, the modern socio-metabolic regime of this Latin American city.

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