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Landfill Communities within the Land of Eternal Spring

Abstract

This paper examines the placement and impact of landfills within Guatemala City, Guatemala. By examining the municipal cite and its accessibility to policy taken on towards proper waste management, the recurring theme of lack of information will be obvious. It specifically looks at the lack of information provided and describes the landfill communities by looking at the minimal scholarship and media attention offered. This paper will also interrelate the importance of all beings, living and non-living with its surroundings and highlight ideas of ecological thinking. An emphasis on environmental racism will be stressed, particularly with the enormous impact it has had on indigenous populations, of whom are subjected to living in these landfills without proper access to education, resources or representation in government.

Introduction

When I was eleven years old, I was granted the opportunity to travel to a place I had only ever heard of through stories and photographs by my parents. This place is a country that I decided was also my home, though I had never visited and the only thing that could settle the doubts of those that questioned this identity was the fact that I was cool enough to have two passports instead of one (in other words, a I'm a dual citizen). In these stories, I became familiar with the roots that my parents grew from, but eventually left behind in order to provide a better future for myself and my sister. These roots came from literal dirt floors, but were protected by cardboard and scrap metal ceilings— and a single lightbulb illuminated the vast darkness that consumed the village after sundown. My parents gained nothing more than elementary and middle school educations, but they still grew in loving homes that encouraged them to seek greener pastures, even if it meant leaving the little gardens they had cultivated in the Land of Eternal Spring. This title of “The Land of Eternal Spring” is the true meaning behind the word “Guatemala”.

Guatemala can be found tucked under Mexico and resting lightly over El Salvador and Honduras within the beautiful sub-tropical region known as Central America (see fig.1). On this trip to the Land of Eternal Spring and armed with memories passed down from my parents, nothing could have prepared me for the horrible truth that is hidden behind such a beautiful name. I had originally gone to visit family, as we were in the midst of figuring out some more adult topics that my 11 year old mind couldn't understand, and though I knew my family lived quite humbly, they lived quite comfortably compared to those that didn't have homes or had direct indigenous/Mayan ancestry (my family would be considered a part of the Mestizo population). I remember being dumbfounded by poverty stricken areas... and the children that ran through the streets playing or looking for food— even more commonly, working or looking for work— while barefoot. They were covered in dirt from head to toe, had sad eyes, rotting baby teeth and runny noses. This was sight far more common in the capital city, Guatemala City, a place where a good amount of my family had migrated to establish their own little businesses (extremely common in Central America) and look for better opportunities. The city is enormous, and has multiple sides, just like any city in the United States. As cities have their beautiful government buildings, scenic parks, beautiful luxury residences, there are slums and ghettos that have unfor-

unately developed and have strategically been placed away from the views of the common traveler or global citizen.

The most striking part of my memory of this trip is not only the devastating poverty, or the smell and smog that covered the city, but the sheer amount of trash that covered the city. What I also found and continue to find incredibly striking, is the indifference people had towards disposing their leftover food or just general waste, properly. My dreams of a simple country home under coconut trees that I had believed flourished in the little garden my parents left behind before leaving for America were very quickly tarnished. The truth was that my home away from home was and continues to be dirtier than expected—later these impressions would only become far worse. It was stepping foot into zone 10's landfill that would leave me with an impression that has lasted to this day. This same impression is what has led me to research and seek answers to the burning questions that have not yet been totally answered. This paper, consequently, only scratches the surface and digs deeper into the interconnectedness of our world, raising even more pressing questions.

Information Literacy and Value Based Perspectives

Landfills plague multiple places on our planet—from the desert areas of Southern Nevada to subtropical countries like that of Guatemala, garbage and its proper disposal is a huge public policy issue that many countries continue to struggle with. In order to properly understand who or what voices are bringing these issues to the public's attention, one must understand what a landfill is (or what even goes into it). One definition of trash is the aggregation of organic or inorganic materials that are determined as having no value. Trash accumulates mostly for the fact that it is not biodegradable, or only semi biodegradable, being that it is not organic and cannot be naturally broken down to return as a natural substance to the Earth.¹ A region particularly impacted by this phenomenon would definitely be the country of Guatemala. Guatemala City, its capital, is so large that it has to be divided into zones (much like a town is divided into counties, or a city is divided into districts.). Between zones 3 and 7, is where an incredibly large landfill is located as it mostly encompasses all of zone 3 (see fig. 2). This landfill continues to grow at an alarming rate, as intakes trash not only from its designated municipality, but also from eight other municipalities.² As a result, many communities have developed within these I claim that these populations of people should not be subjected to living in slums, sifting through tons of garbage, and that every person deserves a decent living space.

There is very little scholarly material presented on these specific dumps themselves from recent years. The most popular publication dates on any kind of formal or scholarly material on the Guatemalan landfill dates back from mid to late 1970s. A more recent document found was published in 2002, from *Organización Internacional del Trabajo (OIT; International Organiza-*

¹ Lourdes García, Nancy Girón, Carlos Ketelar, José Quintana, Otto Sandoval, Juan Andrés Sierra, Luis Fernando Delgado, Carmen Ortiz, "Acondicionamiento y Sellado Del Botadero de la Ciudad de Guatemala" (E-Journal, Facultad de Ingeniería, 1973), 5, Accessed March 2, 2016, http://www.tec.url.edu.gt/boletin/url_02_amb01.pdf.

² Lourdes García, Nancy Girón, Carlos Ketelar, José Quintana, Otto Sandoval, Juan Andrés Sierra, Luis Fernando Delgado, Carmen Ortiz, "Acondicionamiento y Sellado Del Botadero de la Ciudad de Guatemala" (E-Journal, Facultad de Ingeniería, 1973), 3, Accessed March 2, 2016, http://www.tec.url.edu.gt/boletin/url_02_amb01.pdf.

tion of the Workplace) in collaboration with *Programa Internacional para la Erradicación del Trabajo Infantil (IPEC; International Program for the Eradication of Infant/Child Labor)*. A more recent piece of academic work was written in 2012 by an undergraduate student in the University of Arizona for a thesis presentation.³ This thesis looks at a policy making perspective of the issue, and argues that this area in Guatemala has become a “forgotten wasteland”, in which the government has a huge hand in for not involving itself more with its people. The previous academic journal mentioned is in Spanish, as most media coverage that I am noticing is also from Spanish language media outlets. Most media presented on this topic consists of local clips from editorials driven as human interest stories on zone 3 and life in “The Dump”. This contrasts with the well known case of environmental racism which audiences across the globe have come to know as The Flint Water Crisis. In any basic google search, it isn’t hard to find coverage on this topic in a variety of languages... as it has reached a point where it has come to both national and international attention. There are perspectives offered in scientific, humanitarian and the community aspects. This is contrary to the landfills located in Guatemala, which have had a far longer existence than that of the Flint Water Crisis. Still, justice has not been served and no action has been taken to shed light or combat the great disservice being done to the communities that exist within the landfills.

In the Communications field, human interest stories are those that tell the individual trials and tribulations of a single person or group of people by going into specific details of their daily lives. These issues are therefore highlighted as being a humanist issue, as a social issue, while pushing the environmental perspective and main impact of the issue. Highlighting these stories as that of human interest demonstrate how these conditions are horrible, and are meant to shed light on the injustices that are ongoing, yet they do not truly capture the essence of the corruption. It may seem wrong, but looking at it solely from an individualistic perspective and the sole impact of one family or even just community would not be right. Yes, the suffering of the community must be acknowledged, but the suffering of the entire country and the corruption that is deeply rooted in the existence of the landfill is important to note as well. As I will touch upon later, all areas encompassing the humanist perspective, social justice, public policy and environmental justice are interconnected in a very specific yet complicated way.

Many articles on proposed waste management are available. The articles that detail this topic only propose possible solutions rather than actually detailing the effects on human populations, in English. A tentative study published in 1973 did minimal work to observe the impacts on the communities of people living around the landfill, and the impact it has on the environment. The article identifies the landfill and its establishment as a quick fix for a big problem—and it hints at possible health risks and says there are long term environmental effects; but it does not explicitly point them out.⁴ There is little to no anthropological perspective on the communi-

³ Trujillo, Leanne Rose. "A Forgotten Wasteland: The Guatemala City Garbage Dump Community." UA Library Repository. May 2012. Accessed March 05, 2016. <http://arizona.openrepository.com/arizona/handle/10150/244837>. 45.

⁴ Lourdes García, Nancy Girón, Carlos Ketelar, José Quintana, Otto Sandoval, Juan Andrés Sierra, Luis Fernando Delgado, Carmen Ortiz, “Acondicionamiento y Sellado Del Botadero de la Ciudad de Guatemala” (E-Journal, Facultad de Ingeniería, 1973), http://www.tec.url.edu.gt/boletin/url_02_amb01.pdf. 7.

ties/slums that have developed around this landfill. An anthropological perspective would include a detailed look at the daily lives, rituals, and the socio-economic standing (to name a few aspects and details of anthropology) of the people that live within the communities inside/the surrounding area of the Dump. The little perspective I can find on the people is due to local media coverage. *La Prensa Libre (The Free Press)* a national Guatemalan news paper wrote an article on life in the slums of zone 3 as a human interest story, last December (2015). A couple of other online news magazines like *La Brujula (The Compass Needle)* radio broadcasts like that of *Atmósfera* provide short articles explaining the existence and give basic context to Guatemala City's largest landfill. On twitter, a general search of "Guatemala Landfill" gets you multiple results- it appears that though zone 3 is the largest landfill, it is clearly not the only. There's a lot more bits of information from an anthropologic perspective on twitter than any scholarly source. Twitter offers better information as to how these poor communities live and interact with one another and the rest of the world than any news outlet or scholarly source. There is little information given as to how these people live in hard scholarly material and analysis, rather than just live video and photographs of those that actually live in the communities surrounding the landfill.

When browsing the capital city's municipal cite, it's very hard to find any information on this huge area of controversy. The navigation is quite tricky, but once I got to environmental issues- there was little information present with the exception of people of contact. When landing on the page for sanitation, there is a map available of different locations for solid waste. This map is incredibly hard to read, but it does state that the municipal's main deposit for waste is in zone 3, with a secondary location in zone 10.⁵ This map is the only information provided by the City of Guatemala's municipality regarding waste management. Garbage collection techniques, calendars or anything that could mirror what one might be exposed to in the United States is available.

Critical Thinking and Interdisciplinary Approaches

It's imperative to keep these facts and figures in mind, and not just accept them for the awful situations and incidents of corruption that exists in the world. Instead, the audience should think deeper as to why these issues exist. In other words, it is important to think critically of the situation rather than taking it just in a human interest aspect (though, still clearly important). Critical thinking is more than just reading information and taking the facts at face value. It involves asking questions, piecing together many different subjects, and analyzing what they have in common and how different concepts are interconnected. Timothy Morton's *The Ecological Thought* thinks critically about the environment, and how the environmental crisis is more than just climate change and recycling, and stretches beyond basic human interaction and its surroundings.⁶ The very basis of ecological thought is coexistence, and the 'mesh' that holds some kind of connection to everything. The mesh consists of what is interconnected with whom— and

⁵ Alvaro, Véliz and Frank Carrascoza. "Recolección De Basura- Departamento/Ciudad De Guatemala." Disposición De Basura, April 2009. Accessed March 2, 2016. http://infocuidad.muniguate.com/Site/13__recoleccion_basura_files/13_Recoleccion%20de%20basura.pdf.

⁶ Timothy Morton. In *The Ecological Thought*, 2-3. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) 2-3.

nothing can fully exist by itself since everything is so interrelated.⁷ To think critically of environmental justice, humans must stop removing themselves from their very environment and stop identifying as totally separate entities that are not impacted by their surroundings (their environment). By humans, I mean the intelligent beings that have the capability to do more than just exist. I call to humans that simply carry on without a care for the greater impact that they have just by existing on this planet. In my mind, humans can only be people if they are conscious of what impact their very existence has on their surroundings and actively seeks to understand why things are the way they are— and as Morton and Pope Francis have often framed it— why are they not where they should be? Identifying an outside sphere like that of “Nature” is what allows for lesser critical thinking towards environmental justice; therefore creating issues and injustices. Morton specifically capitalizes the ‘N’ in Nature to emphasize its artificial creation.⁸ Humans have adapted this artificial space of Nature as being their surroundings, and for this reason it is our belief that the unequal distribution of resources can be justified due to the kind of economy we cater to and operate on.

Interdisciplinary thought is needed when thinking about environmental justice because it encompasses all beings and things in existence— living and non-living. Interdisciplinary thought is the recognition that, like ecological thought, can apply all subjects into the mesh of interconnectivity. When thinking about individual subjects like that of waste management, for example, this has impacts on not only the animals within the afflicted area— but also the populations that rely on those animals or resources that are impacted by the presence of trash and improper disposal of waste. In Guatemala, outside of the country’s capital, landfills and improper waste management have become an enormous issues. The growth of this landfill has grown into a core component of the lives of over 1,500 people by the year 1995, and this number only continues to grow.⁹ These populations receive little to no aid from government. It is important to note that people aren’t the only beings being impacted. Wildlife, vegetation, water supplies and air quality also suffer at the expense of disposing waste of multiple municipals rather than the one municipal it is supposed to correspond to.¹⁰ Policies can then be put into place to counter phenomena or issues of this sort. The purpose of government, ideally, would be to govern these people and provide them with help to better their lives and achieve a decent living. This situation illustrates the interconnectedness of the environment with the people and all beings and things. This also encompasses law enforcement and places of power. It is important to ask questions like, who will be making these decisions? Who will benefit? Who will suffer? How do we counter these issues? Who/what stands in the way? Acknowledging that different populations and beings are the ones that benefit is just as important as the impact it would have on oppressed peoples. The answers to

⁷ Timothy Morton. In *The Ecological Thought*, 15. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) 15.

⁸ Timothy Morton. In *The Ecological Thought*, 2-3. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) 2-3.

⁹ Franklin, Kristine L., and Nancy McGirr, eds. “Out of the Dump: Writings and Photographs by Children from Guatemala”. 1st ed. HarperCollins, 1996.

¹⁰ Alvaro, Véliz and Frank Carrascoza. "Recolección De Basura- Departamento/Ciudad De Guatemala." *Disposición De Basura*, April 2009. Accessed March 2, 2016. http://infocuidad.muniguate.com/Site/13__recoleccion_basura_files/13_Recoleccion%20de%20basura.pdf.

all of these questions will stretch out to a variety of subjects, showing the clear interdisciplinary aspect that environmental justice is ultimately founded on.

Ethical Reasoning and Direct Action

Though these sanitary landfills are a clear contradiction to the following, Guatemala and its capital city have strived for a city that is clean, and can remain clean, since the 17th century. In fact, a law passed in 1836 states the following:

The head of the state of Guatemala is authorized to dictate measures that help prevent the cholera epidemic through public decrees...These orders include: 1) the cleanliness of all streets, plazas, and public spaces by getting rid of the existence of filth and garbage [...] the state will be in charge of providing sanitation through preventing harmful outbreaks of pestilence through the cleanliness of streets and public services. ¹¹

Since the earliest establishment of Guatemala as an independent state (it gained its independence September 15th, 1821), cleanliness was a priority to the government and its constituents. What is it that went wrong and led to these out of control landfills? At first everything went well with the establishment of laws against littering, but as the population saw a sharp increase (particularly in the urban areas), trash was soon being dumped just about anywhere: rivers, open ‘dumps’, sidewalks, etc. Initiatives to adapt an incinerating system in zone 7 to fully destroy garbage remains were taken, but could not be fully implemented because of costs. It wasn’t until 1953 that a department of sanitation was born under the municipal of Guatemala, and in 1960 did it see the establishment of a landfill in zone 3 by a man named Dr. Luis Fernando Galich Lopez. This landfill would be the final destination of all garbage remain for the capital city, and in time it would take on the waste from seven different municipalities. ¹² As mentioned before, this was an effective *temporary* solution for a larger and more lasting issue. Currently, there are no official proposals for environmental improvement regarding these sanitary landfills, though a couple of scholars have proposed methods of decreasing waste as a whole so that these communities may get the chance to be cleaned up and receive a better opportunity to grow.

Reactive and preventative proponents have been brought to light in the past. The preventative focus aims to educate the population overall. ¹³ This is definitely an issue, as people are not aware that even simple littering has impacts on the environment and wildlife. In order for the idea of these landfills to have some initiative to be cleaned up, this education is necessary. As I have noted in my own experience when talking to family that remains in Guatemala, basic waste management is not something that is taught in schools, like in American schools. These preventa-

¹¹ Trujillo, Leanne Rose. "A Forgotten Wasteland: The Guatemala City Garbage Dump Community." UA Library Repository. May 2012. <http://arizona.openrepository.com/arizona/handle/10150/244837>. 44.

¹² Trujillo, Leanne Rose. "A Forgotten Wasteland: The Guatemala City Garbage Dump Community." UA Library Repository. May 2012. <http://arizona.openrepository.com/arizona/handle/10150/244837>. 45.

¹³ Lourdes García, Nancy Girón, Carlos Ketelar, José Quintana, Otto Sandoval, Juan Andrés Sierra, Luis Fernando Delgado, Carmen Ortiz, “Acondicionamiento y Sellado Del Botadero de la Ciudad de Guatemala” (E-Journal, Facultad de Ingeniería, 1973), http://www.tec.url.edu.gt/boletin/url_02_amb01.pdf. 3.

tive measures have merit in solving the long term impacts of landfills because it takes knowledge on this subject to effectively prevent damage while calling attention to the issue at hand. Reactive measures are those that directly point to the landfills and call them for what they are: simple solutions to complex problems.

Effective waste management seems to be the root of landfills, but it is important to examine who specifically is impacted by these landfills— as in, who is it that lives in these squalid conditions? There is actually a term for these people, they are often referred to as *guajeros*. While examining social media, specifically places of conversation, the landfill in zone 3 and the people in it are referred to in derogatory terms. This was observed in general searches through twitter while sifting through the key terms ‘el basurero’, or the dump. As shown by the searches, these terms are held to being really derogatory and associated with politicians. These issues are held to a much deeper connection. Why is it that zone 3 specifically was chosen for the location of this landfill? And why has it been neglected for so long? I aim to answer this question by connecting it to the concept of institutional racism, the the peoples affected by this landfill and rely on it for sustenance are most typically of the ‘indigenous’ population.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we must focus on what not is present. There is a clear need for scholarship in a variety of fields regarding landfills plaguing Central America— though most specifically, I call attention to those located in Guatemala. The scholarship must evaluate proper waste management practices, the aggregation of waste that we generate as humans, the impact it has on our common home, and the people that must live in it as a result. As a future journalist, I call to the media and demand more. Being lazy is no longer an option, as good journalism should always objectively provide information while still invoking emotion so that direct action can be taken on by readers. Investigative reporting is not something of nuance, and it has often proven effective in gaining more readership... then why is it not being done? A less narrow view of the world’s issues must be given, as proper journalism does, it must give voice to the voiceless. Human interest stories can only invoke so much emotion unless cold hard facts are behind it.

In turn, scholars must do their part. An anthropological perspective on these communities is so desperately needed. In order to properly serve the very people that have been at a disservice for centuries, we must understand how they survive in these specific conditions. We must understand their culture, where they come from and what has led them to subjected to these conditions, so that effective policy and action can be taken by both the public and the government. Proper scholarship begs proper education, to curve indifference and prevent large scale environmentally racist phenomena like of the landfill communities in Guatemala. Education is a form of preventative policy. To build on this demand, more must be demanded from the government, so that problems like improper waste management and people being subjected to living in these conditions can be deterred. It is important to acknowledge indigenous peoples’ rights *as human rights*. By being indigenous, they are no less human and deserving of proper living conditions, or claims them as a separate entity just because they stay close to their original beliefs and practice a different lifestyle from the majority of the country’s population.

As a whole, all issues have proven to be interconnected in some shape or form, highlighting the significance of ecological thought. All beings, living and non living, are interconnected.

This separation between humans and their surroundings will be nothing but counterproductive, as we all serve one common planet, and in the words of Pope Francis, one common home. All people within the Land of Eternal Spring should be able to live a happy life, with proper access to education and resources for survival— to plant little gardens of their own and flourish accordingly, if you will.

Figures and Appendices



Fig.1

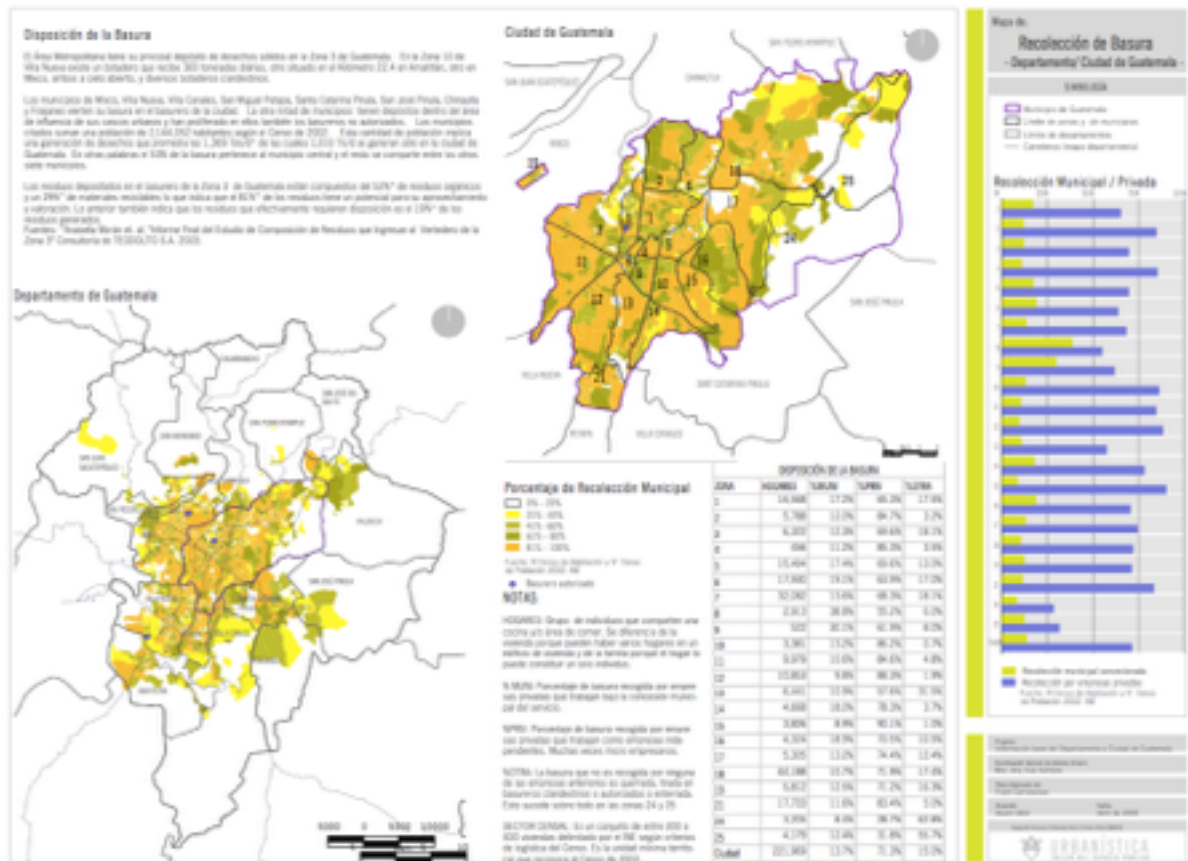


Fig. 2

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