

## **Getting Their Hands Dirty: Raccoons, Freegans, and Urban “Trash”**

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### **Abstract**

Freegans and raccoons experience social and cultural vilification within North America. Rather than separate phenomena, there is a distinct interdependence of discourses relating to humanity and animality that inform popular constructions of these human and nonhuman urban foragers. Discourses related to pests, vermin, and dirt potently combine with others about social delinquency, race, and class. Adjacently, maintenance of urban civility and garbage containment is threatened by the physical and symbolic disruption of trash, refigured by freegans and raccoons as food; Western consumption patterns and their excesses are made visible by urban foraging. Such behaviors help inspire questions not only about conventional capitalist foodways but also the problematics of green consumerism.

### **Keywords:**

Raccoons, freegans, consumption, urban foraging, animality, prejudice

### **Introduction**

During the summer of 2005, a local radio show prompted me to investigate the meaning(s) of raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) within urban landscapes. During the call-in program, listeners were invited to share their thoughts about raccoons and the implementation of Toronto’s municipal Green Bin waste management program. I was amazed by the callers’ largely vitriolic responses. Positioned as pests, raccoons were understood as enemies worthy of elimination, a so-called ‘problem’ in need of fixing. Yet, the problem was an old one: the Green Bin Program simply drew the tensions between humans and urban animals into sharper focus.

The Green Bin Program began in 2002 within the Toronto municipality of Etobicoke. By September of 2004, central Toronto residents were introduced to the Program. Initiated

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by the city's Waste Diversion Task Force, the bins were part of a three-pronged plan to eventually eliminate the exportation of 907,000 tonnes of annual garbage to Michigan (City of Toronto, 2010a).<sup>2</sup> Some might guess that such a move to concentrate organic, edible waste<sup>3</sup> would benefit non-human foragers, such as raccoons: making the disposal of organic waste municipally-regulated meant that nonhuman animals could potentially gain greater access to food, as the city-donated bins were placed curbside by residents each week.

Although the public was assured that the bins were raccoon-proof, in practice the metal latches often provided little security. The temptation proved too great for the raccoons, and the challenge of the latches too small. “[E]ven if you’re not feeding raccoons on purpose, their lives and livelihoods in our communities are often sustained by one of the City’s biggest design backfires: the green bin”, claims Clayton (2009: 51). Typical of previous encounters between urban raccoons and ‘garbage’, many people were aggravated when these night-roamers rummaged through their disposal containers, and scattered the refuse (Sadler, n.d.; Vasil, 2005; Wanagas, 2005). The nature and concentration of the waste made the resulting mess particularly potent and foul. Consequently, a year after the program launch, the “raccoon wars” (Sadler, n.d.) were raging.

To keep raccoons out of the bins, people devised several deterrence strategies, such as fastening the bin lids with bungee cords or packing tape, and applying Lysol or Vicks VapoRub to the containers. These strategies resulted in varying degrees of success. While

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<sup>2</sup> Toronto disposed of its garbage at landfill sites within the province of Ontario until the closing of the city-owned Keele Valley landfill site at the end of 2002. When the Keele Valley site closed, the city was forced to send its garbage to a Michigan landfill site, where the cost of disposal ballooned from \$12 per tonne (at the Keele Valley Site) to \$52 per tonne. In light of such numbers, The Waste Diversion Task Force's 2010 report emphasized both the economic and environmental benefits of Waste Diversion: “It’s not only about doing the right thing for the environment but also doing the wise thing for our wallets” (City of Toronto, 2010a).

<sup>3</sup> I refer to a number of different materials under the umbrella term ‘waste’. Firstly, there is non-recyclable waste, which could include certain kinds of packaging, plastics, and other inorganic material. Secondly, there is inedible recyclable waste, which includes tin, plastics, cardboard, and paper. Thirdly, there is organic waste, which is collected by the city of Toronto for the Green Bin Program. While these materials may be processed differently, conventionally they are all considered ‘waste’.

Toronto citizens embraced the Green Bin Program, with 90% participation from its inception (Sadler, n.d.), accepting raccoons' responses was clearly more difficult, as evidenced by the city-sponsored literature on raccoon-proofing (City of Toronto, 2010b). As of 2007, the City of Toronto offered a \$9 Green Bin latch lock, to "provide additional security against persistent pests like raccoons" (City of Toronto, 2010b), while the most recent *North York Region Green Bin Newsletter* (City of Toronto, 2006) advises how to "discourage four-legged creatures" from getting at the Green Bin contents.

In part, this essay considers the lives of urban raccoons—designated "trash animals"<sup>4</sup> (Humane Society of the United States, 2009) by some—in order to investigate the negative cultural responses to these frequently maligned creatures. For example, as one irate Torontoist commenter wrote in response to an article about raccoon control, "The best raccoon is one squashed and flattened on the road. I do a little giggle of glee every time I see one dead by the road in the city. Hell, if I had a car, i'd [sic] go trolling for them at night!" (Snailspace quoted in Metzger, 2006). I write the following piece from within Toronto, the so-called "raccoon capital of the world" (Woloshyn, 2011),<sup>5</sup> inspired by the belief that raccoons are part of a shared cityscape; they also lay fair claim to this place.

How might we make sense of the vitriol heaped upon raccoons? I suggest it is useful to contextualize such hatred within a larger discursive framework, wherein anger directed at raccoons is understood within a broader cultural network of prejudice and fear related to

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'trash animal' has a number of contemporary usages. For example, the term is sometimes used to define an animal from a non-targeted and/or 'nongame' wildlife species who is caught through trapping (Humane Society of the United States, 2009), fishing, etc. In relation, 'trash animals' can refer to abundant animals who some people consider worthless and/or vermin, as opposed to desirable game animals. Wolch, Brownlow, and Lassiter point to this latter usage in their summary of Marks' study of hunting culture in rural North Carolina: "so-called 'trash' animals have long been a default form of protein for many local African Americans due to the sequestration of 'legitimate' game animals (e.g., deer, partridge, quail, etc.) by local, often wealthy, white hunting clubs. Animals like opossum, 'coon', and squirrel are generally considered vermin by the dominant Euro-American ideology, more often recognized as roadkill than as something prepared for dinner" (2000, p.79)

<sup>5</sup> There are approximately 14,000 raccoons in Toronto, with an average of ten to twenty per square kilometre, according to Ministry of Natural Resources' scientist Dr. Rosatte (Clayton, 2009).

ideas about humanity and animality that impact humans and nonhumans alike. Consequently, in this essay I address a number of major parallels between raccoons and another commonly disparaged group: freegans<sup>6</sup>. I elucidate how both groups threaten dominant urban consumption patterns and, in relation, explore their cultural vilification. I take up two major lines of inquiry: examining the sometimes-tenuous relationship between humans and raccoons within urban environments, while also exploring urban foraging, in the form of ‘freeganism’, as a political praxis. While I am particularly interested in elucidating the negativity leveraged against raccoons and freegans, I also hope to demonstrate how both groups act as mirror for Western society, reflecting back a complex set of beliefs about ourselves and (human and nonhuman) Others (see also, Arluke and Saunders, 1996).

I draw upon the perspectives of both scholars and freegan activists, as well as commentary from contemporary popular media in Canada and the United States. I primarily employ discourse analysis as a means of paying attention to the ways in which raccoons and freegans are culturally figured. While various academics eloquently write about urban, nonhuman animals (e.g., Griffiths, Poulter, Sibley, 2000; Sabloff, 2001) and freegans (e.g., Gross, 2009; Shantz, 2005), to date none place the two groups in conversation and explore the similarity between their practices and larger cultural responses. Alternatively, as shown below, some freegans offer expressions of solidarity with nonhuman, urban foragers. In contrast, some popular critics also highlight overlaps between freegans and raccoons, but such comparisons are frequently offered as insults. These comparisons take on the usual tone of vilification, as suggestions of freegans’ supposed animalistic debasement and relinquishment of humanity: “To suggest that someone or some group has behaved like an

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<sup>6</sup>The Freegan.info website gives the following definition: “The word freegan is compounded from ‘free’ and ‘vegan’. Vegans are people who avoid products from animal sources or products tested on animals in an effort to avoid harming animals. Freegans take this a step further by recognizing 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.”

animal (or wild beast) is to accuse them of plumbing the very depths of moral degradation: no description could be more damning”, argues Neal (Quoted in Baker, 2001: 89). Yet despite their similarities in behavior or cultural rendering, there are also multiple and important ways that raccoons and freegans differ (such as how they are ultimately valued within an anthropocentric and speciesist human culture and the kinds of recourse they have when harmed). Certainly their own self-understandings are heterogeneous and particular, as are the disparate responses to them. I acknowledge that the complexity of these groups is not fully represented here, and I encourage further critical analysis.

Often considered dirty, disruptive, and conniving freeloaders, either as natural pests or social delinquents respectively, raccoons and freegans continue to pick their way through Western society, valuing what others deem valueless. Waste transforms into food, affluence transforms into excess, and ‘necessary purchases’ transform into choices. The presence of raccoons and freegans uncomfortably reveals ideas such as civility, urban progress and economic inevitability as interrelated constructions, rather than natural realities. Historically-informed prejudice is marshalled to stymie raccoons’ and freegans’ disruptive force, while the negation of one group is leveraged in the disavowal of the other. Below I suggest some of the specific ways in which ‘race’, class, and capitalism inform these processes.

### **Freeganism: A Challenge To Consumerism**

A billboard in Toronto shows the smiling face of renowned Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki basking in the warm glow of a compact fluorescent light bulb (CFL). The spiralled glass hovers magically above his palm. “You have the power”, declares the corresponding slogan. Of course, the image makes a kind of crisp, cultural sense. David Suzuki, arguably Canada’s most iconic environmentalist, is paired with a CFL,

arguably Canada's most iconic environmental product. As public consciousness (and fear) grows about the perils of global warming, governments, activists, and corporations simultaneously encourage people to act through their consumption choices, including those as simple as buying different light bulbs. As Tarrant argues, the image of a radiating light bulb is a particularly powerful symbol:

Sight, and its object light, appear to be universal metaphors in human language, both for intellectual apprehension or activity and its objects and also for the experience of aesthetic and moral values. The figure is applied equally to the course or end of a rational approach to knowledge, giving scarcely-felt imagery like 'I see', 'look into', etc., or to a pictorially described 'illumination' or 'vision' that lies beyond the range of reason. Some phrases are applicable to both senses; to 'see the light' may connote either logical grasp of a fact or religious conversion (1960: 181).

Suzuki and his light bulb tap into a network of positive metaphors that resonate within a larger rubric of ideas about morality and knowledge.

The light bulb image is, culturally speaking, an easier 'sell' than many of the images currently associated with freegans or freeganism: buying environmental products fits more comfortably within Western capitalism than recovering products that are deemed no longer profitable. Environmentalism, contends Sociology professor Torres, "is becoming this issue of, consume the right set of green goods and you're green" (Quoted in Kurutz, 2007) despite the resource-consumption required to produce and distribute those goods. Green consumerism today offers a vision of plenitude that is much easier for many North Americans to accept than the possibility of consuming something that came from a dumpster.

In this context, freeganism appears to be an expression of scarcity and denial, rock-bottom scrounging that is similar to the survival practices of people who are poverty-stricken and homeless. The movement, which began in the mid-1990s and grew out of the anti-globalization and environmental causes, focuses on resistance to production systems that commodify food (Gross, 2009). Freegans are people who voluntarily reclaim the refuse of consumer culture as a stance against capitalism and excess consumption (Freegan.info, 2008).

They employ many tactics<sup>7</sup> to put their political beliefs into practice, including (but not limited to) waste reclamation, waste reduction, squatting, hitchhiking, and voluntary joblessness (Freegan.info, 2008).<sup>8</sup> “Simply put: freegans seek to prevent waste by reclaiming, recovering and repairing available resources rather than generate new profit”, states freegan advocate Adam Weissman (Quoted in Adams Matthews, 2006).<sup>9</sup>

In the mainstream press, freegans are described as dressing in “castoff clothes” and standing “knee deep” in trash bins (Kurutz, 2007). Consider, too, the revelation of one reporter who felt compelled to note the partially-trimmed lamp in one freegan’s home: upon the journalist’s detailed inspection, even though the “bright and airy prewar apartment [that] Ms. Nelson shares with two cats doesn’t look like the home of someone who spends her evenings rooting through the garbage”, her home is revealed as a kind of ruse. The reporter eventually spots “an old lampshade in the living room [that] has been trimmed with fabric to cover its fraying parts, leaving a one-inch gap where the material ran out” (Kurutz, 2007). The performance of a middle-class aesthetic literally falls short. Similarly, in her article, “Free-lunch foragers”, reporter Hayasaki writes, “Freegans troll curbsides for discarded clothes and ratty [sic] or broken furniture... They trade goods at flea markets. Some live as squatters in abandoned buildings, or in low-rent apartments on the edges of the city, or with family and friends” (2007).

Taken out of context—context that includes the voluntary nature of freeganism—such actions may appear to be descriptions of destitution. Yet freegans themselves offer a

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<sup>7</sup> Elaboration on freegans’ tactics can be found at [www.freegan.info](http://www.freegan.info).

<sup>8</sup> Obviously, there are people who are homeless and poor who engage in ‘waste reclamation’ or other such ‘freegan’ activities without any political motivation. Likewise, there may be those for whom urban foraging is a necessity, but who also see it as a political act, though they may be unacquainted with the term ‘freegan’. For the purposes of this paper, I consider freegans to be those who explicitly identify themselves as such.

<sup>9</sup> I largely focus on dumpster-diving, as opposed to other common freegan activities (such as wild foraging), because this practice takes a similar form to the garbage rummaging of raccoons. These represent major points of overlap in behaviours between raccoons and freegans, and they inspire comparable revulsion in outsiders.

different rhetoric, one that finds reclamation a “thrill” (Bone, 2005), especially in the case of a “good find” (Hayasaki, 2007) where fridges are packed with tasty edibles (Bone, 2005), and the realization that one can live without new goods seems to be a source of happiness and empowerment rather than hardship. For example, *Globe and Mail* reporter Gearey describes one freegan as “quick to show off two jars of unopened honey<sup>10</sup> he found in the trash, his blueberry eyes sparkling with pride” (2007: F6). Positioning freeganism within a broader movement of DIY (Do It Yourself) anarchist politics, Shantz writes, “In place of the ‘purchasing of pleasure’ anarchists assert the ‘arming of desire’ to create their own pleasures”

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10 Many vegans would consider honey an animal product, and thus would not consume it. While Freegan.info (2008a) maintains that freegan is a portmanteau of ‘vegan’ and ‘freegan’, and an attempt to extend the politics of veganism further, freeganism does not necessarily imply veganism. According to Freegan.info (2008b), the term ‘freegan’ is also a critique of veganism, when the latter is practiced in ways that do not resist all forms of capitalist-driven exploitation, such as contemporary slave labour cocoa production. This position is presented within what is arguably the original freegan manifesto, “Why Freegan?” (Freegan.info, 2008c; originally published in 2000), assumed to be written and popularized by U.S. American musician Warren Oakes. In his article, Oakes names veganism as a “good first step” (2008c) but questions vegans’ support of corporations that sell products free of animal products. He writes, “I couldn’t get behind any aspect of the corporate death consumer machine so I decided to boycott everything” (Freegan.info, 2008c).

Unsurprisingly, debates between freegans and vegans have been heated at times. For example, there has been some confusion between freeganism as a sustained political critique and practice, and a more casual consumption of free animal products (e.g., eating a hamburger at a friend’s barbeque) (Freegan.info, 2008b). However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to address the intricacies of the ‘freegan versus vegan’ discussions. Notably, though, well-known freegans such as Adam Weissman are both dedicated vegans and freegans. Freeganism and veganism are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For an interesting sample of online discussions regarding the potential differences in diet, lifestyle, and underlying arguments between freeganism and veganism, see Kwan (2007), Southan (2010), The Post Punk Kitchen forum thread “Freeganism, could it be more ethical than veganism?” (2010). Dylan Powell, founder of The Vegan Police podcast and website, succinctly argues against freegan consumption of animal products in blog posts, “Species Privilege and Dumpster Diving” and “Species Privilege and Dumpster Diving...Reply 2” (2011a, 2011b). He asks, “Would you eat the corpse of another human being? Of course not. But why?” (2011a). ...

(cont) In his later reply, he retorts, “I reject opening a dumpster and seeing animal products and plants [sic] products as being on the same ethical playing field and reject the notion that commodification happens at the ‘point of purchase’ instead of something which happens to a non human animal throughout it’s [sic] entire life” (2011b). Freegans tend to focus on retraction of their ‘votes’ from corporate consumerism through a withdrawal of their purchasing dollars. “To a freegan,” argues Freegan.info, “anything we buy is morally suspect, and recovering things without driving demand for further production of these commodities with our dollars is a moral imperative” (2008b). I share Powell’s position, however, and do not personally support the consumption of animal products (free or otherwise) except in cases of true necessity. While some freegans would consider a refusal to eat dumpstered animal products as also wasteful, I ethically could not stomach eating the flesh or secretions of someone who had been regarded as property, tortured, and killed. The freegan butchering and consumption of ‘roadkill’ provides another layer to the debate about free meat, as suggested by Gross (2009). Animals who have been hit and killed by cars, including raccoons, are preferred over discarded factory-farmed meat that might be laced with hormones and antibiotics. “Freegan blogs talk about eating roadkill as having more political advantages than other forms of anti-capitalist food gathering. Unlike dumpster diving, it is entirely free of capitalist trappings, they say”, observes Gross (2009: 72). Additionally, wild game and leftover trophy hunt carcasses are part of some freegans’ diets (Gross, 2009).

(2005: 10). Gross (2009) similarly finds that her freegan interviewees intentionally cultivate alternative forms of pleasure. “They talked about the pleasure of getting food for nothing and sharing it with other people”, offers Gross (2009: 71). “Often with the dumpstering crowd, one person might have one ingredient and someone else might have another and they’ll either combine food to make a meal or trade food if they’re going separate ways”, she adds (Gross, 2009: 72).

Similar to raccoons who face disdain and revulsion within the urban environment, freegans struggle against stigmas (Hayasaki, 2007)<sup>11</sup> attached to the reclamation of discarded goods (especially food); they also challenge various prejudices regarding the contexts and practices involved in reclamation. For instance, like raccoons, freegans often forage late at night or early in the morning (Gearey, 2007), and by definition, collect things “without paying a cent” (Hayasaki, 2007). Not only do ‘trash’ and ‘garbage’ have their own negative (human) cultural connotations, but dumpsters and the people – so-called ‘trash pickers’ – who frequent them also carry their own stigmas. These layered aspects combine to connote criminality, or at minimum, desperation. As one editor of AskMen.com, a free men’s magazine, bluntly muses, “It’s no secret that ours is a rather consumerist culture, and that our planet could use some environmental loving. But is reducing ourselves to homeless, jobless, trash-eating bums really a worthwhile movement?” (2007). Similarly-toned comments poured in, including the following:

You know, I’m sure these people have the best of intentions, but they’re lunatics. It’s disgusting to eat from dumpsters. That’s just not sanitary or healthy. And this jobless thing? Can you get any lazier? What do you do with your life when you don’t have a job to do? (2007)

The anti-capitalist stance of freeganism is interpreted by some critics as a matter of sheer laziness or as a simple distaste for work.

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<sup>11</sup> For example in Hayasaki’s article, Deirdre Rennert refused to name her place of employment because of the stigma associated with eating food from dumpsters.

The fact that many freegans are middle-class, employed, or voluntarily unemployed (Bone, 2005; Kurutz, 2007; Hayasaki, 2007) is juxtaposed against cultural ideas about the urban poor, those who have long been associated with garbage consumption as a means of survival (Adams Matthews, 2006). Disparaging naysayers have dubbed freegans “free-loaders” (The Summa Mommas, 2007; Van Horn, 2006) while witty article titles such as “free-lunch foragers” (Hayasaki, 2007) imply a certain level of moral, if tongue-in-cheek, disapproval. *New York Times* reporter Kurutz, for example, points to Weissman’s “considerable free time” and is quick to note that Weissman “doesn’t work and lives at home in Teaneck, N.J. with his father and elderly grandparents” (2007). (The Kurutz article fails to mention that Weissman, according to Ramsay [2007], would likely choose to be a squatter if it were not for the fact that he lives with and takes care of his grandparents.)

Yet those within the movement, such as Weissman, mention the extra time afforded by their lifestyles as a promotional aspect: “I have pity for people who have not figured out this lifestyle. I am able to take long vacations from work, I have all kinds of consumer goods, and I eat a really healthy diet of really wonderful food” (Quoted in Bone, 2005). Similarly, Weissman argues, “[Freeganism] is motivated not by ‘laziness,’ but by a desire to devote time to community service, activism, caring for family, etc.” (Quoted in Adams Matthews, 2006). Still, besides children, volunteer care providers, and those unable to be employed, the societal expectation remains that people ought to have paying jobs and thus be so-called ‘productive members of society’, even if that means producing something environmentally or socially damaging. The notion that urban scavenging could be an ecologically efficient behaviour, or grounded in an environmental ethic, is lost in such an analysis. As Gerard Daechsel, who has dumpster-dived for five decades, laments, “When people see me rescuing things, they offer me money and I say, ‘No thanks, I’m doing this for the environment’.

Sometimes they just stuff [money] in my coat pocket and run off anyways – they don't understand” (Quoted in Gearey, 2007: F6).

The dumpster-diving of freegans exposes Western consumption patterns largely as choices rather than inevitabilities. The consumption of ‘trash’ or ‘waste’ helps spur questions about the underlying causes of poverty and resource plundering. Co-founders of Food Not Bombs,<sup>12</sup> Lawrence and McHenry, contend that in the United States alone, “every day in every city, far more food is discarded than is needed to feed those who do not have enough to eat” (1992: 1).<sup>13</sup> According to Freegan.info, the network “puts freeganism into action. By using food that would otherwise be wasted, Food Not Bombs reinforces its message, challenging a society that allows vital resources to be wasted rather than ensuring that the needs of all are met” (2008).

Food reclamation and distribution has a much longer history than Food Not Bombs or freeganism, though. For example, the Old Testament stipulates that crop surplus should be reserved for those in need and that ‘gleaners’ continue to harvest leftovers from farmers’ fields and other sources (Baker, 2006). Taking this history into account, the apparently radical actions of Food Not Bombs and sharing freegans are simply extensions of some already deep-seated traditions (Dowdey, 2007). I recognize, however, that food reclamation is not exclusively a human activity, and that freegans may trace their history back to non-human roots. In the following section, I seek to situate the previous critiques of freegans and raccoons within a broader (human, Western, dominant) cultural milieu, gesturing toward the depth and breadth of the discourses that mark both groups as beyond acceptable to ‘civil society’. The activities of both groups threaten the very maintenance of the culture/nature

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<sup>12</sup> Food Not Bombs is an international network of autonomous collectives that reclaim, prepare, and distribute food for free.

<sup>13</sup> Though Butler and McHenry’s statement may seem to be hyperbole, current food waste statistics in the US paint a fairly bleak picture. For a brief, recent overview see “Half of US Food Goes to Waste”, Foodproductiondaily.com, <http://www.foodproductiondaily.com/Supply-Chain/Half-of-US-food-goes-to-waste>.

boundary, a key organizing principle of Western modernism and one of ontological and moral implication (Sabloff, 2001). In his excellent examination of the cultural maligning of urban pigeons, following Birke (2003) and Douglas (1984), Jerolmack (2008: 14) reminds us, “We live in an era that celebrates ‘medical triumph and the conquest of disease’ and nature as a cornerstone of modernity; dirt and other ‘pollutants’ [within the city] threaten that vision”.

### **Purity and Danger**

In her classic text, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Douglas argues that “contemporary European ideas of defilement” are not simply a matter of hygiene nor aesthetics (1984: 35). According to Douglas, they are grounded in symbolism:

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systemic order 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 (1984: 35).

Notably, the demarcation of certain classes and races as dirty or filthy has helped perpetuate classist, racist, and imperialist ideologies. For example, as McClintock demonstrates in her discussion of soap, ideas about cleanliness and purity served a symbolic role in the justification of British imperialism. Such notions served as a key means of constructing certain people and values as degenerative:

The emergent middle class values—monogamy (“clean” sex, which has value), industrial capital (“clean” money, which has value), Christianity (“being washed in the blood of the lamb”), and class control (“cleansing the great unwashed”), and the imperial civilizing mission (“washing and clothing the savage”)—could all be marvellously embodied in a single household commodity (1995: 208).

Notions of dirt and filth have not only fuelled racist ideology but have also combined with notions of ‘the animal’ and animality to create a powerful set of mutually reinforcing and negated categories. Within Western culture, animality is typically aligned with ideas about what is unclean, in- or sub-human, and uncivilized. As cultural geographer Anderson argues, animality serves as a key dynamic in the construction of sociospatial difference and hierarchy (2000: 302).

The co-mingling of ‘dirt’ and ‘animality’ within racist discourses is clearly highlighted through the figure of the pest. Describing the historical racialization of vermin, Patell insists, “The outcast group is often described in the very same language used to describe biological pests: unclean, exploitative, opportunistic, etc.” (1996: 63-64). Racists often appropriate the figure of the pest in an attempt to legitimate their attitudes by grounding their rhetoric within the natural world (Patell, 1996: 63-64).

One has to look no further than the racial slur, ‘coon’, or its variant ‘dirty coon’, to find evidence of Patell’s argument. According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, ‘coon’, meaning a ‘negro’ or ‘fellow’, is aphetic of ‘raccoon’. “The coon caricature is one of the most insulting of all anti-Black caricatures. The name itself, an abbreviation of raccoon, is dehumanizing”, states sociologist Pilgrim (2000). (Alternatively, other scholars, such African American Studies professor Adams, suggest that that racial epithet stems from the Portuguese word ‘barracoon’. “The word ‘barracoon’ translates into English as the word barrack, barrier, something that holds you back” [Quoted in Riggins, 2006], asserts Adams.<sup>14</sup>) Brown Lavitt contends, drawing on Roediger, that ‘coon’ transitioned from an insult directed at working class whites in the early 1800s to a racial

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<sup>14</sup> Some sources indicate that ‘coon’ stems from the Spanish word ‘barracoon’, from ‘barracón’, meaning an enclosure used to temporarily confine convicts or slaves [see <http://m-w.com/dictionary/barracoon>].

epithet for Blacks by 1948, gaining force by the 1880s and '90s "as white anxieties flared in the face of rising unemployment, swelling immigration, and economic depression" (1999: 256).

The racist use of the term 'coon hunting', a reference to targeted attacks against Black people, strongly invokes animality. For example, historian Davis recounts his youth during the Jim Crow era:

Once, when a black family moved into our working-class neighborhood, I remember us white kids riding our bicycles the three or four blocks to their house just to get a look. We'd heard that some older kids had tossed sacks of dog poop at the nicely painted white house. I remember my father bemoaning the likes of them "invading" our neighborhood. I also remember that, a few years later, some of my teenage friends would go "coon hunting" on Friday nights, which meant driving into black neighborhoods and tossing bottles or sacks of garbage at elderly blacks walking alone on the streets. It just was something working-class white boys did in Kansas City in the 1950s (n.d.).<sup>15</sup>

Given the bloody and violent history associated with the transference of animal names onto humans, "calling people animals is always an ominous sign because it sets them up for humiliation, exploitation, and murder" (Patterson, 2002: 28). The Nazi depiction of Jewish people as rats serves as an illustrative and salient example of this phenomenon (Patterson, 2002).

According to Dion and Rockman, editors of *Concrete Jungle: A Pop Media Investigation of Death and Survival in Urban Ecosystems*, pests prompt a specific kind of anxiety, as they remind us that we are part of a larger, interconnected ecological reality (1996). Concomitantly, this "dangerous class of animals" points to our inability to control nature and its various dynamic interactions (Dion and Rockman, 1996: 8). Pests threaten us both literally and figuratively. They are a part of nature that we would prefer to cast away or

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<sup>15</sup> A contemporary example of the racist use of 'coon' can be found at <http://niggermania.org/coonhunter/>. The site claims to feature 'Nigger Videos' by 'Coon-Hunting Inc'.

annihilate, at times for practical “legitimate scientific” reasons, such as their capacity to act as disease vectors or their destruction of biodiversity (Patell, 1996: 62). They represent decay, contamination, and a challenge to order (Dion and Rockman, 1996), reminding us, too, of our own deaths. “In the same way that advanced urban society refuses to acknowledge shit, distances itself from food production, and denies the process of aging”, state Dion and Rockman, “these animals remind us that we too are animals, and therefore, mortal” (1996: 9). In this way, ‘pests’ such as raccoons speak to both an external and internal threat, ultimately indivisible from understandings of what it means to be human at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in North America (Patell, 1996). Notably, the definition of ‘pest’ varies from time and place, culture to culture; for example, “what is a pest for one culture may be a delicacy for another” (Patell, 1996: 63).

### **Urban Foraging: Capitalism’s Underbelly**

Raccoons and freegans disrupt and reroute state-regulated and socially-sanctioned food pathways, which includes purchasing food at grocery stores, consuming it in the home<sup>16</sup> or other designated area, placing waste within the appropriate receptacle (recycling, garbage, or compost), and depositing it in a city-approved container. These materials are then to be retrieved and streamlined into various waste management facilities.

Raccoons and freegans, who do not pay for food or patronize stores, subvert each step of that conventional process. Through their consumption, they also shift the category ‘food’ back onto products that were previously labeled ‘trash’ and ‘garbage’ (or ‘compost’) and

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<sup>16</sup> Or, in the case of other urban wildlife, food is also foraged but the foraging does not necessarily infringe on human proprietorship, as it sometimes does with raccoons. For example, squirrels are also urban foragers but they are not as readily perceived as a pseudo-criminal menace, ‘stealing’ from people’s garbage and littering the area.

thrown away. Thus, I propose that these groups transgress both capitalism and a cultural taboo. They transgress capitalism (a kind of cultural taboo action itself) because they benefit from, but do not purchase, materials produced by the economic system.<sup>17</sup> As Shantz contends,

Advanced capitalist societies are organized around surplus value or valorization for capital. That IS one reason why perfectly useable goods will be discarded rather than given away. Surplus value simply cannot be realized if free alternatives are readily available. Against surplus value, freegans pursue what some heterodox Marxists call “self-valorization.” This is the pursuit of productive and distributive activities that are based on the realization of human need whether material, emotional or ideational (2005: 10).

Freegans and raccoons also transgress a cultural taboo, because they both touch and consume ‘trash’. Furthermore, raccoons not only eat ‘trash’; they also often overturn garbage cans, scatter the contents, and leave large messes in their wake. (Notably, raccoons keep themselves quite clean. Clayton remarks, for example, “While they are the ultimate dumpster divers, they’re also fastidious about washing” [2009: 51].) Subsequently, through their actions, raccoons interrupt the waste containment and management systems that serve both a literal and symbolic purpose within urban environments.

Raccoons symbolically challenge the definition of ‘trash’ by treating it as food, and they literally displace ‘waste’ through their foraging. In other words, within the dominant classification system, raccoons do something regarded as dirty (i.e., digging through ‘trash’ and consuming pieces), while they also contribute to dirt through the displacement of previously contained ‘trash’. Unlike companion animals, who may be willingly offered table scraps within the home, raccoons are frequently understood as ‘stealing’ similar scraps from the trash (Whitetail Deer Management and Hunting, n.d.). Their distinct mask-like facial markings further prompt their common categorization as ‘thieves’ and ‘bandits’ (Holmgren, 1990), names which clearly carry normative weight: such metaphorical condemnation draws

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<sup>17</sup> Of course, raccoons who take food from people’s gardens are also commonly met with disdain.

its strength from a comparison with human beings who steal property and break the law, and these individuals are understood as morally corrupt and worthy of punishment. In capitalist contexts, they have broken both a cultural and economic taboo.

Like raccoons, freegans also consume the waste of Western culture, although the intentions behind the behaviour of both groups vary. Though freegans are also sometimes called thieves, unlike their nonhuman foraging cohort, they potentially face prosecution for theft (Hibbert, 2011).<sup>18</sup> Freegans, perhaps because they are human, tend to inspire a unique type of public disgust, as they also disregard the traditional classification systems regarding waste and dirt, and therefore throw the system into question. They appear contaminated or debased by such practices, as if they have somehow revoked their humanity (Essig, 2002).

Freegans rummage near and sometimes in trash bins, like other foraging animals in cities. To some, the behaviour of freegans seems inhuman or animalistic: “To eat ‘trash’ is to go against our cultural consciousness... To consume the abject trash is to risk contamination and status as a fully civil human being”, maintains Essig (2002). Consider, for example, the commentary from the *Times Online*: “Freegans often go ‘dumpster diving’ in packs, delving into skips at supermarkets and restaurants” (Bone, 2005). His choice of the word ‘packs’, as opposed to ‘groups’, gestures toward animality. Further, ‘foraging’ is a name commonly associated with non-human animals, such as raccoons and bears; freegans themselves refer to dumpster-diving as urban foraging (Freegan.info, 2008) or urban scavenging (Weissman, 2006), again evoking terms that are commonly associated with non-human animals. As one blogger coarsely states, “Rats go through people’s rubbish so Freegans are like rats except

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18 The risks are even greater for raccoons. Although they do not face criminal prosecution, raccoons in cities have been poisoned, beaten, and intentionally killed. For example, baby raccoons were recently beaten (and (cont) some killed) with a shovel by a Toronto man as the kits’ mother attempted to rescue them. “It’s believed the man was frustrated with the damage raccoons were causing in his garden”, reports the CBC News (2011). In another instance, raccoons in a Toronto park were poisoned to death. One was posed to appear as if holding flowers. Another was placed alongside a squirrel (CBC News, 2008).

much worse because they're also like tramps and bag-ladies and rats aren't like that. I suspect Freegans carry more diseases than rats too" (Twenty Major, 2006). Yet for freegans, the comparison to foraging animals does not necessarily carry such presupposed negativity. For example, the "Urban Foraging" page on [Freegan.info](http://Freegan.info) includes the link "Dumpster Diving Bear!", about a bear who toppled over a large dumpster. Association with non-human foragers, at least in some instances, appears welcomed.

Freegans are not a homogenous group, however, despite discourses that either collectively condemn or celebrate them. While it may be reasonable to suggest that raccoons and freegans may share some affinities (either through shared practices or discursive rendering), the particularities of individual freegans' experiences are also informed by historical and contemporary oppression, such as racism and misogyny. For instance, the racist slur 'Africoon' still circulates today, as does the epithet 'coontang', which refers to Black women (Taylor, 2008). (I assume 'coontang' is a variant of 'poontang', a sexist term which refers to "sexual intercourse with a woman" or a "woman regarded as a sexual object" [Dictionary.com].) Extending my argument, some might suggest that freegans should recognize raccoons as allies as part of a multi-dimensional stance against racism, sexism, classism and speciesism, yet given the gruesome past and contemporary deployment of such vicious and intentionally degrading terms such as 'Africoon', reluctance or outright rejection of such associations is certainly understandable.

Drake, a contributor to the Vegans of Color blog and student at Vassar College, directly points to some of the racial politics surrounding freeganism in the United States. In one post, he describes how senior students discarded food during their apartment exodus at the end of the semester. Drake and friends—"broke students who [were] working on campus during the summer" (2009)—salvaged some of it from dumpsters. In his blog post he identifies himself as a freegan of colour, and asks where the others are. He then reflects on

some salient differences between his experience as a Black male dumpster-diver and that of his white companions:

Freeganism is a largely white middle-class movement (that seems to forget that poor folks have been eating garbage forever). And when I'm dumpster-diving I seem to have a few more issues to deal with, as a Black male, than my white comrades. They aren't nearly as afraid of the police (or security), or threats of calling the police (or security), nor do they get harassed by law enforcement while diving to the degree that I do. I got harassed by security several times while diving on my own campus, until my white friends pop their heads out of the dumpsters. I'm also extremely embarrassed for people to see me diving, because I can tell that I'm not just me, I'm also a representation of Black people in general (Drake, 2009).

Drake raises crucial questions about freegans as an unmarked group, whose praxis by white activists in the United States is facilitated through racial privilege, despite whatever anti-racist views they may hold. Specifically, freegans, by the voluntary nature of their activities, can choose not to participate in dumpster-diving or other stigmatized behaviors. The ability to 'step out' of discrimination clearly indicates a huge difference between the stigmatization experienced by white freegans, for example, and other persistent and inescapable forms of oppression. The texture of stigmatization resulting from freeganism is influenced by one's social location. Following Drake, Weitzenfeld summarizes these observations well:

A white freegan need not worry about being a token representation of his or her people during dumpster diving, but a person of color does because 1) they are most often a racial minority, 2) they are already popularly depicted as poor and dirty, and 3) they are marked as people of color in contrast to "whites" whose race is most often invisible (to other white people that is).

Weitzenfeld also argues that freeganism can signal not only an enactment of racial privilege but also class privilege. Middle-class freegans have a safety net of financial security when faced with a disappointing dumpster-dive (Weitzenfeld, 2009). Similarly, those without class privileges (in the present or past) may understandably be reluctant to participate in activities that (further) mark or shame them as poor. In relation, 'race' and class intermingle with

geography, factoring into the types of goods available, including one's access to neighbourhoods where activities like dumpster-diving reap greater or lesser rewards.

As suggested above, arguments regarding shared affinities between raccoons and freegans are especially charged when one considers the specific linkages between raccoons and Black histories in the United States. The cultural contexts for Black people whose histories are intermingled with the racist practice of 'coon-hunting' and demeaning terms such as 'coon', 'Africoon', and 'coontang' necessarily complicate efforts to resist shared forms of stigmatization and negative material consequences meted upon freegans and raccoons.

Raccoons belong to a broader category of 'wild animals', which is also inflected with racist discourse. Consider, for example, two abhorrent so-called Ku Klux Klan 'joke' websites, which endlessly reinforce the animalization of Black people by labelling them as "wild creatures" and apes. On both the NJ (Nigger Jokes) and NJKKK (Nigger Jokes KKK) websites analyzed by Billig, the same definition of 'nigger' is included:

An African jungle anthropoid ape of the primate family pongidae (superficially cercopithecoidae). Imported to the United States as slave labor in the last 1700's – 1800's, these wild creatures now roam freely while destroying the economic and social infrastructure of American and other nations. These flamboyant sub-human love to consume large amounts of greasy fried chicken (2001: 276).

Billig notes the pseudo-biology of the passage and how the "ultimate word of racist hate not only expresses dehumanization but also, in the context of these joke pages, signifies dehumanization" (2001: .278). Under the guise of a 'joke', the naturalizing discourse situates Black people within a false and biologically-essentialist paradigm. The racist (and speciesist) comparison of Black people to nonhuman apes and other nonhuman animals is well documented within Billig's article and elsewhere (e.g., Goff et al, 2008; Jordan, 1974; Sorenson, 2009). The websites' description of "these *wild* creatures [who] now roam freely" (emphasis added, 2001: 276), while wreaking havoc is meant to connote images of wild

nonhuman animals who are loathed for, and partially defined by, their seemingly wanton destruction. The marking out of the wild animal Other helps coalesce one's identity as a fully human subject (e.g., civil, white) (see Oliver, 2009).

So while it is clear that there is cultural disdain heaped upon freegans, and that such disdain overlaps with and mutually reinforces negative discourses about urban raccoons, freegans are, of course, also enmeshed within a larger social fabric of racism, cissexism, classism, etc., that impacts their individual experiences. In other words, whatever the similarities between how raccoons and freegans are perceived, one's experience as a freegan will be specific to how she or he is racialized, gendered, and so on. People positioned as 'Other' may reasonably avoid engaging in freeganism, given historical legacies of oppression. Oppressed peoples who participate will likely experience greater risks and consequences than those who are not similarly positioned. The particular genocidal, colonialist, and racist histories of the U.S. and Canada that have figured certain groups as animalistic and dirty throw this point into sharp relief.

Freeganism, through such practices as dumpster-diving, paradoxically offers both a disruption and potential reinforcement of privilege. This is especially interesting in light of the "Why Freegan?" manifesto, which in a subsection entitled "Privilege", explicitly encourages self-reflection and sacrifice of some of one's privilege:

We, in America, have so much and so many people all over the world have so little. Why do we have more? Because we're number one! Other folks are literally starving so that we can have fully-stocked shelves at our supermarkets and health food stores. If this concerns you (as it should) you can protest the unbalanced distribution in America and the world by sacrificing some of your privilege and feeding yourself off of the ridiculous excess of food instead of consuming products from that supermarket shelves we are so unjustly privileged to have access to (2008c).

Such passages directly point to national and global inequities that freeganism seeks to resist. These words are a rallying cry for social justice via a withdrawal of one's financial support from the "corporate death consumer machine" (2008c). By boycotting consumerism, one is

also seen as boycotting privilege. While this certainly may be true, it is unfortunately not that simple either, as indicated above.

As I have attempted to show, freegans are not a unitary group. They are individuals variously located within and through social dynamics, and whatever stigmatization they may encounter cannot be divorced from greater social contexts. Such an assertion will likely seem obvious to those who already appreciate the ways in which people can be positioned simultaneously as both oppressor and oppressed, for example. Recognition of these axes must come to bear in political analyses of freegans and freeganism.

What is perhaps less readily apparent is that raccoons are also individuals, and though they are not subject to identical forms of social construction as people, the category ‘raccoon’ cannot adequately represent the diversity of experience and individuality of its members. Additionally, while many are willing to forcefully refute biologically-essentialist accounts of human groups, these interpretations remain grossly unchallenged in regard to nonhuman animals (Noske, 1997; Sabloff, 2001). Biological and genetic reductionism of nonhuman life is still overwhelmingly unchecked by those who bristle at similar claims made about people. We might rage against the animalization of various oppressed human groups, and yet fail to recognize how such similar understandings also distort our perceptions of nonhuman animals. We protest dehumanization but often readily accept the “de-animalization” (Noske, 1997: 83) of nonhuman animals.

The reductionist biobehavioural model is frequently critiqued as an affront to humanity, one that fails to recognize sociocultural forces (Noske, 1997). Too often we do not afford nonhuman animals such complexity, and thus flatten the richness and totality of their lives. In her critique of the social sciences, Noske notes that culture and sociality are generally conceived as exclusive to humanity, as key features that define and differentiate us from other animals. We alone are subjects, while they are interdependently cast as objects.

She laments, “[S]ince they began by defining sociality and culturality as exclusively human phenomena they fall victim to the circular argument that animals, not being human, can in no way be social or cultural beings as this would be a contradiction in terms” (Noske, 1997: 82-83). Nonhuman animals, considered outside of the realm of the social or cultural, are instead studied within the natural sciences. The common “biobehavioural conception of animalness” found within these fields renders animals as objects while it dissects them into their “smallest constituent parts, and [conceives of] animal actions as mechanisms of living matter governed by natural laws” (p.83).

I raise Noske’s (1997) critique for two primary reasons. First, we are far more accustomed to think about questions of individuality, personality, social construction, and subjectivity in respect to human, rather than nonhuman, animals. Noske’s arguments encourage us to entertain and appreciate nonhuman animals as beings who also have individual experiences and internal worlds. While I noted the complexity of the category ‘fregan’, the category of ‘raccoon’ should also be recognized as composed of individuals with unique subjectivities. Second, although the main aim of this article is to demonstrate common discourses that malign both fregans and raccoons, and to suggest some broader social dynamics and forces that might explain such negation, I have largely presented ‘culture’ and ‘society’ as human phenomena by default. Given that many within the social sciences and natural sciences unconsciously perpetuate this bias, it seems important to interrupt that assumption here. My hope is this paper can be read in conjunction with ethological research that explores the subjectivities of nonhuman animals (e.g., Balcombe, 2006; Bekoff, 2009; Smuts, 2001), including raccoons. Through a combination of such ethology and critical analyses of the social construction of humans and nonhuman animals, my hope is that we will deepen our sense of humility towards Others and be motivated to

engage in different kinds of relationships. As Raymond Williams contends, “We need different ideas because we need different relationships” (Quoted in Sabloff, 2001: 11).

## **Conclusion**

Much theory now intricately describes the social construction of a variety of Others; unfortunately, similar scholarship dedicated to non-human animals is still relatively new. Nonetheless, animality is slowly becoming recognized as an important dynamic in the construction of humanity, and as a key aspect of various Othering processes (Anderson, 2000; Elder, Wolch and Emel, 1998). The history of human-raccoon relations is interpenetrated with notions of animality and ‘the animal’, and yet, the texture of raccoon-human relations must be acknowledged as also specific and particular. Further, the human meanings of raccoons’ lives will remain, necessarily, in flux.

Of course, raccoons also have their own histories and cultural interpretations. As humans’ cultural perceptions of raccoons vary, raccoons’ cultures are also heterogeneous. How might raccoons’ perceptions of humans differ among disparate groups, for example? Are we pests to them, perhaps? I turn to authors such as naturalist Holmgren (1990) who demonstrates that alternative raccoon-human relationships are possible. Her written accounts draw upon humble and engaged interactions with raccoons, suggesting new ways of being with those who are so frequently considered adversaries.

Perhaps what is most striking about Holmgren’s accounts—based on thirty years of close backyard observation in Portland, Oregon—is the hard earned trust (and the related depth of relationship) that is possible between humans and raccoons when there is genuine commitment to meeting them with equanimity as fellow animals, with unique personalities, preferences, and forms of sociality among themselves and others. When raccoons are

approached with humility, openness, true attentiveness to their needs, and careful deciphering of their many nonverbal signals, rich and respectful relationships emerge that can not only delight, but also offer new insight into raccoons' epistemologies.

Holmgren's argument that we might learn from each other seems heretical when set against a steady stream of rhetoric that casts raccoons as vile vermin. In a radical reinterpretation of human-raccoon relationships, Holmgren's repeatedly tries to "comply with raccoon ideas of territorial rights" by engaging in small gestures of understanding such as re-spacing water bowls at distances so that "whoever came late could usually claim a private space" (1990: 87). Actions that might be dismissed as wanton destruction are regarded with some tenderness, and from a willingness to entertain another's point of view. The resultant characteristic commentary is intimate without being saccharine:

[H]ere they were, and though some of our friends warned us they'd be a nuisance—even outright pests—we couldn't believe we could ever feel that way. And we haven't. For the first fifteen years of the nearly thirty they have been daily visitors they did not tear up our lawn, dig up our shrubbery or do any of the other destructive things we were warned about. I must admit that a raccoon mother did re-design the row of tulip bulbs I planted in a curving line that crossed the path she'd established for her kits. When the leaves poked up through the ground as evidence of coming barrier, she rooted them out and swept them aside. Those not in her path remained untouched. I'd left her room for a new path, but she wanted the old one—and she was in the right. In emergency—the sudden appearance of a dog or human stranger, perhaps—each family needs to know exactly which way to go, no one getting in another's way (1990: 113).

Drawing on Michael's (2004) theory of "animobilities" (wild or feral animals' own trajectories) and Douglas' (1984) scholarship on pollution, Jerolmack explains, "When animal and human trajectories collide in the built environment, to the extent that animals cannot be tamed or controlled there is an existential human experience of social disorder" (2008: 18). Holmgren's relational orientation toward the raccoons as fellow subjects, even when they seemingly destroy aspects of her cultivated and ordered space, demonstrates that what is frequently an "existential human experience of social disorder" (Jerolmack, 2008: 18)

is not inevitability. Indeed, Holmgren continually offers a distinct reversal of ‘pest’ discourse, which positions certain animals as useless:

A common theme that emerges out of sociological investigations of problem animals is that more often than not, the worth of the animals is judged largely on their usefulness to humans. Animals are often seen as “pests” when that are thought to be “useless,” especially if they are viewed as scavengers, are not deemed “charismatic” or particularly attractive, and are perceived to wreak havoc on human settlements or property, such as foxes, rats, raccoons, seagulls, deer, geese, and rabbits (Jerolmack, 2008: 4).

Holmgren instead describes raccoons as ‘visitors’, ‘friends’, ‘neighbors’, or directly by individual names related to their unique characteristics (pp.81-96, 109-123). Additionally, though they bring her joy, raccoons are recognized as valuable in their right. Yet Holmgren does not construe raccoons through some naïve Disney-inspired lens. Her goal is not domestication, and she rails against human efforts to keep raccoons as companion animals. Despite her affection for raccoons, her sentiments are accompanied by an appreciation for their wildness, which engenders a necessary distance between herself and those she observes. From this position, marked by trust and relationship, what Holmgren learns about raccoons equally disrupts popular but also, at times, scientific assessments of their lives. For example, she notices that raccoons are not just active at night (a common claim made in raccoon research): At one point, a raccoon known to Holmgren brings her new kits to the backyard. She remarks, “[H]er look of loving pride left no doubt that she had brought them on purpose to show us” (1990: 83). She continues,

From then on all our raccoon families have come by day as well as dusk and dark—any hour in the twenty-four during the years in which we had no human neighbors nearby. So it seems clear that their reported status as “strictly nocturnal,” cited in encyclopedias and other reference material, is frequently altered by choice (1990: 83).

While I recognize that few people will welcome raccoons into their lives as readily as Holmgren, her narrative encourages a reevaluation of commonly held prejudices. She begins with the understanding that we have encroached upon their territories. For Holmgren,

raccoon-human relationships suggest co-habitation rather than expulsion. In this way, picked-through materials and toppled garbage cans are reminders that we share the city with other beings. Despite many of our best efforts, wildlife does not always adhere to our systems nor subscribe to our world-views. As raccoons are vilified for various reasons, it is worthwhile to contemplate how we have colonized other animals' territories and created urban spaces that are not only hospitable for humans. We dramatically (re)shape urban ecologies and create the category of 'trash animals' in the process; it seems unjust to condemn those who have also adapted to changing environments.

While I do not deny that raccoons can pose valid human health concerns (Patell, 1996; Clayton, 2009), the negative responses to raccoons cannot be explained away on that basis alone. Raccoons confront an onslaught of scathing characterizations, as these animals and their behaviours are interpreted through broader (human) cultural frames, which are at times interlaced with ideas about disease. Understandings of 'race', class, civility, dirt, and pests (among other dynamics) intersect and inform our cultural renderings of raccoons, which also resonate more broadly with our conceptions of nature. "In the West, as elsewhere", posits Sabloff, "the relations of ordinary people with the natural world are reflected in their interactions with other animals" (2001: 13).

Raccoons and freegans share a set of behavioural similarities, and experience some parallel prejudices. I have suggested some of the overlaps between the positioning of both groups. Critics may charge that I have over-emphasized the negative views of these groups at the expense of the more positive interpretations. In some respects, regard for raccoons is marked by ambivalence and complexity (Clayton, 2009). For comparative purposes, I focused on the negative interpretations because they most strongly represent how raccoons and freegans are culturally aligned within mainstream society. In some instances, freegans are metaphorically debased as nonhuman animals, while discourses fold back and

metaphorically render raccoons as socially-deviant humans (i.e., as ‘thieves’ and ‘bandits’, for example). With that in mind, though, I encourage readers to further explore the varied ways that raccoons and freegans are appreciated within and outside of their own communities.

As one sympathetic observer writes:

Some closeted raccoon lovers go so far as to call them ‘vermin’ and put them in the same category as rats and cockroaches. It maybe true that they carry disease, attack if cornered, and sometimes scatter garbage around, but this also describes many human Torontonians as well (Micallef, 2009: 50).

Now is an important historical moment to ask questions about the meanings attached to food, waste, and urban foraging. The environment is increasingly seen as a vital political, cultural, and even spiritual issue. The time is ripe not only to reflect on the strategies we use to confront environmental crises in general, but to also seriously ponder our relationships with the non-human world in our daily lives and immediate surroundings. Disdain for certain nonhuman animals can obscure the roots of human-generated problems. Such displacement allows for the continued vilification of entire groups of animals, and for cultural prejudices to remain unchecked. The larger environmental consequences are grim. As Sabloff purports, “The environmental crisis lies...in the very sources of *how we think*, in the basic and often submerged premises we hold about the world” (Emphasis in original, 2001: 10). We literally refuse our refuse and loathe what infringes upon the civility of the city and ourselves.

Trash haunts the urban landscape, as the image of its modern and sanitized surface is perpetually soiled with the concentrated waste of so many North Americans. It settles under streets and behind buildings. It presses up against biological and cultural aversions. It lingers at the periphery, but always threatens to encroach upon us.<sup>19</sup> Freegans and raccoons point to our inability to contain, and thus control, what we cast away in the name of self-

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<sup>19</sup> See Kristeva’s psychoanalytic text *Powers of Horror* (1982) for a thorough examination of how the process of abjection is essential to human identity formation. See also Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* (1993) for in depth discussion of the role of “abject beings” within the social sphere.

preservation and identity. These groups offer radically different ways of understanding and being in the city. They help ‘make strange’ this environment, and when approached with openness, they can teach us possibilities for different types of relationships with waste, Others, and ourselves.

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