

Abstract

The aim of this creative study is to interrogate, by means of a scholarly essay and a body of artwork, the travails of Johannesburg's informal recyclers so as to reflect on the city's exploitative and inequitable history – this while acknowledging that the pattern of inequality is profoundly racially skewed. Matters of labour, race and human value, discussed in conjunction with consumption and discard, are harnessed to sketch a trajectory from Johannesburg's historical gold-mining origins through to its contemporary status as the country's commercial centre.

The study seeks to demonstrate that the recyclers play a pivotal role in linking recyclable waste to commodification and hence labour to human worth. My research can be conceptualised in terms of waste, want and wealth, while also showing that 'waste' can refer, ambiguously, to both human discard and to the wasting of the land and those people who work it. Simultaneously, I advocate the potential of art to address the aforementioned matters by probing the creative labour expended in its making, the potential monetary value of art and, indeed, the cultural impact of art itself.

In an effort to articulate these disparate themes, I propose that just as human discard, since the formation of ancient middens, has provided invaluable evidence of the complex cultural, economic, political and environmental systems that governed our existence then, so, contemporaneously, can Critical Discard Theory posit the potential of waste (garbage, trash, rubbish, dirt) to build relevant interdisciplinary bridges that link the core concepts of this creative PhD.

Keywords: Johannesburg, gold, trash, Discard Theory, mine dump, inequality, recycling, waste pickers, informal economy, consumerism, capitalism, environmentalism, life raft, The Raft of the Medusa, Théodore Géricault, mixed media art.