

“Let the Freaking Canning Begin”: Human Waste in the Workplaces of George Saunders’s *Pastoralia* (2000)

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ABSTRACT: This article suggests how Michael Thompson’s *Rubbish Theory* (1979), specifically the model of the life cycle of rubbish, might be applied to the dystopian workplace environments of George Saunders’s surreal and, often, dystopian collection *Pastoralia* (2000). *Pastoralia* foregrounds rubbish through depictions of live waste (rubbish employees and re-animated corpses), wasted lives, and waste disposal methods within the workplace. I focus on the short stories “Pastoralia” and “Sea Oak” to reveal the mechanisms behind the conversion of human employee to human waste both in, and out of, the workplace. I suggest how waste-theory further advances our understanding of Saunders’s fiction as the literary depictions of human waste in the workplace function as a critique of the dominant ideologies that govern American culture.

KEYWORDS: Rubbish Theory, Michael Thompson, Pastoralia, George Saunders, waste, eliminating waste in business

I begin with one man’s struggle for an epitaph: “LIFE PASSED HER BY? DIED DISAPPOINTED? CAME BACK TO LIFE BUT FELL APART?”¹ Taken from George Saunders’s

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short story “Sea Oak,” it captures the unnamed protagonist’s struggle to commemorate his Aunt Bernie who died, returned as a decaying corpse, and then *literally* fell apart. To sum up, Aunt Bernie “work[ed] at DrugTown for minimum [was] sixty and own[ed] nothing.”² Her life, employment status, and material worth are evaluated as waste to parallel the pile of parts, or *literal* human waste, that she becomes. So how can we commemorate waste? And why is Aunt Bernie evaluated as human waste in the first place?

“Waste” is defined as the “useless expenditure or consumption, [and] squandering (*of* money, goods, time, effort, etc.).”³ The physical, fiscal, and figurative can therefore all be described as, or go to, waste. Waste features in a literal sense in Saunders’s surreal collection *Pastoralia* (2000), through depictions of human waste (excrement, for example, or dead-body goo), but it also features figuratively through narratives of wasted life. Saunders’s representations of the American working class are characterised by a resemblance between waste and life that is inextricably bound to social, cultural, economic, and employment conditions. Such a resemblance is cultivated and maintained by what David P. Rando has termed the dominant “ideological abstractions that govern American culture.”⁴ These include the ideals of the American dream which posit success and social mobility as a materialistic and individual pursuit.⁵ As Rando points out “much of Saunders’s work seems informed by the tension between the ideological abstractions that govern American culture [and] the malignant, sad, or simply shabby reality that these abstractions generate for his no-life lowlifes, characters who barely manage to live and labor beneath the weight of ideology and just above the cold, material bottom.”⁶ While existing research has considered the representation of the working class in Saunders’s fiction, both formally and in relation to material culture, as well as considering representations of the working class at work, in this article I suggest how waste-theory further advances our understanding of Saunders’s fiction because literary depictions of human waste in the workplace function as a critique of such ideological abstractions.

Rachele Dini adopts Zygmunt Bauman’s definition of the term “human waste” and explains that it reflects “the marginalisation of those deemed

supernumerary [as] an ‘inevitable outcome of modernisation’.⁷ Dini identifies the relationship between human waste and redundancy in the following quote taken from Bauman’s *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (2004):

To be declared redundant means to have been disposed of *because of being disposable*—just like the empty and non-refundable plastic bottle or once-used syringe, an unattractive commodity with no buyers, or a substandard or stained product ... thrown off the assembly line by quality inspectors. “Redundancy” shares its semantic space with ... *waste*.⁸

Redundancy exposes the rhetoric of disposability because the employee no longer has use-value; therefore, redundancy has a more immediate connection to waste than the experience of being fired. An employee might be fired for any number of reasons, embezzlement for example, and then be replaced because the job function is still required; however, in this article I consider the employees who are fired, made redundant, or demoted, because they are evaluated (by “quality inspectors” or processes) as underperforming or unnecessary. Unlike the finality suggested by a “once-used syringe,” however, there is possibility for the unemployed—or the rendered human waste—to re-enter employment (although Saunders’s fiction suggests this is a difficult process). Dini identifies a “thingly turn” in the humanities and social sciences, or “the emergence of ‘Thing Theory’ and the fields of material culture studies, New Materialism, and discard studies [which] have opened the entire lifespan of objects to scrutiny” and which “call[s] attention to the malleability of the commodity as a concept” which, in turn, can be extended to human beings.⁹ Just like the objects defined as commodity or refuse, however, the employed and unemployed are not necessarily fixed categories. Similarly, rubbish—or human waste—moves. Non-rubbish can move to become rubbish and rubbish can move to become non-rubbish. This article discusses the prevalence of human waste, specifically how humans become waste, in the dystopian workplaces of *Pastoralia*, with specific reference to the short stories “Pastoralia” and “Sea Oak.”

PASTORALIA

Pastoralia is a darkly satirical reflection of early twenty-first century life, economics, class, and employment conditions in the US. It has been argued that Saunders “peoples his stories with the losers of American history” and those “losers” (so rendered according to the ideologies they “fail” under) populate the *Pastoralian* workplaces.¹⁰ I consider the employees at the failing theme park in “Pastoralia” and at “Joysticks,” the strip club in “Sea Oak,” both of which offer a dystopian warp on familiar practices in the neoliberal workplace. Kasia Boddy explains the changing nature of capitalist labour that informs Saunders’s fiction:

Between 1973 and 2000, the working year of the “average American worker” increased by 199 hours or ... nearly five additional weeks [which] seemed paradoxical, given the introduction during this period of many labor-saving technologies [but as] the economist Juliet Schor argues ... their introduction led to changes in the labor market which structurally embedded the culture of job insecurity and rising consumer norms that Saunders so vividly describes.¹¹

Indeed, the central theme of “Pastoralia” is job insecurity as the staff are threatened with redundancy. Similarly, the culture of job insecurity is embedded in “Sea Oak.” The stripper Lloyd Betts, for example, is fired because “he’s put on weight and his hair’s gone thin.”¹² We also learn that Aunt Bernie was demoted, after fifteen years’ service at DrugTown, from Cashier to Greeter.

Clare Hayes-Brady recognises that “what distinguishes Saunders’s dystopia is the focus on the mundane,” she explains how:

Saunders attends to the everyman, and his everyday experience, positioning the dystopian future as simply another iteration of the frustration of the postmodern working class. Specifically, the work focuses on the daily irritations associated with imagined future cultures: payroll problems, rusting machinery, maintenance issues and the unaffordability of exciting, unnerving technology and technicity.¹³

The “daily irritations” Hayes-Brady notes are predominantly material concerns which draw attention to the changing nature of the workplace and the interconnections Boddy identifies between “the culture of job insecurity and rising consumer norms.”¹⁴ In “Pastoralia,” for example, management shares a vision of the “imagined future [workplace] cultures” which includes the chemical and biological modifications of employees.¹⁵ Such proposals are inextricably linked with cultural, material, and economic pressures. In line with post-Fordist modes of production, for example, “waste reduction has remained at the heart of manufacturing” and, in this sense, Ford’s streamlined production and post-Fordist concerns are applicable to the evaluation of employees and employee bodies.¹⁶ Waste reduction is a primary concern; indeed, during a time of increasing technicity, management’s “maintenance issues” are posed by the organic nature of employees. Redundant bodies, supernumerary bodies or bodily functions, and/or inefficient parts, will be thrown out as human waste.

Dini’s *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth Century Fiction* (2016) is a “study of the literary depiction of waste deployed in the critique of capitalist ideology [and] the focus throughout is on manufactured, visible waste—waste that is very obviously caught up in, and part of, the processes of production and consumption.”¹⁷ Aunt Bernie’s employment status, lack of commodities (indicative of weak consumer power), and literal re-animation as a “working-class zombie,” render her a “loser” under capitalist ideology.¹⁸ Aunt Bernie critiques the inequities of such a system: “Some people get everything and I got nothing. ... Why? Why did that happen?”¹⁹ This is imbued with class concerns and resembles Michael Thompson’s identification, in *Rubbish Theory* (1979), of a self-perpetuating system in which the powerful (the wealthy and/or the middle/upper classes) are not only able to accumulate the most valuable objects but are also able to decide what objects are of value in the first place. Aunt Bernie is relegated human waste under this system, yet the protagonist *is* able to commemorate Aunt Bernie with the inscription: “BELOVED AUNT.”²⁰

A “BELOVED AUNT” is not human waste, so what has happened here? Aunt Bernie is no longer evaluated according to capitalist ideology’s criteria for “worth”; instead, the protagonist reevaluates her as a subject within the family. Within an employment context, however, waste can only be subject to revaluation according to processes of production and consumption. Companies ask how they can reduce, repurpose, or eliminate waste in production and this extends to underperforming or unnecessary workers. Indeed, we know that “value is primarily in the object ... in the person trying to sell his or her labour power” or, in line with thing theory in the job market people can be viewed as *object* with labour value (as the object of exchange), and *objects* can be kept, repurposed, or thrown away.²¹ Just as Dini, Thompson (an earlier theorist), and more recent new materialists, recognise the fluidity of objects—from commodity to non-commodity and, perhaps, back again—I consider how employees are ascribed a similar malleability regarding their object value.

Pastoralia presents “a world of people who regret their lives ... a world where free market economic principles dominate every aspect of life, and a world where everyone’s language is suffused with corporate doublespeak.”²² I consider this world, specifically the depiction of human waste, for the first time using the optic of Thompson’s *Rubbish Theory*, which analyses the culture of waste by asking how objects that have lost their value might become valuable once again, and considering who has the power to determine where value lies. I suggest how the life cycle of rubbish might be related to employee movement within the *Pastoralian* workplace.²³

ELIMINATING WASTE IN BUSINESS USING *RUBBISH THEORY*?

Linda M. Orr and Dave J. Orr’s guide *Eliminating Waste in Business* (2014) suggests that if only “thirteen percent of a company’s sales force brings in 80 percent of the revenue ... it is very clear that many companies have an extremely high number of ineffective, unproductive salespeople.”²⁴ The implicit advice is that management should recognise unproductive employees as *waste* to-be-repurposed, through training (or “maintenance activities” in alignment with *Rubbish Theory*), or disposed of which will, in turn, increase workplace efficiency (streamlining). There are

considerable similarities between this approach and the treatment of employees in *Pastoralia*, which can be understood in relation to the product movement outlined in *Rubbish Theory*, or the life cycle of rubbish. Dini argues that, “in contrast to Thompson’s assertion that certain objects remain impervious to decay or obsolescence ... *any* object has the potential to become waste,” and uses waste objects as an optic through which to read wasted lives.²⁵ Or, in other words, “to consider how the waste-potential of commodities under capitalism relates to the waste-potential of people.”²⁶ I utilise Dini’s bridged approach between Thompson and new materialism in my application of *Rubbish Theory* to the human characters in *Pastoralia*.

The article is structured to reflect a simplified version of Thompson’s life cycle of rubbish but, instead of consumer objects, I focus on employees, “the waste-potential of people,” and employee movement. Thompson suggests a fluid, three-stage, life cycle in which objects can be either transient, rubbish, or a durable object. Objects do not have to pass through each stage, however, and the rubbish object (which in my reading of Saunders’s dystopian workplaces refers to the underperforming, fired, redundant, or unemployed individual) is not necessarily at the end-point of its journey. Being made redundant, for example, does not necessarily mark the end of an individual’s employment history.

A transient object is an object that has entered the consumer market and is of decreasing value over time. As Dini points out “capitalism is thus contingent upon extreme efficiency on the side of production and extreme inefficiency on the side of consumption.”²⁷ In other words, transient objects are deliberately designed to have finite lifespans but must be of a high enough quality, and durability, to encourage repeat custom. If the balance is right, consumers will discard worn out, or non-operational, products as rubbish and replace them. At this stage, in the rubbish life cycle, the object may be subject to manipulation including maintenance or repair activities before it becomes rubbish. In the workplace environments of *Pastoralia*, the employees can be understood as transient objects and we see that “there is ... a subjective element involved, namely, the fact that the value of the object [the employee] is assessed by the employers”—do they value the labour object’s labour

power (the object of exchange) enough to keep them in employment?²⁸ And the employees, like their commodity-counterparts, are similarly subject to maintenance (training or re-training) to remain in transient employment. If the employee receives positive assessments at interview or in performance reviews then the employee can continue as a transient (in employment), possibly subject to further manipulation to ensure that the employer will continue to benefit from them.

A negative assessment, however, could facilitate the employee's transition into the rubbish stage of the cycle. An employee might be fired, for example, as a reflection of poor job performance or malpractice. Thompson argues that it is seemingly impossible for a transient object to become a durable, but within an employment context this transition is theoretically possible (although it is shown to be difficult and even unlikely to happen for Saunders's characters); indeed, as Dini points out Thompson's "conceptualisation hinges on the recognition that new meanings can be assigned to old things."²⁹ Similarly, a rubbish object (a fired or redundant employee) may become transient again (employed), or durable (maybe the company cannot function without them—the name, for example, or personality behind a successful brand) which translates to an increase in value over time, through processes of revaluation. Thompson explains, however, that the power to evaluate and reevaluate objects privileges:

those people near the top [who] have the power to make things durable and to make things transient, so they can ensure that their own objects are always durable and that those of others are always transient. They are like a football team whose centre-forward also happens to be the referee; they cannot lose.³⁰

Such an analogy emphasises *Rubbish Theory* as a social theory as much as it is a theory of the life-cycle of commodities. Processes of gentrification, for example, reveal the dynamic in action (particularly class dynamics) because those "people near the top" are able to transform formerly run-down, often working class, areas or buildings, into sites of value.³¹

The ability to determine which objects are valuable and/or become durable therefore privileges those “near the top.” Within an employment context “objects viewed as durable are endowed with, ideally, infinite life-spans and retain their value or even increase in value over time.”³² If Aunt Bernie was considered durable by DrugTown then writing her epitaph would have been easy. Thompson asks, “how can such a self-perpetuating system ever change itself?”³³ The category of rubbish provides a possible answer because rubbish:

is not subject to the [same] control mechanism [as durable and transient objects] (which is concerned primarily with the overt part of the system, the valuable and socially significant objects) and so is able to provide the path for the seemingly impossible transfer of an object from transience to durability [where] it has the chance of being discovered. ... The delightful consequence of this hypothesis is that, in order to study the social control value, we have to study rubbish.³⁴

We have to test whether the revaluation of rubbish objects, or employees, within Saunders’s dystopian workplaces is quite as promising. The transient object that slides towards rubbish, however, is not always destroyed or thrown away; therefore, it is still, technically, in circulation where it may be revaluated as a collectible or repurposed as a transient. Yrjö Engeström writes that “rubbish [as] the necessary middle point, is largely invisible” and when rubbish is in its designated place, a bin or a landfill, we are largely untroubled by it.³⁵ But what about when it is alive and working? *Pastoralia* makes rubbish visible by taking waste, wasted lives, and waste disposal processes, out of the bin and into the workplace.

The surreal depiction of employment and employees corresponds to Thompson’s idea that “the boundar[ies] between rubbish and non-rubbish [are] not fixed but move in response to social pressures.”³⁶ *Pastoralia* presents the blurring of these boundaries through the assimilation of literal and figurative waste. In other words, through the depiction of human characters as transient objects (non-rubbish objects that are decreasing in value) which can be managed, and disposed of, as literal

waste (rubbish objects) through corporate evaluation processes. The rubbish cycle as it can be applied to employment in “Pastoralia” and “Sea Oak” also reaffirms Thompson’s idea that rubbish is a category *theoretically* open to everyone to reevaluate. When an employee is evaluated as effectively rubbish, for example, the responsibility falls to the rubbish employee to initiate their own reevaluation (improve their job performance), or if they are fired or made redundant to (re)discover value, to rebrand or retrain, and to (re)sell themselves into employment.³⁷

TRANSIENT OBJECTS

Myra J. Hird states that waste is “invested with a diversity of meanings, from lost work time, [to] incomplete production.”³⁸ In the workplace, time and money are spent to ensure minimal waste and secure maximum productivity and profit; therefore, the life cycle of rubbish and employees, within the workplace, are interconnected. The workplace environment that I focus on in “Pastoralia” is the caveman exhibit at the theme park. Despite the lack of visitors, the employees are expected to perform as “authentic” cavepeople. The unnamed protagonist and Janet, his co-worker, must, among other things, prepare fires, skin goats, produce cave paintings, and abide by rules which prevent them talking during the working day. The plot focuses on the “Staff Remixing,” or the threat of park-wide job loss, and the impact unemployment would have on various characters. We learn, for example, of the financial pressures the protagonist faces to pay for medical care for his son. We learn that Marty, who runs the staff store, is concerned that the “Sheep May Graze Safely” exhibit will be axed. “That’s like fifteen shepherds,” he explains to the protagonist “which would kill me. I get a lot of biz off those shepherds.”³⁹ When Marty himself is made redundant, after fifteen years, we learn that he can no longer afford his son’s education.

The protagonist and Janet are similarly threatened with the transition to rubbish under the proposed “Staff Remixing.” If management believe a transient object (an employee) is a “useless expenditure,” which is exactly how the management in “Pastoralia” view Janet, the employee is evaluated as rubbish to be repurposed or thrown away. As Adam Kelly points out, however, management must safeguard

themselves against lawsuits by ensuring (indeed, enforcing) that third-parties (often other employees or customers) corroborate their evaluations of human waste in the workplace.⁴⁰ The manager at the amusement park, Greg Nordstrom, explains to the protagonist “*I KNOW how she [Janet] is. She is BAD. But what I need is for you [the protagonist] to SAY IT. For reasons of documentation.*”⁴¹ I will return to the labelling process (Janet is “BAD”) shortly. Management otherwise operates in alignment with the “templates for calculating and eliminating waste” from the workplace although the principles are taken to dystopian extremes in “*Pastoralia*.”⁴²

The interchangeability of figurative human waste and literal waste is due to management’s unethical approach to waste disposal. Just as management must have paperwork to convert transient employees into rubbish objects for disposal, the employees must complete paperwork to dispose of the literal human waste from the caveman exhibit. The “Disposal Debit” is introduced, for example, which means that employees must pay to dispose of literal human waste produced during the working day. Management justify the fee: “*Does it provide benefit to us when you defecate? No, on the contrary it would provide benefit if you didn’t, because then you would be working more.*”⁴³ Waste production at work is “time wasting” because it reduces the employee’s labour value (the object exchanged for wages) for the company. While the human needs of the characters are greatly overlooked in *Pastoralia*, the titular “*Pastoralia*” expresses the greatest intolerance of biological, *human*, needs and functioning: “*help us help you, by not whining about your Disposal Debit, and if you don’t like how much it costs, try eating less.*”⁴⁴ Theoretically, if employees eat less they will generate less literal waste and therefore waste less company time. Thus, their labour value increases. The promotion of eating less further reduces the biological human in the workplace because it conceivably leads to the literal wasting, or wasting away, of the employee.

In response to employee dissatisfaction regarding the “Disposal Debit” fee, management propose the following “solution” and explain themselves in the following way: “*we are going to be helping you [the employees] in this, by henceforth sending less food. We’re not joking, this is austerity.*”⁴⁵ Management consequently stop sending food

to the caveman exhibit. Eventually they replace the packages of meat, that they used to provide, with a plastic goat. As Boddy points out, Saunders's characters are "usually 'beyond broke' and 'own nothing,' and are therefore particularly vulnerable to economic recession, aka 'budget crunch' ... and 'austerity'" and this vulnerability is exploited in the workplace.⁴⁶ The protagonist and Janet, hungry, resort to eating their emergency "Reserve Crackers" and, still trying to avoid the "Staff Remix," they pretend to roast the plastic goat. In theory, management's austerity is logical but, in practice, it generates further employee dissatisfaction. But management are only interested in transient objects for their labour value. As Bauman recognises, dissatisfied employees can be revaluated as waste, disposed of, and replaced.

Waste reduction in "Pastoralia" targets the biological human. Management jokes "*Not that we're advocating some sort of biological plug or chemical constipator. Not yet, anyway!*"⁴⁷ The "biological plug" and "chemical constipator" suggest that there *are* limits in place; however, the aside "*not yet, anyway!*" in conjunction with the aptly labelled "Human Refuse Bags," has disturbing, unethical, implications for the future. As George Saunders explains in an interview with Matthew Derby, corporations use "acronyms and euphemisms [as] elaborate ways of talking around unpleasant realities or hiding agendas" and the agenda for future waste reduction points towards human modification.⁴⁸ Or dehumanisation. It is not so much about "Human Refuse" in *Pastoralia*, therefore, as it is about the refusal of the human in the workplace.

As the basic biological needs of the human are viewed as waste functions, the ideal transient employee would be more mechanical than biological, in line with the streamlined post-Fordist ideals of production, and increased technicity. If the human labour object can be treated as waste to be disposed of, in the same manner as literal human waste, then the identified waste functions of the human might also be modified, under the guise of maintenance, to keep the employee in employment. From a production perspective, the unemployed, fired, or redundant, are viewed as "remaindered humans," or human waste, because production goes on without them and they are "flawed consumers" because they do not, necessarily, have the means to

continue to participate in consumer norms.⁴⁹ It is likely, in periods of instability, that employees will tolerate more maintenance changes to avoid becoming human waste, perhaps even paying for their own constipators, as management suggest they should, to remain *in* employment.

Indeed, as the “Staff Remixing” process suggests, the employees’ status on the transient-rubbish-durable cycle is unstable:

*Please know that if each one of you could be kept, you would be, if that would benefit everyone. But it wouldn't, or we would do it, wouldn't we, we would keep every one of you. But as we meld into our sleeker new organisation, what an excellent opportunity to adjust our Staff Mix ... some must perhaps go, the upside of this is, some must stay, and perhaps it will be you. Let us hope it will be you, each and every one of you.*⁵⁰

We have seen how the protagonist and Janet simply accept the reduction and then total lack of food being sent; however, as management’s projections for the shape of future employment—“*as we meld into our sleeker new organisation*”—suggests, the employees who remain will have undergone further maintenance—“*melding*”—to fit the new organisation. Indeed, the biological plugs and chemical constipators promise the reshaping of the human to fit the future workplace. The proposed changes are unethical but although Saunders’s characters might consider quitting, ultimately they “remember their last attempt to get a new job (‘two hundred send outs and no nibbles’) and their maxed-out credit cards”: the cost of unemployment is too high.⁵¹

DOUBLESPEAK AND PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

Matt Cheney points out that management’s phrasing is “typical doublespeak.”⁵² Similarly, Hayes-Brady draws attention to the fact that “those who control the theme park’s vocabulary,” or management, “control its running.”⁵³ Orr and Orr also recognise that “companies talk out of both sides of their mouths ... they say that you should stay home if you are sick, but if you are sick too often, you get fired. They say they want you healthy, but they really want you at work.”⁵⁴ Indeed, “*some must perhaps go,*” obscures the “unpleasant reality,” that some *must* go and that “adjust[ing]

our Staff Mix,” translates to the disposal of employees evaluated as rubbish or supernumerary.

Various evaluation forms help management to take out the trash. There are the “Daily Partner Performance Evaluation” forms (which ask employees to note any “attitudinal difficulties” or issues that require “Mediation”) and the “Client Vignette Evaluation” forms in “Pastoralia,” or the “Cute Rating” system employed by the strip club in “Sea Oak” where strippers are evaluated on a scale from “Knockout” to “Stinker.” Such forms are used to evaluate employees and to encourage others, including customers and colleagues, to evaluate employees too. If the documentation reflects poor performance, the transition towards rubbish can be initiated. It evidences Kelly’s claims that:

As many scholars have argued, neoliberalism operates rather by having the subject sign up “freely” to the terms of his or her own subjugation, often through seemingly benign bureaucratic methods. Thus, in Saunders’s story “Pastoralia,” we witness the narrator filling in a “Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form,” and it is through this repeated task that his corporate superiors eventually extract from him an acknowledgement of the poor performance of his colleague Janet, giving them a reason to fire her.⁵⁵

The management clearly expects the employees to “sign up ‘freely’” to “the terms of [their] own subjugation,” which are often at their own expense—such as the “Shit Fee” or the expectation that employees pay for their own constipators evidenced by management’s statement that: “*no doubt some of you would complain about having to pay for the constipators, expecting us to provide them gratis.*”⁵⁶ Similarly, in practice, the “seemingly benign bureaucratic” evaluation forms create the paper trails which facilitate the transition from transient to rubbish object and, figuratively, helps throw out the human waste. In “Pastoralia,” it is just *one* negative evaluation from a visitor and the protagonist’s *one* negative evaluation of Janet which allows management to effectively label her rubbish and fire her. Similarly, in “Sea Oak,” when Lloyd Betts’s “Cute Rating” falls to “Stinker,” Lloyd becomes corporate waste and is fired.⁵⁷

RUBBISH OBJECTS

When Janet learns of the proposed “Staff Remixing” she sees straight through the corporate doublespeak and retorts “let the freaking canning begin.”⁵⁸ The term “canning” here reflects the transition of employees to rubbish objects. And, in *Pastoralia*, human waste from the workplace is disposed of unceremoniously. Whether the character is figuratively “canned,” like Janet, or literally (re)buried in a Hefty bag with a twisty tie like Aunt Bernie, those labelled as rubbish are disposed of as such. But how does the evaluation process *work* to convert employees from transients into rubbish objects?

Engeström considers this question within a medical context, but the same principles underlie the evaluation and conversion processes in *Pastoralian* workplaces. In Engeström’s example, disease is the commodity to be exchanged. Medical professionals determine the value of the disease in economic terms. Questions are asked such as: is it more beneficial to treat the disease, or to disregard the disease and/or the patient as rubbish object? The exchange value of the disease is therefore calculated through the medical and financial evaluation of the patient looking to exchange the disease for treatment. The evaluation of patients is a labelling process but “when a person is declared ‘chronic’, or ‘disturbed’, or ‘alcoholic’, or ‘uninsured’, or ‘troublemaker’, the stigmatic definition is very difficult to eliminate or transform” and might result in the evaluation of the disease and/or the patient as a rubbish object.⁵⁹ Indeed, “stigmatic definition[s],” such as “*THE WORST*,” or “bad,” or “*Poor*,” are integral in the process of converting Janet from transient employee to human waste, out of employment, in “*Pastoralia*.”

Janet’s son, Bradley, is a drug-addict and aptly summarises “the way we name things is important, Ma.”⁶⁰ He understands first-hand how labelling can assimilate life and waste so that the former becomes the latter. Bradley appropriates the more neutral label of “inadvertent substance misuser” for himself, because “inadvertent” and “misuser” indicate the potential to advertently avoid or to use substances correctly in the future.⁶¹ In contrast, “drug addict” has connotations of wasted life and reinforces Engeström’s idea that “stigmatic definitions” are difficult to transform.

Similarly, in “Pastoralia,” management offers an evaluation of its cavepeople employees that illustrates the proverbial stickiness of labels: “you [the protagonist] are good. Very good. One of our best. And [Janet is] bad, very bad, one of our worst.”⁶² The protagonist cannot convert management’s stigmatisation of Janet when even the most basic of negative labels, “bad,” can initiate the transition of employee to rubbish object.

LABELLING RUBBISH AND ROTTING BODIES

In *Pastoralia*, the transition towards rubbish represents an inversion of Hird’s argument that literal waste is “metaphorically alive.”⁶³ *Pastoralia*’s characters are alive but metaphorically become waste, or they represent literal waste but are also literally alive. While Thompson writes that “in an ideal world ... an object would reach zero value and zero expected life-span at the same instant, and then turn to dust” this is not what happens in life or employment, and is certainly not what happens in “Sea Oak.”⁶⁴ Aunt Bernie’s life-span reaches zero (when she is scared to death by burglars) to coincide with her object value (here as an employee on minimum wage at DrugTown who owned nothing), but she then comes back to life (as a decaying corpse).

And, from one decaying corpse to another, in “Pastoralia” the idea that rubbish is “alive” is suggested through Nordstrom’s comparison of the workforce to a rotting body “speak up little toe,” he says “let the brain know the state of the rot, so we can rush down what is necessary to stop Janet from stinking.”⁶⁵ In their attempts to persuade the protagonist, a “good” transient employee, to negatively evaluate Janet, a “bad” transient employee on the slide to rubbish, management describes the organisation as a human body which requires the employer and employee to work together to prevent it from becoming human waste. The *apparent* biological concern here is far removed from the biological and chemical alterations mentioned earlier; however, waste is still attributed to the organic human body who “rots” at work. Rot is representative of disease here, but it does not have exchange value within the company. Indeed, it must be excised to prevent the contamination of other transient objects within the organisation. A literal example of this in “Sea Oak” is the removal of

Lloyd Betts when he is evaluated as a “Stinker” at the strip club. The evaluation parallels the “metaphorically alive” but decaying human body. The smell of rubbish, or biological decay, is also attributed to the employee as human waste.

Labelling employees as rubbish objects and firing them, to reduce the risk of further contamination, does not, however, inhibit future movement. Reflective of the idea that waste is “metaphorically alive” in *Pastoralia*, the rubbish object continues to move outside of employment with the potential to move back into it. The transition to rubbish object *might* therefore be viewed as liberating because “waste never leaves [and] is never fully contained or controlled” and, in an employment context, employees are no longer subject to employer manipulation.⁶⁶ However, as we have seen, the possibility of being unemployed is not financially feasible for many of Saunders’s working class characters who already struggle to pay bills and are accumulating mounting debts. The transition to waste as liberating resonates, in a very limited sense, within “Sea Oak.” Aunt Bernie must, however, *literally* become living waste before she can even attempt to reevaluate her own life or her family’s employment situation. She has “dirt in her hair and dirt in her teeth” and when she “brushes back her hair with her hand ... a huge wad comes out, leaving her almost bald on one side.”⁶⁷ She rapidly decomposes and becomes literal waste again. Her second “life” life-expectancy reaches zero to coincide with her value as a literally rubbish and decomposing object.

BURYING WASTED LIFE

In “Sea Oak,” being evaluated as waste according to the governing abstract ideologies means that Aunt Bernie is disposed of, or buried, amidst other rubbish objects. Aunt Bernie’s “part of the graveyard’s pretty plain ... just a bunch of flat stones like parking bumpers and here and there a Styrofoam cup.”⁶⁸ The fluidity of rubbish—“just a bunch” and “here and there”—describes waste elements that are not “fully contained.” Aunt Bernie’s burial in wasteland corresponds to her family’s financial situation. Freddie, the protagonist’s mother’s boyfriend, assesses the family’s employment situation—“two don’t work [Jade and Min] and one strips ... you kids make squat”—

as a catalogue of failures according to the ideals of the American dream, or the “myth of American individualism and self-determination.”⁶⁹

When the family go to *LOBTON'S FUNERAL PARLOR* following Aunt Bernie's first death, the affordable coffin appears to be made out of cardboard and Jade, Aunt Bernie's niece, refuses to use it: “No freaking way. ... Work your whole life and end up in a Mayflower box? I doubt it.”⁷⁰ The “Mayflower box” references the Mayflower removals company which provides boxes, significantly, for moving.⁷¹ While a moving box is typically used to store objects that one wishes to keep, here the Mayflower box “represents a dialectic between cost and dignity.”⁷² The staples are exposed and there is “some writing about Folding Tab A into Slot B.”⁷³ The quality of the coffin correlates with the labour value of the body. Jade's refusal to bury Aunt Bernie in a “Mayflower Box” represents a challenge to the ideology that “work[ing] your whole life” will pay-off, but the cost of such a challenge (and Aunt Bernie's dignity) means taking on further debt.⁷⁴ The nature of human waste, however, or the rubbish that threatens to return, correlates with the “moving box” designed to bury it. The affordable coffin corresponds with Hird's idea that waste can “never [be] fully contained” and anticipates Aunt Bernie's resurrection. Although the family opt for the more expensive coffin “Amber Mist,” Aunt Bernie cannot be contained post-burial. She moves, and in DIY style returns to reevaluate her life and the lives of those around her.

DURABLE OBJECTS?

But can those who might be labelled as rubbish or human waste in *Pastoralia* successfully transform back into transient or durable objects? The short answer is no. While it is theoretically possible for those who are *not* “near the top” to reevaluate rubbish or their own status as human waste, there are no successful transformations in “*Pastoralia*” or “*Sea Oak*.” Within an employment context, Engeström's argument that “only a few lucky objects find their way into reevaluation and durability” rings true and, as Thompson explains, “those people near the top have the power to make things durable and to make things transient.”⁷⁵ Rubbish objects, out of employment, certainly

have the option to reevaluate and rebrand themselves and to re-enter the workplace; however, it is not an easy process, and those in positions of higher management still hold the most power when it comes to determining employee labour value.

Engeström proposes that listening to patients is the best method for care practitioners to reevaluate the object status of a patient’s condition.⁷⁶ While in *theory* this is logical, he emphasises that it is difficult to put into practice.⁷⁷ The reevaluation process, when translated into an employment context, does not make business sense because it asks that time is invested in employees that have already been evaluated as workplace waste. Management’s awareness of an employee’s personal situation will not necessarily correspond to a positive reevaluation either. An awareness of a problem, which may have caused the initial transition to rubbish, does not translate into the alleviation of that problem. Even if a rubbish object was reevaluated because management listened, the employee may still underperform. In “Sea Oak,” for example, Mr Frenndt, the manager of “Joysticks,” offers little sympathy when the protagonist’s performance is adversely affected by Aunt Bernie’s death. Frenndt asks: “Am I supposed to let you dance without vigour just because you need the money? Why don’t I put an ad in the paper for all sad people who need money?”⁷⁸ Frenndt understands that bereavement underlies the protagonist’s “Stinker” rating, but the evaluation sticks and he is sent home, losing pay, until his emotions cease to impede his functioning as a “good” transient object. In the dystopian workplace, being human is not an excuse for waste.

Similarly, management in “Pastoralia” are uninterested in their employees’ personal circumstances. The introduction of Janet’s replacement, Linda, evidences how the “Staff Remix” changes the nature of the workplace. The protagonist and his wife struggle financially to support their sick son, but the protagonist is reluctant—“I feel a little funny trying to explain about Nelson so early in our working relationship”—to share his situation with Linda.⁷⁹ Following Janet’s dismissal, the workplace increasingly excludes human nature and narratives. Linda does not talk to the protagonist. Her performance as a cavewoman is streamlined which pressurises the protagonist to streamline his own performance:

All afternoon we pretend to catch and eat small bugs. We pretend to catch and eat more pretend bugs than could ever actually live in one cave. ... It feels like we're racing. At one point she gives me a look, like: Slow down, going so fast is inauthentic. I slow down ... there is no way she could have a problem with the way I'm pretending to catch and eat small bugs if I'm doing it exactly the way she's doing it.⁸⁰

A competitive atmosphere is cultivated which breeds paranoia. The role becomes mechanised—"exactly the way she's doing it"—driven by the fear of appearing "inauthentic" and the risk that incidences of inauthenticity may be recorded. There is no longer space for conversation between colleagues let alone between employer and employee. So, while in theory listening to the personal narratives of rubbish employees might explain the reasons behind poor performance, it does not make the process of revaluation practical, or translate into a revaluation of the employee.

Aunt Bernie, as we know, becomes one of "a few [to] find [her] way into revaluation" or, at least, have the opportunity to reevaluate her life and others' employment situation. Her resurrection evidences Thompson's argument that rubbish is a category open to revaluation by anyone—even those whose lives resemble human waste. And such a return is indicative of the need for a wider review of the ideological, economic, and social structures that cultivate the conditions of Aunt Bernie's deprivation in life. In refutation of Engeström's idea that "rubbishness is a state of inaction,"⁸¹ Aunt Bernie's return also illustrates Dini's observation that waste is: "Neither truly 'alive' nor 'dead,' [and] exists somewhere between these two states, reminding us of what Julian Stallabrass terms the 'broken utopian promise of the commodity' but also seeking, at every turn, to be made a commodity once more."⁸² Aunt Bernie's zombie-style resurrection represents human waste as "neither truly 'alive' [or] 'dead'" but still "seeking ... to be made a commodity," or at the very least to be recognised as having value as a subject. Dini focuses on "the different forms that this return from the garbage grave can take—and what happens when it does not lead all the way back into the marketplace, but stalls somewhere along the way."⁸³ Aunt Bernie certainly models a "return from the garbage grave" but it is also stalled. As a

formerly rubbish object within an employment context, earning minimum wage at DrugTown, Aunt Bernie returns to reevaluate her life which resembles waste in order to compensate for her former impoverishment of experience. In addition to this, she is attempting to transform her nephew’s labour value as well as that of her unemployed nieces.

Firstly, Aunt Bernie assesses her previous life as waste—“I never got nothing! My life was shit!”—and proposes the following revaluation: “I am going to have lovers now, you fucks! Like in the movies.”⁸⁴ Lovers might well validate her (in the same sense that “BELOVED AUNT” ascribes value to what dominant ideologies otherwise render human waste) but sadly, at this point in the narrative, it is not feasible because Aunt Bernie is “just this pile of parts,” or a literal rubbish object.⁸⁵ Aunt Bernie’s revaluation process, however, extends to her family’s work lives in an effort to prevent them from similarly becoming human waste. Aunt Bernie advises the protagonist to “start showing your cock. You’ll show it and show it,” as part of her two-stage plan to increase his labour value.⁸⁶ The plan hinges on the increased income that this would generate which could fund the protagonist’s study of pre-law at community college and translate to an increase in the protagonist’s value as a labour object over time. Further education is seen as an investment that could enable the transition to a more secure job role in the future. Aunt Bernie assists in the plan for increasing the protagonist’s value at “Joysticks” by imposing a thumbprint, through magical means, on the customers’ foreheads who are willing to pay-per-view. Ultimately, however, the protagonist does not act on Aunt Bernie’s plans.

Aunt Bernie therefore fails to improve her own life or impact an increase in the protagonist’s labour value. However, as Michael Trussler explains, this is because:

Bernie expressly desires to ... attain the sort of glamorized life most valued in consumer culture. It is precisely in these efforts to fulfill her new fantasy life—derived from “the movies” and an acceptance of the American dream of upward mobility—that Bernie becomes trapped. Unable to imagine modes of satisfaction that aren’t defined by consumer capitalism ... [as] William E. Connolly observes, “a neoliberal economy cannot sustain itself unless it is

supported by a self-conscious ideology internalized by most [of its] participants.”⁸⁷

Aunt Bernie transitions but from one rubbish object to another which can be understood as the material representation of her entrapment and the internalisation of the ideology which traps her. It is a sad reflection on the near-impossibility of upward mobility in Saunders’s fiction and, indeed, beyond the text. Aunt Bernie first represents the figuratively wasted life and then she represents literal human waste—leaving “this sort of goo” over items—before decomposing to become waste once more.⁸⁸ We might therefore conclude that the slide to rubbish, when applied to human lives, only offers the potential for successful transformation if the rubbish objects are able to liberate themselves from the dominant ideologies which consign them to the rubbish heap in the first place.

THE LUCKY FEW

In relation to others’ employment, Aunt Bernie is clearly not one of the privileged few with the power to determine what objects become transient or durable. And this is *despite* having literal magical powers; therefore, her failure to impact transformation provides a powerful critique of existing class, status, and employment divides both in Saunders’s fiction and beyond the text. Engeström’s assertion that it is the “lucky few” who can reevaluate objects clearly only applies to those capable of successful reevaluation. “Pastoralia” suggests who the “lucky few” are within the workplace: “*we [the management] find ourselves in a too-many-Indians situation and so must first cut some Indians and then, later, possibly, some chiefs. But not yet, because that is harder, because that is us.*”⁸⁹ Management are, therefore, most likely to transition to become durable objects—or to remain transient with increased job security—in the impending “Staff Remix.” The everyday transient objects in “Pastoralia” and “Sea Oak” were always more likely to become rubbish because they do not have the same money, social status, or power of those in charge of hiring and firing in the workplace. As Culler points out not only do “the most powerful get the most durables but ... what the powerful collect become durables” and, similarly, in an employment context, those

whose status is secure (the powerful) decide which employees are rubbish and what modifications are necessary to maintain the transient object.⁹⁰

Management are able to “get the most durables” because they are responsible for the evaluation of employees and instigating transitions, including; transient to rubbish; transient to durable, the potential of which is suggested by the Indians and chief analogy; and finally the transition from rubbish to durable (although this transition, while envisioned by Aunt Bernie, is not depicted in the workplace environments of *Pastoralia*). The prospect of transitioning to become a durable object favours those in managerial positions; therefore, the revaluation process and *successful* transition to durable, and even just job security, is precluded for the unlucky many, or Saunders’s representation of the working class at work.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have suggested how the life cycle of rubbish outlined in Thompson’s *Rubbish Theory* might be applied to the workplace environments of Saunders’s *Pastoralia*. The application of waste theory to Saunders’s fiction, specifically “*Pastoralia*” and “*Sea Oak*,” reveals how depictions of human waste and wasted lives function as a critique of the neoliberal workplace and the abstracted ideologies which govern American culture. I have explored how the boundaries between literal and figurative rubbish are distorted in the text as the two become assimilated through similar waste disposal methods. Employees, as labour objects, can be read as transients according to the rubbish cycle. While value is in the individual, or labour object, looking to sell their labour power (or the object of exchange) it is management who have the power to convert the labour object into a transient object, and the transient object into a rubbish object, through evaluation, assessment, and labelling processes.

While the idea of the figuratively wasted life has been discussed, the term “human waste” has predominantly been explored within the workplace. The workplace environments depicted in “*Pastoralia*” and “*Sea Oak*” are noticeably, and unethically, anti-human. Natural human functions, and emotional responses, are

synonymous with workplace waste, tantamount to decreased productivity, decreased labour value, and decreased profit. I have explored how the employee transitions to rubbish object, but subsequent research might consider the transient stage in further detail with a focus on maintenance processes, or rather how the transient object might be kept in employment and, indeed, to ask just how much maintenance an employee will willingly undergo when job insecurity is embedded in the labour market. With links to the future of waste management and the modification of the human, the obvious dystopian line of questioning posed is “how can such a self-perpetuating system ever change itself?”⁹¹ Within the dystopian workplaces of *Pastoralia* the outlook is bleak. The principles of the dominant ideologies are internalised, and continue to oppress, and the stickiness of labels and stench of rotting employees suggest that it is far easier to dispose of rubbish than to transform it.

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NOTES

¹ George Saunders, *Pastoralia* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 125.

² Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 98.

³ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “waste (n.),” accessed August 22, 2018, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/226027>.

⁴ David P. Rando, “George Saunders and the Postmodern Working Class,” *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 3, (2012), 441.

⁵ Rando, “George Saunders,” 443.

⁶ Rando, “George Saunders,” 441.

⁷ Rachele Dini, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth-Century Fiction: Legacies of the*

Avant-Garde, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 11.

⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Oxford: Polity, 2004), 12, quoted in Dini, *Consumerism*, 11.

⁹ Dini, *Consumerism*, 3–4.

¹⁰ Rando, “George Saunders,” 437.

¹¹ Kasia Boddy, “A Job to Do*”: George Saunders on, and at, Work,” in *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, ed. Phillip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff (New York: Palgrave, 2017), 4–5.

¹² Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 91.

¹³ Clare Hayes-Brady, “Language, Subordination, and Freedom,” in *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, ed. Phillip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff (New York: Palgrave, 2017), 28.

¹⁴ Hayes-Brady, “Language,” 28; Boddy, “A Job to Do,” 5.

¹⁵ Hayes-Brady, “Language,” 28.

¹⁶ Dini, *Consumerism*, 6.

¹⁷ Dini, *Consumerism*, 10.

¹⁸ Rando, “George Saunders,” 451.

¹⁹ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 125.

²⁰ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 125.

²¹ Yrjö Engeström, “Values, Rubbish, and Workplace Learning,” in *Critical Perspectives on Activity Explorations Across Education, Work, and Everyday Life*, ed. Peter Sawchuck, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 193.

²² Matt Cheney, “The Way We Name Things Is Important Ma’: The Stories of George Saunders,” *The English Journal* 92, no. 5, (2003), 84.

²³ It should be noted that there are dimensions of employment that have less to do with objects. It may be argued that the more abstract concepts of labour and class, for example, are not so easily accessed by object theory. Although, of course, there are interconnections between such concepts and the material realities afforded by them. The wages gained from labour, for example, will often inform an individual’s material reality.

²⁴ Linda M. Orr and Dave J. Orr, *Eliminating Waste in Business: Run Lean, Boost Profitability* (New York: Apress, 2014), 135.

²⁵ Dini, *Consumerism*, 6.

²⁶ Dini, *Consumerism*, 6.

²⁷ Dini, *Consumerism*, 6.

²⁸ Engeström, "Values," 193.

²⁹ Dini, *Consumerism*, 5.

³⁰ Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 9.

³¹ This is not to say, of course, that such sites did not have value prior to processes of gentrification.

³² Jonathan Culler, "Junk and Rubbish: A Semiotic Approach," *Diacritics* 15, no. 3. (1985), 5.

³³ Thompson, *Rubbish Theory*, 9.

³⁴ Thompson, *Rubbish Theory*, 9–10.

³⁵ Engeström, "Values," 195.

³⁶ Thompson, *Rubbish Theory*, 12.

³⁷ Perhaps problematically, however, when we apply the idea that the revaluation of rubbish is open to all to Saunders's dystopian workplaces, the failure to successfully reevaluate seems to share the well-worn rhetoric of the dominant ideologies of individualism and consumer capitalism which posit success as the result of hard work (and suggest that if you're not successful, you're not working hard enough). Of course, however, Saunders's stories satirise such ideologies and *Rubbish Theory*, when applied to the workplace, similarly functions as a critique.

³⁸ Myra J. Hird, "Waste, Landfills, and an Environmental Ethic of Vulnerability," *Ethics and the Environment* 18, no. 1 (2013): 106.

³⁹ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 41.

⁴⁰ Adam Kelly, "Language between Lyricism and Corporatism: George Saunders's New Sincerity," in *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, ed. Phillip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff. (New York: Palgrave, 2017), 47.

⁴¹ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 27.

⁴² Orr and Orr, *Eliminating Waste in Business*, xvi.

⁴³ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 47.

⁴⁴ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 48.

⁴⁵ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 48.

⁴⁶ Boddy, "A Job to Do," 3.

⁴⁷ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 47.

- ⁴⁸ Matthew Derby, “Between the Poles of Biting & Earnest: An Interview with George Saunders,” interview by Matthew Derby, *A Journal of Literature and Art* 35, (2001), 90–91.
- ⁴⁹ Dini, *Consumerism*, 2, 11–12.
- ⁵⁰ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 15.
- ⁵¹ Boddy, “A Job to Do,” 34.
- ⁵² Cheney, “Way We Name Things,” 85
- ⁵³ Hayes-Brady, “Language,” 28.
- ⁵⁴ Orr and Orr, *Eliminating Waste in Business*, 187.
- ⁵⁵ Kelly, “Language between Lyricism and Corporatism,” 47.
- ⁵⁶ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 47.
- ⁵⁷ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 92.
- ⁵⁸ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 16
- ⁵⁹ Engeström, “Values,” 202.
- ⁶⁰ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 30.
- ⁶¹ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 31.
- ⁶² Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 21.
- ⁶³ Hird, “Waste,” 107.
- ⁶⁴ Thompson, *Rubbish Theory*, 9.
- ⁶⁵ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 22.
- ⁶⁶ Hird, “Waste,” 114.
- ⁶⁷ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 112–115.
- ⁶⁸ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 102.
- ⁶⁹ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 106; Rando, “George Saunders,” 443.
- ⁷⁰ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 102.
- ⁷¹ Rando points out that in “Sea Oak” it seems that “space is organized around corporate landmarks (like the view of FedEx from Sea Oak), and that Lloyd’s and perhaps the narrator’s lives can be depressingly reduced to the logistics of storage of their selves. Lives in ‘Sea Oak’ are so diminished that they are simply stored in rooms by the highway, just as we store the necessary junk that we cannot throw away but prefer to keep out of sight,” which identifies a resemblance between working-class lives, states of objecthood, and waste. Rando, “George Saunders,” 447.
- ⁷² Rando, “George Saunders,” 450.

⁷³ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 102.

⁷⁴ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 102. In “George Saunders and the Postmodern Working Class,” Rando includes a note to explain that the family in “Sea Oak” are “precariously above the poverty line.” He uses textual details regarding the protagonist and Aunt Bernie’s working hours and salary in addition to the “2000 HHS Poverty Guidelines,” which states that the poverty threshold for a six-person family was just under \$23,000, and “History of Federal Minimum Wage Rates” to make calculated estimations of income. He explains that “in 2000, the federal minimum wage was \$5.15,” and that “if Bernie works at DrugTown for forty hours per week, her yearly income would be below \$11,000.” Rando, “George Saunders,” 444.

⁷⁵ Engeström, “Values,” 202; Thompson, *Rubbish Theory*, 9.

⁷⁶ Engeström, “Values,” 206.

⁷⁷ Engeström, “Values,” 206.

⁷⁸ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 111.

⁷⁹ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 66.

⁸⁰ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 66.

⁸¹ Engeström, “Values,” 202.

⁸² Dini, *Consumerism*, 9.

⁸³ Dini, *Consumerism*, 9.

⁸⁴ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 113.

⁸⁵ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 121.

⁸⁶ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 112.

⁸⁷ Michael Trussler, “Everyday Zombies: Ethics and the Contemporary in ‘Sea Oak’ and ‘Brad Carrigan, American,’” in *George Saunders: Critical Essays*, ed. Phillip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff (New York: Palgrave, 2017), 207–208.

⁸⁸ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 119.

⁸⁹ Saunders, *Pastoralia*, 16.

⁹⁰ Culler, “Junk and Rubbish,” 8.

⁹¹ Thompson, *Rubbish Theory*, 9.