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Discards & Diverse Economies: Reuse in Rural Maine

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DISCARDS & DIVERSE ECONOMIES:

REUSE IN RURAL MAINE

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A DISSERTATION

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An Abstract of the Dissertation Presented
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This dissertation presents an ethnographic exploration of diverse reuse economies in rural Maine in an effort to illuminate both how used goods move between people and organizations, as well as the value of that movement for people and communities. In response to a growing number of calls for research into the social dimensions of circular economies, this research explores the varied and uneven impacts of materials reuse as they are experienced by local participants. This work uses a qualitative approach, drawing on two main methods: participant observation in reuse establishments and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with reuse participants. This rich qualitative data provides a detailed picture of reuse activities at a local scale, and helps us understand the complex relationships formed and perpetuated through reuse.

This research presents three important contributions to the literature on reuse and circular economies. First, there are strong associations between reuse practices (buying, selling, lending, and gifting used goods) and social capital. This suggests that reuse practices might contribute to the social fabric of communities, building trust, relationships, cooperation, and support. Yet my research also highlights the negative consequences of social capital, such as when people are excluded from networks, resources, and opportunities along racialized and classed divisions. My

research emphasizes that both reuse and social capital must be understood as complex practices that have the potential to exclude as well as include. Policymakers and community members eager to contribute to localized wellbeing must understand and plan for these complex effects as they create supports for localized reuse. Secondly, this research illustrates key differences between localized reuse economies and globalized platforms for exchange. The social value offered by reuse economies is absent in online, frictionless exchanges that allow for goods to move quickly between buyers and sellers. I find that the friction – the slowness, awkwardness, and time-intensiveness – of localized reuse is what offers potential social benefits. Growing globalized reuse exchanges forecloses important opportunities to foster these important social networks. Finally, my work examines the labor that powers localized reuse economies. I find that the unwaged, voluntary labor of elderly volunteers is often unseen and unvalued. Indeed, volunteers are performing emotional and affective labor as they manage the surplus of their communities. This research suggests that policies designed to address material surplus do so with these laborers in mind.

Taken together this dissertation envisions localized reuse economies as diverse economies defined by complexity and social relationships. These findings offer policymakers and local decisionmakers solutions for promoting just and equitable localized circular economies.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, who made this work possible:

To my grandparents, who taught me that it's okay to bite off more than you can chew if you have a good time with it.

To my parents, who taught me that it's never too late to do what you love.

To my sister, who taught me (almost) everything else.

To Alan and Zora, who are everything.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many ways for a dissertation to not exist. An interesting idea can be squashed in its delicate, early form when it is too fragile for criticism. Life circumstances can shift wildly, uprooting plans and extending research timelines. The research might be (and almost undoubtedly will be) messy, unfolding in ways that are difficult to interpret. That's all before the writing stage, when the dissertation seems to actively reject coming into the world. To bring a dissertation into existence is a feat that cannot be accomplished alone. This dissertation would not exist without my advisor and mentor, Dr. Cindy Isenhour. Her unceasing support, unfailing enthusiasm, and incredible generosity helped me grow as a scholar and as a person. She taught me the joy of research: telling great stories, uncovering new ideas in the data, and above all, helping people understand why it all matters. She read hundreds (perhaps thousands?) of pages of grants and papers, providing comments that got straight to the heart of the issue at hand. Cindy has been my teacher, friend, and champion – and I am forever grateful. I look forward to many years of collaboration and friendship.

My most heartfelt thanks also go to all of the reusers in "Jordan" and "Mill Town." In addition to welcoming me into your homes and organizations, you fed me and clothed me (and Zora!). You taught me so much about reuse, and what it means to be a part of your community. I cannot thank you enough for your time, energy, and enthusiasm. I hope that this dissertation, as well as the work we've done together along the way, is helpful to you in some way.

I was honored to work with and learn from a group of scholars who I admire immensely. I thank Dr. Linda Silka, who never let me leave her office without something new to read, and who continues to teach me about community engagement and public scholarship. I thank Dr. Lisa Neuman, who helped me reckon with anthropology's past while also helping me see its

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction: Waste, wastelands, and circular economies

Environmental pressures are increasingly calling into question the viability of linear systems of production-consumption-disposal, where resources are extracted to produce goods which are consumed and then discarded. This linear system not only contributes to the waste of resources, but is also linked to climate change, as the provision of materials goods is, according to some calculations, responsible for the largest portion of greenhouse gas emissions in the United States (EPA 2009). The impact of a linear system of production-consumption-disposal is uneven – borne particularly by those people and places rendered disposable in the ever-evolving search for resources and profit. In seeking out new resource frontiers, capitalist processes leave behind ruins – places and things that have been "used up" from the perspective of industrial capital (Johnstone and Lionais 2004). Yet scholars of wastelands and post-industrial ruins argue that these spaces, though degraded, can be generative of new and diverse forms of value (Hoag, Bertoni, and Bubandt 2018; A. Tsing 2015). And indeed, those who study discarded materials – that which is cast off – outline the shifting regimes of value that allow for waste to find new life (Bohlin 2019, 2020; Reno 2016b).

Scholars have illustrated how people on the margins find value in waste as a means of getting by, making a living, and enacting fuller life projects (e.g., Saethre 2020; K. M. Millar 2018; Fredericks 2018; Giles 2018). Yet as we reckon with the "end of cheap nature" (Moore 2014) characterized by the scarcity of artificially cheap raw materials, there are growing efforts to revalue waste that stem from a global capitalist framework. In this sense, waste is viewed as an input into productive processes – a means of making a profit rather than making a living. These competing ways of viewing waste make for contested terrain. For as we seek to address the environmental harms of linear systems of production-consumption-disposal, we must also

attend to the ways in which those on the edges of a global capitalist system have always seen waste as a tool for creating a different kind of life.

Waste is, itself, a contested term. Dini writes that "waste is the product of a process […] This temporal dimension endows waste with narrative qualities: with its very presence a waste object signals that something has come before" (2016, 5). While the act of discarding may perceived as the severing of a relationships, then, it is also an inescapable indicator of sociality. Yet waste is more than a symbol of value or relationality. It is material, and its materiality has consequences for people who live and work in its shadow. Efforts to revalue discards must inevitably confront the symbolic power of waste as well as its material effects on the world. Waste is both problem and potential. It contains powerful contradictions –risk, exclusion, dirt, and decay – as well as the potential for future worlds and other ways of being.

Here I draw together studies of post-capitalist spaces and wasted objects to explore the diverse forms of value that emerge within rural reuse economies. Understanding this value is critical as scholars and policymakers alike seek development solutions for post-industrial spaces that "don't matter" (Rodríguez-Pose 2018) according to normative economic indicators, as well as for the discarded surplus of a linear system of production-consumption-disposal. The growing momentum of "circular" economic logics has captured the imagination of actors who are eager to reframe discarded materials as resources (e.g., O'Neill 2019; EMF 2013). "Circular economies" are systems which prioritize the redesign, reuse, recycling, and remanufacturing of resources in order to eliminate the concept of waste (EMF 2013; Geissdoerfer et al. 2017; Gregson et al. 2015). Reuse, in particular, is a critical component of circularity because it is focused on "object durability, so that repeated usage can take place" (Vaughan, Cook, and Trawick 2007, 128). Reuse practices cycle still-valuable goods through economies *in their original forms* – preserving

the labor, energy, materials, and water embedded in material goods. Circular systems, then, are meant to recognize the valuable resources embodied in material goods.

Yet despite the narrative simplicity of the circular economy, there is significant complexity contained within the concept. Redesign, reuse, recycling, and remanufacturing are distinct processes, and their underlying logics may compete with one another (Mourad 2016). Further, these processes are not explored with equal enthusiasm in the academic literature or policy spaces (Ghisellini, Cialani, and Ulgiati 2016; Kirchherr, Reike, and Hekkert 2017). Within the world of waste, an interest in technological solutions has long dominated over social and political approaches (Strasser 1999). Further, attempts to solve waste issues with technological "solutions" often exacerbate inequality and fail to address the underlying issues, such as pollution and toxicity or the production of goods that were never meant to be reused or recovered (Pellow 2002; MacBride 2011). There is a need, then, to adopt human-centered, social, and relational approaches to understanding how circular economies work in practice (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017; Hobson 2016).

My work is an effort to examine the social processes fundamental to circular economies through a focus on materials reuse. This work is motivated in part by the demonstrated environmental benefits of materials reuse, which show that extending product lifespans and offsetting the purchase of new goods can reduce waste and associated energy and natural resource use (MacBride 2011; D. R. Cooper and Gutowski 2015; T. Cooper 2005). Yet as I will demonstrate in this manuscript, our understanding of reuse as a social process must become significantly more complex if we aim to create fair, inclusive, and sustainable circular economies. This manuscript explores the social processes fundamental to the circular economy through a qualitative case study of reuse in a rural community conducted over the course of five

years of research, including six months of engaged ethnographic work in localized reuse. In what follows I first explore the existing literature on reuse, followed by an explanation of the methods used in this research. I introduce the cultural context in which this research unfolds before offering a preview of the three substantive chapters of this manuscript.

Reuse: A Social Practice with Deep Historical Roots

While the discourse around circularity often presents reuse as a novel component of waste reduction systems, reuse practices are nothing new (Fontaine 2008; Strasser 1999). Reuse itself is a broad term that can encompass activities ranging from repair (prepare for reuse) to sharing and lending (Isenhour et al. 2017). Here, however, I bound my definition of reuse to the exchange of used objects through a non-temporary transfer of ownership. This definition excludes temporary use agreements, like leases, loans, and rentals, as well as activities that make goods suitable for reuse, like repair. Even with a narrow definition, reuse practices can take on an astounding and diverse array of forms, including individuals buying, selling, and giving away goods at yard sales (Herrmann 1997; Crawford 2014), community members running pop-up markets where goods are sold or given away (Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera 2012), donation-based charity thrift shops (Gregson and Crewe 2003; Larsen 2019), street markets (Ta 2017), flea markets and swap meets (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988), and more.

The literature on reuse indicates that it is deeply social, relying on trust (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988) and cementing ties between neighbors and strangers alike (Herrmann 1997; Crawford 2014; Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera 2012). It is not just the sites of exchange that are social, either. Scholars argue that used goods are "sticky" with affect (Herrmann 2015), linking us to others through the stories we tell ourselves about objects and their past lives (Bohlin 2019). Some scholars contend that used goods are lively – that they act upon people, creating relational links through their materiality (Lipman 2018; Bennett 2009). Yet if there are hints and

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suggestions in the literature on reuse – that it is generative of social value – there has been little focused attention on this issue.

Much of the scholarly literature has approached reuse in a piecemeal fashion, exploring one form rather than the ways in which reuse practices might interlink. Yet this network perspective is increasingly important as we consider what reuse might look like in more circular economic systems. Used goods do not move exclusively through one form of reuse, nor do people participate exclusively in one practice. Instead, a network approach allows us to understand how reuse economies contribute to the social and economic fabric of communities. Considering reuse as a sector is a methodological challenge, however, as reuse practices defy easy categorization and are not inscribed in official metrics and economic measurements (Isenhour et al. 2017). It is not possible to tally the revenue generated from the reuse sector in the state of Maine – such figures simply do not exist. Even if they did, they would certainly be confounded by small-scale and non-profit reuse establishments, which often hold onto money briefly, only to pass it along to community organizations and local causes. In short, both the lack of official statistics and accounting, as well as the expansive and wide-ranging nature of the sector, call for a qualitative approach to exploring the meaning and value of reuse.

Methods: A Qualitative Approach to Exploring Reuse as a Social Practice

Qualitative research is a way of looking at and conducting research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers largely agree that qualitative research is based in natural settings rather than laboratories or other controlled environments (Creswell, 2007; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013), "since context is so heavily implicated in meaning" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 187). It is further defined by the use of a "researcher as instrument" (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), meaning that a human being collects data rather than a machine, tool, or software as may be common in quantitative research. This has implications for data

generation, as researchers are understood to bring their own values, perspectives, and beliefs to their work (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This means that rather than striving for objectivity – a value-free research process – qualitative approaches identify and acknowledge the ways in which knowledge is value-laden and subjective. A qualitative approach uses multiple sources of data (Creswell, 2007), and an emergent design that can and should change as the specific context demands (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The aims of qualitative research tend toward the development of contextual knowledge rather than grand theory and general truths (Leahy & Anderson, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Importantly, qualitative research is not merely a supplement to quantitative approaches, but instead "an integral part of the complex whole that comprises scientific research" (Bernard, 2011, p. 20).

Understanding the complexity of reuse as a social process demands a qualitative approach. In each of the three substantive chapters in this manuscript I illustrate how purely quantitative measures relating to reuse economies can mask inequality, injustice, and a lack of well-being. In the policy and non-profit space, growth of the circular economy is emerging as an important focus, with many actors arguing that the circular economy needs to "grow" through metrics like technology adoption, waste diversion, and circular jobs (see, for example: Vangsbo and Breen 2018; Gladek, Kennedy, and Thorin 2018; Closed Loop Partners 2019; UPS/GreenBiz 2016). This focus on growth can be seen, for example, when some proponents of reuse argue that we must "scale up" efforts to achieve sufficient outcomes in waste reduction – measuring progress in terms of tonnages diverted from landfill or incineration (MacBride 2011; Minter 2019). The growing online resale market ("re-commerce") is experiencing significant growth according to industry leaders (ThredUp 2020). This growth is touted as fueling the expansion and reach of circular economies (ThredUp 2021). Similarly, scholars and policymakers have

been eagerly seeking solutions for the growth of social capital, measured in quantitative terms at large scales (e.g., Sawhill 2020), and circular economy thought leaders have argued that circularity can lead to the creation or reconstruction of social capital (EMF 2013). The idea of "growing" a circular economy requires critical analysis, particularly with regard to the impact of growth, expansion, and quantitative measurement on small and marginalized actors who find pleasure, make a living, and create their communities through localized reuse.

It seems that a kind of growth logic has pervaded the circular economy. Here, what is grown is not GDP or materials use, but instead circularity itself. In this way, growth in circularity is measured as a net good. I adopt a qualitative approach to this project to complicate our understanding of circularity, and of progress toward more circular economies. The tendency among waste practitioners and scholars is to measure quantitatively: tons diverted from landfills, sector and job growth, and so on. Yet my work demonstrates both the negative impact and the positive social potential resulting from the diversion of materials from landfills (Ch.3). The rapid uptake of the concept of social capital is another source of "positive" growth. Many scholars and policymakers argue that an increase in social capital (in a community, a state, a country, or a region) leads to uniform increases in well-being. Yet I argue that growth in social capital cannot be read in a linear fashion, but instead must be understood as a complex descriptor of complicated and often uneven relationships (Ch.2). Finally, advocates of circularity argue that we need growth in circular business models to advance the sector and bring the green economy to life (Minter 2019; MacBride 2011), yet my scholarship makes a distinction between global growth in reuse and localized community-level interventions (Ch.4). The answers to questions about the social value of reuse are complex, and occasionally contradictory. Reuse is generative

of sociality and conflict – and the qualitative approach used here is meant to retain that complexity in an attempt to bring these practices to light.

This manuscript, then, is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the diverse secondhand economies situated largely within two rural Maine towns: Mill Town and neighboring Jordan. Building on several years of research on reuse across the state of Maine (see: Isenhour et al. 2017; Berry and Isenhour 2019; Berry, Bonnet, and Isenhour 2019; Isenhour and Berry 2020), from May 2019-December 2019 I engaged in a wide range of reuse practices, from volunteering in local and national thrift stores, a local service club, and a home goods bank to visiting yard sales, antique shops, book sales, and charity events. I conducted semi-structured interviews (Bernard 2011) with volunteers, managers, and board members of reuse organizations, as well as with individuals buying, selling, and browsing for used goods – both in person and online (n=54). These interviews lasted between 40 minutes and two hours. Interviews were inductive (Svendsen, 2006), allowing me to follow lines of inquiry as they emerged. I transcribed all audio recordings of interviews verbatim to capture the nuances of what was said (Kowal and O'Connell 2014). My field notes were a form of active reflection as well as a means of capturing ethnographic data from participation observation, and included methodological, descriptive, and analytic components (Bernard 2011). I coded all data in NVivo 12 for Mac (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2018) using iterative coding cycles where codes were created and refined based on subsequent data generation (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

I entered my research phase with a series of questions in hand: How do social, cultural, and economic factors affect how and in what ways people participate in second-hand economies? What diverse forms of capital are associated with distributive second-hand economies? How is value differentially assigned to objects and economic practices? These questions served as

launch-points for my investigation, guiding the questions I asked and early observations I made during my fieldwork. Yet I also let the project unfold based on concurrent data analysis (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2013). As themes emerged, I followed their trails, revising my questions and honing my observations on those new sites of interest. Critically, while my project was initially centered around diverse forms of capital in a "depleted" (Johnstone and Lionais 2004) rural community, I found that my fieldwork led me toward issues of capitalist excess, the sometimes uneven accumulation of social resources, and the often invisible value of reuse labor. My initial focus on depletion was motivated by the idea that reuse could be a form of resilience (particularly as related to alternative forms of capital) in the face of economic decline. Yet as I will show, the themes that emerged through the process of conducting fieldwork and analyzing data paint a picture that is more complex than I had anticipated.

By allowing me into their homes, places of business, and non-profit organizations, participants allowed me entry into their lives. This is not unique within the field of anthropology, but it is a humbling experience, and one that I acknowledge with sincere gratitude. The difficulty of doing justice to the experiences of participants is made more challenging because they are my peers, neighbors, and friends. Many participants were residents of rural communities, where, as someone told me "everyone knows everyone." I have attempted here to maintain confidentiality of participants by changing small details in descriptions of individuals, and by assigning pseudonyms for places, individuals, and organizations. I struggled with the decision to use pseudonyms, as many organizational leaders were eager to share publicly the work they are doing in their communities. Yet for others, the process of sharing information was fraught with emotions. Individuals worried they would be viewed as bragging about their involvement in local

activities, or that their words were too gossipy. For these reasons, among others, I elected to protect the confidentiality of all participants who contributed to this research project.

This manuscript is an attempt to contribute to anthropological theory on alternative economies, post-capitalist politics, discard studies, and social capital. Yet this research always had another purpose, as well: to give back to those who gave their time, energy, affection, and resources to help make this research possible. As such, I include in the Appendix some examples of my efforts to use research findings to share information, generate interest in reuse, highlight the work of local partners, and aid in decision-making. These efforts were critical for developing relationships of trust and support, and for creating a kind of reciprocity between myself and those who so generously participated in this project.

Geographies, Places, and Practices: Networks of Reuse in Rural Maine

My work is framed as a study of networks, of reuse practices that span geographical boundaries. Yet these practices spiral out from a single community – a town that I call "Mill Town" – emerging from its residents and neighbors, and extending beyond its town lines into other communities, states, and countries. I started in Mill Town because of its industrial history, as I sought a place that might be defined as "depleted" – used up from the perspective of monetary capital and investment (Johnstone and Lionais 2004). In what follows, I provide a brief summary of Mill Town's experience with its paper mill to highlight the unevenness of the town's productive history. The mill is a source of significant pride and identity, but also constant uncertainty. Its history is one of investment and decline – of industrial precarity and unevenness. I highlight this history here in part to give a sense of the community, but also to show how local and state resources are – again and again – funneled into productive industries that continually fail to contribute to the ongoing social wellbeing of residents. The history of capitalist

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unevenness suggests, to me, the need to look to diverse economies – like the reuse networks in rural Maine – to envision a socially vibrant and thriving community.

Mill Town: A history of industry

Mill Town has had a mill since 1798, and yet even that narrative evokes a sense of stability. In truth, Mill Town has lived with the echoes of mills and the mirages of mills to come – it is constantly recalling the past and imagining the future. This little town in rural Maine was once a center for industry in the state. A local newspaper reported that "in the early 1800s [Mill Town] had more sawmills for its size than just about any town in the world" (Portland Press Herald 1950). Yet while industry was once abundant in Mill Town, there is one particular mill that residents speak of when they refer to "the mill." A number of mills have operated at the site of "the mill" since 1860 (BDN 2014). The mill has always operated in fits and starts, despite a narrative of permanence and stability (Boston Daily Globe 1894). With each shut down of the facility came promises of future calm. In 1897, after a two-week pause, the mill operators reported that "it is all right now, and is expected to run steadily from now on" (Boston Daily Globe 1897). The following 60 years do seem to be a time of steady running for the mill, yet in 1967, the mill began to experience some rumblings of change.

The existing mill rebranded itself, then joined in a global merger with another large company (BDN 2014; Biddeford Journal 1967). By 1970 there were reports that an expanded mill facility in Mill Town was "one-fifth of a mile long. Tissue is made on a 100-ton-capacity tissue machine. There's a 394 by 216-foot warehouse. And this new mill adds 100 to 150 employees in the Mill Town area" (Sleeper 1970). Expansion continued into the late 1970's with the addition of high-speed tissue machines and the employment of an additional 100 workers (Kennebec Journal 1977). In 1983, the mill changed hands again. This time, the mill was sold as part of a "175 million package deal" to another corporation (Niedt 1983). In 1990, 780 people

were employed at the mill. By 1995 that number would be reduced to 580 (Lagasse 1995). Just a few years later in 1997, the mill merged again – a move "designed to produce annual savings of $150 million to $200 million a year" for the companies, and not likely, according to the companies to result in "head-count reduction" (Cedar Rapids Gazette 1997). A spokesman from the new corporation announced that "employees will have a good, strong, growing company" (Janesville Gazette 2000). Yet mills across the country began to close once the deal was completed (Associated Press 2001; Kates 2001).

In 2003, the downsizing would come to Mill Town. In March, the mill curtailed the use of its two paper machines, affecting 60 employees (BDN 2003). These machines were shut down for two weeks "because of a sluggish economy." Of the workers affected, company officials commented that "we appreciate their dedication […] but [the company] must focus on business strategies for the good of all of our employees, customers, and shareholders" (Turcotte 2003a). This temporary, two-week shutdown extended to eight weeks, and then quickly became indefinite. "It's just the situation at hand," said a communications manager for the mill (Dolloff 2003). Indeed, mill work became increasingly unstable during this time, and "mills send workers home for weeks at a time when paper orders are scarce" (Wickenheiser 2003). The mill planned to retire the two tissue manufacturing machines. This move put 300 people out of work, and shifted tissue operations to other locations, while the Mill Town mill would continue operating the pulp and dryer, "enabling the mill to retain more than 200 jobs for now" (Portsmouth Herald 2003). A mill worker comments that "it's obvious now […] that the company had no intention of staying." The mill at this time represented 35% of Mill Town's tax base (Turcotte 2003b).

Even as the tissue machines were being dismantled for shipment to other parts of the country, and the company was finalizing its "bumping" list for determining which workers

would be permanently laid off, the state of Maine intervened with a "multifaceted plan to reduce costs and restore jobs" (Hauger 2003a). As part of this plan, the State of Maine purchased a landfill from the mill at a cost of $25 million, alleviating a major cost for the company and allowing them to invest in technologies that would improve their production efficiency (Hauger 2003b). After confirming a three-part deal, including the landfill purchase agreement, the mill began to consider who would be able to go back to work – a change welcomed by Governor Baldacci, who praised the mill for retaining "150 manufacturing and support positions" – half the number that had been laid off earlier in the year. The governor commented that "the paper industry is a Maine staple […] his administration will do everything in its power to maintain the enterprise in the state" (Hauger 2003a). After the landfill agreement, the mill owners continued to return to Mill Town and state government to request support, including for an updated boiler. The response is "anything that's good for [the mill] is good for Mill Town" (Dolloff 2004a). Yet even as the state was finalizing the landfill deal amid public outcry, [the mill] was cutting back on tissue production "because of a nationwide decline in retail sales" with a handful of employees to be laid off (Turcotte 2004).

Later in 2004, 15 more people would be laid off when two tissue lines were shut down (Dolloff 2004b). By October, another 50 layoffs were announced when the mill elected to shut down its tissue converting lines. By this time, the mill employed about 400 individuals (Dolloff 2004c). In November, 2005 the mill ownership participated in another merger. Governor Baldacci noted that he was assured that the new ownership "bought this company to grow it" (Dolloff 2005). In early 2006, questions bubbled to the surface about the new owner's plans for the mill. By early March, the response was "the mill continues to operate on a day-to-day basis" (Dolloff 2006a). Less than two weeks later, the mill would close. A mill spokesperson described

the change, saying "the mill's tissue and pulp manufacturing assets are no longer required to service our customer base" (Dolloff 2006b).

In September, four firms purchased the mill for $1 (Dolloff 2006c). Two years later, that partnership would file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, resulting in the loss of 160 jobs (Dolloff 2008). The mill was purchased again in late 2008, rebranded, and in October of 2009 it employed 190 people (Gagnon 2009). In August, 2014 the mill shut down again, putting 180 people out of work. One millworker describes his experience learning of the closure: "'They came up at 4 o'clock and said 'we don't need you to come in tomorrow. Go sign up for unemployment.'' He added that he had 'been through this a few times. Three times'" (Fishell and Ricker 2014). The mill sat vacant until 2018, when an international firm purchased it in the hopes of restarting operations and creating 100 jobs (Hoey 2018). The company was framed as a "savior" for a town at "rock bottom" (Barry and Spinski 2020), receiving over $12 million in state tax credits (Eichacker 2018). In February of 2020, the mill intended to idle for four to six weeks to update equipment. The newest company has promised to operate the mill for 100 years (Barry and Spinski 2020).

Post-Capitalist Politics & Alternative Economies

Mill Town's productive history highlights that idea that capitalism is patchy rather than all-encompassing (Gibson-Graham 2006a). Even in a town defined by its productive industry, the mill has always been inconstant – starting, stopping, opening, closing, hiring, and firing. This patchiness allows us to see that people have always needed to find ways to live and make a living in the absence of formal wage work. Mill Town's history is similar to that of many other industrial towns across the United States. If the patterns of the past indicate anything, it is that an industrial future is increasingly uncertain and unreliable (Ferguson 2015). This understanding encourages us to re-center our gaze on the diverse economies and practices that unfold alongside,

between, and in the margins of productive industry (Giles 2018; A. Tsing 2012). This re-centering allows us to see more than a town at a loss after the (repeated) departure of its mill, or people scrambling to make ends meet by buying used goods. Such narratives may have some truth to them, yet as I will describe in the chapters that follow, they do not tell the whole story. I found a vibrant sociality in Mill Town that was perpetuated, at least in part, by social processes of materials reuse. This dissertation, then, is an exploration not just of reuse economies, but of capitalist alternatives in rural communities.

A robust literature attends to the value that remains in places that have borne the brunt of capitalist extractive processes. These works emphasize not the dominating power of capitalism, but instead the potential that has always existed in the seams, edges, margins, and cracks of capitalist systems. For example, Anna Tsing (2015) explores diverse forms of value generated through matsutake mushroom foraging in post-extractive landscapes in the Pacific Northwest. Here the forest, no longer a lucrative site of extraction for lumber production, provides the disturbed habitat that matsutake mushrooms need to thrive. These mushrooms foster a kind of collaboration with precarious workers, who find both freedom and a sort of community in foraging in the forest. Scholars of diverse economies and post-capitalist politics encourage us to "[read] for difference, rather than dominance" (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 54). I see this as a call not to look at the power of capitalist processes to shape communities (as the mill did in Mill Town), but to explore the invisible economies that hide in plain sight, obscured by our focus on the one kind of (capitalist) economic form we tend to count, value, and support.

My focus on reuse economies in Mill Town, then, is motivated by a desire to understand one of the many diverse economies that is thriving alongside (and in the interstitial periods between) the mill. For if we cannot return to an industrial past (or indeed, might not want to), it

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is important to ask how people and communities might thrive in distributive circular economies. What challenges might we foresee in these diverse economies, and how can they be forestalled or prevented? And if reuse economies defy attempts at quantitative measurement, how can we make sense of the value generated within them? These questions hold relevance not just for an understanding of post-capitalist places and diverse economies, but also for our understanding of circular economies. If we seek to reshape our economic structures towards circularity, we might look to those people and places that have been quietly enacting alternative economic forms through resource reuse.

Production & (Re)Distribution: Things to Come

In what follows I aim to address these questions using reuse economies as a case study. Each chapter is formulated as a standalone article, yet together they tell the story of a sector, a set of lifeways, and the problems and potential of circularity in rural America.

Chapter 2: Rethinking "Depletion": Social capital in rural reuse economies

Chapter 2 explores long-held assumptions of links between financial "depletion", reuse, and social capital – the idea that social networks have value and can be leveraged for collective gain. In the context of depletion, I sought to understand how secondhand economies – the exchange of used goods through sale, swap, barter, or gifting – might contribute to community resilience through the development of social capital. I suggest that narratives of financial depletion neglect the non-monetary value associated with reuse economies, but that claims of building social capital must be analyzed critically. While reuse is certainly associated with sociality, and with indicators of social capital, the presence of social capital is not, in itself, an indicator of well-being. Instead, social capital may be generative of inequality and exclusion as much as belonging, trust, and mutual support. I argue that while reuse may be associated with

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social capital, there is a critical role for public policy to ensure that the benefits and burdens of reuse are spread evenly.

Chapter 3: Circular Economies of Place

In Chapter 3 I move outward in scale, analyzing a shift in reuse economies toward globalized, online reuse platforms. As we move rapidly toward more circular economies, the need to scale up reuse activities feels increasingly pressing. Yet the "frictionless" transactions these markets offer may also eliminate the social potential of reuse – a critical component of circularity. If we take the social dimensions of circularity seriously, I argue that we must look to friction as an important element of reuse economies. For in slowing transactions and bringing in human elements to exchange, friction is precisely what may be generative of social relationships and community well-being.

Chapter 4: Glut: Affective labor and the burden of abundance

Chapter 4 explores the burden of abundance within a capitalist system, examining issues of affective labor within the non-profit reuse sector and the glut of stuff they receive as donations. If we read success in circular economies as tons diverted from the landfill or incinerator, this chapter asks what "successful" divergence means for those who are tasked with managing a community's discarded goods. When we measure success in terms of quantity, we neglect issues of the quality of goods donated, and the moral and emotional weight of this labor.

Conclusion: Complicating Reuse

Together the chapters in this manuscript attempt to paint a complex picture of reuse in rural Maine. My hope is that this nuanced understanding of value, relationships, and materials will aid both scholars and policymakers in developing circular economies that are just, fair, and sustainable.

CHAPTER 2: DEPLETION OR DIVERSE ECONOMIES? EXPLORING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN RURAL MAINE REUSE ECONOMIES

Introduction: In search of depletion

It is easy to describe Maine in terms of what it lacks. It is a poor state (U.S. Census Bureau 2020), with the highest incidence of food insecurity in New England (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2020). Maine is, by some metrics, the most rural state in the United States (US Census Bureau 2012), lacking proximity to large urban centers. Its economy historically relied on access to its vast forests. When the use of wood pulp began to dominate over rags as a raw ingredient for papermaking in the late 1860's (Strasser 1999, 91), paper mills sprung up across the state. A 1910 report on Maine's economy notes that "there is no manufacturing industry in the State so widely scattered, the number of mills being several times greater than that of any other industry" (State of Maine 1910, 32). That same report indicates that by 1910, "on the basis of the value of products, the pulp and paper industry exceeds any other single industry in the State" (State of Maine 1910, 38). Yet in recent years these same mills that were once a dominant economic and political force, have shuttered across Maine, leading to devastating economic crises (Sambides 2017).

This project was conceived in response to Maine's perceived deficits. When I began this work, I was looking for an industrial ruin. Following Tsing (2015), I sought to work in places that had been desolated by capitalist processes to find the life that was left behind. I sought to understand resilience; how people made do and got by in post-industrial spaces, in part, through the exchange of used goods. I expected to find life that was "ordinary, chronic, and cruddy" in these "economies of abandonment" (Povinelli 2011, 14) as people experienced the flight of capital and industry in rural communities. My research site would be a place that "didn't matter" (Rodríguez-Pose 2018) – a rural place left behind by global capitalism, with few opportunities

for consuming new goods – and therefore, a vibrant reuse economy. I looked for a town that had experienced the "natural disaster" (Sambides 2017) of a recent mill closure. Yet I struggled to find a place that had experienced the *right kind* of crisis. I sought devastation, yet from what I could tell, I saw only a sort of normalcy. Eventually, I settled on the community where I live: a rural community that had experienced the loss of its mill in recent years. I felt vaguely uncomfortable with the choice. It didn't match my ideas of what a post-industrial ruin should look like. And the narrative of the mill closure was not a clean break. Instead of a devastating departure, the mill had opened and closed, opened and closed, and opened and closed in a repetitive cycle of disruptions rather than a single lightning crack of economic destruction.

My guiding framework was the concept of "depletion." The term comes from the economic development literature, where scholars argue that depleted communities are "areas that have lost much of their economic rationale as *space*, while retaining high attachments and social relations of *place*" (Johnstone and Lionais 2004, 217). Depleted communities are not "ghost towns" (Johnstone 2011), but rather places experiencing economic stagnation and job losses while retaining strong social connections and community life. In the context of depletion, I sought to understand how secondhand economies – the exchange of used goods through sale, swap, barter, or gifting – might contribute to community resilience through the development of social capital. The idea that the sociality of reuse economies might contribute to rural communities was especially attractive given my own background in urban sustainability. Coming to Maine from New York City, and interested in the environmental impacts of overproduction and consumption, the idea that rural reuse economies might have hidden social benefits had a neat simplicity to it. This idea stemmed from a commonly held assumption that secondhand economies are perpetuated through a lack of access to markets, a lack of monetary capital, a lack

of options. A lack of productive industry, in this view, is linked to secondhand markets because people are assumed not to have the money to purchase new goods (Isenhour and Berry 2020). This received wisdom was shared with me again and again – at conferences, from reviewers, and from people eager to opine about the roots of Maine's strong secondhand economies. Following this thread, I wondered whether secondhand exchanges in "depleted" communities might help people get by in the absence of formal wage work.

Yet from the start, my "depleted" community refused to cooperate with the definitions suggested in the literature. Even though the concept of depletion emphasizes sociality and community life, I struggled to apply it to my field site. Despite official measurements that indicate a higher than average poverty rate (US Census Bureau 2017), many of my participants described Mill Town as economically thriving. Few referenced the mill closure at all, and if they did, it was with a sense of indifference rather than loss. I met Karen at a deserted yard sale. As we sat in her open garage on a hot summer day, waiting for shoppers to come, she told me about her history working for the mill as it closed and reopened repeatedly. She spoke with no apparent emotion about the mill, despite the fact that she and her husband had both worked there, telling me that "some people have really tried to hold out and struggle and wait until the mill reopens. It's like, you know, you need to move on" (Karen, 6/23/19). My trouble with depletion was that it centered notions of loss and deficit. It emphasized what the community lacked, and yet the people I spoke to, on the whole, did not describe a lack. They were not distressed, despairing, dependent, or declining (Fallows and Fallows 2018). Many – though not all – were hopeful and forward-looking. My engagement with Mill Town and my research participants led me to reframe my work. Rather than using "a negative construction, defining something by what it is *not* rather than what it is" (K. M. Millar 2018, 132), I began to look for positive economies –

what is present rather than what is absent. With this restructured frame, I would ask not "how do people get by in the absence of monetary capital?" but instead "what makes these lifeways possible?"

Indeed, the issue of framing is critical for this research. My work largely supports the arguments of Johnstone and colleagues in their work on depletion as they argue that "depleted" communities benefit from strong social relationships and diverse forms of entrepreneurship (see, for example: Johnstone 2013, 2011; Johnstone and Lionais 2004). What I find troubling in the term "depleted" is the descriptor itself, which "suggests a fall from grace. When attached to community it implies that the community's present situation marks an economic demise from a past era of prosperity and economic growth" (Johnstone 2013, 79). The term "depleted" seems to reify a narrative that naturalizes a calm, stable, industrial past. Yet while I selected my site based on deficits (a lack of industry, a perceived lack of monetary capital), I would pursue my project as a search for assets. With this objective in mind, I reframed my focus on social capital to see what use could be made of it in the context of secondhand economies. I asked first what social capital looks like in the diverse – and largely invisible – economies within Mill Town and its environs, as well as whether social capital is an asset or whether the concept obscures more than it illuminates.

In what follows I first explore the epistemological roots of social capital, following some of the key branches of this theory as scholars across disciplines engage with it. Next, I use a multi-dimensional framework developed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to analyze whether and how social capital is present within secondhand economies in Mill Town and its surrounding communities. Finally, I conclude with an analysis

of the findings to attempt to answer the question: does social capital help us see positive economies in what might otherwise be termed "depleted" communities?

Literature Review: Capitals

There are hints in the literature – though it has not been explored in any depth – that secondhand economies are generative of and perhaps generated by social capital (Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera 2012; Crawford 2014; Botsman and Rogers 2010). Yet these suggestions are also based on a kind of received wisdom – a sense that secondhand exchanges naturally lead to the development of networks, norms, trust, and reciprocity. These links are underexplored and have little connection to the deeply heterogeneous literature on social capital (see, for example: Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer 2015; Bourdieu [1986] 2004; Coleman 1988; Portes 1998; Adger 2003; Fine 1999; Scrivens and Smith 2013). Here I untangle the epistemological roots of social capital in an effort to see what can be made of this concept in the context of secondhand economies.

The idea of "the economy" as a singular entity that can be measured and managed by experts is a cultural and historical construction (Mitchell, 2011), and its use often implies a *capitalist economy*. Yet ample research has described the breadth and diversity of economic practices that fall outside of this narrow definition, including unpaid labor like domestic care work (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Johanisova, Crabtree, & Fraňková, 2013), self-provisioning (Kosnik, 2018), "informal" work (Hart, 1985), and non-market exchanges of material goods (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera, 2012; Crawford, 2014; Herrmann, 1997; Malinowski, 1984). Bourdieu argues that the narrow definition of the economy "has prevented the constitution of a general science of the economy of practices, which would treat mercantile exchange as a particular case of exchange in all its forms" (Bourdieu, 1986/2004, p. 16). I take as a starting

point that plural and diverse *capitals* are accumulated and exchanged within equally plural and diverse *economies* that extend beyond capitalist exchanges.

As with economy, the term capital tends to impose a narrow definition of "economic capital or productive wealth which can be employed for the creation of more wealth" (Wall, Ferrazzi, & Schryer, 1998, p. 303). In this sense, (monetary) capital has a single dimension: quantity. Bourdieu argues that there are multiple forms of capital that extend beyond "the one form recognized by economic theory" (1986/2004), identifying a range that includes economic, cultural, and social capital. He argues that capital is a "social relation" (1984, p. 113) that has three dimensions: quantity, composition, and change over time. These capitals can be accumulated and exchanged for each other, although not without investments of labor and time (Bourdieu, 1986/2004). Accumulated capital – in all its forms – is power (Bourdieu, 1986/2004), and can produce and reproduce the economic and social order (Lebaron, 2003).

Monetary Capital

While Bourdieu uses the term economic capital, I instead refer to monetary capital in an effort to avoid slipping back into an overly narrow definition of the economy. Monetary capital is, for Marx, accumulated labor (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 98), and as such represents a social relationship – between worker and capitalist and between worker and commodity – albeit, one that is hidden and mystified. Monetary capital is "immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights" (Bourdieu, 1986/2004, p. 16). In the form of money, monetary capital can "assume any meaning at all that its owner bestows upon it" (Hornborg, 2016, p. 39). It is highly legible, meaning that it is easy to quantify, track, and measure because there are systems in place for doing so. Monetary capital can be accumulated without limit, and is defined by its nearly limitless exchangeability (Hornborg, 2016). Monetary capital is a blunt measure: you have it or you don't. It cries out for quantitative

approaches to measurement: counting, normalizing, dividing, averaging. In the context of Mill Town, monetary capital as a measure would suggest economic depletion due to the recurring loss of industry. I will leave aside much mention of monetary capital in what follows so that I might turn my attention to another form of capital – one that promises to offer an opportunity for a qualitative assessment of the wealth of a community: social capital.

Social Capital

The idea of social capital is not new. Scholars have used or alluded to the term since the early 1900's (e.g., Hanifan, 1916). In 1944 Polanyi wrote that "man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships" (Polanyi, 2001, p. 48), which foreshadows current definitions of social capital as an asset. Social capital's epistemological pathway has branched, twisted, and circled, making any concise definition of the concept challenging. In the very broadest sense, social capital can be defined as the idea that "social networks have value" (Putnam, 2000, p. 11). Where the theory becomes complicated is in determining (1) what kinds of networks, and (2) what kinds of value. We can divide social capital theorists into two schools: the "public good" scholars (Wall, Ferrazzi, and Schryer 1998), including Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1995, 2000), who conceive of social capital as an unalloyed good that should be rebuilt in the face of its perceived decline in the United States; and the critical theorists (e.g. Bourdieu [1986] 2004; Lin 1999; Portes 1998), who see social capital as (re)productive of inequality and exclusion. I discuss each of these schools in further detail to illustrate some of their similarities and differences.

For the public good scholars, social capital is an asset that is linked to improved educational outcomes, safer streets, entrepreneurial success, innovation, and national-level economic prosperity (Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000; Malecki 2012). In this view, "social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be

possible (Coleman, 1988, p. S98). Putnam famously documented what he framed as the decline

of social capital in America, marked in part by fewer people participating in bowling leagues and

more people "bowling alone" (2000). This conceptualization has been heavily critiqued for

neglecting issues of class, power, and inequality (Fine, 1999; Naughton, 2014), being apolitical

(Schneider, 2008), and for ignoring the ways in which social capital can constrain human

behavior in addition to affording opportunities (Portes, 1998). Part of the critique of Putnam

centers on his unit of analysis. He applies social capital at the scale of regions and nations,

asserting that levels of social capital can help us understand the rise of democracy and economic

growth (Putnam 2000, 1995). When social capital is used at such a scale, however, it paints over

the inequalities and unevenness within regions, countries, and communities. To assert that the

United States – or even a state or town within the United States – has a certain amount of social

capital is to assert that all residents have access to that social capital as well. Studies of wealth

and inequality, however, directly contradict this idea (Piketty 2014).

One critical difference among some public goods scholars is the nature of social capital

as a resource. Putnam (2000), a political scientist, draws connections between social capital and

civic participation, which has implications for how he measures and understands social capital. It

can be measured at the community, state, or national level, and exists within groups. Importantly,

for Putnam, social capital is a *collective* resource. Coleman perceives social capital to "[inhere]

in the structure of relations between actors and among actors. It is not lodged either in the actors

themselves or in physical implements of production" (1988, S98). While it exists as a property of

relationships, it is useful to *individuals* to help them "achieve their interests" (Coleman 1988,

S101). In this sense, Coleman follows Bourdieu's ([1986] 2004) concept of social capital as a

means of advancement. Unlike Bourdieu, however, Coleman focuses mainly on the benefits of

social capital, neglecting the ways in which it can result in uneven power relationships and the reproduction of class and advantage.

Critical social capital theorists often acknowledge the benefits of social capital (to a select few), but emphasize the potential for inequality and exclusion as products of its accumulation. For Bourdieu, social capital is "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to […] membership in a group - which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit" (1986/2004, p. 21). This network-based capital is inherently exclusive. At the same time that it provides access to resources for some, it necessarily keeps others out (J. A. Schneider 2008). Portes seems to support this definition, writing that social capital is the "ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures" (1998, 6). These definitions suggest that social capital is certainly good for some people, but not without negative impacts for others. The very closed structures that can support collective action and promote safe communities can suppress individual choices and enforce homogeneity in communities (Portes 1998) by excluding those considered "outsiders" based on a wide array of criteria (e.g., geography, race, ethnicity, gender identity, or income). Other scholars note that the promotion of social capital can support a neoliberal agenda of small government, reduced services, and self-sufficient communities (Naughton 2014). These critical scholars highlight the uneven accumulation and impacts of social capital for individuals, groups, and communities.

These competing approaches to understanding social capital suggest that it is *either* wholly positive *or* a tool to reproduce advantage. Part of the difficulty in integrating these approaches is that they are often working toward different aims. For those who see social capital as a public good, including some scholars and many policymakers (Putnam 2000; Coleman

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1988; Prewitt, Mackie, and Habermann 2014; Sawhill 2020), the emphasis is on how to measure social capital, for its (positive) outcomes are often assumed. These texts rely largely on quantitative methods to assess the presence of social capital across and within populations. Many of the critical theorists who follow Bourdieu take issue with the methods and implicit assumptions of the public goods scholars (e.g., Fine 1999; Narotzky 2007; Durrenberger 2002), yet few offer empirical research that proposes an alternative understanding of social capital. As such, there is a dearth of empirical research that explores the concept of social capital in all of its complexity – that is, as a theory with outcomes and effects that are still unknown. To take on such a project, it is insufficient to simply measure social capital. Instead, this work requires situated knowledge that can explore both whether social capital indicators are present and what effect they have on people's lived experiences.

Social capital has been operationalized (by public goods scholars) in terms of number of associational memberships (Putnam, 2000; Warde & Tampubolon, 2002), number of friendships (Warde & Tampubolon, 2002), volunteerism (Putnam, 2000), newspaper readership (Putnam, 2000), voter turnout (Putnam, 2000) and exchanges of money (Hofferth & Iceland, 1998), to name a few. While I don't argue that all of these approaches are incorrect, I do argue that they lack *complexity.* Recognizing the disparate ways in which social capital has been defined and measured, the OECD proposed a framework for measuring social capital that integrates both public goods and critical approaches (Scrivens and Smith 2013). This framework breaks social capital down into four components: personal relationships, social network support, civic engagement, and trust and cooperative norms (Scrivens and Smith 2013). These components, to be discussed in detail in coming sections, allow us to explore social capital not as a broad and all-encompassing idea, but rather as a combination of interrelated parts with differentiated

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effects. I seek to build on this work, and at the same time respond to calls for increased anthropological – and particularly qualitative – engagement with all forms of capital.

I am interested in social capital as it is accumulated, used, and converted. In short, it is in motion. Stocks flow from one person to another, pool in groups, and result in uneven outcomes that can have differing impacts on individuals and communities (Portes, 1998; Svendsen, 2006). Indeed, scholars describe social capital as a complex *process* (Svendsen, 2006; Woolcock, 2001) rather than a static thing. Part of this complexity stems from issues of power and class that are thought to be critical to fully understanding social capital (Bourdieu, 1986/2004). In adopting a qualitative approach, I follow Creswell, who argues that "qualitative research is particularly useful when a complex and in-depth understanding of an issue is sought" (Creswell, 2007). Within my theoretical framework, social capital is a dynamic process that is situated in specific social, cultural, and economic contexts.

Anthropologists have criticized studies of capitals for neglecting power, inequality, and class (Schneider, 2006), and argue that a qualitative approach grounded in anthropological methods is critical to reintroducing these issues into the theoretical framework (Schneider, 2006). Indeed, scholars across multiple disciplines lament the lack of qualitative research into social capital (Svendsen, 2006; Wall, Ferrazzi, & Schryer, 1998; Woolcock, 2001) and Svendsen writes that studies of social capital have been "dominated by economists and political scientists" (2006, p. 42). My research responds to these calls for qualitative attention to diverse forms of capital, and builds upon a small but important body of literature that is also taking up this effort. For example, in their study of social capital in natural resource management, Leahy and Anderson adopt a qualitative approach to "learn more about the interplay between social structures, individual behavior, and social capital development and use" (2010, p. 228). Much of the

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qualitative research that uses a capitals framework acknowledges its exploratory nature (Leahy &

Anderson, 2010; Svendsen, 2006), not, I think, because capitals are under-studied, but because

they are not often studied with this level of complexity. Svendsen describes being "regularly

surprised" by his results (2006, p. 44), suggesting that his qualitative approach offered a depth of

information that was previously unavailable.

In what follows I integrate the public goods scholarship and the critical theorists' work in

an attempt to build a bridge between these two theoretical approaches. Using in-depth,

qualitative research methods I explore the positive potential of social capital that exists alongside

its perpetuation of inequality within rural reuse economies.

Methods: Things in motion

To study social capital is to study networks – the links between people and things. During

my research I was pulled through relational networks to follow used objects in motion. In my

first meeting with Jon, the manager of a local home goods bank, he paused mid-sentence as he

was explaining his work in Mill Town and asked what I was doing next. When I replied that I

was free, he said "follow me! There's some folks you should meet in River City. They have a

great operation and you should connect with them!" (Interview, 6/13/19). I got in my car and

followed Jon about 30 minutes out of Mill Town to the nearest large city, where we talked with

people who give away free clothing to people in need. I realized that geography was less

important than networks in determining social relationships. Indeed, as Appadurai writes, "it is

the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context" (1986, 5). I found that used

goods traveled across town lines through ephemeral and durable networks of exchange that

represented all sorts of social relationships. Rather than map the secondhand economies in a

single place I focused on the movement of goods through a network structured by relationships. I

asked participants where they went to obtain used goods and how they got rid of things they no

longer wanted or needed. I asked thrift, vintage, and secondhand retailers where they got objects

from and who bought from them. These discussions led me to create a map of the movement of

goods, which also serves as a map of the social relationships that tie people and organizations to

each other (see Figure 2.1, and for more discussion of this map, Chapter 3).
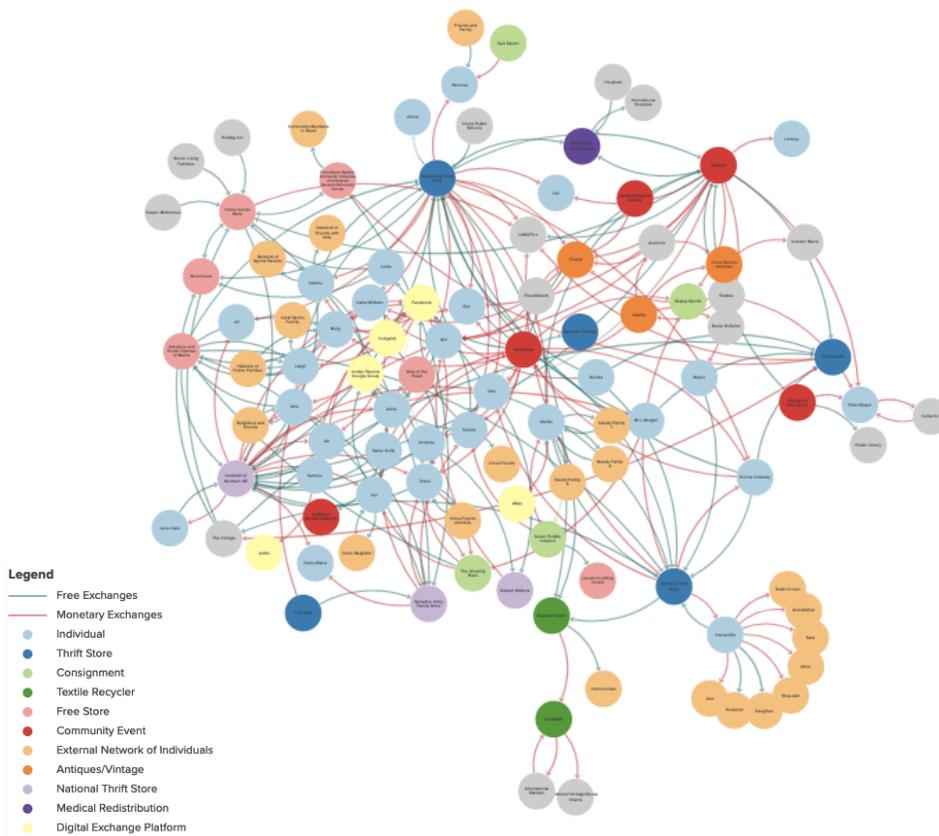
Figure 2.1 Network map of used goods in Jordan and Mill Town

This paper, then, is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the diverse secondhand economies largely in Mill Town and neighboring Jordan. But the work extends out from there, to nearby towns, larger cities, and into global networks of exchange. From May-December 2019 I engaged in a wide range of reuse practices, from volunteering in local and national thrift stores, a local service club, and a home goods bank to visiting yard sales, antique shops, book sales, and charity events. I conducted semi-structured interviews (Bernard 2011) with volunteers, managers, and board members of reuse organizations, as well as with individuals buying, selling, and browsing for used goods – both in person and online (n=54). These interviews lasted between 40 minutes and two hours. Interviews were inductive (Svendsen, 2006), allowing me to follow lines of inquiry as they emerged. I transcribed all interviews verbatim to capture the nuances of what was said (Kowal and O'Connell 2014). My field notes were a form of active reflection as well as a means of capturing ethnographic data from participation observation, and included methodological, descriptive, and analytic components (Bernard 2011). I coded all data in NVivo 12 for Mac (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2018) using iterative coding cycles where codes were created and refined based on subsequent data generation (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

My own positionality as a researcher was critical to my approach and to my interpretations of my results, for "any time phenomena are explained, they are explained from the perspectives of those presenting them" (Ely et al. 1997, 37). As I sought to understand deeply personal relationships – who people know and trust, how they maintain networks of support and reciprocity, where they see themselves within their community – I found that it was impossible to keep my personal life separate from my research. This was particularly acute because my fieldwork was framed by my pregnancy. I found that I could not study relationships without becoming a part of them. As I interviewed volunteers, shop managers, and community leaders I

found people saving stuff for me and for my then-unborn daughter. When I volunteered in local thrift shops there were often bags full of maternity clothing or baby items with my name written on them in permanent marker. There were small piles set to the side on tables with baby clothes that were particularly cute, or new-looking to greet me along with the smiles and hugs of other volunteers. I reflected in my field notes that the thrift shops I worked in were "not just places to get used things, but places where people express care for each other as best they can" (Field Notes, 9/25/19). Yet while I felt wrapped in relationships of care and support, I also saw the edges of those relationships – the places where the inside of a network is distinguished from the outside. In what follows, I sketch the shape of four components of social capital as related to secondhand networks of exchange in an effort to show both its potential and its repercussions. I do so not in an effort to highlight the shortcomings of individuals or organizations, but rather to emphasize that social capital is powerful but that its power does not always result in positive outcomes for all.

Results

Social capital is a complex assemblage of relationships, resources, and networks. As such, it is difficult to identify and understand social capital in any complexity without breaking it into its component parts. I rely here on dimensions of social capital outlined by the OECD: personal relationships, social network support, civic engagement, and trust and cooperative norms (Scrivens and Smith 2013). In this section I draw from my ethnographic fieldwork in secondhand economies to explore these dimensions of social capital as they emerge in practice, and particularly as related to the generation of value in Maine's "depleted" rural communities.

Here it is critical to highlight a persistent issue with the study of social capital: the problem of endogeneity (Leahy and Anderson 2010). That is, it is difficult to determine whether social capital is generated by personal relationships, social network support, civic engagement,

and trust or cooperative norms, or whether those factors are the result of social capital. Setting aside this issue, here I analyze the co-occurrence of the dimensions of social capital with reuse practices to explore the meaning and impact of social capital within reuse economies.

<u>Personal relationships</u>

Described as the "web of connections between a given individual and the people that he or she knows" (Scrivens and Smith 2013, 21), personal relationships are a key aspect of social capital. Personal relationships are at the heart of Bourdieu's ([1986] 2004) social capital theory, and play a role in the theories of Putnam (1995, 2000) and Coleman (1988) as well. Personal relationships, in this framing, can be strong or weak (Putnam 2000; Granovetter 1983), and are associated with networks – "the web of connections between a given individual and all the people that he or she knows" (Scrivens and Smith 2013, 21). This dimension of social capital is distinct from the other three in that it focuses on the nature of personal networks rather than their consequences (Scrivens and Smith 2013).

Personal relationships related to reuse were pervasive throughout my research. These relationships were both deep, long-standing ones and fleeting exchanges. Peter is a bookseller who I met through a local library-related charity. Although he no longer runs a brick and mortar bookshop, his retirement looks a lot like an active business buying and selling used books. Part of his motivation for staying involved in the business is that he "still [has] customers I've had for 30 years and more. They keep me alive" (Interview, 8/28/19). He can trace the lineage of his books through their owners, and tells me about particularly meaningful books that he's sold to individuals, and even how some books come back to him when their owners die. Indeed, for Peter the books seem to be a means of connecting people to each other.

Others describe reuse relationships in terms of family. Hannah, a thrift shop manager, likens her customers to kin, noting to me with some emotion that "to me they're my family"

(Interview, 8/28/19). This sentiment is echoed by Pam, another thrift shop manager, who speaks in glowing terms about the relationships forged through the shop:

> the people are great here and our customers are great. It's like one big family. We have a lot of regular people and you get to know...lots of kids come in and, you know, they give you hugs, you know, and "hi, how are you?!" (Interview, 6/26/19).

Anna, a used and antique furniture seller, describes her relationship to the people in the community, telling me that "Especially when you've been here this long. You get to know the people" (Interview, 6/20/19). These relationships were not secondary to reuse practices, but instead, for many, they were the primary reason for participation in this economic practice. Ivan, a volunteer with several reuse organizations and a self-described "scrap hound," always on the lookout for used furniture to pick up off the street, tells me why he likes visiting the local thrift shop:

> I want to go down to the thrift store and shoot the shit with Jolene because she is such a piece of work. She is what my brother would maybe in his prime have used the term 'a kick in the pants.' She is really something. So that's definitely a factor (Interview, 8/19/19).

There are examples from every aspect of this research that highlight the importance of personal relationships to diverse reuse practices.

These ties bind people through close, enduring connections but there are also "weak ties" (Granovetter 1983) present in reuse economies. These weak ties between acquaintances can lead to connections that link people to broader networks. James describes the presence of weak ties that seem to emerge through the connection the used objects provide:

Every single thing in here that somebody buys is something that I found. You know

what I mean? […] I wonder about who's played with this toy or who treasured it,

because especially if they're things, for example that 18th century bowl. That's been

somewhere. It wasn't in the ground. Someone has cared for that bowl since the

1770's, and cared for it enough to pass it on and pass it on and pass it on. And so

all of these things survived compared to the things that didn't. So there was a reason

somebody kept them and treasured them. So I wasn't the first one (Interview,

9/16/19).

Other participants noted the weak ties perpetuated through the exchange of used objects when

they reference the personal traces that can remain on objects, ideas supported in the literature on

the social and emotional connection between people and objects (e.g., Belk 1988; Herrmann

1997; Bohlin 2019, 2020). Lily, for example, explains that "I wash everything anyway, so I

realize that, you know, if the person died or something I'm sorry about that but it doesn't really

bother me" (Interview, 8/26/19). Here the relationship between the previous owner of an object

is something to be managed, erased, or mitigated rather than celebrated. While in coming

sections I will discuss how these relationships are leveraged for positive (and negative)

outcomes, here it is useful to reflect on some of the problematic aspects of personal relationships.

Personal relationships are not always positive. Delia, a social worker who often helps

clients access used goods, tells me about an experience she had with a thrift shop manager in

Mill Town:

I haven't been treated as nicely as I would've liked...I actually got yelled at one day

myself by the guy that's running the place […] I was not happy with that. I let him

know that. And they're equally disrespectful to clients (7/2/19).

Many of her clients have mental health challenges, are – or were – without access to permanent shelter, and are extremely poor. Here, the relationships associated with thrift shops mean that Delia and her clients experience treatment that is worse than others in the community. Indeed, from Delia's experiences some individuals are kept from the relational world of reuse. Instead of the family-like atmosphere described by some of my participants, Delia explains the web of bureaucratic processes that her clients must navigate to receive help from larger thrift shops. This bureaucracy is a means of removing personal relationships from reuse:

> So you can use the thrift store but you have to meet them at the Welfare Office. [That] is what they call the social services office. You have to meet with a lady there, tell them about your income, give them personal information, and you have to have somebody with you to go to the thrift store […] they'll give you like ten items. It's not a lot. As long as you're income-eligible they will give you these ten items and that's all you get for three months [...] and it doesn't include anything electrical. So you can get pots and pans and they never have towels, so you might as well forget that. But you can get sheets. Occasionally you can get that. You can get some basic household items, but not a lot [...] they weren't even offering that unless it was an emergency. So you had to have someone vouch for you that it was an emergency. Like homeless is an emergency, or you know, you just got displaced from a fire and you need clothing (Interview, 7/2/19).

If personal relationships enliven reuse for some participants, it is clear that these relationships are not equally available to all. Class and housing status delimit who can build personal relationships and who must conform to institutional processes to receive a predetermined level of support for approved emergencies.

Social network support

If personal relationships define the scope of individual networks, then social network support accounts for "the level of resources or support that a person can draw from their social contacts" (Scrivens and Smith 2013, 25). This idea is central to Bourdieu's ([1986] 2004) theory of social capital. Indeed, he argues that "the volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent […] depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital […] possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected" (Bourdieu [1986] 2004, 21). The *mobilization* of network connections is what is meant by "social network support." I found overwhelming evidence of social network support within reuse practices.

One way in which my research participants provided support to their social networks through reuse was the practice of "keeping an eye out." Kaylee, a volunteer at a local thrift shop, describes friends who ask her to keep an eye out for things they could use. She tells me, "they will say 'hey, can you look for this for me?' Or 'do you know of anybody that has this or that?'" (Interview, 9/10/19). Similarly, Sally, the owner of a consignment shop, maintains "a list of things that people are looking for. So we just kind of scan through and try to keep in our heads if we see something" (Interview, 6/11/19). These efforts can result in the matching of people with needed or desired objects – a match made possible by people calling on their social networks for support in finding used goods.

Many reuse organizations I worked with were extremely small-scale, run totally by volunteers. For these organizations, drawing on social network support was critical to their operations. Jon, the founder of a local home goods bank, relies on people to give what they can to enable him to redistribute used goods to people in need. This means that he calls on his network of connections to find volunteers, but he also leverages relationships to gain access to

needed equipment, like moving trucks for when he finds a large haul of goods that can be donated if they can be moved. Jon describes his process, telling me that "if it's anything larger - like from a hotel or house being emptied out - we have a moving company...god love them. I love them. I have no idea how much they've actually spent on us. They'll never tell us" (Interview, 6/17/19). The moving company that Jon forged a relationship with not only lends trucks, but employees to help load the vehicle – all at no cost.

Stories of organizational support were far outnumbered by instances where reuse was helpful to individuals. Sam, the organizer of a resource closet for people experiencing domestic violence, describes how they extend their reach beyond their target population through existing networks:

> We try really hard to...where the community is small and we really know people, we don't - our thing here is we don't want people to go without. If we have it, what's the sense of it sitting in our basement or in our garage if someone could use it right now? (Interview, 7/10/19).

Sam's organization redistributes useful goods to people within her network – allowing them access to stuff that keep people from going without. This effort is echoed by Cassandra, a volunteer at a small, non-profit thrift shop. Cassandra provisions numerous households that she knows through her work in the thrift shop, explaining:

> I've got my mom, my step-dad, my grandfather, and then I've got my sister-in-law. She wants anything that is UMaine. My kids. My husband. Anything that is like sailor stuff I look out for my neighbor over here. Anything that's horses my neighbor over there. I've got Lynn and her two boys. I have my friend Mel. (Interview, 9/27/19).

Personal connections, then, allow Cassandra to help her network access things they need and want at an extremely low cost.

Beyond simply day-to-day provisioning for people in need, we can see evidence of social network support when people in the community face catastrophic life disruptions. When Ivan's apartment building burned down, he turned to a local thrift shop for clothing and necessities:

> We spend the night in the hotel and then the next morning it's like okay...my brother's in his pajamas. So I showed up there just for a pair of pants and they gave me, you know, it was like lots of clothes, toothpaste, tooth brush, they were scurrying around putting together this little care package for me. And it was just like...it really impressed me […] as soon as they realized what my situation was they all set to work, you know? And they were not going to let me leave without doing as much as they possibly could for me. And that's like - that's very un-Wal-Mart like.

These examples of social network support reflect a vision of social capital that is useful, productive, and *good.* In these instances, the collective efforts of friends, neighbors, and community institutions allow people to get by and to thrive, even during difficult times. Yet these positive outcomes must be countered by an understanding of how social network support can, all too often, exclude.

The very networks that allow some individuals to feel warm and welcomed by thrift shops, like Ivan, can make others feel unwelcome. Delia, mentioned previously, whose clients are often unhoused and/or suffering from mental health issues, finds the same shop Ivan visited extremely off-putting. She notes that "they would prefer to only give to their church members. And I think they kind of look down on others that come there. They give you very little"

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(Interview, 7/2/19). The strong bonds that link some to this shop keep others out. Exclusion can be unknowing – the preference for one type of individual over another may not be conscious – but it is also sometimes explicit. Jen, a member of an online exchange platform that is limited to local parents, tells me that she "wouldn't want it to open up to the masses, because then it's just too much. Too many people" (Interview, 8/8/19). Keeping the group limited to other parents in her community feels comfortable for Jen, but this practice ensures that others who could benefit from the resources shared are not allowed in.

Tight networks promote lively exchanges, but they also limit diversity. Many individuals described sharing their "best stuff" with their closest personal connections. Felicity, a parent in Jordan, describes her process of allocating materials for reuse:

I will in fact usually preferentially give stuff first to friends and people I know. Especially people I know who have a greater need, like the friend I mentioned who's just getting started and I know financially it's harder for them. And then if none of my close circle wants it I'll kind of maybe - that's when I'll throw it out there to the public (Interview, 9/23/19).

While Felicity may be connected to people with "greater needs," her practice of redistribution reifies some of the existing inequalities in the community. Importantly, here, although Jordan and Mill Town are neighboring communities, one is both wealthier and connected to a local college, while the other is working class, relatively poor, and associated with a paper mill. These differences mean that relying on personal networks for support often keeps the highest-quality items circulating amongst the wealthiest people.

For many of the individuals I spoke with, connecting people "in need" to used goods was important. Yet determinations about how to defined "need" were rooted in cultural assumptions

about worthiness. For example, Carol, the manager of a local thrift shop, describes marshalling her support for a young person who had volunteered in her shop earlier. She put considerable effort into helping him find full-time employment, telling me "there was something in him that I just saw different" (Interview, 8/20/19). She went on to differentiate him from others from whom she has encountered at the thrift shop, saying "ugh, they just have one excuse after another!" (Interview, 8/20/19). She prides herself on knowing the community – who needs help and who doesn't – and will give her support to those who don't ask for it…those who are not looking for "handouts" (Field Notes, 8/20/19). This practice emerged in other thrift shops, as well. Identifying those who were truly in need was thought to be a skill that volunteers could acquire – learning "who to really soak it to [charge extra] and who to give it to [for free]" (Interview, Jolene, 10/14/19). Yet in making these judgments, volunteers imparted their own notions of deservedness that likely excluded many people who could have benefitted from access to opportunities or objects.

Civic engagement

Civic engagement, or the "actions and behaviours that can be seen as contributing positively to the collective life of a community or society" (Scrivens and Smith 2013, 26) is often used as short-hand for social capital itself (Scrivens and Smith 2013). For Putnam (2000), civic engagement encompasses voting, reading the newspaper, and volunteering, among other measures. In the context of reuse, contributing positively to the collective life of a community often took the form of volunteering in reuse organizations or donating used goods. From this perspective alone, the link between community engagement and reuse is quite strong. For Jon, the founder of a local home goods bank, volunteering is a means of giving back to people in need. When new individuals volunteer with his organization, he loves "seeing the light come on" for them – the moment when they connect their actions with the impact on people in need

(Interview, 6/17/19). Jill, a frequent volunteer at a thrift shop in Jordan, also describes the value of her work for the community, saying "I feel really gratified that I've used my ability to make money for this organization that does so many good things" (Interview, 8/14/19). Indeed, apart from giving individuals access to goods at low- or no cost, many reuse organizations provide funding for programs, services, and people in need. Two local thrift shops generate more than $40,000 each per year, funneling this money into community suppers, local library and school programs, outreach and support for people in need, and critical services like a local ambulance, food pantry, and more. Civic engagement, then, is a motivator for people to participate in reuse and an outcome of that participation.

From a critical perspective, however, civic engagement can be problematic. Jill, the same volunteer who sees the value in her work at the thrift shop, goes on to say that "There are times when I resent it, because I do work so hard and other people don't. You know, I have to be careful about that because it really is just volunteer" (Interview, 8/14/19). This volunteer work asks a lot of individuals, creating emotional and physical burdens (Berry, forthcoming) for the small group of people who are willing to give their time to help their communities. Localized reuse is heavily reliant on volunteer labor (Berry, forthcoming), yet volunteers are aging and are not being replaced by younger residents. Lindsey, a volunteer with a local service club that runs a community yard sale, tells me almost despondently that "my youngest boy, I can't get him to join. He'd rather spend the evening on his iPad […] they're willing to give you money, but they aren't willing to give you time" (Interview, 7/20/19). He says that the sale, which has been a community tradition for decades, is on the decline. "It's a good event for the community," he says with some sadness, "and money aside, [the community will] miss it. Just for the fact that we're here. And they always expected us to be here, you know?" (Interview, 7/20/19). As

volunteers age, and become increasingly unable to do the hard work associated with reuse (Berry, forthcoming), the reliance on volunteer labor may be problematic. It echoes critiques of social capital theory that take issue with its tendency to push self-sufficiency and provision of services onto volunteer labor (Naughton 2014).

<u>Trust and cooperative norms</u>

Trust and cooperative norms refers to the "way people behave towards each other and as members of society" (Scrivens and Smith 2013, 34). Scrivens and Smith go on to argue that "by facilitating mutually beneficial co-operation, trust and cooperative norms bring positive-sum, non-exclusionary benefits for all members of a community or society" (2013, 34). Indeed, trust and cooperation are evident in the local reuse economies within my research, with substantial associated benefits. Yet as we shall see, assertions about "non-exclusionary benefits for all members of a community" are more doubtful. As with each of the previous dimensions of social capital, when there are networks of inclusion and support, someone is always on the outside.

Trust emerges in reuse economies in a number of forms. The heterogeneity of used goods means that establishing their value is exceedingly challenging. Many thrift shop managers and volunteers struggle to determine the price of objects. Clark, a long-time volunteer in the book section of a local community sale, describes calling on experts for help pricing books that look "special," saying of the local expert: "he'll tell us. You know, if it's something that's worth something he's good with us" (Interview, 9/6/19). Trust between this local organization and an expert reseller is critical for both to access benefits. Peter, the book expert, tells me that he shops at some of the local used book sales, saying of his purchasing "I think I've got a pretty good reputation. I try to be fair with people. I'm not trying to rip people off" (Interview, 8/28/19). In another case, a patron bought a used violin from a local community sale for $40. He later returned the violin to the organizer of the sale, saying only "you should get this appraised." The

organization took his advice, and later re-sold the violin for $1,500 to another buyer. "He wouldn't even take his $40 back!" says Lindsey, "He just said 'I can't do that'" (Interview, 7/20/19). Obtaining a fair price for objects is reliant on trust between those who know the true worth of goods and those who don't. On some occasions, reuse organizations forgo the opportunity to get a fair price for goods intentionally, as Ivan describes:

> I had this big pile of stuff at the thrift store and it's like 'okay, there's my pile. I can't find anything more to buy. It's time to check out.' I discovered I only have $4 bucks in my wallet and I've got like $20 worth of stuff there. And the lady predictably says 'oh...just...' and I was like 'no, I can't do...well here's my $4 bucks, but here's what I'll do…' And I noticed there was a community supper there. So I showed up for the community supper and like made a $20 donation. And that was a really interesting little experience, too […] So that's part of what's nice about that thing. It didn't cross the woman who was in charge there […] to not let me walk away with that stuff, right? And so, and often I'll be thinking 'this is a lot of stuff but I've got $20 bucks and I can give them $20 bucks' and someone will add it up and go 'that'll be $7.50.' And so I was like 'okay, I like to haggle. Here's $10 and that's my final offer!' (Interview, 8/19/19).

Here the thrift shop volunteer trusts that Ivan truly only has $4 in his wallet. This demonstrates trust in the general community – whether people in the community are worthy of help and support. Many thrift and reuse shop owners described allowing customers to take objects home without payment. Anna owns a small secondhand shop, and told me that "if somebody comes in and they need something and they didn't have any money...I'm like well take it and bring it when you get some money. And then I forget and then they always come back and pay me and I forget

all about it" (Interview, 6/20/19). Similarly, Hannah, the manager of a non-profit thrift shop, describes allowing a customer to take home a dresser without payment:

> a girl was walking by and there was a little dresser. She goes "well how much is it?" I said "well about $10 bucks." She said "I wish I had the money." I said "take it. Come back Thursday and pay me." So I just wrote her name down and put $10. If she comes back she'll bring the money. If she don't, she don't. So, somebody's got a little dresser…(Interview, 8/28/19).

In all of the instances where people were allowed to take items home without payment, the two parties did not know each other previously. This trust in the community allows for people to benefit from access to used goods.

Yet if there are those in the community who benefit from implicit trust, there are others who do not. Sam, who works with survivors of domestic violence, describes with a mix of humor and frustration how her clients are surveilled by volunteers when they attempt to access free used goods from a local reuse non-profit:

> the volunteers take their job serious. They seriously take their job serious. And they will follow you around and be like 'oh, you can only take two rolls of toilet paper' or whatever. And people that we work with - they're intimidated by being followed. They already feel like 'ugh, I'm going and getting stuff for free' and we want them to be as comfortable as they can, and we don't want them to feel like they're begging or getting hand-me-downs or whatever. (Sam, 7/10/19)

Even as they attempt to redistribute goods at no cost, volunteers express a lack of trust in the people who attempt to access items. The people Sam works with are often Indigenous and poor, indicating that trust in "the community" indicates trust in a certain definition of community. The

signs posted throughout the shop clearly indicate allowable quantities, and yet the dignity of "shoppers" is impinged upon when volunteers communicate a lack of trust in their willingness to comply with rules. Who is trusted to pay later? Who seems deserving of access to goods despite an inability to pay? These questions indicate that trust in reuse economies brings benefits to some, but certainly excludes others across boundaries that can be racialized and classed.

Discussion

My interest in this exploration of social capital within reuse economies is rooted in a question of positive economies. Can social capital help us reframe "depleted" communities – seeing what is present rather than what is absent? Or does social capital theory obscure more than it illuminates? The question must first begin with whether there is evidence of social capital in these rural communities. Certainly based on the framework established by the OECD, social capital is evident within my study sites. Indeed, social capital seemed to be an organizing principle of reuse, as I heard story after story about forming and maintaining friendships through reuse (personal relationships), helping people in need (social network support), giving back to the community (civic engagement), and trusting relationships (trust and cooperative norms). These stories spill out of my field notes, and risk overflowing this text as well. Yet if we blind ourselves to the repercussions of dense, tight networks of relationships, we see a falsely positive social capital. Stories of exclusion, of worthiness (narrowly defined), or a lack of worthiness for help (broadly defined), of trust broken, or of strains on civic leaders were also common in my field work. Here it is important to revisit the notion of "positive" economies, for if we are searching only for assets, then social capital appears to lend mixed or negative results. It excludes and includes. It is a benefit and a liability. It elevates some at the expense of others. Yet if "positive" framing is simply the appearance of what exists, rather than the definition of what does not exist, social capital may have potential for this work.

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Scholars have lamented the difficulty of measuring social capital (Portes 1998; Warde and Tampubolon 2002) and critiqued it as a "chaotic concept" that has been "colonized" by economics (Fine 1999). J.K. Gibson-Graham argue quite compellingly that social capital is based on a "capitalocentric assumption […] that the social relations addressed by these concepts are 'investments' that can eventually be monetized, exchanged, and used to generate profitable returns" (2006a, 59). Yet in exploring the results here, I wonder whether social capital might help us re-think the concept of capital altogether. A social capital that is evaluated on qualitative terms can be read as deeply relational and entangled in power and politics. It need not be another tool for economic colonization, but instead a means for exploring the complex web of social relationships that power local economies – even in places that seem to exist in the absence of (monetary) capital.

Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to bring invisible economies to light. Using secondhand economies as an example, I have argued that social capital can help us see beyond notions of "depletion" in the narrow sense of monetary capital, and instead to frame positive economies that are rich in complexity and contradiction. Rejecting the too-easy narrative that secondhand exchanges are the answer to (re)building community relationships, I explored how the movement of used goods can be inclusive and exclusive with respect to diverse members within the communities in which I worked. This understanding is critical as we seek solutions to issues like global resource use, climate change, and waste. Secondhand economies are an important part of a more circular economic system that reduces waste by extending the lifespans of consumer goods (EMF 2013). Some proponents of more circular economic systems argue that such systems will (re)build social capital, presumably with positive impacts anticipated for all. My work suggests that reuse is indeed related to social capital, but that our understanding of social

capital must become significantly more complex if we are to account for social capital as it is experienced rather than as it is often theorized.

Just as the public goods scholars have tended to romanticize the positive impacts of social capital, some proponents of reuse economies, collaborative consumption, and sharing economies have sought to highlight the positive social impacts without as much attention to the potential negative impacts (e.g., Botsman and Rogers 2010). Here I urge caution. For while reuse economies have the potential to generate all sorts of value (Isenhour and Berry 2020), my research suggests that fairness, equity, and inclusion are not guaranteed. Instead, we must attend to potential inequalities as we plan for reuse. Even as we need to support reuse economies to address global challenges, how reuse economies grow should be a central concern. Understanding reuse as a relational process that is rife with care and connection as well as exclusion and power might mean that there is a need for diverse, localized exchanges that are sensitive to existing personal networks.

The work of re-framing "depletion" in terms of positive economies made space for an understanding of social capital that was complex and nuanced. Rather than seeing industrial decline and assuming that there was positive sociality (devoid of power and politics) that reproduced the community, a positive approach allowed me to ask what practices were at play in rural reuse economies. We might consider a similar tactic for considering a movement to more circular economies. Instead of focusing on the linear systems we need to dismantle, we might follow J.K. Gibson-Graham (2008) and seek the already-existing diverse circular economies that are often unmeasured and under-valued by quantitative tools. This approach might allow us to see circular practices, like reuse, as complex social processes rather than as policy end-points.

CHAPTER 3: CIRCULAR ECONOMIES OF PLACE

Introduction

In his book, *Secondhand: Travels in the New Global Garage Sale,* Adam Minter argues

that the global reuse of materials is "a trade that should be celebrated. It's a guarantee that

somebody, somewhere values old stuff. From an environmental perspective, it's reuse on an

industrial scale**,** *the green economy made real"* (2019, 246 emphasis mine). Minter's argument

about the need for a globalized trade in secondhand materials is motivated in no small part by the

harmful effects of our linear system of production-consumption-disposal. The Environmental

Protection Agency calculates that the provision of goods (including emissions associated with

production, consumption, and disposal) is the largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions

(29% of total emissions) in the United States (EPA 2009). Consumption of goods is linked not

just to greenhouse gas emissions, but to acidification and smog (Mach, Weinzettel, and Ščasný

2018) and global land and water use (Ivanova et al. 2016). Resource use and materials

consumption is continuing to climb, particularly in wealthy countries, and there is little evidence

that resource use can be decoupled from economic growth (Wiedmann et al. 2015). In the

context of this mounting pressure, many scholars and policymakers argue that we must shift to

more "circular" economies, which aim to eliminate the concept of waste by redesigning, reusing,

repairing, remanufacturing, and recycling materials (EMF 2013).

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation, one of the most visible global actors advancing the

idea of the circular economy, writes that "the circular economy refers to an industrial economy

that is *restorative* by intention. It aims to enable effective flows of materials, energy, labour and

information so that natural and social capital can be rebuilt" (EMF 2013, 26). Critically, the

circular economy is often touted as an engine for not only reducing negative environmental

externalities associated with dominant linear systems, but also as generative of social benefits. In

the Ellen MacArthur Foundation quote above, social capital is to be rebuilt alongside natural capital – that is, social systems will be repaired alongside environmental ones. Yet scholars have noted a lack of attention to the social dimensions of circularity in published literature (Gregson et al. 2015; Hobson 2016; Geissdoerfer et al. 2017; N. Millar, McLaughlin, and Börger 2019). Even as scholars debate gaps in the circular economy literature, companies are quickly acting to capitalize on an emerging market that aims to remake discards as a sustainable resource frontier.

Ghisellini and colleagues write that "Circular Economy (CE) is receiving increasing attention worldwide as a way to overcome the current production and consumption model" (2016, 11). Indeed, circular economy policies have been proposed and implemented globally at scales ranging – to name just a few – from an effort at the scale of the European continent (European Commission 2020) to a national plan in Scotland (Scottish Government 2016), municipal approaches like the one in Charlotte, North Carolina (Gladek, Kennedy, and Thorin 2018), and policies across industry sectors and within firms (Lee 2018). The recent meteoric rise of "re-commerce" – online resale platforms – is a notable example of the momentum of the circular economy. Re-commerce is the fastest growing segment of fashion retail (Verdon 2019). Resale platform ThredUp reports that the sector grew 25 times faster than retail in 2019, and projects that resale will be valued at $64 billion USD by 2024 (ThredUp 2020).

Re-commerce platforms are often described in terms that are explicitly circular. Poshmark, for example, declares that "we've created a marketplace and community that embraces individuality, provides support, *fuels circularity*, and encourages dream chasing" (Poshmark 2021 emphasis mine). Luxury re-commerce site, The RealReal describes its business in contrast to a linear system, using terminology that clearly harkens back to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation:

unlike the traditional linear economy of make, use and dispose, *the circular economy is restorative and regenerative by design.* With the help of our shoppers and consignors, *we're contributing to a more sustainable fashion industry where luxury goods stay in circulation* (The RealReal 2021 emphasis mine).

Similarly, Material World writes that "*by creating a circular economy of high quality items*, we are extending the life of each piece and fostering a shopping behavior that reduces wear on the planet" (Material World 2021 emphasis mine).

The emergence of re-commerce can be read, at least in part, as a battle to define the concept of circularity. For many of these platforms, the ability to connect buyers and sellers in placeless online markets is what enables their circular visions of the future. Yet the movement of used goods – and particularly used clothing – is nothing new, with examples of international exchanges of garments dating at least to the 16th century (Fontaine 2008). What re-commerce does offer, however, is a shift to "frictionless" logistics (Tramuta 2021) that reduce transaction costs, increasing the speed at which goods travel. The connection between circularity and friction is described explicitly on online platform Tradesy's website:

> By recirculating pre-owned luxury goods, Tradesy reduces demand for newly-produced and disposable fashion, while empowering everyone to build a high-quality wardrobe for less. Our marketplace connects buyers and sellers directly, creating the smallest footprint for every item sold (Tradesy 2021).

Re-commerce platforms tout their unique abilities to connect buyers and sellers of used goods using streamlined logistics. While the "footprint" Tradesy seeks to reduce is likely a carbon footprint, in speeding up processes and expediting exchanges – reducing friction – what is

necessarily eliminated is the physical footprint of exchange rooted in place. The goal of connecting buyers and sellers directly is one that removes any consideration of place.

In what follows, I explore the concept of friction as generative of both sociality and conflict in reuse. Tsing describes friction as a kind of "sticky materiality of practical encounters" (2004, 1), arguing that its "awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities" are precisely that which enable it to be productive and full of possibility (2004, 4). Here I use friction as a way to think through the social value of place in local and global economies. Friction makes movement possible, but it also drags and slows. It is generative, but the social outcomes of friction can be conflict and discord as well as reciprocity and mutual goodwill. If the goal of re-commerce is to create a "frictionless" circular economy for the recirculation of used goods, I ask what we lose when we remove friction from this economic form. I use the concept of friction to interrogate the claim that re-commerce is "the green economy made real," and the underlying assumption that to solve large-scale crises we must look to placeless, market-based, globalized solutions. I support this critique with data drawn from six months of ethnographic research in reuse organizations ranging from small-scale thrift shops, home goods banks, and community sales to regional and international traders of used goods. I argue that efforts to reduce friction in reuse economies undermine the social goals of circularity. Indeed, friction is critical for developing and sustaining circular economies that take sociality seriously.

Literature Review

The circular economy is meant to address the multiple costs of a linear system of take-make-waste (EMF 2012) by designing waste out of industrial systems. With its roots in industrial ecology and environmental economics (Ghisellini, Cialani, and Ulgiati 2016), much of the literature on circularity emphasizes the need for changes in the design and production of products, new business models to shift from ownership to use agreements, and improved

materials recovery processes (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017). Materials reuse is also an important component of circularity, as it is "well established through life-cycle analysis that reuse is less energy intensive and polluting than recycling" allowing reuse to "maximiz[e] the benefits of diversion" (MacBride 2011, 133). The circular economy is quickly becoming a global project that is being taken up with growing urgency related to the climate crisis. In an effort to create large-scale shifts, organizations like the Ellen MacArthur Foundation are working to help businesses and governments become circular (see, for example: EMF 2012, 2017, 2013). This business friendly approach to a circular economy (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017, 766) has recently been critiqued for a lack of attention to the social dimensions of circularity (Hobson 2016; Geissdoerfer et al. 2017; Friant, Vermeulen, and Salomone 2020; Moreau et al. 2017), and scholars call for attention to the quotidien social impacts of circularity (Hobson 2016).

The circular economy is at a formative stage in the academic literature, when even its definition is contested and fragmented (Kirchherr, Reike, and Hekkert 2017). Whether or not it can or does offer a radical shift from the status quo is a point of heated debate (Hobson and Lynch 2016). Some materials managers see circularity as a new way to describe the waste hierarchy, the decades-old decision-making tool that prioritizes source reduction, materials reuse, and recycling above landfilling and incineration (Flynn and Hacking 2019). Millar and colleagues argue, however, that "without further research it could be suggested that the Circular Economy, as it is currently understood, could continue to cause environmental degradation, albeit at a slower pace, maintain a reliance on the extraction of virgin resources for continuous economic growth and not improve social equity" (2019, 12). Other scholars argue that a circular economy is unsustainable without a transformation into a "circular society" (Jaeger-Erben et al. 2021). A circular society goes "beyond growth, technology and market-based solutions" and

"frames transitions to circularity as a profound social-ecological transformation" (Jaeger-Erben et al. 2021, 1). The circular society aligns with what Hobson and Lynch (2016), drawing from Gibson-Graham (2006a), call a "post-capitalist perspective," which "opens up and experiments with the ways in which citizens can engage with different types of circularity, some of which will eschew market-based interactions for non-monetary exchanges, aiming to deeply embed notions and diverse forms of sharing into norms and places" (Hobson and Lynch 2016, 21). Yet the "imagined novelty" (Berry, Bonnet, and Isenhour 2019, 8) of the circular economy in the academic and policy literature may prevent us from seeing the already-existing circular economies at play.

Giles suggests a guiding question for exploring the diverse economies (Gibson-Graham 2008) that hide in plain sight, when he asks "what economies are possible, and already at play, in the discarded material surpluses of the market?" (2018, 211). Reuse, the social practice whereby discarded material surpluses are sold, purchased, exchanged, gifted, or swapped, is a critical component of the circular economy (EMF 2013), yet it is certainly not a novel economic form (Fontaine 2008; Berry, Bonnet, and Isenhour 2019). Despite its deep history, reuse remains difficult to track as an economic practice, where it largely goes uncounted and therefore unseen (Isenhour et al. 2017). A burgeoning body of literature suggests the sector is socially generative (see, for example: Berry, Bonnet, and Isenhour 2019; Bohlin 2019; Herrmann 2006; Crawford 2014; Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera 2012), where the exchange of used goods links people through historied objects (Bohlin 2019), and can contribute to a sense of community through the practice of holding garage sales (Crawford 2014) or free markets (Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera 2012). This sociality – "the grip of worldly encounter" (A. L. Tsing 2004, 1) – might be described as a kind of friction.

With the rise of re-commerce, markets for used goods are changing rapidly. The slow movement of used goods through local markets is now accompanied by a rapid global trading of used goods. Indeed, O'Neill describes wastes as "one of the planet's newest global resource frontiers" (2019, 8), noting that the term frontier is laden with meaning:

> Its use deliberately harkens back to gold rushes in the mid-nineteenth century around the Pacific Rim and to the race for land by settlers in the US West, regardless of the people already living there. It evokes competition, conflict, even violence, and the displacement of existing resource users or local communities. It also evokes the possibility of large profits reaped in the absence of institutionalized governance (O'Neill 2019, 9).

As circular economies make discards, like used clothing, into new resource frontiers in an effort to reduce environmental impacts associated with extraction, production, and disposal, it is critical to ask what peoples and places are disempowered or sidelined in the process. This paper responds to calls for research on the social dimensions of circularity, asking in particular how circularity might strengthen or undermine equity and justice at local scales (N. Millar, McLaughlin, and Börger 2019; Moreau et al. 2017; Ghisellini, Cialani, and Ulgiati 2016). Recognizing that economies are embedded within society (Polanyi 2001; Granovetter 1985), I ask how efforts to transform our economies might reshape our societies.

Methods

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork in non-profit reuse organizations in two rural Maine towns: Jordan and Mill Town. From May 2019-December 2019 I volunteered in two local thrift stores, with a local service club that ran an annual yard sale, and at a home goods bank. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with shoppers and recipients, volunteers, managers, and board members of reuse organizations both within these rural geographies and at

regional, national, and international scales (n=54). The small size of these rural communities meant that I was able to construct a database of all local reuse businesses and organizations, and was able to interview at least one representative from each. While my focus was understanding the localized meaning and value of reuse, the interviews were inductive (Svendsen, 2006), allowing me to be surprised by a line of inquiry and to follow it. This led me to follow used things in motion (Appadurai 1986), tracing the flows of materials out of the rural communities and into the vast networks of buyers, sellers, and donors that power reuse economies throughout Maine, New England, the United States, and beyond. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and two hours, and largely took place at community cafes, participants' homes, or in reuse shops. I spoke to non-local participants over the phone. With permission, all interviews were recorded. I transcribed interviews verbatim to capture the nuances of what was said (Kowal and O'Connell 2014). My field notes were a form of active reflection as well as a means of capturing ethnographic data from participant observation, and included methodological, descriptive, and analytic components (Bernard 2011). I coded all data in NVivo 12 for Mac (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2018) using iterative coding cycles where codes were created and refined based on subsequent data generation (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Much of my time as a volunteer was spent in the sorting rooms of thrift stores, where I worked alongside other volunteers to sort through donations. Before I began this work, I imagined that most objects received by reuse organizations were directly put out for sale. Yet over the course of my research, I realized that many goods had a much more complex pathway through the reuse economy. In these thrift stores, objects were often routed on the complex pathways with the aid of hand-drawn signs, notes, boxes, and bins (see Figure 3.1). Notes were taped to shelves advising sorters of who to call if a pair of boys overalls, sized 3-7 came in (a

woman with special needs children), or if we should find "ships hats" (a local collector). Boxes under the table were designated for unsaleable wool products (a woman who made braided rugs) or worn out bedding (the local animal shelter). A box was designated for 100% cotton t-shirts with unsavory sayings, which could be sold to a local garage as cleaning rags.
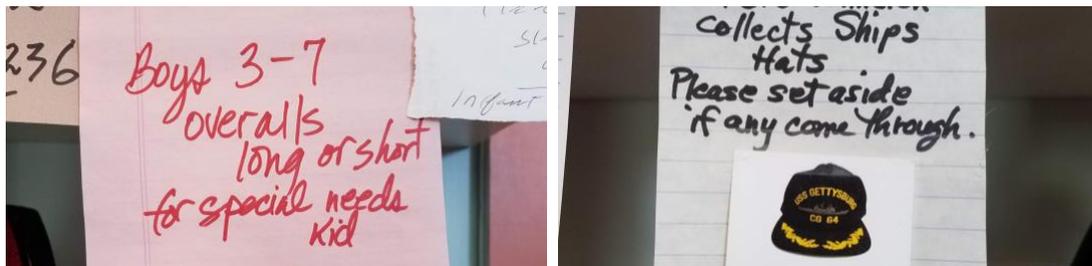
Figure 3.1 Routing used goods through social networks

Goods that didn't meet local thrift shops' quality standards were set aside to be donated to larger outlets, like Goodwill and Salvation Army. There were seasonal bags and boxes, as well, as we set aside winter clothing for migrant workers, or for recent immigrants unused to and unprepared for Maine's cold winter weather. Each of these bags, boxes, and notes was a representation of a relationship as well as a path that used goods might find themselves on. Through my participation in the sorting process, I learned that sorting donations was as much about recognizing the quality of objects as it was about understanding the social relationships that the organizations were embedded within.

These highly social exchanges were often frustratingly difficult. It was hard to find people who could do the physical work of loading up a car to take things to another organization or person in need. Sometimes people we saved items for didn't come to pick them up, and the objects sat in the cramped sorting rooms taking up much-needed space. The exchanges were slow, meandering, and idiosyncratic. Despite best efforts to develop streamlined systems for managing used goods, it was impossible to avoid the friction of sociality. These localized

circular economies were consistently slow-moving and laden with the weight of relationships. In the next section I describe the qualities of this friction and its implications for understanding localized and non-localized reuse economies.

Results

Throughout the course of my research in local reuse organizations I heard references to circles. Yet in contrast to the highly-efficient, market-based logics of online resale platforms, the circles in my research were referring to the movement of goods through social relationships. Kaylee[1] is a volunteer at the Jordan Community Thrift Shop, a small volunteer-run thrift store in Jordan, Maine. She's in her 40's, and can't find full-time work. She balances her volunteer work at the thrift shop with unwaged work caring for her two special needs children and her ill mother, as well as temporary and intermittent paid work, like cleaning short-term rental apartments and substitute teaching. Whenever I volunteered at the Jordan Community Thrift Shop with Kaylee, I was astounded by how much she purchased, especially given her tight budget. She explained her motivation in an interview one day:

> A lot of my friends are pretty needy families, so I have like two or three families that are needy and I buy a lot for them. But then they donate back to me, like to resell it or to...like yesterday they donated back to me [...] They give me like toys and stuff that people have given them. **So it's a circle** […] Stuff is moving and it doesn't stay put! […] Like my friend's baby was born four weeks early. He's on a ventilator right now. So she needs a lot of [stuff]. She'll write, like "this is some of the stuff I need" and I don't want to pay a bunch of money, so I've picked up a lot of stuff for them. I pick up stuff that they need (Interview, 9/10/19).

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[1] Participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

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Kaylee wasn't alone in conceptualizing her participation in reuse as circular. Many other participants in my research used the idea of circularity to describe their reuse practices. James, a reuse shop owner, told me about an object's movement through the community, commenting that he "bought it from the thrift store and brought it [into the shop]. Then a picker bought it here, sold it to an antique dealer who's got a shop in River City, and somebody else is going to buy it**! That's quite a circle!"** (Interview, 9/16/19). Felicity says that "if I outgrew my baby stuff and I pass it off to a friend and they pass it off to a friend that had another baby and they'll like pass it back to me and there's this kind of **circle of swapping** that goes on" (Interview, 9/23/19). Leigh describes her explicitly social reuse practices, saying that "So you create a **circle of friends** and you just use things" (Interview, 7/22/19). Crucially, however, the circularity they described was rooted in localized, socially-connected economies of place.

When Kaylee redistributes used goods through her networks, she is responding to personal requests as well as information she gathers through her friendships. She spends hours sorting through donations at the thrift shop, evaluating whether goods can be placed out for sale. In that time period, when she finds things that might be useful within her networks she sets them aside to purchase them at the end of her shift. This process is extremely time-intensive and unpredictable. Some days she doesn't find much, other days she leaves with bags of clothes to give to her needy friends. Her labor is just one example of the dense networks of exchange that make up localized reuse economies. The network map below depicts the tangled web of exchanges described to me by research participants (see Figure 3.2). While the lines on this map

do not depict the movement of any particular object, they represent the movement of goods between actors, many of which are recurring exchanges through established relationships.
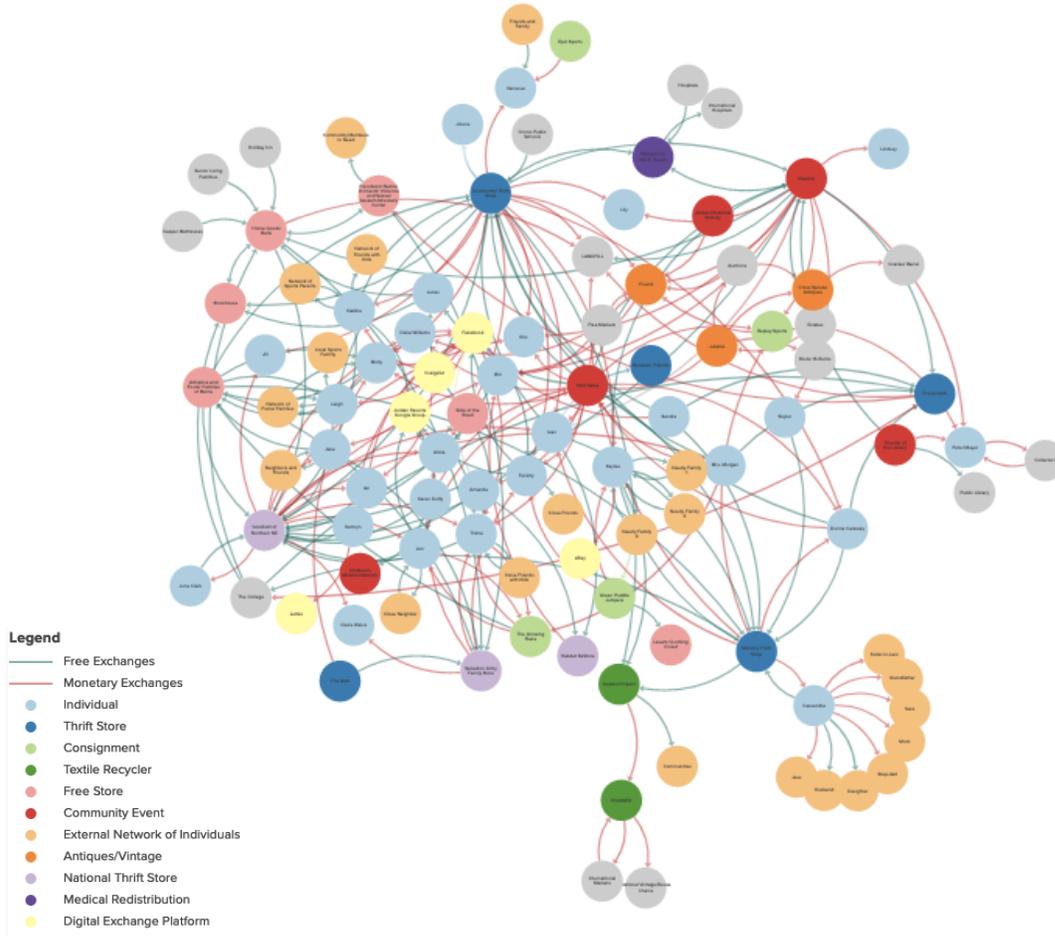
Figure 3.2 Network map of used goods in Jordan and Mill Town

The complex, interconnected, and meandering movement of goods through these local networks allows for diverse forms of value to be extracted from multiple exchanges. Figure 3.3 depicts Kaylee's indirect network – those people and organizations she is connected to through her reuse activities. Kaylee, outlined in red, buys, sells, and gives away objects both locally and extra-locally. Within the local community, objects, meaning, and relationships spread beyond their direct reach, connecting communities through the exchange of used goods.
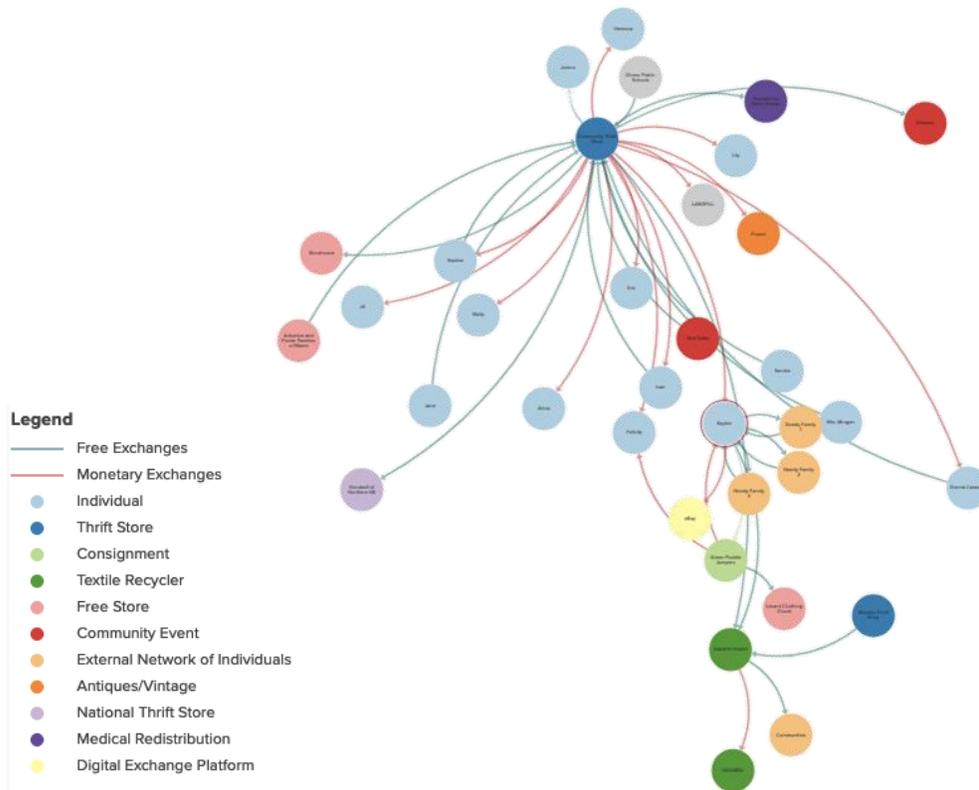
Figure 3.3 Kaylee's indirect network

Although few of my participants sold items on re-commerce platforms, it's interesting to

note that those platforms are terminating nodes in this network. The value to local communities

is lost (see Figure 3.4). While sellers still receive financial benefit from the sale of used goods,

the relationships established and maintained through the movement of objects – the non-market

utility of the objects – is foregone.

Figure 3.4 How goods exit local networks

Kaylee speaks to the social and monetary value of the secondhand economies that she

participates in, where reuse allows her to build and maintain relationships of support and care

while saving money for her friends and occasionally earning money for herself through the sale

of goods. In each of these nodes, there is a story about people interacting to buy, sell, and give

away used goods. These exchanges are explicitly rooted in place, and participants told me over

and over again about the importance of community, networks, sharing, and trust as part of their

motivation for making goods available to others. Here we see friction as generative – the slow

pace of reuse exchanges in this local setting allows for relationships to be built and maintained.

Yet not all of the circular movement of goods in localized reuse economies is associated

with positive social relationships. Sometimes the transfer of possessions through networks of

relationships can lead to a friction that generates heat. A local parents' group organized through

an online platform, for example, is an important site for the gifting, selling, and sourcing of used

children's clothes, toys, and sports equipment. The deeply social nature of this exchange became

apparent, however, when the group had to shut down because of heated disagreements over local

politics. Similarly, Jen, a mother of two and avid reuser in the community, describes her frustration at being on the receiving end of low-quality items:

> I've been on the receiving end of the giant garbage bag full of clothes and having to filter through it and, you know, the things that are nicer I definitely really appreciate, and then when there's stuff thrown in that bag...like, I don't really care about like your family's vacation to Bermuda with the t-shirt that's now stained, right? (Interview, 8/8/19).

Just as the friction generated through deeply social local reuse practices can generate feelings of goodwill and support, it can also cause conflict and resentment. All of these outcomes – the positive and the negative – are muted or lost completely when goods exit the local reuse economy. Yet it would be a drastic oversimplification to suggest that the local circulation of goods exists in a separate sphere from national or global exchanges, for, as Kaylee commented, "stuff is moving and it doesn't stay put!"

I seek here to maintain some nuance in my argument, for I do not want to suggest that local economies are good and global ones are bad. What I do hope to suggest, however, is that *how* goods move into global economies is critical. The sociality of exchanges means that objects move slowly – friction is high – and there are opportunities for diverse forms of value to be extracted from goods. For example, while Kaylee routes many objects to local families and organizations, she has recently begun to sell clothing on eBay. She describes her reasoning to me one day:

> Kaylee: […] my daughter, she'll wear stuff for a while and then she's like "do I really want this? No." So then she'll throw it into a pile. She loves the thrift store finds but she doesn't wear them for too long. So they're in great shape. She's only

worn them like four or five times. But like she's got tons of clothes. So she threw a

whole bunch out and so they're sitting in her room. So I went through them and I

was like "I'm reselling them because she bought them at the thrift store!" She never

wore them.

[Author]: Do you feel conflicted at all about buying it at the thrift store and then

selling it for more online?

Kaylee: At first I was like "do I really want to do this?" And then I was like "no,

because they're going to sell it no matter what." And I usually give a lot away. Like

I buy for a lot of people in need, too, so I donate a lot back into the community

(Interview, 9/10/19).

Selling online allows Kaylee to continue to give away goods to people in need, perform unpaid

care work for family members, and volunteer at the local thrift shop. Further, her participation in

online resale is a small fraction of her overall reuse activity. We can see how the global, market-

based economy for used goods allows Kaylee to generate a fuller life project (K. M. Millar

2018).

When used goods exit the local economy in Jordan or Mill Town, it is often through

textile collection bins, which route objects to larger markets. Clothing placed in textile bins is

collected, sorted, and shipped to clothing graders, who re-sort, evaluate, and ship items all over

the world. This process, while large in scale, retains some of the friction we see in the localized

exchanges. Clothing graders match buyers with textiles through phone calls, emails, and visits to

the warehouse rather than through algorithms (Interview, 11/5/19). And even within this market-

based approach, there are social elements that pervade the process, as one textile aggregator

describes to me:

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We're a for-profit company that focuses on recycling and environmental impact but

at the same time we clothe anywhere from 3,000-4,000 people in New Hampshire

and Maine a year through our own outreach. So we go through the clothing

ourselves and we'll put together packages of women's and men's and kids' clothing

or shoes or backpacks and we'll go and partner with the YMCA or we'll, you know,

hole up in a parking lot somewhere and we'll basically offer free clothing and

resources to the community that we have our bins within (Interview, 8/9/19).

Here we see the value and meaning of goods returning to local communities, even as many

goods are exiting into the wider market. This impact is limited to "doing for" (Putnam 2000) – a

company enacting a kind of corporate social responsibility – rather than the "doing with"

(Putnam 2000) that characterizes the circular exchanges within local networks, yet we still see

the generative power of friction at play.

In addition to generating sociality and conflict, friction slows the speed of exchange. It is

during the gaps and pauses created that sociality can emerge, but it is useful to think through the

other consequences of a slower speed. At an internationally-acclaimed flea market I spoke with

Roy as he waited in line to enter the market for the day. Roy is a picker – an individual who

scours flea markets looking for good deals to resell. He described the high levels of friction at the

market using an example from 15 years earlier:

there was a pile of stuff on the ground and the person who must've dropped their

stuff off stacked it up around this tree trunk and went off to get lunch or something

and they didn't...their car wasn't there […] but all their stuff was. And sticking out

of this bag was this piece of sculpture. It wasn't really a piece of sculpture, it was

like a flower pot. But it was bronze and it was painted white. And it was really

interesting to me. I had a feeling that I'd seen it. But I didn't know, really, but I was

really interested in it. And I stood there and stood there and stood there. And nobody

came. I waited about 45 minutes. And I thought, this is crazy. There's great things

here. I'm wasting my life. And a friend of mine actually came along and saw the

same thing and the dealer was there and he bought it. Anyhow, it was a French vase

by Giacometti. […] They took it to Paris. It went for something like $300,000. I

think about it all the time. That is why I keep coming to flea markets!

This market is a highly competitive environment, where pickers literally race across fields as

they look for underpriced goods that they can re-sell in more lucrative markets. Yet their ability

to leverage their unique sets of knowledge to under-pay for valuable goods is limited by the

friction in these markets. This may be a resource frontier, where used objects are captured and

re-commoditized, but it plays out at a human speed and scale. Goods move into a global

exchange network and enormous profits are made, but to access this network you have to wait

for a seller to come back from lunch.

The slow and meandering progress of items within and outside of local markets is quite

different from what re-commerce platforms offer. ThredUp declares that the company is "able to

process and recirculate clothing at an extraordinary speed and scale, all in support of sustainable

fashion, freer closets, and a better world" (ThredUp 2021). Yet without the friction that

characterizes many reuse exchanges, I question whether this form of circularity can, in fact,

create "a better world" for the diverse range of people who participate in secondhand economies.

Discussion

What can these ethnographic encounters tell us about the relationship between the local

exchange of used goods and placeless platforms? I see an emerging tension. In his writing about

"abject economies" Giles argues that what is important is not simply "that they exist in symbiotic

or parasitic tension with dominant economies but that they enable lives and livelihoods" (2018, 227). And indeed we see that with Kaylee, whose participation in placeless reuse enables her to continue to sort, share, buy, and give away goods locally, as well as perform unpaid care work. She draws on these platforms sparingly, strategically, and in concert with a number of other diverse strategies for circulating used goods. Yet as discarded goods are increasingly being seen as an emerging resource frontier (O'Neill 2019) the rapid growth and expansion of online platforms, and their streamlined, efficient processes make it ever-easier for discards to be captured by firms to be resold, with the profits going to large corporations rather than actors in local communities. Here, Anna Tsing's concept of salvage accumulation is helpful. She describes salvage accumulation as "the process through which lead firms amass capital without controlling the conditions under which commodities are produced" (A. Tsing 2015, 63). Salvage occurs in those spaces that are "inside and outside capitalism" – spaces she calls "pericapitalist" where "all kinds of goods and services produced by pericapitalist activities, human and nonhuman, are salvaged for capitalist accumulation" (A. Tsing 2015, 63). Kaylee's labor (and the labor of people like her) are not controlled by firms, and yet capital is generated from her work of sorting, saving, and selling discards on global markets.

As we seek solutions to our linear system of take-make-waste, through the creation of more circular economies, it would be wise to heed the warning of Scott, who describes "the dangers of dismembering an exceptionally complex and poorly understood set of relations and processes in order to isolate a single element of instrumental value" (Scott 1998, 21). The sole focus of re-commerce on materials – the environmental and monetary benefits of re-selling – ignores the complex economies that are already in place, and that are generative of all sorts of value. There is a stated goal within re-commerce platforms, and indeed within much of the

literature on circularity, that we should be working toward A CIRCULAR ECONOMY. In specifying the circular economy as singular, we also specify the approach we must take to manage and measure it – a (singular) circular economy is a global endeavor. This vision of circularity not only describes its potential, it delineates who are valid actors and administrators.

Yet my research suggests that we should instead be looking at circular econom*ies* (Gregson et al. 2015) *of place*. These are diverse economies, plural and varied, highly dependent on contextual and place-based relationships for the production and circulation of value. These circular economies of place – local, meaningful, slow, idiosyncratic, ubiquitous but not uniform – allow for diverse forms of value to be generated and exchanged along with objects themselves. These "emergent forms of life endure in the interstices of capital" (Giles 2018, 213). My work is an attempt at the "discursive and political work" of bringing these diverse economic forms "to light, to establish their credibility, vitality, and viability" (Gibson-Graham 2006b, xxi). If we are serious about the need for circular economies that do more than just open new market frontiers, but also contribute to human well-being, we must look to localized and place-based economies as the models for circularity. Within these often-overlooked economies, the exchange of goods is leading to the creation and maintenance of all sorts of value. As we begin the slow process of building more circular economies, recognizing and valuing the dense networks that are already in existence is critical. I see in these small-scale, localized efforts, the green economies we need to address a set of problems that are global in scope. When we slow down our exchanges, trading a focus on the materials for a focus on what the materials make possible, we re-embed economies in sociality, allowing us to see what economies are (or should be) for: the production and reproduction of social relationships. Indeed, material goods have value only to the extent that they serve this end (Polanyi 2001, 48).

Conclusion

      In the quotidien examples of localized reuse practices presented here I have shown how friction – that messy, awkward, slow, and deeply social force – acts to generate circular economies of place that have important consequences for circularity at large. As we look to circular systems to address resource consumption and environmental degradation it is critical to keep sociality in focus. This imperative is all the more challenging amid calls to scale up reuse activities to meet the scope of the climate crisis. Like Minter (2019), MacBride also worries about issues of scale in circular economies. She cautions us to think about "measures of tonnage" and the "actual material outcome" of community-scale reuse (2011, 127), arguing that "it behooves all of us concerned with justice and sustainability to take a long, hard, and considered look at the sufficiency of this solution" (2011, 137). While MacBride (2011) focuses on alternative solutions to waste issues rather than the need to develop globalized reuse exchanges, her message is a similar one to Minter's: quantity is the key measurement to successful implementation. The need for urgent action is clear, and yet if we create a circular system that reproduces the inequalities baked into linear systems, we will have sacrificed justice for reduced environmental impact. What I hope to suggest here is that we need not make such a sacrifice. The already-existing circular economies of place I have highlighted are global networks. They move significant – though often uncounted – quantities of goods using systems that are ad hoc, improvised, and salvaged. What could these endeavors accomplish with a modicum of local or state-level support? What could these friction-rich reuse networks produce? Perhaps a just, green economy made real.

CHAPTER 4: GLUT: AFFECTIVE LABOR AND THE BURDEN OF ABUNDANCE IN SECONDHAND ECONOMIES

Introduction: Looking for the Floor

"I've been waiting for the floor to cave in. I keep looking at it and I says 'maybe next week, you know?'" (Interview, Jolene, 10/14/19)

We spend a lot of time looking for the sorting room floor at the Jordan Community Thrift Shop in rural Maine. The sorting room floor is piled high with *stuff*: plastic garbage bags full of clothing, boxes crammed with books, knickknacks, family photos, bedding, outdoor equipment, unfinished craft projects, and many, many unidentifiable odds and ends. The donations litter the floors and creep out of closets, into the workspace of the volunteers who are tasked with making sense of these discards. Since I started volunteering with the Jordan Community Thrift Shop, I've snatched rare glimpses of the sorting room floor, covered as it is by piles of donated goods. This abundance of materials accumulates not through a lack of labor – indeed, volunteers sort through objects nearly every day of the week – but rather through the glut of goods that are streaming into the shop. Jill, a longtime volunteer, explains with some frustration that "you're pretty much just – not even finishing [sorting] the stuff that's donated the day you're there!" (Interview, 8/14/19). The labor of keeping the stuff moving feels deeply Sisyphean. It's impossible to catch up. Any progress made in sorting the waves of donated goods is quickly undone by incoming donations. The floor is covered once again.

The Jordan Community Thrift Shop is not alone in their overwhelming glut of donated goods. At Ministry Thrift Shop in nearby Mill Town, the drop-off shed is full-to-bursting with donations (see Figure 4.1). Inside the shop, black plastic bags full of clothing are stuffed under the sorting tables, packed into closets, and hidden away in storage in the second floor of the building, where the store manager worries she's created a fire hazard by saving stuff for coming

seasons. Similarly, at Home Goods Bank, an organization that accepts used goods to redistribute to those in need, the donations are all too frequently overwhelming. Baskets, chairs, and end tables tangle together in piles that quickly crowd the narrow hallways of the adapted warehouse space. Jon, the manager of Home Goods Bank, shows me a room that is packed with garbage bags full of clothes – floor to ceiling. He tells me that they've had to stop accepting donated clothes because they can't handle the volume.

Figure 4.1 The glut of goods at Ministry Thrift Shop

These reuse organizations are fixtures of their rural communities. They accept donated goods so that they can sell or give them to people in need. Proceeds generated from the sale of donations are used to provide direct assistance to community members or to fund a vast array of municipal services, ranging from public library and school programs to operational and

infrastructure investments at health care facilities. Yet despite the fact that these reuse organizations thrive on the donations of discards, the problem of *stuff* is very real.

This paper explores the interlinkages between the abundance of stuff moving through small community-based reuse organizations and the labor that is needed to manage this material. I draw on theories of gendered, social reproductive labor in capitalist economies to explore how the work of localized and rural reuse, disproportionately borne by unpaid, elderly women, reproduces communities. This labor is productive of all sorts of value (Isenhour & Berry, 2020), and yet it comes at a significant cost to the bodies and emotional welfare of the volunteers who perform it. The problem is twofold: first, there is simply too much stuff for volunteers to handle. Their attempts to save, categorize, and redistribute discarded goods in an effort to help their communities are thwarted by the sheer volume of material donated. The second problem is the practice of donation dumping, where unusable used goods move through reuse economies, washing their previous owners free of guilt while entangling laborers in messy relationships with objects.

Together, these problems exact a toll on volunteers, whose noncommodified labor (Oksala 2015) illuminates the uneven distribution of the burden of abundance and the costs associated with linear economic models. A labor perspective allows us to see the embodied cost that a global capitalist system places on those who manage our discards. Here, labor issues are at least partially disconnected from arguments about just remuneration or working conditions. Indeed, the laborers described here, do so voluntarily, often because they view their work as generative of social relations and community resilience. A labor perspective helps us attend to the structural issues around responsibility for waste. The too-much-stuff that continues to pour through thrift stores means that the (mostly) women performing this affective labor are making

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complex decisions about end-of-life management and resource stewardship for things they did not make and often cannot use or sell. Carol, a manager at Ministry Thrift Shop, wrote to the clothing company J.Crew to express her frustration with the amount and inferior quality of clothing her shop was receiving as donations. A representative from J.Crew responded, expressing a desire to make things that lasted longer, but Carol was not impressed: "They make money selling clothes," she told me with some resignation (Field Notes, 8/8/19).

Carol's experience with J.Crew indicates how little control reuse organizations have over the overwhelming flow of stuff they receive. This glut of donations signifies the need for policies that hold producers responsible for the goods they make. Extended producer responsibility (EPR) and product stewardship (PS) policies, which make producers either financially or materially responsible for their products, are proliferating in Europe (Lifset, Atasu, and Tojo 2013), and have even been introduced in the Maine State Legislature (Grohoski 2021). Yet here, labor issues highlight an important tension because policies are cultural processes that "reflect the rationality and assumptions prevalent at the time of their creation" (Shore and Wright 2011, 3). If the unpaid care work volunteers perform is not seen as labor, and the negative effects of this work on laborers are not counted among the potential harms of a linear system of production-consumption-disposal, then policies designed to address such systems will fail to help this population of laborers, and could even exacerbate the current problems they face. In this paper I argue that there is a need to shift burdens onto producers to ensure that the volunteers, who work to maintain a "good life" for the objects and people in their communities (Isenhour & Berry 2020), are not tasked with the emotional and physical burdens of disposing of the community's waste. Yet how this burden shifting is accomplished matters a great deal. Extended producer responsibility programs must frame waste as more than a problem to be managed by technocratic

solutions (Pollans 2017). Instead they must account for waste as a series of relationships –

between people, between things – characterized by power and privilege as well as care and

community.

In what follows, I first explore the nature of the crisis, investigating the problem of

abundance in community thrift stores and other localized non-profit reuse organizations as a

problem of overaccumulation in capitalist relations. Next, I examine the gendered and

generational labor of volunteers to understand the toll this work takes on their bodies and spirits.

Although many volunteers are eager to do this work to express care for their communities and to

reduce waste, the emotional burden is exhausting, and some worry that it is unsustainable for the

elderly women who predominantly power this sector. I conclude with an analysis of what the

affective, gendered labor in non-profit reuse organizations can teach us about developing better

systems for reducing waste. As we consider systems of enforcing accountability and improved

product design on producers through EPR and PS, we must attend to the lessons that this

gendered, generational, affective work can teach us about creating circular economies for all.

Literature Review: Waste & Waste Work

This too-muchness, the over-abundance of goods, is an issue at a global scale where

levels of consumption and resulting waste continue to rise (Cohen 2003; Schor 2010; Jackson

2009; OECD 2019; UN Environment 2019). This increase is not explained by an increase in

population alone, as globally materials use has far outpaced population growth (Oberle et al.

2019). The US Environmental Protection Agency reports that personal consumer expenditures in

2017 were more than six times higher than in 1960 and municipal solid waste had increased

threefold during that same time period (US EPA 2019). Indeed, consumption and waste are

linked in a system Schor describes as "a grand consumer churn" (2010, 37). This churn is an

integral component of a global capitalist system that produces a constant stream of excess in order to grow profits (Valenzuela and Böhm 2017; Yates 2011; Barnard 2016).

The churn of material goods takes two forms: first, through the disposal of goods that are truly broken, used up, and worn out. The breakdown of goods is accelerated by planned obsolescence, design for disposal, and a disregard for durability. In 1960 Packard (2011) described the "throwaway spirit" cultivated in the United States, starting with "breakable plastic toys, which teach [children] at an early age that everything in this world is replaceable" (Packard 2011, 55). Indeed, the decline in product durability that was lamented by Packard sixty years ago continues today, as material goods from socks to washing machines simply aren't made like they used to be (Minter 2019). This decrease in product durability can be seen even among companies that prioritize sustainability, where design for durability is rarely mentioned as a sustainability practice in corporate reports, especially compared to increasing energy efficiency and renewable energy or supporting recycling projects (Stewart and Niero 2018). In capitalist systems that seek constant growth (of markets, of profits), shorter product lifespans mean more frequent purchases and enhanced profits. When these goods – used up, worn down, and designed not to last – enter secondhand economies, it can be categorized as donation dumping. By donation dumping I mean the offloading of items where both use value and exchange value have been extracted. Nothing remains except the burden (physical, emotional, financial) of disposal.

The consumer churn is not all valueless goods, however. Indeed, if that were the case, few thrift shops and other reuse organizations would be able to operate. The second dimension of this massive flow of goods can be characterized by objects that still have "life" left in them. Here the challenge is linked to the quantity of goods as design and production processes accelerate the pace with which goods move through secondhand economies, where perceived obsolescence

(Packard 2011) linked with shifting tastes and fashion performs a kind of magic on ideas of value. The use value of these objects for their owners is obscured. Because newer, trendier items are available, older items seem worthless. Yet their use value is recognized in the context of donations. These objects are recognized as having life left in them, so long as it's not with their current owner. This rapid accumulation and premature disposal of goods is taking place across sectors (Huisman et al. 2012). The Ellen MacArthur Foundation reports that clothing production has doubled in the last fifteen years while the length of time garments are used has decreased by 36% in this same time period (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017). These discarded but useful goods are increasingly burdensome for those who take on the responsibility for their management. Importantly, however, these goods may not retain their use value for long. As objects are designed for a quick production turnaround, their lifespans are also decreased, meaning that issues of quality and quantity are deeply linked in the movement of secondhand goods.

When faced with an unending stream of goods – many seemingly useless – the volunteers on the sorting room floor are faced with a choice: try to sell or give away the item, or "toss it." Nearly every volunteer I met through the course of this research would prefer selling or giving items away to people in need. The ultimate fate the majority of items "tossed" into the trash in the United States is the sanitary landfill (US EPA 2019). There is a commonly-held aversion to sending objects to landfill (Bohlin 2019; Minter 2019; Isenhour and Berry 2020). They are places where objects "die" social and material deaths, and where waste workers have been literally buried by trash (Reno 2016b; K. M. Millar 2018). Landfills haunt us. They are the epitome of waste – mountains of garbage that attest to overconsumption and our inability or unwillingness to make use of our resources. While many scholars articulate the value that is

recovered through waste work in landfills (Reno 2016b; K. M. Millar 2018), these sites remain the popular antithesis of thriftiness and conservation. A common refrain in the reuse world is that items are "saved," "rescued," or "kept out of" landfills (Herrmann 2019). For those engaged in the work of saving, sorting, and selling used goods, the landfill is not just a management process of last resort in the waste management hierarchy (US EPA 2016), but a morally-charged space that embodies the idea of wastefulness (Isenhour and Berry 2020; Isenhour and Reno 2019).

Perhaps it is the knowability of landfills that adds to their ominous presence in our minds. The amount and type of materials that enter landfills is assiduously tracked by the EPA each year (see, for example US EPA 2019), and we can follow the plotted line on the chart as it rises up, up, up. By contrast, there is a hidden stream of materials that flows through our social system. This stuff evades – either by craft or accident – our technocratic waste infrastructure, and instead circulates within secondhand markets. These markets vary widely in their forms, from informal street vendors (Ta 2017), anarchist free markets (Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera 2012), and garage sales (Herrmann 1997) to vintage boutiques (Gregson and Crewe 2003), thrift shops (Larsen 2019), national used good franchises (Minter 2019), and international exchanges (Halvorson 2012). This diversity of reuse practices suggests an overwhelming abundance of material goods to fuel the sector, and yet the quantity of used goods that move through secondhand markets is largely unknown (Schor 2010). In his exploration of global secondhand markets, Minter laments the lack of data on reuse, writing:

> nobody keeps data on how much clothing moves from closets to rummage sales,
> there's no metric on the number of pieces of furniture that flip from college
> apartments to Goodwills, and no government agency tabulates or even estimates

the number of garage sales held annually in the United States and how much

revenue they generate (2019, xv–xvi).

In this way, reuse markets may be hidden in plain sight (Isenhour et al. 2017). All around us,

people sell, give away, accept, and purchase used consumer goods, and yet in an economic

system that prioritizes production, the redistributive processes that power reuse economies make

it invisible to those who place value on economic activity and determine what gets measured.

Yet when we turn our attention to this sector, even in fragmented and partial ways, we begin to

see a familiar pattern: an overwhelming and ceaseless abundance of stuff (Minter 2019; Schor

2010). Given the difficulty of approaching this issue from a quantitative perspective, there are

calls for efforts to explore secondhand economies using situated, place-based research (Minter

2019).

Attempts to stem the tide of this stuff through our take-make-waste system have recently

gained moment around the concept of a "circular economy" (EMF 2012). A circular economy

(CE) "aims to enable effective flows of materials, energy, labour and information so that natural

and social capital can be rebuilt [and treats] everything in the economy as a valuable resource"

(EMF 2013, 26). This uncountable stuff – an immeasurable river that flows, unseen, through

communities – is often managed at the local scale by community reuse organizations, including

small-scale thrift shops, home goods banks, and community charity auctions. These small

organizations seem to be a feature of towns and cities across the United States, yet they are

under-studied in the academic literature, which has tended to focus on larger organizations (see,

for example Minter 2019; Crewe, Gregson, and Brooks 2003; Halvorson 2012; Larsen 2019) or

direct peer-to-peer exchanges like garage sales (Herrmann 1997, 2015; Crawford 2014), and

ephemeral markets like car boot sales and flea markets (see, for example Gregson et al. 2013;

Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera 2012). This invisibility extends beyond the academic literature to our popular imagination, where the aggregated impacts (social, economic, environmental) of the things we donate or exchange in secondhand markets go unseen and unaccounted for.

Community reuse, itself difficult to quantitatively measure or map, is powered by an invisible labor force. It has been observed – though not systematically studied – that these organizations are run predominantly by the volunteer labor of elderly women (Parsons 2004). Volunteer work is not measured as part of the country's labor force, yet it contributes substantially to the social and economic well-being of the United States (Pho 2008; Turner, Klein, and Sorrentino 2020; Martinez et al. 2011). Like used goods, which elide official categories for measurement and representation (Isenhour et al. 2017), volunteering in the reuse sector crosses multiple categories of measurement or is not measured at all. The US Census Bureau, for example, codes volunteer labor in categories that include "fundraise or sell items to raise money" and "collect, make, or distribute clothing, crafts, or other goods", both of which describe the activities of reuse volunteers (Turner, Klein, and Sorrentino 2020). When combined, these two categories make up the bulk of volunteer work done in the United States in 2017 (Turner, Klein, and Sorrentino 2020).

While there is a robust literature on volunteerism (see, for example Denning 2019; Dowling 2016; Foster 2018; Maes 2012; Milligan 2007; Rogers 2017), there is a need for "more qualitative research […] to critically examine how different individuals and communities experience volunteering" (Martinez et al. 2011, 35). This paper builds upon feminist labor scholars to approach volunteering in second hand economies as a valuable form of unpaid labor.

Scholars have, for decades, sought to expand and enrich our understanding of labor beyond "the privileged model of waged labor" (Weeks 2011, 2015). Feminist anthropologists located women's socially-reproductive labor as a critical site of study (Adams 1991; Nash 1989; Weiss 1993), arguing that we must attend to the unwaged labor that reproduces capitalist relations of production (Brodkin 1998). This scholarship was rooted in studies of unpaid housework, child care, and other domestic labor that was necessary to maintain a labor force but was not valued within a capitalist system. More recent feminist scholarship has expanded the concept of reproductive labor to include care labor that takes place *outside of the home*, including elder and child care, house cleaning, and social work, to name a few examples (Baines 2006; Murphy 2017; Duffy 2007; C. M. Lane 2017). Resituating care work *outside of the home* is critical to make the work of reuse volunteers visible. A labor perspective allows us to see the emotional toll that disposing of a community's discards takes on the elderly women who often do this work.

Reuse labor is, I argue, socially-reproductive labor defined by the concept of care. This emotional and affective work "signals a deeply personal investment on the part of the human" (Chacko 2019, 97). In the context of these small reuse organizations, this deeply personal investment is rooted in community. Whether waged or unwaged, inside the home or out, this work tends to be underacknowledged and devalued compared to other kinds of labor (Murphy 2017; Wright 2013; C. M. Lane 2017). There are also distinctions between affective and emotional labor that are important to parse. Affective labor, Hardt argues, produces "collective subjectivities, produce[s] sociality, and ultimately produce[s] society itself" (1999, 89). Oksala distinguishes between types of affective labor, including noncommodified care work that typically takes place in the home (raising children or caring for sick or elderly relatives),

commodified labor that might include daycare or nursing home employees, and "waged and unwaged labor that does not directly reproduce labor power but instead aims at producing affects" (Oksala 2015, 290–91). The work of producing a caring and cohesive community through reuse, I argue, fits within that last category.

Emotional labor is considered by Oksala (2015) to be a subset of affective labor. Within emotional labor, the emphasis is on the labor of creating or maintaining emotional responses that "require drawing resources from a source of the self that we usually honor as deep and integral to our individuality" (Oksala 2015, 291). Hochschild's ([1983] 2012) work on flight attendants demonstrates how women performed emotional labor to "smile like they mean it" to make customers feel welcomed. Indeed, some work on reuse has explored the role of emotion and affect (see, for example Larsen 2019; Halvorson 2020; Herrmann 2015). These scholars situate reuse practices as deeply affective and emotional, yet they focus on material goods (Larsen 2019) or the act of exchange (Herrmann 2015) rather than labor. More recently, Halvorson (2020) explores the role of affect among volunteers in a charity reuse organization. Her work explores the ways in which affect is displayed among volunteers, but does not address the burdens that affect and emotion place on volunteers in reuse organizations. As I will explore in the coming sections, the affective labor of reuse volunteers is a source of tension when they are faced with the need to discard the overabundance of donations that come to them, unceasing, day after day. Many volunteers also engage in emotional labor when they cheerfully accept donations that are used up, worn out, and broken down. Faced with the burden of excess produced by a wasteful capitalist system, these volunteers attempt to prevent the disposal of surplus. In the process, however, their care work exacts a toll on their emotions and spirits.

Methods: Pitching In, Sorting Out

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork in non-profit reuse organizations in two rural Maine towns: Jordan and Mill Town. From May 2019-December 2019 I volunteered in two local thrift stores, with a local service club that ran an annual yard sale, and at a home goods bank. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with volunteers, managers, and board members of reuse organizations (n=54). These interviews were typically conducted off-site, at a volunteer's home or at a local community café, and lasted between 40 minutes and two hours. I sought to understand individuals' connection to their community, their motivation for participating in reuse, and their experiences as volunteer laborers, but interviews were also inductive (Svendsen, 2006), allowing me to be surprised by a line of inquiry and to follow it. I transcribed all interviews verbatim to capture the nuances of what was said (Kowal and O'Connell 2014). My field notes were a form of active reflection as well as a means of capturing ethnographic data from participation observation, and included methodological, descriptive, and analytic components (Bernard 2011). I coded all data in NVivo 12 for Mac (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2018) using iterative coding cycles, where codes were created and refined based on subsequent data generation (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

When I first conceived of this project, I anticipated that volunteering would put me in close contact with the materials that moved through reuse organizations, as well as gain entry to organizations (Lincoln and Guba 1985) and access to participants (Flachs 2013). I did not anticipate that the act of volunteering would become a central focus of my research. Yet as I worked alongside other volunteers I began to hear a common refrain that seemed to capture an important dimension of reuse: the labor burden of abundance. Through my role as a participant/observer, I began to feel this burden in my own body, as well. Throughout my ethnographic research I was pregnant with my first child. As my fieldwork progressed and my

own embodied experience shifted, the strain of lifting, carrying, sorting, hanging, and hauling used goods became more pronounced. The cluttered floors of the sorting room were not just inconvenient, they became hazards. My positionality as a pregnant researcher certainly helped me see the challenges inherent in this very physical work, particularly for individuals that might not identify as young and able-bodied.

At the thrift stores my volunteer work nearly always took place in the sorting room. In both thrift stores where I conducted fieldwork the sorting rooms were closed off from the public. Standing in front of two sturdy tables, four volunteers would individually sort through donations. First, I would search for a bag to sort from the pile of donations. Most donations were enclosed in black plastic garbage bags, and while they were opaque, seasoned volunteers could tell a lot about the contents of the bag from just looking at it. Each of us had items we enjoyed sorting and those we disliked. I shied away from bags containing table or bed linens, for example, because they were bulky and tended to come in unwashed. Bags with assorted odds and ends were time-consuming to sort and price and often contained lots of items that had to be thrown away – a time-consuming and emotionally-draining process. I quickly found that the process of throwing things away became emotionally exhausting. I felt the burden of disposal begin to weigh on me as I threw away bags and bags worth of stained, broken, or simply dirty items. Even knowing that the shop could not sell or give away these items, the physical act of throwing items into the trash exacted an emotional toll, as I worried about the waste of resources and the social burdens of landfills in addition to larger-scale problems like resource extraction and climate change.

I was taught to open a bag up, leaving the bag intact — if possible — to save it for use as a garbage bag later. This itself was an act of care, an ironic effort to respect the usefulness of an item intended to facilitate disposal—and to conserve resources where we could. Each item would

be removed one-by-one for evaluation. Most of the items we received were clothing. We looked for stains, rips, missing buttons, and broken zippers to start with. Some volunteers with more experience would evaluate objects even more carefully – looking to make sure garments weren't twisted, and if they were wool, that they hadn't been shrunk. We were told to look at the labels of items so that we could set high-value brands to the side for pricing. Objects that seemed special – rare, old, or valuable – were also set aside for evaluation by a skilled volunteer. Items were sized and hung up on hangers or folded to be placed on the sales floor.

Items that didn't meet our strict criteria were either thrown away, put into the recycling bin, or donated to another (usually larger) reuse organization, like Goodwill Industries or Salvation Army, if they were deemed to be saleable. The Jordan Community Thrift Shop had a textile recycling bin for clothing that had stains or holes, but volunteers were uncertain about how items were managed by this third-party company and putting items in the textile recycling bin was thought to be akin to throwing the object away. In each case, when an item was discarded, recycled, or donated, it was lost to the local community. That loss was felt keenly by volunteers, who saw their work as contributing to local wellbeing. It was important to them that items were sold or given away to community members, and that the sale of items benefitted the community itself. When objects were put into bins to be sent elsewhere for processing and resale, then, this felt like a loss even though they were still helping keep items out of landfills. This process was repeated for each item, each bag, over the course of a three to four hour volunteer shift.

While my volunteer work was intended to help me gain access to these sites of reuse (Flachs, 2013), it brought an unanticipated issue into focus over the course of my research. I

noticed the unceasing donations and the pressure it created to deal with objects quickly, as illustrated in the following excerpt from my field notes:

> the floor had been SO clear and everyone was feeling really good about it, making comments, and sort of luxuriating in the space. Then a family came in with bags and bags and bags full of stuff, big rolls of fabric, giant toys, and so on. It took back all of the space we had created and clogged up the whole room again. After they were finished dropping stuff off 'for now' the three of us in the room just sort of looked around in despair. It was extremely daunting. We all stood there for a moment in what I can only describe as a shocked silence. Lily picked up a toy castle and we couldn't figure out how it was supposed to work, so she just dumped it into the recycling bin. It was so much stuff again that it felt like an emergency to clear things out.
>
> (Field Notes, 8/21/19)

This clutter that is passed along to thrift shop volunteers is more than just material goods – it is a manifestation of anxiety with a "capacity to haunt" (Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003, 237). This "universal irritant" (Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003, 237) acts upon people, calling them to shed possessions in an effort to maintain a sense of spatial and emotional order. Indeed, as basements, garages, and home interiors are stuffed with belongings "storage of material goods has become an overwhelming burden for most middle-class families" (Arnold and Lang 2007, 24). This material burden is compounded by the growing trend toward a minimal aesthetic popularized by books like *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (Kondō 2014), and its subsequent Netflix reality show adaptation, *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (Wallis 2019), as well as cautionary tales in programs like A&E's reality television show *Hoarders* (2009) and TLC's *Hoarding: Buried*

Alive (2014). These cultural texts assign value and status to a clutter-free, minimalistic aesthetic which is juxtaposed with a chaotic, often seemingly horrific amount of clutter. Indeed, many of my research participants expressed a desire to "not be a hoarder" as they donated objects or decided not to make a purchase.

This everyday crisis is exacerbated when individuals must deal with the possessions of loved ones who are moving into long-term care facilities or who have passed away. The urgency of managing a lifetime of possessions without a home solution for storage is often managed by donating objects to thrift shops (Verde 2017). I could see this in practice when I opened bags and boxes of odds and ends – things that had been swept wholesale into a container to be gotten rid of:

> I found a bag that was full of clothing hangers, some old cat toys, two torn couch
>
> pillows (priced at $0.50 each, "as is"), and three different VHS versions of *Little*
>
> *Women*. One of the movies had a clearly broken tape, rendering it unusable. Was
>
> this dumping? What can one do with a broken tape of *Little Women*?
>
> (Field Notes, 8/14/19)

Certainly the effort it took to bag up these items and bring them to the thrift store was more than it would have taken to throw them away, and yet many of these items were clearly waste[2]. Used up, broken down, no longer useful or saleable – the anxiety of the clutter of stuff had been passed from a previous owner, who seemingly couldn't bear to throw them away, along to me:

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[2] I recognize, of course, the substantial body of literature that articulates the subjectivity of waste (see, for example Reno 2018; Liboiron 2018; K. M. Millar 2018; Eriksen and Schober 2017). My intent here is to highlight the perspectives of volunteers, who clearly defined these types of donations as waste because they could not be immediately sold in thrift shops or given away to other non-profits. They were trash, in short, because they had to be managed as trash.

I had lots of trash today. Bags full of stained, ripped, or otherwise faded and beat up items. Some curtains had significant fading (would I want them in my house? I asked myself. No, I replied). A really nice men's jacket had a small tear in the arm and a stain on the collar. "No", said Jill. "Donate it." I told her I knew I should donate it, but I felt bad. It was a nice jacket. She said she knew how I felt - someone could use that jacket.

(Field Notes, 8/15/19)

In this excerpt from my field notes I found myself emotionally burdened by the process of putting a worn coat in a textile recycling bin rather than making it available to a local community member. As is clear from the excerpt, I was not alone in this feeling. Other volunteers expressed regret, remorse, and unease with the need to donate (often viewed as a form of downcycling, though the term was not used by volunteers) or landfill items that were useful but not perfect. The glut of donations, however, forced us to make these decisions about objects.

As I began to see, the volunteers constantly contended with a glut of donations – many of which were low quality or unusable. Far from being a dispassionate observer, through my volunteer work I became intimately familiar with the emotional burden of managing a community's unwanted stuff. In what follows, I explore how labor in localized reuse organizations can illuminate the crises of global capitalism through the work of managing the river of stuff that moves through our societies, homes, curbside bins, thrift stores and our landfills.

Results: The River of Stuff & the Burden of Waste

In the next sections I explore the emotional and affective labor of reuse volunteers as they manage the unending stream of donations, and as they contend with the persistent problem of donation dumping.

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For many of the volunteers who labor in community reuse organizations, there is simply too much stuff. Ivan, a volunteer with the Jordan Community Thrift Shop, describes a "river of stuff" that flows through the thrift store constantly: "this summer has been unprecedented in the river of stuff that's coming […] I think the river has never been this mighty" (Interview, 8/19/19). Other volunteers describe being "buried" or "inundated" by donations. Lily, a volunteer at the Jordan Community Thrift Shop, articulates feeling fear at the size of the pile on the sorting room floor, commenting "that scared me. Looking at all those bags and I'm the only one there? […] Sometimes I'm overwhelmed when I go in and see the bags that go up and up" (Interview, 8/26/19). It's hard to ignore the materiality of objects when they pile up. They demand attention, and often act in mischievous ways. For example, at Ministry Thrift Shop, the objects piled up outside the door, trapping a volunteer inside after the end of a shift (see Figure 4.2).
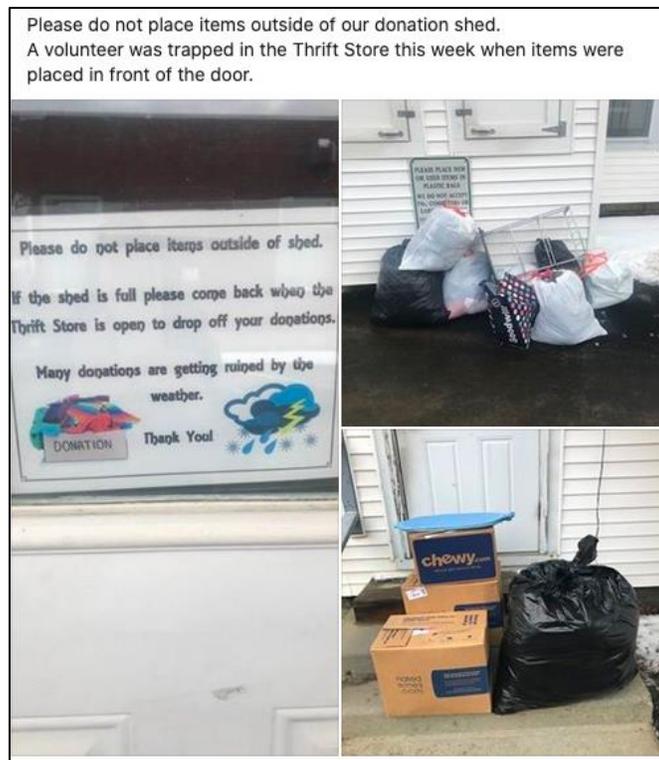
Figure 4.2 Trapped by trash

Julie, a volunteer at the Jordan Community Thrift Shop tells me of the pile of donations "It just grows and grows. It probably grows in the night when we're not here" (Field Notes, 8/14/19).

The donated stuff opens new lifeworlds for the community. Sales of used goods fund social projects, including sponsoring healthcare costs for those in need, funding for schools and civic projects, and direct contributions to individuals going through difficult financial times. For those organizations that give goods away at no cost, it is understood by volunteers and program managers that the stuff provides dignity, comfort, and pleasure to recipients. Yet every organization I worked with expressed a wariness about the over-abundance of stuff. At the same time that it is helpful, it is also a burden for those who try to manage it. It is useful to pause here to reflect. These community reuse organizations are focused on the collection and redistribution of used goods. They make money selling the community's discards, and they use that money for social projects. Or they give the discards to people who need them. Yet even with these goals in mind, they see that the river of stuff is unsustainable, especially as it is currently composed. Community reuse organizations hope to receive high-quality, durable, resalable goods, and are critical of the low-quality, disposable products they receive as donations because they have limited lifetimes. The trouble with all of this stuff is that there is no control over its quality or quantity. For non-profit community reuse organizations, it seems like the burden of a global capitalist system of "take-make-waste" (EMF 2012) is placed squarely upon their organizational shoulders.

The people who power the local reuse organizations in Mill Town and Jordan are defined by care. Jon, a volunteer at Home Goods Bank, explains the impact of his work, stating "when my head hits the pillow at night, I feel great. I know what I've done and what my volunteers have

done […] has made life better for somebody" (Interview, 6/17/19). Helping the community, improving well-being, earning money for local causes, and providing people with access to stuff they can use all emerge again and again as motivations for volunteering. Carol describes her work in Ministry Thrift Shop as explicitly focused on care, stating that because of her thrift shop "no one [in Mill Town] should be going to bed hungry or walking around naked" (Interview, 8/20/19). The volunteer labor of reuse is deeply connected to care for the community. The process of revaluing goods is linked to the production of affect. Scholars have explored in some detail the ways in which volunteer labor at nonprofit organizations can act as part of a neoliberal process of reducing government services (Maes 2012; Milligan 2007). These critiques are important, and in the process of this research I also asked questions about how reuse organizations are filling gaps in services that government should provide. Indeed, paying for health care services, helping the homeless transition into housing, and providing an emergency safety net for people who have suffered hardships are basic government functions. Yet I want to maintain a steady focus on the embodied experiences of laborers here rather than turning to potential roots in larger structural problems or to institutional relationships (as important as they are).

To illustrate the burden of discarding and the affective labor that powers small-scale reuse, I provide an extended excerpt from my field notes where I reflect on the emotional trauma of discarding unwanted goods in the wake of a community sale run by a local service club. The sale has four large "barns" – huge structures that had been packed full of goods for the event, which draws participants from neighboring communities due to its festive atmosphere, low prices, and status as an annual rite-of-summer in the area. The sale is the sole fundraiser for a local non-profit, and the sale of used goods generates around $40,000 that is funneled into

community programs throughout the year. At the conclusion of the sale volunteers who had previously gathered to collect, organize and sell these items in a festive, three-day community party reconvene to deal with the surplus. They do this each year for the annual sale. Once an item is offered at the sale, the organization judges that it won't sell at a future event. So all items that remain at the end are offered to other local non-profits, and if they aren't taken, are relegated to the dumpster. Most items would go straight to a landfill, while a select few of the very valuable items are kept for the next year's sale.

I arrived to see people making big piles of larger items, carrying smaller items in boxes, garbage cans, and plastic totes, and even a big front-end loader moving large items into the green dumpsters that were placed in a few places on the site. The barns are still distressingly full of unsold used goods.

I started in the housewares barn with some of the other volunteers. It had been cleaned out quite a bit compared to how it was even yesterday, but there were still some straggling glass sections. As I grabbed a box and began to fill it, I realized why. It's emotionally very difficult to put those glasses into a box to be thrown away. My first item to discard was an old fax machine so that I could use the box it had been stored in to carry other items. This wasn't so hard. I walked by another volunteer, and we commented on how obsolete fax machines are. This felt less personal than other items, at least. But when I came back to fill my box with glasses, I became very uncomfortable. I wanted to stack them neatly in the box and yet it didn't matter, because they'd all go in the dumpster. I took some of the obviously less-valuable items (those with restaurant logos, faded event logos, and other sort of odd novelties) out and couldn't help but set them gently in the dumpster so they wouldn't break. Others were throwing items into the dumpster. Hearing them crash was both exciting and sad. One of the men commented that it was

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difficult hearing the items break. I told another volunteer that it was really hard to throw things

away and she said "oh, I know! It's really hard!" She told me that "if you run into something that

you're having a hard time throwing away, you can put it in a box to bring to Goodwill" which

made me feel much better.

When I went back into one of the barns, another volunteer was in the glass section and

we together picked through the glassware to identify those pieces that seemed like they should be

saved. She whispered to me "each of these things is a person. Someone gave it to us and they

wanted it to have another life - to be used again. Now we're just throwing them away. That's not

another life!" We quickly filled two boxes full of glassware that was too good to throw away -

mostly sets of wine glasses. Single glasses, things that looked ordinary - they were easier. Still,

we made those two boxes and I realized that maybe I wasn't cut out for the housewares section.

It was too fraught with emotional connections. I talked to another volunteer who said that on her

first clean-up she had to set aside everything with Jesus on it—or an angel—to bring to

Goodwill. She couldn't bear to throw that away. I asked her if things had changed now that she'd

been through it a few times and she said "not really." The emotional labor of discarding other

people's items is real, and it seemed to affect most everyone there. The ones who had done the

most clean-outs seemed the least affected, although that wasn't true across the board. An older

gentleman told me that throwing stuff away "breaks my heart."

I walked into the toy barn, hoping for less challenging fare…. The women there sent me

to the puzzle corner, which was easier for me. They told me to set aside anything that was still

wrapped up, but otherwise to get rid of it all. We were discussing why it was justified to throw

this away, and a woman told me that many of these things had been available at one or two yard

sales before this, then the three day auction. She said that if no one wanted them at that point—

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what else could they do? They encouraged me to take home anything I wanted. I stacked up some puzzles to take out to the dumpster along with another volunteer, but when she encountered a puzzle that featured the TV character Columbo, she said "oh I can't do this - not Columbo! He's my favorite!" and she left the stack of puzzles for me to bring to the trash. Some of the toys had names on them, which proved problematic for other volunteers, who couldn't bear to throw away something that had been personalized. For them, it seemed to represent the child or adult who was linked to that object. These were more than home goods or toys - they were representations of people, and this was never more clear than when we had to throw them all away.

At first the dumpster was open on one end (see Figure 4.3), and people could throw things into it. Some found the throwing of objects cathartic, but others were less comfortable, and were placing things gently or throwing only soft items in.
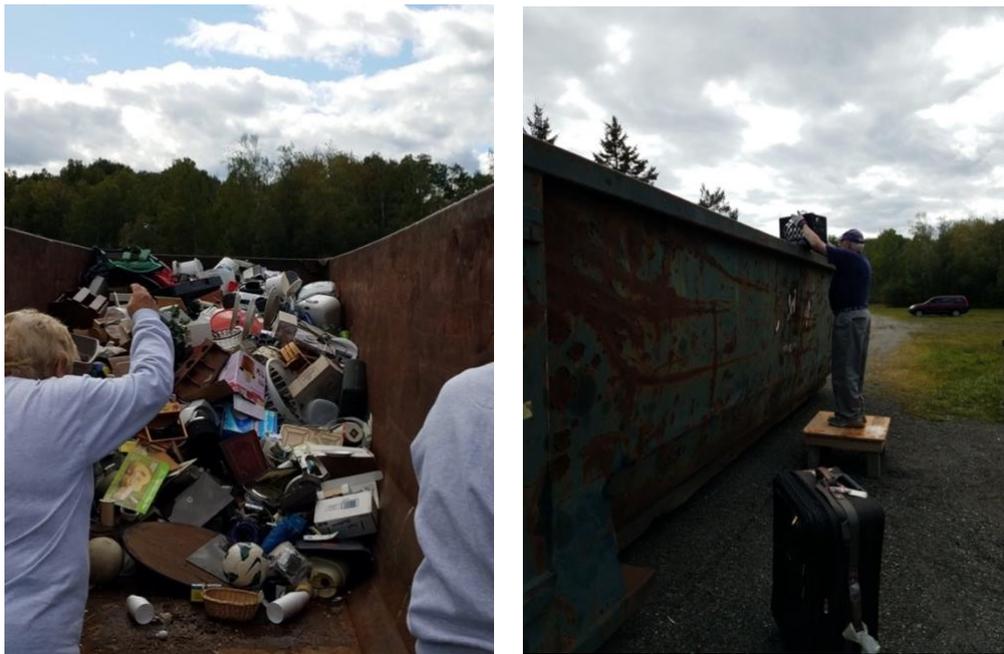
Figure 4.3 Filling the bin

Finally, the end had to be closed to allow the dumpster to fill up all the way. At this point people stepped on a low table to be able to get things inside of the dumpster. I watched a man

struggle to throw a plastic briefcase into the dumpster three times before he got it in. Others couldn't lift items over the side, even with the step. A younger woman (in her 50's) volunteered to throw a nested set of suitcases over the edge because the elderly man carrying them couldn't manage it. Even as we threw it all away, the stuff still had a hold on us, and discarding it was a form of emotional trauma (Field Notes, 9/8/19).

Hardt (1999) argues that affective labor is immaterial – service labor that produces affect alone. Yet for reuse volunteers affect is strongly linked to the used goods themselves. Lucas, a man who collects and redistributes used goods out of his house, articulates this clearly when he tells me that "the caring is what is important. The stuff is the manifestation of caring" (Interview, 9/24/19). In the thrift stores, furniture banks, and charity sales of Mill Town and Jordan care for people is often deeply entangled with care for objects. Objects are connected to people, and they become a part of our "extended selves" (Belk 1988). They retain traces of former owners (Bohlin 2019; Herrmann 1997; Reno 2014), which can serve as sometimes uncomfortable reminders of social relationships. The burden of care for objects makes the glut of donations particularly painful as objects with cosmetic imperfections or slight flaws are thrown away, passed along, or recycled to make room for those that are perfect. Indeed, when I first began volunteering with the Jordan Community Thrift Shop I found myself apologizing to items I put in the trash. They were clearly loved at some point, but given the dire shortage of space, there was no way to keep everything. Another volunteer in Ministry Thrift Shop echoed my own feelings, stating that "my first week here I had a very hard time throwing stuff out because I grew up poor and we didn't throw anything out. And it's like the only thing wrong with this— is that it's missing a button. Can't somebody put a button on it?" (Interview, 8/20/19).

Volunteers manage the items that are too difficult for their owners to dispose of. At the Jordan Community Thrift Shop we received a donation of memorial blankets – blankets with an image of a deceased person woven into their fabric, complete with birth and death dates, and photos of loved ones. Jill opened the bag containing two such blankets, and said with some sadness "why would they do this? How could they get rid of this?" (Field Notes, 7/17/19). The blankets looked unused, as though they had been made, put into a plastic sleeve, and never removed. Despite their pristine condition, Jill placed the blankets in a textile recycling bin because they were too sentimental to be of value to anyone else. The value was not transferable.

This experience repeated over and over again in different sites with the donation of photos. Sam sounds anguished when she tells me about receiving a donation of a used photo album with photos still inside. At first, she couldn't decide what to do with such an object, but she tells me that in the end she "just put the albums on a shelf and let the people – if they want the photo album they can take the pictures out. I can't bring myself to throw the pictures out. I'm like 'oh, that's a bad omen.' I'm not throwing anyone's pictures out" (Interview,7/10/19). I faced this same problem myself when I sorted a donation of a couple's wedding photos. The photos were in a golden frame shaped like two entwined wedding rings, with the names and presumably

the wedding date engraved in the middle (see Figure 4.4). The couple's photos were still in the frames. When I asked the other volunteers what they would do with such a frame, they urged me to throw it away. It was too personal to sell. The burden of

Figure 4.4 The burden of sentimental objects

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discarding this clearly sentimental and emotionally valuable object was transferred to me.

Volunteers describe not being able to bear throwing things away, even as they acknowledge that there is no space to save them. Lily and I reflected on a mass of donations from a school's lost and found that we received over the summer. There were dozens of contractor-sized black plastic garbage bags stuffed with winter coats, snowsuits, and winter boots. We were directed to "STOP SAVING winter clothes" in multiple emails from the thrift shop volunteers, and again in the thrift shop's monthly meeting, due to a lack of storage space. Yet when faced with the goods themselves, that directive was difficult to implement. We secreted items away, over-stuffed racks of hung clothing, and bought items ourselves in an effort to circumvent a system that was designed to produce waste. Some volunteers refused to work with those they knew would force them to throw things out, and strategically scheduled their shifts to work alongside others who saved items. Lily describes her thought process on saving some particularly nice items after that day, saying defiantly "I decided I'm going to keep it and […] said 'I'm sorry but I can't see throwing away this beautiful LL Bean snowsuit.' And then when Bev [another volunteer] came, I noticed that she did the same thing" (Interview, 8/26/19). Volunteers, then, are not just victims of a problematic system, but are also active participants in trying to imagine and actualize something different.

The palpable frustration and emotional agony over discarding surplus coats is, in part, tied to the object itself. In Maine, a state known for its long, harsh winters, coats are essential. Volunteers repeatedly used coats as an example of items that were in high need and should not be discarded. "Everybody could use a warm coat," Sam tells me (Interview, 7/10/19), as she explains her process for saving winter wear. Yet even for an item as highly valued as a winter coat, there are simply too many to manage. Carol, at the Ministry Thrift Shop, described to me

trying to bring their surplus coats to the area homeless shelter, only to find that they had far too many coats, as well. As they discard the too-many coats that they receive as donations, the volunteers imagine someone needing that coat and not having access to it. The objects are difficult to throw away because they have the potential to enact care. They have become more than commodities (Bohlin 2019) as they are reconfigured into hybrid objects that take on social and relational dimensions (Appelgren and Bohlin 2015). The qualities of the objects themselves, as well as their potential to enact care, make them difficult to discard, and yet because there is simply too much stuff, the objects and their potential are wasted.

The Burden of Waste: Donation Dumping

While the overwhelming flow of still-useful stuff donated to community reuse organizations is a burden to thrift shops, the river of stuff is also clogged with what the volunteers classify as trash. Lucas collects home goods in his garage to donate to Home Goods Bank and other reuse organizations. He tells me that "30% of the stuff that I've gotten right now I've actually had to dispose of […] Completely stained, broke down, bedbugs, you know?" He goes on to exclaim, "people donate this stuff!" (Interview, 9/24/19). Many volunteers express a sense of frustration with the quality and quantity of donations. Cassandra, a volunteer at Ministry Thrift Shop, asks "why [do] they think we want this stuff, you know? More than likely they're just thinking that they're helping us. That someone could use it. But when we have this much stuff, it's really just trash" (Interview, 9/27/19). Indeed, many volunteers suppose that donors have good intentions – that they are not intentionally dumping, but instead that they do not understand the scope of the waste problem, or the financial or emotional burden of throwing items away. Rich, a leader at a local service club, sounds bewildered when he describes the donations he's seen come in to their annual sale, including "a used waterpik […] with the little used pieces there! The things you stick in your mouth!" He goes on to wonder about the

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intentions of donors when they give these items: "I've got to believe that some people don't know what they're giving […] that people are giving us things that *they think* are valuable. I don't know where they're living" (Interview, 8/29/19). Jill says with extreme frustration "sometimes bags of things come in that look like they should be thrown away! But somebody thinks 'oh, maybe someone could use it.' They don't think to throw things away" (Interview, 8/14/19). Carol describes the thought process she imagines in donors: "I think people…even if it's disgusting, they go 'well…maybe somebody could find some use for this!' People – I think we help get rid of people's guilt" (Interview, 8/20/19). What is clear, however, is that the guilt, like the objects themselves, doesn't go away. It is merely displaced from the donor to the volunteers. When the donations become too much, anger and frustration can erupt. Hannah, the manager of a thrift store in Mill Town, describes her fight against the onslaught of waste:

> My husband said that somebody was dropping off a bed down there. I walked out and I could see that it had a big hole in it. I said 'put it right back in your car!' And they come here! They shop here! Now why would they drop that off? (Interview, 8/28/19)

Again and again, across donation-based reuse organizations I heard the palpable frustration, anger, and sadness among volunteers who are faced with a glut of poor-quality donations. This glut is a result of a system that continually produces and offloads excess to allow for new consumption.

The problem of donation dumping at local community reuse organizations is firmly linked to a global capitalist system that externalizes the multiple costs of waste while placing value only on the production and consumption of new goods. Indeed, as Ferguson explains, "a kind of productivist common sense has too often rendered distribution subsidiary, invisible, or

even contemptible" (Ferguson 2015, 23). The same system that obscures the value of used goods also obscures the labor that sorts, discards, and redistributes this stuff to those who might need it (Isenhour and Berry 2020). Yet these diverse economic practices – all the ways in which goods are offered, sold, given away, and cared for – are at risk if we are not honest about the nature of the work and its long-term sustainability in the face of myriad challenges.

Even as volunteers struggle to deal with the burden of excess and the emotional weight of throwing things away, they also perform emotional labor (Hochschild [1983] 2012) as they manage the delicate interactions between themselves and donors. This often involves showing appropriate respect and gratitude for the items donated. Or, as Veldstra describes, "it is a form of labour in which one is compelled to display what appears as authentically positive emotions, even when one might be feeling bad or ambivalent" (2018:2). Cassandra, a volunteer at Ministry Thrift Shop, describes her labor succinctly: "A lot of people will bring us in trash and we don't throw it away in front of them because that just would hurt their feelings. We wait until people leave and then we go and throw their trash away" (Interview, 9/27/19). She performs emotional labor to indicate her gratefulness for the donations while concealing her distaste at the quality of the objects. This labor is often difficult to perform, an idea that was made visible to me when we interacted with a donor at Ministry Thrift Shop. The donor had brought piles of goods and was stacking them in the middle of the sorting room floor – an area that we tried to keep clear, both for safety and sanity's sake. At one point the donor asked if something was too dirty to donate and Carol quickly retorted "if it's disgusting, just throw it out." The donor appeared hurt by this comment and replied with some defensiveness, "it's not disgusting. It's just dirty on the outside" (Field Notes, 9/19/19). Cassandra and I had both observed this exchange, and we reflected on it a few days later. Carol, she says, "doesn't realize that she's saying things in hurtful ways." This

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gentle correction is directed at the need to perform emotional labor to make the donors feel comfortable and happy with their experience, even as they donate items that are clearly unable to be offered for resale. While she is frustrated about the amount of "junk" that is brought into the thrift shop on a regular basis, she emphasizes the need to empathize with donors, commenting that "everyone just wants to help and that's where the thought comes from. They want to help and they don't necessarily think about the work that goes behind it all" (Interview, 9/27/19).

Yet if the glut of donations is a burden, there is also a nagging fear of being cut off from that river of stuff. For Sam, a paid staff member at a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping Native and Indigenous victims of domestic violence, emotional labor is necessary to ensure that her organization retains access to goods to help their clients. While her work is focused on advocacy, she also collects donations of used goods to help clients who have had to flee their homes with few possessions. Her frustration with the quality and quantity of donations she receives is palpable in our interview, yet she feels obligated to perform emotional labor:

I get overwhelmed sometimes and I want to say 'alright, we can't take clothes anymore.' You know? Because I'm like oh my god. And not to be rude, but sometimes I think people are like 'oh, the Indians will take it!' You know? 'They need it!' Well, no. We don't need *a sock* or a pair of dirty underwear. But I went through a ton of those bags and took out what I could salvage for people and ***I'm always fearful that if we don't accept something from someone that they'll be like 'oh...they don't need anything.' So it's really hard. And I don't like to hurt people's feelings*** because those clothes - those like 50 trash bags full of clothes were just dumped on us. But what can I do? (Interview, 7/10/19 emphasis mine).

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If the river of stuff is a problem, so is becoming cut off from that river for not displaying an appropriate level of gratitude – even for items that are insulting. Sam goes on to describe the emotional labor of accepting items in an effort to maintain access to the river of stuff:

> I always think 'would I wear this?' Or 'would I want my kids to wear this?' Or whatnot. ***So we don't really tell people a lot of rules just because we want to be grateful. We just really, really want to be grateful.*** And sometimes people give us stuff and it makes them feel better. Like it's sentimental to them and so they're like 'oh, all this bedding was my great-grandmother's' or something like that***. We're like 'thank you.'*** They're like 'we know she would be so happy knowing that it went to your program***.' So we accept it and take it and then we decide what to do with it. Yeah. That's kind of sad.*** (Interview, 7/10/19 emphasis mine).

Sam conceals her ambivalence about the quality and quantity of items donated to her organization in an effort to improve the donation experience. This emotional labor is a means of staying connected to the flow of goods that provide an important source of support for Sam's community.

Discussion: The Problem of Invisible Work

The affective and emotional labor of reuse volunteers is invisible in two important ways. First, it is invisible because of who performs this labor. Sachs writes that "in the same manner that women in the home disappeared from conventional social analysis it is possible for retired, non-productive people who are socially invisible to disappear from analysis" (1984, 23). While I question the extent to which this labor is, indeed, "non-productive" (see Isenhour and Berry 2020; Adams 1991), it does seem to go unseen. Further, the laborers are not retired *people*, but instead they are largely retired *women*, and "women contribute to community in ways that go unrecognized" (Martinez et al. 2011, 26). While the overwhelming majority of reuse volunteers

were women, to call this gendered work is not to dismiss the fact that some volunteers were men. Indeed, while affective labor "is in an important sense feminized labor […] it is important to acknowledge that it is not performed exclusively by women" (Oksala 2015, 285). Affective labor is made invisible through its gendered dimensions, yet that invisibility extends to all who perform this work. Understanding this affective and emotional labor as gendered and generational "shapes […] how that care is understood and valued, individually and culturally" (C. M. Lane 2017, 3). Even when it seemed like the volunteers were being seen and recognized, ideas about gendered labor in community reuse had a too-easy simplicity. Indeed, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of volunteers I encountered were women, most people didn't comment on gender at all. The first person to do so overtly was Ivan, who told me about his first encounter with the Jordan Community Thrift Shop: "It was pretty much, you know, it was old ladies from the church doing what they do when they do thrift stores." He went on to describe their labor as "a bunch of old ladies getting together" (Interview, 8/19/19). Ivan held great respect for the work of the thrift shop volunteers, and yet in this casual diminishment of their labor we see clearly how the gendered and generational nature of reuse labor makes the struggles of workers – the emotional trauma of waste – invisible.

The second way in which this labor is invisible is through the nature of the work. There is a long-standing emphasis in classical political economy and Marxism on productive rather than distributive labor (Isenhour and Berry 2020; Ferguson 2015). This tendency to ignore (re)distribution means that this increasingly important form of labor goes unseen and unrecognized. This is compounded by the fact that this labor is characterized by care. Scholars have articulated the ways in which gendered care work (Baines 2006) and specifically gendered voluntary labor (Milligan 2007) have left women stretched too thin. These analyses emphasize

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the demand that care work and volunteerism make on women's time. Here I want to draw attention to the ways in which this voluntary care work leaves women stretched *emotionally* thin. Even as community reuse volunteers sort through what are, effectively, mountains of trash, the affective and emotional labor they undertake to discard this detritus is obscured from view. In some instances, emotions are intentionally hidden, as when volunteers smile and accept donations of trash to make donors feel good about themselves. The labor of concealing frustration, sadness, or a sense of being overwhelmed is meant to be masked. In other instances, however, affective labor is externalized, but perhaps not in ways that can be easily read by others (Halvorson 2020). Bringing an item home from the thrift shop to wash it or repair it was very common, and represents an affective practice – connecting with the item and practicing care in order to ensure it was not wasted because it was dirty or superficially broken. The invisibility of this affective and emotional labor matters because it obscures the heart of the problem. All of this labor is in response to the mass quantities of goods that volunteers must discard as they continue to accept a glut of donations. Affective and emotional labor can, in important ways, show us the burden that our capitalist systems of production-consumption-disposal place on those responsible for trying to rescue items from the never-ending waste stream. By making the labor visible, I attempt to make the underlying process of take-make-waste visible.

In doing so, I join scholars who critique the capitalist appropriation of labor, and particularly the labor of older adults. They argue that elders are increasingly "valued for their ability to contribute to the market economy through paid or unpaid workforce participation" (Martinson and Minkler 2006, 321), and that their voluntary labor "frees up resources that would otherwise have to be spent" on programs and services (Martinez et al. 2011, 33–34). These lines of thought place an emphasis on the fact that volunteers are unpaid, and connect that to ongoing

processes of capitalist capture. Yet focusing on (non)payment and the co-opting of labor suggests solutions to this problem that involve adequate compensation. The issue of adequate valuation and payment for care work is also a dominant theme in the feminist literature. Oksala describes the narrative, writing that "by understanding the psychological costs of different forms of affective labor, we can try to mitigate or remove them by adequate compensation" (2015, 292). Yet a robust literature on attempting to assign monetary value to nonmarket forces suggests that these efforts are fraught, and can lead to the individualization of collective problems, as well as the commoditization and capture of social practices and resources (Doane 2014). Other scholars argue that assigning a price to something makes it replaceable (Castree 2003, 281). Yet the affective labor of community reuse is deeply relational. One laborer is not a substitute for another, because the work that these women do is tied to their relationships of care with each other and for the community. Oksala goes on to identify the problem of monetizing affective labor, arguing that "the more fundamental problem concerns the question of how certain affective services can be properly compensated at all" (2015, 292). Indeed, questions about the monetary value of this gendered, voluntary labor here elide what I see as the overarching problem: there is simply too much stuff.

Conclusion

There is a pressing need to understand the embodied experiences of reuse workers because of the momentum of circular economic logics in policy and academic spaces (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017). Reuse is an important component of circular economies, and it is contended that "the closer the system gets to direct reuse, i.e., the perpetuation of its original purpose, the larger the cost savings should be in terms of material, labour, energy, capital and the associated externalities, such as greenhouse gas emissions, water, or toxic substances" (EMF 2013, 33). Yet if we view the small-scale community reuse labor described here within the

framework of a circular economy, we begin to see some of the gaps in its visioning and the problems within its implementation. Notably, social dimensions of more circular economies lack attention within the academic literature (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017; Hobson 2016). Hobson calls for attention to the "implications of a CE for quotidian spaces and practices, as the patterns and rhythms of everyday socio-materiality are potentially reconfigured" (2016, 89). Here I have attempted to show how localized reuse laborers are bearing the brunt of an onslaught of stuff. Without accompanying policies and regulations on the production and end-of-life recovery of goods, the burden of excess falls upon – at least in part – these localized reuse organizations. Indeed, while the Ellen MacArthur Foundation frames the externalities of a take-make-waste system as purely environmental (greenhouse gas emissions, water, toxic substances), here I show how there are affective and emotional burdens on people as well. The goal of building natural and social capital through circularity, too, requires attention to the relational labor of reuse. When volunteer laborers, eager to see "everything in the economy as a valuable resource," are instead faced with piles of trash, the potential for positive sociality is diminished.

There is a need, then, to address the waste in material economies in ways that do not unfairly distribute the burden of excess. Reuse volunteers are happy to contribute their labor to causes they see as productive for their communities, but they should not be responsible for dealing with the emotional burden of discarding the community's waste. This paper is an attempt to examine "the messy world of circular econom*ies*, and […] which wastes are being recovered as resources, and where" (Gregson et al. 2015, 220). Situating this social understanding of affective waste burdens helps us see the need for policy to fairly implement a more circular economy.

Programs like product stewardship and extended-producer responsibility, for example, shift the burden of responsibility for consumer goods onto those who produced them. Yet these policies too often focus their sights on recycling, ignoring the role of reuse in circularity (R. Lane and Watson 2012; Lifset, Atasu, and Tojo 2013; Massarutto 2014). Further, there is little evidence that EPR and PS policies, as currently enacted, have encouraged product redesign for durability (Lifset, Atasu, and Tojo 2013; Massarutto 2014), with studies showing that key industry stakeholders prioritize recycling and recovery over durability and maintainability (Tasaki, Tojo, and Lindhqvist 2019). Lane and Watson argue that we must consider product stewardship more broadly than simply producer take-back schemes, suggesting "an additional model of product stewardship [that] would focus on reuse and would be characterised by collaboration between government agencies and consumer and charity sector organisations" (R. Lane and Watson 2012, 1263). Policies are cultural products, and reflect – and reify – the ways in which we see the world. My attempt here to show the gendered, generational, affective labor of reuse is an effort to broaden our understanding of the waste world to allow for policies that attend to the needs of diverse actors. As we move toward much-needed circular economic models, it is critical to see the hidden labor – and the hidden burdens – that some perform and bear in an effort to reduce waste. Without an understanding of the already-existing circularity at play, our policies will undermine and fail to address the critical issues addressed here. Localized reuse organizations are, and have long been, small-scale transition labs for circular economies. Their inundation with goods – and the associated burdens placed on laborers – indicates a need for policies that push producers to create objects that are meant to be reused, with the potential impact of decreasing the production of low-quality and disposable materials.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Summary

As we reckon with the social, ecological, and economic costs of a linear system of production, consumption, and disposal, it is increasingly apparent that a shift toward more circular economic systems is needed. The research presented in this manuscript examines in some detail the complex social processes that underpin materials reuse – a key component of circularity – in rural communities. Together, this collection of research suggests that pursuing circularity without attention to sociality is likely to reproduce existing inequality and to foreclose opportunities for positive local impacts. I argue that reuse is fundamentally social, and that it must be understood as a complex process rather than in simple, growth-oriented terms. Achieving circular goals like diverting resources from landfill or growing new business models does not necessarily result in the socially-beneficial outcomes promised by proponents of circular economies. Yet if circularity is not *inherently* socially-beneficial, there is significant potential for aspects of circularity, like reuse, to contribute to localized well-being. Indeed, many reuse practices documented here are generating all sorts of value for local communities. My research suggests how reuse practices can be generative of positive sociality, as well as emerging barriers to localized reuse. This dissertation as a whole is an attempt to highlight the complex assemblage of behaviors that make up reuse economies, and to suggest pathways to support localized reuse.

Each of the three substantive chapters of this dissertation highlighted the complexity of different aspects of reuse economies. Chapter 2 focused on the association between reuse economies and social capital. I argued that reuse practices are strongly linked with indicators of social capital. This association between reuse and social capital has positive implications linked with community trust, well-being, and social network support, and yet a critical reading of social

capital also suggests that exclusion and inequality are also reproduced through reuse economies. When we rely on social networks and word of mouth to distribute the benefits of reuse (both goods and other resources), those who are most in need may be least likely to benefit because they lack access to networks and relationships. This research suggests that we see both reuse and social capital as complex phenomena rather than unmitigated "goods." The chapter contributes to a significant gap in the social capital literature by integrating a public-goods and a critical approach to understand social capital in all its complexity. In the pursuit of both strong, supportive communities and circular material flows, then, what is needed is not *more* social capital, but rather networks that intentionally include diverse members of the community.

In Chapter 3 I explore the rapid proliferation of online reuse platforms – so-called "re-commerce" – to understand the implications this growth may have on localized reuse networks. I find that the friction generated through place-based reuse – the slow movement of goods coupled with the innumerable personal connections – is associated with positive sociality. The frictionless exchanges that take place through re-commerce may move goods more quickly, but lack the potential to generate the social benefits promised by proponents of circularity. This chapter suggests that economies of place are the keys to equitable and just circular economies, and contributes to anthropological theory related to communities of place and alternative economies. As we seek policy solutions to create more circular economies, we must be wary of solutions that neglect the localized, small-scale, place-based dimensions of reuse in favor of globalized markets.

Finally, Chapter 4 addresses the relationship between the glut of material goods moving through localized thrift organizations and the affective and emotional labor required of volunteers as they manage this abundance. This chapter argues that the burdens of a capitalist

system of take-make-waste are increasingly being placed on those least responsible for producing this glut of material goods. This chapter provides a much-needed anthropological perspective on the emotional burdens of voluntary labor, and contributes to a qualitative understanding of the problems of linear economies and overproduction. Labor issues here bring to light the need for more comprehensive policy to re-place the responsibility for goods at the end of their lives on producers, rather than on volunteers in reuse organizations.

Taken together, these chapters suggest that reuse is a complex set of relationships made up of diverse, and sometimes competing actors. My findings here contribute to a growing literature on the social dimensions of waste (see, for example: Reno 2014, 2016a, 2018; Liboiron 2018; K. M. Millar 2018; Saethre 2020), and the ways in which people seek to revalue that which has been discarded. Understanding reuse as a set of relationships implies that reuse is always in process. This notion is critical as we look to the future of reuse practices in rural Maine and beyond.

My research captured snapshots of reuse practices during moments in time. My dissertation research concluded in December, 2019, just three months before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. I had fully intended to return to the field in the early spring of 2020, and yet like so many plans, these would largely go unfulfilled. While I was able to make short trips to participants' homes, and to different field sites in the months before the pandemic began, much of my in-person research was curtailed by efforts to stop the spread of the virus. Yet if my formal research stopped, my involvement with research participants did not. I heard about the challenges the pandemic posed; about the uncertainty it brought, and the worries that people had about their own safety and their ability to continue to contribute to their communities through reuse. These challenges underscore many of the themes in this dissertation, and suggest starting

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points for policy intervention and potential futures for reuse economies. My attempts at engaging policy audiences on issues that emerged in this research project can also be seen in the appendices to this dissertation, which provide examples of interventions designed for diverse audiences. It is to these potential futures that I would now like to turn. Rather than conclude here, then, I will use the uncertainty generated by the pandemic to suggest that we see reuse as an evolving practice that takes work, support, and care to thrive.

In the early months of the pandemic, the Jordan Community Thrift Store held a board meeting to determine how the thrift store would operate amid the public health crisis. The board members, all volunteers at the thrift store, are in their 70's, 80's and 90's. In the brisk weather of an early summer morning, we sat outside the town library, distanced and in masks, to discuss what to do. It was hard for the volunteers to hear each other when they were so far apart, especially with cloth masks covering their mouths. "Is that you, Jill?" one woman asked, squinting as she tried to recognize another volunteer with half of her face covered. The circumstances felt dire. The volunteers were in the highest risk category for contracting serious complications from COVID-19, and in early 2020 little was known about how the virus spread. As the volunteers discussed their fears, they also talked about why the thrift store was important. The pandemic seemed like precisely the crisis that the thrift store was equipped to help with: supplying people with low- or no-cost goods during difficult times. Amid the fear and uncertainty at the meeting, I also felt an undertone of frustration, brought to the fore when Regan, a long-time volunteer, said with some force "maybe we should throw in the towel. *Where are the young people?*" (Field Notes, 6/8/20). Her question was one that many of my research participants had been asking. At each reuse non-profit I worked with, I was the youngest volunteer – often by more than a decade. This was a real concern in volunteer work that was so

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very physical. Some volunteers struggled to lift boxes of donations, others injured themselves tripping over the piles of objects that covered the floors of sorting rooms. Many older volunteers worried that their organizations had no future without an influx of younger volunteers to support their efforts. COVID-19 highlighted this gap, but it did not create it.

These concerns illustrate the critical point that reuse economies are not static. They are constantly produced and reproduced. Indeed, in the year between the conclusion of my research and the writing of this chapter, many of the reuse businesses and organizations that contributed to my research ceased operations (see Figure 5.1). For some, the pandemic was the critical factor. For others, the end had been in sight for some time. Indeed, much reuse activity seems to be ephemeral, and yet the sector remains strong within Maine (Isenhour et al. 2017). Like the goods within it, the sector is constantly remade. Yet for particular people and places, the question of what the reuse sector looks like in the future is very real. Yes, the sector as a whole will continue, but will the small shops live on or die out? Will global markets supplant the work that is being done locally? Will young people join in, or will aging institutions continue until there is no one left to run them?

Figure 5.1 Many thrift shops closed permanently amid the pandemic

What I have attempted to demonstrate with my research is that reuse is often unseen and undervalued, and that the labor of reuse is both challenging and generative. The sociality of localized reuse cannot be replicated by larger global marketplaces for used goods. When communities lose thrift shops, home goods banks, or swap meets, something more than a hub for the exchange of used goods is lost; so is the opportunity to casually exchange gossip, to connect with neighbors, to give (and take) from the community. My research also suggests that there are simple ways to support community reuse. I highlight some of these suggestions below in an attempt to connect my research to practice.

Social networks are important to localized reuse economies, but they also limit access to used goods and the other associated benefits of reuse organizations. In some cases, people felt excluded from reuse simply because they were not made aware that they were welcome to participate. Several of the non-profit thrift shops who contributed to this research made efforts to publicize their hours of operation, yet these efforts were largely targeted at church networks and local community newspapers. These efforts tended to reach groups of people who were most similar to the volunteers themselves – older, white, long-time community members. Some organizations excelled at communicating with diverse populations by reaching out to area social workers, veterans' organizations, and homeless shelters. Local and state government could support access to reuse by developing, for example, a collaborative online tool to support connecting people with local organizations.

Local government might also support reuse through consideration for the kinds of spaces made available to reuse organizations. Participants in this research were elderly volunteers – women who give their time to help sort, save, and sell donated goods in local non-profit thrift shops. Understanding the needs and limitations of this labor force is critical to supporting

community reuse. Several of the thrift shops that contributed to this research were located in repurposed buildings – spaces that were donated or loaned to these non-profit reuse shops. Yet often the spaces were located above the ground floor, or required volunteers to climb steep sets of stairs to store donations. In other cases, the spaces lacked ramps, elevators, or other features that would allow volunteers to easily move donations into the sorting room. This meant that volunteers often injured themselves climbing stairs, jumping on and off of makeshift step-stools, or hauling goods into their spaces. Understanding the needs of the volunteers means recognizing that these seeming inconveniences are major obstacles to the health and well-being of volunteers, as well as their continued participation in reuse activities.

There is value in the work being done to redistribute used goods within local communities. My research also aims to add complexity to our understanding of reuse economies in rural communities to highlight the value generated, and to help plan for barriers and unintended consequences. The transition to more circular economies is not straightforward, nor are circular economies, by their very nature, moral ones. In attending to the complexity associated with reuse economies I add to a growing body of literature that seeks to envision pathways toward just, sustainable circularity (e.g., Jaeger-Erben et al. 2021; Geissdoerfer et al. 2017; Ghisellini, Cialani, and Ulgiati 2016; Valenzuela and Böhm 2017; Schröder, Lemille, and Desmond 2020). To achieve circular economies that ensure well-being while slowing and closing resource loops we must move beyond growth as the sole measure of progress in circularity. For as I have discussed here, more (social capital, used goods, business models) is not always better, and may indeed be worse. Instead, we must consider reuse economies as social practices to be understood with nuance, and in context. Only with such consideration can we create circular economies that ensure prosperity for all.

Opportunities

My work is nested within a larger project focused on the meaning and value of reuse economies in Maine. This larger project adopts a mixed-methods approach to exploring issues of economic and social value, and includes household and business surveys, over 150 interviews with reuse participants, and economic modeling that places reuse in Maine in conversation with national trends. This dissertation presented results from my six months of ethnographic work in rural reuse organizations, yet it is also informed by ideas, results, and findings from the larger project. Nevertheless, while this project is robust in its examination of localized reuse, nevertheless there remain gaps and opportunities for further research. For example, some research suggests that Maine's reuse economies are, in many respects, unique in their history and in their widespread acceptance, with less stigma associated with obtaining used goods than in other contexts (Berry, Bonnet, and Isenhour 2019). Exploring reuse in another geographical context in the United States would allow for a deeper understanding of the range of practices that emerge in localized reuse economies. Additionally, while this study has emphasized the role of localized reuse, there is a need to understand the motivations and behaviors of online resellers – those engaging in re-commerce – to better understand the relationship between localized and globalized reuse. Finally, the qualitative approach to understanding social capital as a resource and a liability might be applied in other studies of reuse, or other contexts altogether to continue to build a body of literature that explores capital as a diverse and complex concept with differentiated and uneven impacts in practice.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB – Interview Informed Consent

You have been invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Brieanne Berry, a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Maine. This project is conducted under the guidance of Dr. Cindy Isenhour, a faculty member in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Maine. The purpose of the research is to explore the value and potential of reuse markets (thrift, antiques, salvage, swaps, community lending, materials exchanges, etc) and their potential to contribute to economic, environmental and social benefits. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.

What Will You Be Asked to Do?
You will be asked to participate in a 30-60 minute semi-structured interview. Topics include your experiences shopping for or selling used goods, as well as information about your community and yourself. With your permission, the interview will be recorded for transcription. You will also be asked to fill out a short questionnaire that includes demographic information and questions about your perceptions of your community.

Risks
Beyond time and inconvenience, there are no risks to you from participating in this study.

Benefits
We do not anticipate that you will directly benefit from participation in this study. However, the study findings are intended to increase understanding of the value and potential of reuse markets to contribute to multiple policy objectives - information that may promote reuse.

Confidentiality
Any information that you provide is strictly confidential. A code will be used to protect your identity. A key linking your name to the data will be kept separately, on a computer with additional security. Those codes will be destroyed in May, 2024 after completion of the study and final publication. Our recording of your interview will include an interview code, not your name. That audio file, free of identifying information, will be transcribed by Brieanne Berry. The audio file will be destroyed in 2024, however the transcript file will be stored indefinitely on a password protected laptop. Your name or other identifying information will not be reported in any publications. Your name will not be linked to your completed questionnaire, and the paper file will be destroyed in May, 2024 after completion of the study.

Voluntary
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

Contact Information
If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at brieanne.berry@maine.edu or Cindy Isenhour at Cynthia.isenhour@maine.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Maine Office of Research Compliance at 207-581-2657 or email umric@maine.edu

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Social Capital & Community History

Are you from Maine?

Are your parents from Maine?

How would you describe your community? Do you like living there?

About how long have you lived in your current location?

Do you do any volunteering or helping out in your community? Tell me about that.

Do you know your neighbors? Have you ever helped them or received help from them?

Cultural Capital

What was your education like? Was it different from your parents or grandparents?

What kind of work do you do now? What have you done in the past?

How would you say you're doing financially?

Reuse

Where do you typically go to buy things?

How often do you buy used things? Repair things or get them repaired? Loan or borrow things?

Have you ever sold something used? Or given something away? Tell me about what that was like.

Tell me a story about something you bought or sold used. Did you think about where it came from? What its "life" was like before you got it? What was it like to sell or buy this item?

Appendix C: Reopening Reuse Guide

The Reopening Reuse Guide was produced in an effort to guide decisionmakers affiliated with localized reuse organizations on pathways for reopening amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on my knowledge and experience volunteering in small-scale thrift organizations, I was able to understand some of the potential barriers to integrating public health best practices into reuse organizations. These barriers included a lack of capacity to research best practices, because many organizations are run solely by volunteers, who have a range of competing commitments for their time, to difficulties navigating online resources and staying up-to-date on news and information.

The Guide, produced in collaboration with the Maine Chapter of Scholars Strategy Network, was developed over the summer of 2020 and was released through local media outlets in September 2020. This release strategy was intentionally designed to filter information to those audiences who could most benefit from it: the small, informal reuse organizations that abound in rural communities. The Guide was reproduced in whole or in part in a number of weekly newspapers, and was also posted online as a resource for reuse organization managers. While the content is less relevant in the summer of 2021 than it was in the middle of the pandemic, the design, outreach, and communication effort was an attempt to aid decision-making based on priorities, barriers, and needs that I began to understand during my field work.

Reopening Reuse

COVID-19 Safety for Community Reuse in Maine

Brieanne Berry, PhD Candidate, University of Maine

University of Maine | September 2020

About this guide

This document is a collection of guidance, best practices, and current policies adopted by federal and state government, as well as other Maine thrift stores to assist community-based thrift stores in deciding whether and how to reopen safely during the coronavirus outbreak. Our understanding of the virus is emergent, and the resources linked to in this document should be referenced for the most up-to-date information. A list of useful resources for COVID-19 and coronavirus spread can be found at the end of this document. *This document is a compilation of available resources, and should not be used as a replacement for medical advice.*

Author Information

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Reopening Reuse: Summary for Decision-makers

Across the state of Maine there are small, community-based thrift stores, furniture banks, yard sales, secondhand shops, antique stores, auctions, and flea markets struggling to determine how to reopen amid concerns about the spread of COVID-19. Uncertain about the safety of accepting donations, welcoming patrons, or staffing volunteers, many organizations have reduced their services or temporarily halted operations. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for reopening community-based reuse organizations. Decisions about how, when, and whether to reopen will hinge upon space, staffing, community and organizational needs, and the nature of the outbreak in the community, to name only a few considerations. The key considerations for deciding on a reopening strategy are bulleted below, and are discussed in greater detail throughout this guide.

Keeping People Safe

- **Maintaining social distance** (about 6 feet) between people is critical to reducing transmission. Post signs to ensure distance is maintained.
- Patrons, volunteers, and staff should **wear face coverings**. Post signs to alert patrons of this policy.
- **Limit crowds.** Assign a volunteer or staff person to monitor entrances to keep the number of patrons to no more than 5 customers per 1,000 square feet of store space.
- **Create barriers** between patrons and staff/volunteers. Install plexiglass shields at cash desks and limit physical contact associated with accepting donations.

Creating Safe Spaces

- **Maximize ventilation**. Open windows and circulate air to reduce the likelihood that aerosols will spread the virus.
- **Widen aisles and make them one-direction only**. Give patrons, staff, and volunteers as much space as possible in aisles. Put down floor markers to ensure one-way traffic within the shop.
- **Provide social distance markers** to remind patrons to stay a safe distance apart.
- **Clean and sanitize** frequently touched surfaces.
- **Close fitting rooms** or **quarantine items that have been tried on**.

Accepting Donations Safely

- **Quarantine donations** for several days to allow any live virus to die to reduce the risk of transmission.
- Have donors **sort their own donations** to minimize staff/volunteer contact with items.

Consider Alternatives to a Traditional Reopening

If reopening feels too risky for patrons, staff, or volunteers, consider alternative strategies (see "Contactless Reopening" on page 11 for more) that reduce or eliminate contact with patrons while maintaining the important social benefits of reopening for volunteers and staff.

Introduction

Reus e is part of the fabric of Maine. All across the state there are small, community-based thrift stores, furniture banks, yard sales, secondhand shops, antique stores, auctions, and flea markets (to name just a few!) that help people get rid of things they no longer need and help others access goods they might not otherwise be able to find or afford. Many reuse organizations make goods available at no or low cost to patrons, and oftentimes they use their profits to fund social services like food pantries, support for local schools and health facilities, or cultural institutions. Reuse means different things to different people – it's a treasure hunt, a chance to meet with friends, an opportunity to serve the community, a way to clean out the clutter, and a way to meet basic needs.

As with so many things, COVID-19 has disrupted the important work that was being done in community reuse organizations all over the state. Uncertain about the safety of accepting donations, welcoming patrons, or staffing volunteers, many organizations have reduced their services or temporarily halted operations. This document incorporates research findings on the meaning and value of reuse, as well as guidance from state and federal health officials, the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development, and other resources to help community reuse organizations make decisions about reopening safely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for reopening community-based reuse organizations. Decisions about how, when, and whether to reopen will hinge upon space, staffing, community and organizational needs, and the nature of the outbreak in the community, to name only a few considerations. There are risks associated with reopening – particularly for thrift stores staffed by volunteers, who tend to be older and therefore at greater risk of experiencing serious illness from COVID-19 – but there are also risks associated with remaining closed. Many volunteers derive important social benefits from their work in thrift stores and community reuse organizations, and reuse is helpful to those experiencing economic instability because it allows them access to low-cost goods – something particularly important right now. This document is intended to help community reuse organizations balance the risks and benefits of reopening in ways that make sense for their volunteers, employees, patrons, and donors.

Coronavirus Basics

Preventing Illness

The best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed to this virus. In general, **the more closely a person interacts with others and the longer that interaction, the higher the risk of COVID-19 spread.**

- **Maintain social distance (about 6 feet)**.[3] The closer you are to other people who may be infected, the greater your risk of getting sick. Indoor spaces are more risky than outdoor spaces where it might be harder to keep people apart and there's less ventilation.[4]

- **Wash your hands often with soap and water** for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together until they feel dry.[5]

- **Routinely clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces.**[6] This includes tables, doorknobs, light switches, countertops, handles, desks, phones, keyboards, toilets, faucets, and sinks.

- **Cover your mouth and nose with a cloth face covering when around others.** You can spread COVID-19 to others even if you do not feel sick. The cloth face covering is meant to protect other people in case you are infected, and is not a substitute for social distancing.[7]

Monitor Your Health

- **Be alert for symptoms.** Watch for fever, cough, shortness of breath, or other symptoms **of COVID-19.**[8]

- **Take your temperature** if symptoms develop. Don't take your temperature within 30 minutes of exercising or after taking medications that could lower your temperature, like acetaminophen.

How the Virus Spreads

- The virus that causes COVID-19 is thought to spread mainly from person to person, **mainly through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs,**

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[3] CDC, "Social Distancing," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, February 11, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/social-distancing.html.
[4] CDC, "Deciding to Go Out," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, February 11, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/deciding-to-go-out.html.
[5] CDC, "When and How to Wash Your Hands," April 23, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/when-how-handwashing.html.
[6] CDC, "Cleaning & Disinfecting," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, February 11, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/disinfecting-your-home.html.
[7] CDC, "Use of Cloth Face Coverings to Help Slow the Spread of COVID-19," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, February 11, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html.
[8] CDC, "Symptoms of COVID-19," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, May 13, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html.

sneezes, or talks, or through aerosols (suspended air particles)[9]. These droplets and particles can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. Spread is more likely when people are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet). [10]

- **It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes.** This is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads, but we are still learning more about this virus.[11]

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[9] Jim Daley, "What Scientists Know About Airborne Transmission of the New Coronavirus," *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 12, 2020, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-scientists-know-about-airborne-transmission-new-coronavirus-180975547/.

[10] CDC, "Spread," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, February 11, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html.

[11] CDC, "How COVID-19 Spreads," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, June 16, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html.

Recommendations

Reuse organizations vary widely in their resources, staff/volunteer capacity, physical layouts, and needs. **There is no single recommendation that will work for every reuse organization.** Open-air swap shops at waste transfer stations will need to adopt very different policies and protocols than community thrift stores, for example. The recommendations listed below are based on a multi-year research project on the meaning and value of reuse in Maine, best practices from other reuse organizations, and the most recent science and public policy on COVID-19. The recommendations below offer different pathways for reuse organizations to reopen based on their needs, resources, and risk perceptions.

Reopen on a Limited Basis

Research suggests that reuse is helpful to people. It provides people with access to goods that they need and might not be otherwise able to afford. Community reuse organizations often make goods available at no or low cost to patrons – a service that is even more critical in times of economic uncertainty. As unemployment levels rise, more people may benefit from reuse than ever before. If making goods available to people in need is a priority, there are several possible protocols that might be adopted.

The Maine Department of Economic and Community Development[12] has advised that thrift stores should use the COVID-19 industry guidance document for retail businesses.[13] The U.S. Center for Disease Control has also issued guidance on workplace safety for waste workers who come into contact with discards.[14] The following guidelines are adapted from those two documents.

Employee & Volunteer Safety

- Require employees and volunteers to **wear cloth face coverings** and to **practice good hand hygiene** with frequent handwashing.
- Avoid crowding by **staggering shifts** and meal breaks.
- Ensure workers/volunteers **stay 6 feet apart**.
- **Prohibit gatherings** or meetings of 10 or more.
- **Limit interaction between workers and those donating goods.** Implement touchless receiving practices.
- **Discourage workers from sharing** work tools.
- Provide training:
    - Physical distancing guidelines and expectations

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[12] Department of Economic and Community Development, "Phase 1: Retail Businesses," 1, accessed July 22, 2020, https://www.maine.gov/decd/checklists/retail-businesses.

[13] Personal Communication, "COVID-19 & Community Thrift Stores," July 14, 2020.

[14] CDC, "What Waste Collectors and Recyclers Need to Know about COVID-19," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, April 30, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/waste-collection-recycling-workers.html.

- Monitoring personal health

- Proper wear, removal, disposal of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

- Laundering of face coverings

- Cleaning protocols

- Safe de-escalation techniques for patrons who are unwilling to follow safety precautions.

Patron Safety

- Patrons should **wear cloth face coverings**.

- **Inform your customers** of your COVID policies and procedures in advance – try posting your new procedures on Facebook or via email lists, if you use these tools.

- **Place signage at entrances and throughout the space** alerting staff and customers to the required occupancy limits, six feet of physical distance, and policy on cloth face covering.

- Encourage customers to **solo shop**.

- **Support physical distance between customer and personnel** by taping off 6 feet distance markers where patrons might interact with volunteers/employees (at cash desks, places where donations are accepted, etc.)

- **Install plexiglass barriers** to maximize physical distancing at the cash desk.

- **Offer exclusive hours** to high-risk individuals.

- **Decide whether to reopen fitting rooms.** If fitting rooms are reopened, retailers should provide hand sanitizer or hand washing stations near fitting rooms. Fitting rooms should be cleaned and disinfected regularly. Any items used by customers in a fitting room and not purchased should be removed from active inventory on the sales floor and stored for 24 hours before return to sales racks.

- **Clean and disinfect high-touch areas routinely.** Carts and baskets should be cleaned and disinfected between each customer use.

- **Consider providing cleaning "kits"** including disinfectant wipes or sprays, disposable gloves, paper towels, cloth face coverings, hand sanitizer and other cleaning supplies are readily accessible throughout store, including point of sale terminals and other stations that will be cleaned periodically throughout the day.

- **Promote "contactless" shopping** options:
  - Use Facebook or another online platform to sell or give away items.

- o Use contactless payment options (e.g., RFID credit and debit cards, Apple Pay, Google Pay, etc.) OR ask patrons to deposit cash into a cash box and provide them with "clean" change.[15]
- Avoid special events/promotions that could draw large numbers of the public to the business at one time.
- Wash hands or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer (at least 60% alcohol) after handling cash.

Safe Spaces

- **Total occupancy of stores is limited to 5 customers per 1,000 square feet** of shopping space. This occupancy limit may need to be lowered for thrift stores, which are often small spaces with narrow aisles that make social distancing challenging.
    - o While 5 customers per 1,000 square feet is the maximum number at this time, owners and managers should consider the following factors that can increase transmission risk in their building and may decide to set a lower capacity limit, such as 3 per 1,000 square feet, if present:
        - ▪ Poor ventilation, i.e. little outside air circulating in.
        - ▪ Confined spaces that make physical distancing difficult.
- **Provide distance markers** located outside of store for times when capacity limits are exceeded; this will allow for queuing while maintaining physical distance; employees can also be assigned to assist customers who are waiting to enter.
- **Maximize air flow** to increase fresh air circulation (e.g. opening windows, or doors).
- **Implement one-way aisles**.
- **Require regular and frequent sanitization** of high-touch areas like restrooms, doors, PIN pads, and common areas that are accessible to staff, customers, and suppliers.
- Ensure operating hours **allow downtime between shifts** for thorough cleaning.

Safe Donations

- Establish procedure for **quarantining donations** (see case studies for sample policies)
    - o Research suggests that the virus remains active:
        - ▪ On plastic and stainless steel surfaces for two to three days.
        - ▪ On cardboard for up to 24 hours.
        - ▪ On copper for four hours.

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[15] Julia Bayly, "What Maine's Farmers Markets Are Doing to Keep Shoppers Safe during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Bangor Daily News*, March 13, 2020, https://bangordailynews.com/2020/03/13/news/what-maines-farmers-markets-are-doing-to-keep-shoppers-safe-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/.

- In aerosols (i.e., suspended air particles) for up to three hours.

- Advise donors that they are **required to wear cloth face coverings** while on the premises.

- **Create donation appointments** to space out contact with patrons.

- Consider asking customers to **sort their own donations** to minimize contact with goods before they are quarantined. Supervise the process to ensure that only acceptable items are donated.

- **Publicize new donation policies** using signage and via Facebook or website.

- **Provide sanitization materials**, such as sanitizing wipes, to employees to clean work tools and equipment before/after use.

- Organizations might also **provide a textile donation kiosk** (like those provided by Apparel Impact) for overflow or unsuitable items.

Benefits of Reopening on a Limited Basis
Reuse organizations will be able to make goods available to people in need, and will continue to provide important social engagement for volunteers, staff, and patrons. These social connections, strongly documented in research, are an important reason why reuse is valuable to people and should not be discounted. Reopening on a limited basis will allow reuse organizations that serve as a funding stream for community non-profits to continue to meet their missions (like stocking food pantries, supplementing school programs, and assisting community members with emergency funds).

Risks of Reopening on a Limited Basis
When patrons, staff, and volunteers interact there is always a chance that the coronavirus will spread. Reopening – even on a limited basis and with precautions taken – may put people at risk. Staffing may be challenging as volunteers – particularly the elderly volunteers who are so important for community thrift stores – stay home to avoid risks.

Contactless Reopening

While patrons, staff, and volunteers all benefit from the social interactions within community reuse organizations, the risks posed by the coronavirus may be too great to allow for a limited reopening. Exploring contactless or low-contact options for reopening can provide patrons with access to goods and can allow staff and volunteers to socialize on a limited basis. Some strategies for contactless reopening include:

1. **Personal shopping** – allow patrons to request a bag of goods with some criteria (clothing sizes and types, for example). Bags could be a set price (like the bag sales often used by thrift stores), and could be set in designated pick-up areas for a contactless exchange. Reuse organizations could be staffed on a limited basis to allow staff and volunteers to stuff bags. This strategy allows reuse organizations to continue to sell/give away goods, and reduces contact between patrons and staff/volunteers.

2. **Shop by appointment** – invite patrons to shop by appointment only. This would allow for limited staff/volunteer and patron interaction. Appointments could be requested via Facebook, email, or phone.

3. **Start-up packs** – reuse organizations might consider putting together "start-up packs" with items that would be helpful for starting out in a new apartment or home. Through partnerships with college campus organizations, immigrant aid organizations, or other non-profits these packs could be sold for a fixed price or given away to individuals.

Benefits of Contactless Reopening

Volunteers, staff, and patrons will have less contact with each other, limiting the potential for the virus to spread from person to person. This strategy may reduce risks while still allowing patrons to access resources. With social distancing, masks, and proper ventilation, volunteers and staff may be able to work in small groups to pack bags or supervise limited patrons, providing some much-valued social interaction. While contactless reopening strategies will limit patron access to reuse organizations, many patrons express an appreciation for the serendipity of finding used objects. They may appreciate the surprise of receiving a handpicked assortment of used goods, especially if prices are low. Creating start-up packs of commonly-sought items like cooking supplies, dishes, or other home goods may help students and families looking to get an affordable start to a new housing situation.

Risks of Contactless Reopening

While the risks of contracting COVID-19 are lower under a contactless reopening strategy, they are not eliminated. Volunteers will still interact with each other, and care must be taken to minimize risks through social distancing, face coverings, and proper ventilation. The other risks of this strategy are that patrons may not be interested in participating, or that they might not hear about these reuse opportunities. These risks can be attenuated by posting in local newspapers and via Facebook or other sites to spread the word.

Case Studies: Thrift Store Policies for Coronavirus Safety

Goodwill of Northern New England[16]

Safe Donations	Safe Spaces
• Self-serve touchless donations (people sort their own belongings into soft goods, hard goods, glass and breakables). Donations are monitored behind closed doors. Employees cannot assist with donations. • Use sanitizing sprays on bags. • All bags quarantined (3 days for textiles, 5 days for hard surfaces). Anything that can't be sanitized will be sent to warehouse for processing after quarantine is finished.	• Door handles, restrooms, pin pads cleaned and sanitized on an ongoing basis. • Plexiglass sneeze guards installed at cashier stations • Informational signs posted throughout the store. • Installed physical distancing floor markers • Traffic arrow flows require one-way movement through aisles.
Patron Safety	**Employee Safety**
• Limiting number of customers allowed inside the store. • Hand sanitizer provided at entrance to stores. • Carts sanitized between uses.	• PPE (gloves, masks, face shields) provided to employees • Daily temperature checks for employees

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[16] Goodwill NNE, "Goodwill's Response to COVID 19," August 4, 2020, https://goodwillnne.org/news/response-to-covid-19/.

Salvation Army Family Store – Bangor & Newport[17]

Safe Donations	Safe Spaces
• Limited donors are allowed to come through at one time to create distance. • Newport store is doing appointment-only donations as their area is much smaller. • Not currently quarantining donations as the most current information is that the virus isn't living long term on surfaces. • Not accepting linens as those tend to be donated without being washed. • Continually monitoring virus information to make the most informed decisions possible.	• No public rest rooms or changing rooms. • Stores are continually cleaned throughout the day.
Patron Safety	**Employee Safety**
• Limit customers allowed in the store at one time. • Mandated face masks for all staff and customers. One hour per day is set aside for customers with mask exemptions to shop and during that hour no at-risk staff are scheduled to work.	• Staff required to wear gloves. • Staff breaks are staggered so they can be distanced in the break area and have a break from their face masks. • Staff are asked not to come in if they are feeling sick and given the opportunity to make up hours rather than take a sick day, if requested, to help accommodate limited employee sick time. • If staff do not feel comfortable returning to work yet, their positions have been held for them.

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[17] Personal Communication, "Salvation Army & COVID-19," July 13, 2020.

Serendipity – Bar Harbor, Maine[18]
Serendipity is a volunteer-run thrift store located in Bar Harbor.

Safe Donations	**Safe Spaces**
• Limited donation hours (open three days per week but accepting donations only on one of those days) • Donations are piled in a corner of the store and are only touched by the donor (some volunteers/staff rearrange with caution – gloves, face masks, and handwashing after contact) • Donations are generally left for a few days before being sorted. • Donations are only sorted by one store manager.	• Organized "pop-up" sales located outdoors under tents (three hours per day, three days per week)

Volunteer & Patron Safety
• All volunteers and customers must wear masks at the pop-up sales. • Volunteers working within the store must wear masks if they are in the same room as another volunteer unless they are distancing in the same group (i.e. family, housemates etc.). • Most of the pre-COVID volunteers are seniors and uncomfortable volunteering at the moment, so hours have been reduced to 3 days per week and the store has recruited some new volunteers.

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[18] Personal Communication, "Serendipity & COVID-19," July 30, 2020.

Yard Sale Guidance - Bangor[19]
The Bangor Daily News interviewed municipal officials and public health experts to design recommendations for safe yard sales during the pandemic.

Safe Objects	**Safe Spaces**
• Make sure your items are cleaned (and disinfected, if recommended and possible) following CDC guidelines before the customers arrive.[20]	• Post signs to remind visitors of safety protocols (mask-wearing, physical distancing). • Arrange items in a way that limits the amount of people that touch them. For example, consider displaying items on tables rather than putting them in boxes for customers to rummage through.

Organizer & Patron Safety

- Designate someone to keep a head count. Limit large crowds.

- Consider setting and enforcing "early bird" hours for high-risk individuals.

- Think about using touchless payment method like Square (digital card reader) or a contactless cash box.[21]

- Have hand sanitizer readily available for customers.

- Requesting that customers wear masks.

- Organizers and customers alike should wash hands or sanitize their hands after handling any sort of payment method.

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[19] Sam Schipani, "How to Safely Hold a Yard Sale during the Coronavirus Pandemic," *Bangor Daily News*, June 6, 2020, https://bangordailynews.com/2020/06/06/homestead/how-to-safely-hold-a-yard-sale-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/.
[20] CDC, "Cleaning & Disinfecting."
[21] Bayly, "What Maine's Farmers Markets Are Doing to Keep Shoppers Safe during the COVID-19 Pandemic."

Resources

Maine COVID-19 General Guidance: https://www.maine.gov/decd/checklists/general-guidance

Maine COVID-19 Retail Reopening Guidance: https://www.maine.gov/decd/checklists/retail-businesses

US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus

Maine COVID-19 Checklist Compliance Form:
https://appengine.egov.com/apps/me/covidpreventionform

Acknowledgments

Appendix D: Best Practices for Reuse & Repair in Rural Maine

This resource was produced as an outcome of a graduate-level class at the University of Maine titled "Rural Communities: Theory and Practice," taught by Dr. Jessica Leahy and Dr. Mindy Crandall. The course was an important lesson in understanding rural issues and connecting with stakeholders to inform best practices on a range of issues. I produced this guide on reuse and repair in collaboration with the Maine Resource Recovery Association to provide their members with information on establishing and running programs to aid in waste reduction and reuse.

Best Practices for
Reuse & Repair
in Rural Maine Communities

Brieanne Berry, PhD Candidate, University of Maine

About this guide

This document explores how two types of reuse might be implemented within rural communities in Maine: swap shops and community repair clinics. Drawing on academic literature, best-practice handbooks from non-profit organizations, governmental sources, and communication with practitioners, this paper is intended to synthesize the available knowledge on reuse and repair for rural Maine communities.

Author Information

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Reuse & Repair: Summary for Decision-Makers

Community reuse can help municipalities achieve economic, social, and environmental goals. Swap shops and community repair events are opportunities to reduce waste and build a sense of community. There are a few key considerations for determining how to set up new operations and which policies should be adopted:

Consider Space

Many organizers found that community repair events were much more popular than anticipated. Plan for growth as you think about space for your program or event. Consider how people will move through the space and whether lines or congestion will cause issues in the space you have designated.

Make Clear Protocols

There is no single right way to operate a swap shop or a repair event, but it is important to be clear with participants about what is expected. Consider what types of items you will accept and how surplus goods will be handled. Post signage and communicate your protocols ahead of time.

Engage the Community

Whether you are running a swap shop year-round or organizing a one-time repair event, it is important to find champions in the community who will help you succeed. Many swap shops rely on volunteers to keep the spaces organized and tidy. Most repair events are staffed by volunteers who hold a broad range of repair skills, from sewing to small electrical repair.

Introduction

Waste management is a challenge for any community, but is particularly problematic for rural communities. In Maine, where per capita waste generation remains below average for New England states, as well as for the country as a whole, waste is no less an issue.[22] Collecting and transporting waste are time and resource-intensive tasks, especially for rural communities with shrinking budgets. Based on input from a series of stakeholder meetings across the state of Maine, Blackmer and colleagues reported that "waste management expenditures in Maine typically rank between the third and fifth highest category on municipal budgets."[23] National trends show a dramatic increase in consumption of material goods in the United States since the 1960s, meaning that barring an unforeseen decline in consumer purchasing, the quantity and cost of disposing of waste are unlikely to decrease.[24]

Recognizing the economic, social, and environmental costs of waste disposal, the state of Maine developed a solid waste management hierarchy in 1989 that provides guidance on prioritizing waste management decisions.[25] Within the hierarchy source reduction and reuse – strategies that extend the lifetime of material goods and prevent disposal – are ranked above options like recycling, incineration, and landfilling. While governments emphasize "a commitment to the 'waste hierarchy' as a guiding principle […] Recycling, despite being only the third most desirable option in the waste hierarchy, has received the most attention."[26] Recycling is a critical strategy in the waste management toolkit, but it is prioritized below reduction and reuse for a reason.

Recycling is a manufacturing process that breaks materials down into their component parts so that they can be used as raw materials in production. It necessitates the collection, transportation, and sorting of recyclable materials – all energy and cost-intensive processes, especially for remote rural communities. While recycling is an important and well-established practice in Maine, stagnating recycling rates and unmet goals show that on its own it is insufficient as a strategy to reduce waste.[27] Instead, it is important to move "up the hierarchy",[28] using a suite of strategies to *prevent* waste, rather than only managing it after it is created. Compared to recycling, reuse involves a very different set of practices.

Reuse involves the exchange of used goods *in their original form* as well as "prepare for reuse" activities, including repair. Reuse offers economic and environmental benefits compared with other forms of waste management.[29] The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality writes that "while recycling is typically preferable to manufacturing from virgin resources, reuse offers significantly greater potential for conserving resources and reducing pollution."[30] Promoting reuse not only offers an informal, lower-cost solution compared to disposal[31] but it also keeps value

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[22] (Maine DEP 2017)
[23] (Blackmer et al. 2015, 1)
[24] (Schor 2010)
[25] (*Maine Revised Statute Title 38, §2101* 1989)
[26] (R. Lane, Horne, and Bicknell 2009, 151–52)
[27] (Blackmer et al. 2015)
[28] (Isenhour et al. 2016)
[29] (Coe and Hickman 2002; Isenhour et al. 2016)
[30] (Oregon DEQ 2016, 4)
[31] (Bradley and Remolador 2016; Isenhour et al. 2016; R. Lane 2011; R. Lane, Horne, and Bicknell 2009)

within communities rather than exporting it to other towns or states.[32] Further, activities like community-based repair clinics and "swap shops" can build community and lead to greater levels of happiness.[33]

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[32] (Bradley and Remolador 2016)

[33] (Bradley and Remolador 2016; Paralkar et al. 2017; Rosner 2014)

Swap Shops

Known variously as swap shops, recycling barns, take it or leave it centers, treasure chests, freebie barns, and share shacks, these small reuse hubs are dotted across the state of Maine. The Maine Department of Environmental Protection estimated that 86 Maine communities operated some form of a municipal swap shop in 2014. Often located at solid waste transfer stations, swap shops can be as informal as a designated drop-off site or as formal as a shed or garage. Regardless of their form, swap shops function as places where used items in good condition can be dropped off for others to take, often free of charge.[34] Swap shops are associated with greater community-level happiness,[35] and can provide access to material goods to those who might otherwise be unable to afford them. Additionally, these local exchange sites keep materials out of landfills, reducing the costs associated with tipping fees and hauling waste,[36] as well as the environmental costs of transporting and storing or incinerating waste. Finally, swap shops can provide a low-cost solution to community-scale reuse,[37] and are relatively simple to establish and run.

Location & Layout

The first step in establishing a swap shop is to consider the potential location and layout. Oftentimes, swap shops are situated within transfer stations where lines of cars and crowds can cause problems for operations. Thinking through how people will travel through the space is important in reducing the stress on employees and other visitors. One swap shop manager commented that based on the popularity of her swap shop, she would have designed it differently: "I'd spread it out a little bit more. We're kind of cramped here. And I'd have spent a lot more time on placing, you know, things. We have a lot of traffic and I would've done things different. I would have spread it out more." She notes that the swap shop's popularity surprised the local select board, who designed the space anticipating less traffic. Beyond the site layout, the popularity of the shop may quickly outgrow its physical space. Developing a plan for growth will allow the swap shop to expand without requiring changes to the rest of the transfer station or host site.

Swap shops may be located in existing buildings, in freestanding sheds, or under protected awnings. The type of space will determine the amount of items the shop is able to accommodate, as well as how items can be displayed. When possible, it is helpful to make shelving and hooks available for organizing items, as it helps move items through the space more quickly. Further, keeping items off the floor ensures that they stay clean and attractive to shop visitors, which also has the potential to impact the types of goods that are dropped off. Bradley and Remolador write that "if items are nicely displayed, participants will be more likely to only leave things that are working [and] clean."[38]

Protocol

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[34] (Bradley and Remolador 2016)
[35] (Paralkar et al. 2017)
[36] (Bradley and Remolador 2016)
[37] (Bradley and Remolador 2016)
[38] (Bradley and Remolador 2016, 43)

Determining what the swap shop will accept, and what the accepted protocol will be for people to use the space is critical to its success. There is great variation in protocol between swap shops in Maine. Some, like South Portland, Kennebunk, and Cape Elizabeth, prohibit the donation of clothing, and most do not allow televisions, computer monitors, and broken items. Recognizing the variety of goods that may be dropped off at swap shops, many simply state that items should be "gently used" or "serviceable," asking donors to exercise their own judgment. Swap shops may charge for items to be placed in the swap shop, especially for those materials that are expensive to dispose of, and many shops require the visual inspection of goods by a volunteer or staff member. All swap shops should be aware of items that are potentially hazardous and should not be swapped, including children's car seats and tires, among other items.[39] Regardless of the donation protocol, it is important to clearly establish the rules either through posted signage or through verbal communication with staff or volunteers.[40]

It is just as important to establish clear rules around the use of the shop as it is around the materials accepted. Many shops operate on a first come, first served principle where visitors may take what they want and stay as long as they like. When conflicts arise at swap shops, they may be attributed to a lack of clear rules on the use of the shops.[41] While behavior at the shop can be managed through clear rules and regular oversight, some worry about individuals profiting from the free goods available at swap shops. To this end, one swap shop manager cautions "don't get tangled up in worrying about what happens to the stuff when it leaves. Don't get tangled up and think it's going to end up in somebody's yard sale or on Craigslist, because the main reason for doing it is to save tax dollars. And once it goes out through the gate, if somebody sells it on Craigslist and they make $20 that helps out that family." If visitors will be charged a fee to take items from the swap shop, it is advisable to decide in advance how the funds will be used.

Not all items will be taken from a swap shop, and "removing things that don't move is important to ensure customer return."[42] In Berwick, Maine, items are tagged when they arrive in the swap shop to allow for staff to determine when to discard goods that have remained untouched in the shop for too long. Other resources suggest partnering with non-profit organizations to donate materials that remain in the swap shop for too long.[43] Some swap shops charge residents to dispose of goods, but allow for free exchanges to take place if an item is directly transferred from one person to another, in an effort to reduce the accumulation of undesirable items. Posting clear signs about the types of items accepted by the swap shop can preclude some of the issues associated with items not moving.

Staffing

Some oversight of the swap shop is helpful in ensuring that items left are in accordance with the facility rules.[44] While some swap shops require that items are checked in by a staff person to ensure they meet quality and safety standards, others are less time-intensive of staff, and many shops are run by volunteers. Having people on hand to organize the space, answer questions, and oversee the

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[39] (Bradley and Remolador 2016)
[40] (Bradley and Remolador 2016)
[41] (Bodnar 2017)
[42] (Bradley and Remolador 2016, 43)
[43] (NEWMOA 2016)
[44] (Bradley and Remolador 2016)

intake of items can help the shop run smoothly. Further, having staff or volunteers available to track donations can aid communities in assessing the success of the swap shop.

Savings and Benefits

Communities with swap shops have realized significant waste reduction goals as well as cost savings. Buckfield is reported to save over $3,000 annually in solid waste disposal costs, and has reduced its waste by over 30 tons per year.[45] Another swap shop is diverting over 100 tons per year from the community's waste stream, with significant cost savings for tax payers. Further, these facilities are helpful to town residents, as one manager notes:

> We've had tragedies in town where apartment houses burned, and the owner of the building supplied the beds and mattresses to the people and we actually furnished their apartments for them out of the take-it shop. And even today if people need, say they're looking for a recliner and they can't afford it. We have beautiful recliners that come in and we contact them and tell them we've got one.

On economic, social, and environmental terms, then, swap shops have great potential to benefit rural communities. With careful planning and foresight, these facilities can enhance quality of life in rural places, build social relationships between people, and reduce costs associated with waste disposal.

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[45] (K. Schneider 2016)

Repair Clinics

With a focus on durability, community repair programs keep materials out of landfills by fixing them when they are broken.[46] Repair clinics are temporary (often three to four hours), volunteer-run, community-based events that focus on fixing material goods. Events can focus on specific types of goods (electronics, for example) as well as offering broader services (from fabric to cabinetry). As with swap shops, the structure of repair clinics varies based on the needs of each community. Some clinics request a donation for the repair of items, while others only ask that attendees collaborate in the repair process. These events provide a place for community learning and knowledge-sharing between volunteer repair-people and attendees,[47] and are often very low-cost to run,[48] staffed as they are by volunteers.

Location

Because repair clinics are temporary events, they can be held in under-utilized community buildings, like libraries, town halls, or even schools, during off-hours. This allows communities to maximize the use of existing space, and can provide a low-cost or free location to host the event. Libraries in particular have become popular sites for hosting repair events.[49] This is relevant for rural communities because libraries, "which are present in so many communities, serve a strategic role in extending public services to residents that may be hard to reach by other means. Many small and rural libraries are accustomed to linking what may be considered traditional library services with a variety of other social, educational, and economic development programs."[50] Libraries are increasingly expanding beyond lending books to becoming multi-use community spaces,[51] and hosting events like repair clinics is a way to bring new community members through the doors. Hosting repair clinics in schools and other institutions can foster vibrant community relationships between stakeholders that may have similar goals, but do not often have the opportunity to interact.

Organization

Communities may choose to host a repair clinic independently, or to join an existing organization, like Repair Café. Organizing the event independently may offer the greatest flexibility, while partnering with an existing organization can provide structure and support. Repair Café, established in Amsterdam, is an organization that helps communities run repair events across the world. To operate as an official "Repair Café," organizers must register with the parent organization for a one-time fee (€49 in 2017) that covers all subsequent events. Organizers must commit to running a noncommercial and voluntary event. In return organizers receive a startup kit that includes a startup manual, a logo, flyer templates, liability protection forms, poster templates, and more.[52] Additionally, organizers are connected to a larger network of individuals and organizers which can help improve participation in events.[53] For some communities, the benefits of being associated with a larger

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[46] (Rosner 2014)
[47] (Hobson 2016; Martel 2016; Rosner 2014)
[48] (Bradley and Remolador 2016; Rosner 2014)
[49] (Calvert 2017; Cottrell 2017; Martel 2016)
[50] (Swan, Grimes, and Owen 2013, 9)
[51] (Calvert 2017)
[52] ("Repair Café: Start Your Own" 2016)
[53] (Rosner 2014)

organization and a network of support will outweigh the cost of registering with Repair Café, while other communities will value the flexibility of deciding their own logo, name, and operating procedures outside of the structure of a parent organization.

Logistics

A repair clinic might be as simple as a series of folding tables with plenty of outlets available, and tools supplied by volunteer repair people. Good signage and strong recruitment efforts will boost attendance, but perhaps the most important element to a successful repair clinic is recruiting skilled volunteers. "'Repair expert' volunteers need to have the skills to be able to repair items, but they also must have the patience to be able to teach others how to disassemble the items and assist with repair."[54] Others note that enthusiasm is a critical attribute of a volunteer, perhaps more than technical skill.[55] Volunteers are also needed on the day of the event to staff a welcome table, direct foot traffic, track attendance, and distribute and collect waivers. While repair clinics are not high risk events, it is important to consult with an attorney to discuss liability concerns. Importantly, attendees should understand that volunteer repair people make no guarantees, and are not responsible for the condition of the item.[56]

Benefits

While a primary benefit of repair clinics is reducing waste and extending materials' lifespans, the temporary nature of these events makes it difficult to estimate their impact on waste reduction. What has emerged from the literature is a strong sense of the role that community-based repair plays in building social relationships.[57] When volunteers and attendees work together to solve problems, they not only exchange knowledge,[58] but also build community. These relationships can form between participants that span generational, income, and educational divides. Cottrell describes how repair clinics can foster an interest in engineering and science in young people, describing a young girl who co-repaired her broken electric scooter at a repair clinic, and who ties that experience to a newfound desire to study engineering in college.[59] Further, when repair clinics are located in welcoming community spaces they can prompt engagement from individuals who might not otherwise be able to access repair services, or feel comfortable doing so. Cottrell goes on to detail how a homeless man attended a repair event at a local library to get his headphones fixed:

> The man explained he had gotten the headphones for $2 at a hardware store several years back, and while he knew how to fix the broken wire that was likely inside, he didn't own or have a place to keep a soldering iron. [The organizer] and the patron were able to fix the headphones, and the man was appreciative.[60]

Building ties of trust and cooperation between people, also known as social capital,[61] is connected to a greater ability to work together to achieve shared goals, with positive implications for rural

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[54] (Bradley and Remolador 2016, 38)
[55] (Cottrell 2017)
[56] (Bradley and Remolador 2016)
[57] (Boyko et al. 2017)
[58] (Hobson 2016; Rosner 2014)
[59] (Cottrell 2017)
[60] (Cottrell 2017)
[61] (Putnam 2000)

communities. There is some evidence that repair clinics might facilitate those durable connections between people that can be so productive for rural communities.

Conclusion

Swap shops and repair clinics offer benefits to rural Maine communities on several levels; from reducing costs associated with waste management to building relationships between people. Swap shops offer low-cost strategies to prevent waste at transfer stations, with demonstrated cost savings and social benefits. While swap shops exist in many rural Maine communities, this simple solution could be expanded to communities across the state. Repair clinics are often associated with urban settings, but have great potential in rural contexts, as well. By maximizing the use of public spaces, engaging diverse (and often intergenerational) people in collaborative work, and extending the lifespan of material goods, repair clinics can meet multiple community objectives at a low cost. Both of these solutions could also be approached as a collaboration between communities to maximize participation and beneficial outcomes.

Useful Resources

Bradley, Athena Lee, and Mary Ann Remolador. "Reuse Explorations Guide: Innovative Programs and Strategies." Northeast Recycling Council, Inc., August 2016. https://nerc.org/documents/Reuse/Reuse%20Explorer%20Guide_FIN.pdf

An overview of strategies for promoting and implementing reuse programs, with specific sections on swap shops and repair clinics, as well as other opportunities for waste reduction.

NEWMOA. "Reusing and Recycling Large Rigid Plastic Items in Rural Communities." Northeast Waste Management Officials' Association, August 2016. http://www.newmoa.org/solidwaste/pubs.cfm

The Northeast Waste Management Officials' Associations (NEWMOA) produces resource guides on waste reduction in northeastern states. Specific guides are available for a number of reuse programs.

Appendix E: Editorial Columns & Public Scholarship

As a Legislative Graduate Fellow for the Maine Chapter of Scholars Strategy Network I had the opportunity to engage in public-facing scholarship that took the form of editorials in local newspapers and related media outlets. These columns allowed me to highlight my research findings by connecting my work to timely issues. Producing these columns was an exercise in translation – attempting to craft a story that would be compelling to a broad range of readers while not losing the nuances that are so critical to social science research. In some cases these columns were also a way to engage with partners as collaborators – finding ways to write together, think together, and craft a shared message. In every case, the columns that I wrote generated feedback from the public and from my research participants. These short pieces prompted people to email me with questions, stories, and support. Some of my participants hung the columns on the walls of their reuse organizations while others emailed them to funders or shared with board members. These informal engagements helped engage a broader audience in my research, and allowed me to participate in a discourse that went beyond the walls of academia.

<u>Share Your Trash, Build Your Community</u>

This editorial was originally published in the Bangor Daily News in the [Research Shows](#) Column on November 7, 2019.

November 15th marks the 22nd annual [America Recycles Day](#), a day where Americans commit to sorting their unwanted materials into the correct bins so that they can be broken down into their component parts and remade into something new. Recycling is a critical component of Maine's [solid waste management hierarchy](#), but on its own, recycling is insufficient to sustainably managing the materials that move through Maine's economy. This has been clearly demonstrated by the recent upheaval and uncertainty in global recycling markets in the face of [China's National Sword Policy](#), which bans the import of certain types of waste products and toughens standards on contamination rates. Cities and towns across the country – [including here in Maine](#) – are now paying for recycling services rather than being paid for recyclable materials, forcing many municipalities to rethink their service offerings. In the face of these economic and political changes, it can sometimes feel as though we are out of good options for managing our unwanted materials. Yet if the future of recycling seems bleak, perhaps today we might turn our attention to another strategy highlighted in our solid waste management hierarchy: reuse.

Recycling is often mentioned as the third piece of a trio of waste management solutions: "reduce, reuse, recycle." My own research is part of a [larger effort](#) to understand the value of reuse in the state of Maine. Unlike recycling, reusing materials means that they remain in their original form instead of being crushed, grated or melted into raw materials for new production. This means that when we reuse things we conserve the energy and raw materials that went into producing them. There are certainly environmental benefits to reusing compared to recycling, but critically important are the other kinds of benefits that we don't often measure. Used goods can be helpful to people, and can even help build community support for those in need. We can see this with non-profit organizations like [Welcome to Housing](#) in Old Town, Maine, which collects unwanted furniture and home goods to assist people transitioning into housing after homelessness or crisis events. Not only does this organization keep items out of the waste stream, it provides resources to people in need. Consider the [Old Town/Orono Kiwanis Auction](#), an annual event that not only connects people to used goods at bargain prices, but whose proceeds fund community events like read-aloud programs at schools and daycare centers, local scouting groups, and even public facilities. While we lament the loss of recycling programs across the state, we might do well to celebrate and recognize all the ways in which Mainers are reusing things. These networks of reuse not only reduce waste, but contribute to stronger, healthier communities.

Maine has a long history of leadership in waste reduction and materials management, from its expansive bottle bill to important product stewardship laws. Our research indicates that Maine is also a national leader in reuse, with a strong reuse economy relative to other states. As we reflect on the changes in global recycling markets, we would do well to consider ways to support and encourage reuse across the state. Not only is this an issue on which Maine can lead, it is one that offers localized community benefits far beyond waste reduction and cost savings. Our research seeks to learn from practitioners where support is needed, and to help envision policy solutions to challenges reuse organizations are facing, like shortages of space for storage, and volunteer labor for sorting and distributing materials. On America Recycles Day, let's turn back toward reuse – for our communities, our economy, and our environment.

Brieanne Berry is a PhD candidate at the University of Maine. This column reflects her views and expertise and does not speak on behalf of the university. She is a member of the Maine chapter of the national Scholars Strategy Network, which brings together scholars across the country to address public challenges and their policy implications. Members' columns appear in the BDN every other week.

<u>Bring Back the Reusable Bags</u>

This editorial was written in partnership with Julie Lamy, and was originally published in the Bangor Daily News in the <u>Research Shows</u> Column on July 28, 2020.

In a time when we are all scared, frustrated, and just generally upended by the novel coronavirus it may seem trivial to talk about plastic waste. After all, we're in a crisis and we need to do whatever it takes to keep us safe. We totally agree, and that's why we argue that it's *critical* to talk about plastic waste *right now*. <u>We now know that single-use disposables do not keep us safer than reusable products.</u> For the past three months our cloth grocery bags and reusable coffee thermoses have been languishing in our closets and cupboards due to fears about spreading the coronavirus.

As we learn more about the novel coronavirus it makes sense to reassess our approach to public policy. We know that the main way the coronavirus spreads is from person-to-person, <u>not from contact with surfaces</u>. Still, out of an abundance of caution, shouldn't we avoid reusable bags, cups, and mugs? A recent study demonstrated that the <u>virus remains viable on plastic for up to three days</u>, compared to one day on cloth. There is no evidence that reusable bags or cups present a greater threat for the transmission of the coronavirus. Reusable products are designed to be washed, laundered, and disinfected, unlike their disposable counterparts. If safety is our goal, single-use plastic products that are difficult to clean and disinfect are not likely to be our best option.

Maine has been a leader in its response to Covid-19. Our state's quick, bold action has led to low death rates and infection rates <u>compared to other New England states and to the country as a whole</u>. When we were first learning about the coronavirus and Covid-19, our initial response was to take immediate steps to stop the spread of the virus and protect people. One quick action was to <u>halt the rollout of Maine's plastic bag ban</u> to allow retailers to provide single-use plastic bags to customers – all in the hopes of creating safer outcomes for everyone.

Now that we've lived with the coronavirus for several months, it's time to take stock of our response and see where it can be improved. There is a clear scientific consensus that <u>reusable systems can be utilized safely</u> by employing basic hygiene and creating contact-free options for customers' personal bags and cups. Grocery stores can allow customers to bring their own reusable bags if they keep them in their carts and bag their groceries themselves, for example.

Even as we deal with the new normal brought about by the coronavirus, we must continue to address the persistent threat of plastics in our environment. The hard truth is that when we consume more single-use products, they end up in the environment. Covid-19 has <u>dealt another blow</u> to already struggling municipal recycling programs, making it clear that we can't simply recycle our way out of this problem.

Unfortunately it seems like the coronavirus isn't going anywhere any time soon. How we respond to the virus will have long-term impacts on the state's economy and environment. As we seek out solutions that keep us safe in these uncertain times, it's important that we create policy informed by the best available science rather than our own fears. We can promote public health *and* meet our environmental goals. This crisis has shown us what we can achieve when we work together with a common purpose. It's important that we remember the other things we've already agreed are important: protecting Maine's environment and reducing our use of single-use plastics.

Julie Lamy is chief friendmaker and chief operating officer at [UPSTREAM](), a nonprofit organization working in Maine and across the country on innovative solutions to plastic pollution. Brie Berry is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Maine and a member of the Maine chapter of the national Scholars Strategy Network, which brings together scholars across the country to address public challenges and their policy implications. Members' columns appear in the BDN every other week. This column reflects their views and expertise and does not speak on behalf of the university.

Furniture Banks: Here for your community during a crisis and beyond

This editorial was written in partnership with Chris Olsen, and was originally published in the Bangor Daily News in the [Research Shows](#) Column on June 15, 2021.

If you were driving down the highway and saw someone's car broken down on the side of the road, what would you do? You might pull over and provide assistance yourself, or you might call emergency services to render aid. You probably wouldn't blame the person who was going through this difficult experience. This is partly because you realize that you could go through this experience, too. Your car might break down on the side of the road, and you might be able to imagine wanting that help from a stranger. There are always those who need help - but sometimes our cultural systems stigmatize them instead of encouraging us to empathize with their situation.

Over the course of the past year we've seen an outpouring of support for people suffering from the economic and health impacts of COVID-19. Yet for many, financial insecurity meant that they were living on the brink even before the pandemic, constantly fearing that a slight change to their income would render them unable to feed, house, clothe, or provide medical care for themselves and their families.

[Food banks have been a model](#) in helping neighbors care for each other, and the long lines snaking around distribution centers show too clearly how changing circumstances can push people into a situation where they are in need of help. As the need for support became clear, food banks saw [increasing donations](#) to help them meet the needs of community members.

There's another kind of "bank," however, that doesn't get much attention. Furniture and home goods banks are non-profit organizations that help people in need access home goods at low or no cost. This support is critical, as [estimates show](#) that the cost of furnishing a one-bedroom apartment can run over $8,000. Emerging research on the social value of reuse indicates that furniture banks not only connect people with much-needed home goods, but that they do so with dignity and respect for the people they serve.

Consider the circumstances of some people in need:

When an individual experiencing homelessness is transitioning from a shelter to permanent housing, they can often benefit from services ranging from health care to SNAP benefits, but these services [do not include the provision of home goods](#). This means that they are often moving into an empty home. No bed. No chair. No kitchenware. None of the things that are needed to live life with some modicum of comfort or dignity.

Imagine next the circumstances of someone fleeing domestic violence. Forced to leave their possessions behind, they are faced with the prospect of starting anew with few resources and none of the comforts of home. In a troubling trend, [domestic violence rates are increasing](#) in Maine during the pandemic, meaning that more individuals may be in need of support than usual.

Victims of fires, too, benefit from furniture banks. In 2018 there were over 4,000 house fires in Maine. In an instant, a family can go from a situation of comfort and stability to losing all of their possessions.

In each of these circumstances, people are transitioning to housing without ample resources to provision their new homes. Access to free or low-cost furniture, bedding, basic toiletries, kitchenware, and small appliances means the difference between moving into an empty house or a comfortable home.

Like our partners who run thrift stores, we also want useful, high-quality donations that are in good condition. We often describe the need for "donation with dignity" - the idea that people who have less do not want anyone's trash. Furniture banks and home goods banks play a critical role on the road to stability for people in need. Organizations like Welcome to Housing and Furniture Friends are helping Mainers make ends meet, during the pandemic and beyond.

Whether you are in search of home goods during an unexpected life challenge or if you are in the position to donate or volunteer, we encourage you to learn more about furniture banks in your area. They're hiding in plain sight and are an opportunity for you to access help or to support your neighbors in getting back on their feet after life brings unexpected challenges.

Just like a broken-down car on the highway, we all have times when we can lend a hand and times when we need a hand. Caring for each other makes all the difference in the world.

Chris Olsen is the founder of Welcome to Housing. Brie Berry is a PhD candidate at the University of Maine. This column reflects her views and expertise and does not speak on behalf of the university. She is a member of the Maine chapter of the national Scholars Strategy Network, which brings together scholars across the country to address public challenges and their policy implications. Members' columns appear in the BDN every other week.

The Pandemic Dilemmas Confronting Thrift Stores

This editorial was written in partnership with Luisa Deprez for the Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity.

They approached the meeting site cautiously, arriving singly and standing an awkward distance apart from each other. Instead of meeting inside the local community center, they met in the shade of an outdoor pavilion. Instead of the warm sound of conversation and laughter, the conversation is stilted: "oh, is that you? I could hardly recognize you with your mask on!" It was a meeting of a community-based thrift store – a small volunteer operation, run almost exclusively by women in their 60's, 70's, 80's, and 90's. The volunteers had gathered to discuss how they might respond to the pandemic.

The thrift store in rural Penobscot County, Maine had been closed since mid-March once the full impact of the pandemic became clear. The women, who typically spend one day per week sorting and selling used goods, know they fall into the high-risk category for complications associated with COVID-19. They are all over age 65 – a population that has to date, made up eight out of ten COVID-19-related deaths in the United States and nearly all deaths in Maine. Almost 28% of cases in the state are among those 60 years and older; 52% of all cases are women. Many of the thrift shop volunteers have underlying health conditions – or live with those who do – a factor associated with more severe COVID-19 outcomes. And all volunteer in a small space with cramped, crowded aisles that attracts throngs of community members to shop, socialize, and donate. All these factors combine to make volunteering in a thrift shop an activity of the "highest risk" for seniors.

But the risk of contracting COVID-19 was not the only peril discussed at the meeting. The volunteers expressed concerns about those who wouldn't be able to shop at the store – people who might need access to the low-cost goods the thrift store provides to the community. They also worry about their non-profit's continued ability to provide funds to support community services. This thrift store, like many small, community-based thrift shops across the country, does more than sell clothing and home goods at bargain-basement prices. It also funds an astounding array of programs, which range from a school backpack program that addresses food insecurity, to local food pantries and community health services. This funding comes from the sale of used goods, and with the thrift store closed there is no money coming in. At a time when they see the need for community assistance more than ever, the idea that this supplemental social safety net might be in jeopardy worries the volunteers nearly as much as the pandemic.

The immense strain on formal social safety net programs like unemployment insurance, food stamps (SNAP), and housing vouchers has been well-documented. Yet the informal social safety net, of which thrift stores are an important part, is under the same strain, and facing a far greater risk of collapsing. Elderly women have, for so long, done the invisible work of accepting, sorting, and selling discarded goods to benefit the community. How do we proceed knowing that these women are at risk while the people they serve are in need? What is the risk to the community if they do not remain open?

The plight of non-profits in the wake of the pandemic is [tenuous at best](). These thrift stores, stalwarts of communities around the country, are confronting the same dilemmas as larger non-profits: How do you provide an essential service if the workforce cannot work?

With the onset of COVID-19 and thrift store closures, the volunteers worry about those who have few other options to obtain goods cheaply in the area: families with newborns; unemployed workers who can barely pay utility bills and rent, or buy food; poor and low-income children needing clothes and school supplies; seniors on fixed budgets; and families whose children or parents moved back in and need basic supplies. These shops have long served as a supplemental safety net of sorts for people who are poor and in need but too often ashamed or reticent to seek assistance from government programs. In Penobscot County, [poverty]() is not a stranger: 14.7% of the population and 17.1% of [children]() are poor. Now, these percentages are undoubtedly higher.

While there is a stigma often associated with wearing used clothes or buying used wares, these items – donations from community members – are a way to save money. Many of the thrift store volunteers use the phrase "donation with dignity" – the idea that they should only accept items that they would be comfortable purchasing themselves or giving to a close friend. Indeed, thrift stores offer a place to shop with dignity. They connect patrons to the community and provide them with access to the support they need to thrive.

A special quality of thrift stores, especially those in rural areas and small towns, is that they are run by people living in the community. Going into a thrift store is like meeting a neighbor in the drugstore; there is a feeling of ease that may lessen the shame often associated with being in need. One thrift store manager described her customers, saying "they're very proud, and many of them are embarrassed by their situations." Because thrift stores rely on social networks to operate, many of the women who volunteer also know the people coming in. They know when kids are growing out of coats and pants, and they know which families have just had to replace their boiler and can't afford winter boots. They know which families are having a hard time putting food on the table because of a lost job. In response, they slip gift cards to grocery stores into patrons' hands as they leave with bags full of gently used clothes or set aside items for them to pick up the next time they're in the shop.

Oftentimes when we think of thrift stores, we think about finding a bargain or offloading our unwanted stuff so that it can be used again. What we may not consider is that shopping, donating, and volunteering at thrift stores also generates social capital – networks of trust, reciprocity, and support that are useful to people. Social capital is a way of doing *with* rather than doing *for* – an important distinction because it helps us understand one reason why thrift stores are so helpful to the community: they are a place where people take care of each other. Thrift stores may just be the hidden engines of cohesion in rural communities.

Many Americans went into the nationwide lockdown with limited or no savings, unprepared for the current financial challenges. The cost of this pandemic on individuals and families is staggering. Families are struggling, anxious that the basics – food, shelter, and health – are even farther out of reach. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of low-to moderate-income American households don't have enough assets to withstand three months without [income.]() Almost 25% of people, not working because they're [caring for a child]() not in school or day care, do not have

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enough to eat. Those who lost hours or jobs found it "difficult to get by." Housing insecurity is becoming more pronounced. In early August, of the 66% of renters worried about eviction, two-thirds had not yet made a complete August payment.

The number people living in families with combined weekly earnings below the federal poverty line rose by 24% from February to May. Twelve million people eligible for their $1,200 "stimulus" cash have not received it because they are too poor to have filled out a tax form or don't know how to claim it.

These are the people for whom thrift shops are a lifeline.

Non-profits in this country are stretched to the limit. Small, community-based thrift stores are facing similar challenges. These shops, so difficult to quantify because of their size and informal nature, are scattered across the country. It seems as though every small town has at least one located in a church basement, senior citizen center, or another out-of-the-way space. They are overwhelmingly powered by volunteers, older women who give their time – sometimes as much as 50 or 60 hours a month or more – to help their communities, their neighbors. Many volunteers view their work as an important social function that keeps them connected to and valued by their community and feeling less alone. They also have a great time volunteering – their friends are volunteers and they love looking through the stuff, imagining where it came from and who might find value in it.

Yet right now, many volunteers wonder about how essential their work really is. If it is essential, can they keep doing it? They are precisely those most at risk of experiencing the most harmful effects of exposure to COVID-19. But few have the time or expertise needed to develop action plans to reopen their stores safely, and in accordance with guidance from the state and federal government – an uncertainty that places both the volunteers and patrons at risk.

While large thrift stores, such as Goodwill and the Salvation Army, will probably continue to operate and accept used goods, although they too are under enormous stress, the community-based thrift stores that provide critical redistributive functions for those most in need are at risk of shutting down for good. This hidden safety net is often obscured because it is informal aid distributed by word of mouth and social connections rather than through a formalized bureaucratic process. It is also hidden because it is powered by elderly women whose work is too often underacknowledged and undervalued. What, we ask, might be lost first – the thrift shops or the workers in them?

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Brieanne Berry was born in Langhorne, Pennsylvania and graduated from Richfield Senior High School in Richfield, Minnesota. She holds a B.A. in Cultural Anthropology from The George Washington University and a M.S. in Urban Affairs from CUNY Hunter College. Before coming to the University of Maine, Brieanne had a career in urban sustainability in New York City, including experience as an energy auditor, an environmental educator, and a member of the team that rolled out New York City's Zero Waste Schools program. Brieanne has published her work in *Maine Policy Review, World Wide Waste: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, Economic Anthropology, the Journal for the Anthropology of North America,* and *Spire: The Maine Journal of Conservation and Sustainability*. She is a member of the American Anthropological Association, the Society for Economic Anthropology, the Society for the Anthropology of North America, the Maine Chapter of Scholars Strategy Network, and the Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society. Brieanne is the Co-Editor-in-Chief of Home/Field, a multimedia web platform for anthropological engagements with North America. She is a candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Anthropology and Environmental Policy from the University of Maine in August 2021.