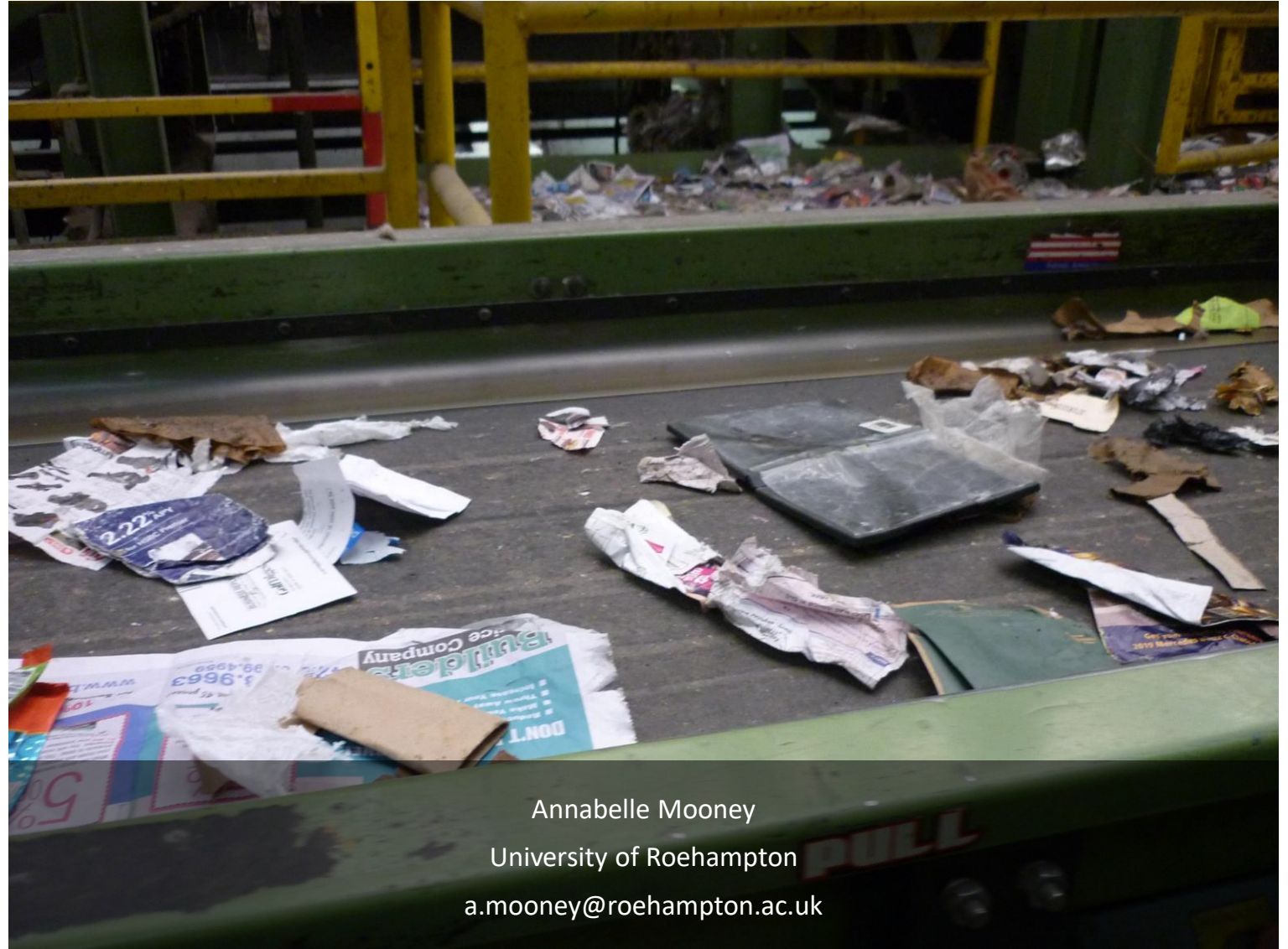


# Dirty or Clean?

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Frameworks for waste



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# Structure

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- Research Context
- Field and field Work
- Results
  - Discourses and Frames
  - Cultural/value systems
    - WASTE IS DIRTY
    - MIXED THINGS ARE DIRTY
    - UNSEEN THINGS DO NOT EXIST
  - Waste, markets and values
  - Time
- What next?





# Background

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- Extensive literature on waste
  - Popular work
  - History
  - Philosophy and cultural theory
  - Waste studies (literature)
  - Discard studies
  - Garbology
- Common touchstone
  - Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (though note it has established antecedents)

# Ecolinguistics

- Attention is paid to waste ecolinguistics (see e.g. Chen, 2016; Harré, Brockmeier & Mühlhäusler, 1999; Mühlhäusler, 2001 [1983]; Poole & Spangler, 2019)

...ecolinguistics consists of questioning the stories that underpin our current unsustainable civilisation, exposing those stories that are clearly not working, that are leading to ecological destruction and social injustice, and finding new stories that work better in the conditions of the world that we face. These are not stories in the traditional sense of a narrative, however, but rather discourses, frames, metaphors and, in general, clusters of linguistic features that come together to convey particular worldviews (Stibbe, 2013: 117)



# Methodology and fieldwork

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- Seattle, WA January-February 2019
  - Good recycling and waste management infrastructure
  - Not my city
- 10 interviews (63,412 words)
  - NGOs
  - Government employees
  - Recycling company owners/employees
    - **W** = someone working in waste water (sewerage, storm water etc),
    - **P** indicates someone working across fields in an institution or other entity including non-profits,
    - **SW** indicates anyone working with solid waste, including landfill, recycling facilities or composting.
- Documents (from above)
- Public tours to MRF (materials recovery facility)

# Analysis

- Frame
  - “a story about an area of life that is brought to mind by particular trigger words” (Stibbe, 2015: 47).
- Framing
  - “is the use of a story from one area of life (a frame) to structure how another area of life is conceptualised” (Stibbe, 2015: 47).
- Reframing
  - “is the act of framing a concept in a way that is different from its typical framing in a culture” (Stibbe, 2015: 47).





# Discourses and frames

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- Business
  - WASTE IS A BUSINESS
  - WASTE IS A LIABILITY
  - WASTE IS A COMMODITY/RESOURCE
  - WASTE IS ENERGY
- Environment/nature
  - RECYCLING IS A (NATURAL) SYSTEM
  - NATURE IS A SYSTEM
  - WASTE PROCESSING IS A NATURAL SYSTEM
  - WASTE IS ENERGY
- Cultural/Value Systems
  - WASTE IS DIRTY
  - MIXED THINGS ARE DIRTY
  - UNSEEN THINGS DO NOT EXIST

# WASTE IS DIRTY

## MIXED THINGS ARE DIRTY

- Water

- One facility “*cleans* 20 to 25 million gallons of wastewater a day...” (W1).
- The ‘ick’ factor – more common when the material is ‘brown’ (W1)
- Like this whole process to get rid of all the stuff ... we take this out and then we take this out and then you do this and you know they’ve figured out OK this is quite a production (W1).

- Solid Waste

- “what we do here is *sorting*. We don’t manufacture new things. We’re not cleaning things...what we’re doing is taking this *jumbled mess* that was picked up at your curbside recycling it goes on our truck comes over here and it gets *sorted* out through a human and a mechanical process (SW1, emphasis added)





# WASTE IS DIRTY

## MIXED THINGS ARE DIRTY

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- “if you have a little aspirin bottle maybe one from that line that made it over to this line and got into a bale. Failed. They won't accept your order. Medical waste zero. Zero. Nothing. Food waste zero. You got food in your material because it moulds, it creates mould spores you know” (SW2).
- One interviewee explained that while waste processors describe contamination as ‘the wrong stuff in the wrong place’, their organisation argues that it is “the right thing in the wrong place” (P4).

# Who does the cleaning?

- “The success of recycling depends on you” (SW1, Document 2).
- “the waste industry is trying to say that it’s the fault and the problem of the consumer or the residents. And we heartily disagree with that [laughs]. So they’re basically trying to use [this] as justification for no legislation but also for not even [making] policy changes” (P4).
- One informant explains, “if the products that are available to you aren’t recyclable that’s not your fault” (P1).
- We have no words for “someone who does not recycle their bottles, papers, and so forth”, nor a “short word for ‘to separate garbage’” (Harré, Brockmeier & Mühlhäusler, 1999: 31).



# UNSEEN THINGS DO NOT EXIST

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“We’re so removed from it. You flush the toilet and that’s the end of the story. Who thinks about where it goes? Same with your garbage. You throw everything in the garbage and the guy comes and picks it up. You don’t think twice about where it’s ending up...it goes away into the abyss. It’s gone. I don’t have to worry about it... it’s totally magic and fairies” (W2).

“We’ve made it so that people really don’t have to connect to their waste at all really. Don’t have to think about it” (W1)

“‘there is no away’, so you may think it goes away but it’s actually sitting in the landfill for 400 years or it dropped to the bottom of the landfill and leaked out the bottom... yeah everything goes everywhere” (P1).



# Waste, markets and values

- What is 'waste', what is a 'commodity' depends on
  - Whether there is a market
  - Whether the cost of creating the commodity is lower than the market price
  - A clear distinction between use value and exchange value
- "There's no value in [plastic] we're basically - whatever we haul plastic wise in weight right now it's probably it's a landfill so it's a cost. It's a negative number" (SW2)
- Clear glass is "where the real high grade market is", it has "the highest value" and is "a marketable commodity" (P1).
- "Can I make new stuff? Can I sort it? Do I have an end market? Is it contaminated?" (SW1)



# Resource vs product

- Resource: use value (trees, recyclable paper, water etc)
- Product/commodity: exchange value (established by the market and technology cost and access)
- “when you throw away a piece of paper that can be recycled you're throwing away the trees, the land, the resources, the water all the energy that went into harvesting that.” (SW1)

# Time

- Natural time (resource)
  - Cyclical (humans are part of these cycles and can disrupt them)
- Cultural time: Business (commodity)
  - Linear (though co-opting the language of 'natural' cycles)
- Harré, Brockmeier and Mühlhäusler observe “Environmentalism, above all, links the past with the future” (1999: 7). They distinguish three kinds of time
  - Natural time
  - Cultural time
  - Individual time



# On single use packaging

- “yes they're more convenient but only for the moment you're using them. If if you're asking if they're more convenient for the survival of the species the answer's no. And so where do you draw the boundaries around words like convenience? But the packaging industry loves to hold up instantaneous consumer gratification convenience as their only metric. But if you expand convenience to will we survive 200 years? Yeah it's not so convenient” (P1)



# What is next

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- Reframing, reminding and therefore re-languaging of 'value'.
- Reframing the different orders of time
  - E.g. by marking packaging with how long it takes to degrade
- Intervention in markets to align with 'natural' cycles and processes
  - E.g. a levy on virgin products
- Remind people of waste
  - E.g. by making it present rather than invisible





# For more trash talk

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