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**Západočeská univerzita v Plzni**

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**RUSTING AWAY: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF  
TOTALED CARS, INFORMALITY, CAPITALISM,  
WASTE, AND SUSTAINABILITY AT A BOHEMIAN  
AUTO SALVAGE YARD**

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### Statement of Authorship

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this dissertation thesis and that I have not used any other sources than those identified as interlocutors and those listed in the references and notes. I further declare that I have not submitted this thesis at any other institution in order to obtain a Ph.D. or any other academic degree.

Praha, August 20, 2023 \_\_\_\_\_

For Ella

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## Abstract

Building upon my long-term ethnographic research at an informal auto salvage yard in Central Bohemia, this dissertation attempts to reveal that there are places that—albeit sustaining capitalism—correct the damage this globally prevailing politico-economic system causes, as these relatively marginalized places can reveal the hidden corners of one's own society. In addition to presenting and describing the everyday life of the workers at the auto salvage yard, wrapped in the context of the omnipresent mis/trust related to friendship, hostility, and knowledge “battles,” I discuss the meaning of various greenwashing eco-slogans, which in reality seem more like a tired marketing ploy than a real solution to current environmental problems. I build on the theory of containers and combine it with the idea of the ecology and economy as non-mutually exclusive parts of originally one concept (*oikonomia*) to touch upon the idea of responsiveness concerning wasting and its shift towards the individual level and morality, and consequently, feelings of personal guilt. Based on the experience of salvage yard workers' creativity and skills, I attempt to reveal through the lens of the “quiet sustainability” concept—complemented with recent ideas on the practices of repair, maintenance, and care—that “greening” can also be achieved quietly by the grey economy of breaking cars. The case of auto salvage yards shows that sustainability arises even through the yearning for profit. At auto salvage yards, eco-nomic meets eco-logic; therefore, the unintentional sustainability reached by auto salvage yard workers opens space for debate on sustainability reached through the profit motive. The world of auto salvage yards is about a strong interconnection of humans and things; therefore, I focus on the analogy between human bodies and car bodies. Sometimes, these bodies—as assemblages—share a similar fate; their organs and spare parts can be disassembled and used in different contexts. Cars and humans are divisible individuals comprising a complex of separable parts that can be dismantled. The organs of humans who died during a car accident or later in the hospital can be commodified in the same way as the parts of the car they were driving. Based on this experience, I intend to emphasize the close dynamic relationship not only between cars—as material objects—and humans or non-humans inside cars but also between that whole assemblage and the material world and humans or non-humans outside, and therefore I propose the “person-car” concept. I present the car as a human's second body to demonstrate the flexibility of human bodily boundaries; the human body can include lots of incorporated objects—in this case, the car.

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# I. INTRODUCTION

## **Zoom out ... seen from a wider perspective**

The automobile is one of the most prominent inventions of the last two centuries. The automotive industry reshapes landscapes, human lives and health, local and global economies, and produces and reproduces social inequality in a significant way. The relationship of humans to the world became increasingly mediated by the car to such an extent that social scientists started to talk about car cultures (Bull, 2001; Edensor, 2004; Featherstone, 2004; Gartman, 2005; Garvey, 2001; Gilroy, 2001; Laurier, 2005; Maxwell, 2001; Merrimen, 2005; Miller, 2001a; O'Dell, 2001; Sheller, 2005; Stotz, 2001; Thrift, 2005; Young, 2001).

Across a wide range of political/economic discourses, the production and consumption of automobiles have been viewed as playing a fundamental role in the promotion of economic growth and, thus, in the reproduction of the capitalist system—the automobile became the symbol of progress (Paterson, 2007). The impact of the automotive industry will most likely only increase as the global vehicle “population” doubles, as predicted, to two billion by 2030 (Sperling and Gordon, 2009), regardless of the use of internal combustion engines or any kind of alternative motors.

Nevertheless, let us focus solely on the context of one of the European leaders in the production of cars—the Czech Republic. There were nearly four thousand automobiles produced each day in 2017 in the Czech Republic, and the data from 2018—when I started my Ph.D.

studies—showed a tendency toward growth;<sup>1</sup> in fact, in 2018, a record-breaking number of private vehicles were produced in the Czech Republic: 1,437,396 in total.<sup>2</sup> The majority of these newly-produced automobiles in the Czech Republic were (and to date still are) intended for export,<sup>3</sup> mainly into Germany. After the problems that the global automotive industry experienced during the Covid-19 crisis in 2020 and 2021, the production of new cars in the Czech Republic got back on track in 2022.<sup>4</sup> It is legitimate to believe that car production will not stagnate, whether the world is going through any kind of crisis or not. The automotive industry is a crucial segment of Western countries' economies, and its decline would have significant consequences.

At the same time—in places called auto salvage yards—there are usually between eleven and sixteen thousand automobiles discarded each month in the Czech Republic.<sup>5</sup> A significant number of these automobiles are used cars imported from Germany, as they exceed German emissions limits and hence enter the Czech market. From a certain point of view and with a certain degree of irony, one could see Czech roads as a sort of retirement place for German “senior” vehicles or as the return of the Czech exported vehicles that have “matured” on German roads.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://autosap.cz/en/data-and-statistics/annual-time-series-of-vehicle-production-and-sales/> (accessed August 20, 2023)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.spcr.cz/muze-vas-zajimat/z-clenske-zakladny/12545-ceske-automobilky-loni-vyrobily-rekordni-pocet-aut> (accessed August 20, 2023, available only in Czech)

<sup>3</sup> <https://autosap.cz/en/data-and-statistics/annual-time-series-of-vehicle-production-and-sales/> (accessed August 20, 2023)

<sup>4</sup> <https://autosap.cz/en/aktualita/pres-rozsahle-vyzvy-roku-2022-bylo-v-ceske-republice-vyrobena-celkem-125-mil-vozidel/> (accessed August 20, 2023)

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.mzp.cz/C1257458002F0DC7/cz/modul\\_vraky\\_isoh/\\$FILE/OODP-souhrn\\_MA\\_ISOH\\_2020-20210617.pdf](https://www.mzp.cz/C1257458002F0DC7/cz/modul_vraky_isoh/$FILE/OODP-souhrn_MA_ISOH_2020-20210617.pdf) (accessed August 20, 2023, available only in Czech)

However, every single thing—German “senior” automobiles included—gradually loses its value and is eventually perceived by some as waste that continues to exist in a timeless and valueless limbo (Thompson, 2017, p. 10) where it has a chance of being rediscovered and getting a new identity and value. Based on my research that resulted in this dissertation, I perceive automobiles primarily as a transitory part of a social being,<sup>6</sup> formed together with a person or persons and by non-humans inside that vehicle, which gradually passes through different regimes of value (Appadurai, 1988, pp. 14–15; Graeber, 2001, pp. 30–33; Souleles, Archer, and Thaning, 2023).

The transitoriness of automobiles is individual and in direct relation to humans. However, cars always reach a moment when someone considers them waste; we can think here in terms of the Thompsonian category of rubbish object. However, it does not mean that automobiles really become waste; at least salvage yard workers—whom every car will eventually encounter—do not consider them waste. From their perspective, a car is a commodity (or an object of commoditization in an Appaduraian sense, if you like) that still bears specific value regardless of its state.

The end of a car’s life can come at any moment—most vehicles that appear at auto salvage yards are totaled (*totalky*), that is, they are cars irreparably damaged during car accidents. Vehicles fall into this category if the price of their repair exceeds the price of the car, while insurance companies are the arbiters of this category. Even new cars can become

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<sup>6</sup> I am reluctant to use the words *thing* or *object*, since the automobile cannot be so simply reduced in relation to human beings. I deal more with this issue in the second chapter of Section II.

totaled. In other words, time may or may not be of crucial importance for their value.

As things move both into and out of the rubbish category, waste can be understood as a dynamic social construct (Thompson, 2017, pp. 1–18, p. 59, pp. 88–111). Nevertheless, we can extend Thompson's concept of waste as a dynamic social construct, where one form of value ends and at the same time another begins, with the intersubjective agreement of the actors who process totaled cars that it is more advantageous to look at a thing that might be considered waste as a commodity (Appadurai, 1988). Although both the public and the people working in waste management might perceive waste as something fixed and stable, waste has the potential to be indeterminate (Alexander and Sanchez, 2019), and it is precisely for that reason that social scientists are not able to clearly define waste (Brunclíková, 2015, pp. 14–28). What is certain, however, is that waste is not the final stage of anything (Thompson, 2017, pp. 88–111), just as disposal or getting rid of things does not necessarily mean emptying them of a particular value (Hetherington, 2004).

As Hetherington (2004) puts it, things that humans dispose of are mobile—including an automobile that has ceased to be “auto-mobile;” they move between a status of presence and of absence and the absent is only moved along and is never entirely removed. The erasure of a thing is never complete, as there is always a trace effect that is passed on by its absence. Therefore, a thing with the status of “waste” has the potential to be reused and thus enter other social, environmental and/or political relations (Alexander and Reno, 2012).

Furthermore, one cannot always predict in advance what will remain in the category of waste and what will return to being highly valued; the circuits of value that secondhanded or discarded commodities move through are non-linear and unpredictable (Gregson and Crewe, 2003).

Disposal is not merely getting rid of the unwanted. It is a dynamic and performative act involving spatial displacement. It is not an endpoint for discarded things, because everything that has been turned into waste tends to have the ability to return.

And that is precisely why it is not an endpoint for the production-consumption sequence either, because there is no such thing as an inevitable linear temporal sequence ending with disposal (Hetherington, 2004). Getting rid of something is implicated in maintaining a recognizable state of social order; therefore, disposal is about questions of boundary and order, about putting everything that threatens to pollute behind a line separating the internal from the external (Douglas, 1984, p. 99). In this sense, disposal is part of the ordering work that goes into making a society. Nevertheless, as Strathern (1999, p. 61) puts it, one cannot dispose of waste, only convert it into something else.

Automobiles go through regimes of value in which we can view them as consumer or capital goods, until they gradually reach the state where one might perceive them as material. Therefore, vehicles experience a transformation in which their value is eventually determined more by the potential of using their parts than by their original function for transporting humans, non-humans, or things.

Cars can be sold several times during their lifetime, but their final value is always the scrap value. They move from the first-hand market as new goods through the second-hand market to the area of the disposal market, where they are evaluated based on their suitability for further use as material. After its demise, the car enters into the global network of disposal and reuse, that is, into places such as auto salvage yards, where it is disassembled—thus becoming changeable—and ready to be assembled into other things. These yards, therefore, allow cars to be reborn as a new commodities in a different network of values.

Hynek—my fellow salvage yard worker—argued that a car (as an assemblage of parts) has value only in two phases of its life—when it is brand new and when it becomes an old-timer—otherwise, it is, according to Hynek, worthless.<sup>7</sup> However, this does not apply to its parts, which do not lose much in their exchange value and are thus more valuable than the car as a whole. The price of a totaled car's undamaged “heart” (*srdce*)<sup>8</sup>—its most valuable “organ”—is always higher than the totaled car itself. The auto salvage yards' business with car parts is based on temporal stability, with some parts being less resistant to time. However, in cases where there are no customers interested in a particular car's part or even a car brand or car type, there is a cross-border trade in totaled cars, which broadens the market for goods of this kind.

The world nowadays is driven by capitalist ideology on both global and local levels (Graeber, 2015; Millar, 2015). It is characterized by the majority of new products having only a limited life span, just to reach faster product turnover. Products age faster and become waste way too soon, which is influenced mainly by the affordability of buying new products while throwing old ones away (Eriksen, 2016). A fieldnote from the beginning of my fieldwork:

Some fixtures are not easy to dismantle, or it is not easy to get close to them at all. Hynek told me that many parts are made in such a

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<sup>7</sup> In social sciences, value is not perceived as a property of a given thing but rather as a product of social processes. However, we must realize that in emic thinking, value is seen in terms of money, that is, as exchange value. So far, I have not met a single person in the field who—when buying a car—did not consider reselling it. People who “trade cars” do not buy a so-called vehicle-for-life. I often happened to be the target of innuendos and jokes about my old, high-mileage car, which I do not intend to give up for at least another 20 years.

<sup>8</sup> Slang expression for an engine.

way that they cannot be repaired—the production simply aims to replace the parts with new ones.

A characteristic of the currently prevailing global politico-economic system is that humans regularly visit various marketplaces for new commodities to be obtained, just because they can afford to. Thus, against this background, it is not surprising that various practices related to the second-hand market, recycling, repair, and reuse have emerged as increasingly significant social phenomena in recent years (Alexander and Reno, 2012). Buying second-hand enables access to goods in consumable form while requiring less financial means. On the other hand, the lower financial investment also means that consumption of secondhanded things may involve a quicker turnover of purchases, allowing spontaneous acts of shopping (Appelgren and Bohlin, 2015), and the initial aim of behaving thriftily might awkwardly fizzle out.

Besides being motivated by pragmatic needs, economic necessity, sustainability, or personal moral consciousness, second-hand practices often involve enjoyment and pleasure, such as the joy of unexpected finds (Gregson and Crewe, 2003). Within the second-hand market, a particular thing's social (hi)story is strongly desirable and deliberately emphasized, as that may affect its value. One can find all this at auto salvage yards, although they seem to be slightly different second-hand marketplaces, where sustainability (Appelgren and Bohlin, 2015) and/or moral consciousness or sentimental value (Hetherington, 2004) are not among the leading forces for second-handing practices. Furthermore, the (hi)story of a particular spare part is not desirable at all, quite the reverse.

## **Zoom in ... seen from a narrow perspective**

Auto salvage yards are places that most drivers are familiar with. Nevertheless, only a minority know much about the everyday life of salvage yard workers, the things they handle—totaled cars—and their relationship, that is, the relations between humans and things. Although vehicles ending up at auto salvage yards are usually labelled as end-of-life vehicles, auto salvage yards are not anything like car cemeteries (not even for German “senior” vehicles), although they are generally referred to as such; cars do not die at auto salvage yards, nor are these places any kind of resting sites. In fact, cars survive their demise thanks to these places, although very often in the form of their parts.

Crang et al. (2012) assert that activities in places such as salvage yards can be perceived as destructive, as it is mainly about how to disassemble a car (or a ship or a plane) rather than how to put their parts back together. However, I cannot entirely agree with their argument, because salvage yard workers know cars perfectly and are also able to “build” (*postavit*) them. In my opinion, it is quite the opposite: salvage yard workers do not dismantle unusable cars with the intention to “dispose of them” as the law requires but rather with the vision of using and placing their spare parts in another car and, thus, using the potential of the totaled car as well as the potential of their own creativity and skills.

I even dare to say that, from an emic point of view, auto salvage yards are not part of the so-called disposal market (or waste management, if you wish), despite their exact definition as given by the law. That is why I chose to use the term auto salvage yards and not wrecking yards, wreck yards, wrecker’s yards, wreckers, breaker’s yards, car breakers,



dismantlers, scrapheaps, scrap yards, or junkyards<sup>9</sup>—although all these terms refer to places that handle totaled cars, the term auto salvage yards is most suitable for purposes of this dissertation, because as I already mentioned, cars are salvaged in the auto salvage yards.

Although auto salvage yards might be considered a part of the colossus of waste management, it is not waste that enters the yard, but sort of a material that still bears some potential to be recognized by salvage yard workers who take full advantage of it and use their skills and knowledge for their own profit. The material might turn into waste easily, although waste can be considered material as well, as Millar (2018, pp. 123–150) shows us. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference from, let us say, landfills—auto salvage yards are not final destinations; they are stopovers on the waste/material trajectory where one can experience diverse situations and find a fascinating world connecting production, consumption, and disposal.

That sunny morning in August 2019 in Prague, I cranked up my adventure tourer and set off to an auto salvage yard in the neighboring region to fetch a window switch for my brother's car. I took it as another opportunity to map the terrain before I settled on one of the numerous auto salvage yards in the Czech Republic. During the previous couple of months that I had spent as a visiting Ph.D. student at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany, I had been thinking intensively about how to enter the field. Based on the assumption that salvage yard workers would not let me into their profession easily, my idea about auto salvage yards was that I would have to go around several places before settling on one of them.

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<sup>9</sup> There is only one word in Czech expressing the same meaning as all these terms in English: *autovrakoviště* (or abbreviated as *vrakoviště*, or, in slang, *vrakáč*).

Once I arrived at the place later that morning, all the salvage yard workers crowded around me and my bike, and I realized that the decision to ride the motorcycle to that place was good. First of all, salvage yard workers usually admire all kinds of vehicles, even radio-controlled (RC) models, as I learned later during my research; but more importantly, riding an adventure tourer means being used to a great degree of discomfort and requires the rider to be physically fit, which salvage yard workers consider a mark of someone who is most likely not afraid of hard work under pressure.

It was an intuitive and instant decision: I knew that I had appeared at the right spot and therefore asked: “Any chance you need a worker?” I expected anything but the response of a man in his early forties whose eyes immediately sparkled: “Yeah, we do actually. Wait a minute, I’ll fetch the boss.” And that was it. Sometimes things are easier than we think. When I lived and worked in Brussels, Belgium, I had two Basque colleagues—brothers—who would often mention that their father used to say: “No you already have.” This experienced man’s advice has made my life easier several times.

The boss appeared in a while—a quadragenerian man with short greyish groomed hair—looking at me from head to toe, slipping his gaze to my motorcycle. He leaned on its top case and simply asked: “Why would someone with a bike like that want to work for me?” I appreciated such an honest and direct question and immediately decided not to hide anything.

I am a Ph.D. student, and I have decided to do research on auto salvage yards. I am here to discover what such a place is and what it means for you. Hopefully, I will be able to use the knowledge I eventually get here for the dissertation and successfully obtain a Ph.D.,

I answered. The boss looked at me with interest and replied:

I don't know anything about that, but I need another pair of hands for some dirty work here. It's not easy work, but you seem to me like someone who knows how to use his hands,

shifting his gaze from me to my bike and back to me, wearing clothes soiled by regular motorcycle riding.

All right, you're in. Come on Monday, and you can start breaking this little beauty over here,

the boss turned and pointed at a slightly wrecked white Hyundai I20.

It shouldn't take you more than a day and a half to break it completely. All right, we have a deal,

he said finally and added with a soft laugh:

Let's see how long you can keep doing this job. Most of the men who've come in here could only do it for a few months, and then they ran away.

I stayed for almost two years.

## **Summer, Fall, Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter ... and Spring**

Back in 2003, when I was twenty, I was amazed by Kim Ki-duk's then newly-released movie, the title of which I have paraphrased in this section's title. Similarly to Finn Methling's book *Kukkerhuset ved åkandesøen*, the life of the humans appearing in the story is set in and viewed in the context of one particular place, which humans gradually enter and leave. In other words, there is a stable place that anchors our focus and a dynamic sequence of events and circumstances related to that place. While the narrator of Methling's book is a personified old wooden chalet, in Kim's movie, we can follow a monk living in a small Buddhist temple in the middle of a mountain lake and strongly related both to the place and its surroundings, including the human beings that become part of the monk's life for a certain period of time.

The idea of life as a continuous process determined by regularly changing seasons, that is, linking the dual concept of time—on the one hand, the circularity of seasons and humans gaining life experience on their way from birth to their demise on the other—is inspiring for thinking about and describing the world of auto salvage yards. As I experienced all four seasons at the auto salvage yard, I decided to use this experience to frame the text of this dissertation to allow readers to explore and better understand not only the yard's environment and the life and work of the workers there but also the researcher's personal view and way of thinking that gradually developed during the fieldwork. I also hope that the dissertation's structure gives readers a specific image of the themes that, step by step, came to my mind in relation to the experience gained by working at the yard.

Before entering the field, I initially thought of following the “waste stream” of totaled cars. I should stop here for a moment, and before I continue, I ought to explain why I chose to do research on auto salvage yards and totaled cars.

At the beginning of 2018, while finishing my master’s degree studies, two of my teachers at that time encouraged me to start studying for a Ph.D. Originally, I wanted to focus on the liminality that performers experience on stage while performing. This interest had its roots in my almost twenty-year career in the artistic sector as a performer. During those beautiful and creative years, I realized that being on stage was an indescribable experience comparable with a rite of passage experience, with one significant difference: the liminality was the most important, not the new status.

Therefore, I asked one of the two then-teachers who had encouraged me to continue with post-graduate studies—Dr. Daniel Sosna—to become my supervisor; to my delight, he agreed, although his research interests did not converge much with topics related to stage performance. However, during the first month of my Ph.D. studies, I realized that Daniel and I would benefit from changing the subject of my dissertation research. After all, as a Ph.D. student, one has a unique opportunity to devote oneself to an issue in depth, and I was convinced that this would be favorable not only to the student but to the supervisor as well.

Therefore, Daniel and I discussed changing my dissertation research topic. As a specialist on the ethnographic and archeological research of discard, Daniel came up with an immediate proposal:

I think that we know really a little about what happens with all the cars produced and used around us after they are no longer operable on roads. How about doing fieldwork at an auto salvage yard?

asked Daniel, and I knew instantly that this was a great idea. I would never have imagined what happened next—five years full of new things and inspiration coming to me, either during the fieldwork or during the time spent at Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, where I was to discover an inspiring environment and experience the everyday life of one of the world's leading scientific institutions, as well as the time spent at the Institute of Ethnology at the Czech Academy of Sciences in the Department of Ecological Anthropology, where I could focus on my research activities entirely and meet great people.

That is to present the very beginning of my Ph.D. studies, as everything begins at one or more points and ends eventually—and this dissertation is meant to be the endpoint of the last five inspiring years. In fact, the liminality of the Ph.D. student—the longest liminality I have ever experienced—should finally end, and a new status should occur; unlike liminality on stage, here the new status is highly desirable. At this point, readers of this dissertation are at the beginning of my journey, and I hope that the following pages will guide their steps in a clear, understandable, and inspiring manner.

Nevertheless, back to the point that I did not finish. As I mentioned, before I entered the field, the initial idea—after several discussions with Daniel—was to follow the “waste stream” of totaled cars. As I learned later during my research, although auto salvage yard workers are skilled in processing and creatively utilizing most parts of any totaled car, dismantling cars at auto salvage yards is not only about extracting usable parts and their subsequent retail sale. On the one hand, that is indeed a

profitable activity generating a new life for things; on the other, breaking up cars also generates a lot of waste. Basically, there are four types of waste produced during car dismantling: (1) vehicle fluids, (2) plastic components, (3) glass, and (4) metal car parts. While the first is sometimes used as combustible material to heat the befriended official yard's buildings during winter,<sup>10</sup> the second and third types of waste usually end up as anonymous mass in landfills or incineration plants. However, the fourth type of waste—metal—is the one in which salvage yard workers are most interested because its market is among the largest in the world's recycling economy (Alexander and Reno, 2012; Minter, 2013, p. 27; Reno, 2016, p. 121). It shows us that not only quantity, but also the quality and properties of material objects that salvage yard workers deal with are determining factors.

When salvage yard workers try to eliminate the rubbish generated during dismantling, their quantitative imagination derives from piles of material. During the research, I often heard *Pan Všemohoucí's* ("Mr. Almighty"—I will explain this nickname in the next section, as well as the nickname *Pan Vedoucí*, "Mr. Headman")—the yard owner—cursing: "*Kurva to je bordel!*" ("What a fucking mess!") as he restlessly waited days for a delayed garbage truck to come and make all the piles of rubbish disappear.

I made a few fieldnotes regarding the sanitation workers that visited the yard—always the same three men:

The garbage guys (*kluci popelářský*) came in the morning. The same bunch again. I helped them again. Their boss has charisma. He looks like an intellectual academician from the 1970s whom the

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<sup>10</sup> Salvage yard workers in our yard used wood-burning stoves to heat the yard's buildings.

commies grounded. He is 2 meters tall and looks authoritative but approachable. He helps the other two (a Romani and a whitey) load the garbage. Otherwise, he drives the truck and gives orders to the other two. But without saying a word. The academician cleaned our cart down to the very last bit because there was always a mess from our waste. *Pan Všemohoucí* told him that it was OK, that he would finish it himself after the collectors had left, but the whitey replied: “It will be OK only when he says it is OK,” and pointed to the academician, whose eyes sparkled with a smile. I asked them if they were taking it to an incinerator or a landfill. The whitey replied that he didn't know (or didn't want to tell me because he found my question rather suspicious) but that they probably went to the landfill because they were already at the incinerator today.

On another day, I made this note:

The sanitation workers are still nowhere. We're already overflowing with waste here. Prokop and I cleaned the area around the piles a bit together so that the garbage guys could get to it with their truck. *Pan Vedoucí* came to see us and said: “It is unbelievable how much those trucks can devour.”

When the sanitation workers finally arrived, I made a note:

The sanitation workers came in the morning. Still the same bunch. We had accumulated a huge amount of waste. I was wondering if it would fit in the truck. It did. Incredible. It took us about an hour, but we put everything in there—car glass, airbag units, levers, speedometers, plastic components, etc. Before the workers arrived,



*Pan Vedoucí* had looked at the pile and said: “You know, I'd rather sell it all.” When we were done, the academician went to the yard's office with *Pan Vedoucí*. Maybe some kind of financial thanks? Meanwhile, I asked whitey to explain the principle of the mechanism inside the truck. He said there was a sort of hand that pressed it all against the back wall. It's really like a disappearing box.

A few months later, Hynek confirmed my assumption about financial compensation for the sanitation workers:

Today, Hynek and I hung out for a while behind the warehouse near the waste piles. Hynek told me that *Pan Všemohoucí* and *Pan Vedoucí* probably have some kind of agreement with the three sanitation workers who come to the yard, because normally they would never take away our garbage. In addition, it is the same three guys who always come. But then Hynek added that the waste would end up in the landfill anyway, so why to make a drama out of it.

In these cases, the piles were disfavored, and *Pan Všemohoucí* would feel annoyed by their presence because they contained plastics that could not be monetized. However, on other days, I could see *Pan Všemohoucí's* eyes silently counting while looking at piles of metal and larger objects sorted into two containers and could hear his mumbling voice saying: “*Furt málo*” (“Still not enough”). In this case, the pile of metal and its continuing enlargement were highly desirable.

The salvage yard workers would sort two types of metal: aluminum and the rest. Car components made of aluminum were understood as highly desirable commodities. Consequently, the material quality of

aluminum meant representing an object's quantity in different numbers—seen in the form of money—than other types of metal. Here, we can see the interdependence of quantity, the creation of numbers, and an object's material quality.

Another example of the waste's relativity and performative capacities of classificatory categories—which I deal with further in the text—emerges when one follows the trajectory of a totaled car through its cross-border journey to an auto salvage yard. As I observed later during the research, imported or exported totaled vehicles are not transported as waste because they are sold with a foreign registration certificate; therefore, these cars are classified as commodities in the Czech Republic. While the transport of waste is constrained, commodities travel in a relatively unobstructed manner. Furthermore, after their export, there is no requirement to confirm the proper ecological disposal of totaled vehicles unless they appear in the vehicle registry. However, they do not.

Therefore, after a few days in the field, I soon realized that the auto salvage yard is a kind of “micro world” that can tell us a few things about the current prevailing global politico-economic system. Humans tend to perceive things that are usually not visible on a much larger scale than they actually are. Moreover, humans also tend to “inflate” these things to a larger extent. However, when one dives deeper into these hidden things, one may realize that they are, in fact, quite large. Here I especially mean informal practices happening within the framework of the formal.

## Formally informal

When I entered the field, I was sure that I had started to work as a salvage yard worker at a legal auto salvage yard. Nearly everything implied that the place was official; the only thing missing was any banner stating that the place was an auto salvage yard. On the second day of my fieldwork, in August 2019, when Hynek—who after almost two years gradually became my closest interlocutor and friend—gave me a lift to the railway station after the shift, I decided to open the question of the yard's status: "I noticed the banner on the gate, and it says it's a service garage..." "Strange, right?" smiled Hynek.

Although we're most likely the biggest Hyundai and Kia salvage yard in the Czech Republic, we are just a service garage.

Hynek observed my confused face with amusement and continued:

*Pan Všemohoucí* made a deal with his friend from a nearby village, who runs an official auto salvage yard. All the cars you will break up here are officially disposed of there. As I said, we are just a service garage.

*Pan Všemohoucí* and the other yard owner's friendship developed into an informal win-win arrangement; while the legal auto salvage yard officially reports more disposed of wrecked cars than are handled and, therefore, receives a higher subsidy, the informal place profits from the subsequent sale of spare parts on the second-hand market.

In terms of numbers, although about 600 auto salvage yards have been active in the past decade in the Czech Republic,<sup>11</sup> we can observe innumerable small operations that handle wrecked cars informally. Basically, almost all processed totaled cars appear in the reports for the officials, but a significant amount are dismantled in places not intended for the purpose. Moreover, it is not unusual that an officially disposed of vehicle still physically exists somewhere.

Although being an inseparable part of the formal (Hart, 2010), the informal is often understood as being hidden. In the case of auto salvage yards, nevertheless, the elusiveness of informality is a matter of perspective. On the one hand, the practices of informal salvage yard workers are not monitored and reported. On the other hand, the results of their work do appear in the official statistics because of being reported as part of the activities of the legal yards.

This works as follows: legal yards report the processing of totaled cars that never actually appear on their premises due to an informal deal created among informal and formal salvage yard workers motivated by their common goal: profit. A considerable number of totaled cars are either dismantled, repaired, and returned to roads or processed and disposed of at informal places—while this activity, at least according to official reports, is supposedly happening at legal auto salvage yards. Thus, in this case, one could see numbers as vehicles of relational and creative agency between two actors that are used to hide things that need to be revealed somewhere else while still being hidden in their original context. In other words, cars as material objects have often been hidden when they have

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<sup>11</sup> A database of totaled cars and auto salvage yards in the Czech Republic is maintained on the Ministry of the Environment's website. Available at: <https://autovraky.mzp.cz/autovrak/> (accessed August 20, 2023, available only in Czech).

been physically present and made visible in places where they never appeared; in a way, it reveals the informal without one realizing that one, in fact, is seeing a grey area while looking at the formal.

Thus, the inspectors of the Czech Environmental Inspectorate are forced to trust the numbers reported by salvage yard workers. There is no other way to detect any fraud, and—as *Pan Všemohoucí* once pointed out— “to trust is really convenient.” In other words, numbers, in this case, say nothing about the real auto salvage yards’ real entrepreneurial practices, and one may thus realize that one’s idea of such places existing in a rather informal manner is not false at all.

Informality is natural for salvage yard workers; therefore, everything in this text is wrapped in that context. To better understand the concept of informality, I often use thoughts of perhaps the most qualified person on this subject, who is none other than Keith Hart. However, he is not the only one.

My theoretical approach regarding this matter is based on the premise that informality is deeply interwoven into the fabric of society (Ledeneva, 2018, p. viii) and present everywhere, regardless of any particular ideology, although in different forms and intensities. Informality is often associated with the periphery rather than the center, yet it is central to maintaining order (Ledeneva, 2018, p. 5). In fact, one cannot have the informal without the formal and vice versa (Hart, 2010); they seem to be opposites but are interconnected and interdependent (Ledeneva, 2018, p. 5). Informality is not necessarily a transitory phenomenon, nor is it limited to places that have poor, socially unacceptable working conditions, and is not used only by the poor and marginalized; it has been shown that informal practices exist among all segments of society (Henig and Makovicky, 2017). Recent tendencies on informality are not a merely economic view. Current approaches have rediscovered the

interconnection of informality with social phenomena; informality is present everywhere and penetrates all aspects of public life (Polese et al., 2017).

Thus, I realized that my research would not be only about waste, as auto salvage yards are not places of disposal in the same sense as landfills. At least, salvage yards workers do not perceive yards to be such places, nor do they think of their work as contributing to waste disposal—for them, auto salvage yards are not part of waste management. Therefore, relatively quickly I came to know that I should not focus only on waste but keep my eyes wide open and let things come to me as they are. After all, the luxury of long-term fieldwork allowed me to slow down and live the research, as some things cannot be rushed.

## **Pan Všemohoucí, Pan Vedoucí, Hynek, Jáchym, Prokop ... and I**

In the previous section, I used the nickname *Pan Všemohoucí*, literally “Mr. Almighty,” which is what the salvage yard workers underhandedly called the owner of the yard—the boss I had talked with the very first day I visited the auto salvage yard to fetch the window switch for my brother’s car. The workers at the yard were creative and invented a pejorative nickname for the yard owner’s deputy as well: *Pan Vedoucí*, literally meaning “Mr. Headman.” Naturally, the workers only used both these nicknames when referring to the yard owner and his deputy behind their backs.

As I like both these nicknames—and after all, they were emic expressions used on a daily basis by the workers at the yard and somehow created a friendly bond among us—I use them to refer to the yard owner

and his deputy in the text, although I respect both and know that neither of them would probably be happy to hear the pejorative nicknames that were given to them by their employees.

I mentioned that the yard where I ended up realizing my fieldwork was the biggest (although being an unofficial place) auto salvage yard processing and specializing in Hyundai and Kia brands in the Czech Republic. It may sound like such a place had plenty of employees. Nevertheless, during my research, there were three of us workers processing totaled cars, one warehouseman, and the already-mentioned *Pan Všemohoucí* and *Pan Vedoucí*; that is, six in total. None of the names appearing in the text are real; with the intention to protect my interlocutors, I use the following pseudonyms: Hynek, Prokop, and Jáchym for the other two workers and the warehouseman, respectively.

As there is plenty of space to explore even the smallest details in this dissertation, I will take this section as an opportunity to write a few things about the salvage yard workers I worked with and about the yard, where I had the opportunity to spend quite a long time. Nevertheless, I will start with a few paragraphs about auto salvage yards as seen from a somewhat broader perspective, written in kind of simultaneously romantic and decadent style.

Larger Czech cities rarely fall asleep nowadays. Even at night, their life flows through their streets lined with houses, walls, and fences, as though through the veins of some enormous beast resting in a lair. Through these veins, the life of the city seeps into the beast's organs, where it transforms, dilutes, mixes, enriches, impoverishes, and subsequently travels elsewhere through the same veins. Some parts of the urban space are livelier, even crowded; others are more shrouded, unexplored, in the shadows, but this does not mean that the life has been

drained from them or that these places are empty. Quite the contrary, these are often the places on which the life of the entire organism depends.

Very often, these places are heterotopias (Foucault 1998, p. 181), places that are separated from the places of everyday social life. They might be securely fenced so that nothing and no one can freely come in or leave, which does not mean that these places exist in isolation or are independent (not only) of the surrounding environment. Places, in general, are not stable but dynamic entities that exist through and in complex relationships and interactions (Sosna, 2016).

Auto salvage yards, for example, are such places. These yards are often situated on the fringes, both in terms of their physical location, for example, on the outskirts of cities, especially along city exits, and in terms of their public perception. In case one finds auto salvage yards in a city closer to its center, these yards are most often located in industrial zones or former industrial districts close to railroad tracks and city ring roads.

Soderman and Carter (2008) argue that auto salvage yards appear in places where no one wants to live; they appear in places that are usually considered empty. And the emptiness, deliberately presented as a natural characteristic of both the landscape and the city, ostentatiously calls for filling, which becomes a highly political gesture (Reno 2016, p. 137). Landscape, a space that can be found everywhere, including the city, is always the result of political negotiation, as Gibas and Pauknerová (2009) argue.

The characteristic described applies to auto salvage yards within the city. However, in the Czech Republic, where—in addition to the roughly 600 legal auto salvage yards—there are a considerable number of informal places that handle totaled cars, there is also a different kind of phenomenon which, to a certain degree, avoids being marginalized:



informal yards in a rural setting. When a city person travels outside the city to the surrounding area after Sunday lunch, they can come across a local service garage in every other village. Most likely, the service garage handles totaled cars to a greater or lesser extent; and in most cases, these are also places where people live.

The auto salvage yard where I conducted my research was precisely one of these places. The setting of the yard was as follows: the large area of the yard was flanked by three large buildings that previously had served as warehouses for a sugar factory which processed sugar beet grown in the surrounding area since 1871. The factory stopped running its business before the beginning of the Second World War.

After the war, the area served as a place for agricultural supply and purchase, run according to the idea of a collective socialist economic system for another forty years. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, through the restitution process, the buildings were returned to the sugar factory owner's descendants and then sold. The new owners used them as warehouses and shops. When *Pan Všemohoucí* bought the first building, it became a service garage and eventually the auto salvage yard. To date, he owns two of the three buildings and rents the last one, which is used for the storage of auto body parts.

When one stood in the middle of the yard and looked around, then plenty of totaled cars could be seen ready for dismantling as well as garbage in two metal containers—one of them for metal, the other one for mixed municipal waste; the waste appeared organized and the place, therefore, tidy.



*Figure 1. Former sugar factory storage house, nowadays serving for storing car body parts.  
Source: The author.*

The yard was bounded and separated from the road by two of the aforementioned brick buildings on the western side and by a beautiful old wooden warehouse on the northern side. Behind that wooden warehouse—which smelled so nice, especially during summer, and reminded me of the smell of my grandparents’ old coal shed or old wooden railway sleepers—was a sawmill owned by another entrepreneur. At the eastern part of the yard, on a hill, there was a charming multi-storey building, the former sugar factory’s administrative building from the 1870s, which serves as an apartment building nowadays.

At the southern part, also on the hill, one could find a tasteful modern family house with a large garden. This house was where *Pan Všemohoucí* lived with his family and a dog that had joined him in Romania while he was on a motorcycle trip with other salvage yard workers. *Pan*

*Všemohoucí's* place had a perfect view of the yard and a rear garden entrance connecting the garden with the yard, which was used not only by *Pan Všemohoucí* himself but by his wife and two children, who would regularly use the yard as a shortcut on their way to the railway station or the central part of the village.

Behind one of the brick warehouses was a space hidden from the view of the yard's visitors and, thus, contained processed car bodies waiting for their second life, all with their VIN (Vehicle Identification Number) codes removed. They were placed there to hide the yard's informal activity, that is, disposal of totaled cars, which was, in fact, illegal at that place. Next to these car bodies, one could find plastic containers for municipal waste containing all kinds of valueless stuff from the dismantling of the cars. There, unlike in the yard's visible part, chaos ruled, and that place was anything but tidy. No customer could visit the inside of the warehouses, as there were also traces of illegal activity, and probably none of them would realize that there were car parts worth millions of Czech crowns being stored.



Figure 2. Processed car bodies hidden from the eyes of the yard's visitors. Source: The author.

The yard looked unobtrusive; it was as much a part of the community as were other parts of the village. In the countryside and in smaller towns, these places are not as stigmatized as they are in cities and do not bear the stigma of landfills, which they resemble in some respects, while in both cases, it is primarily about an entrepreneurial activity. In other words, Soderman and Carter's (2008) argument about the marginalization of auto salvage yards and their existence on the periphery is not always valid. These can be prestigious places that are not perceived negatively by the surrounding residents, and salvage yard workers can be regular members of the local community.

Based on my description of the yard's setting, one could see it as an island. This image is supported by the yard's placement between a state road, busy international railroad tracks, a large breeding pond, and a newly established brewery surrounding it on all sides. Nevertheless, the yard is entirely part of the village. This is so not only because it is not at its fringe, but also because of *Pan Všemohoucí's* involvement in the social life of the village. He is one of "them."

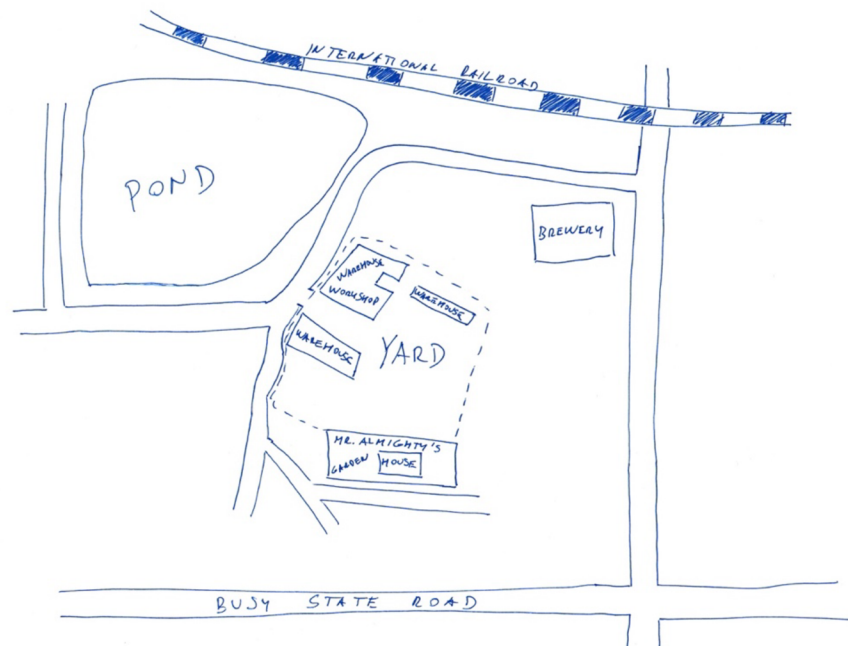


Figure 3. Scheme of the "yard island." Source: The author.

This contrasts with the nearby legal auto salvage yard, which is one of the largest in the Czech Republic. This yard is located at the end of the village, further away rather than closer, surrounded by fields. Due to its location on a hill, it can somewhat resemble a rural cemetery, which in some cases were built just outside the village, most often on an elevated site. The owner of this auto salvage yard does not live in the village; in fact, he rarely visits the place. Nor do the village inhabitants work in the yard. A vast area with tons of accumulated scrap metal and cars of various types and brands obscures the panorama of the otherwise picturesque village. However, such places usually mean higher income for the municipal budget, and, as Reno (2016, p. 162) points out, when people get used to the comfort resulting from higher income, they are willing to overlook the negative consequences arising from the proximity of such places.

As I mentioned several times, auto salvage yards are like landfills in certain ways, not only because a non-negligible part of the waste that is created during car dismantling ends up in landfills, but also because both can be considered heterotopias. Auto salvage yards—primarily as sorting places where the valuable (in the emic classification) and the usable are separated from the worthless—are about preserving and creating value. At the same time, an everyday market exchange occurs here, so as previously mentioned, these yards are not just car cemeteries, which would only serve as places to store and hide unwanted things. Vehicles that end up in auto salvage yards might be perceived as “inappropriate” by their original owners but are certainly welcomed by salvage yard workers—their new owners. Totaled cars represent a sufficient profit source for salvage yard workers; the saying “your trash is someone’s treasure” (Reno, 2009) applies perfectly here.

Nevertheless, like landfills, auto salvage yards are “highly heterogeneous entities which are connected to a plethora of other spaces”

(Sosna, 2016, p. 162). However, auto salvage yards are much more open to the public eye than landfills, primarily because they are also places where people go shopping. The movement of persons at auto salvage yards is therefore not as limited as it is at landfills, nor does it apply here that a thing that gets to this place once should not leave it again: auto salvage yards are not just cumulative, as are landfills (Sosna, 2016). In fact, it is the exact opposite; everything leaves this space at some point; nevertheless, some things leave sooner, others much later, just like the people working there. Auto salvage yards are places of constant movement, as *Pan Vedoucí* confirmed when saying goodbye to me after one of my first shifts:

Well, thanks for today and see you tomorrow. You know, it's still the same here; you finish one car and start a new one. It never ends.

Working at an auto salvage yard is not very popular due to its low social status and physical demands. Here a fieldnote from the sixth day of my fieldwork:

I'm hurting myself a lot today—grinding my fingers, lacerating my knuckles. Totally pointless, I'd say. Hynek said with an encouraging smile: "That's all right, buddy, a real *mechoš* (mechanic) sometimes feels some pain."

And here, for the sake of interest, to show how one's view of things gradually changes, is a fieldnote from the fourth month of the fieldwork:

I already look at cars differently in the yard. Now I don't just see wrecks or wrecked cars, I see what can be taken and used from them.

People usually start doing this kind of work—by which I mean breaking up cars as the lowest-ranking worker—when there is nothing else left, or they need a job that—just like them—is nowhere to be seen. Before I started to work at the yard, several people took turns there, although there were not many, considering that the yard had been in operation for slightly more than 20 years.

For example, two Ukrainians had worked and lived in one of the warehouses for over ten years. Salvage yard workers would always be talking them down in our yard. According to *Pan Vedoucí*, the Ukrainians were “self-confident scumbags who didn't want to work.” One day, when there were no cars to dismantle, I was tasked with cleaning out the room where the two Ukrainians had once lived. It was a windowless space, two meters by two meters, with two dusty sofas and a kitchenette. I found plenty of Orthodox icons and personal objects from drivers that the two had accumulated while dismantling cars. But I also found textbooks from the Uzhhorod National University. Later that day, I asked the other workers if they knew that at least one of the Ukrainians probably had studied at the university; they had no idea about it—in fact, they would never have expected it.

This story illustrates the hierarchical organization of the yard quite well. The highest position is held by the owner of the yard (*Pan Všemohoucí*); below him is the person who takes care of the business—the owner's deputy (*Pan Vedoucí*); and then, down in the lowest positions are those who dismantle cars and those who store their parts. “Democracy

ends at the door,” Jáchym—the warehouseman—warned me at the beginning of my research.

I gradually realized that this “undemocratic” setting was mainly reflected in the hierarchy of the “moral order of dirt” (Dant and Bowles, 2003), which is closely related to the “moral division of labor” (Hughes, 1958); the lowest-ranking always did the dirtiest and most physically demanding work. One could say that it might be an effective way to maintain hierarchy by obeying unwritten rules, whereas, similarly to skin color (Zimring, 2017, p. 6), being a worker from East is a sign of impurity; similar to the observations of Resnick (2021) regarding this correlation in the context of being Romani and a sanitation worker in Bulgaria (as well as in the Czech Republic).

Dealing with otherness almost always occurs by associating specific humans with pollution, hygiene, and cleanliness, or their absence (Zimring 2017, p. 80). It is about supremacy; those at the top maintain their position by never doing dirty work (Perry, 2017). They leave it to those who are considered human waste (Bauman, 2004), or even inhuman or dehumanized (Millar, 2020).

However, as Zimring (2017, pp. 114–118) shows us in the case of the North American continent, comparing immigrants to waste can lead to a situation wherein the lowest ranking part of society—in case their members are entrepreneurial—climbs up via dirty work to be among the entrepreneurial elite that eventually controls waste management and the profit that it generates. Waste can thus become a means to profit, to increase one’s prestige as well as that of one’s own family, and to gain influence.

I tried to put myself into the two Ukrainians’ shoes, although I was fully aware that I was in a totally incomparable position at the yard.



However, as a newcomer, I was in the lowest position in the yard's hierarchy. Even though there were informal deals among auto salvage yard workers and garbage collectors who liked to turn a blind eye when scooping up the waste that should not end up in landfills or incinerators, from time to time the rules became stricter, and salvage yard workers were forced to deal with things that they usually did not have to think about.

For example, out of the blue one day a scrap metal company refused to take away unprocessed shock absorbers. Shock absorbers contain nitrogen which explodes when heated. No one had ever removed nitrogen from shock absorbers in our yard. Nevertheless, a resounding "no" from the side of the scrap metal company meant that it was my turn. *Pan Vedoucí* handed me a drill and tried to encourage me by saying: "Well, it won't tear your arms off, will it?" It did not. I tried not to drill into the shock absorbers too fast so as not to heat them up. By the end of the day, after I had drained the nitrogen and oil from the shock absorbers and placed them in two huge containers, my whole body was covered in grease, as the oil had spewed out of the pressurized absorbers. Occasionally, during the day, other workers would come to watch me from a safe distance, and sometimes someone cracked a joke about taking a bath in a tub filled with degreaser after the shift.

As I mentioned, although being in the lowest position in the yard's hierarchy, I developed a positive relationship with both the low-ranking workers and with the lead workers. Therefore, I am fully aware that I could never experience the same negative relationship as the two Ukrainians had. I can imagine that the salvage yard workers would probably not have joked with them as they did with me if the Ukrainians had been in the same situation.

Nevertheless, working in an auto salvage yard undermines the social identity of each of the workers in the lowest positions, at least in the

view of the public. Although the salvage yard workers tried to mitigate the stigma of their work with branded work attire, the aura of the Engelbert Strauss brand does not function outside the yard, especially when one sees the greasy and dirty clothes. Working in branded work attire may make one feel better in the workplace, but it does not function during lunch breaks when interacting with people outside the yard. Salvage yard workers in the lowest position, whose clothes were constantly dirty and greasy, felt it the most. Still, they did not change clothes for the lunch break. Here is a fieldnote from the first week of fieldwork:

Today, I had some time to sort my thoughts out, because there was not much to do. Two thoughts stuck in my mind. One was about clothes. I realized I haven't seen guys from the yard wearing everyday clothes. They arrive already dressed in working attire in the morning, leaving like that in the evening. Until this time, I was changing for my lunch break, but I didn't today and went for lunch in dirty clothes. Just like them.

It was an important moment, as that decision brought me closer to the salvage yard workers, and from then on, I did not change my clothes for lunch anymore.

*Pan Všemohoucí*, as well as other higher-ups, are aware of their ability to accumulate a significant amount of money in a short period of time (not just by formal means), especially if they can repair and salvage totaled cars. They have a decent income and live a good life, but all of them—without exception—imagine a “better future” for their children. *Pan Všemohoucí's* son joined the children's opera choir of the National Theatre in Prague, and at the time of my fieldwork, he had applied to the conservatory. Jáchym's stepson was in his first year of studying medicine

at that time. In other words, working at auto salvage yards is hard and dirty, but at the same time a way to behave responsibly towards one's family regarding financial security and stability. For example, Hynek could afford to financially support the treatments for his mentally disabled sister. Although salvage yard workers, similarly to landfill workers (Reno, 2016, pp. 69–70), very often encounter a general view of their work as a personal failure, there is no single reason for this assumption. Salvage yard workers are mainly men with specific skills that they can use in their profession. Nothing less, nothing more.

There is a significant difference between huge yards that prefer quantity over quality and those that prefer the opposite. I visited several auto salvage yards at the beginning of my Ph.D. studies. There was one yard, which I have already mentioned in this section, that I thought would be the best choice for my fieldwork because it is probably the biggest yard in the Czech Republic, and my idea was that it clearly would be the place where I could get plenty of data. During my first visit to that place—while searching for an engine for my parents' old car—I had a chat with the yard's manager, who told me that there was not a single worker employed. Most of the men there were Eastern workers who would work there very irregularly. Their wage was less than half of what *Pan Všemohoucí* paid to his men.

*Pan Všemohoucí's* philosophy emphasized the quality of car parts, so he could sell them at a higher price and, therefore, afford to pay a higher hourly rate to his workers. They were all employed by *Pan Všemohoucí*, except for me, considering my situation. Here is a fieldnote revealing the everyday image of selling parts at the yard, as well as the image of its workers' daily wage:

A lot of people came here before lunch. One guy came to get the bonnet I took off that red car yesterday. He also took some parts for his car's radiator, wheel arches, and some other parts. Hynek helped me to remove the parts I didn't have time to disassemble yesterday. After a while, *Pan Vedoucí* came in, looked at the parts, and counted out loud: the smaller parts together for 3,000, the bonnet for 5,000, in total 8,000 CZK. Later I asked Hynek about how *Pan Vedoucí* valued the parts. Hynek replied that *Pan Vedoucí* would estimate the plastics in such a way so as to get at least 200 or 300 per piece; the other parts are usually 50% of the price for the same part if it were new. During the lunch break, Hynek told me that the guy actually paid the four of us a day's pay.

However, the workers at our yard would be paid the minimum legal wage while getting the remaining two-thirds as undeclared cash in hand—a win-win situation for both *Pan Všemohoucí* and the workers. Sometimes, I would try to open a discussion on this matter, saying something about low retirement pensions in the future. The workers would answer in unison that the pension was anything but certain and that they were happy with the way it was.

## **Objectives and the chapters' structural outline**

The main research goal of my dissertation project is straightforward: to bring a new world into being by making visible the auto salvage yards' environment, as it can tell us a lot about the current prevailing politico-economic system and the way in which its possibilities can be used for socially positive consequences without being primarily intended to do so,

as this environment sustains capitalism and simultaneously corrects the damage it causes.

As far as I know, only Soderman and Carter (2008) have conducted research at an auto salvage yard, yet not to such an extent and depth that my research eventually reached. On the one hand, one can see it as disadvantageous. On the other hand, it can be taken as an advantage. To a certain extent, I was not burdened by someone else's perspective, which allowed me to keep my eyes wide open in the field and perceive the overall context without subconsciously looking for research problems someone else might have encountered. To a certain degree, it felt like discovering something new.

The research project focuses on everyday life at an auto salvage yard and its possible placement in the broader context of waste management since the yard can be perceived as one of the intermediate stations in the trajectory of moving waste. This pursuit was allowed by long-term ethnographic research: the alpha and omega and the luxury of social anthropology. If I were asked to draw the yard's environment as a picture, I would most likely draw it as an island in the ocean of neoliberal capitalism. This island certainly is a part of the ocean but, at the same time, somehow isolated and capable of creative use of relations between the ocean and itself. The image of the auto salvage yard as an island that chooses only what best suits its needs may help readers to better understand that auto salvage yards are places the existence of which everyone knows about; yet only few can really see the everyday life on this tiny piece of land in the ocean. To avoid any misunderstanding, I am aware that the ocean I am mentioning is full of islands similar to the one where I had the opportunity to conduct my ethnographic research, which means that the auto salvage yard's island is not unique, because one can find

various sorts of islands with similar positive consequences for the whole ocean we swim in.

At the beginning of the research, I had only casual knowledge of the environment of auto salvage yards; it was based more on the generally widespread idea of these places as an environment in a somewhat unapproachable male world, in which the incoming visitor and potential customer must act carefully because this world is ruled by the omnipresent desire to rip off everyone, vernacularly stated. Fortunately, I shook off this unnecessary burden immediately after being accepted among the salvage yard workers and gradually absorbed the surrounding sensations and situations through my body and senses with my eyes wide open and ears pricked up through daily work and interaction with people and things at the yard, and thus recognized the richness of this hidden world, which is not what it may appear to be.

The research problems with which I gradually decided to work came to me continuously and slowly. This pleasant fluidity was allowed by the possibility of long-term fieldwork, which is so typical for social anthropology. As I mentioned, my focus was aimed mainly at waste at the beginning of the fieldwork. Here is a fieldnote from the very first week of my fieldwork:

They don't give a hoot about recycling here—although there are containers for various types of metal, a place for batteries and e-waste—the rest, including plastics, is mercilessly thrown into the municipal solid waste container (the big blue one, plus the standard waste container).

It is necessary to add that car producers use non-recyclable types of plastic, so throwing it into municipal waste bins is the only thing left to do.

The first few weeks I spent working in the field, I also focused on waste in my life outside the yard. I would observe slogans written on the outside of garbage trucks and wonder how far the message delivered was from what was happening inside the trucks. Thus, I gradually realized that garbage trucks were not only a way to collect produced waste and take it to a landfill or a waste-to-energy plant, but also a way to hide one's tracks. Garbage trucks may, thus, be perceived as magicians' disappearing-person-boxes, wherein things that could lead to any illegal activity quietly vanish while being a medium of hierarchical communication and political order-keeping.

This inspiration from waste resulted in the text that can be found in the first chapter of Section II, called *The Dark Side of the Container*. I build on theory of containers (Robb, 2018; Shryock and Smail, 2018; Greenland, 2018), and one of the inspiring authors for visual anthropology—Vilém Flusser—and combine it with the idea of the ecology and the economy as not being mutually exclusive parts of what is originally one concept (Hann and Hart, 2011, p. 20; Graeber, 2012) in order to touch on the idea of the responsiveness concerning wasting and its shift towards the individual level (Glücksberg, 2013, pp. 234–235) and morality, and consequently, feelings of personal guilt (Hawkins, 2005, p. 30).

Nevertheless, the very first impulse to think and write about waste, a stream of which flows through auto salvage yards, was gradually supplemented by other themes that I slowly discovered during the fieldwork. I mentioned the 1959 Methling book, in which a personified old wooden chalet tells a human story. The world of auto salvage yards is about a strong interconnection between humans and things. The theme of the second chapter of Section II, called *Wrecked Cars, Leaked Humans*,

*and the Death of the Person-car*, occurred to me when I first encountered blood stains in one of the totaled car's interiors. Therefore, this direct—and during the very first moment also surprising—experience of the presence of death in totaled cars initiated my interest in the analogy of human bodies and car bodies. Being inspired by Marilyn Strathern (2005), I started to think of the analogy more and more, and through Warnier's (2001) praxeological approach and Dant's (2004) theoretical concept of a driver and car as one social being, I started to develop the concept of a person-car being. My mind had been bothered by the idea of the analogy of the human body and car body for a longer period, which was captured, for example, in this fieldnote:

The workshop is full of cars today, so I'm taking the Santa Fe apart outside in the yard. A customer with an IX55 parked next to me. *Pan Vedouci* fiddled with its engine for a while and then left to go somewhere. I stayed there alone with the customer, who watched me thoughtfully and then pointed to the almost dismantled car's body and said: "This is how it is born and how it ends is exactly the same." I replied with a smile: "Naked, similarly to humans." The analogy still attracts me.

During the long research, I could not help but notice the auto salvage yard workers' creative work while creating value, which I anchor in Thompson's (2017) notion of waste as a dynamic social construct, even though in the emic understanding of salvage yard workers, the things they "work with" are not waste at all. It is somehow a circle that returns to my initial interest in waste. The experience with eco-slogans that is described and theoretically grasped in the first chapter of Section II., the fact that the prefix "eco" is only present in the slogan but not inside the garbage trucks as well as elsewhere where the trucks' contents ended up brought me to



the work of Petr Jehlička, that made it a current and urgent research problem in a certain way—environmentally responsive behavior of salvage yard workers. Unlike the waste management companies that loudly spread their green way of thinking without a real positive impact on the environment, salvage yard workers are silently environmentally responsive. Inspired by Smith and Jehlička's (2013) concept of "quiet sustainability," I present the salvage yard workers' practices in a different, unconventional light.

Therefore, in the third chapter of Section II, called *Grey Greening: Quiet Sustainability at Auto Salvage Yards*, I attempt to reveal, through the lens of the concept of quiet sustainability, that "greening" can also be achieved quietly by the grey-market economy of breaking cars. The case of auto salvage yards shows that sustainability arises even through the yearning for profit. At auto salvage yards, economic meets eco-logic. Therefore, the unintentional sustainability achieved by salvage yard workers opens space for debate on sustainability reached through the profit motive. While quiet practices leading towards sustainability might not lead to large-scale environmental or social changes, reaching sustainability through profitable practices seems to be a much more appealing way for many, with considerably larger pro-environmental consequences. Hence, these practices could provide inspiration for strategies towards a more sustainable society.

The last chapter of Section II., simply called *Mistrust*, opens up a debate on a theme that came to me surprisingly as the last bit at the end of my fieldwork. I gradually realized that the informality experienced at the yard was somehow linked to questions of trust between the salvage yard workers and their customers, among the salvage yards workers themselves, as well as to trust that the informal practices are securely hidden in the formal. When I thought about it more thoroughly, I realized

that I had seen mistrust in the yard rather than trust. However, I do not perceive mistrust as the negation of trust. Quite the opposite; mistrust is a way to prevent potential troubles, that is, a kind of positive attitude; in fact, it is an inseparable part of trust.

## **Methodology**

The dissertation is based on the 22 months of long-term ethnographic research that I conducted from mid-2019 until mid-2021. As I mentioned, I randomly chose an auto salvage yard in Central Bohemia, which later appeared to be the biggest unofficial Hyundai and Kia salvage yard in the Czech Republic.

As a social anthropologist, I consider participant observation (Bernard, 2006, pp. 342–386, DeWalt, 2014, pp. 251–292, Spradley, 1980) a key research method. Therefore, I worked as a salvage yard worker and participated in the everyday disassembly of cars during the research (I dismantled 64 cars during my fieldwork). Thus, I fulfilled the primary condition of participant observation—active and complete participation (Spradley, 1980, pp. 60–62). Having in mind Virtová, Stöckelová and Krásná (2018) and their notion of the ethical dilemmas of covert research, I did not want to practice anything like the undercover research. I introduced my research identity and explained my aims and intentions to all the workers in the yard. On and off, I would share and discuss partial research results and my thoughts with salvage yard workers during the whole research period. The data analysis builds on informal interviews, field jottings and fieldnotes, which complemented the method of participant observation.

Relatively soon, I established a strong rapport with the workers at the yard. It allowed me to see the salvage yard workers' quotidian informal practices. In the early stage of the research, I followed the advice of Ledeneva (2011, p. 729), who recommends the use of so-called rear-mirror methodology—studying open secrets indirectly—while approaching sensitive matters of informality, because engaging with research on informality means to study phenomena that are not immediately visible; nevertheless, a rather slow and non-violent approach allowed me to uncover what Maurice Bloch described as what goes without saying (Bloch, 1998, pp. 22–38). Informality is neither talked about nor kept entirely hidden. Nevertheless, its profundity can only be understood through in-depth qualitative studies (Polese et al. 2017). Later, when my relationship with the salvage yard workers reached a close friendship, I could extend the range of topics discussed. Here is a fieldnote from the day when I realized that something might have changed in this sense:

I'm starting to feel good at the yard. I feel that I already have the knowledge that I need to have for the job. I don't ask how things should be done, I just do it, saving other people's time. I even suggest what to do by myself. I feel good here. They accept me. But maybe it's just the beautiful sunny weather today.'

And also a note important for me as a researcher:

I feel that I already know the environment, that I can already say something about it with a clear conscience.

However, I also realized the other side of ethnographic research, as noted in fieldnotes during my fieldwork, when I returned to the yard after

four weeks of absence caused by a knee surgery that could not be postponed any longer, and subsequent recovery:

Hynek told me that it was boring here without me. He had no one to talk to. He had gotten used to being alone in the workshop for a few years, but then I showed up and completely screwed it up. According to Hynek, *Pan Všemohoucí* and *Pan Vedoucí* are looking for someone, but NO ONE WANTS TO DO THIS JOB. Anyway, Hynek realized it was better to be with someone in the workshop. (EDIT: and I'll disappear again in a few months, for good, this time—we anthropologists simply disrupt these places in a certain way, we become part of the lives of these people and the space, and after all, we indeed leave an indelible trace behind. It's sad somehow).

## II. THE YARD



Figure 4. The yard as the Czech illustrator Dora Čančíková sees it. This illustration was originally made for our “Waste Regime at a Crossroad: Divergent Trajectories of Things, Cars, and Electronics” project ([www.wasteregime.cz](http://www.wasteregime.cz)).

### 1 THE DARK SIDE OF THE CONTAINER<sup>12</sup>

One late August morning in 2019 (this scenario subsequently became routine in my research), a blue garbage truck arrived at the auto salvage yard. One could not miss the inscription on the truck reading “FCC Environment—Service for the Future.” Nothing but the familiar shape of the truck and the fact that we were all rushed to handle the enormous piles

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<sup>12</sup> This chapter is a revised version of a paper that first appeared as Mašek, P. (2020): „Čistě ekologicky“: Autovraky, recyklace a morálka. *Biograf* 71-72: 3–24.

of waste generated during the dismantling of cars indicated that the three men in the vehicle were sanitation workers. As Alexander (2016) points out, the word waste disappears from public space. It is being replaced by various short text slogans, which in all cases contain the prefix “eco-“ or the words “future,” “recycling,” “sorting,” or “the environment,” as in the case of the blue truck.



Figure 5. “FCC Environment: Service for the Future” garbage truck. Source: FCC Environment Company.

This certainly deliberate shift towards the gradual avoidance of the word “waste” means that people are not offended by the daily amount of waste when they look at the garbage truck, as its exterior reassures them about the environmentally responsive treatment of the interior. In most cases, the word “waste” has disappeared from garbage trucks. It seems that waste disappears forever by being moved to a garbage truck—at least in one’s mind or imagination. It was tamed, at least visually, by the message that one does not have to worry. Inside the truck, there is a brash of various types of waste. The vehicle’s exterior proudly announces that its content will be processed “purely ecologically” (“čistě ekologicky”) or that it will become a source of green energy.

As Alexander (2016, p. 35) reminds us: “Classifications do things.” Classification is a deeply moral process that makes visible only a part, while something else is intentionally hidden or disadvantaged (Alexander and Sanchez, 2019, p. 1). One could think of Vilém Flusser’s concept of an apparatus (Finger, Guldin, Bernardo, 2011, p. 101). Flusser uses the word “apparatus” as a metaphor for any system that is viewed and used

as a black box. In other words, it is a mechanism in which we only control inputs and outputs without knowing what is happening inside. Rather than being a physical object, the apparatus characterizes one's relation to it. It is about the inability to see beneath the surface or behind the wall of a container and limiting oneself to merely monitoring of inputs and outputs. It might be easier to trust the black box. Any container (or garbage truck in our case) is an apparatus that becomes an ideal vehicle for any ideology (that is, of another apparatus), where it serves as a medium of hierarchical communication and political order-keeping as, according to Robb (2018, p. 33), "containers play with time, slowing down or speeding up processes."

On the outside, the garbage truck reassures us about environmental responsiveness. Inside, a transformation (Robb, 2018) —which might not necessarily be conjoined with the statement on the visible side—takes place. According to Shryock and Smail (2018, pp. 49–40), "things happen inside containers." These "things" inside are relational because containers connect things inside and relate to things that happen outside.

The mentioned FCC Environment company states that the waste we entrust to it is converted into green energy. After I threw several dashboards, glove boxes, windshields, door handles, headrests, and other mainly plastic car components into the massive mouth of the garbage truck, I strongly doubted my personal contribution to green energy creation. Hynek only laughed and, over a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, said: "So this is the informal<sup>13</sup> waste management, man," and while the loud sound of the former commodities' transformation into a waste commodity that was happening inside the truck (the black box, the

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<sup>13</sup> It surprised me when I heard Hynek saying the word "informal," as one would not expect it to be salvage yard workers' vernacular in the given context.

apparatus, the container; you name it) emanated all around, Hynek added that “none of this shit can be traced to us anymore.”

I was intrigued by the hint of latent fear that implicitly emerged from Hynek’s monologue. The fear of leaving traces was ubiquitous.<sup>14</sup> As I already mentioned, the workers at the yard processed wrecked cars informally and, therefore, could not afford any officials to find traces of such activity there. No wonder the workers at the yard understood the garbage truck as a way to dispose of traces of their informal practices and would restlessly wait for the following Thursday to let the traces disappear inside the garbage truck.<sup>15</sup>

I realized that the garbage truck was a kind of magician’s disappearing-person-box for salvage yard workers, wherein things quietly vanished. However, it was only ostensible vanishing. As Greenland (2018, p. 19) puts it: “What comes out of the box is a different sort of thing than what entered the box.” In other words, the relation between container and content is transformative.

Similarly, the truck is a magician’s disappearing-person-box for the waste management company that operates the vehicle. It is a black box wherein new possibilities are being produced. We could say then that the garbage truck serves as a vehicle to hide things, transform them, and, thus, as a vehicle of creation or creativity. Hawkins (2005) asserts that a garbage truck is not a place of destruction, a place of the end. Quite the contrary, it is a place of beginning, a place of value transformation. As she

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<sup>14</sup> One of the first instructions I received from the salvage yard workers after I joined them at the yard was to destroy the vehicle’s VIN (Vehicle Identification Number) codes (there are usually three of them). A processed naked car’s body without a VIN code is an anonymous piece of metal.

<sup>15</sup> Although the garbage collection should have been done once a week, it was not unusual that we would wait for three—four weeks for the garbage truck to arrive.



aptly points out, “it’s an economy on wheels that reminds us that waste can be commodified” (Hawkins, 2005, p. 93).



Figure 6. Removed VIN code. Source: The author.

Cars consist of various sorts of parts. Some of them are reusable, either in the form of spare parts or as materials suitable for further recycling (mainly scrap metal and e-waste). Nevertheless, some parts do not have any “potential,” as Jáchym would often say. These are mainly plastic

components. From the perspective of the global recycling economy, a recent problem is that there is not only “one plastic” but various types of plastic that either constitute one of the recycling programs’ pillars (plastic bottles for example) or not (MacBride, 2012, p. 175); and cars’ plastic components are not the favored type of plastic for recycling because, as MacBride (2012, p. 174) puts it,

recycling ... requires the separation and sorting of discards into clean, homogeneous streams of inputs to remanufacture. Among other hurdles, heterogeneity within a single product ... drives up the cost and difficulty of the recycling process. Disposal, instead of recycling, is one favored option in the face of such costs.

For this very reason, cars’ plastic components end up as an anonymous brash in landfills, or they are transformed into “green energy” in incineration plants.

“Filling up and emptying out of containers is ... a moral project,” Shryock and Smail (2018, p. 49) say. However, I argue that it would be only half of the garbage trucks’ moral project without the short slogans written on their sides. Any garbage truck would not be the same vehicle as the one enriched by a text; but not just any text. Based on their cultural knowledge, an illiterate person might perceive the garbage truck as dirty. Nevertheless, when one can read and understand the meaning of the text, the garbage truck becomes a vehicle of hope, a sign of a better future. Therefore, I argue that the meaning of a container is significantly created by its exterior, no matter what happens inside it. Thus, something equally transformative happens to both content and garbage trucks—each acquiring a new potential—a new value.

The discrepancy between various “eco-slogans” vis-à-vis my experience on the ground led me to explore “the dark side of the container” more thoroughly, and I realized that slogans ensuring environmental responsiveness might be mere words. “Such divergence between socially responsible communication and practices is commonly known as *greenwashing*.” (Gatti, Seele, and Rademacher, 2019, p. 1).

## **1.1 Purely ecological: playing with time**

On one of my regular morning trips to the auto salvage yard, I passed a flashing orange garbage truck operated by the waste management company Komwag. There was no word such as “waste” on the truck; only two words that said it all: “*Čistě ekologicky*” (“purely ecological”). After some experience with waste management on the ground, I kept repeating these two words like a mantra and tried to understand them—only two words, which, thanks to the human culture, carry an encoded meaning. In the case of the visual aspects of culture—and I consider short textual slogans to be one of those aspects—we are talking about cultural perception, which means, among other things, that culture is visible. It does not mean, however, that methods for researching the visual (Banks, 1995) must be purely visual and that visibility should become the focus of ethnographic research. Rather, I am concerned with an emphasis on specific visual aspects of culture that exist in direct relation to other cultural aspects, including other sensory ways of perception (Pink, 2009, pp. 7–22).

Images are everywhere, as Pink (2013, p. 1) points out, including the space where social scientists conduct their ethnographic research. Slogans are a kind of image, and are, therefore, visual representations.

According to Flusser (1994), images—along with languages and texts—are media. Flusser was convinced that the image’s significance lies on its surface. This means that it can be grasped at first glance, similar to short slogans. We could be satisfied with Komwag’s clear, obvious statement, which assures us that everything is all right, but that would be too simplistic and lacking context. Visual representations are contextual; therefore, we search for the meaning that arises somewhere on the axis between the image creator and its recipient. It means, among other things, that all visual (as well as textual) representations are produced and consumed in a social context (Banks, 1995).

That is why it is necessary to read these two words—*čistě ekologicky*—as a more complex text, which includes an image that “speaks” to us. However, I do not mean only the visible image but also the inseparable part that can be easily hidden from our view. The visual aspects of culture, which are relational and necessarily include non-visual parts, are an instrument of cultural representation with many possibilities and with both intended and unintended consequences. Moreover, if we look at it from the ontological perspective, then everything around us, including these kinds of slogans, cannot be assumed as given but are in a state of continual flux (Woolgar and Lezaun, 2013).

The slogan “purely ecological” sounds truly positive within the public discourse. It bears a certain degree of hope, which resonates with current climate change issues. The question is whether it is not a marketing strategy that parasitically preys on an intersubjective perception of “doing the right thing.” However, “doing the right thing” is not a stable category. Quite the contrary, it is a very fluid concept. The problem occurs when “doing the right thing” becomes a required norm under the threat of sanctions and repression. Or is it not a problem but an effective way to

reach collective environmental responsiveness in the era of the capitalocene (Moore, 2015; Hann, 2017)?

Gille (2007, pp. 32–34) asserts that any political system or ideology plays a game with time, “with systemic consequences for waste generation” (p. 32), and as we might already know, these systems and ideologies use different kinds of containers (black boxes, apparatuses) as vehicles for slowing down or speeding up processes. The system that prevails globally nowadays—capitalism—is characterized by continuously accelerating production (Vostal, 2016, pp. 34–62). However, production is dependent on consumption; this relationship is one of the weaknesses of capitalism, as underconsumption threatens capitalism’s viability. Therefore, one of the ways of keeping capitalism alive is to accelerate consumption via the production of consumer goods with a minimal serviceable lifespan (Strasser, 2000, pp. 386–397). Quantity wins over quality. It is made possible, among other things, by the human ability nowadays to afford to throw things away and buy others instead.

On and off, the salvage yard workers at the yard would complain about the fasteners used in cars made after 2010. It looked like the automotive producers had produced “immortal” cars that did not need any parts replaced or fixing. Even if we used a perfect fastening tool at the yard, loosening some screws, bolts, or nuts was not easy; sometimes it was not even possible to get to them at all. “And imagine that there are car parts no one can fix. Their production is aimed at direct replacement of the whole part. Crazy, ain’t it?” added Hynek. Time speeds up in this case.

As we can see, humans are capable of manipulating time. It can be slowed down or speeded up. In the public discourse, reusing or recycling are considered ways to slow time down. There have been plenty of debates on the importance of reusing and recycling. However practical these debates may be, they sometimes end up with a slogan written on a

“container,” that is meant to produce a positive message—nothing more. Nevertheless, slogans might have the power to link everything around waste and environmental issues with guilt, morality, or hopelessness (Hawkins, 2005, pp. 21–41). And the overused word “recycling” or the prefix “eco-“ are no exceptions.

## 1.2 “Eco-“ and recycling

According to Graeber (2012, p. 278),

[w]e live ... at an extraordinary moment, when rapidly advancing climate change has made it utterly apparent that the global industrial system is already causing global destruction on an unprecedented scale, and existing institutions of global governance have proved absolutely incapable of addressing the situation,

despite the omnipresent positive slogans and commitments that they spread. How is this possible? Graeber (2012) comes up with an explanation in the form of considering of industrial cosmology, which is related to the public perception of the term recycling as to “cycle again.”

Graeber argues that humans perceive production and disposal in the same way as they do birth and death; both are pushed out of sight. The desire to own and accumulate more and more is completely separated from the awareness of places of production, the ways particular products are being produced, as well as from the knowledge of where these products end up after we decide that they are valueless and useless to us (Hawkins, 2005).

Nevertheless, where does the image of circulation come from? Both the beginning and end of life are not crystal clear, and as I already mentioned, humans usually do not see either into production or disposal. It might create a specific form of sanctity but also uncertainty. The image of the circular course of human life is most likely an attempt to create a coherent framework, which serves as a medium of control. Humans might yearn for stability, yet this desire is at odds with constant motion, with inevitable flux. In this context, the easiest way to preserve the existing is the image of the circular movement because human life, according to Graeber (2012), begins and ends in nothingness, like the life of things.

What, after all, is the easiest way to see something moving and changing, yet ultimately remaining exactly the same? Obviously, to say that it is moving in a circle (Graeber, 2012, p. 280).

Thus, even if something moves, it is in a steady state. The image of the circular control helps one to think of a better future.

Scholars across various academic discourses agree that we should approach global environmental and climate change issues interdisciplinarily by integrating both biophysical and social sciences (Moran, 2010, p. 1). Natural sciences should not monopolize environmental issues. However, as Ingold (2000, pp. 13–26) points out, each of the discourses understands the concepts of environment or ecology differently. While those in the biological sciences approach this issue with a certain distance, for social scientists (mainly social anthropologists), the category of ecology, that is, the life of all organisms in a particular environment, is relational (Ingold, 2000, pp. 19–20). At the same time, this category has neutral value compared to public discourse.

All living organisms are active agents in the environment, which means that there is also a relationship between these organisms and the environment. In other words, no organism can exist without the environment and vice versa. Thus, ecology is a relational category, which includes a process of constant flux, because everything is always in the process of changing into something else (Ingold, 2011). However, Ingold (2000, p. 14) aptly points out that humans live in culturally constructed discursive worlds. This fact somehow separates humans from the environment they are part of. As humans, we both are and are not part of the environment around us.

Let us investigate the word “recycling” more thoroughly:

Recycling is the process by which previously used objects and materials are converted into something else, rather than discarded,

explain Alexander and Reno (2012, p. 1). Nevertheless, the word “recycling” was initially employed as a purely technical term in oil refining before it took on its recent meaning as part of a broader ecological awakening (Graeber, 2012, p. 281). The word “recycling” stopped being a technical term and became a moral imperative instead. Moreover,

[r]ecycling has generally been explored as a form of green consumerism—something that consumers engage with because of feelings of civic duty (Wheeler and Glucksman, 2015, p. 2).

Just like the prefix “eco-“ (a sort of abbreviation for everything associated with environmental politics), “recycling” has lost its value neutrality, and refers to the behavior of individual consumers (Glücksberg, 2013, pp. 234–235). This shift occurred in the 1960s when waste was



represented as evidence of the collapse of civic obligation, and disposal was no longer a sign of individual purification but a sign of pollution (Hawkins, 2005, p. 30).

Individual environmental responsiveness has usually been perceived as “morally right,” which, in itself, creates a certain degree of superiority that leads towards possible malfeasance. It seems that everything moral tends to be amoral at the same time. As a result, the moral essence gradually evaporates. Environmental moral superiority might contribute to social inequality represented in amoral forms.

What we are seeing here is a shift of responsibility towards the individual level. Graeber (2012, 2015) suggests that the root of this shift is the habit of treating moral questions as matters of individual conscience resulting from neoliberal ideology’s denial of its responsibility on the governmental and state bureaucratic levels. This ideology insists “on the individual’s responsibility not only for their life and choices in a free-choice-free world, but for the state of global affairs as well” (Bauman and Donskis, 2016, p. 17). And as Graeber (2012, p. 282) aptly points out,

it is much easier to appeal to the personal conscience of consumers than to create the kind of mass social movements it would take to seriously change the modus operandi of powerful capitalist firms.

However, the question arises as to whether we know where the border between individual and mass is, or whether it even exists.

Recycling—this morally highly exalted and valued activity—is, above all, about trading source-segregated materials on the open market

(Alexander, 2016). In other words, various companies recycle primarily for profit. To trade something labeled as waste, the category must be shifted; therefore, waste must become a commodity. As I mentioned in the introduction, waste transport is tightly controlled. Compared to waste, commodities travel in an unobstructed manner. It is a classificatory game.

In this sense, when one sees a vehicle with totaled cars on its trailer going along highways and crossing EU borders, one could look at the cars as containers. That is to say that as commodities, these cars contain highly valued “things” for salvage yard workers. These containers do not need any slogan written on them; they carry it in the category in which they momentarily rest.

Such as when, one cold January morning in 2020, *Pan Všemohoucí* arrived with a Hyundai Santa Fé on the trailer behind his green-colored Toyota Land Cruiser.<sup>16</sup> The driver of the Hyundai had ended up stuck between a truck and another car on a three-line highway with his car. The right side of the vehicle had been torn open like a tin can. *Pan Všemohoucí* started to take pictures of the car on the trailer. I asked him the reason. “No one here is interested in that car or its parts, but I’ll try to sell it further east. It might make decent money,” he explained.

Later that day, when I chatted with *Pan Vedoucí* during lunch break, I was told that there was a chance of higher demand for this particular car’s parts in Poland or Russia. “There are ten million of us. How many Poles are there? Forty-ish million? And Russians? More than enough.” This short story is interesting not only because of *Pan Vedoucí*’s reasonably accurate estimate of these three states’ populations but also because it confirms the

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<sup>16</sup> When the salvage yard workers dismantle totaled cars, they use diesel oil from that cars to “feed” *Pan Všemohoucí*’s Land Cruiser.

old saying that “one person’s trash is another person’s treasure” (Reno, 2009; 2016, pp. 98–135).

A few days later, a man from Bulgaria came for that vehicle. Both his arms were missing from the elbows on down. Despite this handicap, he refused our help and loaded the car onto the trailer of his tow truck alone, using arm prostheses. There were already two other cars loaded—a Toyota and a Volkswagen. The market in totaled cars is interconnected throughout Europe and consistently profitable for all persons involved.

The line separating the waste category from the commodity category is thin, yet very concrete. Commonly, a commodity becomes waste when it enters the world of waste management, that is, the world of clear contractual rules. If there is no use for some material, its recycling is not profitable or is not subsidized, there is no interest in recycling it at all, as the case of plastic car components shows us. Recycling is usually regulated by a contract, a premise of is an income stream. As a result, we can experience situations where “ecological” waste management (including recycling) is sustained even though it produces other sorts of waste or is energy intensive. On the one hand, it is allowed by the threat of legal restrictions and penalties, and by financing mechanisms on the other (Alexander, 2016).

Daily morality becomes an effective tool for manipulating individuals to collect recyclable material and, hence, make access to this material more straightforward for recycling companies that profit from it. One of the ways to achieve recycling companies’ aims is nicely described in Minter’s (2013, pp. 251–252) *Junkyard Planet*; the author argues that

... consumers may focus only on the positive aspects of recycling and see it as a means to assuage negative emotions such as guilt that may be associated with wasting resources and/or as a way to justify increased consumption (Minter, 2013, p. 252).

Therefore, consistent with Minter's argument, we might say that individual consumers or households become essential targets for policy interventions (Wheeler and Glucksmann, 2015, p. 1). In this context, we might talk about the moral recycling economy—humans participate in recycling because they believe in some abstract sense of social and environmental good. “They experience recycling ... as autonomous gestures, as expressions of their ‘environmentally concerned’ identity” (Hawkins, 2006, p. 32). As Sosna, Brunclíková, and Galeta (2019) assert in the case of food waste, people usually follow the moral conviction that wasting is bad. This moral attitude, however, is not based only on a social and economic calculus or social pressure but rather arises from a particular household custom. Non-wasting as morally superior manners is based on a quotidian experience with value creation.

Humans collect their own waste, which later becomes a private company's or state waste management service' commodity. To better understand the moral shift of the environmental issues to the individual level, looking at units that form a society—households—is more than helpful.

### 1.3 Autarkia

In the world recently, globally, the eco-nomic seems to be superior to the eco-logic. Nevertheless, these two words have the same basis and originally were Siamese twins violently separated into two independent entities. I do not hesitate to claim that these two words represent a Lévi-Straussian binary opposition nowadays; there is growth-oriented maximization of profit, on the one hand, and mainly sustainability, on the other. Humans have learned to live in a world where the eco-nomic is considered to be rather non-eco-logic, that is, environmentally unfriendly.

However, the prefix “eco-“ originates in the Greek word *oikos*, meaning a house occupied by a family that was understood ideally to be a self-sufficient unit—*autarkia* (Hann and Hart, 2011, p. 20)—the essence of *oikonomia*. The word *oikonomia* literally means household management, where both the *eco-nomic* and the *eco-logic* parts were understood as equally important. For Aristotle, *oikos* were the critical core of society.

The moral imperative of ancient Greece was that a free man should not be dependent on anyone else. “A man’s holdings should, ideally, provide him with everything he needs,” points out Graeber (2012, p. 283). Profit was not the primary motive back then; “it only came into the picture after those needs were completely provided” (Graeber, 2012, p. 283). In any case, there was no need for profit as we know it nowadays.

Furthermore, Aristotle considered the pursuit of profit to be an antisocial activity (Hann and Hart, 2011, p. 20). Nevertheless, according to Graber (2012, p. 284), the concept of *oikos* contained “both a notion of self-contained, self-sustaining equilibrium with nature, and of maximizing production and hence profits, at the same time.” Therefore, we could say

that sustainability and maximization—which are usually considered contradictions—are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

One can find the concept of household within anthropological texts quite often. A universal form of a household does not exist. The household's universality derives from its existence within human societies worldwide. Socio-cultural anthropologists usually agree that a household is not a mere economic unit but mainly a fundamental social unit wherein production, (re)distribution, and consumption take place next to reproduction (Roberts, 1991, p. 62). The heritage of 1950s' British social anthropologists'—such as Goody, Fortes and Evans-Pritchard—understands household primarily as a non-isolated unit.

Fortes (1969, p. 2) considered the household a workshop of social reproduction in all human societies that secures the society's continuity. In this sense, a household is a system of social relations through which its members are integrated with the environment and with the structure of the society (Fortes, 1969, p. 9). Therefore, we can follow not only the economic and ecological part representing households but also its social and politico-jural domain.

According to this logic, the approach of researchers dealing with climate change and environmental issues does not seem strange; that is, they consider the household a pivotal factor in better understanding current environmental changes (Moran, 2010, p. 33). The argument that the societal change in relation to the environment can be achieved by aiming at households, sounds logical. On the other hand, it is odd that households are, in this context, understood as the universal bearer of agency that moves the world. Not only is this idea questionable in theory, it also ignores various household conceptualizations in different societies.

A vital change appeared along with the Industrial Revolution, “once the household came to be imagined not as a unit of production at all, but rather of consumption” (Graeber, 2012, p. 284). This change is closely connected to the human perception of material things or objects in the era of the consumer economy; humans tend to perceive things as disposable. As soon as things show signs of depreciation, they end up dumped or incinerated. This kind of human relation towards things is most likely caused by the type of production that allows the manufacture of things that are either irreparable or not worth repairing. According to Strasser (2000), this rather strange relationship of humans towards things will not change as long as the maximization of turnover of goods and resulting profit is understood as the goal of production.

There can hardly be any surprise that the automotive industry has adjusted to this situation. According to mechanics, it is not easy to repair today’s automobiles. On the one hand, mechanics often do not know how to fix new vehicles because car manufacturers constantly change something in them; on the other, it is not possible to change one single part of new vehicles without being forced to change related parts. Hynek was convinced that the profit of car manufacturers is not gained only from the purchase of new cars but largely also from the purchase of original spare parts. That is why car producers consider cars as mainly consumer goods.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, in recent years, we can observe that “the household or the consumer becomes an important target for policy interventions” (Wheeler and Glucksmann, 2015, p. 1), especially in waste management:

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<sup>17</sup> A mere change in the type of products, the replacement of cars with internal combustion engine with e-cars, for example, will most likely not solve anything. Although electric vehicles might seem to be green, profit will remain the main goal of their production, and furthermore, with a non-negligible by-product—waste.

“requirements have been placed on consumers to sort their recyclable waste into different fractions and, in some cases, transport this waste to communal sites” (Wheeler and Glucksmann, 2015, p. 1). What we can see here is household waste management and waste sorting on the consumption level, which is a phenomenon that Wheeler and Glucksmann (2015, pp. 1–2) describe as “consumption work,” a concept that challenges the image of production being separated from consumption.

In this sense, it seems that households can be considered an essential partner of the global economic colossus not only through the lens of consumption but through that of production as well. Households’ contribution, by sorting recyclable waste from non-recyclable waste, produces a material that can be industrially processed.

The active participation of households through the performance of routine and regular consumption work links to a new global market economy of materials reuse, which is only likely to expand in a future of scarce natural resources (Wheeler and Glucksmann, 2015, p. 1).

What we can see here is yet another dimension. By denying its own responsibility on both governmental and bureaucratic levels, the current global politico-economic system creates ideal conditions for emotional pressure to be put upon individuals regarding individual responsiveness. Humans then tend to think that their responsible approach to waste and recycling helps solve environmental issues. Nevertheless, these issues have only been moved elsewhere but not solved.



## 1.4 Summing up

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 2023, quite some time after my fieldwork, I went for a short walk through Stromovka Park in Prague with my current non-academic colleagues after lunch—something we do regularly. We usually use this moment to talk about something other than our work, which—in my view—somehow strengthens bonds between us and is later reflected in our work.

However, when we left the park behind and entered the streets of Letná neighborhood, I noticed an orange garbage truck cruising with ease among the cars parked on the narrow street. My thoughts immediately shifted to a few years back, and I saw myself next to Hynek, throwing plastic car components into the garbage truck together in the yard.

This time, however, it was not the blue FCC Environment truck but a Prague Services (*Pražské služby*) truck, with their slogan “*nepřEKOnatelný servis*” (literally “unsurpassable service”). The stressed prefix *EKO* (eco) appeared to be some kind of contrived attempt to obtain city contracts, being merely a tool to reach that aim successfully. Nothing more.

In this chapter, I aimed to show the despair related to individual responsibility for household waste production. Through the concept of the apparatus as a metaphor for anything that is viewed and used as a black box—or better, the magician’s disappearing-person-box—I focused on garbage trucks, which can be viewed as containers that destroy traces of various activities. However, this is so not only on the micro level, that is, destroying traces of salvage yard workers’ informal practices, but also—and primarily—on the macro level of global society, because the world we live in is full of containers with their dark sides.

I offered a view of the outside from the inside. While the outside is decorated with “green” lettering and/or symbols from which the word “waste” has disappeared for good, the dark inner side rots in transformation. It might be a long-term process, but eventually the state of the inside will be made visible through the outer part that serves to cover it up.

I presented the ancient idea of *oikonomia* as something that can be truly relevant in our times as well. I wrote the text of this chapter at the beginning of my fieldwork—at the turn of 2019 and 2020. Although I gradually found other topics in the field, the idea of the balance between the economic and ecological stayed with me. Eventually, it resulted in the text that can be found in this section’s third chapter, where I aim to reveal that economic and ecological (or environmental if you wish) are not necessarily mutually exclusive entities but that the latter can also be achieved through the profit motive.

However, prior to that, in the next chapter, I introduce readers to the topic that came to me during long dark winter mornings at the yard: the analogy of the human body with the car body, and the relationship between humans, non-humans, and cars.

## 2 WRECKED CARS, LEAKED HUMANS, AND THE DEATH OF THE PERSON-CAR<sup>18</sup>



Figure 7. Car bodies waiting for their time to be reused. Source: The author

Late on a sunny morning in September 2019, just before lunch break, *Pan Vedoucí* left the yard. Hynek and I decided to use this rare moment without anyone checking up on us to chill, chat, and stroll the yard. We spent a significant part of the time throwing stones at an old car window. While still chatting, we stopped at a car that seemed untouched by us, the salvage yard workers, yet had been placed among the metal

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<sup>18</sup> This chapter is a revised version of a paper that appeared as Mašek, P. (2023): “It’s Only Us, Hyenas, Who Profit Out of It”: Wrecked Cars, Leaked Humans, and the Death of the Person-car. *Journal of Material Culture* 28(1): 24–39 (online first in 2021, DOI: 10.1177/13591835211055709).

bodies of dismantled cars, ready to be taken to a scrapyard. The car was heavily damaged as the result of a car accident. Nothing unusual, all the cars that we broke up at the yard were damaged; they were objects that were no longer “auto-mobile.” However, this particular Kia was full of food, portable refrigerators, and beach accessories, which suggested a family going to spend their vacation on the Croatian coast.<sup>19</sup> I asked Hynek about the car, and he replied that no one wanted to break it up because it was pretty messy and stinky inside—the car was dirty. The only thing that had been taken from the car by the yard workers was the most valuable part, the engine – the “heart” (*srdce*) of the car.

I realized later that humans had died in the car.<sup>20</sup> It was not only sausages or schnitzels and their pungent odor that discouraged salvage yard workers from processing the Kia—although odors do have the power to contaminate, and therefore, might be vehicles of contagion (Miller, 1997, pp. 66–79). It was primarily because someone had died inside it; traces of

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<sup>19</sup> As the Czech Republic is landlocked and has no coastline, the majority of Czechs spend their vacation on the Croatian coast, probably the most popular holiday destination.

<sup>20</sup> Protecting the rights of the researcher’s interlocutors is (or should be) a main ethical concern. Nevertheless, when bearing this in one’s mind, we think primarily of living human beings. I happened to experience seriously injured and deceased people during my research, although only as traces of their presence in the wrecked cars—mainly in the form of their blood. Therefore, I cannot fail to mention ethical concerns in this context. Many researchers experience ethical dilemmas (Guillemin and Gillam 2004) regarding researching the dead. In this sense, I find Caswell and Turner (2021) helpful; their research builds on telling stories of individual people’s lives and deaths and is, therefore, similar to mine, as neither of us has ever spoken with the deceased people that are part of our research. Nevertheless, there is one significant difference: while Caswell and Turner conducted research on solitary dying and focused on and knew the identity of the “participants,” the deceased that I experienced in my research stayed anonymous to me. I was not in a position to check the cars’ documents and the names stated there. It was not crucial for the research, and moreover, morally, I did not feel like investigating someone’s identity in such a way. I was aware of possible harm to the deceased and did everything I could to avoid it, relying on my own judgment (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). However, this chapter could not exist without the injured or deceased “participants;” it is about a social being called the person-car, and wrecked cars are just half of the story.

death inside the car repelled salvage yard workers from breaking it up. The image of the family going on a holiday stayed with me for a long time. One could recall J.G. Ballard's novel *Crash* (1973, pp. 103–104) and the character Vaughan's list of almost all the conceivable violent confrontations between an automobile and its occupants.

I gradually realized that, in some cases, humans and cars share a similar fate; their organs and parts, respectively, might be used and assembled in different contexts. In this respect, on the one hand, I build upon literature on assemblages (Dant, 2004; DeLanda, 2016; Deleuze and Guatri, 1987), and on the other hand, upon literature on the medical environment and the issue of organ donation (Giraldo Herrera and Palsson, 2019; Katz, 1981; Mol, 2002; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1994; Scheper-Hughes, 2002a; Scheper-Hughes, 2002b; Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant, 2002; Sharp, 2000; Sharp, 2001; Sharp, 2014). These theoretical inspirations and my long-term fieldwork at an auto salvage yard, where I worked to break up totaled cars in which people sometimes had died, bring me to the argument of this chapter: car bodies and human bodies might be perceived as analogous.

Humans and cars are assemblages—assemblages of organs (Strathern, 1992, p. 183) and auto parts, respectively—and are, therefore, divisible individuals comprising a complex of separable dimensions or aspects. This claim is supported by DeLanda (2016, pp. 19–21) following Deleuze and Guattari (1987): “each of them [assemblages] is ... an individual entity” but at the same time “always composed of heterogeneous components,” and as such “emerge from the interactions between their parts.” Thus, we can think about and conceptualize these two bodies similarly. However, humans and cars are not only assemblages in and of themselves; they create an assemblage together; according to Deleuze and Parnet (2007, p. 143), an assemblage is also a collective.

In this sense, I build on Dant's (2004) concept of the "driver-car" as an assembled social being that takes on properties of both the driver and the car. The driver-car is an assemblage that can be endlessly re-assembled, a form of social being that produces a range of social actions associated with the car. According to Dant (2004, pp. 61–62), this assemblage comes apart when the driver leaves the car, and neither the human driver nor the vehicle, acting apart, can bring about the types of action that the driver-car can.

However, when Hynek and I looked at the Kia, we could see the names of the two children who used to sit in the rear seats. It reminded me of Strathern (2005, pp. 66–67), who describes a vessel that is treated as a single person regardless of the number of persons inside, where the plurality of the (invisible) persons coalesces into a single (visible) person. I realized that the assembled relationship between humans and cars is not always a binary relation between the driver and the car. The way of driving, and therefore the way the driver-car behaves, might depend significantly on the presence of other human or non-human beings inside the car at the same time. A driver-parent will most likely drive the car differently with their children present than without them, for example.

I intend to account for a wider range of parts that go beyond the binary nature of the driver-car. Therefore, I propose the concept of the "person-car" to better reflect the multiplicity of parts, both human and non-human, that constitute the whole assemblage. We might consider, following Strathern (1988, pp. 14–15), the person and the car as a "dividual" that exists as one social being, characterized by a specific range of social actions. Nevertheless, the "dividual person-car" being constitutes a dynamic relationship in which one might find frictions and disruptions that emerge from both the relationship itself and relations to

other humans and non-humans, as well as from its existence within a particular material context. The names of the two children on the Kia are visible traces of social life lived in and through the car (Miller 2001a), and a dynamic principle of the person-car.

In this respect, building on Warnier's (2001) praxeological approach to material culture is of great help. The concept of the person-car as an assembled social being formed by a person and an object is similar to the example of the Kabyle man who can run down a slope without losing his slippers because they are incorporated into his motor habits: "He is a man-with-slippers," says Warnier (2001, p. 7). In our case, the "subject-acting-with-its-incorporated-objects" (Warnier 2006, p. 187) is the person-car. There is one significant difference, in either case, which I have already mentioned: humans and cars are divisible individuals whose bodies can be perceived as analogous.

Nevertheless, as noted, analogy is not the only relation between cars and humans. Despite their primary function, cars are not used merely for the transport of things, humans, and/or non-humans; they are also part of the intimate and personal life of humans. Some authors (Sheller, 2004: p. 232; Young, 2001) even say that the car not only supports human kinship practices, but it also has become kin, a genuine member of human society in which the life and death of cars are connected to the life and death of their owners (Young, 2001, pp. 48–52).

Thus, we can talk about the "humanized car" and the "automobilized person." And as Miller (2001b, 24) suggests, "it is this highly visceral relationship between bodies of people and bodies of cars that forces us to acknowledge the humanity of the car in the first place." In any case, in social sciences and humanities, scholars no longer think about cars as things—simple objects of production and consumption (Urry, 2000, pp. 57–

64). They rather talk about their “personalities” (Cole, 2013, pp. 23–26; Edensor, 2004, p. 105), similar to the way Wantoat people in Papua New Guinea think of a decorated *kula* canoe as a ceremonially arrayed person (Strathern, 2005, p. 66).

I attempt to achieve a picture of what follows after the violent death of the person-car as a social being. Therefore, I move through a section discussing the driving body, followed by a section about divisible and alienable parts of bodies, toward a section about places where humans and cars may end up after the person-car’s demise: places of second chances (hospitals and auto salvage yards). There, the divisible individuals can be “dismantled,” and their parts and organs can be assembled in different contexts. The last section focuses on dirt and disgust that appear during this “operation” at the auto salvage yard.

## **2.1 Whose body is the driving body?**

First, I will explain the position from which this chapter focuses on bodies. In 2001, based on Mauss, Schilder, and Merleau-Ponty, Warnier challenges the notion of the static body as understood by anthropologists during the last twenty years of the twentieth century and reconceptualizes ideas of body dynamics. Whether it be Mauss’s “techniques of the body,” Schilder’s “*Körperschema*,” or Merleau-Ponty’s “embodiment,” none of these concepts considers the body static; the body moves and exists by virtue of certain motor habits. Ingold (2012) sees the body as a dynamic center of unfolding activity. Similarly, Schilder does not talk about the body as the anatomo-physiological sum total of all the human organs; instead, he thinks within the bodily synthesis, where the boundaries of the human body are flexible; “they can be extended to include lots of objects, the



dynamics of which are successively incorporated in the synthesis” (Warnier 2001, p. 7).

Warnier, therefore, suggests bringing together studies on the body, material culture, agency, motricity, power systems, unconscious drives, and the subject to better understand that human bodies exist within and are part of a given materiality. “We cannot talk of a body when it is not immersed in language and material culture,” argues Warnier (2009, p. 465), suggesting that material culture is partly included in the subject and, thus, is “an essential component of the subject in the human species, just as language is” (Warnier 2009, p. 465). Warnier’s suggestion is similar to Ingold’s (2012) concept of the ecology of materials, that is, considering the material world to be a fundamental condition for (not exclusively human) life, and Mol’s (2002, p. 20) notion of the body inevitably existing in relations. As Mol points out, when we talk of bodies, these are not isolated (2002, p. 44).

Urry (2004, p. 31) argues that the car becomes an extension not only of the driver’s body but of their senses as well. There are some similarities with the barkcloth and bamboo extensions worn by Wantoat dancers when Strathern (2005, pp. 63–65) describes the image of a dancer almost being a tree, and as Douglas (1984, 126) points out, “when a man uses an object it becomes part of him, participates in him.” Keane (2003, p. 418) describes the same in different words when he asserts that the qualities of things enter into certain qualities of subjects, and in this embodied state, mediate future possibilities. Thus, I argue that the car is the driver’s “second body,” because driving a car, following Merleau-Ponty, is a form of embodied skill, where the driver “feels” the car while eventually mastering this skill (Dant, 2004; Sheller, 2004).

It is this same principle that Warnier, following Schilder, describes when pointing to the importance of the sensorimotor apparatus and its adaptability and flexibility in his discussion of the human body and its existence within the material world. “The blind person’s cane is integrated in his sensori-motor [*sic*] apparatus to such an extent that the blind person’s perception is not projected from his/her hand, but from the tip of the cane” (Warnier 2001, p. 7). In other words, material objects are incorporated (and can be disincorporated) into bodies to “such an extent that the subject identifies with his embodied objects” (Warnier 2009, p. 467). In this sense, the driver not only feels the car (their second body) but also through it the “terrain” (Kruglova, 2019), as driving occurs within a given materiality.

Car driving is a bodily activity, and the human body does remember every movement it has performed. It is a question of psychomotricity engaging with sociomotricity, that is, driving as a bodily mastered skill within the context of road traffic rules where non-verbal sensorimotor communication becomes essential (Warnier, 2001). Car driving is based on the acquisition of motor algorithms, which “are the kind of motor habits we use in given materialities when there is some amount of uncertainty or unpredictability in the situation” (Warnier, 2001, p. 9), thus challenging the motor stereotypes supported by the car’s autonomous safety technology or driver-assistance system.

Even though we can consider cars to be humans’ second bodies, there is a significant transformation in the automotive industry concerning cars and driving cars as an embodied skill in particular. Automobile technology progressively changes the vehicles used by humans in such a way that the driver feels these automobiles to be “bodiless.” Nevertheless, no matter how far technology goes, no matter how perfect and autonomous cars might become in the future, the reality of which they are

a part and in which they perform will always be “bodily felt.” Human bodies are palpably, undeniably real material objects (Scheper-Hughes, 2002b), and so are cars.

When Jáchym was coming back after lunch break, just at the beginning of the winter, driving his car (because he never uses another means of transport), a doe ran into his second body. The social being formed by Jáchym and his car felt the material of the animal’s body, and the poor doe felt the material of Jáchym’s second body.

So far, there is no other way in which humans and animals can experience reality and the world around them. As Sartre (1984, p. 770) argues, the qualities of things are revealed in the “there is” of being: the qualities of a being, including material stuff, cannot be separated from other beings or from the thing itself. I see both the human body and the body of an animal as a transient, volatile medium for experiencing the surrounding world. We can drive cars that make us feel disassociated from the surrounding environment, bodiless cars, in other words; yet there are still moments when the environment becomes tangible; “landscapes are not just ‘views’ but intimate encounters,” as Bender (2020, 136) aptly writes.

Driving is an activity where the expected often meets the unexpected. Even the most perfect German road can become a place where a brand new bodiless Mercedes-Benz feels reality at its most visceral in the brutal physicality of the crash. While driving on smooth roads in a cushy car, one can almost forget about the physicality and the danger of driving (Kruglova, 2019, p. 5). This shows us that the feeling of a car as the driver’s second body significantly depends on modernity and the constant improvement of road infrastructure. What we might observe here is the gradual estrangement between the driver and the car. It seems like

the “driver” instead becomes a “passenger” whose second body changes into a “moving shell,” rather than being a receptive part of their social identity. As an unintended consequence of the bodiless feeling of driving, drivers have become numb to the fear of death.

Moreover, the estrangement between humans and cars underlines the recent technology used to gather sensitive data about drivers (Quain, 2017). Today’s “vehicles of tomorrow” constantly exchange information with one another and with the transportation infrastructure, which significantly violates privacy within the car. These cars can not only collect data on their drivers and their driving behavior but also store that data for a long time (Rannenbergh, 2016). The individual that previously comprised at least two more or less equal individuals living in symbiosis has been transformed into the driver and their personal policeman. In this case, the social being no longer acts on its purpose or will; it loses freedom and autonomy—at least so imagined—without reporting its intention to anyone. The car acts for the “good of society.” The synthesis of person and car acts in a different relationship. Whose second body is the car then?

I argue that, despite car driving being a bodily activity, drivers will lose the “sensory” function of their second bodies as today’s cars become somewhat bodiless. It is comparable to paralysis combined with sensory loss. Another function has supplanted the sensory bodily function of the car: exchange of information. Technology enables not only the sharing of data between cars, their environment, and the transport infrastructure, but also data collection, supposedly for purposes of road safety. Driving as an embodied skill will most likely lose its importance, as the majority of road emergencies can be handled with the support of automatic driver-assistance technologies such as a forward collision warning (FCW) system.

## **2.2 2-in-1: the (un)bounded body and its divisible and alienable parts**

The human body not only serves as a metaphor to describe society and its particular social outcomes (Douglas 1984, pp. 115–129); it is a frequent target for metaphorical thinking as well.

The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries ... The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures (Douglas 1984, p. 116).

Widespread use of corporeal metaphors, that is, tropes that are ways of establishing relations between humans and things, thereby influencing humans' grip on reality (Giraldo Herrera and Palsson, 2019), probably results from the fact that the human body is first and foremost a medium of experiencing the surrounding world for every single human. The body is the existential seat of personhood; "I" is experienced through the body (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1994, p. 240). The human body is always present. Metaphors are the cognitive tools through which humans understand themselves and the world around them (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, pp. 3–6), and as humans are physical beings bounded and set off from the rest of the world—at least in their imaginations, as Warnier would probably disagree otherwise—they experience it as outside themselves (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 29).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980, pp. 29–30) point out that humans project their in-out orientation onto other physical objects or substances and view

them as containers with an inside and an outside. Similarly, we can perceive human bodies as containers (Warnier, 2006; Warnier, 2009). The human body, as well as the body of the car, consists of something that we could call the outer body and the inner body. While the former has visible characteristics, the latter is usually out of sight, but can be made visible by its performance, especially, as Featherstone (2004, p. 20) puts it, when things go wrong, or start to misbehave (Carroll et al., 2017).

In this context, one of the things that cars and humans often share is last-minute care. Although (so far) no car is able to decide for itself to go to a garage, humans can both visit their doctors and take their cars to the garage regularly. However, they often do so only after realizing that something has gone wrong, and the inner body has become visible through the outer body or its performance. Ultimately, both cars and humans can end up in need of parts replacement or the transplantation of organs. The human body and the car can work together as one social being, yet they still exist as two separate bodies, each with a specific range of needs.

We can observe how things—cars, in particular—are treated as humans, while the humanity of a human being is frequently lost in a euphemism, mostly when someone is suffering and dying.<sup>21</sup> In the medical context, humans are transformed into generic bodies (Sharp, 2001), and we can witness the dehumanization of the human body in the context of organ donation on the black market (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1994, p. 241). As Scheper-Hughes (2002a, p. 1) puts it, in the larger society and in the global economy, the body is generally viewed and treated as an object, a

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<sup>21</sup> Social scientists are in agreement in describing this practice as a denial of death as a natural outcome of life. See, for example, Becker (1975), Robben (2004), Ariès (1974), Bloch and Parry (1982).

commodity that can be bartered, sold, or stolen in divisible and alienable parts. Similarly, Škara (2004, p. 188) writes, “humans are de-integrated, dissolved or broken down into distinct parts like machines.”

Deleuze and Guattari (1987, pp. 159–160) assert, in a play on words, that the human body is an organism, and is thus organized. However, the organized organism can be dismantled, and thus become disorganized. In other words, within a body, the relationships between components, such as organs, are not stable or fixed, as they can be displaced and replaced, just like the parts of cars. There is an exciting problem, nevertheless. “If body parts are freely replaceable,” says Ohnuki-Tierney (1994, p. 240), “then ‘I’ or ‘me,’ which is existentially represented in every culture by the body, loses its identity and permanence.” It might mean that “I” is no longer a unique person.<sup>22</sup>

The last two sections of this chapter lead us to a closer examination of the auto salvage yard, as the entities constituting the person-car can end up in such places of second chances after the death of the individual, resulting in a split into divisible individuals. These places contain a workspace that could be called the operating theater.

### **2.3 Operating theater**

When a large truck hit the Kia while it was stuck in a traffic jam on a highway, it pushed the poor car into a vehicle in front of it—a common pile-up that happens every day all around the world. Moments after the

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<sup>22</sup> As one of the reviewers of the original article noted, there are also parts of the human body that are constantly being replaced (nails, hair, skin, blood cells or cells constituting the body) without threatening “I” as a unique person.

accident, the life of the person-car turned into its death. In other words, the assembled social being became violently disassembled for an unspecified period. However, that does not necessarily mean it could not be assembled again, albeit in another circumstance, space, and time, as assemblages can be separated and endlessly reformed (Featherstone, 2004). The driver (along with the other humans or non-humans inside the car) and the Kia took different paths. The victims of the accident were dispatched to the hospital, and the car eventually to an auto salvage yard. In both cases, the respective halves of the social being ended up in places of second chances.

Hospitals and auto salvage yards, as places of second chances (Soderman and Carter, 2008), have the same goal: rescuing and salvaging, respectively. While within the auto salvage yard cars are mostly broken into parts that fully develop their property of being a commodity (Appadurai, 1988, pp. 13–16; Kopytoff, 1988), hospitals do their best to rescue humans and keep them in one piece. In some cases, such as serious car accidents, humans die in the car or later in the hospital, and their organs can be commodified (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1994, p. 241; Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant, 2002; Sharp, 2000) the same way as the parts of the car they were driving.

In hospitals, one can find the operating theater. The term “operating theater” evokes an image of a place where a particular kind of human action is being performed. Primarily, it is a kind of performance that needs an auditorium where the audience watches someone who has mastered particular skills, whether a physician, artist, or mechanic. It is the kind of performance that can be perceived as a medium for the transference of knowledge. After the person-car’s demise, where the whole social being has died, cars and humans can be disassembled. It requires some



procedural work before vehicle parts or human organs and tissues can be assembled in a different context.

In the Czech Republic, according to Law no. 285/2002, “On donation, collection and transplantation of tissues and organs,”<sup>23</sup> anyone is a potential organ and tissue donor after their death, as there is a default presumption of consent. The exceptions are people who during their lifetime have expressed explicit written disagreement with donation. These persons need to be registered in a national register of persons opposed to the post-mortem withdrawal of tissues and organs (NROD), established by the Ministry of Health, and administered by the Institute of Health Information and Statistics of the Czech Republic. Irreversible stasis or irreversible loss of function of the entire brain—brain death, in other words—must be confirmed to become a donor after such a death. Confirmation of death has to be carried out by at least two physicians with the appropriate specialized qualification.

Although brain death is framed as if it were highly scientific and thus culture-free, the notion of brain death is culturally constructed, argues Ohnuki-Tierney (1994, p. 234), who is convinced that “there is no question that the need for donated organs has played a major role in the construction of brain death” (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1994, p. 234). The brain-dead individual is dead as a person; they are not an independent individual making rational decisions anymore (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1994, p. 237). Nevertheless, brain death is a different sort of death; it is not a gradual process of cessation of heartbeat and decreasing body temperature. In the case of brain death, a medical professional makes death happen. It seems that for most of the bereaved, this sort of death is not culturally acceptable

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<sup>23</sup> This law is available (in Czech) at: <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2002-285> (accessed August 20, 2023).

(Ohnuki-Tierney, 1994) and difficult to acknowledge as social death (as understood within death studies) (Králová, 2015), which is a precept of culturally defined biological death in every society (Metcalf and Huntington, 1979). In many societies, to acknowledge social death, the survivors need to see the body of the deceased (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1994); in other words, the body is essential not only to the life but also to the death of a person.

The issue of organ donation is a sensitive matter across a variety of societies. Transplantation is very much a moral domain (Sharp, 2014, p. 25), and transplants have a highly disruptive potential for both donors—as it may disrupt the integrity of a person and/or the society, or the interdependence of the deceased and the survivors—and recipients. Therefore, as a common practice in the Czech Republic, physicians have decided to ask permission from the deceased person’s relatives and respect their will, even though the law on donation does not require the consent of family members.

The treatment of wrecked cars (“end-of-life vehicles”) is much simpler than the issue of organ donation. It is laid down by Directive 2000/53/EC of the European Parliament.<sup>24</sup> According to this directive, the disposal of cars in the Czech Republic must be done ecologically. There is a plethora of auto salvage yards in the Czech Republic. As already mentioned, according to the Czech Environmental Inspectorate (CEI), about 600 auto salvage yards have been active in the past decade. Those are the legal ones. In practice, we can observe innumerable small operations that handle wrecked cars informally—places like the one where I conducted my fieldwork, worked as a salvage yard worker, and

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<sup>24</sup> A PDF of this directive is available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:02000L0053-20130611&qid=1405610569066&from=EN> (accessed August 20, 2023).

participated in the everyday disassembly of cars. As the number of formal auto salvage yards and places handling wrecked cars informally is comprehensive and based on intimate friendship and solidarity, obtaining formal documents that confirm ecological disposal is not a problem at all, even for the informal places.

One of the ways to hide the informal handling of wrecked cars—dismantling and storing them in places not intended for the purpose—is to run the business alongside a legal repair and service garage. Such places recall the operating theater. Not only do auto salvage yard workers (*vrakaři*) and mechanics (*mechoši*) use various human body parts analogously to name auto parts,<sup>25</sup> just as the human body is often used as a metaphor for the non-human world (Škara, 2004); the breaking room itself looks like an operating theater. The performance of repairing or breaking a car is reminiscent of surgery or autopsy, respectively. Surgery, as the most important healing technique in biomedicine (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1994, p. 236), consists of three distinct stages (Katz, 1981)—the opening, the repair, and the closure—similarly to car repair. Breaking a car involves only the opening and an excision. Dismantled cars are never again put into their original state. Although an organ can be implanted or excised during

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<sup>25</sup> As already noted, the engine (*motor*) is called the “heart” (*srdce* or *srdíčko*). Similarly the engine control unit (*řídící jednotka motoru*) is called the “brain” (*mozek*), headlamps (notice the word *head* in English) (*přední světlomety*) are called “eyes” (*oči*), the cylinder head (*hlava válců*) is called just “head” (*hlava*), control and trailing arms (notice the word *arms*) (*přední a zadní příčná ramena*) are called “shoulders” (*ramena*), the chassis and the car’s body (*podvozek* and *karoserie*) are called the “skeleton” (*kostra*), and the grounding cable (*zemní kabel*) is called the “skeleton” (*kostra*) as well, because of its direct attachment to the metal parts of the car. The half shaft joint (*kloub poloosy*) is called just “joint” (*kloub*), and the rear part of the car is called the “butt” ( *zadek* or *prdelka*). When a pipe, tube or hose (which might be likened to veins or arteries inside human bodies—similar to the analogy of the spinal cord and nerves to the electrical wiring of cars) leaks, mechanics say that the car is “pissing” (*chčije*). Similarly when there is not enough fuel, the car is “hungry” (*má hlad*), and when the fuel consumption is high, the car “guzzles” (*žere*). When the car’s mileage is higher than 200,000 km, mechanics literally say that “it is death” (*to je smrt*), thereby expressing their lack of interest in such a car.

the second stage, there is always the third stage to a surgery or an autopsy.

The garage has a spatial arrangement similar to that of an operating theater, and we can find here all sorts of instruments and tools, enabling the smooth running of the operation. We can observe similar rituals in connection with dirt as well, as the environment in which salvage yard workers work is continually being contaminated by dirt and needs to be cleaned.

## **2.4 Leaked humans**

Salvage yard workers work with material objects that have gathered dirt elsewhere, mainly from the roads they have been used on, but also from places the cars ended up after the crash, such as fields, woods, or even in water. Within the activity of work, the salvage yard workers clean their workspace, their tools and equipment, themselves, and some parts of the car, to remove dirt. Before the worker starts to dismantle a car, the room must be clean, as he usually starts with the car's interior. Similarly, the instruments or tools are prepared, cleaned, take out of the toolbox, and placed on a little workbench with wheels that can be easily moved around the car. Salvage yard workers usually wear protective clothing as their work attire, which serves not only to protect them from contamination by dirt but also to protect the car parts that need to stay clean, such as the light-colored headlining.

While places where cars are being repaired deal with a different type of dirt than medical operating theaters, and mechanics usually do not find any of the materials they deal with offensive or disgusting (Dant and

Bowles, 2003), the management of auto salvage yards is similar to the management of extreme dirt in hospitals (Mol, 2002, pp. 88–89). It is not only end-of-life vehicles that end up at salvage yards, but often, and in a significant number of cases, totaled cars (*totálky*).<sup>26</sup> Every car I broke at the yard was totaled during a car accident. It also means that in some cases people had died in the vehicles. I remember my surprise when I saw a splash of blood on a headlining for the first time. It took me some time to realize and believe what I was seeing. Jáchym and Hynek came to glance at it and only said: “We are happy that we don’t have to break this one. We definitely don’t envy you.”<sup>27</sup>

Dealing with dirt is part of a salvage yard worker’s everyday work. Unlike in a clean automotive factory in which new components are being assembled, workers in auto salvage yards always get dirty during their performances, as surgeons do during surgery. Thus, salvage yards are ideal places for seeing the hierarchy of the “moral order of dirt” (Dant and Bowles, 2003), as well as the “moral division of labor” (Hughes, 1958, p. 71), as some auto salvage yard workers—often the newcomers—undertake dirty work on behalf of the others.

As I learned during my research, the type of dirt the salvage yard workers are most disgusted by, and in a strange, almost religious manner afraid of the most, is the ‘leaked human’ (*vyteklej člověk*), as Hynek put it. Not only might this type of dirt appearing within auto salvage yards be hazardous to health—at least in the view of salvage yard workers, as Hynek finds dry bloodstains toxic—but it is also related to the death of a particular person. Remnants of a leaked human are ambiguous, yet

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<sup>26</sup> The real wrecked car business is based on dealing with totaled cars, not with end-of-life vehicles.

<sup>27</sup> As already mentioned, in the hierarchy of our auto salvage yard, I occupied the lowest position.

undoubtedly explicit materials that cling to surfaces, including the salvage yard workers' skin, thereby compromising the material integrity of that surface (Douglas, 1984; Sartre, 1984, p. 776). Skin is the organ of sense, and "touch shares with smell the honor of being the sense that is most intimately involved in sensing the disgusting" (Miller, 1997, p. 52). The image of touching an object contaminated by the leaked human—even though in gloves, the salvage yard workers' second skin (Reno, 2016, p. 17, pp. 40–43) —was disgusting for both Hynek and Jáchym. "Once our imaginations imbue the never-having-lived [that is, the inorganic] with metaphorical life," writes Miller, "the inorganic might suggest disgust" (1997, p. 39).

Blood, death, and human body parts are, among salvage yard workers, often a subject of sometimes hard-to-believe stories, such as the one I heard just a few days before Christmas 2019. *Pan Vedoucí* was helping me and Prokop with sorting engines in the warehouse. It was an ordinary Christmas cleaning. I noticed an engine with a label stating "ABSOLUTELY OK—4,000 KM." It sounded unbelievable to me, so I asked about the story of this "heart." "There was this old bag who just drove out of her house and was almost immediately slammed into by a truck," said *Pan Vedoucí*. The woman ended up in the hospital, seriously injured, her car at our yard. "Holy shit," said Prokop, and *Pan Vedoucí*, pleased by Prokop's and my interest, started to pull similar stories out of his hat (an activity salvage yard workers usually love because it positively disrupts the work routine), such as the one about an elderly couple and their two cars:

Once, there was this elderly couple driving their two cars to the garage for a service check. The old fart was driving in front of the old bag. He fell asleep and drove into an intersection where a truck slammed into him. Dead on the spot. And you wouldn't believe what

followed. The truck sent the old boy's car into the car of that biddy. Two totaled cars at once, one dead, one seriously injured. No one wanted to get close to those cars full of blood for a good number of days. It's just us, hyenas, who profit from it.'

*Pan Vedoucí* did not forget to add that both their cars were relatively new with low mileage. However, one thing everyone can be sure about in the context of auto salvage yards, the mileage as stated by auto salvage yard workers is anything but real. In fact, mileage is relational, as I realized when Hynek and I were breaking up a 2011 Hyundai I30. When we were nearly finished, Hynek suddenly burst out laughing while marking the engine and related parts:

We are like fucking magicians, man. When we started breaking up this rice cooker,<sup>28</sup> it had 97,000 km. And now, only 71,000!

Unlike the human heart, the heart of the car must be rejuvenated to arouse customers' interest. The transplantation of the human heart is also about time, but not in the same sense.

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<sup>28</sup> *Pan Všemohoucí* trades only Korean cars and their parts, as Hyundai and Kia are among the most popular cars in the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, there are derogatory similes shared among people doing car business regarding Korean cars. One of the most well known is "*kdo si koupí Hyundaie, nadosmrti kunda je*" ("If you buy Hyundai, you will be a cunt till the end of your days."). In fact, there are similar sayings for German cars, such as "*čtyři kroužky pro teploušky*" for Audis ("Four circles for faggots"). To get a better sense of this, the two Czech similes about Hyundai and Audi are comparable to making acronyms out of the names Fiat ("Fix It Again, Tony") or Hyundai ("Hope You Understand No Dependable Autos Included"). Nevertheless, the magic of these Czech similes lies in their somewhat infantile rhymes.

In either case, there is one similarity: one never knows if the body receives a new heart well. On one of the beautiful days in September 2019, Hynek and I spent almost the whole day installing a new heart into a Hyundai IX55; as its heart is huge, the operation required precision and patience. When the heart finally rested in its place, and Jáchym came to help Hynek with the revival, I could sense a thin atmosphere of stress in the air. Jáchym checked the injection system to see if the diesel fuel was circulating in all the fuel injectors, and Hynek refilled the oil tank. When we finally cranked up the engine and could hear its nice purr, I was the only one who felt deep satisfaction. Hynek and Jáchym knew that this was only the first step; no one can guarantee that a car receives a new heart without any problems.

## **2.5 Summing up**

The early evening of June 24, 2021 surprised many people in the Czech Republic. That evening, the stormy weather of previous weeks resulted in a severe supercell and the unexpected occurrence of a destructive tornado that is somewhat unusual in Central Europe. Seven Moravian villages were nearly razed to the ground. This event showed several things: on the one hand, it revealed the hopelessness stemming from the impossibility of facing these kinds of extreme weather conditions; on the other hand, it confirmed the ability of the integrated rescue system to react promptly. However, the rescue corps were not alone in quick action; although everyone could see wrecked cars along the whole damage path of the tornado, only a few people could sense that these cars were golden geese: auto salvage yard workers.



A wrecked or damaged car does not just disappear. It becomes an object of entrepreneurial interest. I dismantled 64 cars during my fieldwork, the majority completely, until nothing other than their metal bodies remained. When I looked at the “naked” car bodies, I would feel like I had taken the cars through a rite of passage and experienced deep personal satisfaction. But other yard workers did not share my personal car-preparing-for-burial experience at all; for them, wrecked cars are just a way to generate profit. Breaking up cars is an entrepreneurial activity with a space open to the informal economy, yet not attractive for people doing business in waste management. Maybe *Pan Vedoucí’s* comparison of salvage yard workers to hyenas is appropriate after all. Hyenas eat carcasses, and salvage yard workers extract parts from dead cars. In both cases, it is about getting rid of something seemingly unwanted, something no one else is interested in, at least not the big players.

In this chapter, I aimed to show the part of the world of waste management that prefers to be hidden (Sosna, 2021) —the world of auto salvage yards. These places deal not only with end-of-life vehicles but also with totaled cars that might bear traces of dead humans. I focused on the analogy between human bodies and car bodies. Sometimes, these bodies—as assemblages—share a similar fate; their organs and spare parts can be disassembled and used in different contexts. Cars and humans are divisible individuals comprising a complex of separable parts and can be dismantled. This operation happens at places of second chances—hospitals and auto salvage yards—which share a similar spatial arrangement, employ all sorts of instruments and tools that enable the smooth running of the operation, and observe rituals in connection with dirt. The organs of humans who have died during a car accident or later in the hospital can be commodified the same way as the parts of the car they were driving.

By the concept of the person-car, I intended to emphasize the close dynamic relationship not only between cars—as material objects—and humans or non-humans inside cars but also between that whole assemblage and the material world as well as the humans or non-humans outside. I presented the car as a human's second body to demonstrate the flexibility of human bodily boundaries; the human body can include many incorporated objects—in our case, the car. Automobile technology may change the vehicles used by humans in such a way that the driver feels these automobiles to be bodiless, but living in the material world will always be bodily felt, no matter how disassociated humans might feel in cars.

### 3 GREY GREENING: QUIET SUSTAINABILITY AT AUTO SALVAGE YARDS<sup>29</sup>



Figure 8. A freezing morning in the yard. Source: The author.

It was a sunny but cold morning in November 2019, and all the car bodies in the yard were covered with lace blankets knitted from frost. The naked, processed cars ready to be taken to a metal scrapyards looked like crafted goods from the display of a crystal glass shop in the tourist areas of Prague’s Old Town, or like the excavated skeletons of future ancient beings. I was enjoying playing with my imagination while sipping coffee when Hynek’s voice yanked me back: “Are you still sleeping or what?”

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<sup>29</sup> This chapter is a revised version of a paper that first appeared as Mašek, P. (2022): Grey Greening: Quiet Sustainability at Auto Salvage Yards. *Geografie* 127(1): 55–73.

Come on, lend me a hand, will ya?” It was a day when we could no longer ignore the enormous pile of old, unsellable tires.

The auto salvage yard where I worked and conducted my research was divided into clear sectors; each of them had huge or small containers that functioned as intermediate stopovers for the trajectories of flowing waste. The order imposed on the yard fought against a persistent natural entropy. At some points entropy nevertheless dominated—since everything was always in the process of changing into something else (Ingold, 2011, p. 3; Reno, 2016, p. 9)—and one could see a slightly different world, such as the forgotten heavy metal beams being absorbed by tree trunks and shrubs, or life emerging inside the metal skeletons of the oldest cars: nests of slow-worms (*slepýš*), which are endangered and are thus a protected species in the Czech Republic.



Figure 9. The yard's "entropy." Source: The author.

However, this was not the case with the tires. Hynek backed a pickup close to the heap, and we started to load it. Rubber tires are a liability for salvage yard workers; they have to pay a fee to get rid of them. Nevertheless, as in all similar situations, the fee is much less than the one an ordinary car user has to pay to discard their tires. Therefore, the apparent expenditure is an asset, in fact. It is usually a win-win situation because salvage yard workers can sell the used tires again or discard them for a laughably small fee.

“Why don't we just burn them?” I tried to induce a situation to find out more when we hit the road. “Are you fucking joking, man?” laughed Hynek, and continued:

Like that cunt the other day. After I changed his tires, he refused to pay the fee for the old ones and wanted me to give them back to him. Just to save two fucking hundred [CZK], man. After a short hassle, I told him to fuck off with no need to pay anything. I'm sure the dumbfuck would have thrown the tires into the first ditch. We should take care of the environment, right?

Hynek smiled. I mumbled my agreement and could sense that there was something more going on. It was not only the image of waste deliberately left in a ditch that troubled Hynek, but also the loss of potential money.

“Taking care of the environment,” as expressed by Hynek, contrasted with the everyday practices on the ground. Everything that salvage yard workers found useless or valueless ended up inside the collection yard's containers or municipal solid waste bins; these were mainly plastic components and window glass. Once a week, all the junk from the yard disappeared inside a garbage truck that later unloaded its

squashed, anonymous contents into a nearby landfill or an incineration plant. On the other hand, everything valuable was safely stored in weatherproof warehouses.

One can find traces of the “taking care of the environment” attitude at most auto salvage yards in the Czech Republic. The range of this environmental awareness is relatively broad. First of all, when entering such places, one sees banners stating: “ecological disposal (*ekologická likvidace*) of cars.” This clearly shows a strategy of adaptation to the gradual society-wide tendency to identify climate change culprits and the necessity to adjust to lawmakers’ interventions.

Nevertheless, on the other side of the scale—in the everyday practices on the ground—we can find environmentally responsive behavior that is not a result of any legislation, nor a deliberate outcome of any moral beliefs concerning the necessity of being environmentally friendly. It is a byproduct of the yearning for profit—profit made from accidents (Martínez, 2019, p. 8). At the same time, it amounts to more than just policy and propaganda on the part of the auto salvage yard. While there is clearly an explicit goal of projecting the green image of auto salvage yards, recycling and reuse permeate the everyday activities of salvage yard workers without being the primary goal of these activities.

Therefore, at auto salvage yards, one can detect an environmentally responsive behavior that we might call “quiet sustainability” (Smith and Jehlička, 2013). According to the authors of this concept, this kind of environmental responsibility exists and emerges in everyday practices rather than being generated by policies or PR campaigns. At the same time, practices of quiet sustainability are non-activist (Daněk and Jehlička, 2021), neither are they a replacement nor an alternative to the market economy, “[n]or a response to its environmental or social failings, but rather a vivid demonstration that that is only part of life” (Smith and

Jehlička, 2013, p. 155). Practices of quiet sustainability can be considered a third way; that is, they are a way of reaching sustainability<sup>30</sup> (as is desired in the context of current environmental events) without being framed by any legislation or constituting a bottom-up groundswell in the form of grassroots movements. Moreover, the environmentally friendly activities at auto salvage yards are often a result of informal practices, which I will discuss further below.

While one might perceive auto salvage yards as places that “ecologically discard”<sup>31</sup> unwanted and useless things (broken-down cars—in other words, waste), sustainability here does not pertain to the disposal of the cars, but rather to reusing spare parts and repairing seemingly totaled vehicles. As Martínez (2017) points out, waste is the opposite of sustainability, yet the brokenness or breakage of things that might become waste is never final; the practices of repair at auto salvage yards—which can be considered quietly sustainable practices—create new relationships and reconstitutions that do contribute to sustainability (Laviolette, 2006). As Martínez (2019, p. 2) puts it:

To repair is an act on the world: to engage in mending and fixing entails a relational world-building that materializes affective formations. It also settles endurance, material sensitivity and

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<sup>30</sup> When I talk about sustainability, I refer to the definition of what has been called sustainable development, that is, the ability to meet “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1991).

<sup>31</sup> Legislatively, the primary goal of auto salvage yards should be collecting hazardous waste – end-of-life vehicles – and effectively recycling these vehicles.

empathy, as well as more altruistic values oriented towards the sustainability of life.

Nevertheless, I do not consider salvage yard workers' practices to be born out of the necessity of being environmentally responsive in the context of current events. Instead, I intend to point to the fact that widespread practices of quiet sustainability have been present in various human activities without needing any explicit law to motivate them, because these practices are not, in fact, consciously trying to achieve sustainability. Yet they are widely practiced and do have positive environmental impacts (Smith, Kostelecký, and Jehlička, 2015, 224).

The relative invisibility and marginalization of places like auto salvage yards and the practices happening there do not suggest that these positive impacts are somehow less significant and should be avoided or ignored. Quite to the contrary, these practices could provide inspiration for how to progress towards a more sustainable society (Reid, Sutton, and Hunter, 2010).

In this chapter, I respond to the invitation to acknowledge “practices that are sustainable in outcome, but don’t seek or claim to be” (Smith and Jehlička, 2013, p. 155), and similarly to Sovová, Jehlička and Daněk (2021), I respond to Gibson-Graham’s (2008) call to bring new worlds into being by making visible the range of existing diverse economies. Therefore, I attempt to shift attention towards the widespread but not-much-recognized world of auto salvage yards—as part of the waste management world that prefers to be hidden (Sosna, 2021)—to reveal that “greening” can also be done quietly through the “grey” economy of breaking cars. Inspired by the concept of quiet sustainability, I complement it with recent ideas on the practices of repair, maintenance, and care



(Alexander, 2012; Isenhour and Reno, 2019; Martínez, 2017; Martínez and Laviolette, 2019).

The structure of the chapter is as follows: I begin by showing some of the quotidian practices and situations taking place at an auto salvage yard, and then consider the informality in which the practices of salvage yard workers are framed. The last section focuses on the concept of quiet sustainability and its meaning for recent public and academic debates on environmentally responsive behavior.

### **3.1 Materialized potentials**

Workers at auto salvage yards deal with the discards of other people. They are masters of seeing value and money where others see nothing more than unwanted rubbish. Auto salvage yards are places of secondary disposal<sup>32</sup> and second chances (Soderman and Carter, 2008). They are places that allow old cars to stay alive, despite a global politico-economic system that is based on continuous production and money flow, forcing humans to waste things (Hawkins, 2006, pp. 24–30). Auto salvage yards are second-hand marketplaces, sites of practical expertise and know-how (Reno, 2016, p. 125) as well as know-why.

Some salvage yard workers do more than trade used auto parts and wrecked car components for use as a secondary source—mostly metal,

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<sup>32</sup> Cars within the yard have been disposed of by their previous owners; auto salvage yards are, in fact, locations of accumulated waste from past production. However, the salvage yard workers extract specific things that still hold some value for them (use-value and exchange-value). In this way, the salvage yard is a kind of waste sorting place. Individual usable parts are extracted for reuse—thus salvaged—and the unusable remainders, such as metal, e-waste, and plastic material, are sold and shipped away for recycling—at best.

as its market is among the largest in the world's recycling economy (Alexander and Reno, 2012; Minter, 2013, p. 27, p. 31; Reno, 2016, p. 121); they also repair totaled cars (*totálky*) and thereby rescue them from the waste regime (Gille, 2007, pp. 34–35), returning them to the regime of consumer goods. In this way, salvage yard workers realize not only the potential of discarded cars but also the potential of their skills. Such activity might be perceived as both an environmentally responsive practice of salvage yard workers (*vrakaři*) and environmentally responsive consumption by their customers (*zakoši*). However, such behavior is, in either case, motivated mainly (but not only) by calculated reasoning.

As already mentioned several times, there is a plethora of auto salvage yards in the Czech Republic. Alongside to the 600 legal auto salvage yards that have been active in the past decade, we can also observe innumerable small operations that handle wrecked cars informally. One of the ways to hide the informal handling of wrecked cars—dismantling and storing them in places not intended for that purpose—is to run the business alongside a legal repair and service garage. These are places like the one where I conducted my fieldwork.

The treatment of wrecked cars (“end-of-life vehicles”) is laid down by Directive 2000/53/EC of the European Parliament. According to this directive, the disposal of cars in Czechia must be done ecologically. As the number of formal auto salvage yards and places handling wrecked cars informally is comprehensive and based on intimate friendship and solidarity, obtaining formal documents confirming ecological disposal is easy to do, even for the informal places. However, it also creates a pledge between salvage yard operators.

One day at the beginning of spring 2020, *Pan Všemohoucí* went merrily to Teplice (North Bohemia) for a new Hyundai I40 that had been totaled. He planned to repair the car and sell it, as it was only a few months

old. As I have mentioned, some salvage yard workers do not only break cars, but also repair them, often using parts of another car's body. They say that they "glue" (*lepí*) such cars together.

After *Pan Všemohoucí* returned to the yard, he seemed to be somewhat disappointed. The car was not what he had expected: its top was damaged in a few spots, making it unmarketable as a whole. There was no way to fix its top; the car was good only for breaking up, which usually does not make sense when a salvage yard worker has purchased an expensive car. I asked Hynek why *Pan Všemohoucí* had bought the car. Why did not he refuse the purchase when he had not even seen any pictures of the car beforehand? "He couldn't," answered Hynek, "a friend of his procured the purchase, and you can't just refuse, even if you don't like the fucking car at all." If he did refuse, *Pan Všemohoucí* would become untrustworthy and could possibly have difficulty staying within the profitable system of the wrecked car market.



Figure 10. Car bodies missing their parts that were "glued" into another cars' bodies. Source: The author.

Besides the disposal of cars and extracting their parts, some auto salvage yards—both legal and informal ones—also obtain spare parts from elsewhere. One could find more than just car parts from totaled vehicles at the yard where I worked. Soon after entering the field, I noticed some brand new parts that only had a coat of primer applied, such as car doors and other mostly metal parts, stored among used items in the warehouse. I asked *Pan Všemohoucí* about the origin of these parts.

From time to time, gypsies (*cikáni*) bring them. They say they sometimes find them somewhere near a scrap metal yard in Germany. It's bullshit, I know, but curiosity killed the cat (*kdo se moc ptá, moc se dozví*).

Similarly, *Pan Všemohoucí* cooperated with a man who used to work as a manager for the Czech branch of Hyundai. Shortly after realizing he was going to be fired, the manager secretly started to steal and hoard car parts that did not meet the quality requirements, hiding them in his office. These parts were rejected for use in new vehicles, and should have been ecologically discarded; yet they were still perfectly good enough to be informally sold to an auto salvage yard. The manager, who was convinced that moral law was on his side, made a deal with *Pan Všemohoucí*. As I learned later, the surreptitious sale of car parts like these by car manufacturer employees who have access to them is not unusual at all.

A common phenomenon is the cross-border import and export of cars both to and from the Czech Republic in order to extract cheap spare parts from them; such vehicles are not transported as waste because they are sold with a foreign registration certificate. These cars are classified as commodities. While the transport of waste is tightly controlled, commodities can travel in a comparatively unobstructed manner. Wrecked

cars cannot be classified as waste without being de-registered. At the same time, after their export, there is no requirement to confirm the proper ecological disposal of such vehicles unless they appear in the vehicle register. But they do not. This abundantly practiced circumvention allows the ultimate recycling of motor vehicles without the necessity to confirm their official ecological disposal. Nevertheless, this informal dismantling and reuse of most of a car's parts is not only economically profitable but also has a positive effect on the environment.

In this case, classification shifts serve as a vehicle of profit within the grey zone of the informal economy, but, at the same time, also support the reuse of car parts in the spirit of the officially promoted (green) circular economy. The classificatory game is not played only on the informal side of the field; Czech officials kick the ball around their half of the field, too. Transfers of vehicle ownership abroad are much cheaper than transfers made within the country. It might suggest a different approach towards the same thing: officials see a vehicle as a future problem—rubbish—that needs to be solved eventually. Salvage yard workers, contrariwise, see a vehicle as a resource, a chance to profit; thus, they play with classification and import a significant number of wrecked cars that never appear in the statistics.

At first blush, it might sound like the level of environmental awareness among salvage yard workers is low. However, to be sure, auto salvage yard workers are aware of environmental problems and reflect upon them. *Pan Vedoucí* would often complain about the “consumption age” (*doba spotřební*), as he expressed it, which leads to the over-production of cars that become waste relatively quickly. In this sense, he saw the practice of leasing cars, for example, as problematic.

Leased cars are used for approximately three years of their life. As the cars are passed among several car users, they are often not cared for

appropriately. There is no interest in further leasing the cars after three years or so, as their mileage is not attractive anymore, but their market price remains relatively high for being sold as used cars. The result is that these cars end up parked in huge private parking lots where they gradually lose their quality and value.

Cars are meant for driving, not for being parked for an extended period somewhere. They become spoiled otherwise,

*Pan Vedoucí* pointed out. According to him, the production of cars intended for leasing causes a future environmental problem. It creates a situation where many products that once generated profit have no use anymore. Despite this, automotive producers keep producing more and more of these products, regardless of the associated environmental problems.

### **3.2 Informally formal**

In the previous section of this chapter, I provided a glimpse of some of the quotidian practices and situations taking place at the auto salvage yard. Although auto salvage yard workers might be seen as men<sup>33</sup> who ecologically discard the useless and unwanted, thus maintaining the social order (Douglas 1984) or servicing the boundary (Bauman, 2004, p. 28), their own notion of their activity is far from this image. Ecological disposal of cars or preventing waste is not their goal. It is just a tool that enables them to make money. Salvage yard workers know that there are some rules they are obliged to follow, but they take them as a framework for

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<sup>33</sup> I did not meet any female salvage yard workers during my research.

meeting their own needs, that is, to profit through what seems to be junk. Since waste tends to be pushed to the margins of human perception, it often stimulates informal practices. Although the practices of salvage yard workers are framed by formal constraints, they are realized in an informal manner.

Breaking a car at an informal place is a real “shadow economy” activity, if we follow economists’ notion of informal economies, such as that of Schneider and Enste (2000, pp. 78–79), who define this economy as “unreported income ... hence all economic activities that would generally be taxable were they reported to the tax authorities.” The economy at informal auto salvage yards is almost 100 per cent cash-in-hand economy. However, it is much more than this. We should certainly overcome economists’ notion of informal economies, that is, “market-based production of goods and services, whether legal or illegal, that escapes detection by the tax authorities” (Smith, 1994, p. 4), and consider informality as a regular part of everyday human life—driven not only by calculative motivations—and as a regular part of the formal.

“Form’ is an idea whose origin lies in the mind. Form is the rule, the invariant in the variable,” writes Hart and continues: “The ‘formal sector’ is likewise an idea, a collection of people, things and activities that share an idea; but we should not mistake the idea for the reality that it partially identifies” (2006, p. 5). Therefore, we can observe the real world taking place in the informal. However, the informal is not random and independent of the form. Denying the informal would be to cling to a utopian ideal (Hart, 2006, p. 6).

Economic anthropology—as a field that attempts to research and explain human economic practices in their widest scope— “is equated with cross-cultural philosophizing about human livelihoods in the broadest sense” (Hann, 2018, p. 1708), which contrasts with the notion of modern

economies associated with market commerce. Therefore, for the very purpose of opposing an economistic notion of economy, various different approaches have appeared, such as the concepts “real economy” (Neiburg and Guyer, 2019) and “diverse economies” (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham, 2008) that broaden the perspective on economy, or even call for people to take back the economy from governments and corporations (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy, 2013).

Having these theoretical approaches in mind, I regard informality as being deeply woven into the fabric of society (Ledeneva, 2018, viii) and being present everywhere regardless of any particular politico-economic ideology, although in different forms and intensity. Informality is often associated with the periphery rather than the center; nonetheless, in my view, it is its omnipresence that makes it central. Moreover, the case of auto salvage yards reveals that informality is central to their proper functioning: the entrepreneurial activity of salvage yard workers is rooted in and builds on informal practices.

Informality is not necessarily a transitory phenomenon, nor it is limited to places that have poor, socially unacceptable working conditions. Informal employment (Samers, 2005), for example, does not necessarily provide a means of survival for the unemployed. It has been shown that informal practices exist among all segments of society (Makovicky and Henig, 2017); it is a global phenomenon penetrating all aspects of public life (Polese et al., 2017, p. 3).

Based on my fieldwork, I see informality as practices that take place on a daily basis as a part of the formal economy, which is similar to Millar’s (2018, p. 130) observation about blurred categories of informal and formal vis-à-vis everyday practices on the ground. As Hart (2010, p. 151) puts it aptly, “[t]he formal/informal pair ... leaked into each other to the point of being often indistinguishable.” One cannot have informal without formal



and vice versa; “[t]he formal and informal aspects of society were always linked” (Hart 2010, p. 143). They might seem to be opposites, but they are interconnected and interdependent. Hart (2010) describes the formality of the formal as caused by the regularity of its order, a predictable rhythm. I believe the same applies to the informal. The world of informality can be rationalized the same way and made predictable just like the formal world. There are certainly some features that the informal economy shares with formal economy, such as unrestrained competition or even coercion, exploitation of employees, and links with the formal state. All these features blur boundaries between formal and informal, and confirm their interconnection.

“Formal constraints limit but also enable informal ways of circumventing them,” writes Ledeneva (2018, p. 5). The salvage yard workers’ “green,” environmentally responsive behavior, resulting from their informal “grey” practices (as we could see in the previous section of this chapter), is made possible by circumventing the formal requirements of car disposal. Commonly, wrecked cars are supposed to be (ecologically) disposed of at auto salvage yards, and they are—or at least the official documents confirming the disposal state so. In fact, parts of the totaled vehicles return to the roadways by being “glued” into other cars. As I have already mentioned, the practice of repairing a vehicle using parts from another car’s body is not unusual at all.

An event that happened late one beautiful Indian summer afternoon in 2019 illustrates quite well the salvage yard workers’ (informal) yearning for profit that results in environmentally responsive behavior. *Pan Všemohoucí* arrived at the yard with a Kia Carens on a trailer. It was a totaled car, a valueless piece of scrap for an insurance company; but it represented the tremendous luck of a rare find for *Pan Všemohoucí*. The Kia was only four months old and, according to *Pan Všemohoucí*, also

repairable. He was so excited that he brought ice cream for each of us along with the car.

We did not break it down as usual. *Pan Všemohoucí* decided to “build” (*postavit*) that car again and return it to the roadways. We used parts of another car of the same brand and type that *Pan Všemohoucí* had bought only a couple of weeks before. *Pan Všemohoucí* asked me to “peck” (*vyzobat*—dismantle) the older car’s whole interior, thereby expressing confidence in me. During the ordinary pecking of a wrecked car, salvage yard workers destroy some parts of the car, such as cutting the wiring with an angle grinder (*flexa*) to save time and effort; but the interior of the Kia needed to be dismantled carefully so that the parts could be re-used, including the wiring. The next day, after I finished pecking the interior, *Pan Všemohoucí* cut out—using a Sawzall (*šukačka*—literally meaning “fucker”) —parts of the older car’s body that needed to be glued into the newer Kia.

Before the life of the Kia ended for its original owner, it was worth 590,000 CZK. *Pan Všemohoucí* bid on the car at an auction for 190,000 CZK, invested 100,000 CZK into the repair, and sold it for 400,000 CZK. No doubt he made a great deal, which resulted in 110,000 CZK profit. But profit was not the only reason why *Pan Všemohoucí* decided to purchase and repair the car. Salvaging value via repair, reuse, or recycling cannot be reduced to economic efficiency, because it is an inherent part of social relations and/or moral values (Alexander, 2012; Alexander and Reno, 2012; Isenhour and Reno, 2019). All the salvage yard workers that I met during my fieldwork were obsessed with cars, and repairing totaled vehicles was explained as being a way to demonstrate their skills. Moreover, “it would be a waste not to buy such a nice car and put it back together,” said *Pan Všemohoucí*.

Beyond this is the deep satisfaction and pure joy stemming from seeing a repaired vehicle that was previously labelled a total loss; this is similar to the scrap metal yard workers' satisfaction arising from work that is creative, skilled, and based on transformation (Sanchez, 2020), or the enjoyment and pleasure involved in the second-hand practices described by Gregson and Crewe (2003), or the joy of unexpected finds among landfill workers observed by Reno (2016, pp. 98–135) or Sosna (2022). The auto salvage yard workers' "culture of repairing" (Smith and Jehlička, 2013) is characterized by quiet sustainability, and as Martínez (2017, p. 349) puts it, "we can situate repair as part of the micro-powers, those that contribute to create transcendental narratives of reconstitution after wrongdoing or abandonment."

We might consider this particular example of salvage yard workers' quotidian practices resulting in environmentally responsive behavior without the initial intention of being environmentally responsive to have a positive impact on the environment; yet it is often not labelled or valued as an example of sustainable development or sustainability. Similar to the case of food self-provisioning in the Central European area, auto salvage yard workers' activities "appear to be longstanding practices that the practitioners themselves, and the research and policy community, have not recognised or valorised in those terms" (Smith and Jehlička, 2013, p. 149).

Concerning the event with the Kia mentioned above, another intriguing problem floated to the surface. I helped *Pan Všemohoucí* take the parts of the cars' bodies to a neighboring village, where a tinsmith later "glued" (welded) them together. During the journey, *Pan Všemohoucí* started to talk about his conversation with the previous owner of the Kia. He suggested selling the car back to him after repairing it using parts of another car's body. The previous owner was speechless. *Pan Všemohoucí*

did not mean to fool or defraud him by any means. Quite the reverse, he was fair and honest with him. However, an incompatible clash of two completely different perspectives took place here.

The previous owner of the car was convinced that a glued car could not be safe. However, *Pan Všemohoucí* argued that gluing cars used to be a common practice, and no one had found it weird. According to him, before the Czech Republic became a member state of the European Union in May 2004, it was not easy to import a car from abroad. It was almost impossible to register such a car. One of the options for obtaining a cheaper car was to buy a glued one. Upon entering the EU, legislation concerning the import of used cars changed and, therefore, registering these cars became much more manageable. Along with this change, the automotive industry started to blame imported used and glued cars for a higher number of traffic collisions. According to them, these cars were not safe at all. Opening the European used vehicles market meant lowering the automotive industry's profit, and their offensive move was a way to save their business.

One can still find glued cars nowadays, but not to such an extent as two decades ago. When I asked *Pan Všemohoucí* about the safety of glued cars, he replied:

If you do it right, it's totally safe, but people usually don't think so, because they are being persuaded by someone who profits from doing business with new cars.

*Pan Všemohoucí* meant that a proper vehicle repair by using part of another car's body is another option, which does not have to be bad. In

other words, practices of repairing totaled cars do not necessarily reduce the safety of these vehicles, and they do contribute to sustainability.

The argument mentioning car safety does not come out of the blue. Within the automotive industry, safety is one of the principal desirable features of cars; most car producers emphasize—along with comfort—the safety of their products. However, the constant improvement of car safety features and the production and consumption of cars could be considered harmful to the environment. The pursuit of safety might lead car producers towards activities that can be understood as environmentally unfriendly.

The automotive industry is a key economic sector for many European states. Whenever this sector feels endangered, a culprit is found almost immediately. During the second half of 2020, somewhere between the first and second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Czech Republic, something called “pandemic motors” appeared in the EU and caused the ambitious aim of EU countries to cut carbon emissions produced by cars to hit a wall, which was partly welcomed with satisfaction by the workers at our yard. On the one hand, the number of discarded cars went down as the Covid-19 era shaped the lives of many humans, making their behavior less predictable; feeling uncertainty about the future, people stopped trading in their old cars for new ones. On the other hand, salvage yard workers felt satisfaction because they “hate” electric vehicles and favor diesel engines.

In short, pandemic motors describes a situation in which some Europeans, being afraid of using public transport, resorted to buying a car instead (EURACTIV.com, 2020). However, they did not buy the green dream-car of EU executives: the e-car. This time, cheaper used cars were more in favor. Instead of expressing understanding, EU policy elites started to panic. They wanted to “heal” the pandemic of “sick” and dirty old cars to meet ethical consumerism obligations based exclusively on

western models and ideas (Gregson et al., 2010; Smith, Kostelecký, and Jehlička, 2015, p. 226) about environmentally friendly vehicles. Therefore, the policy elites labelled old cars as agents of pollution and danger.

### **3.3 Quiet sustainability monetized**

Although Smith and Jehlička (2013), the authors of the quiet sustainability concept, orient this concept around practices that do not relate, either directly or indirectly, to market transactions, everything else in the concept applies to auto salvage yards. Nonetheless, Jehlička explained to me that the connection to the market transactions is not a crucial condition for quiet sustainability. The informal practices of salvage yard workers represent an unforced form of sustainability—which the practitioners do not link directly to environmental or sustainability goals—that results in beneficial environmental outcomes. Although some of salvage yard workers' practices at the yard can be considered environmentally unfriendly, the friendly ones prevail over them.

The case of auto salvage yards shows that sustainability can be reached even through the yearning for profit. I chose to regard the sustainability observed among salvage yards workers as quiet, because it is an unintentional byproduct of practices having one main goal: profit. Recently, two new approaches towards sustainability have been trending. One of them advocates abandoning the idea of sustainable development in favor of sustainable degrowth, which can be understood “as an equitable and democratic transition to a smaller economy with less production and consumption” (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010, p. 1741). Another one calls for complete nongrowth (Monsaingeon, 2017, pp. 149–176).

Yet, the sustainability achieved by salvage yard workers, even though unintentionally, opens space for debate on sustainability reached through the profit motive. At auto salvage yards, economic meets ecological. These two words—which form something of a Lévi-Straussian binary opposition these days—used to be conjoined twins: the Aristotelian idea of *oikos*—a house occupied by a self-sufficient family—consisted of both the economic and ecological part, and formed the essence of *oikonomia* (Hann and Hart, 2011, pp. 18–20). It is a rather holistic perspective which, as I believe, is applicable in our times too.

According to Higgins (2015, pp. 1–11), who thinks within the context of *oikonomia*, the goal of sustainability has been to maintain balance among the economy, the environment, and society. In other words, sustainability is a matter of the interdependence of these three elements. Therefore, Higgins suggests approaching this complex issue as a system of three elements that function together as a whole. If we look at sustainability as an integrated system, we can realize that it “adapts to its environment and behaves in ways determined by the interactions among its parts” (Higgins, 2015, p. 9). The outputs of this integrated system come from how the system operates. While the ideas of sustainable degrowth and nongrowth build on slowing down and limiting the economic growth to preserve environmental and social values, there might be another way to create balance among these three elements and reach sustainability, eventually—through the profit motive. The quiet practices leading towards sustainability might not lead to large-scale environmental or social changes, but they can serve as an example of reaching balance.

Yet when we look at it from a broader perspective in terms of the policy community, practicing repair of totaled cars and reusing car parts does not fit well with the images and ideas about what modernity and sustainability could and should mean for societies. In other words, these

practices are taking place at the “wrong places” (Smith, Kostelecký, and Jehlička, 2015, p. 226) and in the “wrong manner.” Paradoxically, the activities of salvage yard workers are based on capitalist logic—at least in terms of profit—while at the same time, their “culture of repairing” goes against it,<sup>34</sup> as it goes against the constant cycle of production and consumption.

Auto salvage yard workers make a profit, but their practices help keep things alive longer, thereby disrupting the profitability of market-based producers. In a time of overproduction, hyperconsumption, and acceleration (Crocker and Chiveralls, 2018; Lipovetsky, 2010; Vostal, 2016), salvage yard workers’ activities represent obstacles; they slow things down. Despite this, practices of repairing totaled vehicles and reusing their parts at auto salvage yards are often not considered to be contributions to sustainability by the general public. Nevertheless, the salvage yard workers’ practices of repairing could provide inspiration for how to progress towards a more sustainable society through the yearning for profit—by finding the balance between economy, environment, and society.

The research of several scholars (Daněk and Jehlička, 2021; Eriksen and Schober, 2017; Millar, 2012; Millar, 2018; Reno, 2009; Sosna, 2016; Sovová and Veen, 2020) has shown that places which are considered to be of a non-market character and/or dealing with discards, and therefore “marginal,” are often associated with activities that are usually perceived negatively and promoted as a coping strategy to provide

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<sup>34</sup> As one of the reviewers of the original article noted, salvage yard workers might not be able to do what they do without a constant influx of new broken cars, that is, without their production and consumption. This is most likely, at least not to such an extent. However, auto salvage yards do not depend on the automotive industry entirely. The automotive industry is the crucial economic sector in the Czech Republic. But even if there is something wrong with the automotive industry, salvage yard workers never lose; they can only gain.



poor individuals or families suffering from scarcity with an opportunity to enhance their livelihood or diet (in the case of food self-provisioning), or as an activist practice. Despite the creative (and sustainable) labor they engage in, people working at such places are often stigmatized rather than celebrated. The same scholars also demonstrate that all of this is too simplistic. The misunderstanding of such places and the practices taking place there most likely stems from the current market-based politico-economic system's narrow idea of modernity, "progress," or developed markets. We cannot explain either salvage yard workers' activities, nor the behavior of their customers, as coping strategies.

When I entered the field, I had somewhere in the back of my mind the general notion from mainstream society that auto salvage yards are places where the poorer segment of society would go shopping, as well as the notion that salvage yard workers only want to cheat everyone. Both of these notions soon proved to be the result of prejudice. While all the salvage yard workers I met were members of the middle-class and their work was not driven by the urge to fight scarcity, their customers represented all segments of society.

Although the auto salvage yard workers' aim is to profit (which is more than compatible with the current global politico-economic system), their work is not driven purely by economic need. Neither are the people who shop at these second-hand marketplaces. During my fieldwork, in many cases, visiting an auto salvage yard appeared to be the only way to solve a problem with one's vehicle. Unlike mechanics (*mechoši*) in official service garages, salvage yard workers (*vrakaři*, who are mechanics themselves) offered solutions that could prolong the life of one's vehicle; this has a remarkably positive impact on the environment. Despite this, salvage yard workers or their customers are not activists fighting for a greener planet. Environmental reasons are not motivations for either of

them, and they are not actively opposing the growth-dependent capitalist system. I am careful to not idealize the positive environmental impact of activities at auto salvage yards: yet we cannot avoid acknowledging the quiet “green” behavior that goes along with the practices of salvage yard workers.

### 3.4 Summing up

In this chapter, I aimed to reveal that there are practices and ways of reaching sustainability—through the profit motive—that are not recognized as such, and therefore, might be forgotten or ignored as marginal. To do so, I chose to frame these practices within the concept of quiet sustainability which appeared to be of great help. I wanted to give a louder voice to salvage yard workers and their quiet practices with environmentally positive impacts, even if only for a moment, with the goal of stimulating discussion on this topic. If I stick to the game of colors that served as a quiet guide for this chapter, I argue that we can observe not only grey greening taking place at the end of the imaginary line<sup>35</sup> stretching from production through consumption to disposal, but also greying of the proclaimed green happening at the beginning (or maybe the other end?) of the same line: the sphere of production.

Argenti and Knight (2015) assert that none of what the green economy promises—to heal the wounds made by the predatory consumer economy while retaining the same patterns of production and consumption—passes through the sifter of neoliberal growth-logic

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<sup>35</sup> Disposal is not just the last act of a sequence that runs from production through consumption. The movement of commodities is non-linear and unpredictable, as Gregson and Crewe (2003, pp. 142) argue.

unchanged. The case of pandemic motors shows this quite well. While the sustenance of top-down environmental awareness is limited by the market-based economy, societal and individual environmental concerns are part of diverse economies that work for societies and environments (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy, 2013, pp. xiii–xxiii) in a much more “natural” way. A market economy, in contrast to diverse economies, is not flexible, regardless of whether we call it “green” or not. It is only a case of repainting steel-grey capitalism green (Howe and Boyer, 2020). Human motivations are diverse, and therefore they cannot be seen only through the market-based economy perspective. If one acknowledges this, then one cannot be surprised that the expectations of lawmakers, whatever they are, are not always fulfilled.

## 4 MISTRUST



Figure 11. The IX55 missing its heart. Source: The author.

“Sixty-two thousand?” asked the stockier of the two men in a strong Eastern European accent.

“Or fifty without the invoice.” said *Pan Vedoucí* alluringly.

“Who’ll give us a guarantee?” the other man wondered.

“No one. Trust me and risk it or leave. It’s up to you.” *Pan Vedoucí* closed the conversation decisively.

I overheard this triologue while cleaning the yard. *Pan Vedoucí* stood under the open bonnet of a Hyundai IX55, leaning with seeming disinterest over its “heart” (*srdce*), and negotiating with two Bulgarians who wanted to buy the engine. Trust “always involves an element of risk,” argues Ingold (2000, p. 70). Trust is an emergent property of social life embedded in social relations experienced on a daily basis (Robbins, 2016), while in some places much more often and with greater intensity.

As one has no guarantee when carefully walking in the informal—because there are no contracts, no requirements, and no fines—one could think that trust is an essential condition for informality. Nevertheless, generalized trust is not “generalized” throughout informal economies. Trust is a highly relational and contextual cognitive process. I follow Corsín Jiménez (2011) and argue that trust itself—no matter if it is a relationship (Hardin, 2001), an attitude (Miller, 2000), a disposition (Carey, 2017), or a decision, either rational or non-rational—is less important than the impression it makes.

The image of trust within informal might come from Mauss’s (2002) analysis of gift economies. However, the informality at auto salvage yards is not based on giving or trust. It is a rough world of trade without any traces, rather filled with mistrust, which is something that goes without saying.

Mistrust at Czech auto salvage yards might resonate with post-socialist countries’ broader social context, resulting from the state’s repeated failure to perform its fundamental duties. Following Giordano and Kostova (2002, p. 75), we could consider mistrust as a social product that is “based on specific practices that necessarily stem from past negative experiences.”

However, I want to stress that I do not treat mistrust as a negation of trust. Instead, I follow Carey (2017, p. 18) and consider mistrust an alternative to trust, which gives rise to social forms of its own. Mistrust can be, in the same way as trust, a rational strategy, but it would be too simplistic to think of mis/trust as a mere matter of choice. It might also be a way of viewing the world or a particular situation based on one's previous experience—negotiating at auto salvage yards, for example.

Gluckman (1972) observed—among Lozi and Azande— “the limits of their technical knowledge,” which resulted in finding a different way to gain certainty. Knowledge, experience, and the availability of information are most important during a deal at auto salvage yards—the more one knows (a salvage yard worker or a customer), the more trustworthy the context is. Nevertheless, mistrust still lies somewhere in the back of the minds of those involved. Trust, writes Gambetta (1988, p. 234), “begins with keeping oneself open to evidence, acting as if one trusted, at least until more stable beliefs can be established on the basis of further information.”

The everyday negotiating at auto salvage yards is something like a battle based on specific knowledge that refines the skills of convincing someone. Salvage yard workers are masters of recognizing the adversary's weight category. *Pan Vedoucí* would often say with a smile from ear to ear: “A fry has swallowed the hook. Now you need to pull carefully.” I always had the feeling that he loved moments like this. He was very competitive, and “winning” over the yard's customers satisfied him. Nevertheless, he could also recognize that someone surpassed him in knowledge, and in that case, the customer gained *Pan Vedoucí's* respect. These “fights” were rather funny, but sometimes there were moments when the situation could have turned out much worse, such as the one with the IX55 engine.

The most expensive car parts that we sold were always marked—“tattooed,” as Jáchym—the warehouseman—would say. “Tattoos” on spare parts solved future problems with customers. When I arrived at the yard one January morning in 2020, Hynek already had an IX55 on the two-post lift (*hever*), inspecting its heart. I noticed a Bulgarian license plate on the car and immediately recollected the dialogue between *Pan Vedoucí* and the two Bulgarians. I asked Hynek whether it was the same men, and he somewhat absent-mindedly nodded. I could see that he was trying to make sense of what was really going on there. Something was not right.

The Bulgarians claimed that the engine they had bought from us was not working correctly. Right, it can happen, and that is why Hynek was trying to find out what was wrong with the heart. He found the tattoo on the cylinder head (*hlava*) but could not find the other placed on the engine itself. Therefore, *Pan Vedoucí* jotted down the identification number of the engine and disappeared into the office. Meanwhile, I started to break a Kia CEED CW on the second two-post lift. After a while, *Pan Všemohoucí* suddenly appeared from nowhere and followed *Pan Vedoucí* into the office. By checking the engine’s identification number and the vehicle identification number (VIN), they found out that no one had ever taken the original engine out of the IX55. The engine was simply not the one that we had sold them. Someone just replaced the cylinder head and hoped it would look like the engine that we had “pecked” out of one of the totaled cars in the yard had been “transplanted” into the vehicle.

There were two possible explanations for what had happened:

They [the Bulgarians] either wanted to scam us (*chtěli s náma vyjebat*), or someone, who was supposed to have replaced the heart had scammed them (*někdo vyjebal s nima*),

said *Pan Vedoucí* calmly.

Well, that's their business, isn't it? Fuck them, assholes (*serem na ně, na vymrdance*),

he added and left for the office. The two Bulgarians were disappointed and could not do anything but leave. They never showed up again, albeit for some time there remained a strange feeling of apprehension lest they would return with some other cronies.

However, events like this are rather exciting disruptions of the work routine for salvage yard workers. They are ready to handle the situations, and mistrust is the way to prevent potential troubles. However, there is more than mis/trust between salvage yard workers and their customers to be observed. One can find both among salvage yard workers themselves too.

While I was “pecking” the “heart” of the IX55 mentioned above, having the car on one of the two two-post lifts in the workshop, Prokop was dismantling a Hyundai Accent next to me on the other lift. When he was almost done with the interior and revealed the sheet metal body, he noticed that the part of the body where one can normally find the VIN code was cut out—it was simply missing. Only Prokop, Hynek, and I were in the workshop, and I asked, probably too quickly: “You think the car is stolen?” At that exact moment, I heard the voice of *Pan Vedoucí*—who meanwhile had entered the workshop—behind me saying vigorously: “No, no, that car was disposed of a long time ago at a yard far away from here.”

The temperature in the room suddenly dropped. *Pan Vedoucí* left for the office, and I could read from Hynek and Prokop's bemused faces that



they had no clue about dismantling possibly stolen vehicles. We remained working in silence for almost an hour, all three alone in our thoughts. Here is the fieldnote full of questions I wrote after that day's shift:

What? So, is it really the case that we deal with stolen cars here? Could someone have stolen the car, cut out the VIN code, and offered it for sale to *Pan Vedoucí* because they knew that the salvage yard workers would take it without unnecessary questions? And *Pan Vedoucí* never asks unnecessary questions. Was it a bargain for *Pan Všemohoucí* and *Pan Vedoucí*? It must have been, as they rarely leave any traces behind.

In any case, my hastily worded question left hints of mistrust towards me that I experienced during my first weeks at the yard when no one was sure about my real motivation for working there. Before starting my first day at the yard, *Pan Vedoucí* and *Pan Všemohoucí* googled me. They found out that I used to be an artist, and it appeased them. However, one day, when I drove *Pan Všemohoucí* to the befriended yard nearby, I scared him a little. I asked him what ecological disposal was all about. *Pan Všemohoucí* became nervous but said firmly:

It depends on whether you are asking out of your own interest or if you are asking for an office.

Oops. I assured him that I was no official. And I proved that during the entire period of my research.

Little by little, I realized that the degree of mis/trust is related to friendship and hostility. I already mentioned that Hynek gradually became

my closest interlocutor—a friend, in fact. Although he also dismantled totaled cars sometimes, his role was mainly about fixing cars in the yard. He was a *mechoš* rather than a *vrakař*. One day, when there was no car to fix in the workshop, Hynek changed the engine oil and filters in my old Volvo with permission from *Pan Vedoucí*. After he was done with the oil, he took a protective wax spray and secretly sprayed the entire chassis, mentioning that we should not discuss it with anyone. When we said goodbye in the evening to each other, Hynek said: “So, watch out for *Volvino*” (*Tak mi na Volvino dávej pozor*). It felt nice.

I experienced a similar sign of trust from Jáchym while helping him sort parts in one of the warehouses. Jáchym usually did not talk much, especially when Prokop was present. Nevertheless, that day Prokop was not in the yard, and Jáchym started talking about things he would not talk about in front of Prokop. I learned, for example, that it was not *Pan Všemohoucí* who buys totaled cars, but someone completely different. Jáchym even said that person’s name, which, like Voldemort’s (the main antagonist in the *Harry Potter* franchise), was never to be spoken in front of anyone. One day I wrote this fieldnote:

It never ceases to amaze me how thin the line is; I mean that their livelihood depends on someone else. There must be a lot of trust (or commitment). It also still surprises me that we are not an auto salvage yard on the outside. It really seems to me that the guys have no fear at all although they might do something wrong.’

That day I heard on the radio that one of the largest auto salvage yards in Central Bohemia was on fire. It can happen very fast. I told the news to Hynek, who was joking that he hoped Hyundai cars were on fire there so we could take over their business. And he added that, most likely,

safety inspections at auto salvage yards will begin now. I replied that they might not come to us if we were not an auto salvage yard. He agreed.

A few days later, on one of the last days of my last month in the field, I jotted down this:

Today, for the first time, it occurred to me that I have reached saturation.



*Figure 12. The author*

### III. CONCLUSION

After I had written the previous jotting, I knew it was time to stop doing my research in the field. After all, I started feeling more like a salvage yard worker than a researcher. When I arrived at the yard on the very last day in the field, I noticed a totaled Suzuki Grand Vitara. I asked Hynek whether that meant that *Pan Všemohoucí* was expanding the range. “It looks like,” Hynek answered. The Covid-19 pandemic had forced the salvage yard workers to adjust their business. *Pan Všemohoucí* even confided in me that he was considering becoming an official auto salvage yard to get state subsidies. Eventually, it did not happen; Covid-19 gradually disappeared, as if it had not existed at all, and the activities of informal salvage yard workers returned to their old ways. Later that day, when I was leaving the yard on my adventure tourer for good, I knew I would not visit the place for some time. I needed distance, although I felt a bit of “end-of-summer-vacation syndrome.”

The purpose of this research was to discover a place and its environment that were escaping the attention of researchers so far, albeit it offers a wealth of impulses for further study and research, not only of current global problems. Hopefully, I fulfilled the main research goal of my dissertation project, that is, to bring a new world into being by making visible the auto salvage yards’ environment, as it can tell us a lot about the current prevailing politico-economic system and the way in which its possibilities can be used for socially positive consequences without such being primarily intended, as this environment sustains capitalism and simultaneously corrects the damage it causes. After all, everyone can find answers to their questions in these places and simultaneously receive new stimuli essential for the theoretical development of their discipline.

This research is based on the assumption that despite the growing trend of researching the area of waste, there is a lack of research in social sciences on auto salvage yards, which are somehow marginalized. Sociocultural anthropology, as a discipline of otherness or exoticism, is a perfect tool for learning about any society and, nowadays, especially, the hidden corners of one's own society, because these places can tell us a great deal about our own society. However, this research does not claim universal validity. Its conclusions are linked to the specific environment of the informal auto salvage yards in rural Bohemian settings. Nevertheless, a certain universality can be assumed, at least in the Czech context, since informal auto salvage yards are an integral part of the network of legal yards.

Thus, in addition to presenting and describing the everyday life of salvage yard workers at one informal auto salvage yard in central Bohemia wrapped in the context of the omnipresent mis/trust related to friendship, hostility, and knowledge “battles,” I discussed the meaning of various greenwashing eco-slogans, which in reality seem more like a tired marketing ploy than a real solution to current environmental problems. In this context, I build on the theory of containers and one of the inspirational authors for visual anthropology—Vilém Flusser—and combine it with the idea of the ecology and economy as not mutually exclusive parts of originally one concept (*oikonomia*) to touch upon the idea of responsiveness concerning wasting and its shift towards the individual level and morality, and consequently, feelings of personal guilt.

Based on salvage yard workers' creativity and skills, I also aimed to reveal that there are practices and ways of reaching sustainability—through the profit motive—that are not recognized as such, and therefore, might be forgotten or ignored as marginal. I chose to frame these practices within the concept of quiet sustainability—complemented with recent ideas

on the practices of repair, maintenance, and care—which became a lens to see that “greening” can also be achieved quietly by the grey economy of salvaging cars. I responded to the invitation to acknowledge practices that are sustainable in outcome, but do not seek or claim to be, and to the call to bring new worlds into being by making visible the range of existing diverse economies, and thus contributed to the expansion of the awareness of our discipline by investigating another marginalized place where it is possible to experience these phenomena.

The world of auto salvage yards is about a strong interconnection between humans and things; therefore, not surprisingly, I focused on the analogy between human bodies and car bodies. Sometimes, these bodies—as assemblages—share a similar fate; their organs and spare parts can be disassembled and used in different contexts. Cars and humans are divisible individuals comprising a complex of separable parts and can be dismantled. This “operation” happens at places of second chances—hospitals and auto salvage yards—which share a similar spatial arrangement, employ all sorts of instruments and tools that enable the smooth running of the operation, and observe rituals in connection with dirt. The organs of humans who died during a car accident or later in the hospital can be commodified in the same way as the parts of the car they were driving.

With the concept of the person-car, I intended to emphasize the close dynamic relationship not only between cars—as material objects—and humans or non-humans inside cars; but also between that whole assemblage and the material world as well as humans or non-humans outside. I presented the car as a human’s second body to demonstrate the flexibility of human bodily boundaries; the human body can include lots of incorporated objects—in our case, the car. Automobile technology may change the vehicles used by humans in such a way that the driver feels

these automobiles to be bodiless, but living in the material world will always be bodily felt, no matter how disassociated humans might feel in cars.

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## Resümee

Diese Dissertation soll auf Grundlage langfristiger ethnografischer Forschung auf einem informellen Auto-Schrottplatz in der Region Mittelböhmen zeigen, dass es Orte gibt, die die vom neoliberalen Kapitalismus verursachten Schäden reparieren, und das obwohl sie auf der kapitalistischen Profitlogik beruhen und damit dieses global vorherrschende politisch-ökonomische System gleichzeitig am Leben erhalten. Auto-Schrottplätze sind relativ marginalisierte Orte und dies sowohl im Sinne der gesellschaftlichen Wahrnehmung als auch vonseiten der Wissenschaft. In der gegenwärtigen Zeit voller Fragen, die die Nachhaltigkeit des menschlichen Handelns betreffen, können sie uns jedoch dabei helfen, unsere eigene Gesellschaft zu verstehen, vor allem durch das Verstehen verborgener Ecken, über die nicht viel gesprochen wird und die vielleicht nicht einmal als etwas betrachtet werden, was dabei helfen kann, akademische Theorien zu entwickeln und gleichzeitig Handlungsweisen zu finden, die positive gesellschaftliche Auswirkungen haben.

Nach einer einführenden Vorstellung und Beschreibung des alltäglichen Lebens von Schrottplatz-Mitarbeitern, das eingebunden ist in den Kontext ständigen Vertrauens/Misstrauens verbunden mit Freundschaft, Feindschaft und gelegentlichen kleinen Kämpfen zwischen den Mitarbeitern und ihren Kunden beim Versuch, Teile der Autowracks zu verkaufen, wendet sich die Diskussion der Bedeutung verschiedenster Öko-Slogans zu, die als sog. Greenwashing bezeichnet werden können. In Wirklichkeit kann sich hinter ihrem grünen Glanz eher ein Marketingtrick verbergen als eine wirkliche Lösung aktueller Umweltprobleme. In diesem Zusammenhang stütze ich mich auf die Containertheorie, die ich mit der Idee des Ökonomischen und des Ökologischen als sich gegenseitig ausschließende Einheiten von ursprünglich einem Konzept (*oikonomia*)



kombiniere, und berühre die Frage der Verantwortung in Bezug auf Abfälle und ihre Übertragung auf die Ebene der Individuen und ihr moralisches Empfinden, was bis zu Gefühlen des persönlichen Versagens in diesem Bereich führen kann.

Auf Grundlage der Erfahrung mit der Kreativität und den Fähigkeiten der Schrottplatz-Mitarbeiter soll mithilfe des Konzepts der „stillen Nachhaltigkeit“ - ergänzt durch aktuelle Theorien über Praktiken im Zusammenhang mit der Reparatur, Wartung und Pflege von Dingen – gezeigt werden, dass „Greening“ auch im Stillen durch den grauen Markt der Verschrottung erreicht werden kann. Der Fall der Schrottplätze zeigt also, dass Nachhaltigkeit auch durch das Streben nach Profit erreicht werden kann. Auf Schrottplätzen verbindet sich das Ökonomische mit dem Ökologischen, sodass die hier zu beobachtende unbeabsichtigte Nachhaltigkeit einen Raum zur Diskussion über die durch das Profitmotiv erzielte Nachhaltigkeit eröffnet.

Die Welt der Auto-Schrottplätze ist durch eine starke Verbindung von Menschen und Dingen gekennzeichnet. Aus diesem Grund konzentriert sich die Dissertation auf die Analogie zwischen dem menschlichen Körper und der Karosserie eines Autos. Manchmal kann es passieren, dass diese Körper – die ich als Assemblagen wahrnehme – ein ähnliches Schicksal teilen: Ihre Organe und Teile können in einem anderen Kontext verwendet werden, da Autos und Menschen aus einem Komplex von trennbaren Teilen bestehen, die aus dem Ganzen entfernt werden können. Dies geschieht im Zuge einer „Operation“, die an sog. Orten der zweiten Chancen stattfindet, also in Krankenhäusern und auf Schrottplätzen, die eine ähnliche räumliche Anordnung gemeinsam haben, sowie auch die Verwendung verschiedenster Werkzeuge zur Erleichterung des reibungslosen Ablaufs der Operation und auch verschiedenste mit Unreinheit verbundene Rituale. Die Organe eines Menschen, der bei einem oder infolge eines Autounfalls ums Leben

gekommen ist, können ebenso vermarktet werden wie die Teile des Autos, das dieser Mensch gefahren hat. Ausgehend von der Erfahrung des Todes, die in einigen Autowracks gegenwärtig ist, wird in dieser Dissertation die enge Beziehung nicht nur zwischen Autos (als materielle Objekte) und Menschen oder anderen Lebewesen im Inneren des Autos betont, sondern auch die Beziehung dieser Assemblage und der materiellen Welt um sie herum zu Menschen und anderen Lebewesen außerhalb des Autos. Daher soll die Verwendung des Konzepts des sog. „person-car“ vorgeschlagen werden, um die Wahrnehmung des Menschen und des Automobils als ein soziales Wesen zu erleichtern und gleichzeitig das Automobil als einen zweiten menschlichen Körper wahrzunehmen, und zwar um die Idee der Flexibilität der Grenzen des menschlichen Körpers zu demonstrieren, der in der Lage ist, eine Vielzahl von Dingen, in diesem Fall das Automobil, aufzunehmen.

## Shrnutí

V této disertační práci, založené na dlouhodobém etnografickém výzkumu na neformálním autovrakovišti ve Středočeském kraji, se snažím ukázat, že existují místa, která napravují škody způsobené neoliberálním kapitalismem, a to i přesto, že jsou založena na kapitalistické logice profitu a tento globálně převládající politicko-ekonomický systém tak zároveň udržují při životě. Autovrakoviště jsou relativně marginalizovanými místy, a to jak ve smyslu společenského vnímání, tak i ze strany vědecké komunity. V současné době plné otázek, týkajících se zejména udržitelnosti lidského jednání, nám však mohou pomoci porozumět naší vlastní společnosti, a to skrze poznání skrytých zákoutí, o nichž se příliš nemluví a možná dokonce ani neuvažuje jako o místech, která nám mohou pomoci rozvíjet akademické teorie a zároveň pomoci nalézt způsoby jednání, které mají pozitivní společenské dopady.

Po úvodním představení a popisu každodenního života vrakařů, který je zaobalen v kontextu neustálé ne/důvěry spojené s přátelstvím, nepřátelstvím, a občasnými „bojůvkami“ mezi vrakaři a jejich zákazníky při snaze prodat díly z autovraků, obracím diskusi k významu nejrůznějších eko sloganů, které mohou být označeny za tzv. greenwashing, přičemž ve skutečnosti se za jejich zeleným leskem spíše může skrývat pouhý marketingový tah než skutečné řešení současných environmentálních problémů. V této souvislosti stavím na teorii kontejnerů, kterou kombinuji s myšlenkou ekonomického a ekologického jako vzájemně se nevylučujících entit původně jednoho konceptu (*oikonomia*) a dotýkám se otázky zodpovědnosti v souvislosti s odpadem a jejím přesunem na úroveň jednotlivců a jejich morálního cítění, které může vyústit až v pocity osobního selhání v oblasti zbavování se odpadu.

Na základě zkušenosti s kreativitou a schopnostmi vrakařů se skrze koncept „tiché udržitelnosti“ – doplněný o současné teorie praktik

spojených s opravováním věcí, jejich údržbou a péčí o ně – pokouším ukázat, že „zelenání“ lze dosáhnout také v tichosti skrze šedou ekonomiku rozebírání autovraků. Příklad vrakovišť nám tak naznačuje, že udržitelnosti je možné dosáhnout i prostřednictvím touhy po zisku. Na vrakovištích se ekonomické snoubí s ekologickým, a proto nezamýšlená udržitelnost, kterou zde lze pozorovat, otevírá prostor pro diskusi o udržitelnosti dosažené skrze motiv profitu.

Svět autovrakovišť je charakteristický silnou provázaností lidských bytostí a věcí. Z tohoto důvodu se v disertaci soustředím na analogii lidského těla s tělem automobilu. Někdy se může stát, že tato těla – jež vnímám jako asambláže – sdílejí podobný osud: jejich orgány a součástky mohou být použity v jiném kontextu, jelikož automobily i lidé jsou složeni z komplexu oddělitelných částí, které mohou být z celku odebrány. To se děje v průběhu „operace“, odehrávající se na tzv. místech druhých šancí, tedy v nemocnicích a na vrakovištích. Operační sály a autodílny sdílejí podobné prostorové uspořádání, stejně jako užití nejrůznějších nástrojů usnadňujících hladký průběh „operace“, nebo nejrůznější rituály spojené s nečistotou. Orgány člověka, který zemřel při či v důsledku autonehody, mohou být komodifikovány stejným způsobem jako části auta, které tento člověk řídil. Na základě zkušenosti se smrtí přítomnou v některých vracích automobilů, zdůrazňuji v disertaci blízký vztah nejen mezi automobily (jako materiálními objekty) a lidmi či jinými žijícími bytostmi, které se nacházejí uvnitř automobilu, ale také vztah této asambláže a materiálního světa kolem ní k lidem i jiným tvorům nacházejícím se mimo automobil. Proto navrhuji užívání konceptu tzv. „person-car“, který má usnadnit vnímání člověka a automobilu jako jedné sociální bytosti, kdy zároveň vnímám automobil jako druhé tělo člověka, a sice proto, abych demonstroval myšlenku flexibility hranic lidského těla, které je schopné inkorporovat nejrůznější škálu věcí, v tomto případě automobil.