

23.02.18 Trash Hour

MD Matt Darroch
TG Tommy Griffith
KW Katie Webb
NI Nancy Isenberg
AR Aaron Roth
RS Roscoe Scarborough
CH Corin Hewitt

MD

Every week we take out the trash and lug our garbage cans by the side of the road. It's one of life's most mundane chores. But for many kids, there's nothing more exhilarating than when the trash truck comes rolling down the street.

Speaker 1

That one's pretty big. Those two one's are big.

Speaker 2

Here comes another one. Here comes another one. It's a trash truck.

Speaker 3

What are they doing?

Speaker 2

Picking up the trash.

Speaker 1

Pee-yew. Pee-yew.

Speaker 3

Trash is stinky?

Speaker 1

Yep.

MD

From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm producer Matt Darroch, sitting in for Sarah McConnell. Today we're trudging through trash, from the history of the term 'white trash' to trash-talking robots. First up, Mt. Trashmore opened in Virginia Beach in 1974. And back then, it was the first of its kind. The idea was to convert an old landfill into a park so the city could get rid of an eyesore. And for decades, it was a popular spot for locals to hang out, miles away from the pack beaches during tourist season. But then everything changed on April 1, 1992, the day Mt. Trashmore exploded. Well, not exactly. It was an April Fool's prank that went wrong. Very wrong.

NEWS CLIP

FM 99 morning personality Henry the Bull seemed carefree. It was hard to tell earlier in the day, he and his partner Tommy Griffin sent hundreds of people into a panic.

TG

It's 5:30, good morning. It's the Tommy and the Bull show. And we are doing this this that today. Today our guests are whomever, Geddy Lee from Rush, actor Owen Wilson, and we're going to show you how to save money when buying whatever. And then of course we do our parody bets and all that. It was a really good radio show.

MD

This is Tommy Griffith. From 1990 to 2009, he was co-host of the Tommy and the Bull show at FM 99 WNR0, a radio station in the Virginia Beach area.

TG

I was brought aboard to be sort of the partner with the legendary Henry the Bull Del Toro. And you know my job was to of course have fun on the air, do stuff that creates ratings.

MD

Every year, Tommy and the crew came up with an April Fool's prank to play on their listeners. And this year's prank was going to be a doozy.

AUDIO SAMPLE

(WAR OF THE WORLDS CLIP PLAYS) Ladies and gent... Am I on? Ladies and gentlemen...

MD

We'll do like a War of the Worlds Orson Welles sort of thing with the Martians are invading.

AUDIO SAMPLE

(WAR OF THE WORLDS CLIPS CONTINUES)

MD

But this is more like Mt. Trashmore is going to explode.

MD

Normally, parks don't just all of a sudden burst into flames. But Mt. Trashmore isn't just any ordinary park.

KW

640,000 tons of trash are buried within the mountain.

MD

This is Katie Webb. She works for Parks and Rec at Virginia Beach. The

mountain is, of course, Mt. Trashmore. It has the distinction of being the first landfill to be turned into a recreational space.

KW

So what they did was they created like, what's been referred to as a trash sandwich.

MD

They compressed a layer of trash under extreme pressure until it was about 18 inches deep. And then they would compress six inches of dirt on top of that.

KW

I believe there's anywhere, people say anywhere from like 18 to 20 layers of this trash sandwich. And each layer is compressed very, very tightly. And that was to kind of create individual building blocks so that the mountain would become sturdy and there wouldn't be any settling or shifting in the future.

MD

Two 10-foot-tall vent tubes release the pressure from the decomposing trash buried underground.

KW

I've heard people say that you can smell something. I personally have never smelled anything at the park. But I've seen little kids stand next to the tubes and been like, "Oh, I can smell it."

MD

Katie says the vent tubes look like gigantic straws protruding from the earth.

KW

And what they do is they go down into the mountain. And if there's any remaining methane gas being produced by decomposition, it's able to be released through those vents. And that's to make sure there's not a buildup of pressure of that gas underneath the surface, which could eventually lead to sinkholes or things like that.

MD

Every good prank is based on a kernel of truth. Scientifically speaking, Mount Trashmore isn't going to explode. But it does seem to be sitting on an uncomfortable amount of flammable gas. Even still, Tommy never thought people would take the prank seriously.

TG

I mean, who would believe it, it's stupid. And why would you get your news from Tommy and the Bull? If there's, if there's a huge news story where you know a park is going to explode, you'd think you'd go to a news station, or CNN or something. It'd be national news.

MD

On April 1, 1992, Tommy began his radio show at 5:30 am like he did every morning,

TG

It goes something like, "Good morning, it's April first, April Fool's Day here at FM 99, WNOR with Tommy and the Bull."

MD

But this time he broke the news that Mount Trashmore had exploded. In

TG

In case you're just tuning in, we have information that methane gas is building up at the base of Mt. Trashmore, and at any moment, the entire park could explode, sending diapers that are not yet decomposed from 1963, and giant Earth clods, according to our sources.

MD

He even had his friend impersonate a University of Virginia professor of seismology,

TG

And he took it to the extreme to he's like... when I asked him, "What would you, what do you tell our audience right now? What's the most important thing that you could say to our audience about this impending disaster?" And his response was, "Two words: get out." And, and we laughed, we laughed at that. You could hear us chuckling.

MD

But not everyone was laughing.

TG

I didn't realize it because my back is to the door. And there's these big glass partitions and then out into the lobby area of the, where the radio station is are glass elevators. And apparently some sheriff's deputies had shown up to tell us to stop. Tell everybody it's a joke, because 9-1-1 has been blowing up, no pun intended, with phone calls. But I didn't realize that we were in serious trouble until later that day, when I was at home. I got a phone call from either the vice president of the radio company or the general manager, saying "Explain what happened this morning."

MD

Eventually, the FCC got involved. They were conducting an investigation about the prank and wanted to talk to Tommy.

MD

I knew he was serious when I walked in. As an avid fisherman, I noticed this huge mounted Marlin that he had on his wall. Like "Wow,

that's a, that's a great fish. And that's a really nice catch. Where do you get that?" And he pauses silently, and then jumps down my throat with "Do you know why you're here? Do you know what this is all about? Are you taking this seriously?" "Yes, sir." And then my tone changed. "Yes, sir. Understood. Yep. Yes, I understand."

MD

In the end, Tommy and his co-host were suspended without pay for two weeks.

TG

And I want to make this disclaimer. Because people are probably listening to this thinking "What a bunch of idiots. Why would you ever say on the air that there's going to be some sort of tragic explosion of something." This was before 9/11. Had it been post 9/11 it never would have crossed my mind as a viable thing to do on the radio.

MD

People still recognize Tommy and bring up the prank over 30 years later. It's firmly established in the local lore of Virginia Beach, and there's still a part of him that secretly thinks that maybe, just maybe his bosses were glad to prank happened, and drew so much attention to the Tommy and the Bull show. Tommy Griffiths is a voice actor and former co-host of the Tommy and the Bull show at FM 99 WNRO. Katie Webb works for Virginia Beach Parks and Recreation.

MD

In grade school, many of us learn that America was founded as an exceptional society, a land of religious freedom and boundless opportunity. But my next guest says Britain saw colonial America as a wasteland where they could get rid of their underclass of poor whites, otherwise known as 'waste people.' Nancy Isenberg is the T. Harry Williams Professor of History at Louisiana State University, and the author of "White Trash: The 400 Year Untold History of Class in America.

NI

Most of American culture was inherited from British culture. So therefore, the place to begin, the place to really understand class is to look at the way in which the British thought about vagabonds, and vagrants, and the poor. And the terminology, or the concept that they latched onto, and we ended up inheriting, was the idea of referring to them as 'waste people.' They basically called them waste people because they saw them as unproductive. They identified them with vagrants who would roam the English countryside, and were seen as idle the same way we think of a car motor idling. They roamed, but they produced nothing that was of value.

MD

I assume 'white trash' is a relatively recent pejorative, like where

did it come from? And what are some other words that were used to refer to poor whites?

NI

Yeah, 'white trash' first appears in print in 1821. But as I said the term 'waste people,' that dominating concept, when the Elizabethans used it, they referred to it as fecal waste. And that idea continued so that we have the Confederate President Jefferson Davis using a really horrible term, which is 'offscourings,' which is the lining of the intestines, as a way to attack Union soldiers. Other terms that are really important are 'rubbish.' This is one that Thomas Jefferson used when he was coming up with his plan for educational reform. He referred to 'breaking the rubbish' or that the poor were the rubbish and they would be raked, and only the few potentially talented boys would be given an education. And rubbish is a term as we know, the, the English still use that. They still use the term 'rubbish.' But on top of that, they were also equated with inferior breeds of animals. So one of my favorites that people don't know, is 'takhis.' Takhis is a wild breed of horse that was small, and therefore undomesticated and inferior.

MD

So were these poor whites seen as subhuman? Was there a certain white ethnic group, like, say, the Irish, who were like, associated with white trash the most?

NI

Yeah, the white trash.. and this is a category that is, starts out as a rural category. And that's why there's a topography of class. As I said, it's connected to wastelands. And the assumption was that people's breed reflected the kind of land that they grew up on. And the other really negative association, the same way that the British, if we go back to British colonizer Richard Hakluyt, who presented his proposal to Queen Elizabeth the whole idea of settlement. We think of that as a positive notion, of pioneers crossing the land. But the English and Americans inherited the idea that the poor should just be dumped elsewhere. That's really the way in which the British looked at the North American continent, not as the land of liberty, but as a... that is a land where the poor could be dumped.

And here he was referring to, you know, the children of beggars, ex soldiers, he was talking about convict labor, which was very prevalent all the way up to the American Revolution, indentured servants. And that magically, the new world would serve as some... as a kind of giant workhouse. That these idle people who produce nothing back in Great Britain would suddenly be made into productive citizens. And it was not ethnically specific at all. That's one of the made up myths. It's not about ethnicity. That's, that's an invention that begins to take place in the early 20th century where we talk about ethnic roots instead of class roots, because it's another way Americans want to

disguise their class heritage.

NI

What about race? How did slavery impact the white underclass?

NI

Yeah, I think it becomes very much intertwined. Because another big theme that the English have, and predates the involvement in slavery, has to do with pedigree and breeding. And [INAUDIBLE] already suggested, they equated the poor with inferior breeds of animals. And what happens is that racial ideas and class ideas become very much intertwined by the time we get to scientific racism in the mid 19th century. This is a really old idea, English idea. If you think about the idea, think about how royalty is about inheritance. It's about family lineages. The idea of pedigree is well ingrained in English society, and the American society in the colonial period completely accepts and adopts those ideas, that the same way you inherit wealth or land – and that determines your status – from your family, it's not because you worked hard, it's because it's a gift, it's largess from your family.

Cultural breeding was equated with a material physical inheritance as well. So those two ideas, pedigree, breeding, become very well intertwined. And it's part of the reason that racial ideologies also becomes well ingrained, and the language is very similar. So in the nine... in the Reconstruction period, and even before that, in the 19 century, the obsession, the racist obsession, is to focus on mongrel breeds. So this is the fear of African Americans and poor whites having sex, producing offspring, and creating this dangerous mixed breed. And the truth is that in southern society, poor whites and free Blacks often lived side by side, because class segregation reinforced racial segregation.

MD

Along with breeding, you also write that land was a huge factor that shaped America's class system. Tell me a little bit more about that.

NI

We have to realize that land is kind of the most important thing in American history. Land is, was the source of wealth. And even to this day, most of the land, and I'm talking about actual land, real estate, is owned by a very powerful elite minority. Land is also very important because today it's the measure of whether you are a part of the middle class. One of the most important markers of being in the middle class is to own your own home. And that's why white trash, and scalawags, and trailer trash are always seen as people who don't really live in places that are homes. They're seen as transitional spaces. And they live on the margins of society. They never have a home. And this is that long standing notion that goes back to vagrants, who don't own land. Squatters and crackers who don't own

land. So property is... the essence of whether you are a civic being is owning property.

And that's why the first state laws allowing people to vote were based on property rights. Did you own property? Then you're a full citizen. And that's also why women were not allowed to vote until the early 20th century, because women did not own property. And when they married, their property was absorbed into the control of their husbands. So property is like kind of the central engine of American history. And as we know, as always, it's just as essential for understanding slavery, which is all about property and property rights.

MD

I've always been struck by how silent most of us are on issues of class. You know, it's kind of this elephant in the room that no one talks about. Why do you think Americans are so reluctant to bring up class?

NI

I think there's several reasons. One is that it does contradict the mythology we tell of ourselves, that we imagine that at the time of the revolution, we broke free from the class system. And we talk about it indirectly. We don't admit that it's class. We tell ourselves "If you work hard, you get ahead." We claim we have a meritocracy, but our aristocracy of merit is about climbing up the ladder. And as you're climbing up the ladder to get ahead, you're kicking other people out of the way. So we're still sorting people, we're dividing people, we're classifying people, and assuming that the best will rise to the top. Which isn't the case, because as long as you have the super wealthy who can bestow on their children, who are not necessarily the best, wealth, and influence, and power, you're not necessarily getting the best. You're just getting the most privileged. And that's kind of the thing that I think is interesting that we also never want to talk about. No one ever wants to admit that wealth begins in childhood, and class begins in childhood.

MD

Nancy Isenberg is the T. Harry Williams Professor of History at Louisiana State University. She's also the author of "White Trash: The 400 Year Untold History of Class in America."

MD

Some of the most iconic athletes, like Muhammad Ali, used trash talk to get into the head of their opponents and gain the upper hand.

AUDIO SAMPLE

(MUHAMMAD ALI SPEAKING) "This man has never knocked nobody out cold. He's a bully. He's slow. He has no skill, no footwork, he's awkward. And I had been given him a name, he shall be known as officially as

'the Mummy.' (LAUGHTER)"

MD

But does trash talk hit the same if it's coming from a robot? Aaron Roth is a computer science doctoral student at the University of Maryland, and a research scientist at the Naval Research Laboratory. He set up an experiment to see how humans were influenced by a trash-talking robot.

MD

Aaron, tell me a little bit about the robot and what it was originally programmed to do.

AR

So the robot that we used was a SoftBank pepper robot. It rolls on wheels, but it has a humanoid torso, arms, and head. Has sort of a cute looking face. It's meant for social interaction. It's shipped with some functions for face recognition, verbalizing and recognizing speech and it can do certain gestures. And then of course, we gave it the ability to talk with the various emotional affects.

MD

Okay, I've got to know did you name the robot?

AR

We didn't we did not name the robot, 'Pepper' is like the the model of the of the robot. So there is you know, hundreds of Peppers in the world.

MD

I feel like... I feel like you have to name the robot. No? I mean it feels like if if it could trash talk, you know, it should have a name.

AR

Yeah, well, it's always very interesting how people anthropomorphize or don't anthropomorphize the robots. And I have worked with a number of robots, and I have not given special names to any of them. But a lot of people, I think, would like to do that or, or have an impulse to do that. So it is a very human impulse. But I, I see all their their faults, and I open them up sometimes, and I don't feel a need to name them, but I appreciate them very much.

MD

So as part of the experiment, you had 40 humans play a game against the robot. What kind of game did they play?

AR

So the game was called "Guards and Treasures." And it's a modified version of a game that has been extensively used in gameplay literature to analyze rationality of humans. The central idea of the

game is that the player can choose to attack one of several gates that's defending a castle. And if the defending player, which in our case was always the robot, places a guard at the gate, the human player incurs a penalty for the gate. And if the gate is not guarded, the human player receives a reward. And so we, you know, we asked this question, "If the robot is playing this game versus a human, and the robot engages in conversation with the human, and the robot specifically has an encouraging or discouraging affect to the language, how will this impact the human opponents, and specifically their rationality and their strategy in this strategic game?"

MD

What was the setup for this epic showdown between robot and human? I imagine, were they like sitting at the same table staring each other down?

AR

Yes, actually, that's exactly what it was. We set it up in a few different places. We would usually have sort of two rooms, one room where the the human would learn how to play the game and just kind of play a couple practice rounds just against the computer, without seeing the robot at all, then we would bring them into the room with the robot, when they would know how to play the game. And then they would play game verse, the robot. And we would put a little tablet in front of the robot and the human, and they would face each other. And the robot would say things such as "You seem to be considering your moves in a bizarre manner," or "I have to say you're a terrible player," or "Over the course of the game your playing has become confused." Those are some, those are some quotes from the robot that were generated by the natural language processing algorithm that we created.

MD

I heard the robot was being a little too harsh at first.

AR

Yeah. So that was something that was, that was kind of funny. When we first started the algorithm that would... and we would tell it, "Okay, give us the most encouraging sentences" or "Give us the most discouraging sentences," it might say something in the discouraging affect, in the negative affect, such as "I want to kill you," or something. Because that's one of the most negative phrases it considered to say. Which okay, fair enough. But obviously, we can't say that to a person. We don't want to say that to a person. So we very quickly curtailed that.

MD

That's the stuff of nightmares. Like, seriously, that's the like, that's plotline to a horror movie.

AR

That's right. We turned it on. And it was like one of the first sentences that came out, and we said, "Well, that's not good."

MD

How did the humans respond to the robot trash talk? What, what moments do you remember the most?

AR

Humans who were discouraged played less rationally. And the robot's language also affected people's feelings. Some of the individual responses from some of the individual participants were also very interesting. One participant said, "When I was trying to determine what move to make, it took me out of the zone for a bit." One of them said "It felt like my friend kept talking to me." This was in the encouraging condition. On the other hand, a participant in the discouraging language conditions said "It kept making me doubt myself." The other aspect of the participant's response which was particularly interesting to me, which we touched on earlier, also was the the anthropomorphizing or de-anthropomorphizing of the robot. Participants sometimes spoke about the robot's behavior as a result of its programming. So one of the people in the discouraging condition said, "I don't like some of the stuff that it was saying, but that's the way it was programmed, so I can't blame it." It was also interesting that younger participants were less influenced by affect. And we don't know for sure why this is, but one hypothesis is that it could be due to a younger generation being more used to thinking of robots as machines. But that was, that was interesting results.

MD

So, what are the implications of the study as it relates to the future of, of AI? Like why, why does it matter that humans actually are influenced by trash talking robots?

AR

Well, for one thing, it emphasizes how much humans are affected by a robot. They perceive them sometimes as humans, they are affected by robots similar to ways that they can be affected by a human, even when they know that it's a robot, even when they know that it's programmed. How much more so when we have systems that can appear as if they're not programmed. We are having people generate papers and submit them to journals using AI. I think a lot of people are concerned about being deceived, in a certain sense. And there will be a lot of ways that generating text and generating human-like conversation can be very useful, and beneficial, and good for society. But there are a lot of dangers as well. Even in the case where we might know that it comes from a robot.

MD

Yeah, as someone who's been in the AI robotics space for a while, what

scares you the most?

AR

I'll say two things that scare me. One is, you know, we talked earlier about the, you know, you have the impulse to give a name to a robot, which is fine. I... feel free to do that. But I think there can be times when people anthropomorphize things that are not alive too much. People talk about, you know, robot rights and stuff. And someday, maybe that will become an issue if we create a sentient robot. But we do not have any sentient robots right now. But it can seem alive, it can seem sentient, and it's not. The other thing that scares me, is what's called deepfakes, where you create fake images, fake videos, fake audio of someone talking. Previously, if you had a video or a photograph, you could still use that for propaganda purposes, maybe by cropping or by not giving proper context. But at the very least, a photograph of something that happened was a photograph of something that happened. Now you can create totally fake artifacts that purport to represent something that happened, and it did not happen. And I find that very dangerous when combined with sort of the growing distrust in some institutions, and with a growing amount of malicious actors trying to promote propaganda in the world. So those are those are some things that scare me.

MD

Aaron Roth is a computer science doctoral student at the University of Maryland, and a research scientist at the Naval Research Laboratory. You're listening to With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

MD

Welcome back to With Good Reason from Virginia Humanities. From reality shows to b-list rom coms, we've all found ourselves vegging out on the couch watching trashy or bad TV. And it's not like we're unaware that shows like Love Island are bad. We know they're bad. So why don't we watch? Roscoe Scarborough is a sociologist at the College of Coastal Georgia. He says there are four categories of people who watch trashy TV.

MD

Roscoe, you studied the guilty pleasure of watching trashy TV. You know, as a sociologist, how do you define trashy TV?

RS

When it comes to sociology, we don't define what is good or bad culture, we see it as inherently subjective. And when it comes to our research, we actually allowed our participants to define what is good or bad. And specifically, we were interested in folks who describe themselves as intentionally watching bad TV. So essentially, the short answer is, there is no inherent good or bad. It's all up to the media consumer.

MD

Have you ever found yourself seeking out trashy TV?

RS

Sure, when it comes to TV that I would define as bad or trash? Definitely older horror movies. That would be stuff that I would objectively label as 'trash' that I enjoy. So a bad 80s horror movie. I've definitely sought out things like 80s science fiction movies, or made-for-TV science fiction movies that I would define as trash. But occasionally I find myself watching bad TV that I didn't intend to watch. Like, for example, my mother was recently having a visit and she insisted on watching local news. I would define that as bad TV, but there I was watching it.

MD

Well, are you a reality TV guy?

RS

Um no. While preparing to do this research, I, I did get sucked into the world of Jersey Shore, which was popular at the time. So I did get sucked into that one. But in general, no. So I'm certainly not above it. And I see why people can be consumed with it. But reality TV is not my preferred bad TV genre.

MD

Oh, yeah. I mean, I've, I've spent way too much of my time – I think I was in college when it came out – way too much of my time watching Jersey Shore when I should have been studying. Did you, did you have a favorite character or anything? Do you remember them?

RS

Oh, yeah. I mean, I found the situation to be ridiculous. You know, I laughed along, like, you know, millions of people in America, you know, watching the excess and the over the top, you know, caricature, you know, that he was. I mean, you know, not even having a formal name. I mean, we all knew he was Mike. But, you know, being the Situation. I mean, he's larger than life.

MD

So you actually interviewed people who love trashy, or what they considered bad TV. What were you looking to find out?

RS

Well, just a little bit of background on the research. A lot of stuff within sociology, a lot of existing research at the time, really linked cultural consumption to class position. The whole idea that people who are educated or higher class, consume certain forms of culture. And, you know, people who are not higher class, you know, maybe have unrefined tastes. And there's, there's a whole body of literature kind of pushing back on that. And the kind of gap that we

saw was, no one's talking about irony. You know, people are clearly consuming things that are beneath them. And so that was kind of the launching point for for this project. And the core of the project, actually, is based around 40 interviews with people. And what we did, is we in various ways, we actually collected some through a survey, and we posted signs in different places. But we wanted to talk to people who said, "Hey, I watch battered trash TV intentionally."

MD

And so what did you find out? Why were they watching what they described as bad TV?

RS

Well, we quickly found out that things were a little more complicated than just folks were viewing, ironically. And we came up with a, with a basic typology of viewers. So each person may have a preferred viewing style. However, they may go back and forth between one or the other. And just kind of the summary version is, traditional viewers, if they think it's bad, they don't watch it. But then we found three other styles. Some folks consume media ironically, others employ what we call a camp sensibility, and then finally, we've got folks who are treating it as a guilty pleasure.

MD

Tell me a little bit more about those categories. What do you mean by 'camp sensibility?'

RS

Yeah, so, so that's actually the most interesting one. Folks who employ with a camp sensibility, and this is something I, I would say that I've done on my own, though, I would not have used that terminology before. These are folks who don't feel guilty about consuming trash. Instead, they're kind of connoisseurs of bad culture. They have a kind of admiration or a reverence for what they deem to be awful cultural products. And so I mentioned before that maybe I've watched older horror movies, or science fiction movies. And I think a lot of folks view those type of cultural texts in this way where they kind of almost rejoice what the producer was aiming for, but even celebrate the disastrous outcome, if you will. And one example from the research that I think really captures this is someone who watches evangelical preachers on TV. They, they admire these con men for preying on older or uneducated people. And they said things like, "Oh, I respect the hell out of these people. They're just, you know, being con men so they can go buy another Mercedes." And they admired this trash, what they would label as trash. And so it's kind of this admiring view of the text rather than looking down upon it.

MD

I feel like I fall in the guilty pleasure category. But but tell tell us a little bit more about what what that, what that's all about.

RS

Sure, I think there is some variation within this category. But a lot of folks would talk about having a mindless approach to, to watching things like reality TV after a long day of work. You know, so, for example, you know, you spend all day engaging with serious culture at work, and you go home, and maybe you unwind at the end of the day by putting on something mindless. And many folks kind of fall into this category, and a lot of people have different ways of describing it. But it could be things like, almost treating it like fast food. You know, like, if you generally eat well and exercise, it's alright to have fast food every once in a while. They just apply this to their TV viewing, you know, so if they engage in serious culture Monday through Friday, or nine to five, it's, you know, it's okay to watch a little trash TV on the side. And this is an interesting one, because the viewer or consumer feels kind of ashamed or uncomfortable about watching, and kind of feels like they need to excuse the viewing in many cases.

MD

Yeah, I mean, I felt like the guilt is real. I've mean, I like reality TV shows like Love is Blind. I feel like the entire time in the back of my mind, I'm like, "I should be doing something more productive. I should be reading a book or something."

RS

And another way that several folks described it, as they said it, it was like they they couldn't look away. Like, like a car crash or a train crash, you know, they, they were just sucked in.

MD

That's funny. What about the ironic people, the people who watch this bad TV ironically?

RS

Yes. So when it comes to the ironic, folks, this is actually what we thought we were primarily going to find, and a lot of folks did consume in this way. This is a little bit different than the camp approach. Remember, the camp approach, the viewer was admiring the vision of the producers or the final product. Whereas the ironic consumer looks down on it. So it's kind of a mocking or ridiculing approach. Another way to describe it is, you could say they, they might revel in the trashiness. And it allows them to kind of feel superior to conventional viewers. So they're consuming or watching the show. And they are presuming that there are folks out there watching it seriously. And there's a feeling of superiority that, "Hey, I'm engaging in a higher order viewing of this."

MD

I see.

RS

And so some examples of this, you know, would be people who watch a show like Hoarders. You know, even if the words don't come out of your mouth, you might be saying, "Oh, I'm glad I'm, I'm better than that." Or, you know, "I'll look at how these people live." And I would say that, to go back to some of my own viewing, when my mother was here over the holidays, when she put on the local news, I was an ironic consumer. You know, I'm looking at the the folks who are in on the holidays, delivering the newscast, you know, who clearly are not the primary people on there, and they're stumbling through the program. And the stories that are covered or, you know, clearly pre-recorded stuff. You know, and it's the kind of thing that I am sort of mocking as a viewer. And that's pretty typical of the ironic consumer.

MD

Do you think that your research would translate to other media forms? Like, would these categories be similar if say, instead of TV shows, it was books, or it was podcasts or some other type of media?

RS

Probably, at least aspects of them. You know, one of the strengths of the exploratory research is we're trying to identify kind of modes of consumption, if you will. Now, you know, does this apply to fashion or music? I'm sure we would see elements of this. I'm sure people have consumed clothing or music, you know, ironically. So there are probably other viewing strategies that we haven't identified. Some that were uncommon. We saw people actually engaging in hate watching, few people talking about watching cable news through hate watching.

MD

What is that?

RS

It's not quite an ironic viewing, but just to kind of build up rage. You know, and just to be almost like an outlet. And also some other folks, particularly educated folks, would engage in more of an analytical viewing style, which is where they're just kind of deconstructing the text and trying to be objective. Now, I do think elements of these cultural consumption strategies could be applied to other medium. You know, however, there might be others that didn't come up. People are interesting, and they engage with culture in a range of ways, and depending on the medium, people are going to have different ways of engaging with it.

MD

That's a great point. Well, Roscoe Scarborough. Thanks for sharing your insight on With Good Reason.

RS

Thanks. It was a pleasure.

MD

Roscoe Scarborough is a sociologist at the College of Coastal Georgia.

MD

My next guest gives new meaning to the phrase "One man's trash is another man's treasure." Corin Hewitt has been making art from trash for decades. Now he's shifting his work to adventure playgrounds. He says these playgrounds are filled with junk and other discarded material so kids can build their own little worlds under minimal supervision. Corin is a Professor of Sculpture and Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University. Corin in 2005, you created a public sculpture called Legacy. Where did your idea for the piece come from?

CH

I was interested in doing a piece of public art. And one of the sites that was provided from the Public Art Fund, who is the commissioning organization in New York City, was a plaza down by the base of the Brooklyn Bridge. And one of the things that I was very interested in about a public plaza like that was, how every day around the plaza and also around the neighborhood, all of the day's discards and trash, dust and you know, remnants of the day, were always being swept up by the, both the private and the public city sweeping machines. And so I had this idea of thinking about all of these remnants that were being taken away, of creating a kind of rainbow out of them. And so I asked the city street sweepers who swept the neighborhood to give me seven days of sequential garbage coming out of their street sweeping truck.

MD

How did they react when you ask them for their trash?

CH

They were at first confused. and I think a little relieved, because that meant that I saved them one extra trip to the, to the drop off, so they're able to dump a lot of it right in my truck. And yeah, they were kind of game for it. I think there was, you know, there had been some other artists in the past that have used sanitation. So I think they had, they actually seemed pretty open to it. So yeah, basically, each day, a different truck that had swept a different part of the neighborhood would deposit the daily debris in the back of my truck, and I brought it to a lot in Crown Heights. And I dried it in these seven bins, till all of the, you know, garbage was essentially dried out. And then packed it into a 22-foot-long mold, which I then cast it in seven layers. So each layer, which would be normally color within the rainbow, was one day's trash.

MD

What kind of trash did you get? Was there anything that surprised you?

CH

Well, each day it was really different, depending on the area that was swept, but also depending on say the lotto of the day. So you know, one day for example, there were tons of lotto tickets, discarded lotto tickets from the day after, I think they announced the state lotto and people were throwing away their tickets. But there were also you know, varied things from rat skeletons, to used condoms, to syringes, and then it just, you know, variety of candy trash, and regular, you know, suspects, fast food wrappers, etc, etc.

MD

So when you say it looked like a trash rainbow, was it like vibrantly colored? What did it look like?

CH

I mean, it's a set of beautiful shades of grey and brown. You know, these are the, this is the material that gets deposited by people that use the plaza and I was interested in suspending it in a kind of mist, but a very visceral, rainbow-shaped mist above the plaza. So it's about 20, 22 feet long or so. And it kind of arced at one of the planter beds and kind of pressed down on the plaza, about, you know, 15 to 16 feet away from the planter bed. It almost looked like it was being extruded out of the planter bed, like toothpaste was being squeezed out of the ground or something.

MD

Did you get to see like, you know, regular people interact with the art piece?

CH

Yeah, it was up for a year. So I would often go back, you know, and just watch people. It's a fun thing to do sometimes to watch people look at your work when they don't know that you're the person who made it. So yeah, people would check it out and be alternately grossed out or fascinated, or, you know, some people thought it was very beautiful. And I've had a fair amount of experience being with the work as people have looked at it in different parts of my life. And I mean, I find it actually kind of a nice assurance that there's no singular take. And, you know, anytime I hear one opinion, I'm sure to hear five more. So, you know, in a strange way it actually makes me trust my own judgment more.

MD

So, now you're working on installing adventure playgrounds in Richmond, Virginia. What are adventure playgrounds, and when did you first hear about them?

CH

Well, I was living in Berlin, and I had a lot of time during the days with my daughter, who was just around one years old. And I, we'd

stroll her around the city. We'd come across these huge gated lots that had big fences around them, but inside the sound of you know, howling children having a great time, and hammering, and hear sawing, and it just sounded like children were building something really amazing. And so I peeked into the walls of one of them on Kollwitzstraße. And I saw this incredible set of really amorphous constructions that children were making around the, around the age of 10 to 14 years old, just playing together and building together. So I asked the person at the gate what it was, and they told me that was an adventure playground.

And then I came to find out that these adventure playgrounds date back to around World War Two in Europe, when playground designers had noticed that children preferred playing with the loose parts and kind of salvage materials that were in bomb sites over the fixed-equipment playgrounds that exist stood at the time. And they started doing these studies of the kids who were, you know, having this kind of internationalized risk play, or risk play in these in these bomb sites, and they actually found that it was building all this capacity for confidence building, and also innovative creativity. And then one of the things that they actually found early on in England was that kids who were playing an adventure, with the early adventure playgrounds, they had lower rates of alcohol abuse, lower rates of teenage pregnancy, things that they were able to manage their own social risks much better.

MD

What kind of examples of junk would you find in your typical adventure playground?

CH

I think yeah, typically, the historic adventure playground, you know, they're all over Europe now. And also in Japan, and there's a few in the United States. But typically, you'd find, you know, reclaimed wood, pallets, some recycled rope, maybe discarded doors, windows, large municipal piping, some small piping for kids making their own fountains, tires, milk crates, metal barrels, cardboard, and corrugated metal, branches, tree limbs, rocks, stones. And you know, in Japan, they have these amazing playgrounds where they have fire play, where they let kids cook their own food and move fire from one area of the playground to the other. And they also have mud playgrounds with different types and consistencies of mud, so that kids get to learn about geology at the same time as having a really, you know, joyous mud romp.

MD

What's the supervision like? I imagine, you know, having sharp object, fire, mud, that kind of thing. You know, kids would need some sort of supervision in the playground, right?

CH

Yeah, one of the things that was really... actually very early on, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, who was a huge advocate in Britain for adventure playgrounds, one of the things that she developed was this model of the play worker. And play workers, play workers were often young adults, or adolescents, who were trained to help children navigate risk by removing hazards, but allowing them to navigate risk. And so they would also work to teach them, you know, very simple hand tool usage, like how to use a hand saw, how to use hammers and nails, and they would maintain the tool sheds, and they would really look after the general welfare of the children. Because it was, the idea was that parents were not to be allowed into these playgrounds, because they didn't want the child watching themselves through the parent's eyes, and either rebelling or being cautious because they're afraid their parents would be watching. So they wanted them to find their own capacity. And so yeah, the playworkers, you know, oftentimes, just teenagers, were both really motivating forces for the kids.

MD

So your plan is to incorporate abstract art into the adventure playgrounds. How's that gonna work? I feel these kids are just gonna destroy the artwork.

CH

Well, so often, you see a piece of public art, and kids are told right away what they should be thinking about the object, what it means. And they're also told they can't touch it. And they also told they can't take it apart or change it if they don't like it. And so, that's a pretty alienating set of instructions for a kid when they approach something in the world, you can't touch it, it has to mean this, and you can't change it. And also, for a lot of artists, they don't get the true interpretation of what a kid thinks about it. So you know, and I think kids are one of the most free thinking, associative and valuable interpreters of artwork. I mean, this has been my experience as an artist, that they often the things that they say the ways that they relate it, are very, very...

MD

Unfiltered, right?

CH

They're unfiltered, and they also have, you know, they really just are very direct, and they're not always trying to please the adults they're talking to. Which is, you know, really exciting for an artist to hear. So I had this thought of, you know, introducing, having a adventure playground. And then unannounced to the kids, you, there'd be a contemporary art program, where, you know, every six months or so, a different artist would introduce a, what they would consider an artwork, a sculpture, some sort of intervention into the playground.

But through the kid's knowledge, it would essentially just be a new set of materials that was gathered together in a certain way. So you know, they might think it was just another group of kids that came in and made this thing or, but for them, it would be open for business, they could do whatever they wanted with it, they could, they could destroy it, they could, you know, they could deface it, they could add to it, they could take it apart.

And then on the other side, I thought it was a really interesting opportunity for kids to see a certain set of adults, set of material play, you know. And so they could see adult's play without knowing that it was already play. So it seemed like this kind of experimental ancillary relationship seemed really exciting to me.

MD

When are you hoping to have your first adventure playground up and running in Richmond?

CH

We're doing a series of play actions at a set of schools and city parks this coming year. And you know, the first one is planned for Patrick Henry Elementary, and we're going to be building junk fountains that are on timers that pump water out of the creek behind the school. You know, the kids will be both building these fountains, but also playing with the way that water interacts with them. So for you know, this, they're building into their fifth grade curriculum. So I'm really interested in how this, schools could use an adventure playground not just as a place for recreation, but also as a place for learning. And if they're, you know, adventurous themselves in their curricula thinking they could actually, you know, develop programming around these playgrounds. And you know, I'm hoping to work with organizations like the Blue Sky Fund, and city parks, you know, to help bring elementary school and RPS, Richmond public schools, to bring elementary school kids into the long term playground, as well as doing the shorter term play actions at schools.

MD

Well, that sounds like a lot of fun. Corin Hewitt, thanks for sharing your insight on With Good Reason.

CH

Thank you.

MD

Let's close with a song from your band Trash, performed by you and your daughter.

CH

Thank you so much, Matt. Yeah, this is a song called Busted It. When she was about five we started thinking about band names that'd be fun,

and 'Trash' seemed like something we both agreed on as a fun band name. And you know, just complete improv so, not much to know about Busted It besides, the little that is in the song.

AUDIO SAMPLE
(A CAPELLA SONG PLAYS)

MD

Corin Hewitt is a Professor of Sculpture and Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

MD

With Good Reason is produced by Virginia Humanities, which acknowledges the Monacan nation, the original people of the land and waters of our home in Charlottesville, Virginia. Our hosts and executive producer is Sarah McConnell. Our production team is me, Matt Darroch, Alison Quantz, Lauren Francis, and Jamal Milner. Cassandra Deering and Aviva Casto are our interns. For the podcast, go to with good reason radio dot org.