Henry Mayhew, Urban Ecologist

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> *Recycle:* a. *trans.* To process (waste) so as to convert it into a usable form.
> —*Oxford English Dictionary*

> *Why, sir . . . as to the number of rats, it ain't possible to say . . .*[1]

IN the fall of 1849, when Henry Mayhew was first commissioned to write about London's poor neighborhoods for the *Morning Chronicle*, he was appalled by what he saw. Instead of the running brooks, charming houses, and trees that had defined Bermondsey in the medieval period, there was now "putrid filth," "hovels, sties, and muck-heaps," and "a tidal sewer" on which the community relied for drinking water.[2] In a memorable account published on 24 September 1849, Mayhew writes that at the same time as a little child "dangled her tin cup as gently as possible into the stream, a bucket of night-soil was poured down from the next gallery."[3] One week later, Mayhew returned to the topic of sewage in a lyrical leading article on the ecological patterns of decomposition and recomposition. On a mundane level, this second article is a paean to the recycling potential of excrement of all sorts. More profoundly, it expounds on nature's astonishing economy: what is used in one place returns in another in what Mayhew calls a "doctrine" of "universal Compensation" defined by the "mutually dependent" relations between humans, animals, plants, and things.[4] The first article is Mayhew's well-known and oft-cited "A Visit to the Cholera Districts of Bermondsey," but the second article (hereafter referred to as "Nature") is almost unknown in Mayhew studies; it is not included in any of the abridged anthologies of his work, and it is rarely cited.[5] Taken together, however, these two articles demonstrate how thoroughly intertwined Mayhew's study of urban London was with the ecological issues that inform his thinking throughout the four volumes of *London Labour and the London*

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Poor, for which he is best known today. In this essay, I want to make a case for Mayhew's contribution to a midcentury urban ecology, a contribution that departs from the closed ecology that his vision of waste recycling in "Nature" implies to endorse instead an open ecology consonant with the "open" and "unfinished" form of midcentury London and Mayhew's *London Labour* itself.[6]

London Labour is widely appreciated as the first social survey of poverty in London that values the voices of the poor.[7] Mayhew collects his information from "the lips of the people themselves" (1, xv), but he sets these unprecedented microbiographies alongside a dizzying array of statistics on labor and the city, tables, illustrations, quotations, political and social commentary, etymologies, and reprinted works. This focus on people (the biographies) and social theory (the latter categories) also accounts for a division in Mayhew studies between his groundbreaking anthropological and ethnographic treatment of the London urban poor and his social theory (which itself is divided between readings that consider its contradictory, disorganized, inconsistent, and unfinished formulations either as shortcomings or assets).[8] It is only recently, however, that critics have begun to appreciate what Mayhew has to offer for ecological studies. Here, the focus has been on Mayhew's obsession with the environmental disorders—weather, pollution, decay, sewage—besetting what he calls a "populous city" (2, 7), his studies of animals (especially rats), and his elaboration of secondhand economies and recycling.[9]

Invested in the idea that print culture could promote social and political change, Mayhew does not shrink from cataloging the social, political, and environmental devastations of his day. In Mayhew's first article for the *Morning Chronicle*'s "Labour and the Poor" series (which began three weeks after the articles cited above), he remarks on how, in the city, disparate things are "muddled together."[10] Mayhew's approach to the city does not resolve that muddle but rather animates it. Writing in the context of industrial modernity, Mayhew was keenly attuned to the demise of old trades, as new technologies and industries rendered them redundant and new energy economies generated more itinerant and precarious forms of labor. But despite many attempts, nowhere does he offer a coherent theory that captures the challenges peculiar to industrial modernity. What he gives us instead is a seemingly endless procession of new and interrelated categories that, like the city they sought to describe, were frustratingly porous, permeable, protean, and resistant to closure. And it is this approach that

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can be linked—via recycling, compost, and "usable form"—to the open urban ecology that Mayhew describes and in the context of which, I want to argue, he develops a new print form paralleling the open and unfinished form of the city that is his focus. In the first section of this paper, I address Mayhew's elaboration of recycling and composting in *London Labour;* in the second, I address Mayhew's composition practices. Mayhew's volumes, I will argue, may be read as a casebook study of anti-organic form in which the very appeal he makes to a reassuring closed circuit of natural cycles is undercut by his own practice of open-circuit recycling and his zealous appreciation of myriad inventive urban forms that unspool the expected and generate new, unruly possibilities.

"Compost" is not a word that Mayhew often uses—although he is alert to decomposition and recomposition—and recycling, of course, was anachronistic to his period. But composting and recycling neatly capture Mayhew's eagerness to bring natural cycles into conversation with the transformed urban environment as well as his fascination with the thriving economy of secondhand items by which the poor crafted new livelihoods in a period of economic precarity. Further, compost's close cousin, composition, parallels Mayhew's own writing process, which, if it was, like the city, "muddled together," also involved one definition of composition on which Bruno Latour capitalizes—the "putting together" or combining of diverse things.[11] The proposals in Latour's "compositionist manifesto" capture the potential of new compositional forms to provoke social change and offer, as he puts it, not an alternative to critique "but rather critique acquired secondhand—so to speak—and put to different use."[12] But it is the work of Walter Benjamin—a critic to whom many scholars turn in our current moment of climate precarity—and his elaboration of the scavenging practices (or what we might call recycling and reuse practices) of ragpickers in nineteenth-century Paris that perhaps most closely aligns with Mayhew's approach. Indeed, Benjamin draws on Charles Baudelaire, writing in the same decade as Mayhew, to articulate his new "collage" method: "I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. . . . But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them."[13] In what follows, I trace an urban ecology that is sensitive to the creative fertility of "rags and refuse" to consider compost and composition as intertwined and suggestive of a new methodology, which unites the ragpicker and the writer in the production of open and usable forms generative of social change.

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1. Composting: Secondhand Matter and Human Waste

. . . there was 100 pairs of rats there . . .
sir, here, and there, and everywhere.[14]

Of the two articles noted at the outset, only "Nature" is included in *London Labour*. Attesting to Christopher Hamlin's point that "urban sanitary problems were ecological problems in the most fundamental sense,"[15] "Nature" details one strand of the ecological underpinnings of Victorian thought via the unlikely route of sewage management. What Hamlin refers to as the "recycling imperative" in mid-Victorian approaches to sanitary science is especially relevant to the focus on secondhand items in volume 2 of Mayhew's *London Labour*.[16] It is here that "Nature" is reprinted in a section entitled "On the London Dustmen, Nightmen, Sweeps, and Scavengers." I will return to the composition of *London Labour* in the following section to illustrate the resonance between Mayhew's form and an open ecology; here I want to consider this selection's broader context in the volume and its contribution to mid-Victorian ecological thought in relation to its challenge to the closed circuit that urban recycling promotes.

Whereas Mayhew focuses on what is "bought and sold *first-hand*" by the London poor in volume 1, in volume 2 he turns to the even more "novel, curious, and interesting" practices of "*second-hand* sellers" (2, 6). He begins with a survey of the secondhand items he will address—from tin kettles, old linen, and cigar ends to, somewhat less obviously, the trade in live animals—and closes this introduction with "the many uses to which that which is regarded, and indeed termed, 'offal,' or 'refuse,' or 'waste,' is put *in a populous city*" (2, 7). Far from presenting an obstacle to the smooth operations of cyclical patterns that he will remind us of later in the volume, cities offer all sorts of creative and enterprising responses to secondhand matter. In a "populous city," a horse carcass is not left to decompose, for example, but is turned into tripe, skin, glue, and dye, a process that Mayhew anatomizes, drawing on Charles Babbage's report in *Economy of Machinery and Manufactures* (1835), for five densely packed columns. This is a promising turn for the problems posed by populous cities: it describes a cycle whereby the valueless, here "offal," gains value (2, 9); waste becomes "usable form." Even printed matter—old books, newspapers, ledgers, love letters—take on second lives as packaging, until the very meaning of the word "waste" is reversed such that "waste" defines books and papers that are no longer read but rather

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used. And yet as soon as *use* is the operative mode, open and unpredictable connections emerge that cannot be contained by either recycling as a closed circuit or the categories generated by Mayhew to describe its functioning (2, 11).

If paper ends its life as useful "waste"—itself an unbounded term in Mayhew's lexicon—it begins as rags.[17] The trade in secondhand clothing, among the "most ancient of callings" (2, 26), takes on a grim cast when Mayhew considers "the several uses" to which the reader's "left-off clothes may be put" in the shoddy factory (2, 30). First they are torn and "grinded" with a coarse willow that produces "dry clouds of choking pungent dirt and floating fibres" (2, 30). Once reduced to something like a pulp, "fresh wool is added" to create a "reworked" "mingled material" from which new items can be produced. Mayhew is unsparing in his indictment of the health effects of this "lowest and foulest" of factory work (2, 30), stressing the "choky volumes," the "devil's dust" that is "exactly like smoke," and the "mildewy fungus" that create a respiratory disease called "shoddy fever" (2, 30–32). The "rags which the beggar could no longer hang about him," he concludes, are in this way made into the "library table-cover of a prime-minister" (2, 30–31). Just as the "shoddy" is constituted by many recycled secondhand garments, so too is it constituted by the searing labor conditions of industrial modernity, conditions that here tie rags to books, the beggar to the prime minister, as they also exceed the recycling circuit—witness the pollution, airborne particulates, and labor conditions Mayhew expounds—they describe.[18] In another example of emergent secondhand economics, dogs' dung —ironically called "pure"—is collected and used to cure leather that binds the books that will, in turn, become the "waste" noted above. But just as "pure" is an unlikely term for dog dung—redefined to correspond to its *use*—so too is "recycling" a term inadequate to the many fissures in the open recycling circuit recorded in Mayhew.

While dogs' dung enables the pure-finders to support themselves, however minimally, human excrement is not so easily converted into something useful. Rather, it poses a problem in "populous cities" precisely because of the absence of a viable sanitary system to address rising populations. As Mayhew was well aware from his earlier "Cholera" article, the need for better sanitary measures was especially urgent among the poor, many of whom had moved to London seeking work, only to find their health more imperiled and their living conditions more precarious. That Mayhew chooses to reprint his article on natural cycles in volume 2, the volume dedicated to secondhand matter, and that he

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chooses to do so in the context of population control, is telling. Here, ecology is neither apolitical nor ahistorical; instead, it is *used* by Mayhew to urge reform and support recycling measures that will require concerted urban management extending well beyond the labor practices of isolated individuals. We have already seen how "Nature" was originally published one week after Mayhew's article outlining the political and national neglect of cholera, poverty, and sanitation in Bermondsey. In its reprinting, the implicit politics of natural cycles is only enhanced. On the face of it, "Nature" reads like a standard ecological account celebrating the interconnection of all things. But following the compromised interconnections *London Labour* has thus far cataloged, coupled with the political questions of sanitation and population, a different reading emerges.

They're some of 'em [*rats*] *as big as good-sized kittens . . .*[19]

The dustmen, sweeps, and scavengers comprise the last of three categories "Of Street-Finders and Collectors" who are themselves the last category of six that encompass the volume's focus on secondhand matter. This grouping—the cleaners of the city—occupies the greatest space in the volume, just under four-fifths of it; they are warmly praised for "silently and efficiently" ensuring the city's cleanliness as if under "the care of a tidy housewife" (2, 159). This alliance of the city and the house or *oikos* anticipates Mayhew's turn to the ecological patterns of decomposition and to his sharpening analysis of urban social distress. That is, if the dustmen, sweeps, and scavengers expertly attend to urban filth, the problem of sewage witnessed in the "Cholera" essay and extended here is beyond their capacity to address. Here, a comparison not to the built *oikos*, but to the natural world's composting and purification practices, is instructive:

> That man gets his bones from the rocks and his muscles from the atmosphere, is beyond all doubt. The iron in his blood and the lime in his teeth were originally in the soil. But these could not be in his body unless they had previously formed part of his food. . . . The little lichen, which, by means of the oxalic acid that it secretes, decomposes the rocks to which it clings, and fits their lime for "assimilation" with higher organisms, is, as it were, but the primitive bone-maker of the world. By what subtle transmutation inorganic nature is changed into organic, and dead inert matter quickened with life, is far beyond us even to conjecture. . . . [I]n Nature everything moves in a circle—perpetually changing, and yet ever returning to the point whence it started. Our bodies are continually decomposing

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> and recomposing—indeed, the very process of breathing is but one of decomposition. (2, 160)

This process defines a "wondrous economy" that translates what may be "pollution" for some into "nourishment" for others.[20] The carbonic acid that humans exhale, for example, is what plants take in as nutriments. "Plants," he writes, "are not only Nature's scavengers but Nature's purifiers" (2, 160); Mayhew transposes the terminology he has adopted at the outset of this section and applies it to the plants whose purification properties have been inadequately understood. In this vision of "mutual dependence," plants are seen as protorecyclers transforming what is useless to us, indeed poisonous, into a usable form. The wondrous economy of the system follows from the fact that everyone and everything gains something: "What our lungs throw off, their [plants'] lungs absorb —what our bodies reject, their roots imbibe" (2, 160). Mayhew perceives in this account, indebted to Baron Liebig and new research in organic chemistry, a lesson on recycling that the city would do well to follow: to maintain "the balance of waste and supply" and the "principle of universal compensation" (2, 160), the infrastructure of the city should be designed to ensure that plants receive the human waste that optimizes growth.

Humans have always found excrement offensive, and they have removed it, one way or another, Mayhew observes, from the localities in which they live. But "the idea of using it never entered [their] minds" (2, 160). Inroads in science have helped Mayhew to comprehend that excrement is, in fact, "Nature's capital," that it is "*wealth set aside for future production.*"[21] At this point, Mayhew *interrupts* his "Nature" reprint to offer a critique of Malthus's theory of surplus population and its failure to consider the ecological relations he delineates here (2, 161). That is, he cuts into his recycling essay to add more extended commentary on the topic. Excrement should be removed from the city, processed as fertilizer, and used to enhance agricultural output: "This doctrine of universal Compensation extending throughout the material world, and more especially through the animal and vegetable kingdom, is, perhaps, one of the grandest and most consoling that science has yet revealed to us, making each mutually dependent on the other, and so contributing each to the other's support."[22] Here the material, animal, and vegetable worlds again work together in mutually supportive relations. But the fissure Mayhew introduces into his text in combination with his invocation of Malthus and political economy also binds his urban ecology to the open and unfinished city and its need for political and sanitary reform.

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Indeed, the "doctrine of universal Compensation" may extend through the natural world, but in the city its smooth functioning is thwarted. The solution at the heart of Mayhew's volume—finding solace and comfort in the natural cycle as an answer to the problems besetting a populous and polluted urban environment—is to redirect urban sewage to rural agricultural lands in an interconnected sewer system. While this solution is compelling—Mayhew imagines the sewage seamlessly converted into loaves of bread to feed the poor (2, 162)—its vision of a closed circle of "productive continuity," as Tina Young Choi puts it, fails to be realized. As Choi illustrates, "no system could be perfectly self-sufficient and self-perpetuating in the ways they [Mayhew and Chadwick] envisioned."[23] Choi points to Mayhew's illustration elsewhere in the volume of the shortcomings of the cyclical model he promotes as well as to the wider problem of land availability,[24] but the perforations and interruptions in Mayhew's own print recycling of his article coupled with his framing of this reprint in the context of the intractable city also challenge a hermetically sealed recycling model.

If the city, for example, is like a body in which its refuse—the population's excrement—is "a precious ore, running in rich veins beneath the surface of our streets,"[25] it is not a bounded body. In his introduction to this section, Mayhew notes that it is difficult to demarcate where "the capital begins and ends" (2, 159). He later returns to this point: the city's "precise boundaries and extent cannot be defined" (2, 163), and, citing J. R. McCulloch, it is "difficult to ascertain the extent of the metropolis at any particular period" (2, 163). This porousness of city boundaries is especially clear in Mayhew's numerous, and often idiosyncratic, tables.[26] The section on "London Dustmen," for example, includes six tables. The first two seek to catalog the streets, people, and houses in London to compass the sanitation and cleaning required. But in the text, Mayhew notes that the "total here given can hardly be considered as the dimensions of the metropolis." And even if one *could* draw a line accurately demarcating its boundaries, its size is "so vast as almost to overpower the mind with its magnitude" (2, 159). Further tables subdivide the city by district and attempt to define the city by historical period, but in every case the numbers are unreliable; as Mayhew puts it, all the official bodies seem "to delight in creating a distinct metropolis for themselves," thus producing a statistical "confusion worse confounded" (2, 166). Indeed, the volume opens with a table of statistics and then immediately qualifies it: "it is here cited, as indeed all the statistics in this work are, as an approximation to the truth rather than a definite

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and accurate result" (2, 2). The turn to nature at the heart of Mayhew's volumes on London's "bricken wilderness" (2, 159), then, renders the boundaries between the country and the city, animal bodies and vegetable worlds, the organic and the inorganic, and, indeed, life and death, unstable, porous, and dynamic. In short, a vision for closed-circuit recycling cannot be sustained either in relation to the constraints of midcentury urban development, as Choi notes above, or in relation to the fact that the city itself is not a bounded whole but a dynamic, mobile, and open network of relations.

As Mayhew recorded the city's rapid and unbounded expansion, moreover, so too did his project expand exponentially. The costermonger study in volume 1, for example, initially projected to include only two street biographies to represent the class as a whole, soon "inflates like a balloon," as Anne Humpherys puts it,[27] to include dozens of such biographies in ever-wider circles of inquiry. Instead of closing down and concluding any of his studies, he simply opened new tracks for analysis. Just as there were no boundaries neatly demarcating city from country, so too the communities within the city itself were porous, overlapping, and unsettled. Consider the porous spatial boundaries on which he focuses: the unloading of coal on the docks, the relay of watercress from suburban market to city street, and the rats in the sewers cutting irregularly through the city. In each of these cases, the boundaries—between river and dock, country and city, sewer and dry ground—are defined by activity and movement. Always fascinated by the usable forms derived from secondhand items, Mayhew traces connections between plants and people, excrement and food, rats and livelihoods in collaborative constellations and fertile alliances that never settle or take a final form despite the many charts, tables, statistics, and headings that seek to rein them in. Further, Mayhew's own practice of print recycling opens his earlier article to more extended commentary, interrupts its narrative, and situates it in a series of comments on the ways in which the city resists containment and closure. To see Mayhew as an urban ecologist, then, is to see him as tracing lines of connection such that all the selections of the volume are animated in each instance, but, like this ecological selection in which "Nature" is reproduced from the *Morning Chronicle* with new political commentary and interruptions, there are also perforations or punctures in the cyclical returns.

All my lifetime I've been a-dealing a little in rats . . .[28]

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2. Composing: Usable Form and Open Ecology

There's nothing turns so quickly as dead rats . . .[29]

If Mayhew dedicates many hundreds of pages to the recycling of secondhand matter—from horses, paper, and dogs' dung to human excrement—into usable forms, to what extent can we consider his volumes themselves as usable forms?[30] And if, in his passages on recycling, he privileges movement, connection, collaboration, and relation, to what extent, again, does his form support these discussions? In short, if volume 2 is keen to trace the work of street finders and collectors, to what extent is Mayhew's own practice of collection—"my vocation is to collect facts,"[31] he writes—linked to the material he records?[32] Mayhew offers an account of people, places, animals, plants, and things that does not follow a familiar or easily traceable pattern. He has been much criticized for his haphazard display of material, his lack of systematic conclusions, and his lack of theory. But I want to pause at this question of method to consider not what these volumes could have offered—a theory of labor or poverty—but what they do offer; not what they might have done, in other words, but what they do. I want to suggest that the idiosyncratic mode of Mayhew's collecting of facts and composing of print volumes captures a process that is about relating and interrelating, about composing, decomposing, and recomposing. They do not pin the city down; they set it in motion.

This dynamic process is intimately bound up with the composition—the putting together—of these volumes, a composition that reflects the focus on collecting and resonates with the political imperative underpinning Latour's "compositionist manifesto." Donna Haraway, building on Latour, suggests that "compositionist practices" can build "new collectives" indebted to collaboration.[33] Indeed, to refer to Mayhew as the author of *London Labour* is a misnomer insofar as these volumes are not in any traditional sense single-authored texts. In his introduction, Mayhew notes that he is indebted to two colleagues, Henry Wood and Richard Knight, and that Wood, moreover, deserves "to be considered as one of its authors" (1, xvi); further, when he was working for the *Morning Chronicle*, Mayhew had an entire team at his disposal, and presumably this practice continued with *London Labour*. The entries themselves, as I have noted, include a range of authors from the anonymous *Morning Chronicle* articles, to long passages, if not entire selections, from named authors, to, of course, the selections in the words of the street-folk themselves. But *London Labour* is also collaborative in the

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way that all writing, this article included, is. Even when material is not explicitly cited, it is written in an ongoing dialogue with others, a dialogue that Mayhew's collaborative method highlights and that was enhanced by many of the new forms to which it gave rise.

Haphazard, undisciplined, and collage-informed compositions may be a flaw when one is seeking to articulate a tidy theory, but they are an advantage when one is seeking to describe a volatile, "open and unfinished" city—its labor changes, its environmental changes, its practices, people, plants, things, and animals—to give readers some idea of how the different pieces operate together. Karel Williams, more than others, approaches Mayhew's work on its own terms, alert to the ways in which his efforts to classify create not "classifications but lists" that render his project "interminable" and alert, too, to his "openly chaotic" structures in which material sometimes stops "mid-sentence."[34] Williams argues that Mayhew's "methodological precepts"—what he calls his "inductive and taxonomic" approach—"far from organizing the work . . . become an active disorganizing principle."[35] For him, the "the non-unitary and uncontrolled quality of the discourse of *London Labour* defines [its] modernity."[36]

A compositionist in Latour's sense, like a composter or recycler, is adept at taking what has been neglected, overlooked, or dismissed and transforming it into a "usable form" in an open circuit. While Mayhew's interviews with street-folk have rightly enjoyed wide critical appreciation, the other textual material on which he draws has been less often discussed. And yet this material—the commentaries, summaries of the interviews, tables and statistics, copies of letters and songs and sundry other street productions, governmental reports, lengthy footnotes, illustrations and other found material of all kinds from poems, sample letters, and street literature to selections from Charles Dickens—is integral to Mayhew's project. It is as interrelated as the stones and bones and lichen to which he draws our attention in the natural cycle. The material collected from street people (their voices, songs, and writing) is placed alongside the material collected from published works and official records to put them on the same footing in an inventive, open, uncontained, and nonlinear form.[37] This is not a narrative but, as Marilyn Gaull points out in relation to natural histories and oral traditions, an episodic, composite, collective, and unfinished form ideally suited to an urban ecology.[38]

Consider Mayhew's recycling of texts, for example. He crafts a definition of the "secondhand" by offering a secondhand account of

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Babbage's elaboration of the secondhand (notably, both in exact citation and in paraphrase). Similarly, he offers an account of waste recycling to make compost by recycling his own work, and of wool recycling to make shoddy by reprinting an article from the *Morning Chronicle*. My point, however, is not just that Mayhew was a recycler of speech and print but that (1) these documents, by being placed alongside one another, bring disparate genres and voices into conversation, and (2) they explicitly draw in material from outside the text and, in doing so, open its boundaries. The interviews exceed the bounds of the text as Mayhew sought to track down different informants between the various publication periods and as they also took on extended lives in the "Answers to Correspondents" to which I will turn in more detail below. The recycled print material, moreover, is rarely neatly demarcated: Babbage is cited, there is a digression, he is cited again, and so on; Mayhew imports his text from the *Morning Chronicle* but interrupts it in the middle to offer a fuller commentary and then returns to it. In both cases—and many more could be enumerated—the recycled text does not stay within its "boundaries" but generates new text that is equally recalcitrant to strict delimitation. Like the interviews that critics have come to realize are likely "composites" rather than case studies of single figures,[39] the recycled material also shares a fuzziness of outline. Further, the print history of *London Labour* itself offers its own minihistory of "recycling" flexibly defined: the three volumes of *London Labour* published in 1861–62 are comprised, in part, of Mayhew's weekly numbers from 1850–52, which were themselves comprised, in part, of articles from the *Morning Chronicle* in 1849–50 (all of which also draw on a range of authors and experts reproduced from other print forums).

But if Mayhew was adept in crafting new usable forms by recycling old texts, he also wanted to mobilize these texts to generate political reform (1, xvi). Texts are "open" when they are in process, when material is added and deleted and adjusted, but at some point an author will typically conclude the text, at which point it will be bound between two covers and appear contained through all the familiar conventions of publication. We tend to forget there was once an "open" stage. This forgetting may be an even more pronounced disservice to Mayhew's unruly and disordered process in which the textual collisions, contradictions, and collaborations were very much part of the new form he developed. I want to turn to two examples of this open form that dovetail with Mayhew's political commitments and cannot possibly be captured in a print volume: his mass meetings and his "Answers to Correspondents."

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They both pivot on how the text is *used* and illustrate how an open form animates relations to generate new alliances and collaborations. The vitality of this mix, however, is necessarily muted in the edited volumes through which many readers are introduced to Mayhew's work.

From the outset, Mayhew used his writing on the London poor to catalyze mass meetings in which he encouraged workers to condemn the living and working conditions that they endured. These meetings, held in public halls, were large even by today's standards, with upward of one to two thousand people in attendance. Indeed, a series of mass meetings in 1850 for needlewomen, tailors, and costermongers, respectively, likely led to Mayhew's break with the *Morning Chronicle*. The public meetings did not diminish in the following years, with large gatherings organized by Mayhew on topics ranging from trade unions to Sunday openings to dockworkers. As Anne Humpherys notes, moreover, he used public meetings instead of private interviews to gather information for his volumes and to develop a print form that allowed workers' voices to enter the text en masse.[40] These meetings accordingly serve as a canny example of the collective, collaborative practices that Latour and Haraway associate with a compositionist approach. But I also want to stress here that his innovative composition is inseparable from his treatment of compost, recycling, and reuse in an urban context, and his composition of *London Labour* combines print culture and public meetings to generate dissent and prompt political action.

The public meetings also clearly indicate that the people about whom Mayhew was writing were also reading his work, a point even more emphatically made in the "Answers to Correspondents," introduced to the monthly part publications in January 1851.[41] "In compliance with the request of many Subscribers," Mayhew writes, "the outer pages of this periodical will, in future, be used as a wrapper, intended to be cut off in binding."[42] Mayhew calls these disposable wrappers "*waste* papers";[43] they will not only prevent the work from being "soiled," he explains, but also open a dialogue with his readers.[44] Indeed, Bertrand Taithe calls his chapter on this correspondence "Open Letters" to spotlight the new dialogic form they introduced. Mayhew uses his responses to these letters, moreover, as a forum to expand on his political views and issue his calls for social reform. Not surprisingly, he also receives many letters from readers eager to advance the causes he elaborates (and, occasionally, to dispute the claims he makes). Taithe's reminder that each of *London Labour*'s "polymorphic" iterations was "read according to how it was presented"—"as part of an expensive

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newspaper; as a cheap, penny periodical sold alongside 'penny dreadfuls,' and as an expensive four-volume book"[45]—perhaps finds its best example in these disposable "Answers."

To read something "according to how it was presented," however, also raises the question of mediation. Indeed, another word to describe the various examples of textual recycling I've been discussing here could be remediation. To read Mayhew's article in the *Morning Chronicle* is to read it in one print form that shapes how it is received; to read its reprinting—that is, its remediation—in *London Labour* is another; and to read passages from the article recontextualized in this article is yet another. In all these contexts (and others), the reading experience will be shaped by the printed work one holds, the surrounding textual material, the font, and so on, as well as its broader material mediation in relation to its conditions of production. Mediation draws attention to the conditions of production and the medium of representation as well as its process—to what Raymond Williams calls "the material social process."[46] Williams speculates on whether mediation may offer a way to make more material interventions in cultural studies as well as an alternative to philosophical dualisms (subject/object, nature/culture, and so on).[47] While Williams remains unsure of the merits of mediation in relation to resolving dualisms, I want to suggest that a focus on mediation allows us to sidestep representation and exposé (qualities that critics often celebrate in Mayhew's work) to emphasize, following my focus on recycling here, the text as a usable form. The "Answers" give us a particularly vivid example of this point insofar as they at once animate a political exchange and force the reader to *use* the text, to treat it as a material object, to cut it off, to turn it over, to turn it around. Similarly, a copy of a letter included in *London Labour*'s volume 1 confounds interpretation until one understands that to read it, one has to hold it up to a mirror (1, 241). Of course, when we read anything, we engage with it and, on some level, are aware of its weight (or lack thereof), its print, and its call to encourage certain practices. But these two examples, in their tactility, bring this point to the fore and remind us that the form of the text is an inseparable and dynamic dimension of its meaning.

If mediation, in other words, "is in the object itself" as Adorno puts it,[48] when we are offered a summary or even an exact transcription, the object gains a new meaning bound up with its mediation. Often these distinctions may be so slight as not to seem to matter. But the point I want to make here is not the slightness of the difference but the fact that the

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remediation of texts draws our attention to their medium (the thin paper wrappers, the mirror-image text, for example); we become more alert to the way in which the work functions—what the work does, how it is used—in a multifaceted, ever-changing system in which, as Mayhew maintains with respect to nature, *everything moves*. This method, consonant with Benjamin's support of montage, mobilizes a commitment to reading the mediations of the text, its disjunctive moments, its composition process, as well as its loose ends, gaps, fissures, and repetitions. Many of the wrappers are now gone, a poignant reminder that Mayhew's work is part of the same "cycle of print" from rags to paper to printed page to "waste" that he documents. As Daniel Williams wryly notes, citing Mayhew, the last step in this process is composting "so that we again have the remains of the old garment in our beer or our bread,"[49] and we may have all "consumed" Mayhew in one way or another.[50] If Mayhew was drawn to the rag-pickers, to borrow Benjamin's terminology, and practiced their art of collecting by finding discarded material—people, practices, things, animals, plants, and so on—and making it resonate, if he also took his own previously used writing and reanimated it, can we read his composition practices, which dovetail in many ways with the composting practices about which he writes, as discarded matter made to resonate now in our ecologically precarious moment?

. . . [*the rat*] *was nearly mad with rage*. . .[51]

Mayhew was not only attuned to the interimplication of plants and animals, country and city, humans and soil, but also to ecological disorder. Put simply, when too many people gather together in one place—here, the city—natural cycles are disturbed. This observation could describe what we now call the Anthropocene, although now the place that is disturbed is not the city but the planet. Mayhew's response is to remind his readers of their roots—literally (their bones that derive from soil and lichen)—in order to recalibrate natural cycles (which could be yet another description of the Anthropocene and a practice of which we are now more wary) *and* to invent a new print form adequate to his moment of economic and urban precarity. This form arguably develops out of the open and unfinished city and its itinerant populations, rapid growth, and changing labor practices that are Mayhew's focus in *London Labour*. It is also interesting that in another precarious period almost ninety years later—when Horkheimer and Adorno directly confronted the threat posed by new technologies under

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capitalism—Benjamin developed a new collage method, derived from the retrieval of discarded urban forms, that resembles Mayhew's in so many ways, albeit considerably more theoretically sophisticated. Now, almost ninety years later again, we confront our own precarious moment that resonates with both Mayhew's period of industrial modernity and Benjamin's of capitalist expansion in the years leading up to the Second World War. From our vantage point, we can also recognize in these two historical moments—industrial modernity and the mid-twentieth century, respectively—two of the main contending time periods for the Anthropocene's origins.[52] But their forms are not our forms. Indeed, we would learn nothing from them—especially in the case of Benjamin—if we did not adjust our forms to the distinctiveness of our historical situation. Nevertheless, confronted by a climate precarity that, unchecked, spells unmitigated disaster for humans and other living things, we would do well to mobilize *all* the responses available, to loosen boundaries and classifications, to include more, to allow collisions, collaborations, and connections to flourish, and to explore what new possibilities may arise.

It is clear that the impact of climate change falls most heavily on the lives of those living in poorer nations and communities just as, in Mayhew's period, the impact of labor changes following from industrialization fell most heavily on the lives of the poor struggling to survive in a perilous urban environment. It is also clear that the climate changes we are now experiencing can be traced back, in part, to the very inventions that so disrupted the lives of the poor in Mayhew's London. But less often acknowledged are the ways we can use the insights, information, and practices of the poor as a way to address where we are now.[53] In this context, I am interested in whether attending to questions of mediation might perhaps also offer a more robust response to social or climate injustice than the accumulation of knowledge approach on which we often rely and with which Mayhew is often credited. This attention to form as form that is *used* also makes me wonder about the potential of usable form in our own moment when, like Mayhew and Benjamin, we are confronted by an instability that seems to demand different—more lively, more unpredictable, more incisive, more open—forms.[54]

When a rat's bite touches the bone, it makes you faint in a minute . . .[55]

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3. Conclusion: There's a Rat Running Through It

. . . it seemed to come nat'ral to me [*handling rats*].
I very soon had some in my pocket.[56]

The rat escapes the boundaries of Mayhew's classifications in *London Labour:* the rat is running up and down the shirt of a rat-catcher, the rat is in the sewers, the rat is in the homes of the poor and rich alike, the rat invites disgust, the rat is baited by dogs, and the rat is a valued pet.[57] The rat is also the symbol of a scavenger par excellence. The rat is what the city tries to shut out but cannot. The rat runs through the sewers, by-streets, and mews of London, and the rat runs through the pages of Mayhew's work, but the rat is also killed—by men, dogs, ferrets, and, perhaps most alarmingly, other rats—and dead rats equally abound in these pages, ripped to pieces in the dog-baiting competitions, tossed carelessly in piles to fester, poisoned by rat-catchers wearing velveteen jackets, bloated in sewers, until the rats arrive, dead or alive, in the book we read. I want this paper to be open-ended, but I also want there to be a rat running through it that squeaks and bites and alarms, that is live and interested and unexpected, that appears and disappears. I want my figurative rat to animate Mayhew's dead rats and to keep alive all the ways in which the stories we tell have the capacity to bite back.

They [*the rats*] *would dart off like so many sparks . . .*[58]

Notes

Many thanks to Sara Adams, Devin Griffiths, Jenna Herdman, Deanna Kreisel, and especially Janice Schroeder for invaluable feedback on the essay.

1. Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. 2, 431 (emphasis mine). All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text by volume and page number.
2. Mayhew, "Visit to the Cholera Districts," 4.
3. Mayhew, "[Nature] That Man Gets . . .," 6
4. Mayhew, "[Nature] That Man Gets . . .," 6
5. Tina Young Choi's excellent analysis of this selection offers the only extended treatment of it. See also Christopher Herbert for a briefer analysis. Choi, *Anonymous Connections*; Herbert, "Rat Worship," 12–13.

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6. This description of the city as "open" and "unfinished" is from Richard Sennett, "The Public Realm," 271–72. Sennett also links these design characteristics to sustainability and politics: "[T]he value of incomplete form is a political act architects should perform in the public realm. This means asserting not only the beauty of unfinished objects but also their practicality. Buildings left incomplete, partially unprogrammed, are structures which can truly be sustainable in time; the flexible building would help end the current wasteful cycle which marries construction and demolition."
7. Like Etienne Turpin's recent study of Jakarta, Mayhew is attuned to the knowledge one can gain from marginalized communities whose voices are often excluded from information collection. What Turpin calls "residential epistemologies" not only record the open systems of life on the ground but also alert us to the contingent, volatile, constantly changing world of these communities and generate the forms best equipped to capture the stories told. See Cameron's *Far Off Metal River*, Norgaard's *Living in Denial,* Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, and Kohn's *How Forests Think* for discussions of climate change and local knowledge practices in nonurban contexts.
8. John R. Rosenberg describes *London Labour* as the "first and possibly the greatest sociological study in English" (Rosenberg, "Introduction to the Dover Edition," v). Herbert refers to Mayhew's "ethnographic imagination" (Herbert, "Rat Worship," 1). Karel Williams refers to his "empirical ethnology" (Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, 265), and Priti Joshi examines Mayhew's "project as an early-ethnographic effort" (Joshi, "The Other Great Exhibition," 95). See also Thompson and Yeo, *The Unknown Mayhew,* 86; Humpherys, *Travels*, xviii; and Taithe, *The Essential Mayhew,* 65n.34.
9. In a review essay, Priti Joshi calls for more ecological approaches to Mayhew's work ("The Other Great Exhibition"). See Choi, *Anonymous Connections*; Pemberton, "The Rat-Catcher's Prank"; Samalin, "Plumbing the Depths"; and Daniel Williams, "The Clouds and the Poor," for some more recent work in this context.
10. October 23, 1849, in Henry Mayhew, *The Unknown Mayhew.*
11. Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" 474. Latour aligns composition with composure, compromise, and compost, on one hand, and decomposition on the other.
12. Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" 474.
13. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 460. Like Mayhew, Benjamin is drawn to rags and refuse; like Mayhew, he makes a livelihood of collecting and

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compiling what he finds; like Mayhew, he was interested in the obsolescence "generated by a developing capitalism's productive forces" (Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill," 932); and like Mayhew, his work was often left unfinished. Ben Highmore aligns Benjamin's methodology with a "trash aesthetics" of "recycling—an ecology of everyday experience" (Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 65).

14. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 432 (emphasis mine).
15. Hamlin, "Providence and Putrefaction," 411.
16. Hamlin, "Providence and Putrefaction," 386.
17. Leah Price writes: "Until the second half of the nineteenth century, most reading matter was made from old rags, and much of it went on to be recycled in turn. Newspapers were handed down a chain of households as their contents staled; letters were torn to light a pipe; broadsheets pieced out dress patterns or lined pie plates or wiped shit" (Price, *How to do Things with Books*, 219).
18. Mayhew's classificatory zeal is on vivid display in this section as he catalogs the many clothing items—from satin waistcoats through beaver hats and old stockings—whose materials are not used in the shoddy factory.
19. Mayhew, *London Labour,* vol. 2, 431 (emphasis mine).
20. Mayhew, *London Labour,* vol. 2, 160. Interestingly, "economy" is one of the ways that Darwin talked about ecology, and Haeckel's "ecology" was an explicit reframing of the term for ecological purposes. I am indebted to Devin Griffiths for this observation (private correspondence).
21. Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. 2, 160 (emphasis original).
22. Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. 2, 161. For excellent discussions of the "regeneration through pollution" thesis, see Choi, *Anonymous Connections*; Hamlin, "Providence and Putrefaction"; MacDuffie, *Victorian Literature*; and Schuster, *The Ecology of Modernism.*
23. Choi, *Anonymous Connections*, 97.
24. Choi, *Anonymous Connections*, 97.
25. Liebig cited in Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. 2, 161.
26. I had long been interested in the work that Mayhew's tables performed, and I'm indebted to Sierra Eckert for enriching my understanding of the tables and how little equipped they are to draw lines around their areas of inquiry (private correspondence).
27. Humpherys, *Travels,* 68.
28. Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. 3, 2 (emphasis mine).

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29. Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. 3, 10 (emphasis mine).
30. Several critics have drawn parallels between Mayhew's project and the work of the people whom he documents. See Joshi, "The Other Great Exhibition," 103; Choi, *Anonymous Connections*, 87; and Samalin, "Plumbing the Depths,," 392.
31. Cited in Thompson and Yeo, *The Unknown Mayhew,* 105.
32. Taithe discusses the ways in which perceiving Mayhew as a collector or "compiler" may have limited his reputation (Taithe, *The Essential Mayhew,* 5).
33. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 40.
34. K. Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, 245, 238. Taithe notes that E. P. Thompson tracked this information by comparing his 1860 volume to the volume in the British Library (private correspondence).
35. K. Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, 241.
36. K. Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty*, 239. See also Loftus, "Work, Poverty and Modernity," 508.
37. Several critics have noted the ways in which Mayhew rewrites the poor as valuable contributors to society: "Mayhew reframes the street-folk as producers of a robust economy" (Joshi, "The Other Great Exhibition," 103). At the same time, Daniel Williams notes that Mayhew identifies the poor "with the refuse amidst which they live" by highlighting the materiality of both (Williams, "The Clouds and the Poor," 323). Choi astutely remarks that Mayhew's "representation of waste both describes and actively enacts the recuperation that renders the system coherent"; the street-folk about whom he writes "are, as it were, narrative waste, analogous to the discards off which his subjects make a living" (Choi, *Anonymous Connections*, 87).
38. Gaull, "From the Fossils to the Clones," 77.
39. Steedman, "Mayhew," 563.
40. Humpherys, *Travels*, 45–46.
41. Taithe offers the most detailed discussion of these letters in *The Essential Mayhew*. See also Humpherys, *Travels*, 68–69, and Anderson, *London Vagabond,* 127. See Ole Münch for a discussion of the dialogue these letters open with readers (Münch, "Henry Mayhew").
42. Mayhew, "Answers to Correspondents," 87.
43. Mayhew, "Answers to Correspondents," 118 (emphasis original).
44. Mayhew, "Answers to Correspondents," 87.
45. Taithe, *The Essential Mayhew*, 5.
46. R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature,* 97.

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47. See my *Open Houses*, 8–12, for an extended treatment of this topic.
48. Cited in R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature,* 98
49. Mayhew, *London* Labour, vol. 2, 32, cited in D. Williams, "The Clouds and the Poor," 326.
50. D. Williams, "The Clouds and the Poor," 326.
51. Mayhew, *London Labour,* vol. 3, 8 (emphasis mine).
52. See Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor's introduction for a discussion of the Anthropocene's origins.
53. See note 7.
54. Here I am reminded, too, of the many recent books that address ecological issues by mobilizing form in different ways: the second half of Anna Tsing's *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, for example, has to be turned upside down to be read; Katrin Klingan et al.'s *Textures of the Anthropocene: Grain / Vapor / Ray* is composed of three volumes, each bound with a differently textured cover that draws attention to its topic; and Kath Weston's *Animate Planet* ends, like Mayhew's second volume, midsentence. They remind us that texts are material, mobile, and open, usable forms.
55. Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. 3, 13 (emphasis mine).
56. Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. 3, 13. (emphasis mine).
57. Mayhew's many sections on and references to the rat in these volumes are legion. It is probably the figure that most often exceeds the textual boundaries as Mayhew defines them. See Christopher Herbert's "Rat Worship and Taboo in Mayhew's London" and Neil Pemberton's "The Rat-Catcher's Prank" for fascinating, if very different, analyses of Mayhew's rats.
58. Mayhew, *London Labour*, vol. 3, 8 (emphasis mine).

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