To the Editor:

Sally Satel offers a provocative solution to the American organ transplant system failure: try incentives. She's right.

African-Americans are disproportionately affected by the organ shortage. They represent 40 percent of people on the kidney transplant waiting list, have the longest waits, and experience the highest death rates on lists.

For years, commentators have suggested that African Americans would suffer most under a system with incentives. Their arguments verge on the paternalistic and polemical, and their rationales are outmoded and incendiary.

Such thinking ignores the fact that blacks might benefit from the introduction of incentives into the current transplantation system, because African Americans need kidneys more than any other group.

The consequences of ignoring the possible advantages of cadaveric sales for curing organ deficits and thereby enhancing the health opportunities for all Americans, especially black Americans, are extreme.

MICHELE GOODWIN
Chicago, May 15, 2006

The writer, a professor at DePaul University College of Law, is the author of a book about the supply and demand of body parts.

TOPICS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. Hayes says in her second paragraph, "I consider cash for organs an obscene proposal." Do you agree? Why, or why not?
2. Fruit offers statistics concerning financial rewards to the families of the deceased, but he does not address the points Satel raises in paragraph 11—outright payments to the donor, or to a charity of the donor's choice, or to the donor's estate. Would any of these plans influence you to become a donor after your death? Why, or why not?
3. Goodwin in her third paragraph mentions "paternalistic" arguments, but she doesn't describe them. What do you suppose a paternalistic argument would be?
4. Write a response (250 words, in the form of a letter) to one of the preceding letters.

Heather Rogers

Heather Rogers is a writer and filmmaker. We give an excerpt from her recent book, Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage *(2005). The message of the book is that our capitalistic society is inherently wasteful—businesses need to create objects that don't last, so they can sell more goods—and that if the planet is not to be destroyed we must create a society that does not need much of what we think we need.*

Hiding in Plain Sight

In the dark chill of early morning, heavy steel garbage trucks chug and creep along neighborhood collection routes. A worker empties the contents of each household's waste bin into the truck's rear compaction unit. Hydraulic compressors scoop up and crush the dross, cramming it into the enclosed hull. When the rig is full, the collector heads to a garbage depot called a "transfer station" to unload. From there the rejectamenta is taken to a recycling center, an incinerator or, most often, to what's called a "sanitary landfill."

Land dumping has long been the favored disposal method in the U.S. thanks to the relative low cost of burial, and North America's abundant supply of unused acreage. Although the great majority of our castoffs go to landfills, they are places the public is not meant to see. Today's garbage graveyards are sequestered, guarded, veiled. They are also high-tech, and, increasingly, located in rural areas that receive much of their rubbish from urban centers that no longer bury their own wastes.

There's a reason landfills are tucked away, on the edge of town, in otherwise untraveled terrain, camouflaged by hydroseeded, neatly tiered slopes. If people saw what happened to their waste, lived with the stench, witnessed the scale of destruction, they might start asking difficult questions. Waste Management Inc., the largest rubbish handling corporation in the world, operates its Geological Reclamation Operations and Waste Systems (GROWS) landfill just outside Morrisville, Pennsylvania—in the docile river valley near where Washington momentously crossed the Delaware leading his troops into Trenton in 1776. Sitting atop the landfill's 300-foot-high butte composed entirely of garbage, the logic of our society's unrestrained consuming and wasting quickly unravels.

Up here is where the dumping takes place; it is referred to as the fill's "working face." Clusters of trailer trucks, yellow earthmovers, compacting machines, steamrollers, and water tankers populate this bizarre, thirty-acre nightmare. Churning in slow motion through the surreal landscape, these machines are remaking the earth in the image of garbage. Scores of seagulls hover overhead then suddenly drop into the rotting piles. The ground underfoot is torn from the metal treads of the equipment. Potato chip wrappers, tattered plastic bags, and old shoes poke through the dirt as if floating to the surface. The smell is sickly and sour.

The aptly named GROWS landfill is part of Waste Management Inc.'s (WMI) 6,000-acre garbage treatment complex, which includes a second landfill, an incinerator and a state-mandated leaf composting lot. GROWS is one of a new breed of waste burial sites referred to as "mega-fills." These high-tech, high-capacity dumps are comprised of a series of earth

covered "cells" that can be 10 to 100 acres across and up to hundreds of feet deep—or tall, as is the case at GROWS. (One Virginia whopper has disposal capacity equivalent to the length of one thousand football fields and the height of the Washington Monument.) As of 2002, GROWS was the single largest recipient of New York City's garbage in Pennsylvania, a state that is the country's biggest depository for exported waste.

WMI's Delaware-side operation sits on land that has long served the interests of industry. Overlooking a rambling, mostly decommissioned US Steel factory, WMI now occupies the former grounds of the Warner Company. In the previous century, Warner surface mined the area for gravel and sand, much of which was shipped to its cement factory in Philadelphia. The area has since been converted into a reverse mine of sorts; instead of extraction, workers dump, pack, and fill the earth with almost 40 million pounds of municipal wastes daily.

Back on top of the GROWS landfill, twenty-ton dump trucks gather at the low end of the working face, where they discharge their fetid cargo. Several feet up a dirt bank, a string of large trailers are being detached from semi trucks. In rapid succession each container is tipped almost vertical by a giant hydraulic lift and, within seconds, twenty-four tons of putrescence cascades down into the day's menacing valley of trash. In the middle of the dumping is a "landfill compactor"—which looks like a bulldozer on steroids with mammoth metal spiked wheels—that pitches back and forth, its fifty tons crushing the detritus into the earth. A smaller vehicle called a "track loader" maneuvers on tank treads, channeling the castoffs from kitchens and offices into the compactor's path. The place runs like a well-oiled machine, with only a handful of workers orchestrating the burial.

Get a few hundred yards from the landfill's working face and it's hard to smell the rot or see the debris. The place is kept tidy with the help of thirty-five-foot tall fencing made of "litter netting" that surrounds the perimeter of the site's two landfills. As a backup measure, teams of "paper pickers" constantly patrol the area retrieving discards carried off by the wind. Small misting machines dot fence tops, roads, and hillsides, spraying a fine, invisible chemical-water mixture into the air, which binds with odor molecules and pulls them to the ground.

In new state-of-the-art landfills, the cells that contain the trash are built on top of what is called a "liner." The liner is a giant underground bladder intended to prevent contamination of groundwater by collecting leachate—liquid wastes and the rainwater that seeps through buried trash—and channeling it to nearby water treatment facilities. WMI's two Morrisville landfills leach on average 100,000 gallons daily. If this toxic stew contaminated the site's groundwater it would be devastating.

Once a cell is filled, which might take years, it is closed off or 10
"capped." The capping process entails covering the garbage with several feet of dirt, which gets graded, then packed by steamrollers. After that, layers of clay-embedded fabric, synthetic mesh, and plastic sheeting are

draped across the top of the cell and joined with the bottom liner (which is made of the same materials) to encapsulate all those outmoded appliances, dirty diapers, and discarded wrappers.

Today's landfill regulations, ranging from liner construction to post-capping oversight, mean that disposal areas like WMI's GROWS are potentially less dangerous than the dumps of previous generations. But the fact remains that these systems are short-term solutions to the garbage problem. While they may not seem toxic now, all those underground cells packed with plastics, solvents, paints, batteries, and other hazardous materials will someday have to be treated since the liners won't last forever. Most liners are expected to last somewhere between thirty and fifty years. That time frame just happens to coincide with the post-closure liability private landfill operators are subject to; thirty years after a site is shuttered, its owner is no longer responsible for contamination, the public is.

There is a palpable tension at waste treatment facilities, as though at any minute the visitor will uncover some illegal activity. But what's most striking at these places isn't what they might be hiding; it's what's in plain view. The lavish resources dedicated to destroying used commodities and making that obliteration acceptable, even "green," is what's so astounding. Each landfill (not to mention garbage collection systems, transfer stations, recycling centers and incinerators) is an expensive, complex operation that uses the latest methods developed and perfected at laboratories, universities, and corporate campuses across the globe.

The more state-of-the-art, the more "environmentally responsible" the operation, the more the repressed question pushes to the surface: What if we didn't have so much trash to get rid of?

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. How does Rogers explain the public's tolerance for waste (para. 3)? Do you think her explanation is the correct one, or not? Explain your position in an essay of 250 words. (Notice that the same kind of explanation is offered on other topics, e.g. the return home of U.S. troops killed or badly wounded fighting in Iraq.)