

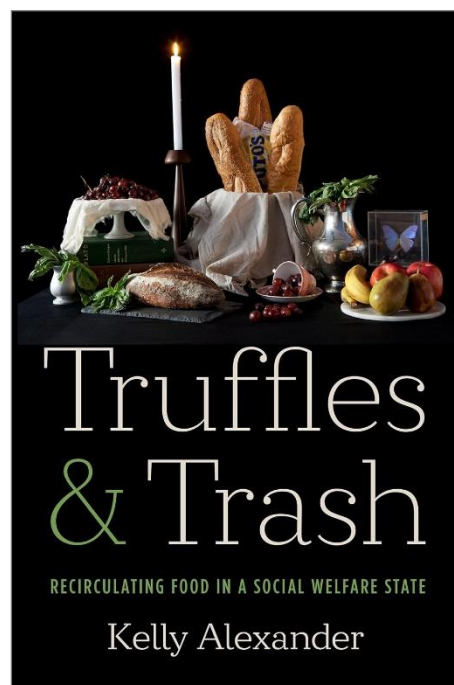
Revaluing waste: Care, recirculation, and food politics in *Truffles and Trash*

Book review by

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Review of *Truffles and Trash: Recirculating Food in a Social Welfare State*, by Kelly Alexander. (2024). Published by University of North Carolina Press. Available as hardcover, paperback, and eBook 236 pages. Publisher's website: <https://uncpress.org/9781469678597/truffles-and-trash>



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Kelly Alexander's *Truffles and Trash: Recirculating Food in a Social Welfare State* traces the movement of edible but discarded food through Brussels' expanding network of food-recirculation initiatives. The book enters a global conversation on food waste intensified by the 2011 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) report estimating that one-third of food produced for human consumption is lost or wasted. Rather than framing waste as the individual

consumer's responsibility, Alexander situates it within the structural logics of capitalist food systems. As she explains, "This project is about innovative and creative ways to recirculate discarded food *before* it becomes food waste, and to do that as a way of caring for other people and for the planet" (p. 41, emphasis in original).

Alexander—an anthropologist and food studies scholar—entered the project curious about how certain foods, especially truffles, acquire extraordinary value—or are overvalued. Her apprenticeship at La Truffe Noire, a Michelin-starred restaurant in Brussels built around one of the world's most expensive ingredients, quickly confronted her with a different reality: the sheer volume of edible food routinely discarded. "I felt ill peering into that bin every day, seeing so much good-looking food

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go uneaten” (p. 12). That encounter became a pivotal moment, shifting her focus from why some foods are prized to how food gains and loses value along a spectrum of edibility. What began as a fixation on waste in one high-end kitchen broadened into a study of food waste across Brussels, exploring how surplus is produced, judged, and redistributed.

She spent the next five years conducting ethnographic fieldwork across three food-recirculation sites in Brussels. Through participant observation, volunteering, and informal interviews, Alexander traces how people and institutions assign or deny value to discarded food. These methods position her to explore the book’s guiding questions: When does food become waste? Who decides whether food is still edible: the institution, the consumer, or the state? What are the social, ethical, and political dimensions embedded in this process? These questions anchor the book’s three sites, each of which illustrates a distinct mode of recirculation within the Belgian welfare state. Some sites allowed extended immersion in daily operations, while others provided more limited but still meaningful access. Together, these field encounters form a layered portrait of how surplus moves, who can transform it, and what social relations emerge along the way.

Before turning to these sites, Alexander outlines Brussels’ unusually fragmented political structure. The city’s overlapping linguistic communities, municipal authorities, and European Union (EU) institutions create a dense bureaucratic terrain through which food recirculation efforts must navigate. This context is crucial: recirculation is not only a matter of moral commitment or logistical ingenuity, but also of jurisdictional constraints that shape what services can exist in the first place. Her political-geographic framing makes it possible to understand each site not as an isolated initiative but as operating within—and sometimes pushing against—a thick bureaucratic landscape.

The first site, The Food Bank of Brussels, reveals both the necessity and insufficiency of food-bank infrastructures. Alexander demonstrates how food banks, despite formal neutrality, reproduce charitable logics that differentiate between givers and recipients and subtly

police who is “deserving.” Her documentation of sorting protocols, eligibility checks, and volunteer oversight illustrates how hierarchy is continually reproduced. The food bank alleviates immediate need, but it does so within a neoliberal welfare model that treats hunger as an individualized problem rather than a political one. While analytically strong, the chapter shallowly touches on how clients navigate or resist these structures. Still, the food bank serves as the book’s baseline: a system that redistributes surplus while remaining tethered to the very conditions that produce precarity and waste.

The second site, Bel Mundo, a “social restaurant” using surplus as a primary resource, offers an alternative model. Rather than treating waste as refuse, Bel Mundo reframes waste as “surplus” and thus as productive input, allowing recirculation to function simultaneously as social welfare and partial economic alternative. The restaurant provides affordable meals, workforce development, and community services without relying on charity or discourses of personal responsibility. At the same time, the chapter raises a deeper contradiction: initiatives dependent on surplus redistribution remain structurally reliant on the very systems of overproduction they seek to mitigate.

The final site, Cultureghem, centers on reclaiming unsold produce from Belgium’s largest outdoor market and redistributing it through community cooking and mobile soup kitchens. Alexander’s attention to ethnographic detail shines here as she captures the improvisation, relational labor, and regulatory tensions shaping open-air food work. Cultureghem transforms waste into a vehicle for creating shared spaces and forms of care beyond formal welfare institutions. Yet the initiative remains precarious as it is dependent on volunteer labor and discretionary tolerance from authorities. Its success underscores the book’s central tension: care can flourish in the gaps left by state and market systems, but those gaps are structurally produced and easily threatened.

Alexander’s concluding pivot to the United States feels somewhat abrupt. Her brief discussion of Philadelphia’s The People’s Kitchen gestures toward parallels but stops short of sustained com-

parative analysis. U.S. food-welfare infrastructures operate under weaker safety nets and a more aggressively privatized nonprofit landscape than Brussels, yet the book only briefly acknowledges how these structural differences shape what food-recirculation initiatives can realistically accomplish. The comparative section raises more questions than it answers.

Even with these limitations, *Truffles and Trash* is a valuable contribution to scholarship on food systems and the politics of waste. In a field shaped by dispiriting statistics and individualizing solutions, Alexander offers a hopeful perspective. Her ethno-

graphic attentiveness, paired with her strong understanding of political geography, makes the book especially useful for readers interested in the labor required to revalue discarded food. Ultimately, *Truffles and Trash* shows that small, grounded interventions can generate social, economic, and civic benefits far beyond the meal itself. The act of seeing value in discarded food can foster community and create spaces that challenge the systems producing waste. Alexander reminds readers that recirculation is not merely a technical fix, but a social and political practice—one capable of reshaping how care and value circulate in society. 