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Garbage Citizenship: Vital Infrastructures of Labor in Dakar, Senegal by Rosalind Fredericks

Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2018. 200 pp.

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There is power in garbage. As an object of governance—problematic matter to be managed by public authorities—it discloses changing modes of statecraft. As a symbolically charged striking sensorial substance, it is a potent resource capable of disrupting urban order and manifesting the power of waste workers. Waste sits messily at the juncture of multiple points of empirical and conceptual concern in anthropology, including global urbanization and extreme inequalities, the infrastructural basis of social reproduction, the politics of the Anthropocene, the materiality of meanings and the meanings of matter. Rosalind Fredericks’s ethnography of municipal waste infrastructure in Dakar, Senegal, dives into the mess to examine how, and to what ends, garbage accrues power. The book details how the mundane remains of everyday life have become a political terrain upon which struggles over urban belonging both take place and make place. It situates waste infrastructure within the changing contours of urban belonging, gender, spirituality, and embodiment in a structurally adjusted, postcolonial city.

Fredericks’s overarching intervention in the burgeoning ethnographic literature on infrastructure is to put labor at the center of her analysis. Indeed, if infrastructure is vital—both critically important and lively—in her analysis, human labor is at the core of this vitality. In this sense, the book is an effort to bridge the conceptual gap between old and new materialisms, examining the interplay between labor politics, the physical stuff of city life, and the symbolic charge of dirt. Waste infrastructure emerges as an especially rich site for this analysis because of the sheer intensity of labor involved in taking out the city’s trash. Recent research has illustrated the work that users engage in to access services like water and electricity provided by the state and to self-provision officially absent services. It has also explored the emergence of a niche of bricoleur-technician workers and the governmental work entailed in policing all of these practices. Fredericks’s work demonstrates that for waste management, the human body is “the *primary* technology of the infrastructure” (p. 131; emphasis added).

This primacy of human labor and bodies, however, is not inevitable. It is the outcome of historical processes that, over decades of structural adjustment and municipal austerity, have shifted the balance of fixed capital to living labor in Dakar’s waste systems. Successive governments and ever-changing institutional frameworks have seen the fleet of trash trucks decay, the promised upgrades of public-private partnerships fail to materialize, and even basic protective equipment become scarce. Workers’ bodies have taken the place of this missing and badly functioning material infrastructure. At the same time, work has been rendered ever more precarious, flexible, and badly paid. This vital infrastructure, the book shows, relies on carefully coaxing collaboration between machinery and residents’ domestic practices. It depends on and fosters ongoing personal relationships between municipal workers and the people and neighborhoods they serve. Fredericks theorizes this process as the devolution of infrastructure onto labor and charts the everyday inequities and uncertainties it entails for workers and residents alike.

Changes in the socio-material composition of waste infrastructure, she argues, have transformed urban citizenship. The book tracks the shift from the postindependence modernist figure of the citizen as a breadwinning unionized (male) municipal worker through structural adjustment and discourses of community and participation to a notion of citizenship embodied in the responsibility to clean up for oneself. This shift represents the feminization and concomitant devaluation of municipal labor, as waste infrastructure is refigured as an extended version of domestic housekeeping and social reproduction. The gender of waste work is ambivalent and shifting in this account. Fredericks argues that the institutionalization of a participatory labor-intensive waste system afforded women an opportunity to enter into waged municipal work, but at precisely the moment when this labor was becoming increasingly precarious. More perniciously, she documents how NGO and World Bank experiments in community waste management and “appropriate technology” coerced marginalized women into unpaid labor collecting rubbish, but couched this work as a form of empowerment through volunteering. These changing systems of dealing with waste amount to what Fredericks calls “governing-through-disposability” (p. 32), a mode of rule that differentially values people and places and affords them radically divergent levels of municipal service and labor protection.

But garbage’s power is not just in the hands of the state. Because waste infrastructure depends so thoroughly on labor, it affords workers the power of refusal, the ability to hold “the city captive to its own garbage” (p. 130). Fredericks details how workers have deployed this power. Intimate relationships and shared Islamic subjectivities foster solidarity between striking workers and urban residents, resulting in successful strikes and politicized acts of dumping that relocate the symbolically charged and substance of household trash to embarrassingly visible public spaces. These protests draw on a unique Senegalese history of protest dating to the 1980s Set/Setal youth movement that politicized the act of cleaning as a way to protest unemployment, municipal neglect, and state corruption. Governing-through-disposability takes form by responding to and co-opting these earlier movements, remaking protesting activists as flexible workers on day contracts. Participatory waste management appropriated popular critiques and discontent, disciplining youth outrage by channeling it into municipal housekeeping.

In the tradition of Frederick Cooper’s *Struggle for the City* (1983), Fredericks theorizes African cities as outcomes of contestation, showing the uneven, nonlinear, and fragmenting production of the structurally adjusted city. While this earlier scholarship focused on contestations between labor and capital, new Africanist work on infrastructure highlights struggles between citizens and the state, the effects of privatization, and neoliberalism as a form of rule. Capital and capitalism are less explicitly present in these analyses of municipal reproduction. Likewise, focusing on the politics of waste management has not left much room for an analysis of the upstream mass-production of waste, naturalizing it as the outcome of growing populations. But where has all this garbage come from? How is it implicated in changes in the material culture of everyday life? Disposability is not just a social category, but a characteristic of commodities and a strategy of accumulation. As with critical accounts of the Anthropocene, it remains essential that responsibility for waste should be apportioned not to a generic human or urban resident, but to those who have most benefited from its production. *Garbage Citizenship* powerfully details, however, how the responsibility for waste has disproportionately fallen on the urban poor and how they have taken up, responded to, and contested this burden.

REFERENCES CITED

Cooper, Frederick, ed. 1983. *Struggle for the City: Migrant Labor, Capital and the State in Urban Africa*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications.