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Abstract:

This paper explores how the politics of garbage in Senegal’s capital city are constituted in and through gendered spaces and divisions of labor. In Senegal, like in many Muslim and Third World countries, household trash is seen as the responsibility of women. As such, the household represents the starting place in the trajectory of conflict and debate surrounding garbage in Senegal as well as the crucible of blame and responsibility used by the Senegalese state in explaining the current crisis in the city’s trash management. Furthermore, the neoliberal era in Senegal has seen an explosion of a) participatory development projects which place the work of neighborhood trash collection into the hands of neighborhood women; and b) the widespread entrance of women into the official (paid) trash collection sector as street sweepers and their mobilization in the trash workers union—two developments which have important implications for gendered spatialities and political imaginations. This paper considers the politics of trash in Senegal’s neoliberal era through examining the dynamic gendered geographies of garbage at the household, neighborhood, to city scale. It shows the present conjuncture—a time of “crisis” in the official trash system—to be a productive moment in which gendered spaces and roles are being renegotiated in and through discourses of cleanliness, responsibility, and work. These negotiations turn, in particular, on key reference points including Islam and autochthony, and reveal insight into the gendered politics of home and street in contemporary Dakar.



**Gender and the Politics of Trash in Dakar: Participation, Labor and the
“Undisciplined” Woman**

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I. Introduction

I am going to talk to you a little bit about gender and trash in Senegal. More precisely, this paper explores how the politics of garbage in Senegal’s capital city, Dakar, are constituted in and through gendered spaces and divisions of labor. Just back from a year of fieldwork in Dakar, this paper is less a theoretical analysis than a few notes from the field and, as such, only scratches the surface of some larger questions and debates. Most broadly, my research looks at the political geographies of household garbage in Dakar from the household, neighborhood, to city scale over Senegal’s neoliberal¹ period. The management of household trash—as a highly politicized affair at all levels—offers an insightful lens into Senegal’s political-economic landscape and illuminates all manner of negotiations at play in Dakar’s dynamic social fabric. These contestations turn, in particular, on key reference points including Islam, generation, and autochthony—as well as—the gendered politics of home and street in contemporary Dakar. The present conjuncture, furthermore—a “crisis” in the official trash system —represents a unique moment of debate and from which to explore the ways in which gendered spaces and roles are being renegotiated through discourses of cleanliness, responsibility, and work. Two complex and contradictory developments in the last two decades will be specifically examined: a) the proliferation of participatory development projects which place the work of neighborhood trash collection into the hands of neighborhood women; and b) the widespread entrance of women into the official² (paid) trash collection sector. Both raise probing questions for our understanding of neoliberal development in Africa and the changing political relevance of gender in the emerging African city.

¹ While there is no definitive break with the earlier period, the neoliberal moment is here seen to begin in the late 1980s when a handful of structural adjustment and economic policies were taking effect in specific ways.

² Official/unofficial is here used to distinguish between state-run (paid) and non-state (unpaid) trash collection strategies.

II. Background

Anyone who visits Dakar—in many ways the most cosmopolitan city in West Africa—is undoubtedly shocked by the stench and unsightliness of the city’s trash problem. In fact, the trash system in Dakar is currently, by all measures, a system in crisis—the most recent episode in a line of crises dating back to the ‘70s. During my year in Senegal (2007), the crisis had reached unprecedented proportions, involving the complete dissolution of the previous trash system and its incomplete reorganization, extensive strikes by a highly mobilized trash union, and trash “revolts” – concerted throwing of trash in city streets—staged by Dakar’s neighborhoods. The year was thus a year of intense posturing: as the state waffled indecisively on how to organize the sector and concerned citizens and trash workers attempted to mobilize their opinions. Trash has become a key site of political contest in Dakar, the consequences of which are born by city residents. Furthermore, the geographies of trash labor and cleanliness—in the home and the street—involve a whole set of negotiations along political and cultural lines, which differentially shape impact and implication in the trash sector. Overall, service by the official trash system—which has gone from public to private and now is in an interim phase of neither—is deeply uneven, involving political contests and representation priorities and leaving certain poor neighborhoods generally in the filthy lurch. Moreover, the question of trash work involves a complex and evolving exchange between official and non-official trash labor—joining the formal trash system and its 1800 workers with household labor and various “participatory” neighborhood strategies. Without directly engaging many of the larger contours of trash politics, this paper simply highlights some observations of the gendered negotiations at play in the politics of garbage.

III. Unofficial Trash Management: *Women’s Work*

One cannot understand the trash system in Senegal or the politics that surround it without first looking at the household and the world of organization and labor that goes into managing waste in the home, before it even reaches the street or the dump. For—it is important to mention—

household trash in Dakar is tricky business. The hot weather, high percentage of organic and animal material³ in household garbage, and the serious lack of space in most Dakar homes, mean that keeping trash from getting stinky and dangerous is no easy task. As a result, most illnesses in Dakar are rooted in poor sanitation—making trash management a very serious challenge indeed. The business of household trash is, of course, not just a technical challenge. *Waste* is a subject loaded with cultural meanings which shape—and are shaped by—the social organization of waste work and the political landscape of waste management. Mary Douglas’ seminal work on pollution and taboo illustrates how discourses around dirt and danger create social boundaries, and, importantly, classify people into different social categories within a hierarchy of status (1966). In Senegal, women’s connection to the home as well as to impurity through Islamic custom places dealing with household wastes squarely and exclusively within women’s domestic duties.

How does the connection of household waste as women’s work play into the political economy of trash? Undoubtedly, this has contributed to the fact that trash management in Dakar has gone under the political radar for so long and to the disconnect that has often existed between policy-makers and the reality (house meets the street). In fact, trash didn’t really gain serious political stakes until the *Set/Setal* social movement (to be discussed later) of the late ‘80s/early ‘90s forced the state to reckon with the trash crises as symbols of state failure and general depravity in a degrading city (Diouf 1996). The gendered nature of waste-work, furthermore, has deep implications for *who* bears the brunt of the trash crises and in the discourse of blame and responsibility for the dirty city. When—and *where*—the trash truck does not come, women are forced to find ways to store garbage, pay informal horse-cart drivers to take it away, or—most commonly—dump it wherever it may pose less of a nuisance (often a beach, park, or by the road).

What is interesting is how these last resort behaviors play into a discourse of blame and responsibility for the city’s insalubrities which is quite divorced from a recognition of the official trash system’s inadequacies. Senegalese government officials—while admitting that the system is

³ Including fish heads and bones as well as all manner of animal entrails.

in crisis—almost always launch into a debate about women’s “undisciplined behavior” as a central challenge the state faces in cleaning up the city. Furthermore, and perhaps even more surprisingly, neighborhood residents (men and women) while sometimes referring to the lack of official trash collection are also quick to pronounce that “behavioral” problems lie at the root of the trash problem. This discourse of who behaves “cleanly”—in addition to being deeply gendered—intersects in different ways across the city with ethnic stereotypes as well as prejudices against recent immigrants or non-autochthonous residents (if in the traditional neighborhoods of Dakar⁴). In these cases, “trashier” parts of neighborhoods are blamed on the dirty behaviors of certain communities, despite the fact that they may in fact be less well served by the official system. These discourses of cleanliness and indiscipline of course resonate with a number of long-running debates including: the historic question of pollution and class that can be seen for example in the progressive era in the US (Riis 1890); the discussion of caste and waste-work in India (Prashad 2000); and the question of race, sanitation, and disease in colonial public health administration (Andersen 1995) to name a few. A post-structural reading can also help to elucidate how power works in and through the discourse of cleanliness and personal blame for the trash crisis, and furthermore, how these may operate as techniques of self-governance (Foucault 2003).

In addition to directing blame at “undisciplined” women for the city’s filth, the gendered nature of household trash management has also been explicitly mobilized in participatory approaches to neighborhood waste management which are overwhelmingly targeted at women. In Dakar, as in many cities, the waning of public services in the face of neoliberal structural adjustment has been met with a multitude of community-based public service provision programs. The most prominent amongst these approaches in Dakar are neighborhood-based horse-drawn cart trash collection projects spearheaded by the Senegalese NGO ENDA (*Environment and Development in the Third World*) in some of the peripheral neighborhoods of Dakar in the late

⁴ There are a number of Lebou neighborhoods which represent “original” habitations that were settled by Lebou fisherman over 500 years ago. In these neighborhoods, including the one I studied, Yoff, the non-Lebou are both considered outsiders and seen as dirtier.

1990s. My work examined closely one such project which involved the voluntary labor of neighborhood women enlisted to accompany and assist a (paid) horse-cart operator (male), in a neighborhood collection scheme. The project, which lasted less than one year due to a lack of community support and coordination with the official authorities, raises a number of important questions about the role of gender in development projects and the implications of “participation.”

In many ways, community-based waste management fits squarely within hegemonic neoliberal development discourse aimed at “tapping” the entrepreneurial capacities of local residents and claiming to enhance local democracy through targeting the marginalized (World Bank 1989). Gender features prominently in the contemporary obsession with participation in development, which is often justified by a rhetoric of gender empowerment, and ENDA’s promotional material on these projects was indeed centered on such claims. As such, one must consider the growing body of feminist critiques revealing that participatory approaches may exacerbate unequal burdens and impacts of development (Parpart et al. 2002) and, in particular, the possibility for women-centered waste management projects to instrumentalize gender in the service of exploitative labor (Beall 1997; Miraftab 2004; Samson 2003). An analysis of empowerment claims must thus pose the question of how the mobilization of “traditional” discourse—such as women’s cultural responsibility for trash—may in fact risk reinforcing systems of embedded power. And yet, my research shows this to be a more complex assessment than one might assume. For as much as community-based trash mobilizes women’s connection to trash, it was also precisely *because* it is taken for granted that women manage trash that they were able to seize onto development resources they may otherwise have been excluded from to enter new spaces they would not otherwise have entered. Similarly, looking at one of the ENDA projects in another Dakar neighborhood, Simone concluded that participatory waste projects offered women important “platforms for reaching the larger world” (2003). So, my work attempts critically interrogate the way power works through gendered waste discourse while also considering how local power structures may be reworked through new spaces “opened up” by these projects.

IV. Official Trash Management: *Taking to the Streets*

The last 20 years have also seen dramatic changes in the social organization of official – that is state or state-contracted—waste work in Dakar, stemming from changing political contests and economic priorities as well as an urban social fabric in flux. Until the early 1990s, trash in Dakar was officially collected by a public-private company that recruited —mainly for historic reasons that will not be explored here—men of the Pulaar ethnic group who were not originally from Dakar. It was not until the *Set/Setal* movement that this group lost their stronghold on the sector. *Set/Setal*—which means “Clean/Be Clean” and which has been considered in some deeply probing work by historian Mamadou Diouf—was a youth-driven movement born on the streets of Dakar in the late 1980s as a reaction to the increasing literal filth of the city and the perceived moral filth of delinquent policy-makers. While I cannot go into great detail, a major component of *Set/Setal* involved neighborhood clean-up efforts, including trash management. Importantly, *Set/Setal* mobilized *all* youth (young men and women), and *not* primarily along ethnic or class lines. In the early ‘90s, when the trash company was officially bankrupt, the Mayor of Dakar had an idea: “tap” this youth fervor for cleaning up the city’s neighborhoods, appease these unemployed, agitated, and dangerously mobilized youth, and in the process, save money and shore up political support. Eventually the youth activists were made into the official trash workers of Dakar—paid very little but motivated by the, albeit limited, opportunities this made available to them.

What’s interesting for this paper is the opportunity that *Set/Setal* provided for women to enter into, first, neighborhood clean-up mobilizations and then, official trash labor as the sector became more formalized. It not only made fairly uncontroversial sense for women to be out there cleaning up, given that it was their duty in the home anyways, but the timing of the movement also dovetailed with a moment when various pressures had women looking outside the home for economic and other opportunities and when they were becoming an increasingly important political constituency. As such, women found themselves working next to men sweeping streets, hanging onto trash trucks, and, eventually, comprising approximately 30% of the city’s official trash

workers when the sector became privatized again in 2001. In many ways, this transition tracks closely global trends towards the feminization of labor: women entering the workforce en masse but, overwhelmingly dominating the worst, most exploitative labor positions and, thereby, acting as a “subsidy” to cheapen production in neoliberal capitalism (Nagar et al. 2002). Gender is, of course, a key organizing principle of neoliberal globalization—a process often originally facilitated through a language of community responsibility and participation. So we see again, the possibility for women’s cultural connection to trash to be mobilized in placing them in dirty, low-paying jobs.

And yet, as in the community-based trash case, these opportunities in official waste management need not be summarily dismissed, for as the women I’ve spoken to make abundantly clear, these were jobs taken with enormous pride and the newness of entering the public space in this way, wearing pants, and wielding a shovel or sitting on the truck itself was a subversive and radicalizing activity to many. In fact, while women’s early organizing might have gone fairly un-debated, their formalization in the sector—and eventual occupation of real, public jobs in times of scarcity did not go unnoticed. Gender has continued to be a factor—used to different ends—to motivate various changes in the sector. Around 2000, when the jobs were becoming truly formalized (more lucrative but streamlined), women workers were dismissed in more than one neighborhood on the grounds of a convenient new gender discourse: that the work was too hard and that women were not main breadwinners. This point is still upheld and deplored by male trash workers and women who lost their jobs, respectively, to this day. On the other hand, a new trend seems to be in the works: the new trash company that was hired in 2007 to do a test run appears to be actively recruiting young women in their district—justified in part because they are seen as better workers, and, importantly less likely to rock the boat. This development, of course, echoes many trends intrinsic to the feminization of labor in many parts of the world and the paradoxical workings of gender in the neoliberal workplace (e.g. Salzinger 2003).

V. Conclusions

These observations are intended to highlight a number of important concerns for understanding the political economy of Senegal as well as the transitions underway in Dakar's urban social scene. The last couple of decades in Senegal have seen women entering into new and different spaces and roles with regard for trash, all connected to their seemingly "natural" connection to household trash labor. Thus, we can see that the household acts as a sort of crucible of conflict and negotiation, which in turn mediates larger processes outside of the home and implicates men's and women's different experiences of economic change. It also points to the very different work that gendered discourses do in different circumstances. Women's responsibility for trash, it can be seen, works in the home, street, and city as a whole to, in many ways, burden women with the work and responsibility for trash—even explicitly blame them for a dirty city and a non-functional system. The implications of the "undisciplined women" discourse are deeply disconcerting, both for the distraction it provides from a recognition of state accountability as well in the very dirty power it exerts in uneven ways through the dangers of trash. Furthermore, women's cultural responsibility for trash has dovetailed with neoliberal development trends to increasingly install women as the trash collectors of Dakar. This illustrates for us how the practice of waste management is intrinsically tied up with the exercise of power and raises serious concerns about how these trends serve "the interests of capitalism through forms of domination exploiting" gender (Miraftab 2004). And yet, developments in the participatory and official waste sectors show us all manner of contradictions in the workings of gender. In today's desperate jobless Dakar, working in the trash sector is not the best job around but it is a job all the same—and a growing percentage of the workers are women seizing and defending this opportunity, and, in the process, negotiating new roles and spaces with different political implications. Thus, attending to how gender articulates with other identities and structuring factors in specific contexts, I seek to explore how the *Dakarois* come to negotiate with development in different ways; and the world of opportunity and constraint they face in the context of the immense transformations taking place in this urban landscape.

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