The Socialites of Trash: Understanding the Work of Waste in Chennai, India
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Abstract

Chennai is a cosmopolitan, transnational South Indian state capital, generating over 5,000 tons of solid waste per day, primarily disposed of in two refuse dumps situated atop wetlands. Waste is defined here, following Gidwani and Reddy, as "a mobile description of that which has been cast our or judged superfluous in a particular space-time. It is a technical and political artifact that gathers force in its performativity" (2011: 1649). Waste is tangible, visible matter. But it also influences, in its presence and absence, the political economy and ecology of the city. This paper is not an analysis of the (mis)management of waste in Chennai, but an inquiry into the economic and cultural values of waste; waste simultaneously embodies plenitude and scarcity, despair and hope, worthlessness and value, repulsion and compulsion. Waste is not a thing of zero value, but a complex social fact representing chiasmically intertwined dualisms, that culturally transforms—in its presence and absence, invisibility and visibility—the urban landscapes of Chennai. The paper contributes to a long line of literature exploring the cultural economy of waste, asking, what do the transformations in value of waste tell us about cultural and individual values in Chennai? How do human-waste relationships reflect and reproduce interclass and caste tensions? The paper is based on an ethnographic study conducted from May to August 2013 in Chennai, and draws on semi-structured interviews of 30 middle-class residents of gated communities in Chennai as well as on semi-structured and informal interviews of domestic laborers, conservancy workers, informal waste workers, and other key informants (e.g., waste management officials, environmental activists).

The Perungudi refuse dump in Chennai—a South Indian metropolis of over four million residents—is a fortress of trash. The road leading up to the dump has been constructed from trash. Along the sides of the roads are walls made of trash. The waterways beyond the waste walls are turgid with trash.

The stench is uniform but multi-dimensional. It is mobile. It latches onto your clothes, your skin, your lips, the hairs of your nostrils. It leaves no element of the human body behind in its quest to make its presence known.

Out in the distance, informal waste workers, also known as "scavengers" or "rag pickers," are milling about in pursuit of recyclables from the trash, while others lounge under make-shift tarps they constructed from cotton fabric, waiting for fresh loads of trash to be dumped. While government officials had firmly insisted that the dump prohibits informal waste workers on the premises, Sendhil, an engineer and operator at the dump, explained that there are always some informal waste workers there. "The rag pickers get out around 100 tons of the waste," he explained. "It's good for us because it gives us more space." For Sendhil, and other operators at the dump, as well as the informal waste workers, waste is not just the cast-offs of

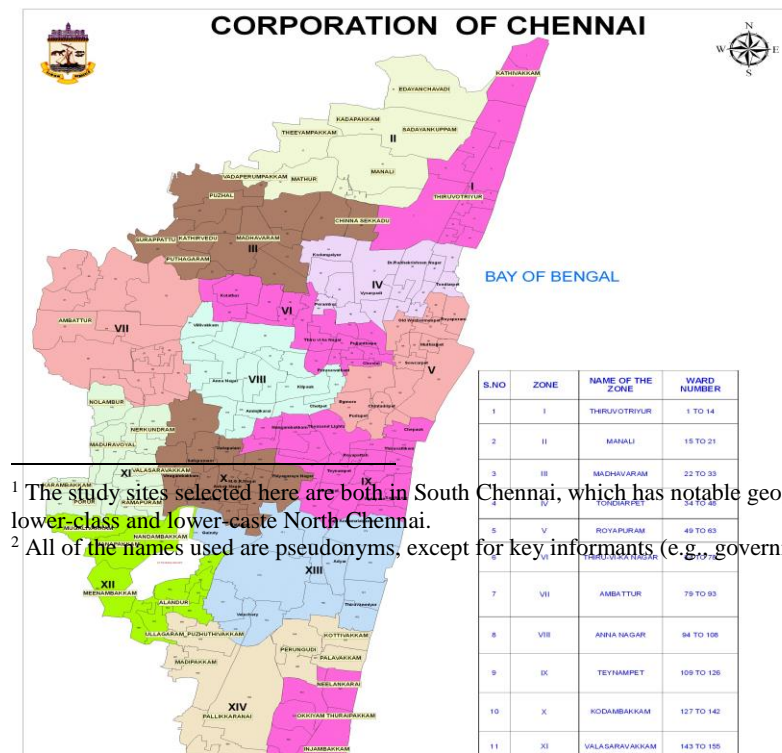daily production and consumption; it is labor, income, and livelihood.

The Perungudi dump receives over 2,500 tons of waste each day, collected from seven of fifteen municipal administrative zones. Faded cotton shirts hang limply from the trash walls. Neon plastic bags bounce lethargically in the thick breeze. A used syringe floats limply in the waterway below.

Still, people work every day to extract value from the detritus of society. In the fortress of trash, all is waste, but not all is wasted.

It is this phenomenon that motivated my research. Waste and human beings are mutually constitutive; cultural values congeal and are realized in garbage through the "work of waste." Waste work here refers to formal management procedures as well as informal modes of recycling. But waste work is also the daily experience of transforming a material object into something to be discarded, saved, or reclaimed, while simultaneously transforming the subject. Even in the dump, where waste makes its presence unabashedly known by the way it hijacks all senses and spreads itself indiscriminately across air, water, and land, there is hope.

This is not a paper about the management or mismanagement of waste in Chennai, but about the way in which waste simultaneously embodies plenitude and scarcity, despair and hope, worthlessness and value, repulsion and compulsion. This paper asks: How does waste becomes a vehicle for accumulating or establishing social identity and notions of personhood? How do sensibilities around waste become shaped by different forms of waste work? How does the work of waste challenge and reinforce notions of citizenship, sovereignty, and human value?

The paper draws on ethnographic research conducted in Chennai from May to August 2013, consisting of semi-structured and informal interviews of residents of Mylapore and Mayor Ramanathan Chettiar (MRC) Nagar, two primarily middle-class neighborhoods. Mylapore is renowned for its hybrid cultural and commercial landscape, while MRC Nagar is an upper middle-class area rife with posh gated enclaves that was recently carved out of Adyar, a larger middle-class area.[1] In order to capture the textured landscape of waste work, I also interviewed key informants (e.g., politicians, activists, NGO representative) in different parts of Chennai, including peri-urban areas and town panchayats. Finally, the study also consisted of the author's participation in public forums around waste, informal waste working, and private meetings between local activists and their stakeholders.[2]

S.NO	ZONE	NAME OF THE ZONE	WARD NUMBER
1	I	THIRUVOTRIYUR	1 TO 14
2	II	MANALI	15 TO 21
3	III	MADHAVARAM	22 TO 33
4	IV	TONDIARPET	34 TO 48
5	V	ROYAPURAM	49 TO 63
6	VI	THIRU-VI-KA NAGAR	64 TO 78
7	VII	AMBATTUR	79 TO 93
8	VIII	ANNA NAGAR	94 TO 108
9	IX	TEYNAMPET	109 TO 126
10	X	KODAMBAKKAM	127 TO 142
11	XI	VALASARAVAKKAM	143 TO 155

[1] The study sites selected here are both in South Chennai, which has notable geographic and socioeconomic distinctions from the lower-class and lower-caste North Chennai.
[2] All of the names used are pseudonyms, except for key informants (e.g., government officials, environmental activists).
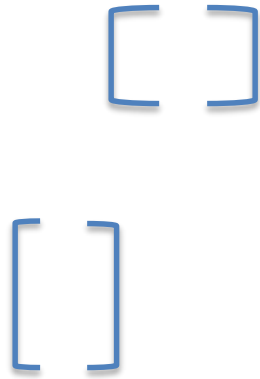
Figure 1 Chennai District Map (chennaicorporation.gov.in) with study sites Mylapore (IX) and MRC Nagar (XIV).

The paper first discusses current discourses around the cultural significance of waste, as well as subject formation around waste. This is followed by two illustrations of waste work in Chennai—informal recycling among lower-class and lower-caste residents, and household composting initiatives among the middle classes—and an example of resistance movements around waste, specifically resistance to state-led waste management schemes—to illustrate the transformative capacities of waste work.

Bruno Latour (1993) has articulated the way in which the humans and non-humans become intertwined in an ongoing process of hybridization into quasi-object assemblages. Understanding waste through this lens can be beneficial—that which is cast off is non-human yet simultaneously a living relic of the rhythms of consumption that influences in its afterlife individual habits and practices. Things circulate, as Arjun Appadurai (1986) argued, "in different *regimes of value* in space and time" (4). Appadurai's ground-breaking theoretical and methodological contributions to the discourse of economic valuation of things through an analysis of their historical trajectories cannot be understated. However, these findings can be taken further in waste studies to not only demonstrate the commodification and sociality of waste matter, but how waste—through an assemblage of interactions between humans and nonhumans—influences and transforms individuals. To this end, Vinay Gidwani and Rajaysree Reddy (2011) put forth a framework for understanding waste not as a static castoff, but as "a mobile description of that which has been cast out or judged superfluous in a particular space-time;" waste *"is a technical and political artifact that gathers force in its performativity"* (1649, emphasis in original). Waste is tangible, visible matter. But it also influences, in its presence and absence, the political economy and ecology of space.

Mazzolini and Foote (2012) have brought to bear the dualistic nature of waste, and the ways in which waste and humans are mutually constitutive:

> The mark of what is despised after having been desired and needed, garbage and
> waste bring into sharp focus the complicated relationship between nature and culture. For

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this reason, garbage and waste occupy a unique position in how we narrate the keywords that underpin the cultural, social and political effects and causes of an environmental crisis that brings global and local concerns into sometimes discordant conversation (3).

Gillian Pye (2010) artfully describes how "the status of trash [is] simultaneously present yet absent, empty and yet replete with potential." It is this quality, she argues, that makes waste "especially attractive against a background of anxieties about durability and order and the relationship between self and other, present and past" (7). Waste is fundamentally a dyadic thing, representing, embodying, and intertwining binary opposites in its presence and obsolescence. This quality is not something intrinsic to the thing itself; it is a result of multiple and varied interactions with humans. Waste is that which is discarded because it is no longer perceived as worth retaining; it has little to no utility to its possessor. . But the ontological process embedded in the process of determining that a thing has no value is both a reflection of and implication of the intertwined relationship between subjects and waste.

While subject-waste relationships and the ethical and cultural dimensions of waste have been explored by others (cf. Hawkins 2006; Mazzolini and Foote 2012), such discourses have often been primarily theoretical and/or informed by analyses of waste's presence in literature, art, and media. Still emerging are investigations into how these cultural values influence and shift the discursive landscape of specific, situated spaces. There have been attempts to analyze the ways in which middle-class alliances with the state in India to serve an environmental agenda simultaneously influence the expansion of state power and disenfranchise the urban poor (Baviskar 2003, Chaplin 1999). However, the literature is less attentive to Chennai, a dominant urban center and state capital in India, as well as to the variant forms of governmentality and biopower at play through the lens of waste work—both of which this paper aims to address.

In his study of Kumaon, India, Arun Agrawal (2005) analyzes the ways in which participation in governmental regulatory schemes influences environmental sensibilities, arguing that actions—as opposed to solely values and beliefs—are what drive environmental sensibilities into consciousness. Applying Michel Foucault's notion of "governmentality" the concept of how technologies of power encourage citizens to self-govern) to the environment, Agrawal introduces the framework of *environmentality*. He reconfigures Foucault's explorations of governmentality by looking not only at "when, why, and how some subjects rather than others come to have an environmental consciousness," but by questioning the very notion of self-formation (166). He presents a compelling case, but his study is limited to forested areas in India.

Emma Mawdsely (2009) applies Agrawal's concept of *environmentality* to urban India with a focus on Delhi. She questions Agrawal's implication that environmental subjects are compelled to action through a shared interest in a collective good, advising that this be taken with caution in urban contexts, and specifically among middle classes. Mawdsley analyses a specific state-sponsored development scheme in Delhi, adding to a long line of literature on the pitfalls of middle-class, "bourgeois environmentalism" (cf. Baviskar 2003). She argues that we must be wary of forms of environmentalism that tend to favor "specific environmental priorities and agendas of the wealthier groups, [as]…these are not likely to be universally shared priorities" (248). However, as this study will show, middle-class environmentalism itself is neither uniformly "bourgeois" nor collectively generative, but reflective of interrelated discursive, biopolitical, and moral implications.

While some scholarship has critically analyzed middle-class environmental sensibilities more research is needed around: 1) the ways that the urban poor are transforming themselves

into waste "subjects" via informal waste work; 2) the forms of counter-conduct and resistance around waste across class and caste boundaries; and 3) well-intentioned middle-class environmental sensibilities that foist harmful side-effects on the urban poor, This paper will argue, through the case of Chennai, that the moral and biopolitical implications of waste work challenge notions of citizenship, sovereignty, and the very question of what it means to be human.

While subjecthood and citizenship are distinct concepts, the discursive space of waste offers an opportunity to see the two as related, not least because the efforts of the middle classes to conduct themselves as environmental subjects radiates into how lower class and caste individuals conduct and imagine themselves as citizens of the city. As Rose and Novas (2002) articulate, drawing on Foucault, the biological techniques of power "identify an aspect of the person to be worked upon, they problematize that field or territory in certain ways, they elaborate a set of techniques for managing it, and they set out certain objectives or forms of life to be aimed for" (22). Such a concept of "biopower," or the power exerted over a population that brings into political question the fundamental biological aspects that constitute the human, has yet to be applied to informal waste workers in a substantive fashion. Waste is, in its material matter and spatial flow, a transnational product that challenges notions of citizenship and rights to space among the networks of agents involved with it.

In the first section of this paper, I argue that the biopoliticalization of waste is occurring on a multiscalar level, and producing striated spaces of citizenship based on interaction with and notions of rights to waste. The reactions to the work of informal waste workers from activists and the state bring to bear biopolitical questions of their citizenship. Waste allows for informal waste workers to establish their sovereignty; meanwhile, the efforts of NGOs to "dignify" their work within the context of making them more legible citizens simultaneously enables and challenges their sovereignty.

In the second section, I explore another form of waste work—voluntary recycling and composting habits among middle-class individuals. I aim to supplement existing theoretical and empirical insights into middle-class environmentalism through a focus on the individual household to bring to bear the disciplinary interactions between the middle-class resident and waste handler (e.g., domestic laborer, gardener, gatekeeper), and the development of a sense of environmental citizenship among the middle classes via the regulation (or lack thereof) of the physical body and work of the lower class and caste individual who is in contact with the waste of the middle classes.

In the final section, I analyze resistance to waste management through the Foucauldian lens of "counter-conduct." The way in which waste is managed by the government has inspired resistance movements that can be better understood through the analytic of "counter-conduct," which captures the way in which resistance is not an external reaction but a marginal interaction with the system against which it is working. Resisting waste management is not work in the way that informal waste working is or in the way that middle classes are participating in recycling or composting, but is reflective of a form of governmentality that waste inspires in Chennai with implications of notions of personhood and sovereignty.

These three explorations into waste work exemplify the differing forms that governmentality with respect to waste takes in Chennai. Through the work of waste—whether informal waste working, voluntary sustainable waste management, or activism against standard waste management—a better understanding can be had of the implications of the unruly interfaces of waste with human beings in Chennai.

Waste as Work: Informality as Formality

Under the dry and unapologetic stare of the mid-afternoon Chennai sun, I approached Durai, a street waste picker who I see frequently in the middle class neighborhood of Mylapore. I handed him a bag of cans and plastic bottles accumulated in my flat over the past month and asked if he would be willing to let me shadow him as he went waste picking. Durai obliged, after overcoming the initial confusion and suspicion, and we set off together. Unlike some of the other informal waste workers to whom I had talked, Durai had no tricycle or cart, only a white burlap sack and a wooden stick he uses to poke around and help pick up trash in dumpsters that were not too full. Durai had started at eleven in the morning in the Alwarpet neighborhood, sold what he found, and had a one rupee (US$.02) lunch at the government-sponsored canteen before resuming work. He prefers avoiding the afternoon, often taking solace beneath a leafy coconut tree, because of the relentless heat but also because the trash gets cleared around one or two pm and good finds are harder to come across. However, most of the informal waste workers stop working during this time so there is less competition for him. Additionally, it is the time that school lets out and people tend to have their afternoon tea and snacks, which means there will be a fresh supply of trash to pick through.

We walked by a secondary school flanked on either side by small shops, including a Kwality ice cream stand, a cafe, and a pawn shop (small convenience store). As I noticed in a more upper middle-class neighborhood, MRC Nagar, the temporal release from school signals a spatial redefinition of the surrounding area from an educational institution to a space of consumption and leisure. Durai reclaimed a few soda cans, several thick plastic bags, and small cardboard candy cartons just in front of an unofficial dump near the school. After making a loop around the area, we ended back on a main road, by the Cooum River—a waterway of thick, green sludge and scattered litter nestled inside and alongside the banks. Informal waste collection as work offers a sense of autonomy and sovereignty that other formal prospects—such as working as a conservancy worker for the government or the private waste management contractor—do not, but with this autonomy comes the risk of unregulated exposure and vulnerability to waste picking-related diseases. In some sense, in the lived experience of waste work among informal waste workers, the grittiness and grime of garbage is supplanted by the hope for a better self and future.

Figure 2: Informal waste workers at the Perungudi refuse dump. Credit: Ashwini Srinivasamohan.

As Donald Moore (2005) writes, "governmentality works through the agency of subjects, encouraging conduct and forms of self-discipline that target improvements in welfare and security" (6). Especially for the migrant or gypsy populations that take on informal waste working, it is waste that serves as sanction for their existence as citizens of the city, but also places them at the center of policy debates around the regulation of their work in relation to their physical health. Thus, they arguably can be considered "biological citizens," following Rose and Novas (2003), who present the analytic of "biological citizenship" to refer to "all those citizenship projects that have linked their conceptions of citizens to beliefs about the biological existence of human beings, as individuals, as families and lineages, as communities, as population and races, and as a species" (2). In Chennai, the state and NGOs are interested in the regulation of informal waste workers either by formalizing them—that is, incorporating them into state or private contract-led waste management schemes—or initiating certain state-led mechanisms in order to ensure the health and safety as well as maximum economic productivity of the workers. In a sense this resonates with Rose and Novas' (2002) discussion of biomedical citizenship and emergent "ethical pioneers" who are active through cyber mediums. They find that activists are developing "a set of techniques for managing everyday life in relation to a condition, and in relation to expert knowledge" and that, by identifying "an aspect of the person to be worked upon, they problematize that field or territory in certain ways, they elaborate a set of techniques for managing it, and they set out certain objectives of forms of life to be aimed for" (22).

The transformation of the body into a discursive, political space lends itself to the formation of biological citizens. The legitimacy of informal waste workers' citizenship in Chennai then is seen as being a function of how much their body is a space of regulation. As Rose and Novas (2002) aver, "biological citizenship can…embody a demand for particular protections, for the enactment or cessation or particular policies or actions, or…access to special resources" (4). Biological citizenship is implicated within what Rose and Novas term "a political economy of hope" such that "biology is no longer blind destiny, or even foreseen but implacable fate. It is knowable, mutable, improvable, eminently manipulable" (5). In the case of informal

waste workers, this hope is embodied not necessarily in the individuals themselves but by the NGOs and state representatives who are attempting to "make more dignified" the lives of the informal waste worker.

Jha et al. (2013), in reference to solid waste management in urban India, identify "three 'unstable discursive spaces' where the practices of law, labor and conflict come together: the first, in the policy arena, largely at the national level, where privatization has been brought in through strategies of creation, definition, categorization and managing of unruly populations; the second, in the practice and implementation of the policies at the city level, where the employer-employee and worker-worker conflicts unfold; and the third, at the individual worker level, where the body of the worker becomes a site for discourse" (59). It is in particular the third discursive space that is of interest here, the way in which the body of the informal waste worker becomes a political negotiation.

However, informal waste workers are not all uniformly in favor of such biopolitical regulations, even with the potential for safer working conditions and lowered risk of disease. For example, Pandiyan, a young Dalit (lowest caste) man who collects waste primarily in Mylapore and the neighboring area of Alwarpet, told me earnestly, "I don't need the government telling me how to do my job. If they wanted to help, they'd get us more money for the stuff we sell. But, honestly, giving us gloves or injections is neither here nor there. I have been working for 5 years and never gotten sick." This is included here not to undermine the well-established literature on the severe health hazards posed by informal waste working (e.g., severe sun exposure, second-hand contraction of diseases from contact with used syringes), but to bring to light the striated nature of this discursive space of waste work. This sentiment also indexes the informal waste workers' willingness for government intervention—in specific areas, namely, that of the market.

Evident through discussions with local NGOs and activists is an emergent recognition that there are noneconomic incentives to informal waste work, a realization that has spurred a robust debate around the question of formalization. By formalizing the informal waste workers— that is, incorporating them into existing schemes of waste management such as becoming street-sweepers, dump operators, or garbage haulers—the workers will have economic stability via a monthly salary and the promise of other securities such as health insurance. But this approach elides the high priority the informal waste workers place on self-governing. Informal waste workers are in some ways establishing autonomy, control, and authority over the waste to which they feel rightfully entitled. The informal waste workers are not powerless, or in need of some sort of empowerment that grants them the right to waste; they find themselves always and already with the power to collect waste, yet the way in which they can access the waste is limited by both state mechanisms (and its expectations for waste management) and the discursive practices of those residents whose waste they handle; rather, waste becomes a medium through which to simultaneously articulate a sense of citizenship as well as autonomy from the government. A young woman who has been waste picking for five years told me that she is not embarrassed by the work, though of course it is taxing: "My whole family has been doing it for years. And while I do feel sad when I see other girls my age in school uniforms with nice things, I feel better that I'm not alone. I want to be in Chennai, not in the village, and we just hope it'll get better."

The alternative discourse to formalization is that of the government implementing a mechanism that makes the work of informal waste collection more economically productive and socially *humane*. The cornerstone of this discourse is the "return of dignity" to informal waste workers. For instance, Srinivasan, a local activist with the Save the Pallikarnai Marshland

forum, claims that the "solution is not to formalize the scavengers," but rather that the government should provide them with tools that allow "them to lead more dignified lives." Another local activist, Mathew José (a young entrepreneur who started the organization Paper Man in order to engage informal waste workers—specifically those who run "waste paper marts" and door-to-door collection operations) argues: "All I want to do is engage the society to give him [the informal waste worker] more dignity. The Paper Man movement has to move people to identify your local paper man, look at him, and think about giving your waste to such a person, give some dignity, because he deserves it. He's the guy making all the impact." The focus on "returning dignity" is a prevalent theme among activist discussions around informal waste working, signaling the deeply-entrenched belief that waste work is always and already *un*dignified. But it also indexes how informal waste working inspires forms of work among middle classes—voluntary, social entrepreneurial, non-governmental—with the essence of the efforts grounded in the physical effects of waste on the body. But it also indexes how informal waste working inspires forms of work among middle classes—voluntary, social entrepreneurial, non-governmental—with the essence of the efforts grounded in the physical effects of waste on the body.

These attempts to "formalize" and regulate are essentially techniques of power enacted on the body of the informal waste worker. While the health hazards of informal waste work are evident, there has been a tendency among scholars to render the sector homogenous. For people like Pandiyan, mentioned above, who work the street dumpsters as opposed to refuse dumps, the health hazards are qualitatively different. But the policies toward informal waste workers are applied indiscriminately ignoring these variations. All bodies that work with waste informally are massed together and politicized uniformly.

It is at such a discursive impasse that it becomes evident how contextualized insight is critical for informing governmental and extragovernmental attempts to "formalize" or otherwise intervene in the regulation of the informal waste working sector. Even something as seemingly intuitive as providing gloves for sanitation purposes is problematized by the workers' notion that the integrity of their work would be compromised. Thus, well-intentioned efforts to make informal waste working a more "dignified" enterprise through regulation of their physical health could bear side-effects that may invariably disenfranchise the worker further by way of impinging upon his/her economic productivity. While the physical toil of waste work is indubitably taxing and poses the potential for an onslaught of health ailments, it is also a treasured form of work that is distinct from the state and preserves a degree of autonomy over work.[3] Thus, the regulating of informal waste workers as biological citizens can have both productive and repressive consequences. It exemplifies the biopolitics of informal waste working: how state (and extra-state) efforts to integrate informal waste workers into the formal economy bring to the fore the very question of what it means to be human. The body of the informal waste worker is negotiated along political lines and in turn raises the question of sovereignty and expanding the workers' sense of citizenship.

Waste can be work: Middle-class environmental sensibilities

Insofar as waste as (informal) work offers a perspective into the biopoliticization of waste, when waste *can* be work governmentality can be observed through an alternate lens— namely, through how middle-class residents are conducting themselves into environmental

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[3] For more on the materiality of waste work as it relates to kinship and caste-based networks and ties, see Kaveri Gill (2010)'s economic and anthropological analysis of the informal waste workers in Delhi.

subjects. However, these emergent environmental sensibilities are not only influencing the middle-class individuals but are also influencing notions of sovereignty among those physically engaged with waste—the domestic laborers—whom the middle classes attempt to discipline into performing environmental practices such as recycling and household composting.

The level of participation in recycling among Chennai's middle classes is minimal. Most middle-class individuals interviewed in this study indicated that the compensation is too low—about Rupees 5 (US$.10) per kilo—and that it takes too much effort to segregate waste at the source. However, those who do participate keep segregated recyclables, or instruct their maids to do so—mainly large cardboards, newspapers, and plastic bottles, or goods with significant enough weight to deem some value. Thus, for those who do practice recycling, it tends to be through the disciplining of their (lower caste and class) domestic laborers, who are expected to sell recyclables at the neighborhood waste paper mart, acting in some ways then as an informal waste worker. Middle-class environmental subjecthood is thus contingent upon their domestic laborers, whom they presume to be driven by economic motives as well as a sense of obligation to the environment, but also serves to satisfy the middle-class resident's sense that their property can be exchanged for continued loyalty and service. By accepting the recyclables, then, maids and other domestics are also accepting their lower class status.

For instance, one homemaker in Mylapore said to me, "The maid gets to earn a few extra rupees; so, we help her out like that." Indeed, maids play a critical role in the disposal of waste, both by the way their middle-class employers discipline them into being environmental subjects as proxies for themselves, but also by how they resist these attempts to be disciplined. For example, one housewife and mother of two children in Mylapore averred that "there is no recycling happening in the house," but also said that she does "save plastics and heavy paperboards" to give to the maid because "she can get some money for it, or maybe use it in her own house." When I spoke to the maid about this, however, she somewhat reluctantly admitted that it was rare that she ever sold the recyclables her employer set aside for her because the profit margin is so low; rather, they would just end up in the street dumpster along with the rest of the garbage. Another informant, Bharat, an elderly man in a Mylapore gated community, explained to me that he and his wife "help [their maid] here and there, giving her leftover food, so we expect she'll throw the garbage away properly, sell these things for money." The expectation that domestic laborers be compliant reflects both a sense that they are obligated to the employer in nonfinancial ways, but also that they must naturally be drawn to any source of additional income, as menial as it may be. I discovered through conversations with the maids in these households that they did indeed trade in the recyclables for money—but only if significant enough. Light-weight items were just disposed of in the trash.

Perhaps in recognition that recycling has come to occupy a space of penuriousness—closely identified with scavengers and lowest caste individuals—individuals such as maids who become pseudo informal waste workers are adopting a similar aversion to the practice because the industry no longer pays as prolifically today (Medina 1997), but also because of the symbolic capital gained from not engaging in such practices.

Waste for the middle classes is a form of currency to establish further control over domestic laborers, and a means of disciplining them to not only ensure that they effectively render waste invisible from within the private quarters but also that they engage in practices not directly stated in their professional agreement, such as selling the household recyclables. But while the maids dutifully take the recyclables, whether they become converted to wealth or left in the trash is contingent upon each maid's economic stability, pride, and social status. Thus,

there is a fundamental disconnect between the middle-class expectation of the domestic laborer's engagement in recycling and what actually happens, because of an assumption that those of lower class are a) equally motivated by money, and b) feel a sense of obligation to the middle classes as their employers. Regardless, the middle class residents are attempting to articulate a sense of environmental subjecthood that relies on the actions of their domestic laborer, bringing to bear the extension of interclass relations into environmental praxis.

Another form of expressing environmental subjectivity by Chennai middle classes is initiating household or community-wide composting schemes. Waste, as Gay Hawkins (2006) observes, "captures the attention not simply of those in desperate need but also those able to imagine different uses" (74). This creative zeal to *transform* waste into something productive is evident among the middle classes in Chennai, seen in the gravitation toward developing home composting initiatives (cf. Anantharaman 2014). In contrast to recycling through domestic laborers, composting offers middle classes the opportunity to be in control of the waste themselves, and to participate in the process of its revaluation. However, even in the process of disciplining themselves into being environmental subjects, the middle classes are also disciplining those around them in more direct contact with waste (e.g., domestic laborers, gardeners, gatekeepers). For example, Hema, a working mother in MRC Nagar, was part of a group of women who initiated a composting project in the neighborhood, using the guidance of a Bangalore-based composting company Daily Dump, which sells tools and advice on composting for an individual and community level. Hema also sells her recyclables to a company called Kuppathotti.com (meaning, waste basket). Hema took on this initiative out of a sense of desire to "do something about the waste situation." She explained, "It's very sad. There are Mercedes Benz on the Road, which means we're at that level [of development]. But when it comes to waste, I don't know what happens [sic]. Five years ago, I started segregating waste, but it was very difficult because I didn't know what to do with it." That sense of unknown compels instead of deterring action among middle-class individuals, and illustrates the transformation into environmental subjects. Yet the actions that Hema takes, especially in terms of the composting, are only as successful as the domestic laborer's willingness to comply with her requests for segregation. That is, Hema instructs the domestic laborer to keep recyclables and "wet waste" separate, and if the segregation does not happen on that level, then the waste is invariably entering the waste stream indiscriminately.

If, as Hawkins and Muecke (2003) posit, "changing relations to waste mean changing relations to self" (xiv), then it can be said that the middle-class movement toward working closely with waste through composting is an indicator of a cultural shift, one that recognizes the transcendence of waste across class and caste boundaries. However, there is a limit to how close one can get to the waste, a limit demarcated by the form the work of waste takes. Hema has disciplined herself into an environmental subject around organic waste. But also implicated in the process of composting is disciplining those who already work closely with waste, similar to the practice of recycling via domestic laborers.

When waste *can* be work, the middle classes are conducting conduct, as they are transforming themselves into environmental subjects while disciplining their domestic laborers. But Agrawal's (2005) concept of *environmentality* does not seem to suffice in trying to explicate this form of environmental subjecthood. For, insofar as middle-class residents are recycling or composting, they are doing it via another body—their domestic laborer. Here, we see emerge another layer of governmentality. Not only are the middle classes experiencing some form of eco-governmentality in that they are feeling compelled to recycle or compost, they are

conducting the conduct of their domestic laborers in order to realize their imagined identity of being "eco-friendly" and the imagined reality of a cleaner city.

The disciplinary tendencies of the middle classes on the lower class and caste laborers alone is clearly related to the historical entrenchment and conflation of low caste and waste (cf. Douglas 2003[1996]; Chakrabarty 1991), but what is also brought to light is how because domestic laborers fall into a liminal category of neither an informal waste worker nor resident of the household they clean, they are largely excluded from biopolitical discussions as those mentioned around informal waste working. Clearly the hazards to the body are radically different amongst these two forms of waste handling, and it should further be noted that occupational hazards of domestic service are fewer and less severe in households such as those in Mylapore in comparison to those in larger and more posh gated communities with hundreds of apartments, such as those in MRC Nagar. In such posher communities, individual apartment domestic laborers and the community's housekeepers often sort through the accumulated trash at the end of a cleaning cycle, without gloves or other precautions, lining up glass jars, plastic bottles, and cardboards in the community's underground parking lot, which they then divide up and sell. This is in large part because individual segregation and the inclination to discipline their domestic laborers into recycling is even lower among MRC Nagar residents than those in the more modest apartment complexes of areas like Mylapore. When waste *can* be work then, such as when middle-class residents attempt to recycle via their domestic laborer, the practice is more an attempt to discursively discipline the domestic laborer, with ostensibly the idea of, for example, exchanging a form of capital for continued loyalty, or out of a perceived moral obligation as "the more educated class," as several residents indicated. But it also indicates how domestic laborers occupy a pseudo-space of informal waste work, which excludes them from the very biopolitical and moral debates that surround actual informal waste working.

To distance oneself from waste has come to be a signifier of one's societal status, because recycling and composting (which many residents used to practice as children via disposing of organic matter in open fields as opposed to the bin) have been historically intertwined with processes of consumerism, urbanization, and globalization. But waste also invokes affect, such as nostalgia for a more ethical city alluded to by informal waste workers. Waste also inspires thought into how such pro-environmental practices as an embodied knowledge represent a more rural, simpler time. For example, several middle-class individuals reflected upon their childhood during conversations about recycling, reminiscing about how their fathers would collect newspapers to sell to door-to-door salesmen, or how their mothers would meticulously wash out milk sachets and take them to the corner "waste paper mart" to sell, or how they themselves would take out the vegetable peels to feed to the town cow. But such practices lost their luster and became quaint habits of a rural, poorer past. It is perhaps by way of recapturing this spirit and to form a response to the indisputable repercussions of waste, which has become so visibly problematic in the city, that middle-class individuals are remerging as environmental subjects while also transforming their domestic laborers.

Middle-class environmental subjectivities are not all synonymous, and can be indicators of more political articulations of localized action. For instance, Srinivasan, a resident of the middle-class neighborhood of Adyar, helped initiate the composting program at his apartment complex of over 200 flats with the central purpose of turning their gated community into a model for the government to see, recognize, and adapt. The composting project was inspired by a desire to find an alternative to the large quantities of organic waste disposed of, but it also spurred, according to one resident, "a campaign for the removal of the [municipal] dumpsites"

and a call for "the government [to] come out with a very clear policy of segregating waste at source. Waste has to be segregated and, in fact, apartments and residential houses should be allowed to manage their organic waste. Here we do it, in our complex. It is a model for the government on how decentralized composting can work. We compost it within our building and we use it for our gardens."

As exemplified by the Hema and Srinivasan scenarios, middle-class environmental sensibilities are grounded in an imagined future of a cleaner household, community, or city that must be realized through individual action, especially in the absence of effective government policies. As Agrawal (2005) illustrates, knowledge does not necessarily precede action, and rather, environmental subjectivity can be developed through action that is at once grounded in the present and sketched in the prospects of an imagined future reality. In the case of waste work in Chennai, this imagined future reality is not a linear disciplinary process. Rather, the form and function of actions that the various involved agents take together create shifting discursive terrains around waste.

Working against Waste: Resistance, struggle, and counter-conduct
In addition to informal waste work and middle-class individual environmental practices around waste, the way in which waste is managed by the government has inspired resistance movements that can benefit from the analytic of Michel Foucault's "counter-conduct." Counter-conduct refers to the "sense of struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others" (Foucault 1978: 201). Significantly, counter-conduct is a means of developing not a lack of conduct but an *alternate* form of being conducted. In this sense, Foucault notes (through the example of anti-pastoral struggles) manifestations of counter-conduct are not external, but marginal to conduct, and retain, by way of "tactical elements," parts of conduct within themselves (215).

In this final section, I analyze two examples of resistance—one of a Dalit (lowest caste) leader of a movement and the other of a middle-class Brahmin leader of an organization—in order to demonstrate the layers of counter-conduct imbricated within resistance movements and the implications for the perpetuation of caste/class divides.

About 20 miles outside of central Chennai is Kuthambakkam, a peri-urban area described as "a model village," due in large part to the arduous campaigning of one particular activist, Rangaswamy Elango, the former President of the Kuthambakkam town panchayat of the Dalit caste.[4]

Elango is most renowned for his Gandhian philosophies and attempts to make Kuthambakkam village into a model for other Indian villages to be self-reliant and resilient. He has been an active voice in bringing to light inter-caste tensions, establishing, for instance, "equality housing" areas where a "backward" and "forward" caste must share a building. Through his political activity and persistent litigation, he has also contributed to solutions to solid waste management issues in Kuthambakkam.

Elango orchestrated a movement to successfully put a stay on a proposed plan to construct a dump yard in Kuthambakkam, where some of the city's waste would go as a response to ongoing calls for shutting down the Perungudi dump as well as the second dump, also atop a

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[4] Town panchayats are—in theory—autonomous local bodies located in rural or peri-urban areas of Chennai that should function as municipalities that exist beyond the realm of the Corporation of Chennai (the government arm handling municipal services) or government. However, as Mr. Elango described to me, the level of autonomy depends on the leadership; he considers himself to be one of the few, if not only, leaders that has been fully transparent and unwilling to participate in bribery schemes.

wetland, in Kodungaiyur. With the ongoing protests against the dumps and the real threats of over 5,000 tons of waste being generated each day, government officials are looking for town panchayats and villages to which they can export the waste being generated within the city. While a local activist and scholar informed me that the dump yard proposal was particularly problematic because Kuthambakkam is predominantly a Dalit (lowest caste) village, Elango—of Dalit background himself—was hesitant to frame it in this way: "It's not necessarily because it's Dalit [that the dump was proposed in Kuthambakkam], but because there is land available here." According to Elango, the major opposition to the proposal came not out of some notion of not wanting "their" waste "here," but from the notion that the project itself was not environmentally or socially feasible: "They were proposing to create it upstream on a major reservoir, the Chembarambakkam Lake." The Lake serves as water source not only for the village but for several areas within the Corporation. Meanwhile, the engineers proposing the project were promising that there would be no environmental or health issues, and did not take the Kuthambakkam villagers seriously, claiming that the Corporation's project was "technically sound." Evident through Elango's explanation of their efforts to resist is a sensitivity to how subaltern populations can be cast off as being "unknowledgeable." Waste, like other municipal services such as electricity and clean water provision, transcends caste boundaries in certain ways, appearing to be apolitical. The government depoliticizes waste by making it an issue of technoscientific knowledge, and "technical soundness" but simultaneously expands its power by continuing to marginalize the poor.

  While Elango attributes the resistance largely to the issue of water contamination, it became apparent as we spoke that the resistance was also in part a reaction to the historical tendency to couple waste with the low-caste individual. The struggle against the dump is as much about not having "their" waste in "our" village as it is about asserting a political influence through an appeal to technical, scientific discourse. The protest is a deliberate effort to be acknowledged by the state by speaking the language of state.

  Elango lamented, "The pity of the caste system is that it is the only system in the world that says that someone 'dirty' *should* be 'dirty.'" While most of the study's middle-class informants shied away from discussing caste, and instead pointed to class as the explicative for waste habits, Elango insisted that waste and caste are intimately connected: "Development and economics are masking the social, caste system." Caste is a system, a way of life so deeply entrenched that it has become taken for granted. This caste system entrenchment has in turn translated into not only a lack of empathy, but a sense that certain people belong or deserve certain tasks, such as clearing garbage or waste picking.

  What Elango is saying is that working in waste as a low-caste individual is not degrading; rather, it is that individuals are systematically taught to feel that they *should* be doing such work because of their caste that is problematic. In this conceptualization, waste is not work, nor can waste be work, but waste *should* be work. And it is against the normative prescription that he and his supporters work. Waste is not just a byproduct of human consumption but an essential component to ensuring that the caste system remains a well-greased machine. Waste is an active participant in the logic of the caste system, a means through which individuals can construct their own identities through their relationship with it—or lack thereof. Still, even while holding this ideology, Elango speaks to the state in the language of the state, not acknowledging the pitfalls of the caste system, in the hopes of gaining legitimacy or legibility from the state. To this end, as Death (2010) presents, resistance reflects forms of governmentality: "Resistance…is itself bound up within *networks of governmentality*; and liberal democracy's toleration of dissent and protest

within certain limits works, paradoxically, to reinforce as well as challenge dominant power relations" (239).

What needs to be considered of these "networks of governmentality," are the discursive effects of class differentials *within* a given resistance or revolt. John Harriss (2011), for instance, has described how most activism in Chennai is "for the urban poor" and not "of the urban poor." In Chennai, while there are protests around the closure of the burgeoning refuse dumps with predominant participation from local, low-income residents, these are also often orchestrated by middle-class NGOs or individuals, such as the protest in 2005 around the closure of the Perungudi dump, which had a prominent presence of a primarily middle-class NGO, ExNoRa (Sujatha 2005).

While the concept of "counter-conduct" is helpful in considering the ways in which the resistance movement perpetuates the system against which it is struggling, resistance is far more layered, with different networks of agents and systems imbricated within a given movement. For example, on the topic of movements being primarily middle-class led, Srinivasan of Save the Pallikarnai Marshland (an organization lobbying for the closure of the Southern Chennai refuse dump in Perungudi) told me the following:

"They are only from middle-class background, *because you need some amount of knowledge about all these things*. See the poor, they cannot even afford to sustain themselves, it's very hard. I had to pay thousands of rupees to get the lawyer from Delhi. Litigation is very costly. Today, if you have to file a case, it costs you an arm and a leg. The entire question of environment and development—the fight is extremely difficult. At the local level, they'll just buy off the poor people, so then, you don't necessarily carry on the fight. In spite of that, someone will have to fight it. Then necessarily it'll have to be from outside, or the middle classes, to get support."

What counter-conduct as an analytic does not necessarily account for are narratives of empowerment, which Srinivasan's sentiment reflects, that are employed by well-intentioned middle-class individuals or NGOs working on behalf of the urban poor. Empowerment sets up a hierarchy that brings to bear a multiplicity of counter-conducts within a given resistance movement. In Chennai, there is a constellation of extra-state organizations that are predominantly led by middle class individuals working to challenge the ways in which they are being conducted by the state to manage waste. But implicated within this counter-conduct is also an empowerment agenda that indexes how the middle classes are not just challenging how they themselves are being conducted, but how the urban poor are being conducted—and how they are reacting to this conduct.

Mangalam Balasubramanian leads Exnora Green Pammal, located in the Chennai municipality of Pammal, a peri-urban area of Chennai. The parent organization, Exnora (Excellent, Novel, Radical), was founded by M.B. Nirmal and is credited for being the first such organization to raise awareness and initiate action around waste management in Chennai. ExNoRa has inspired numerous satellite Exnoras through Chennai, on the city, household, and community levels, such as Exnora Green Pammal.

Like Exnora, Exnora Green Pammal has its origins in waste removal as a beautification and cleanliness enterprise. Exnora Green Pammal created the "Green Ambassadors" program to recruit (lower-class, low-caste) individuals to collect, sort, and of waste in as sustainable of a way as possible. Like the Corporation's conservancy workers, the Green Ambassadors have a designated uniform, and are encouraged to sell any recyclables they come across.

The idea of "green ambassadors" seems to be packaged in a brand that would be legible

to the Western world or environmentally-aware individuals. When I asked one of the workers at the composting shed, an elderly woman wearing a green sari (the uniform) what being a green ambassador means to her, she chuckled nervously and said, "I don't know, I guess we are helping the earth? We don't waste much at home so when I saw this I was shocked. Too much waste." Being engaged in a project appears to be gratifying for these women, but, like any other job fulfilled by lower-caste and –class individuals, it comes at the expense of individual integrity. In the distance, the field manager, an energetic middle-aged woman, was disciplining a few elderly women who were sitting idly, and told them promptly to demonstrate for me the dry waste incinerator—the ash is collected and made into small blocks that are sold to industry. They admitted later to me that they are not treated with respect, that precautions such as gloves are a distant dream, and working with waste is always and already a degrading job.

Exnora Green Pammal emerged not only in response to the anemic efforts of the municipality's government to manage waste, but also as a resistance to Exnora itself. Mangalam aims for Exnora Green Pammal to be an "expert organization," unlike, according to her, Exnora, which functions more as an idea generating machine without follow-through. To this end, Exnora Green Pammal accumulates facts and figures, draw up calculations, and prepares reports. A part of the modernization process has been the creation of "centers of accumulation," following Latour (1988). As such, the Pammal headquarters serves as a clearinghouse and production center for data, statistics, and reports, which in turn are discursively shaping the landscape of waste management within the non-profit.

Sustainable waste management in Chennai has, following Timothy Luke (2009), developed into an expertarchic space. According to Luke (2009), expertartchic spaces are mobilized through which "the Earth is reduced, typically in experts' research programs and projects, to little more than a vast standing reserve, serving as a ready resource supply center and/or accessible waste reception site where "natural resources" for "local use" and "global exchange" are reshaped daily into products and by-products of "natural resources" consumption" (133). In this case, waste is being rendered legible through the accumulation of statistics, calculations, and projections; informal waste workers, though quantifiable, disrupt the rhythms of waste management and remain visible but illegible. Informal waste workers to Exnora Green Pammal are not recognized as assets to the organization's efforts. Rather, Mangalam, like most middle-class informants in this study, views informal waste workers as impediments, as they do not facilitate the process of establishing *clean* streets—though their contributions to recycling are unacknowledged. The issue is also with the level of participation from the residents to segregate, which is again laced with implications of class and caste dynamics. According to Mangalam, only 40% of the Pammal residents segregate their trash at source, while the remaining 60%, people from lower income areas, fail to do so: "They say it's because of a lack of space," she averred. "How can you get to these people?" she asked.

The work of activism and action around resistance to waste management illustrates the on-the-ground messiness of counter-conduct against waste. These resistances invariably reproduce certain logics of the conduct—such as leaving the actual work of waste collection to the lower class and caste through the notion of empowerment—but also underscore the multiplicity of counter-conducts within the given resistances.

While counter-conduct as an analytic offers a medium through which to develop a more tempered perspective on the resistance movements, it also seems to elide the power differentials that emerge through the varying classes and castes of participants in the movement. Waste, whether through the state or through an energetic NGOs' resistance to the state, remains as the

work *of* the poor. The connection between poverty and waste management is centuries-old; the question brought forth here is how these "resistance movements" are indeed continuing to dehumanize the waste worker while maintaining waste as an abject on the name of environmental progress.

Conclusion

Chennai is home to a vibrant informal waste recycling sector, but also fervent efforts—individual and organized—to address the looming issues associated with improper waste management. Chennai is by no means exclusive in its struggles with managing waste, and the discursive dynamics of working with waste can be identified in other rapidly urbanizing Indian as well as non-Indian metropolises around the world.

The paper has aimed to bring to bear the ways in which narratives and practices around waste are challenging and reproducing notions around personhood and citizenship This ethnographic analysis of waste work in Chennai offers a perspective that acknowledges the plurivocality and complexities of waste in a city that, not unlike many others of the Global South, is struggling to reconcile the realities of the material stuff of waste with its socialites. The paper has aimed to provide an initial foray into tensions that surround subject-waste relationships, as well as the discursive role of the state and extrastate, by indexing three different approaches to waste work—informal waste working, voluntary middle-class environmental praxis, and organized resistances to waste management. The work serves as an invitation to explore these questions with further ethnographic research and historical contextualization, to deconstruct further socially embedded categories such as class, caste, and gender as well as global capitalism as they relate to waste work.

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