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Producing Value at a Soweto Garbage Dump

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Abstract

This article contributes to debates on the relationship between waste and value by exploring how the revaluation of waste at a dump in Soweto, South Africa, was transformed during the 2008 economic crisis. It critically engages Herod, Pickren, Rainnie & McGrath-Champ's differentiation between 'devalorisation' due to material degradation and 'devaluation' due to prices being too low for recycling to be profitable, in order to develop three arguments. First, it is necessary to recognise how political mobilisation by reclaimers shapes the conditions for devaluation by affecting local prices for recyclables. Second, reclaimers' struggles to monopolise control over waste as they govern their labour process may lead to materials that could be profitably reclaimed remaining wasted. Third, waste is not only revalued through global production networks. Analysing why reclaimers choose to revalue waste through either formal or informal circuits provides insights into how the economy is constituted and affected by crisis in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords

crisis – waste – value – South Africa – waste picker – reclaimers – global destruction networks

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Even trash has become worthless

TIAN WENGUI, *Chinese recycler on the 2008 global economic crisis*¹

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Introduction

From the top of a festering garbage heap in Soweto, South Africa, the sleek, glamorous world of Wall Street seems literally and figuratively a million miles away. Wall Street is at the epicentre of the global economy. It conjures images of excess and extravagance, of lithe young men and women clad in designer suits and opulent accessories working hard and playing hard as they gamble with our futures. By contrast, garbage dumps lie on the peripheries of our cities and occupy even more marginal places in our thoughts. People who work with trash are universally reviled.² Reclaimers who collect reusable and recyclable material and live from what others have cast aside are frequently depicted as the ‘the ultimate symbols of urban poverty’.³ They are presumed to have been pushed outside of the economy and to simply subsist on its detritus, and are upheld as the epitome of capitalism’s ‘human waste’.⁴

Surprisingly, then, the industry that turns between 700 and 800 million tonnes of waste back into commodities each year⁵ was one of the first in which it was clearly evident that the financial crisis which started on Wall Street in 2007 was mutating into a more generalised economic crisis in late 2008. As early as November 2008⁶ stories began appearing in mainstream media around the world as journalists grappled to understand why recyclables were piling up in local communities and what this had to do with the crisis. Within the next four months the *New York Times*,⁷ *The Guardian*,⁸ and the *Christian Science*

1 Cited in Levin 2009.

2 See, for example, Beall 2006; Chikarmane and Narayan 2005; Huysman 1994; Medina 2007.

3 Beall 1997, p. 73.

4 Bauman 2004, p. 59.

5 Chalmin 2010, p. 2.

6 See, for example, Birney and Goldstein 2008; CBC News 2008.

7 Levin 2009.

8 Birney and Goldstein 2008.

*Monitor*⁹ all carried in-depth features probing the issue. Journalists writing for small local papers in developed countries were astonished to discover that recyclables were being buried at landfills because they had previously been shipped to China, and as a result of the 2008 crisis Chinese companies had stopped accepting imported materials.

Although recycling is seen as the most local of environmental activities, in fact the industry is highly globalised and governed by world prices benchmarked against prices for virgin materials.¹⁰ Summing up the relationship between the recycling industry and the economy, Minter comments that because the industry salvages materials from wasted commodities and re-inserts them into the production of new ones '[i]t's a canary in the coalmine: it's the front and back end of industry'.¹¹ Echoing Minter, Gamal Salam, an Egyptian rubbish collector remarks, 'I can tell the condition of the economy easily from the rubbish I collect everyday'.¹² Indeed, the rate at which the scrap industry crashed was a harbinger of just how bad things were to become in the global economy. According to industry insiders, the recycling industry 'fell off a cliff' in October 2008.¹³ Prices plummeted so low that one Chinese purchaser of recyclables bemoaned to the *New York Times* that as a result of the 2008 crisis '[e]ven trash has become worthless',¹⁴ succinctly capturing both how highly-prized items retrieved from waste had been before the crash and how quickly the crisis transformed recyclables back into nothing more than rubbish. With virtually no demand for their products, four-fifths of Chinese recycling companies closed shop and official Chinese media predicted that millions of Chinese would be rendered unemployed.¹⁵

Evidently, then, Wall Street and the garbage dump are not so far removed. Although in advanced capitalist economies most recyclables are extracted from the waste-stream before they hit the dump, millions of people in postcolonial countries work as reclaimers who retrieve materials of potential value from the rubbish heap and reinsert them into formal and informal circuits of use, exchange and production while also putting them to direct reproductive use. If the recycling industry is 'the front and back end of industry',¹⁶ the

9 Kutner 2009.

10 Chalmin 2010, p. 2; Packaging Council of South Africa 2011, p. 89.

11 Cited in Branigan 2009.

12 Cited in Emam 2008.

13 Cited in Levin 2009.

14 Cited in Levin 2009.

15 Branigan 2009; Kirchner and Thomas 2009.

16 Cited in Branigan 2009.

garbage dump is where these two points meet, and is a particularly generative site for studying transformations in the production of value.

Political economists have long argued that interrogating the relationship between waste and value provides crucial insights into the nature and dynamics of capitalist accumulation.¹⁷ Moments of crisis bring these dynamics into sharp relief, and in this article I explore how the revaluation of waste at the Marie Louise garbage dump in Soweto, South Africa, was transformed during the 2008 crisis in order to tease out broader implications for how we can think about the reinfusion of waste with value. In doing so I critically engage Herod *et al.*'s theorisation of 'global destruction networks'¹⁸ in order to make two interrelated arguments. First, I argue that, while their differentiation between 'devalorisation' (rooted in the material deterioration of a commodity and its constituent elements such that they cannot be reinfused with value) and 'devaluation' (due to lack of profitability) is crucially important, they fail to sufficiently theorise the role of workers in determining the conditions for de- and re-valuation. Rooted in close analysis of the form the 2008 crisis assumed at Marie Louise, I argue that the social identities, power-laden social relations, social institutions, and spatial praxis developed by reclaimers prior to the crisis constrained their ability to mobilise collectively to obtain higher prices. In the context of falling prices they also led South African reclaimers to bolster their own incomes by excluding Zimbabweans from the dump. Power politics between reclaimers therefore meant that materials which could have been profitably revalued remained devalued and wasted as the limited numbers of reclaimers onsite were not physically able to salvage all of the recyclable materials mingled with the trash. Second, I argue that analysing how reclaimers responded to the crisis by placing increasing emphasis on informal revaluation as opposed to formal revaluation provides crucial insights into the dynamics of crisis as well as the specific nature of the capitalist economy in postcolonial contexts in ways precluded by Herod *et al.*'s exclusive focus on the re-insertion of waste into global production networks.

The research for this article was conducted between 2009 and 2011. It includes ethnographic analysis from extended periods hanging out at the dump, 152 semi-structured interviews and focus groups, and a survey of 267 of the

17 Baran and Sweezy 1966; Crang, Hughes, Gregson, Norris and Ahamed 2013; Gidwani and Reddy 2011; Goldstein 2013; O'Brien 1999; Packard 1960; Rogers 2005; Thompson 1979; Whitson 2011.

18 Herod, Pickren, Rainnie and McGrath-Champ 2013, 2014.

estimated 500 reclaimers at Marie Louise.¹⁹ As the reclaimers at Marie Louise came from across South Africa and the surrounding countries they spoke virtually all of South Africa's eleven official languages as well as additional regional languages. A team of multi-lingual research assistants conducted the survey. Long-time land-rights activist and current National Organiser for Right2Know Bongani Xezwi was my primary research assistant, assisting with translation when needed in formal and informal interviews, conducting interviews, and playing a critical role in forging relations with reclaimers.

The remainder of this article proceeds in seven sections. In the first section I locate my intervention within relevant debates on the relationship between waste and value, focusing specifically on theorisations of 'global destruction networks'. In the second section I provide an overview of how the global and South African recycling industries were affected by the 2008 crisis. I then explore the form that the crisis took at Marie Louise and elaborate the centrality of the social subjectivities, social relations, spatial praxis, and social institutions forged by reclaimers in this process and in determining the conditions for the revaluation of waste in the context of the crisis. The concluding section thinks through the implications for how we theorise the relationship between waste value as well as postcolonial capitalism.

Theorising Waste and Value

Political economists have long recognised that interrogating the intimate relationship between waste and value provides crucial insights into the nature of capitalism. Packard²⁰ coins the term 'planned obsolescence' to capture how capitalists purposefully render commodities obsolete in order to induce further consumption. Baran and Sweezy²¹ deepen this understanding of capitalism as intrinsically wasteful by arguing that monopoly capitalism necessarily results in unabsorbed surplus. They see this wasting of productive capacity and consumer goods as a key structural contradiction that will contribute to the demise of capitalism.²² However, other scholars establish that both the

19 The survey sample was stratified by gender and shift. For the overall survey population there is a 4.1 per cent margin of error at the 95 per cent confidence interval. Thanks to Mark Isserow and Zaid Kimmie for assistance in designing the sample and analysing survey data.

20 Packard 1960.

21 Baran and Sweezy 1966.

22 Gille 2007.

privatised management of waste and the transformation of waste into new commodities create new spheres of accumulation for capital.²³ Rogers²⁴ highlights that recycling also staves off calls for more radical transformations to less wasteful forms of production.

Recently two distinct bodies of literature emerged interrogating the moments and processes during which waste is infused with new value. While literature on reclaiming (frequently referred to as 'waste picking') can be traced back almost forty years to Birkbeck's research on the 'self-employed proletarians' on the dump in Cali, Colombia,²⁵ there has been a veritable explosion of research on the topic in the past decade.²⁶ Often rooted in rich, ethnographic study, this literature provides insights into the daily working lives of reclaimers, focusing primarily on the labour of reclaiming, the contributions reclaimers make to the economy, city and environment, and how they organise collectively. Unfortunately there is little theoretical engagement with literature on value theory or interrogation of *how* reclaimers contribute to the generation of new value. In addition, although it is frequently noted that reclaimers are not employed and have more autonomy than wage labourers, curiously scant attention is paid to the ways they govern their labour process, how this shapes and is shaped by power relations between them, or how this informs whether and how waste is reinfused with value.

This same lacuna characterises the small number of studies of reclaimers and the 2008 crisis, all of which cast reclaimers as passive recipients of a completely externally generated crisis, with the relevance of local context limited to understanding how reclaimers coped with its effects.²⁷ By contrast, in the following sections of this article I interrogate how the grounded politics of reclaimers at Marie Louise shaped the form which the crisis took at the dump and the ways they continued to reinfuse waste with value in the context of the crisis.

A second current strand of literature focuses explicitly on how new value is forged out of waste. It is particularly relevant to analysis of what the 2008 crisis reveals about the transformation of waste into value because of its central preoccupation with global recycling networks and its exploration of the relationship between waste, global value chains, and global production

23 Crang, Hughes, Gregson, Norris and Ahamed 2013; O'Brien 1999; Rogers 2005.

24 Rogers 2005.

25 Birkbeck 1978.

26 See for example: Chikarmane 2012; Dias and Cidrin 2008; Gidwani and Reddy 2011; Medina 2007; Millar 2012; Nzeadibe and Mbah 2015; Parizeau 2014; Reddy 2013; Whitson 2011.

27 Chintan 2009; Horn 2009, 2010 and 2011; Millar 2012; SEWA 2009.

networks (GPNs).²⁸ While Crang *et al.* argue that global recycling networks 'operate not through adding value, but by connecting different regimes of value',²⁹ Herod and his collaborators³⁰ draw on a classical Marxist understanding of value as congealed labour to focus on the centrality of labour in creating value from waste. In theorising how commodities are transformed into waste and whether they can be reinfused with value Herod *et al.* develop the crucial distinction between 'devalorisation' and 'devaluation'. They elaborate:

we can think of the instance of a component coming to the final end of its life because it can no longer physically be recycled as marking its devalorization. However, it is important to distinguish this situation from that of when a component is no longer recycled simply because it is not profitable to do so under current circumstances, for in this latter instance there is still value that it could potentially bring with it if it were to be used as raw material for new commodities being fabricated in a GPN (we have previously referred to this latter phenomenon as manifesting the component's 'devaluation').³¹ In both instances, then, the ongoingness of various components will stop, but for quite different reasons. Moreover, although for one the termination of ongoingness is permanent (as with paper or certain types of plastics whose chemistries have been permanently changed by being recycled so many times that it is simply impossible to continue to recycle them), for another it is not – ongoingness may start up again should market conditions change.³²

A key question then arises as to what shapes the conditions that allow for devaluation, and relatedly, for revaluation. Recognising the globalised nature of the recycling industry, Herod *et al.* propose the concept 'global destruction networks', which they define as 'networks of places where products are disassembled and their constituent parts are extracted for processing and re-use'. GDNs are 'indelibly imbricated with, and an indispensable Other to, GPNs, for the work of most GPNs is fairly pointless if they are not producing raw materials for GDNs'.³³ They observe that the physical nature of waste influences where

28 See Crang, Hughes, Gregson, Norris and Ahamed 2013; Herod, Pickren, Rainnie and McGrath-Champ 2013, 2014; Lepawsky and Mather 2011.

29 Crang, Hughes, Gregson, Norris and Ahamed 2013, p. 12.

30 Herod, Pickren, Rainnie and McGrath-Champ 2013, 2014.

31 See Herod, Pickren, Rainnie and McGrath-Champ 2013.

32 Herod, Pickren, Rainnie and McGrath-Champ 2014, p. 428.

33 Herod, Pickren, Rainnie and McGrath-Champ 2014, p. 427.

disassembly occurs and how a GDN links to GPNS, citing the example that shipwrecking must occur along coasts. However, they emphasise that ‘the pursuit of value under capitalism is the principal moulder of how GDNs evolve’³⁴ and highlight the central importance of the organisation of the labour process in shaping GDNs.³⁵ Ironically, although they assert that labour should be seen as ‘an active shaper of GDNs and GDNs and thus of the movement of value through different commodities and across space’,³⁶ all of their examples focus simply on how differing labour costs and health and safety regulations in the global North and global South lead GDNs to take different forms in these locations. In addition, although they note that not all GDNs provide inputs into GPNS, they dismiss this as ‘unproductive labour’ aimed merely at ‘reuse’ and focus exclusively on revaluation through GPNS.³⁷

In the remainder of this article I use analysis of the form the global crisis took at the Marie Louise dump in order to argue that it is, instead, crucially necessary to recognise both how informal workers actively shape conditions for the de- and re-valuation of waste and that the choices they make about how to revalue waste reveal important insights into the deep inner-relations between formal and informal, and local and global aspects of the economy in postcolonial contexts. First, however, it is necessary to locate this discussion by providing an overview of how the global and South African recycling industries were affected on a more macro level by the 2008 crisis.

The 2008 Crisis and the Recycling Industry

By the start of the new millennium China was by far the main destination for the world’s recyclables and the formation of a global market for recyclables was linked to China’s rise as the world’s factory. Both virgin and recycled materials were in short supply as inputs for Chinese manufacturers.³⁸ Ships coming to China to pick up consumer goods to sell in Europe and North America arrived empty. Seeing an opportunity, Chinese companies filled them with recyclables purchased in Europe and North America that were then used in China to produce the consumer goods sent back on the same ships.³⁹ Between 2000

34 Herod, Pickren, Rainnie and McGrath-Champ 2014, p. 429.

35 Herod, Pickren, Rainnie and McGrath-Champ 2014, p. 422.

36 Herod, Pickren, Rainnie and McGrath-Champ 2014, p. 438.

37 Herod, Pickren, Rainnie and McGrath-Champ 2014, pp. 427, 439.

38 French 2009; Levin 2009.

39 Minter 2008.

and 2008 the amount of recovered paper and cardboard exported from the United States to China increased more than five-fold and reached 11.6 million tonnes.⁴⁰ In roughly the same period scrap metal became the largest American export to China in terms of volume.⁴¹

The 2008 crisis was characterised by plummeting global demand that devastated the global recycling industry. Before October 2008 hit its halfway mark, prices for used newspapers in the United Kingdom dropped by 24–28%.⁴² By May 2009 prices for paper fell by 50–70%.⁴³ Plastic recyclables dropped more than 50% in the final months of 2008.⁴⁴ Between 2007 and March 2009 prices for copper scrap decreased from US\$8,000 a tonne to US\$3,000, tin plummeted from US\$300 per pound to US\$5, and paper prices decreased by 80%.⁴⁵

To date no studies have been published on the 2008 crisis and the South African recycling industry. Research on this issue is complicated by the facts that there is virtually no official data on the industry, companies are highly competitive and secretive, and the statistics available are questionable.⁴⁶ Due to the closed nature of the industry, attempts to access information related to the sector and the crisis were largely unsuccessful. As much of the data presented below comes from industry it cannot be independently verified and is presented for indicative purposes.

One key point which is, however, objectively clear, is that the South African economy as a whole was profoundly adversely affected by the 2008 crisis. The ways different economies were implicated in and affected by the crisis were informed by how they were structured and integrated into global markets when the meltdown started. Marais argues that in South Africa '[t]he global economic crisis was channelled into the economy along two main routes: falling commodity prices and the drying up of easy credit'.⁴⁷

These two factors were particularly salient due to the economy's historical and continued dependence on mining and associated industries through the minerals energy complex (MEC)⁴⁸ and how financialisation was implanted on top of this largely untransformed economic base starting in the 1980s.⁴⁹

40 Levin 2009.

41 Minter 2008.

42 Eminton 2008.

43 French 2009.

44 Plastics Europe 2009.

45 Levin 2009.

46 Lowitt 2007, p. 5.

47 Marais 2011, p. 147.

48 Fine and Rustomjee 1996.

49 Bond 2010; Marais 2011; Mohamed 2009.

In 1998, in line with its neoliberal macro-economic strategy, the ANC permitted South Africa's largest companies to list overseas, leading to a massive long-term capital outflow.⁵⁰ High interest rates counterbalanced this outflow, but attracted short-term portfolio investments used to finance consumption and speculation in real-estate and financial markets.⁵¹ By 2007 household debt reached over 80% of household disposable income and debt-driven consumption became the key factor underpinning domestic growth.⁵² The surge in consumption stoked demand for imports, further widening the trade deficit.⁵³

This configuration of the South African economy rendered it particularly vulnerable to the 2008 crisis. The stock market plummeted 10% in the second week of October 2008 and by the next week the currency had lost almost a fifth of its value.⁵⁴ Mining output fell 33% in the last quarter of 2008, with devastating effect due to the dominance of the MEC.⁵⁵ In February 2009 the *Economist* ranked South Africa the riskiest of seventeen middle-income countries,⁵⁶ and by April 2009 there was a 21.6% year-on-year drop in manufacturing production.⁵⁷ The US dollar value of exports fell by between 19% and 35% compared to the previous year every month between November 2008 and April 2009 and the current-account deficit hit 7% of GDP.⁵⁸ Company failures increased 47% in the first four months of 2009.⁵⁹ Overtime for formal-sector workers decreased 13% in the first half of 2009, a million jobs were lost that year, and the unemployment rate returned to 35.4%.⁶⁰ Consumer spending decreased 5% in the first half of 2009, house reposessions increased 52% in early 2009, and there were 6,000 car reposessions a month.⁶¹

With such significant declines in production, income and consumption it is reasonable to assume that there were related decreases in levels of waste and

50 Bond 2010, p. 19; Marais 2011, pp. 124–5.

51 Mohamed 2009, p. 22.

52 Marais 2011, p. 130; Mohamed 2009, pp. 3–4.

53 Mohamed 2009, p. 3.

54 Bond 2010, p. 21.

55 Marais 2011, p. 146; Mohamed 2009, p. 3.

56 Marais 2011, p. 146.

57 Ashman, Fine and Newman 2010, p. 179.

58 Ashman, Fine and Newman 2010, p. 179; Baxter 2008, pp. 87–8.

59 Marais 2011, p. 147.

60 Ashman, Fine and Newman 2011, p. 177; Makgetla 2009.

61 Ashman, Fine and Newman 2010, p. 179; Bond 2010, p. 23; Mohamed 2009, p. 23.

hence in reusable and recyclable materials being disposed. In order to discern the effect of the crisis on the South African recycling industry it is also necessary to explore the nature of the industry, the extent to which it was integrated into global recycling chains, and hence how it was affected by international reductions in both demand and prices.

The Packaging Council of South Africa (PACSA) estimates that 1,539 million tonnes of packaging and paper were recycled in South Africa in 2009, representing a 44.5% recycling rate.⁶² Almost no formal recycling programmes exist in the country, and reclaimers play a critical role in achieving this high rate. For example, according to PACSA in 2009 almost a quarter of recycled plastics came from landfills, where it was collected by reclaimers.⁶³ Street reclaimers provided even more materials. Reclaimers are therefore an integral part of the recycling value chain.

The South African recycling industry is highly concentrated. In 2006 three companies were responsible for 74% of post-consumer paper collected and five companies for 80% of paper recycling in the country.⁶⁴ Consol had 75% of the glass-recycling market, and together the four largest glass recyclers comprised 99% of the market.⁶⁵ As small companies can recycle plastic this sector is more competitive, and in 2009 193 recyclers converted 228,057 tons of plastic.⁶⁶

The metal-recycling industry is also dominated by a small number of companies. In 2009 it was reported that 95.31% of all scrap was ferrous, and Arcelor Mittal was 'super dominant' with 70% to 80% of the market for steel production. Six companies accounted for 70% of non-ferrous scrap traded. Scrap metal is a lucrative business, and between January and September 2008 alone the metal-recycling industry recorded R19 billion in sales.⁶⁷

In the years preceding the 2008 crisis the South African recycling industry became increasingly globally integrated. Imports were minimal, but exports were growing. All types of waste paper were exported, primarily to India, but also to China, Japan, Indonesia, and Swaziland. Between 2003 and 2008, plastics-recycling companies interviewed by Lowitt more than doubled their exports.⁶⁸

62 Packaging Council of South Africa 2011, p. 3.

63 Packaging Council of South Africa 2011, p. 37.

64 Lowitt 2007, p. 58; Lowitt 2008, pp. 68, 76; Packaging Council of South Africa 2011, p. 35.

65 Lowitt 2008, p. 31, pp. 49–50; Packaging Council of South Africa 2011, p. 33.

66 Packaging Council of South Africa 2011, p. 36.

67 Econex 2009, pp. 8–25.

68 Lowitt 2008, pp. 72, 74, 123.

An estimated 50% of aluminium scrap is exported and in 2007 24% of ferrous scrap valued at R1.74 billion was exported.⁶⁹

No information is available on the relationship between domestic and global prices for recycled paper, plastic, or glass. However, interviews with the largest collection company in South Africa (which was also the primary purchaser of materials from Marie Louise) reveal that, as in the global arena, prices for paper and plastic started crashing in October 2008. Industry sources would not divulge how much their prices dropped, but revealed they maintained their percentage mark-up by reducing purchasing prices in proportion to the reduction in their sales prices.⁷⁰

Industry data and an interview with the largest metal-collection company in the country demystify the relationship between changes in global prices linked to the crisis and domestic prices for scrap metal. Prices for both ferrous and non-ferrous scrap in South Africa are directly derived from international prices. One metal-collection company dominates the national scrap market, holding between 65% and 75% of the market share. It was also the main company that purchased scrap from buyers at Marie Louise. This company exports approximately 70% of its products, primarily to China, and has a trading desk that negotiates scrap sales on a daily basis. According to a trader at the company, when the 2008 global crisis began metal prices fell quickly because metals 'are almost like frogs in an eco-system, one of the first things that you can see whether there are going to be issues, because they are traded daily and they are high value and they are the underlying raw material for all industry'.⁷¹

In a three-week period starting in October 2008 global prices for scrap metals dropped by two-thirds, with copper plunging to \$3,000 from a high of \$8,000. It takes three months for a shipment to reach China and a number were en route when prices fell. The trader explained that 'we had approximately six or seven thousand tons of non-ferrous metals, highly valued metals, on the water when it happened. And about 40% of our buyers turned and ran – they would not honour our shipment'.⁷² The traders flew to China to negotiate new rates so that they could recoup at least some funds and ensure the cargo was not stranded. Back in South Africa the company closed its purchasing depots for more than a week. When they re-opened the company dropped prices paid for scrap by more than the prices it received as it did not know how much farther prices would fall before its shipments arrived in China. Prices offered

69 Econex 2009, pp. 8–25.

70 Interview with Recycling Company #7, 23 August 2011, 10 September 2011.

71 Interview with Recycling Company #6, 2 September 2011.

72 Interview with Recycling Company #6, 2 September 2011.

within South Africa to people such as the buyers at Marie Louise therefore fell by even more than the global prices.

The 2008 Crisis at Marie Louise

In October 2009 there were fourteen buyers at Marie Louise. The majority purchased paper and/or plastics. Only four men had the cash flow to trade in more lucrative scrap. Four additional buyers worked at the dump in 2008 but left when prices they received dropped. Only one returned at the end of November 2009. None of the buyers processed materials. They simply bought recyclables from reclaimers and sold them to collection companies once they had amassed enough to obtain a reasonable price.

The large number of buyers at the dump would seem to indicate a strongly competitive market. However, the concentration in the overall industry was replicated at the dump as in October 2009 at least ten of the buyers were selling to just two companies.⁷³ The buyers felt unable to negotiate selling-prices. Only one buyer proactively searched for other companies to sell to when dissatisfied with the prices on offer. But after he began selling directly to a locally-based Chinese manufacturer the large collection company that dominated the dump negotiated with the manufacturer to buy from it instead and he was forced to sell to this company again.

Prices received by buyers at the dump for PET (plastic soft-drink bottles) were the first to fall in October 2008. HD (plastic milk-bottles), mixed plastic, clear plastic, and copper soon followed. Prices for other metals remained stable a bit longer, but also collapsed before the end of the year. The prices received by the buyers plummeted overnight, with severe implications:

They [prices] crashed in the middle of the month, and they crashed on a Friday on top of it. On Friday you buy perhaps R5,000.00 or R6,000.00 worth of stuff. And now you have to sell it for about R2,000.00 or R3,000.00. So, you had nothing.⁷⁴

The reclaimers were also taken off-guard when they went to sell their materials the next week and found buyers offering dramatically lower prices. A few reclaimers who actively monitored the recycling market travelled to sell materials to firms their buyers sold to in order to see what prices were being offered

73 One buyer would not reveal whom he sold to.

74 Interview with Buyer #2, 17 February 2010.

and followed the commodity markets on the evening news. They learned of a worldwide economic crisis that was having a profound effect on the global recycling industry. But they also quickly realised that the buyers were shifting virtually the entire burden onto them. As the keenest market observer at the dump explained:

Prices dropped because the middlemen, what they do, when the price drops by ten cents, the middleman drops by fifty cents in order to cover their expenses. That is what they usually do, and whenever the prices increase they don't tell you. They keep quiet up until ... I don't know what will happen before they raise it.⁷⁵

Indeed, all buyers explained that they passed on as much of the price-drops as possible. They calculated their margins as fixed rand amounts per item rather than as percentages so that they knew how much they would make per tonne. When the prices they received plummeted they took the initial hit on the materials which they had already purchased at a higher price. But then they immediately cut prices paid to reclaimers by the same amount that the price they received had dropped, effectively making the reclaimers absorb the entire rate cut. This meant that their percentage profit margin on each item actually increased. Only two buyers did not manage to maintain the rand amount mark-up on items they sold.⁷⁶

As a result of buyers passing price reductions onto reclaimers, in the period between August 2008 and March 2010 prices at the dump changed dramatically. Although prices of all materials started to improve by March 2010, none had fully recovered to pre-crisis levels. At the depths of the crisis eight out of the ten most commonly-collected materials at the landfill lost 50% or more of their price, and all materials dropped by at least 30%. PET fell by 64.29%, HD by 55.56%, white paper by 30%, clear plastic by 37.5%, mixed plastic by 42.86%, cardboard by 57.14%, copper by 79.31%, aluminium by 58.33%, heavy steel by 53.12% and light steel by 66.67%.

Existing research on the 2008 crisis and reclaimers simply reports on the decrease in prices, how this affected reclaimers, and the coping strategies they adopted.⁷⁷ Despite reporting that reclaimers in different cities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America experienced different changes in prices, Horn⁷⁸ does not

75 Interview with Reclaimer #4, 18 August 2009.

76 Interview with Buyer #8, 5 August 2010; Buyer #13, 6 May 2010.

77 Chintan 2009; Horn 2009, 2010 and 2011; Millar 2012; SEWA 2009.

78 Horn 2009.

interrogate why this should be the case. By exploring the political dynamics that underpinned the price cuts at Marie Louise, the following section analyses why prices changed as they did at the dump.

Power, Politics and Prices

When prices offered by buyers began to plummet the reclaimers could have bypassed them and sold directly to the larger collection companies as do some of their organised counterparts in other parts of the world.⁷⁹ This would have allowed them to make more money by both cutting out the middle person and selling collectively, thus receiving a higher price based on the larger tonnage. One of the reclaimers who had checked prices at the larger collection companies and who was aware that prices had fallen disproportionately at the dump attempted unsuccessfully to organise such an initiative. He reported that the main reason it failed was because ‘people cannot think beyond the dump’.⁸⁰ While some reclaimers, such as the organiser, clearly had broader geographical imaginaries, he highlighted that the majority of reclaimers’ spatial political imaginaries were limited to the confines of the dump, which circumscribed the terrain for political action in the context of the crisis.

The other option would have been for the reclaimers to negotiate with the buyers for higher prices. In theory the reclaimers had significant bargaining power as virtually all of the buyers earned their entire livelihood at Marie Louise and would have found it impossible to start buying at new dumps during the crisis. The reclaimers were acutely aware that the buyers profited from their labour. They stated that they knew the buyers ‘rob us’⁸¹ and ‘progress at our expense’ as they saw buyers who arrived at the dump with nothing just a few years earlier driving fancy cars purchased with profits made from selling recyclables bought from the reclaimers.⁸²

However, the reclaimers did not entertain mobilising collectively to demand higher prices. Fearful buyers gave leaders of the reclaimer committee higher prices to dissuade them from such action.⁸³ But the recent history of failed strikes at the dump played a more important role. In the first years at the dump reclaimers had engaged in selling-strikes and succeeded in increasing prices.⁸⁴ Yet in more recent years attempted strikes failed as many reclaimers ignored

79 Dias 2016; Samson 2016.

80 Personal conversation with reclaimer at Marie Louise Landfill, 8 July 2010.

81 Group interview #53, 15 February 2010.

82 Group interview #52, 27 February 2010.

83 Interview with Buyer #11, 6 May 2010, Group interview #53, 15 March 2010.

84 Interview with Reclaimer #4, 21 December 2009.

them and continued selling to the buyers. Some reclaimers broke ranks as they lacked savings and were desperate to sell. Others had borrowed money from the buyers and were beholden to them.⁸⁵

However, the most significant reason why strikes failed was because of deep divisions reclaimers created between themselves as part of their on-going struggles over access to and control over the materials buried at the dump.⁸⁶ Marie Louise was run by Pikitup, a private company owned by the Johannesburg Council that was formed in 2001 when the Council hived off its waste-management departments as part of its *iGoli 2002* municipal neoliberalisation plan.⁸⁷ Marie Louise had been established in 1993 by the Roodepoort Council (which was merged into the Greater Johannesburg Transitional Metropolitan Council in 1995) as a 'sanitary landfill' for the sole purpose of disposing of waste. For the first 18 years of the dump's life the Council was completely uninterested in recycling any of the materials interred there. Although the permit forbade reclaiming and the Council actively tried to keep reclaimers out, this was a losing battle, as unemployed people desperate for an income kept fighting their way back in. Eventually in 2000 an agreement was reached allowing reclaimers to work there informally. But once the reclaimers had established that income could be generated from recycling, one of Pikitup's first acts in 2001 was to attempt to evict them and grant a contract to a private company to collect recyclables. After the reclaimers successfully deployed protest and legal action to stave off this attempt, everyone at the dump, including Pikitup managers, agreed that when it came to reclaiming, the reclaimers 'owned the dump'. As the Pikitup Landfill Manager at Marie Louise explained, '[w]e don't want to take ownership of that reclamation activity. We leave it to the reclaimers to basically govern and manage'.⁸⁸ The original reclaimers therefore secured the *de facto* right to govern the process of reclaiming and the initial phases of the production of value out of waste at Marie Louise. The notion that the original reclaimers 'owned' the dump therefore became central to what Harvey calls a 'geographical lore' that establishes who can shape use-values⁸⁹ in a particular

85 Interview with Buyer #13, 6 May 2010; Group interview #50, 5 January 2010; Group interview #53, 15 March 2010; Interview with Reclaimer #4, 21 December 2009.

86 See Samson 2014 for more detailed discussion of how these divisions were socially produced.

87 Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council 1999.

88 Interview with Pikitup Landfill Manager, 18 May 2010.

89 Although Harvey focuses exclusively on 'use values' his theorisation of 'geographical lore' can be expanded to encompass the production of value more generally.

place and can be deployed to dominate other groups attempting to use the same place.^{90, 91}

The original reclaimers who started working at Marie Louise in around 1994 were all South African. As unemployed people from the surrounding settlements learned they could make a living at Marie Louise the numbers increased. Initially most newcomers were South African, with a few hailing from Mozambique and Lesotho. As the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe deepened and tens of thousands of Zimbabweans sought refuge in Johannesburg, the number of Zimbabweans at the dump increased dramatically. By 2009 only slightly over half of the approximately 500 reclaimers at Marie Louise were South African. 41% were from Zimbabwe, 5% from Mozambique, and 3% from Lesotho.

The original reclaimers tried to prevent new reclaimers from working at the dump. But as its physical boundary was porous they failed and turned from regulating space to regulating time at Marie Louise. Drawing on the 'geographical lore' that granted them 'ownership' of the dump and the right to manage all processes related to reclaiming, the original South African reclaimers created a shift system which secured them disproportional access to the recyclables interred there. Elsewhere⁹² I argue that the shift system should be theorised as a social institution that shaped and was shaped by the forging of identities and power-laden social relations and that the key identity linked to the shift system at Marie Louise was nationality. The privileged morning shift (which actually stretched from 9am until 2pm) was known as the 'South African shift'. The much shorter afternoon shift, which lasted for only three hours a day, was known as the 'Zimbabwean shift'.

Despite these names, the link between the shifts and nationality was neither necessary nor obvious. While 80% of the reclaimers in the morning shift were South African, 20% were from other countries, primarily Mozambique and Lesotho. A full third of reclaimers working in the 'Zimbabwean shift' were South African. But while South Africans, baSotho and Mozambicans could move from the afternoon shift to the morning one when spaces became available, Zimbabweans were virtually precluded from doing so. Arguably the second shift was called the Zimbabwean shift not because it was made up only of Zimbabweans, but because this is where Zimbabweans were confined.

Rather than simply acting on pre-existing national identities, the reclaimers actively participated in the forging of citizenship, nationality, and the nation

90 Harvey 2001, pp. 108–9.

91 See Samson 2015 and Samson 2017 for further details.

92 Samson 2014.

by ascribing certain negative characteristics to Zimbabweans and developing and acting on their own understandings of the differential rights which South Africans and Zimbabweans had to create their own jobs and produce value out of waste at Marie Louise. Developing their own understanding of how and why access to the dump should be linked to citizenship, South African reclaimers regularly made claims such as ‘we fought for this garbage . . . so we are the ones who should be working here, not the people who are coming from outside, because we are the ones who are voting’.⁹³ The morning shift justified restricting the Zimbabweans to their own shift by characterising them as untrustworthy and violent. Although some South Africans eschewed these stereotypes, for the most part South Africans echoed the arguments of one who stated ‘they are just not good people. They get here and they do not become good people’.⁹⁴

The production of social institutions is a contested process, and a key question that arises is why the Zimbabweans participated in a shift system that so greatly disadvantaged them in a context where the South African reclaimers did not have legal or formal authority to regulate the labour process at the dump. Zimbabwean reclaimers resented the negative ways they were stereotyped, were bitter that their working day was so circumscribed, and held a more pan-Africanist understanding of identity in which they believed all Africans should have equal rights at the dump. As one noted, ‘for as long as we are African we must work everywhere in Africa, because even if they can come to us in Zimbabwe we don’t treat them badly’.⁹⁵ Many were shocked to discover how strictly regulated work at the dump was when they first arrived and wondered ‘how can a dumpsite have rules?’ But as the same reclaimer noted, she soon learned that ‘each and every house, even if it can be poor, it can be rich, there are rules there’.⁹⁶

The Zimbabwean reclaimers did not challenge the shift system as they accepted the geographical lore that granted the South Africans ownership of the dump, noting ‘they do own it because they fought for the dump and they won the case in court’.⁹⁷ They felt that as guests at the dump and in the country they needed to respect the rules of their hosts. Particularly in the wake of the 2008 ‘xenophobic attacks’ that swept across South Africa, the Zimbabwean reclaimers were understandably fearful when South African reclaimers threatened them with violence if they transgressed the rules of the shift system. In addition,

93 Group interview #13, 27 August 2009.

94 Group interview #12, 27 August 2009.

95 Interview with Reclaimer #57, 8 January 2010.

96 Interview with Reclaimer #38, 14 October 2009.

97 Group interview #11, 26 August 2009.

most Zimbabweans said that as soon as conditions in Zimbabwe improved they would return home. Working at the dump was a temporary income-generation strategy, and they would rather labour under unequal conditions than risk being evicted for disobeying the rules of the dump.

The South African morning-shift reclaimers believed that because of the Zimbabweans' status as visitors, they did not have a right to be involved in decisions around the governance of work at the dump. As one exclaimed in a private conversation, 'WE are workers. THEY are squatters'. The morning shift excluded the afternoon shift from participation in their committee, and scuttled attempts by the afternoon shift to form their own committee to represent their interests at the dump by inviting emerging leaders to join the morning shift. Ironically, one of the only ways that an individual Zimbabwean could easily move into the morning shift was to begin to mobilise for the collective rights of the afternoon shift. The morning-shift committee did not involve the afternoon shift in any decisions, including the planning of strike action. Unsurprisingly the afternoon-shift reclaimers did not participate. All attempted strikes in recent years had failed, and therefore when the crisis began to unfold reclaimers did not consider strike action to try to force the buyers to absorb more of the price cut.

Coping with Price-cuts #1 – Diversifying Revaluation Strategies

The social identities, power-laden social relations, geographical lore, and social institutions that served so effectively to reproduce the shift system therefore undermined the potential for collective struggles against the buyers to secure higher prices. The vast majority of reclaimers in both shifts reported decreases in their income between August 2008 and September 2009 due to the drop in prices paid by buyers. However, because morning-shift reclaimers had longer access to the dump and fewer competitors during their shift, their incomes both prior to and during the crisis remained far higher than the incomes of afternoon-shift reclaimers, and they experienced a marginally smaller percentage decrease in income. Average weekly incomes of morning-shift reclaimers decreased by 39% from R708.73 to R428.84, while those of afternoon-shift reclaimers decreased by 43% from R450.36 to R256.45. Because of an informal gender division of labour which allowed young men to dominate collection of more lucrative materials (such as metal), women's incomes in both shifts were lower than their male counterparts, and at 48%, women in the afternoon shift experienced the greatest percentage drop in income from R338.17 a week to R202.07.

Like their counterparts in other countries, reclaimers responded to these devastating reductions in income through a range of strategies including

selling assets, increasing the geographical area covered on a daily basis, taking on additional debt, taking on new additional work, and reducing expenditures on food, accommodation, health care, and children's education.⁹⁸ In addition, they also diversified the ways they transformed waste into value. 64% of reclaimers at Marie Louise began to collect more types of recyclables, thus expanding the number of formal value chains they contributed to. In addition, just under half (47%) compensated for their drop in income and ability to purchase goods on the market by collecting more materials they could use themselves. Popular items that came to the dump on a regular basis included clothes detergent, clothing, and frozen chicken which had passed its sell-by date but was still edible. Reclaimers also salvaged a plethora of useful household items ranging from cutlery to dishware to ornaments to children's toys. One fifth of reclaimers (21%) also began to collect materials they could sell informally. Interestingly, one elderly male reclaimer who specialised in the collection of foam to make pillows said that he was not really affected by the global crisis as people always need pillows,⁹⁹ indicating that local informal markets for low-cost essential items may be more stable and resistant to crisis. As the formal recycling market collapsed, the reinsertion of reusable materials into circuits of reproduction and informal exchange and production took on greater importance for the reclaimers, illuminating the deep interconnections between the formal and informal aspects of the economy, and how both workers and consumers move between them in order to meet their needs as economic conditions change.

Coping with Price-cuts #2 – Increasing South African Access and Control

Although the geographical lore, social identities, relations and institutions forged by reclaimers constrained them from collaborating to obtain higher prices, they emboldened the morning shift to try to eliminate the Zimbabwean shift in order to increase their own access to recyclables and at least partially compensate for the drop in prices. When Pikitup began building a wall around Marie Louise, the South African shift seized this as an opportunity to implement a card system, drastically reduce the number of reclaimers at the dump, and eliminate the Zimbabwean shift so that the remaining reclaimers could work the entire day. A small number of afternoon-shift reclaimers, most of whom were South African, were given cards, and the rest were kicked out in early 2010. Eventually, after the intercession of the new Pikitup landfill

98 Chintan 2009; Horn 2009, 2011; SEWA 2009.

99 Interview with Reclaimer #55, 5 January 2010.

manager and a corrupt process, some were given cards and allowed to work in a reinstituted second shift. This time, however, the morning shift changed the rules so that morning-shift members did not stop working at 2pm.

Although the morning shift faced greater competition for the materials after 2pm, they could work the whole day. They expanded their access to and control over recyclables at the dump and ensured that in the wake of the 2008 crisis they retained a clear, institutionalised upper hand in struggles with other reclaimers over access to materials at the dump and could protect their own incomes. What they had not done was engage in struggles with the buyers or collection companies, and had therefore allowed the buyers to force them to bear the entire brunt of the price cuts associated with the crisis.

Ironically, the buyers were negatively affected by the reclaimers' internal struggles and the South Africans' strategies to bolster their incomes in the wake of price cuts. All buyers complained that the introduction of the card system and the expulsion of the majority of the afternoon shift significantly decreased the quantity of materials for sale and dramatically reduced their income. In addition, the card system also barred street reclaimers from entering the dump to sell materials they collected in the surrounding areas. Previously up to 30% of people selling to some buyers were street collectors, so their exclusion added to a significant decrease in buyers' source of income.¹⁰⁰ Although the remaining reclaimers increased the amounts they each collected individually, as one buyer bemoaned '140 [reclaimers] cannot pick up what 500 can pick up. It's impossible'.¹⁰¹ Another decried that 'too much material is going to rubbish there because they chased people away that were working. Now this place is going to be full very soon'.¹⁰²

Within this context buyers would, perhaps, have been willing to increase prices if expelled reclaimers could return and quantities could increase. However, the South African morning-shift reclaimers' beliefs that they had a greater claim to the space of the dump linked to their claim to a place within the nation, and their production of national identities and borders at the dump precluded them from considering such possibilities. This reveals that when looking at conditions that affect the de- and re-valuation of waste we need to consider not only the role that dumpsite politics between reclaimers plays in setting prices, but also how these power politics and exclusionary processes can prevent certain people from accessing waste, resulting in materi-

100 Interview with Buyers #5 and #7, 5 August 2010; Interview with Buyer #13, 6 May 2010.

101 Interview with Buyer #2, 17 February 2010.

102 Interview with Buyer #10, 13 August 2010.

als that have the potential to be revalued at current prices remaining buried amongst the trash.

Conclusion

Drawing on ethnographic study, qualitative interviews, and survey data, in this article I have conducted a fine-grained analysis of how the revaluation of waste at the Marie Louise garbage dump in Soweto was transformed during the 2008 economic crisis. In doing so I moved beyond existing studies that focus simply on how reclaimers responded to falls in prices assumed to be completely exogenous and focused instead on the role reclaimers played in shaping the particular form that the crisis assumed at the dump. In particular, I argued that the identities, power relations, institutions and hierarchies of claims to the space of the dump developed by the reclaimers prior to the crisis constrained their spatial political imaginaries to such an extent that the majority could not envision collective mobilisation to raise prices, even in a context in which they had significant bargaining power to do so. Instead, these same factors led South African reclaimers to turn against their Zimbabwean counterparts and exclude them from the dump in order to increase their own access to materials with potential value. While this propped up their own incomes, it led to significant amounts of waste that could have been re-valued (even at low crisis prices) remaining buried in the trash heap. In response to the low prices for recyclable materials channelled into formal production networks, significant numbers of reclaimers also began to salvage materials for personal reproductive use and for sale in informal local markets.

While these insights have been gleaned from one particular dump and relate to the specific social relations in that place, they raise points relevant to broader theoretical debates on the relationship between waste and value, the production of value more generally, and the constitution of the economy in postcolonial contexts. Herod *et al.*'s¹⁰³ differentiation between 'devalorisation' and 'devaluation' is extremely useful in beginning to specify how both the materiality of objects and capitalist imperatives contribute in different ways to the wasting of commodities and contain different possibilities for the revaluation of waste. However, it is inadequate on three counts. First, it is crucially important to recognise the role of informal workers in determining the conditions for the de- and re-valuation of waste through the impact that their collective mobilisation can have on setting local prices for recyclables. Second, it

103 Herod, Pickren, Rainnie and McGrath-Champ 2013, 2014.

is necessary to understand that price is not the only factor that affects whether a commodity (or component of a commodity) that still possesses the physical potential to be infused with new value is devalued. Because informal reclaimers govern their own labour process and often develop informal mechanisms to regulate access to materials, their own power struggles to monopolise control over waste may limit access to such an extent that materials which could be profitably reclaimed are devalued and wasted. Finally, an exclusive focus on the relationship between global destruction networks and global production networks blinds us to the ways in which waste is also revalued informally in local markets and problematically limits our ability to grapple with the real workings of the economy in postcolonial contexts. Focusing on how and why reclaimers choose to reinsert materials into either formal circuits of exchange and production or informal circuits of exchange, production and direct reproductive use provides crucial insights into the dynamic inner-relations between the formal and informal aspects of the economy and how both are bound up in and affected by capitalist crises.

Although the arguments presented here relate to the production of value out of waste, they each at least partially arise out of powers and possibilities associated with work in the informal economy, which differ from those of formally-employed wage workers. As such, they open up new lines of enquiry to be pursued with respect to theorising how informal workers in other sectors contribute to the production of value in ways that potentially differ from their formally-employed counterparts.

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