Waste is Not a Metaphor for Racist Dispossession: The Black Feminist Marxism of Marisa Solomon

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There is a particular kind of treasure our fellow thinkers sometimes give us, a little gem of brilliance so well cut that it refracts the world for us in a way that snaps everything into place, a gem both dense with the materialities of history and also so lightly worn it you could put it on a t-shirt (though more often it appears as a book title). Marisa Solomon's work on urban trash is full of such treasures.

Drawing on black feminism and black geographies with a Marxist attention to materiality and the production of value, Solomon's ethnographic descriptions of the material practices of salvage are themselves incisive critiques of the way place is made within racial capitalism. Her work attends not only to value and place, but to flows and displacements and the temporal logics that justify them. The clarity of her thinking is matched by the clarity of the gems she offers us in her writing: "If redlining is a socio-material process that distributes risk and reward with durable consequences, gentrification is a process that effaces black material histories by rewriting what matter *matters*" (Solomon 2019); "Producing materiality productive for capital requires policing to maintain" (#); "Racism has to be material for it to be structural" (#). Coming soon to a t-shirt (or book title) near you.

Zoë Wool (ZW): Given the clarity and originality of your analysis of the dynamics of race, waste, and gentrification in the US, I wonder, what do you think is the

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least helpful story people in the US tend to tell them/ourselves as about race, waste, and/or gentrification? Like, do you have a pet peeve in the discourse around any of these intersections?

Marisa Solomon (MS): My biggest pet peeve is treating waste as a *metaphor* for race and racist dispossession. Dispossession is, psychic, embodied, historical, and it's also *material*. It is a process itself contingent on the production of waste and toxicity. But waste is also a condition of dispossession. I think Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins says this really well in her recently published book, *Waste Siege*. Waste is not just an object (or discourse) it is a *condition* through which objects are also managed, understood, effective and affective.

Another pet peeve is too easily taking for granted that "cleaning" and "improvement" are inherently good. "Improvement" and "cleaning" as sets of practices and discourses speak more to who is and isn't considered productive for capital than they speak to ecological repair, producing an (immoral) hierarchy of materiality schematized along an unproductive/productive binary. Producing materiality productive for capital requires policing to maintain; thus, the relationship between "cleanliness" and policing is not analogous, it is co-constitutive. Instead of environmental "clean up," then, I'm interested in how aesthetics, categories of objects, and sanctioned object-relations become *evidence* naturalizing modes of racial capitalist violence.

For me, anthropological obsessions with cleaning and improvement lead to imaginations—dare I say, romanticizations—of poverty, which make assumptions about what and who is (and isn't) degraded. These assumptions are dangerous because the language we use to describe poverty *inscribes* the logics that naturalize poverty. Referring to a place where people live as a "degraded cityscape" re-mobilizes the "primitive or savage jungle" someone how outside of, if not without, time—until improved and thus re-incorporated into "civilization's" teleology of betterment.

All description, especially if we are to take the anti-racist, anti-colonial, feminist injunctions seriously, is motivated. A degraded cityscape is not a neutral or objective description of a place where people live. As Steven Gregory says of the description of "ghetto," it reveals as much as it conceals. It obscures the processes of racial capitalism (that Robin Kelley elegantly outlines in all of his work) that construct places through the migrations of capital, but it also reveals the desire for certain people to be immobilized by place. We should be invested in more descriptions of place that don't simply render the poor as inert, passive subjects/objects who don't resist (even if they fail to overturn racial capitalism).

ZW: Your work is expressly formed by the commitments of Black feminist Marxism. What do these commitments mean--analytically, practically, ethically, or in whatever way you want to comment on them--for work on waste?

MS: Most importantly, racism is material. (Like I said above, waste is not a metaphor for racism, it's an effect). Racism has *material* effects, or rather racism has to be material (it has to involve objects, orientations to objects, and the kinds of relationship people are supposed to have with objects) for it to be structural. This is a lesson I take very seriously from Black Marxists. It also means seeing gentrification not as a "new" practice but a mode of racial capitalism with a long history that is colonial. There is no capitalism without racism, and there is no racism without capitalism. If gentrification is a manifestation of this history, then trying to describe its newness seems to miss how the production of value is yoked to larger global colonial structures that racialize in order to produce, circulate and exchange value.

Black feminist Marxists also make the argument that the material conditions of racism are not only historical, they create the conditions of possibility for anti-Black futures through constraint, the regulation of labor, gender, sexuality, and most importantly, property.

ZW: What forms of scholarly engagement are the most generative and vital to you? / Since this interview was occasioned by a conversation about citational practices and networks, are there any books or articles or pieces of art that are touchstones for you but tend not to be engaged with by others?

MS: Black Geographies, or scholarship theorizing the spatialization of race. I'm think of course of Katherine McKittrick, but also of Khalil Gibran Muhammed, Clyde Woods, Ruthie Gilmore, Jacqueline N. Brown—these scholars turn our attention to understanding race broadly, but Blackness (in the U.S.) *specifically* as fundamentally a socio-spatial project whose material effects reinforce the construction of Blackness as abject, outside, or devalued. Moreover, these scholars show us—in the lineage of the long durée of Black anti-colonial scholarship—that the production of "the abject" is central to the relationship between the colony and the colonizer. Or that the negation of value (or devaluation) is central to producing both the *idea* of value and *value* itself.

But as a queer Black feminist I would be remiss not to mention the arsenal of thinkers who challenge Marxist traditions of (prioritizing labor) at the cost of understanding Black *fungibility* as that which is actually exchanged/produced in the production of value. Here there are so many scholars to draw from (Wynter, Spillers, Da Silva, Hartman, Weheliye and so many more) but I want to focus on some emergent scholars whose work pushes my thinking and analysis: Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Tiffany King, C. Riley Snorton. These three scholars individually,

but also in concert, have pushed me to think through the raciological and sexiological sciences that violently construct, wrench apart, and figure Blackness through flesh. Moreover, I take these scholars together to think about how the fungibility of Blackness constructs assumptions about objects and the debates about objects/the material/materiality in ways that challenge the antiblackness that goes unchecked in the social studies of science.

I also can't help but think of this question as about those who help me reframe the field of inquiry. My collaborators in the Black Atlantic Ecologies Working Group at the Center Center for the Study of Social Difference at Columbia University—Vanessa Agard-Jones, Anna Arabindan-Kesson, Jayna Brown, Aimee Meredith Cox, Alyssa A. L. James, Julie Livingston Amber Jamila Musser, and Sonya Posmentier—have been foundational to my thinking around the contours and expansiveness of Black ecological thought. While scholars absolutely help me reframe the field of inquiry, I'm also inspired by people who prioritize experimentation. From abolitionist organizers and my informants, to jazz musicians, to queer and trans of color scholarship and art, to anti-racist and feminist labs like (Max Liboiron's, CLEAR), to Black diasporic speculative fiction, experimentation and speculation is a collaborative mode through which people refuse the terms of a white supremacist world. These are the people who continue to inspire my approaches.

ZW: Anthropology, trash or treasure?

MS: This is such a hard question to answer because I love trashiness! Borrowing the language and spirit of Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives*, I've been experimenting with calling myself a "wayward anthropologist." I've constantly felt like I'm in a vexed relationship with my anthropological training—at times treasuring the kinds of insight it's given me about the co-production of knowledge, and at other frustrated, if not devastated, by its continuous colonial impulses. Something that Hartman's work continues to inspire in me is writing in tension with that which cannot be resolved. Here I'm thinking about "Venus in Two Acts," in particular. In that piece, she writes about the impossibilities of recuperating a single life/story from the archives (or rather ledgers) of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. She talks about the way the ledger obliterates personhood many times over, and the researchers' desires in the archive to "recover" become their own kinds of violence to resolve a violence that can't be undone. For me, this piece reminds me to take account of the ways my colonial training has impacted the battles/debates I prioritize and then write carefully in tension with the possible routes/choices/stories/histories made illegible by scholarly "data collection" practices. In other words, I try to think through the violence of our methods and what stories and descriptions we prioritize over others.

I think, “writing in/with tension” is important for understanding trash/waste. It is an intractable global problem that is thought about and discussed with particular narratives that trap people (the marginalized poor and the Global South more broadly) in liberal progressive frames, including ones of degradation and (often deferred) improvement. Writing in tension reminds me to ask, who does and should my story serve?

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