

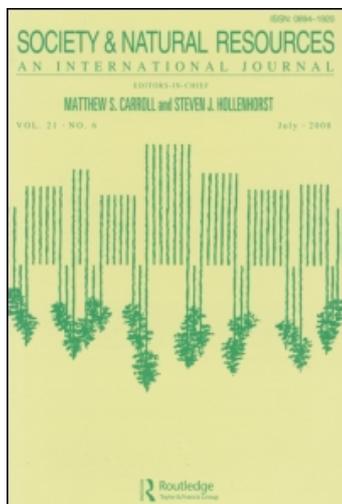
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The Politics of Garbage in Oaxaca, Mexico

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Municipal solid waste management (MSWM) and politics are common themes in environmental justice. However, insights garnered from the experience of the global north cannot be applied directly to the global south since local processes shape unique landscapes of waste. To this end, my fieldwork in Oaxaca de Juárez, a rapidly urbanizing city in southern Mexico, concentrates on the history and politics of MSWM in the area. Here, the livelihood struggles of local neighborhoods are imbricated with the management of the existing official municipal dump. I argue that it is the marginality of these neighborhoods, both physical and social, that makes it possible for them to block the flow of municipal trash and so reveal it to visitors, residents, and politicians. This case presents a reworking of traditional concepts of environmental justice by examining the contradictory processes of abjection and political activism particular to the global south.

Keywords abjection, environmental justice, urban political ecology, waste

For more than 10 days in January 2001, some 2,500 tons of trash—everything from plastic diapers and Coca-Cola containers to banana peels and rotten meat—piled up on the streets of Oaxaca de Juárez (Oaxaca) and the surrounding area. Groups from *Colonia* (neighborhood) *Guillermo González Guardado* near the dump had blocked access to the site in protest of the city's inability to prevent a large fire there. Behind this act of protest, however, lay a series of broken accords between the *colonia* and city officials that included plans for the sorting of hazardous materials, the creation of a new landfill, the recovery and reforestation of the existing site, and the construction of a local health center. Whether the fire was started intentionally by *colonia* residents to attract attention to their cause, as some more cynical observers claimed, or whether it resulted naturally (e.g., from combustible materials deposited there), was never determined. What is known, however, is that the event rekindled an underlying controversy over the seemingly intractable problem of waste disposal in the growing city.

This case presents one example of environmental justice (EJ) issues in the global south. EJ, of course, involves both struggles over local environments (defined as

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“where we live, work, and play”) and analyses of these struggles by scholars associated with higher education or other knowledge producing institutions. While some work in environmental justice relies heavily on establishing the spatial correlations between waste facility locations and poor and/or minority neighborhoods, other studies have analyzed the location of waste disposal and processing facilities as the result of complex sociospatial practices that simultaneously produce both waste and marginalization (Pulido 2000). Such insights not only have broadened notions of justice, risk, value, and the environment, but also have led to a reexamination (among academics, policymakers, and activists alike) of what it means to practice “politics.” The political activism discussed in this article is made possible by several related conditions of life for marginalized urban dwellers in Oaxaca. Moreover, it is undergirded by locally specific notions of justice, citizenship, and modern (city) life. This is not to say that such notions have not been influenced (sometimes greatly so) by Mexico’s participation in a thoroughly globalized modern world. It is to say, however, that the way in which conflicts over municipal dump management in Oaxaca have played out thus far can provide insight into the complexities of extending an environmental justice framework to the global south. Particularly, this case presents a contradictory notion of marginalization, one that highlights the need for additional analytical and political tools to achieve environmental justice.

Here, then, I argue that the same cultural, social, political, economic, and environmental processes that “marginalize” some communities can also provide the political leverage necessary to achieve their local development goals. It is their location, both physical and social, that makes it possible for residents of *Guillermo González Guardado* to block the flow of municipal trash and so reveal it to visitors, residents, and politicians. The ability to make visible the abject product of capitalist development—garbage—gives them unique power while at the same time marking them as the “Other” to ‘normal’ urban citizens.

Much of the article concentrates on what Hawkins calls “disturbances”: that is, “what happens when the fantasy of absolute elimination and purity is abandoned” (Hawkins 2003, 42). This is methodologically useful as moments of transgression are more readily identifiable than is the normative sociospatial boundary that they transgress (Cresswell 1996). In other words, one way to understand the socially accepted practices and politics around solid waste, for example, is to consider the implications when the *unacceptable* happens. To explore these transgressions and disturbances, I rely on archival research, survey data, and interviews with government officials and local neighborhood leaders. The archival data were drawn mostly from Oaxaca’s two major daily newspapers, *Las Noticias* and *El Imparcial*. Surveys were collected in three locations in Oaxaca. These locations were chosen (in conjunction with local experts) for their spatial location and socioeconomic characteristics. Interviews were conducted with the actors most involved in municipal solid waste management during these moments of disturbance.

The analysis of disturbances is also significant in terms of environmental justice because “If we can grasp the system of extremes which encode the body, the social order, psychic form and spatial location, we thereby lay bare a major framework of discourse within which any further ‘redress of balance’ or judicious qualification must take place” (Stallybrass and White 1986, 3). While this notion of transgression may (like much of the traditional EJ framework) come out of the global north, it is useful in that it asks one to consider the local conditions under which a particular set of

practices are deemed to be normal or radical. Further, and more relevantly, it can provide a road map for addressing injustices by highlighting the social norms at work.

This article proceeds in four main sections. I begin with the relationship between the modern city and waste management practices. In cities from ancient Rome to contemporary Latin America the desire for modern urban orders has meant an increasing emphasis on hygiene and cleanliness on the part of city managers, whether or not this was reflected on the ground. After discussing the relationship between modern urban development in Oaxaca and garbage management there, I turn to the ways that this fragile urban order relies on the exclusion of both garbage and certain marginalized others for its survival. I argue that the (always unrealizable) need for purity is inscribed on material wastes and human bodies through processes of abjection. The necessarily incomplete nature of discursive and material exclusion leads to the possibility of a politics of manifestation that I describe in the next section. Here, I describe how an abject group is able to use garbage as “matter out of place” to highlight social and environmental inequalities. At the same time, though, the tactics used by the group increase its outsider status. In conclusion I argue that the disturbances created by this group’s politics of manifestation provide an opportunity to enrich our understanding of the processes of marginalization that any scholar or activist interested in environmental justice in the global south must address.

A Clean City is a Beautiful City—Urban Development and Garbage

The practical purpose of sanitation is to efficiently remove waste; that was its modernist promise. Here was a technology that would purify urban space, that would allow populations physical and moral escape from the unacceptable; that would render shit secret. Transport it away from the body and home . . . out of sight, out of mind. (Hawkins 2003, 40)

[T]he director of municipal services expressed the fight for a clean city, as in no other entity of the country is 24-hour service offered, as it is here. . . . The current municipal government is looking to preserve and reinforce the cleaning of the city, as more than just being an obligation, this situates [Oaxaca] as one of the cleanest in all of the republic. (Torres 1988, 1 A)

In *The Sanitary City*, Martin Melosi notes that there has long been a connection between cleanliness, beauty, and order and that the desire for these in urban areas has been a contributing factor in the development of urban infrastructure (Melosi 2000). Similarly, in *History of Shit*, Dominique Laporte argues that the articulation of such concepts goes back as far as Rome’s sewer system, which was considered not only a technological achievement, but also the “height of civilization” (Laporte 2000). Though Laporte is speaking more specifically of human feces, the same argument can be made for garbage. While these two books deal with the history of sanitation in the global north (Melosi’s in the United States, Laporte’s in France), Beatriz González Stephan has made a similar, compelling argument for Latin America:

The modern era was intimately linked to hygienization policies for individuals, languages, and territories . . . imposing pure and non-polluted

categories. . . . The *asepsis* and *cleanliness* of streets, language, body and habits appeared as the panaceas of progress and materialization in a modern nation. . . . Bodies were not the only things that should be disinfected. The modern city plan redesigned Latin American cities by redistributing buildings into discreet units, removing waste and the “vulgar” bustle of social life from the urban centers. (González Stephan 2003, 199–200)

In this spirit, Oaxaca, the capital of the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca and now home to over 650,000 people, started a campaign in 1985 called “Una Ciudad Limpia es una Ciudad Bonita” (A Clean City is a Beautiful City). The city took out half-page advertisements in the local newspaper with various slogans to inspire the citizenry to “help out”: for example, “Life is better in a clean city. Citizen: Help us keep our city clean” (*El Imparcial* 1985a). In the beginning of the campaign, the mayor seemed pleased with the progress: “The mayor of the city . . . acknowledged yesterday, that Oaxacans have responded favorably to the campaign started against garbage because they are conscious that, ‘a clean city is a beautiful city’” (*El Imparcial* 1985b, 1 A). This campaign was enacted to preserve the image of the city locally, but also nationally, as was noted by the head of municipal services: “One of the most serious problems in the city, without doubt, is that of garbage. One day without sweeping stains the impeccable image that Oaxaca has at the national level” (Cruz García 1987, 1 A). Signs were posted at each of the major entrances to the city, saying “Oaxaca welcomes you to a clean city,” and, of course, “A clean city is a beautiful city”: both assertions that could only be supported by effectively hiding (that is, containing or expelling) the city’s waste.

To this end, Oaxaca has (though not evenly or in a linear way) tried to increase the efficiency of its collection services, which include two main components—the *barrenderos* (who use handmade brooms of natural materials to sweep up litter in the city’s streets and parks) and a fleet of garbage trucks. Collection is more frequent and there are several times as many *barrenderos* in the city’s center, *El Centro*, where most of the tourists are, than in other areas (City of Oaxaca 2002). However, uneven collection is only one of the city’s problems.

The question of disposal is a difficult one for Oaxaca, as it is for many rapidly growing medium to large cities in the global south. While some sanitary landfills and processing plants exist in Mexico, the majority of solid waste (including hazardous, toxic, and medical) goes to open-air dumps. Compared to the United States, which produces more waste overall, Mexico both disposes of more waste in landfills (99% versus 57%) and has fewer landfills (76 versus 2,216) (OECD 2004). This means that the average amount of waste per fill in Mexico is staggering—396,840 tons (versus 54,010 in the United States) (statistics compiled by the author from OECD 2004). Like many Mexican cities, then, Oaxaca has only one open-air dump for the entire municipal area. Its 16 hectares are located on land indemnified by the city in the 1980s in a neighboring municipality (Zaachila). Like many cities at the time, Oaxaca decided to export its garbage to what were then the hinterlands.

However, as greater numbers of people who had been expelled from their pueblos by the modern state (through direct violence, political exclusion, or more subtle threats to rural agrarian livelihoods; Murphy and Stepnick 1991; Stephen 1998) moved to the capital city in hopes of a better (modern) life, the rate of rural to urban migration outpaced official planning and development schemes (Girón Méndez 1990; Ramirez 1990). Informal squatter settlements emerged on any unused land. This included the land around the dump, which was sold (often

illegally) for very little (interview with Felimon Diaz, Office of the Regent for Ecology of Zaachila 10/16/03).

When events like the blockade described in the introduction occur, the 800 tons of garbage that Oaxaca and its suburbs produce per day can no longer be ignored. The “public secret” of waste (Hawkins 2003) is thereby revealed. Despite the fact that the city’s cleanliness ordinances prohibit the leaving of garbage in the street (Ciudad de Oaxaca 1993, Chapter 2, article 23), this is often ignored. According to the Secretary of Ecology of Oaxaca City, this is an act of protest against the city for not fulfilling one of its important obligations to the citizenry (interview with Jacqueline Mariana Escamilla Villanueva 9/29/04). However, this action of dirtying one’s own area, or living with one’s own waste, begins to erode some of the distinction between the civilized and the uncivilized that became the basis for modern urban citizenship:

The “process of civilization” dragged in its wake a rise in the threshold of shame, because it was necessary to differentiate clearly between all the social strata that did not belong to the sphere of the urban, the *civitas*, . . . identified as the paradigm of modernity. “Urbanity” and “civic education” played, then, as pedagogical taxonomies that separated the vest from the poncho, the elegant from shoddiness, the republic from the colony, civilization from barbarism. (Castro-Gómez 2003, p. 76)

Rather than taking responsibility for this action of “dirtying” the city, the residents project all of the blame for the mess onto the residents of the *colonias* around the dump, effectively establishing themselves as “clean” and righteous citizens versus the “dirty” outsiders that live there. This projection, as I discuss in the upcoming section, elides the difference between the people who live near it and waste itself, positioning both as abject.

Threats to the Urban Order

[T]he danger of filth represents for the subject the risk to which the very symbolic order is permanently exposed, to the extent that it is a device of discrimination, of differences. . . . [It is] a threat issued from the prohibitions that found the inner and outer borders in which and through which the speaking subject is constituted. (Kristeva 1982, 69)

By specifying and rejecting the unclean, the improper, the impure, the proper boundaries of the subject can be managed and regulated. . . . Seen in terms of the *social* body, the abject functions as a spatial boundary, by rendering “outside” those social activities deemed to be a threat to the social and moral symbolic order. (Popke 2001, 745–746)

In discussing the development of Cato Manor in Durban, Popke argues (following Sibley 1995) that the attribution of disease and dirtiness to the area “became an important means to demarcate the boundaries of modern industrial society by identifying the shack settlements as spaces of defilement occupied by ‘others’” (Popke 2001, 745). This, he continues, can be thought of as a process of abjection, a term whose analytical use is attributed to the French feminist, Julia Kristeva. The notion of abjection is used to describe the simultaneous revulsion toward and need for the

Other as the constitutive outside which defines the self. Many social scientists have also used this term in the context of social and spatial exclusion (McClintock 1995; Sibley 1995; Cresswell 1996; Popke 2001). While this notion implies exclusion and marginalization, it goes beyond conventional views of these concepts. Specifically, abjection, as illustrated in the preceding quote by Kristeva, is related to the very boundaries that separate “us” from “them.” Rather than seeing individuals as atomistic beings, relegated to a certain position by economic or ethnic status, abjection describes a situation in which “speaking” and “nonspeaking” subjects are created through prohibitions developed to ensure purity (of the body, the city, the social order, etc.). Abjection also implies the potential failure of this tendency toward purification through exclusion of the “Other.” As prohibitions proliferate, they create ever more opportunities for the “Other” to disrupt individual or social identities.

The case of garbage politics in Oaxaca is, in this sense, very much a process of abjection, wherein garbage is the abject to the modern city and those associated with the dump the abject to the modern citizen. In the remainder of this section, I first discuss the ways in which the presence of garbage in the city disrupts notions of urban modernity. Using interview, survey, and archival data, I describe the uneasy complexity around ideas and expectations of cleanliness in the city of Oaxaca. Next, I discuss the ways in which the threat of disorder is projected onto particular bodies, marking them as “Other.”

Garbage: The Abject Nature of Waste in Modern Cities

[T]he cultural economy of waste can work on different strata: symbolic, affective, historical and linguistic. All these strata extend the . . . assessments of waste emerging out of the dominant scientific/environmentalist discourse on waste, where the highest values *tend* to lie in pious and unrealistic assumptions about purity. (Hawkins and Muecke 2003, xvi)

Waste has a bad reputation. Part of the reason is its affective qualities—“for waste can touch the most visceral registers of the self—it can trigger responses and affects that remind us of the body’s intensities and multiplicities” (Hawkins and Muecke 2003, xiv). However, especially in the context of Mexico where most of the 30% of waste that is recycled (SEDUE, 2003) is recycled by scavengers, the nature of garbage is hard to pin down. Most often, though, garbage is discussed as a threat to the public. Mrs. Magdalena Loaeza Cruz, neighborhood president of the *Colonia Guillermo González Guardado*, for example, framed the issue in these terms: “we do not want the dump anymore, every day our children and older people are sick because of the wastes that are in the ground” (*Las Noticias* 2004a, 1 A). Apparent agreement came from the director of municipal services, who argued, “it is important to note that [the problem of garbage] is very serious, that perhaps the majority of citizens do not perceive the magnitude, because the overflow of wastes kept in this site harms not only the environment, but also the people that for necessity live on the outskirts of this dump” (Sánchez 2004, 1 A).

The threat is to the health of the populace, a definition supported by the rhetorical separation of garbage in Oaxaca into “Dirty Waste” and “Clean Waste” (*El Imparcial* 1988). Dirty waste includes anything that smells and is seen to attract and feed disease vectors such as rats, flies, mosquitoes, and street dogs. This means that organic garbage—almost 50% of the city’s waste—is considered dirty. On the

other hand, materials that do not smell or decompose, like plastics and aluminum cans, are considered clean garbage, despite the fact that they will not decompose in the dump and that they release toxic fumes when they are burned. These definitions have varied over time, of course, and owe much to the changing composition of garbage and growing consumerism. However, such distinctions also owe much to discourses of modern urbanism, particularly to the hygienic manuals and legal constitutions of the 1800s and 1900s that defined the proper citizen-subject (Stallybrass and White 1986; González Stephan 2003).

As discussed earlier, one organizing principle of the modern municipality is to keep the city clean. As is true of all processes of abjection, however, this purification is always ambiguous and incomplete; as Kristeva explains, while “we may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” (Kristeva 1982, 9). This ambiguity permeates citizens’ attitudes toward the cleanliness of the city of Oaxaca, as shown in the results of a city-wide survey conducted in September and October of 2004. This survey was conducted among randomly chosen households in three areas of the metro-area—the central city, the outer city, and in the *municipio* of Zaachila, where the dump is located. These areas were chosen both for their spatial relation to the dump and for their socioeconomic status. The central city is more affluent than the outer city and the surveyed neighborhoods in Zaachila, which tend toward more informal development. According to the data, fully 58% of residents from all areas do not believe that Oaxaca is a clean city. Of course, it may be hard to interpret such subjective responses, but the data become more interesting when one notes that these numbers vary according to location. In the central city, 33% do not agree that Oaxaca is clean, while 64% think it is. In the outer city, on the other hand, the reverse is true: While 73% believe that Oaxaca is not a clean city, 27% believe it is. This is similar to the situation in Zaachila, where 60% felt that Oaxaca is not clean while 40% thought it was. There is, then, a clear distinction between the central city and other areas. There are a number of possible explanations for this—collection services are more frequent in the center, as mentioned earlier, and many of the outer areas are harder to reach. Zaachila, on the other hand, while not having the level of service that the central city of Oaxaca does, has more frequent service than the other *municipios conurbados*. This does not mean, however, that garbage is not seen as a serious problem by those in the center. In fact, 72% of those who resided in *El Centro* felt that garbage was among the most pressing environmental problems in the city. While this number is less than the percentage of people in Zaachila who listed garbage as Oaxaca’s number one environmental problem (at 92%), it is higher than the number in the outer city. These data support the notion that garbage is seen as an environmental threat by many people from around the city even when it is considered to be relatively under control. The barely sublimated existence of garbage, what Hawkins calls its strategic absence (2003), provokes anxiety among even those most removed from it. This anxiety is then projected onto those most closely associated with waste, marking them as outsiders.

People: Abject Others and the Boundaries of Citizenship

Transgressing the boundaries through which the bourgeois reformers separated dirt from cleanliness, the poor were interpreted as also transgressing

the boundaries of the civilized body and the boundaries which separated the human from the animal. (Stallybrass and White 1986, 132)

“We too are Mexicans”—Sign over the entrance to a Mexico City dump, populated by scavengers. (Castillo Berthier 1990, 98)

In Oaxaca, an association with garbage is used to discredit and shame various groups at different points in time. The annual strike by the state teachers union is often described in the papers as a problem because it produces “mountains” of garbage (Valencia 2004). Another group often denounced for its contribution to litter in the city is traveling vendors, who are disliked by the more permanent business community (*El Imparcial* 2004).

In this way, the case of Oaxaca shows how people associated with garbage are often portrayed as dirty, defiled, dangerous outsiders (Prashad 1995; Sibley 1995; Mills 2000; Kwawe 2000). Moreover, “the metonymic associations (which trace the social articulation of ‘depravity’) are constantly elided with and displaced by a metaphoric language in which filth stands in for the slum-dweller: the poor *are* pigs” (Stallybrass and White 1986, 131).

While other groups are affected by this elision, the most drastic case is the people who live most intimately with society’s waste—scavengers and residents of communities adjacent to garbage dumps. In Oaxaca, the whole area of the dump and the surrounding *colonias* is commonly referred to as “La Ciudad de Basura” (City of Garbage). Others describe the area as, “not a place made to live, it is not apt for humans” (interview with Arquitecto Cutberto 1/31/04). There are also more disparaging remarks made about the area and its inhabitants. The Regidora de Ecología of Zaachila (Regent of Ecology of Zaachila) described the residents as “paracaidistas” (squatters) and continued, “they are not people from Zaachila; they are people who have conflicts, people to be careful of, and the majority of them indigenous” (interview with Merced Marcela Nuñez Armengol 10/23/03). The invocation of indigeneity here is important, as Oaxaca has the largest indigenous population in of any state in the republic, with 16 different ethnic groups represented. While many urban dwellers have indigenous heritages, the implication in this statement, made by a government official, points to the complicated relationship between some notions of indigenous identity—the idea that they were better stewards of nature and the symbolic importance of “traditional” identities in the tourist industry—and modern city life. Such statements often serve to make indigenous people appear “out of place” in the modern city. As the urban is, in this and many other places, the focus of citizenship (Gonzalez Stephan 2003), this marks the urban indigenous as less than citizens and therefore threatening.

This racialization, though, is not separate from the processes of abjection that were described earlier. Because of the place in which they live, and the “metonymic” associations made between descriptions of the place (not apt for humans) and the residents (dangerous, outsiders, indigenous), the people who formed squatter settlements around the dump are seen not as speaking subjects in Kristeva’s terms, but rather as abject others who pose a threat to the more civilized citizens of the central city. In the next section, I describe how people in a group from one *colonia* near the dump are able to use their physical location to disrupt the integrity of the urban body by blocking the flow of trash, thus making visible this abject product of development. By exploiting the precarious nature of modernist strategies of purification, these residents have achieved several local development goals.

The Politics of Manifestation

“It is a sad thing to live here” said one of the residents of this *colonia*, “We are humble people and we have to live in this place, but not under these conditions because we do not have many services and now we have to struggle with the garbage that they will leave here and closing this dump will benefit many people, not just the inhabitants of these neighborhoods.” Resident of *Guillermo González Guardado Las Noticias*. (*Las Noticias* 2004a, 1 A)

“The residents of *González Guardado* use the problem of the municipal dump as blackmail, when it does not affect them in the least, nevertheless 700,000 pesos have been invested to maintain the 16 hectares of the dump in optimal condition.” Director of Municipal Services to *Las Noticias* (*Las Noticias* 2004b, 1 A)

[T]he qualities of space and place that make them good strategic tools of power simultaneously make them ripe for resistance in highly visible and often outrageous ways. . . . The notion of “in place” is logically related to the possibility of being “out of place.” (Cresswell 1996, 164)

As Cresswell (1996) argues, the notion of normativity is directly related to that of transgression. The act of transgressing the boundaries of what is acceptable in a particular space/time is enabled by the very rules that establish those boundaries in the first place. In terms of garbage and the city, then, the desire for clean and modern environments means that garbage and those associated with it must be erased from the landscape. As this process of expelling the abject is never complete, however, remnants threaten the integrity of the (social) body. The residents of the *Colonia Guillermo González Guardado* are able, for this reason, to use waste and their proximity to it as a political resource. While these tactics are effective leverage for the *colonia* in negotiating with the municipal government, they are not well received by residents in the city center, as I discuss later.

Tactics

Since the year 2000, there have been a series of blockades in which people from *Guillermo González Guardado* have closed off access to the dump, leaving the city of Oaxaca and its 21 associated suburbs with no way of disposing of their trash. During these blockades the city suspends collection and usually asks residents to keep the trash in their houses, although, as mentioned earlier, this request often goes unheeded by the public.

As garbage piles up in the city center, particularly around markets, and begins to smell and get in the way, the city is forced into negotiating with the *colonia* to end the blockade. Because of the nature of public space and political protest in Oaxaca (it is perfectly legal to block roads, occupy parks, etc.), the city does not have recourse to remove the protestors. The public in Oaxaca is fairly tolerant of, or at least accustomed to, their streets being filled with protestors, and many of the protests are barely registered for this reason. However, the presence of garbage in the streets is considered a crisis that demands immediate attention.

To date, these blockades have resulted mostly in more unkept promises by the city to find a new location for a dump, to reforest, or to provide facilities or services for the *colonia* (interview with Arquitecto Cutberto 1/31/04). In a recent crisis, the *presidenta* of *Guillermo González Guardado* expressed her frustration with the city's failure to follow up on promises made in the last 6 accords. Through these efforts, though, the *colonia* has gotten a meeting center and a basketball court (2001), a medical center (2003), and electricity in part of the *colonia* (2003).

"Public" Reaction to the Blockades

Results from the city-wide survey described earlier show that the political tactics of people from *Guillermo González Guardado* are perceived differently, not only from those of other *colonias*, but also from those of the union of street sweepers and garbage collectors who go on strike. While both groups cause garbage to pile up in the center, their actions are often viewed differently by "the public."

Citywide, 76% did not support the activities of the *colonia*, while 13% did support them, at least part of the time. In contrast, 31% of respondents supported the municipal workers' strikes at least part of the time. While the notion that the city was being harmed by the accumulation of garbage was expressed by citizens who did not support the protest activities of either group, many respondents were more inclined to separate themselves from the *colonia* and blame the activists for making the city and its citizens suffer.

Several respondents who did not support either group made statements similar to the following about the *colonia*:

"You can't fix things [the way the *colonia* tries to]."

"They use the dump for this end [to get what they want]."

"[The blockades of the dump] provoke problems."

"The garbage dumps were put there first, [the people of the *colonias* around the dump] arrived later."

Those that always or often supported the municipal garbage workers, but never the *colonia* residents, said of the *colonia*:

"They harm us."

"The dump was there before [they were]."

"This affects the citizens."

"They obstruct work and dirty the city."

"People that knew of the pollution of the dump decided to live there and they knew about the huge problem."

"They know that the problem is living near the dump."

Similarly, a recent editorial claims that conflicts over the dump do not have to do with the dump's location in Zaachila, but rather, "The problem is the fact that this zone has been settled by *colonias* of squatters with bad ways of living which leads to delinquency" (*El Imparcial* 2004b, 2 A). While the point of this analysis is not to negate these constructions with "the truth," it is fitting to note that many of the original settlers of this area were expelled (like waste) from the township of Zaachila because of political conflicts and *made* to live near the dump (Bracamontes Ruiz 1990). However, what is more important here is what Laura Pulido has described as a failure to acknowledge that the same sociospatial processes produce both marginalized "Others" and urban landscapes (Pulido 2000). This conceptual error

is highlighted by the position of the Regent of Ecology of the City of Oaxaca, who has claimed that, as the dump was already there when they moved in, the residents have no right to complain about their environment (interview with Jacqueline Mariana Escamilla Villanueva 9/29/04).

In addition to popular and official agreement that *colonia* residents have no right to complain about their situation, in the survey described earlier and in editorials citizens also echoed the opinion of the Director of Municipal Services, who claimed that the *colonias* used the dump as blackmail: “We urge the people of these *colonias* to use other means in their struggle since in place of being supported, they inspire repulsion for causing and provoking a dirty city with waste everywhere” (*El Imparcial* 2004). One editorial argues that the dump is for some “a rich source of gold to ask for what they want in exchange for allowing the disposal of wastes. This problem has caused serious headaches for citizens of the capital, businesses and tourism” (Girón 2004). In many of these responses, there is both the explicit assumption that these people do not count as urban citizens, despite living within the municipal statistical area, and the implicit suggestion that they (therefore) do not deserve to receive services. The process of *colonia* formation in Oaxaca is often one in which neighborhood groups organize against the city in some manner and stage public protests to demand services. This is, while sometimes characterized as chaotic, more or less “normal.” As one informant explained, though, “[the people who live around the dump] are somehow seen as worse than the other *colonias* that demand the same things that anyone else would—they are resented because they live with the garbage” (interview with Juan Carlos 9/1/04).

Conclusion

Disturbance in all its multiplicity . . . reveals the inestimable value of shit for understanding the contingency of “the political.” In other words, shit is “good to think with” because of the ways in which it can unsettle the boundaries between the body and its others, public and private, truth and concealment, state and environment, and, of course, pure and impure. (Hawkins 2003, 42)

As Cresswell (1996) argues, “transgressive acts prompt reactions that reveal that which was previously considered natural and commonsense. The moment of transgression marks the shift from the unspoken unquestioned power of place over taken-for-granted behavior to an official orthodoxy concerning what is proper opposed to what is not proper—that which is in place to that which is out of place” (10). The political tactic available to the residents of *Colonia Guillermo González Guardado*, that of blocking the urban area’s access to the municipal dump, is an act of transgression that highlights the incomplete nature of the purification of the modern Mexican city. By forcing the people of the center to live with their own garbage, the activists help to expose the material effects of the process of urban development. This act also undermines the strategic absence and willful ignorance needed to support the “public secret” that wastes do not just disappear magically. Moreover, these events bring to the fore broader conflicts over the sustainability of the urban area and issues of environmental justice because waste piling up in this city, designated as one of UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites, disturbs the citizenry.

As it offends their senses of sight and smell, they begin to realize just how much of it there is and start to imagine where it all goes. While some turn away, there is the possibility, as Stallybrass and White (1986) suggest, that such disturbances can affect real differences in the processes that produce both garbage and the marginalized populations that live with it.

These disturbances also provide insight to the processes of marginalization that need to be addressed in scholarly work on issues of environmental justice in the context of the global south. Several scholars interested in development and environmental justice in the global south have critiqued Rawlsian notions of justice (Sen 2001; Nussbaum 2006). Others have used the concept of social contracts to understand alternatives to privatization of resources (McDonald and Ruiters 2005) and environmental exploitation (Bond 2000) that negatively affect many communities in the global south. As a complement to such work, I argue that it is also necessary to reexamine our taken-for-granted notions of marginalization in expanding EJ to the global south. While much early work in environmental justice constructed class and race as static categories that determined one's relative status and his or her power over the environmental conditions in which he or she lives, later work focused on the political economic processes that created racialized and class bodies through which marginalization took place (Pulido 2000). The case of garbage politics in Oaxaca reveals the need to build on such conceptualizations by further interrogating the causes and effects of othering and its relationship to the distribution of environmental goods and bads. Here, abjection provides a starting point for viewing the complex relationship between places and peoples. While the residents of *Colonia Guillermo González Guardado* are constructed as outsiders (and often use that term to describe themselves), the very processes of abjection that "other" them also allow their ability to demand services from the city. This is due not only to their physical location, but also to the relationship between modern clean spaces, the dirt that threatens them, and the citizens that expect sanitary cities. The power of the *colonia* lies in its ability to threaten the borders of the (clean) city of Oaxaca and the identities of other citizens. As the purification of people and places is always incomplete, the abject—be it garbage or the othered urban citizens associated with it—have the power to transform our cities and contribute to the global struggle for environmental justice.

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