Introduction

DISPOSABILITY'S INFRASTRUCTURE

I. THE STENCH OF POLITICS

"Can we retain the glory of our market?" Fred Kidamba was agitated. We were sitting in his office at Nakasero Market in downtown Kampala, which, Fred was explaining, is Uganda's oldest, proudest, and most glorious market. "We've grown up here. We love our market. It is known all over the world as the oldest in Uganda," he boasted. "Nakasero was put up by colonialists to buy food products and other goods easily. The prices were too high for many locals." The Traders' Association has tried to keep up high standards ever since. "We are the heart of the Kampala food trade. The market runs twenty-four hours: once these people leave, others come for the night." Fred was the chairman of the market's Traders' Association, charged with managing disputes between traders, maintaining the space of the market, and liaising between the market and the municipal government. I had come to ask what I had imagined were some fairly straightforward questions about waste management at the market: How much waste is generated daily? What composes it? Who collects it, and how often? Municipal policy documents I had consulted identified market waste as one of the biggest challenges to garbage collection in the city, so

I wanted to learn more. Answering these questions, it turned out, was anything but straightforward.

Fred's office was on the second floor of the main market building. Dark and stuffy, it was crowded with furniture—desks and armchairs too big for the room. The walls were plastered with bright yellow posters, left over from the 2011 elections two years previous, advertising the Traders' Association's support for President Museveni and the ruling National Resistance Movement. A five-foot-tall cardboard cutout of Museveni occupied pride of place next to a bookshelf laden with binders and newspapers. Outside the office, a balcony overlooked the market proper, with its bustling trade in fruits, vegetables, meat, and spices spilling out from the inside of the bright-red, one-story, colonial-era covered market onto a square covered with plastic tarps and shaded by colorful umbrellas. Traders jostled for space in the crowded downtown with small retail outfits touting hardware, plumbing supplies, and electrical equipment. Casting a shadow that sheltered the market from the afternoon sun, newly built arcades—shopping centers five to six stories tall—towered over the scene. These arcades, Fred feared, were the future of Nakasero. "These investors are given tenders to manage the market, but really they just want to remove us and build some commercial complex like those ones," Fred explained, gesturing to the high-rises around us. He pointed to another building across the market. "You must talk to those ones in there. They are handling our rubbish now." The office he meant belonged to the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA)—the newly, and controversially, created municipal authority mandated to transform Kampala's government, infrastructure, and economy.

"But you know, we have our own plan for development." Opening a binder from the shelf, he presented me with a stack of documents and unfolded a large printout of an architectural rendering of the future of Nakasero Market. The Traders' Association had commissioned this work, a proposal for a new high-rise that would house the food market, with all the existing traders in place, on the ground floor, and also included a shopping mall, hotel, and a parking garage. "It will be like a supermarket that is owned by many people. It doesn't have to be like your [American] supermarkets, it can be an African idea! We can provide fresh and organic food on a daily basis. And we want to include a small museum to

remember how it has been. It is only that the KCCA will not allow us to manage our own development!"

"Now those ones are managing us, but they want us gone as well! Our traders are not happy." Fred told me that since taking over the market, the KCCA cut garbage collection from four to two times daily, leaving an unwieldy heap of rubbish to accumulate and overflow its designated place in a skip (the preferred term for a dumpster in Uganda) at the corner of the market. "Now the market is stinking so much people refuse to come," Fred complained. He continued, "People passing by see Nakasero as a stinking place, but they don't know the real reason." Fred saw the heap of trash in the market as part of an ongoing struggle to keep the market in place. Stench was a weapon produced by the municipal government to turn the public against Nakasero, he argued, so that there would be no opposition when they decided to redevelop the space and evict the traders. A savvy member of political society, Fred had reached out to President Museveni directly to protect the Traders' Association. "He is our supporter, and we are his," Fred told me. "He is very observant of issues where many people are affected; you can't remove people from the president." "But," I interjected, "wasn't it Museveni who brought the KCCA in the first place?" Smiling wryly, Fred cautioned me, "Now you are getting into politics when you said you just wanted to know about our rubbish."

This book is a study of the dynamics of development and disposability in contemporary Kampala, Uganda. It asks how people, places, and things become disposable and how conditions of disposability are challenged and undone. I explore these questions through an ethnography of Kampala's waste worlds: the official and unofficial infrastructures and economies that constitute the city's waste stream and develop around it. My conversation with Fred tracks the theoretical contours of this project: capital-led urban transformations and the displacements they engender, the materiality and affective power of garbage, the forms of labor that go into creating a clean city, the pride and vision that inform and sustain the creation of popular infrastructures, as well as the contradictions and heterogeneity of the state as it governs waste worlds.

Situated on the shores of Lake Victoria, Kampala has grown from a leafy city of seven hills to a sprawling urban agglomeration stretching well

beyond its official boundaries. Depending on where and when it's measured, the city's population is between one million and four million people and is said to double and halve everyday as commuters come into Uganda's capital and economic hub to work, trade, study, pray, seek medical care, shop, and visit. The Central Business District is the heart of Uganda's economy and government, where banks, bureaucracies, courts, hotels, and transport hubs channel flows of people, power, money, and commodities through the country. New suburbs, both wealthy and impoverished, are continually under construction as glamorous shopping malls, hotels, and gated communities mushroom within the commuter belt in parallel to the more modest, low-density, auto-construction projects undertaken by the urban majority that extend the urban fabric well beyond the paved road network, sewerage system, and electrical grid. Hugely cosmopolitan and proudly traditional, Kampala hosts a vast network of international NGOs and embassies as well as multiple communities of refugees and migrants from around the region. The latter have long made homes as guests of the Buganda Kingdom, which made this area its capital as successive kings built their palaces on the hilltops that now make up the city. Between the hills are rivers and wetlands that flow into Lake Victoria and are increasingly under pressure from industrial and residential construction.

All of this booming creates waste by the ton. Industrial, construction, medical, and residential waste pose continual challenges to Kampala's ambitious and overextended municipal government. Questions about waste infrastructure in Kampala are highly charged. They cut to the core of debates over the future of the city and struggles over urban belonging: Who will and who will not have a place as the city undergoes an ambitious program of infrastructural and political transformation? Who has the moral authority to clean Kampala, and on what basis? Who will bear the brunt of pollution, and who will be cleansed from the city? These politics of cleanliness are both moral and material. Moral values are embodied in, reproduced through, and transformed by surprisingly mundane material infrastructures like dump sites, skips, trash fires, drainage channels, and garbage trucks. As Fred Kidamba feared, garbage has the ability to pollute perceptions of the spaces where it accrues and of the people who inhabit them. Garbage can produce a stench that attracts the moral condemnation of neglect and irresponsibility and, in turn, paves the way for

displacement. In this, and in many other ways, waste *worlds*: it participates in the creation and transformation of urban life.

Kampala is hardly the only city grappling with waste, infrastructure, and social inequality. These are pressing questions as urbanization intensifies around the world in what many observers have called the urban century: an epoch in which the majority of the world's population live in cities and the issues facing urban populations are critical challenges for the sustainable development agenda.[1] Cities of the global south experience critical disjunctures between growing populations and limited opportunities for formal work, between increasingly visible and mass-mediated forms of extreme wealth and extreme poverty, between consumer cultures dependent on disposability and moral projects to clean and green cities, and between discourses of sustainability and extractive political economies predicated on growth. These disjunctures have provoked crises for both urban government and urban theory because the form that the cities of the global south are taking, the economies that shape them, and the political frameworks governing them little resemble the normative developmental models and canonical case studies upon which the urban theory of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was built.[2]

Garbage and garbage infrastructure provide a unique vantage point on the urban crises of inequality, governance, and ecology because of the ways they link the most intimate spheres of social reproduction to transnational economies and to large-scale projects of urban development. Most of Kampala's municipal waste, for example, is organic matter, the byproduct of food preparation. It is generated in the city's kitchens, where the highly gendered and morally charged work of feeding families is performed. Waste infrastructure attempts to reach into and act upon these domestic spaces, linking them to new planning initiatives, drainage projects funded by the World Bank, international NGO campaigns, and more. Following the city's diverse waste streams shows how these multi-scalar connections are made in practice, how multiple moral logics, ideologies, and structures of feeling emerge and interact, and how actors in different locations imagine each other and imagine the future of the city.

Waste worlds take shape in the context of complicated socio-technical waste infrastructures whose materiality has emerged over time, sedimenting colonial racial hierarchies, morally charged ideals of respectability,

nationalist developmental aspirations, and globally circulating visions of urban futures. Waste worlds are densely inhabited. They emerge through the process of inhabitation—the everyday world-making practices of cleaning, sorting, discarding, and salvaging. Kampalans' work with waste does not simply result in disposability—although it often has; it also affords people across the city's class structure an opportunity to define what a clean Kampala would mean, to assert their sense of belonging in the city, and to engage in novel practices of urban citizenship. Far from being peripheral to the real locations of politics or unproductive sites of bare suffering, waste worlds are creative and generative. Waste economies and the moral project of cleaning, in other words, have both produced disposability and offered a way to challenge and undo it.

II. WASTE IS A VERB

This book is not about waste in itself precisely, because there can be no such thing. Waste is not *an* object. Waste does not a have a singular materiality; anything can become waste. Waste is something we *do*. We waste things, money, time, and effort. Through the arts of care and repair, waste is also something we undo. What counts as waste is a moral question. Waste is a verb. It is a process, a practice, and a social category. Waste is value's co-constitutive other. Waste materializes: it takes particular material forms as a result of diverse processes of wasting. Waste poses moral questions of responsibility across class, racial, gender, generational, national, and species borders. As matter, waste can also permeate and muddy these borders, requiring cleanups to reproduce and shore up social differences and hierarchies. Because waste cannot be assumed in advance, *Waste Worlds* asks how people and places, forms of life and life forms, things and ideas *become waste*, and what worlds this *becoming waste*, in turn, constitutes.

This understanding of waste builds on Mary Douglas's foundational insights that dirt is matter out of place, the outcome of ordering, and as such a fundamentally relational category.[3] This means continued attention to the processes of boundary making, by which places are made and things become dirt, as well as to the consequences of this coding. But

dirt is not the same thing—materially or conceptually—as waste. Rather, waste management infrastructures are precisely about constructing a network of places and flows that ensures that discards remain manageable waste and don't become dangerous and polluting dirt.[4] Nonetheless, as *Waste Worlds* illustrates, this process of taming and controlling the material presence and symbolic charge of garbage through waste management is always ongoing and never fully complete. Rather than reducing dirt to the ambiguities of social structure and symbolism, I focus on the infrastructures (themselves material-discursive phenomena) through which entities are contingently and temporarily stabilized as waste and the categories of cleanliness are maintained. This approach means going well beyond Douglas's framework.

In contrast to Douglas's arch-constructivist symbolic approach to waste, new materialist approaches have argued that treating pollution merely as a human cultural construct is both analytically and ethically inadequate. This critique has become increasingly urgent in the face of industrial pollution, environmental racism, soil degradation, and nuclear fallout.[5] The social and ecological crises of the Anthropocene have given new stakes to long-standing philosophical questions about the place of nonhumans, from living animals to inanimate matter, in Western political ontologies that have tended to see materiality simply as a limit to human agency. Indeed, waste figures prominently in efforts to bring matter into political theory. In the opening pages of her influential book *Vibrant Matter*, for instance, philosopher Jane Bennett encounters some litter in a drain in Baltimore. Seeing it almost as a sculptural installation, Bennett is repelled and attracted, entering into a discussion of singularity and semiotics.[6] But she does not ask who threw the litter away or, before them, who made it; nor does she wonder why the streets of Baltimore are littered. Instead, she attributes these projections to the force of things, their autonomous power to act in the world, and uses this as evidence to argue for an anti-anthropological approach to matter.[7]

Understanding waste as a verb—a historicized process of relational becoming—offers an alternative both to anthropocentric liberal-humanist views of inert matter and to anthropomorphic vitalist views of agential matter. Matter exceeds discursive corralling, practical enactment, and the social relations that discipline it, but any examination of the materiality of

waste must also include an anthropology.[8] Understanding wastes' materialities requires accounting for the ways in which race, class, gender, nation, and citizenship—as well as the histories of normative regimes like biomedicine, public health, and environmentalism—simultaneously participate in the materialization of waste and are themselves materialized and sedimented through continued encounters with that matter that is cast off in the construction of social worlds. In this light, it is necessary to account for the materiality of wastes, their particular effects, the ways in which they are regulated and distributed, the places they concentrate, their movement through ecosystems and bodies, and their role in the materialization of systematic forms of structural violence and social abandonment. The material properties and relational liveliness of waste streams matter, but their materiality is neither ahistorical nor independent of the moral worlds in which they emerge.

III. DISPOSABILITY: BECOMING WASTE

The idea of disposability comes from the world of consumer goods, where it refers to one-use products, designed to be discarded. Cheap enough to throw away, these goods have been integrally linked to the remaking of production and consumption, gender and subjectivity, domesticity and urbanization, infrastructure and environmentalism.[9] Disposable goods proliferated in the United States alongside suburbs and supermarkets in the decade of post–World War II economic growth that saw the baby boom and the rise of modern American consumer culture. Made possible by new plastic technologies and cheap sources of oil, disposables promised cleanliness, freedom, and convenience.[10] This kind of disposability is an effect of material abundance, the idea that it is easier, cheaper, and more desirable to make new things rather than repair and maintain existing ones. But the public had to be taught to embrace disposability. To overcome deeply held cultural and moral objections to wastefulness rooted in the Protestant ethic, American manufacturers and advertisers framed disposability as a means to hygiene and efficiency: waste in the service of cleanliness and deliverance from domestic drudgery.[11] Marketing for disposables promised a whole new way of life, easy living through disposability—a new habitus

for a new mode of mass consumption. One of the earliest disposable goods, sanitary pads, for instance, promised women newfound freedoms and mobility, interpellating new gendered subjects such as "the modern college and business woman," able to overcome bodily difference to enter the workplace.[12] Disposability has engendered new modes of subjectivity, transforming not only how we relate to the material world but who and how we are.

Disposables have become indispensable. In a modern hospital setting, for example, single-use gloves, syringes, gowns, masks, and surgical drills are vital disposable technologies intended to guarantee a sterile environment. The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear the extent to which hygiene is predicated on disposability. Shortages of disposable personal protective equipment has also illustrated the ways that shortages of disposable goods unevenly transfer the risks of disease onto vulnerable populations and essential workers, who themselves become disposable.[13] The scale of medical discards generated by the pandemic also highlights the relational qualities of waste, as cleanliness in one domain generates vast quantities of garbage elsewhere. This fact has been rendered invisible—at least to wealthier and whiter communities—through the work of routine municipal infrastructure and waste management. As Josh Reno argues, this ferrying away of waste underpins and sustains ordinary domestic life.[14] At the same time, these decades-long shifts in material culture have encountered resistance and critique from moralists and environmentalists denouncing the new regimes of wastefulness.[15]

Disposable commodities are highly visible everyday artifacts that implicate consumers directly in a mounting garbage crisis and large-scale environmental matters of concern, such as global warming and ocean pollution. As such, they have been recurrent targets for environmental action and the cultivation of novel environmentalist subjectivities, such as the emergence of ultra-austere zero-waste lifestyles.[16] Objects like the polystyrene foam cup and the disposable diaper have become touchstones for environmentalism, although this has more to do with their visibility as litter than their actual status in the waste stream.[17] Of course, disposable goods are not unique to consumer cultures of the global north; they have proliferated globally.[18] Disposables have merged with diverse vernacular practices of reuse and repair, and in so doing, have generated massive

economies of salvaging and recycling that are often both vital livelihood strategies as well as massively injurious to bodies and environments.[19] New politics of repair contest disposability by demanding consumers' right to open, know, and fix consumer goods to break the cycle of planned obsolescence.[20] Similarly, by salvaging and serving discarded food, movements like Food Not Bombs critique the wastefulness of contemporary commodified food systems that render edible food disposable.[21] Everyday practices of discarding that place usable goods alongside, rather than in, the waste stream to allow for the possibility for salvage and reuse contest disposability by enacting a parallel infrastructure of reciprocity.[22]

Research in discard studies teaches us how to see individual disposable products as artifacts of regimes of disposability.[23] Throw-away culture is not a moral failure of individual participants in contemporary consumerism but a material fact about the world, something that is engineered into objects and environments. Not just located in commodities, however, disposability has an extensive spatial form, relying on specific infrastructures that manage visibility and distribute harm.[24] As environmental justice researchers in the United States have repeatedly illustrated, these infrastructures of disposability reproduce geographies of economic and racialized inequality, as injurious installations like landfills, incinerators, and chemical plants are sited in and around poor, Black, and immigrant communities. Disposability is embodied not just in the new kinds of everyday consumer habitus that disposable commodities enable but also in the ways disposability's infrastructures channel the toxic externalities of disposability into bodies and environments.[25] These material flows are also discursive phenomena guided by colonial environmental imaginaries that construct particular places and people as always-already wasted and wasteful and thus available as repositories for new waste streams.[26]

Disposability is an infrastructurally produced material condition with a distinct temporality. Made from carbons produced over thousands of years ago from ancient life forms, used in a fleeting moment of disposability, and then remaining in the environment without decomposing for thousands of years, disposable commodities are artifacts of fossil-fueled capitalism that will endure long beyond their utility.[27] Disposability thus refers to the future state of objects as waste. Disposables are here today and gone tomorrow. Disposability is thus a potentiality, combining immediate