

## **Being a *Boudioumane* in Mbeubeuss An Ethnographic Perspective on Waste in Contemporary Senegal**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents some results of an ethnographic research project I am conducting at the Mbeubeuss dump, set up in the 1960s in the outskirts of Dakar (Senegal). Over the years, Mbeubeuss has given rise to socio-economic relations which are (directly and indirectly) caught up with the treatment of waste, thereby contributing significantly to the urbanization of neighboring municipalities and the consolidation of migratory inflows from the country's rural areas.

Moreover, since the 1960s, a community of *boudioumane* (waste-pickers) has lived and worked inside the landfill. In public representations at local and international levels, the Mbeubeuss dump is depicted as a closed world that unfolds parallel to the social context in which it is located; the informality of working practices at the dump are seen as corresponding to inevitable social, economic and political marginality. By analyzing the social stratification of a community of waste-pickers living and working in the landfill, I focus on the life and work trajectory of Badara Ngom, *boudioumane* associated with this dump site. Mbeubeuss represents both the cause of a long-lasting environmental crisis and the opportunity for many workers – such as Badara Ngom – to make a life for themselves, thus concealing its role in generating forms of vulnerability and normalizing the production of social inequalities.

**Keywords:** anthropology, ethnography, waste, Dakar, Senegal

### **Introduction**

In this article I present some considerations from a research project I am conducting at the Mbeubeuss landfill, first opened in the 1960s on the hilly site of a dried-up salt lake (Mbeubeusse) located on the outskirts of Dakar (Senegal)<sup>1</sup>. Mbeubeuss is a “wild” landfill without borders or perimeter walls; viewed from above, it currently appears to be almost nestled between the outermost houses of districts belonging to the Municipalities of Malika and Keur Massar – formally constituted in the second half of the 1990s as part of the Pikine arrondissement. Every day, all solid waste

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(both industrial and domestic) from the houses, construction sites and other activities taking place in the Senegalese capital, approximately 30 kilometres away, is dumped here. Hundreds of trucks cross a teetering bridge – on which they are weighed – and drive along dirt roads to cross two informal settlements (Gouye-gui and Baol) until they reach one of the dumping platforms where they unload about 2,000 tons of waste per day into this landfill. Beginning in 2015, control over the flow of trucks and their routes was entrusted to a dozen workers from *Unité de Coordination de la Gestion des déchets solides* (Coordination unit for the management of solid waste – UCG), an entity set up by the State in 2011<sup>2</sup> and currently associated with the Ministry of Local Governance, Development and Spatial Planning<sup>3</sup>. In the intervening years, these formal workers have been joined by hundreds of informal workers engaged in various activities, the most representative and widespread of which is undoubtedly the waste recovery carried out by *boudioumane*. It is extremely difficult to accurately quantify the number of people working (and/or living and working) in the landfill: figures range from 2,000 to 3,500 people in an area currently measuring about 86 hectares, but continually expanding.

Between the end of 2016 and the middle of 2019, I spent just over twelve months in the field, most of which in the landfill and the districts of Diamalaye and Diamalaye 2 (Malika), Daru Salam and Kheroum Keur (Keur Massar). I approached and accessed the landfill gradually and through the mediation of various social actors, a fact which certainly influenced the initial perceptions my research participants had

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<sup>2</sup> Ministerial decree 12551 /MCGCV/IAAF dated November 17, 2011, the *Unité de Coordination de la Gestion des déchets solides* (UCG) created the Ministry of Culture, Gender and the Living Environment (Ministère de la Culture, du Genre et du Cadre de Vie). Article 2 of this decree states that one of UCG's objectives is to coordinate the collection, transport, landfill disposal and treatment/recovery (including the management of equipment and infrastructure) of solid waste throughout the country; to coordinate street cleaning; to ensure the continuity and day-to-day operation of state programmes and projects in the management of solid waste; to ensure the effectiveness of state commitments' compliance with technical and financial partners in the urban waste sector; to contribute to the search for new partnerships; to contribute to the visibility of the actions carried out by the state and its partners in developing the urban waste sector; [and] to contribute to social mobilisation for health (<http://www.jo.gouv.sn/spip.php?article9390> (last accessed April 18th 2018, translation by author).

<sup>3</sup> In the first decades following the country's independence, waste collection in Dakar was entrusted to the individual municipalities in charge of transport inside the two landfills located in the urban territory they managed. Between the early 1970s and mid-1980s, a private company – *Société africaine de diffusion et de promotion* (SOADIP) – took over dealing with the capital's waste. Between the mid-80s and mid-90s, Communauté urbaine de Dakar (CUD) and Société industrielle d'aménagement du Sénégal (SIAS) took turns doing this job. The CUD-AGETIP was then put in charge of managing the city's urban waste until, at the beginning of the 2000s, then-President Wade created the Agence pour la propreté de Dakar (APRODAK) which was followed by the ALYCON-AMA Sénégal (2002). Between 2006 and 2011, waste management was entrusted to CADAQ-CAR, under the control of the municipalities of Dakar and Rufisque. It was not until 2015 that the state returned to dealing with waste management through the UGC. For further information, see Cissé 2007, p. 21-48 and Diawara.

of my role as anthropologist. The first two times I arrived at Mbeubeuss on an off-road vehicle: the first time it had been rented by the Italian coordinator of a micro-credit project operating for several years in the Municipality of Malika, the second time it belonged to the local manager of the same project who belonged to the Senegalese NGO *Intermondes*. In both cases my visit was relatively short. The first time, in October 2016, my aim was to meet the representatives of the various supply chains involved in the micro-credit project, which also included the representative of the waste pickers. On that occasion, I visited the headquarters of Bokk-Diom, the association of Mbeubeuss waste pickers, and there met the president and vice-president. When I returned to Senegal in December of the same year, *Intermondes* classified my work as a “research internship” and this allowed me to physically enter the landfill using the consolidated channels that exist between the NGO and the association. As is often the case during this type of research (Reno 2016, Alliegro 2018, Millar 2018,), I chose not to limit my fieldwork to semi-structured interviews, preferring to also observe work practices from a distance and to collect random conversations. For many of the months I spent in the field, I tried to work (*góóóru-góóórlu*) first as a waste picker and later as a plastics buyer. It was only thanks to the extended time I spent in the field, in fact, that I was able to build a series of trust-based relationships that allowed me to conduct – albeit not without difficulty – field research. My research was ultimately made possible by Badara Ngom<sup>4</sup>, a young landfill worker. My (simulated) work trajectory represented a partial attempt to follow the path he had taken, albeit with substantial differences in terms of working hours and days as well as continuity. Moreover, I choose to schedule the 6/7 hours a day I was able to spend in Mbeubeuss during days when Badara Ngom was on site<sup>5</sup>.

In February 2017, during one of the many visits that cooperative workers and representatives of international organizations make to the Mbeubeuss landfill, a young woman from the USA who was walking with me towards *Kawedial*<sup>6</sup> – one of the spaces in the landfill where the waste is unloaded and waste pickers work – told me: “It looks like hell, I feel like I’m dying”. In fact, that day as so many others, one of the mountains of trash had caught fire (or was set on fire) and was letting off very

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<sup>4</sup> This name, as well as all the other names of informants mentioned in this article, is invented. In some cases, the pseudonyms were chosen by the people themselves. Moreover, I decided to try to preserve the ethnic origins indicated by the surname (*sant*) and by the interlocutors themselves. Ngom indicates Serere origins; Diarra, Diop origins; Niass, Wolof origins; Kâ Haal, Pular origins and, finally, Tamba Diola origins. The interview extracts presented in the text were collected in French and translated by the author during the transcription phase.

<sup>5</sup> In the words of my interlocutors, it would have been too dangerous for a toubab (white man) to move alone along the streets of the landfill. In their perception, the risk had to do with both the dangerousness of the environment itself and the possibility, not all that remote in their opinion, of being attacked.

<sup>6</sup> The Wolof word consists of *kawe*, indicating something located on top, and *dial*, indicating a pile of objects and, by extension, a landfill.

dense, black fumes that choked the air, making it difficult to breathe: “How can you live like this?!” she exclaimed, touching her mouth where she wore a white surgical mask. Shortly after, she demanded, “and... why don’t you have one of these [meaning the mask]? Get yourself one”, pointing to the cardboard box held by a colleague of hers. In the meantime, the smoke became thicker and thicker; in the distance you could hear the crackling of the fire almost drowned out by the roar of the bulldozer engine and honking of truck horns. Cows, goats and dogs wandered far and wide in search of food while hundreds of people carried on with their activities. No one paid much attention to our presence or to my polite refusal to put on the mask: “No, thank you... nobody here is wearing one”.

Ethnographically investigating the power relationships generated by the waste of an urban settlement led me to focus on the trajectories that lead objects and people into and out of the landfill. It certainly is not an easy task to sum up in a few lines the complexity of the social relations that construct Mbeubeuss as a political arena. In this article, therefore, I instead focus on recounting a part of Badara Ngom’s daily life, trying to provide some insights which, building from ethnographic details, may lead to more general, structural questions. Fundamentally, my objective is to indirectly answer the first question the American collaborator asked me: “how can you live like this?”.

## **Objects and waste**

In *Eupalinos or the Architect* by Paul Valéry (1989), the shadows of Socrates and Phaedrus engage in dialogue in Hades. Socrates tells Phaedrus that he was first drawn to philosophy as the result of a causal encounter with an object during adolescence and the thoughts this encounter kindled in him. Surprised by Socrates’ revelation, Phaedrus begins to interrogate him about the nature of this discovery. Socrates reports that, during a walk by the sea, he accidentally found an object of ambiguous nature, most likely tossed up by the sea:

«Socrates: The object lay upon the beach where I was walking, where I have halted, where I have spoken to you at length of sight with which you are as familiar as I, but which, when recalled in this place, acquires a kind of novelty from the fact that it has forever disappeared. So wait, and in a few words I shall have found this thing that I was not looking for [...] I stood still for some little time, examining it on all side. I questioned it without stopping at an answer... I could not determinate whether this singular object were the work of life, or of art, or rather of time – and so a freak of nature... Then suddenly I flung it back into the sea». (Valéry 1989, pp. 113-116)

The nature of the object that Socrates finds on the beach, “equally claimed and rejected by all the categories” (Valéry 1989, p. 118), is beyond his comprehension and the philosopher cannot help but throw it away, refusing it (that is, turning it into refuse). However, the object stimulates his curiosity so much that he finds himself wondering about its function and origin (human or divine). While at first glance the act of throwing it back into the sea might appear to represent a negation of his “discovery”, in reality turns out to be the spark that helps to give rise to an idea.

In general, the anthropological study of objects can be said to have contributed to our understanding of the social worlds in which they were positioned. And yet, the analysis of the social life of objects (Appadurai 1986) does not limit them to a passive role as products or tools of human activity. Indeed, many scholars seem to have accepted Daniel Miller’s argument (2013) that there is actually a dialectic relationship between human beings and objects. According to Miller, it is relationships with objects that generate subjects themselves and, therefore, a theory of objects – as representations – must be replaced with an object theory as part of a process of objectification and self-alienation (Miller 2009).

Like all biographies, the cultural biography of objects (Kopytoff 1986) similarly captures a transitory nature that cuts across and creates, for example, various statuses and phases of life. It is particularly evident in consumer societies how objects continuously pass through and move around inside the category of merchandise, a movement which in some ways punctuates the inevitable transition through which an object becomes waste. The status shift from object to waste (or merchandise to refuse) seems to characterize the everyday life of every human being. All life stories must necessarily end, and in the case of objects this shift seems to be marked by the loss of both use value and exchange value.

If, as Miller (2009) argues, the relationship between people and objects is dialectic, turning an object into waste would at first seem not only to doom it physical elimination, but also to erase the entire store of labour incorporated into that object, deleting its own life story. On closer examination, however, this transformation might instead be no more than the transition to a “new social life” in which the loss of the former category of belonging does not necessarily correspond to a loss of utility or functionality. In this sense, the social life of waste becomes a hugely fruitful topic of investigation for disciplines such as anthropology interested in studying precisely the aspects of people’s lives which are usually less investigated and, consequently, more embodied. “Portrayed as the dirty secret that must be exposed, North American waste is most often used to provoke concern about human exploitation and pollution of the Earth as a whole” (Reno 2016, p. 2); however, as Reno goes on to note, the purpose of anthropology is to study waste disposal as a social relationship and not simply as environmental abuse. This relationship is part of the so-called “waste regime” (Reno 2016, p. 2) involving consumers and producers, a regime entailing the necessary conditions enabling the existence of certain lifestyle. “The garbage keeps coming”,

Bob, operation manager at the Four Corners landfill, told the anthropologist. As Reno (2014) notes:

«Human settlement has, for millennia, involved systems of waste management, including sewers, waste collectors and dumps. Just because waste is amassed does not mean it is mass waste, however. What defines mass waste is that it no longer refers back – like animal scat – to the body that left it behind. Mixed in with the wastes of other people, discards lose their indexical connection to the being that generated them, they become anonymous and acquire an abstract, general character. We speak of ‘garbage’ and ‘rubbish’ as mass nouns, as a type of substance, but this is only because there are systems in place to assemble them in this way». (Reno 2014, p.17)

While the category of waste or the category of refusal might at first glance represent the convergence of multiple social levels, it should not be forgotten that, as Thompson states, “On a cultural basis people can grant value to different things, or they can grant a different value to the same thing, but all cultures insist on some distinctions between what has value and what has no value”. (Thompson 1979, p. 11). In English the terms *garbage*, *trash*, *refuse*, *rubbish*, *discard* are often used as synonyms even though they have different meanings. Whereas *trash* theoretically indicates dry waste (inorganic waste) and *garbage* wet waste (organic waste), the term *refuse* includes both types of waste, as does *rubbish*; the latter, however, also refers to construction site waste. The Latin-derived term *waste* (from *vastus*, desert, empty, plundered, destroyed) mainly refers to lands or regions and indicates a state of abandonment, while *discard* refers to the action rather than its object, literally indicating the act of throwing away a playing card. In French, the masculine noun *déchet*, derived from *déchoir*, originates from the Latin word *cadere*, preceded by the prefix *dis-*, indicating separation or distance; *ordures*, from the ancient French word *ordu*, derives from the Latin word *horridus* and indicates all that which causes the physical sensation of skin crawling and hair standing on end, that is, all that is disorderly and dirty. In Italian, the synonyms of waste include *immondizia*, *pattume*, *sporczia*, *ciarpame*, *spazzatura*. While *pattume* (from the Latin *pactus*, compact) and *ciarpame* (from the Latin *ciarpa* – scarf – and, by extension, a set of things considered useless) refer to the materials of the objects in question, *sporczia* and *immondizia* refer to their acquired characteristics. The term *spazzatura* is more interesting, in my opinion: in fact, it indicates both the action of sweeping (*spazzare*) and the sum of waste and derives from the Latin verb *spatiari* (from *spatium*), understood in the sense of “making space”. As I will show, the question of space is central to the analysis of the social life of waste: suffice to recall Mary Douglas’ (1966) point that what counts as dirty in a given society is that which is considered “out of place”.

## **A space for waste**

The landscape (Ingold 1993) of Mbeubeuss is constructed through multi-faceted symbolic representations stemming from individual and collective imaginaries and narratives. Tilley (1997) argues that landscape is a system of meaning through which the social sphere is reproduced and transformed, while Mary Douglas' classic essay (1966) sheds light on the fact that waste is capable of affirming or negating a certain social order. The case of Mbeubeuss suggests a further development, namely the process of socially constructing the landfill landscape and its continuous renegotiation as a space of daily life that redefines the identities of its workers and surrounding neighbourhoods.

The fact that waste exists in Mbeubeuss represents a source of danger and contamination, both visible and invisible. The data collected and published by the *Institut Africain de Gestion Urbaine* (IAGU) show that such contamination affects the air, water, soil, and populations living around the landfill (Cissé 2012). In the case of Mbeubeuss, therefore, the environmental threat is not an external factor which pushes into domestic space (Fichten 1989) but rather the very reason this domestic space was created and is inhabited, acted on and transformed on a daily basis.

Over the years, several plans for relocating the landfill to other sites have been considered. Between 2005 and 2014 protests by the local populations of Sindia and Diass blocked a project to construct a *Centre d'Enfouissement Technique* (Technical Ditching Centre) that would have been the first step towards closing Mbeubeuss once and for all<sup>7</sup>. More recently, through various communiques by the Council of Ministers, President of the Republic Chérif Macky Sall urged Prime Minister Mahammed Boun Abdallah Dionne to implement a special plan for redeveloping and relocating Mbeubeuss while at the same time ceasing to issue construction permits in the area (January 2017). In January of the following year, he reiterated this invitation “à accélérer la modernisation de la décharge de Mbeubeuss et à encadrer l'ouverture de décharges contrôlées dans les communes” (to speed up the modernisation of Mbeubeuss landfill and encourage the opening of controlled landfills in the municipalities)<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Decree no. 2010-791 of June 21, 2010, signed by then-President Abdoulaye Wade and Prime Minister Souleymane Ndéné Ndiay, authorised a construction-exploitation and transfer contract for the construction of a technical ditching centre (CET) in Sindia and for the expansion of the transferring and sorting Centre (CTT) in Mbao. <http://www.jo.gouv.sn/spip.php?article8134> (last accessed April 18<sup>th</sup> 2018).

<sup>8</sup> See notices by the Council of Ministers dated January 18, 2017 <https://www.sec.gouv.sn/actualité/conseil-des-ministres-du-18-janvier-2017> and January 31, 2018 <https://www.sec.gouv.sn/actualité/conseil-des-ministres-du-31-janvier-2018> (last accessed April 18, 2018).

At the moment, however, beyond the umpteenth changeover of the authority in charge of waste management (from local to governmental), my informants perceived that daily life and work in the landfill has not changed. Through this analysis of waste management policies in contemporary Senegal (Fredericks 2018), I consider such policies as institutional processes that have placed the population in conditions involving both risk and a means of earning a living. It is also necessary to gain a cultural understanding of a critical situation such as this case which unquestionably changes according to social variables (Hewitt 1983) and, from an anthropological perspective, to the social actors and interlocutors involved in constructing the view. The cultural and symbolic meanings attributed to the landfill landscape thus constitute a window for observing the social stratification of a social group that has been formed through a slow (Stroud 2016,) and only partially visible environmental disaster. In fact, although from a technocratic standpoint Mbeubeuss can be classified as an environmental disaster, this has not meant the disruption of the social structure (Rimoldi 2018).

“Waste, in its essence, is nothing more than the residue of produced goods when they cease to have use value or when this is no longer considered sufficient to justify their possession or to enable their exchange” (Viale 2008, p. 18). However, as Bourdieu (2001) correctly pointed out, the unequal circulation of material and symbolic goods does not give rise to closed and static cultural universes in which the actors might be imprisoned; rather, it generates an arena of fluid resources that the actors themselves exploit in creative and dynamic ways as part of their strategies of social repositioning. The work of the *boudioumane* and other professional figures at the landfill is aimed at conferring use and exchange value on the waste through minimal processing and transformation practices that generate the possibility of earning money<sup>9</sup>. I thus interpret the landfill as a social phenomenon with a profound environmental impact which, as the years pass, has produced socio-economic relations (directly and indirectly) linked to waste treatment and, in so doing, contributed considerably to the urbanization of neighbouring Municipalities and the consolidation of migratory flows from the agricultural regions of the Country as well.

The environment set aside for holding is usually perceived as empty, neutral, uninhabited space, space that is ready to receive something which is considered harmful, hazardous, and impure: the waste itself is considered to be the excrement of the social body (Viale 2008, p. 21). Mbeubeuss’ geography is not so uniform or

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<sup>9</sup> The trajectories through which waste is salvaged and subsequently placed on the (national or transnational) market differ by type of material recovered. As I mentioned, in fact, both inside and outside the Mbeubeuss area, real networks have been created that connect up the waste pickers who physically collect the waste on the platforms, the semi-wholesalers and wholesalers (*borom pàkk*) buying and selling inside the landfill, and the workers in the factories – owned by Chinese investors – that have been established in recent years near the Mbeubeuss area. In a subsequent publication I will examine in more details the life stories of these objects or, rather, these categories of salvaged objects.

aseptic, however. The landfill entails to a series of very different environments and workers who are equally diverse in terms of age, geographic and ethnic origin, language – although, as in the rest of the country, almost everyone speaks Wolof – and the biographical trajectories that led them to work in the landfill. One initial distinction can be made on the basis of the site where they do most of their work, understood, in the case of waste pickers, as a site of exchange rather than a waste collection<sup>10</sup>. Thanks to my numerous “walks” through the territory of Mbeubeuss, I was able to begin mapping the landfill and its places in an effort to understand its internal borders and division of space; divisions involving sections that I initially perceived as uniform. For instance, Gouye-gui – closer to the entrance – and Baol – further inside the landfill – are parts of Mbeubeuss which are devoted to (temporary or permanent) exchange and domestic practices. Gouye-gui and Baol differ in terms of the geographical origins of their inhabitants: in general, the men and women working in Gouye-gui are from the Dakar region (called *citoyens* or, ironically, boytown), and they usually return to their family homes after a workday spent at the landfill; Baol is instead inhabited by people from the Diourbel region, a region that was once called *Baol*, thus explaining the name. These pickers are called *Baol-Baol* or, in an ironic tone, *kawekawe* (country people), and they work alongside migrants from different backgrounds (Guinea Conacky, Guinea Bissau and North African regions). Most of them have temporary accommodations, such as rented houses or rooms in the municipalities bordering the landfill, while others also stay in Mbeubeuss overnight.

The environments themselves are not fixed or immutable. For instance, in the second half of the 2000s the construction of a sewage channel passing through the southwest border of the landfill caused the entire settlement of Baol to be moved while a major fire in February 2018 completely destroyed all the settlements (and picked waste) of Gouye-gui. Similarly, during the dry season only the main platform – located in the western part of the landfill area – is used. During the rainy season it

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<sup>10</sup> As mentioned above, trucks dump the waste onto the platform. During the dry season (September-June), the platform used is the largest one, *Kawedial*, located in the western part of the landfill and furthest from the entrance; during the rainy season (June-September), on the other hand, two smaller platforms that are closer to the entrance are used to facilitate the passage of trucks along the roads seeing as, in that season, such tracks are almost always impassable. In the summer of 2017 the two platforms were called *Daru Salam* and *Wembley*, but my interlocutors repeatedly pointed out that their names often changed. In addition to the “official” unloading sites, informal agreements between waste pickers, *boroom-pàkk* and private truck drivers can create fictitious platforms, with trucks unloaded directly into a *pàkk*, thereby eliminating both transport costs between the platform and the *pàkk* – which are usually managed by carters (*boroom-charettes*) – and the work of waste-pickers on the platform and, consequently, competition among them. The creation of fictitious platforms – usually located in the Gouye-gui settlement – has always given rise to intense tensions with the workers of Baol, who are very often excluded from this type of agreement.

remains empty, as people instead concentrate on two other, smaller platforms located closer to the place where trucks enter.

### **Stories of the landfill *boudioumane***

Although changes in the people's life trajectories are not as rapid as in the spaces making up the landfill, they have a significant impact on expectations for the future and everyday life. Badara Ngom is just over thirty years old and arrived at the Mbeubeuss landfill more than ten years ago. Born in the holy city of Touba (Diourbel region) to a Serere family, he joined his older brother in Dakar in the hopes of finding a permanent job in the capital. He told me that he ended up at Mbeubeuss almost accidentally because, as is the case with many, he knew some people who were employed as informal pickers at the landfill.

For some years now, Badara has been renting a room in a large house located next to Keur Massar's Terminus, which allows him to avoid spending the night in the landfill.

Currently, his work begins early in the morning and ends at sunset. After having breakfast at the shack [*mbar*] of a female restaurateur next to the main entrance of the landfill, he goes to a tent located next to the entrance of the Chinese industrial unit for which he works. There, he puts on his work tunic and takes a long wooden stick with a small, round blue scales attached to it. Badara also carries a shoulder bag with he in which his keeps a notebook, a pen, a calculator and a fair amount of money in small coins or banknotes (500, 1000, 2000 F CFA). Moving between the *pàkk* of Gouye-gui and Baol, resting the stick on his shoulder, Badara shouts out the initials of the names of the materials he is looking to buy: polyethylene (PE), polypropylene (PP) or polyethylene terephthalate (PET). When a salesman calls to him, Badara is tasked with weighing the plastic – previously collected inside a piece of mosquito netting – by hooking the scales to the mosquito net and, together with the salesman, holding the stick up horizontally, above their heads. After writing down the weight on the page of the notebook for that day, Badara calculates the price and pays the seller. He leaves the mosquito-net pouch and its contents with the seller. Only after having amassed a certain quantity (2 or 3 tons) does Badara pick up the nets he purchased, load them onto a truck and take them to the Chinese factory. There he can sell them for just over twice their purchase price. Badara does not know exactly what happens to the plastic he sells to the Chinese. The plastic recovered and sold to and from Badara regains exchange value, but its use value remains concealed within the links of transnational market chains. Many other objects, in contrast, follow routes that are easier to trace: backpacks, after being sewn into specialized *pàkks*, are resold in local markets, along with clothes; the remains of food are resold as feed for animals raised in the landfill and in neighbouring areas.

The complex and not-always-effective waste management systems allows hundreds of men and women to earn a living through social and economic DIY (Fall 2007). Not all waste pickers choose to work in the landfill: some instead see this activity as being forced on them as the result of unfortunate events and the vicissitudes of life (the premature death of one or both parents, divorce, the impossibility of finding a job quickly). Many migrants in the country told me that they conceal their activity from their families back home. A feeling of shame and sense of failure permeates the stories of some pickers. For others, however, the situation is completely different: there are even some husband and wife pairs working in the landfill, in many cases each with his or her own role. None of my interlocutors were happy to see their children working in the landfill, however. For Badara Ngom, like many other landfill workers, waste has a deep economic and social significance. When asked about his hopes for the future, Badara Ngom was never embarrassed to say that he wanted to continue working at Mbeubeuss; like many of his colleagues, however, he did complain that the lack of formal recognition this work enjoys made his working life precarious and, as a result, burdened by unpredictable responsibilities in relation to his family.

Thanks to its nature as a set of objects, possessed of materiality, waste allows Badara to earn enough money to support a family which, following the recent death of his mother and older brother (summer 2017), included two wives, three children from the first wife and two children from the second wife through a previous marriage. In addition, in its materiality waste also represents a source of direct and indirect danger: as mentioned above, everyone working in the landfill (not only pickers) face risks deriving from direct contact as well as potential visible and invisible contamination (of both their bodies and the environment). There are also many accidents involving people, trucks and carts forced to wind their way narrow streets which are often clogged with metal waste that ends up being crushed by the passage of heavy vehicles. Badara's body carries visible signs of the danger waste entails. "Look at this", he told me one day, pulling up the sleeve of his work tunic and pointing to a scar on his arm, "I injured myself one night with a television set here in the dump".

On the basis of my ethnographic findings, the landfill can be read as the key factor driving a series of social changes: by creating the environmental conditions for change, by altering the spaces in both functional and symbolic senses, by creating new institutions, and, from a more material point of view, by creating sources of income and host settings for seasonal migration inside the country, Mbeubeuss represents a motor for change in the social and spatial organization. In the second half of the 1990s, a group of waste pickers founded the formally-recognised cultural association Bokk Diom with the objective, among others, of coordinating and governing work in the landfill. It currently has approximately 350 members. Although Bokk Diom and its members' goals within the landfill have not yet been

achieved, far from it, the organisation is fundamental in managing relations with (local and international) institutional actors interested in the management of Senegalese solid waste or in the economic and social development of the waste-picker community. A long-term analysis is fundamental for understanding this case. Contrary to sites struck by “sudden” disasters in which the affected society “lives in the uncertainty arising from the existence and centrality of technological processes that are ungovernable and incomprehensible to most, controlled by restricted technical and political oligarchies, within a regime that postulates trust, and yet has repeatedly proven to have betrayed the mandate conferred by the people” (Saitta 2015, p. 9), by accounting for the passage of time I have found that the landfill and its workers face profound social stigma. Saliou Diarra, one of the oldest waste pickers, says:

«Do you know what they used to say? That the state had taken all the crazy people and put them here in Malika from Dakar. Because it was the first time you saw people working with waste...they said “all the crazy people in Dakar are gathered by the state and thrown there” and they kept saying these things for many years... but... and now... they call us *boudioumane* and now people keep coming to work here. Now the population has begun to say that the people here have bought houses and earned a living... and the whole population is starting to come here. When we founded the association, the pickers had a reputation as bandits, criminals. We got together... we decided to do something. We had partners with whom we made agreements and who supported us. We created documents to achieve recognition and to be recognized as an association by the Prefect. It was hard... but the association began to fight these criminals who actually lived in the nearby villages not live in the landfill at all». (Saliou Diarra)

“I am both for and against the presence of the landfill,” stated Mamadou Kâ, the manager in charge of safety at the Chinese factory for which Badara Ngom works. He moved to the Kheroum Keur district with his wife and children in 2008 and said that he had worked for several years in public and private security sectors and that his current job was not much different from what he had been doing in the city, all except for the working environment – which was certainly more polluted and dangerous for his and his family’s health:

«On the other hand, Mamadou Kâ acknowledges that his choice to buy land to build a house in that neighborhood was determined by the extraordinarily lower cost compared to other areas of the municipality of Keur Massar. Furthermore, the presence of the landfill, in addition to having a direct impact on the possibility of his having a job, also allowed his wife to start working as a water seller managing, from

what he told me, to earn almost twice as much as him per month». (Field notes, Q2, April 18th 2018)

In Mbeubeuss, disorganization and bewilderment are only the evidence and indicators of a disaster having taken place (Saitta 2015, p. 10) in cases of circumstantial disasters or events. Such conditions do not seem to characterize the structured working life that takes place within the landfill. Environmental contamination thus creates the microcosm of the dump and channels it through various kinds of institutions. These institutions in turn develop through their roots in the history of the local community and area, shaping the local community itself. In general, therefore, this disaster did not cause a place to disappear; rather, in the long run it actually gave rise to a place in both social and economic-political senses.

Setting off from the assumption that, as Tim Ingold claims, “Places do not just have locations, but histories” (2016, p. 105), I believe it is important to try to connect up individual choices and the cultural features of the local context (Torry 1979) through the stories of some of Mbeubeuss’ workers. In the case of my informants at Mbeubeuss, the moment the landfill opened and activity began there marks a chronological turning point in their individual stories of life and work. The accounts of Badara Ngom, Demba Niass and Adama Tamba provide counter-narratives which unfold against the grain of their assumed conditions of social and economic marginality:

«I lived in Touba and worked for a merchant, I did secretarial work [...]. He didn’t pay me regularly so I decided to join my brother here in Dakar. He worked for Moustapha Tall, the rice importer. Once I arrived, I thought I would get a job. But things didn’t go well, but I didn’t want to go back to Touba. My brother had been here as a picker as well and he told me to come and work here (2003). He explained to me how to get to Keur Massar station and how to get to the landfill. When I got here, I got my bearings quite quickly, but I didn’t know what a landfill was or how to recover waste. Slowly I learned from other people. Here we all experience the same situation, we are part of the same social situation... we do things together. I got up one morning, built myself a lonku and did some general picking. I didn’t know what was best to pick. Then things slowly improved, I began to feel better, to get to know people, ways of living... I stayed here for a long time and things got better and better. At a certain point things evolved so much that I got used to it and I also integrated into the association». (Badara Ngom)

«It wasn’t my decision. I stopped going to school because I lost my mother. Do you know how the Senegalese family works? I was forced to look for a woman because we lost our mother. I had to stop studying and look for a job in order to keep the family going. I am the firstborn of a very large family. Here in Senegal it is difficult

to find a job. I had friends who used to come to this dump and when they came back to the village for a party, I realized that I could do something. Then my friends brought me here to the dump. I didn't know anything... not even where it was... but I had to support my family». (Demba Niass)

«When I get to the dump I go to my *pákk*. As soon as I arrive I change, because I have clothes for working here at the landfill that I leave here. I put my clothes in a bag and close it, because when you talk about waste you are talking about health... there is dust, there are fumes. I have my work clothes which are the basis of waste picking. When I arrive at the landfill, between 7 and 8 in the morning, I go to get breakfast. I have a little time to get breakfast, because the vehicle I work with hasn't arrived yet. He arrives around 10 a.m. Here in the landfill there are different ways of picking waste: there are those who salvage household and industrial waste. I deal with industrial waste. (...) It depends on the way you use your time. Sometimes work forces me to eat in the landfill, because if the truck arrives with a lot of waste I have to stay there. But salvaging is hard and if you pick waste for an hour and you haven't eaten anything... you can't do it, it takes a lot of energy, a lot of strength, you have to be brave to do the picking. You are obliged to drink a lot of water, when we talk about waste we are talking about heat... and if you are in contact with waste, every thirty minutes at least you have to drink cool water and you also have to eat, because it's tiring...». (Adama Tamba)

The landscape of the landfill takes on the basic value of asserting a specific expertise on the part of Mbeubeuss waste pickers. Beyond the pickers' individual desire or ability to remain in the landfill or to break free from it in some way, their identity as workers is forged by their knowledge of its schedules, of techniques for moving along the paths of Gouye-gui and Baol and along the unmarked paths through the *Kawedial*, of procedures for establishing agreements and create unofficial, invented platforms (that is, the construction of a specific know-how and form of professionalism).

## **Conclusion**

As Daniel Miller (2009) argues, objects dialectically construct forms of humanity, and Mbeubeuss' waste likewise has an anthropopietic character (Remotti 1999). In addition to generating the social category of landfill *boudioumane*, this waste also creates gender- and age-based distinctions: the same object may take on a different value if it is salvaged by a man, a woman or a child. Since not all picked waste can be resold directly, the practices through which it is partially processed contribute to forming the rhythms and environments of Mbeubeuss. For example, only when the

price of metal increases do the waste pickers burn salvaged tyres to recover the metal rims. The materiality of Mbeubeuss' waste also plays an important role in driving social change. In addition to contributing to the urbanization and population of the areas surrounding the landfill, the presence of undifferentiated waste and existence of waste management models has attracted the attention of various international and national bodies over the years. Numerous projects have been proposed to improve the situation of Mbeubeuss and its workers, from moving the landfill to another place to forming a cooperative of waste pickers that would have the power to legitimately take over the management of waste. None of them seems to have altered the complex economic and social dynamics of the landfill, however.

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