

# Garbage as Racialization

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**SUMMARY** *This essay examines parallels between the representation of garbage and the racialized production of the category of the human. In recent years, waste has become a ubiquitous metaphor for understanding the lives of the jobless poor, perceived as discarded by global capitalism and thereby rendered “disposable life.” The essay questions the conflation of waste with abjection through an ethnographic analysis of a film and art project produced on a garbage dump in Rio de Janeiro. [Brazil, humanism, labor, race, waste]*

There is a moment in the documentary *Waste Land* (Walker et al., 2010)—so brief that it could easily be missed—when one of the subjects of the film cracks a joke. It happens during the filmmakers’ first visit to Jardim Gramacho, a sprawling garbage dump in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Until its closure in June 2012, this site received 8,000 tons of waste daily from across the metropolitan area of Rio and was considered the largest garbage dump in Latin America. It was also a place where several thousand self-employed workers, called *catadores*, collected plastics, paper, cardboard, and other recyclables to sell for a living. The documentarians came to film this rather unusual site because they are accompanying Vik Muniz—a Brazilian, New-York-based, internationally renowned artist—and his assistant Fabio, as they embark on a new photographic project that they hope will involve the *catadores*. On this first visit to the dump, the camera follows Muniz as he stands at the edge of the unloading zone, chatting with a manager from the waste management company, Comlurb, about the *catadores*. Behind him is a busy scene of dozens of *catadores* scrambling up piles of freshly unloaded waste and trekking to and fro with barrels of recyclables carefully perched atop their shoulders. Muniz then walks over to the base of an impressively large mound of waste that is currently being bulldozed and without saying a word to any of the *catadores* who are collecting material above him, pulls out his camera and begins snapping photographs of them. It is at this point that a *catador* pauses from his work, looks up in the direction of the camera, and shouts: “They are filming for *Animal Planet!*” (00:15:29).

Laughed off as a light-hearted joke, Muniz and Fabio continue on their tour of the dump. However, this is not the only time that a slippage between *catadores* and animals is made in the film. A few scenes later, Muniz and Fabio

are examining aerial photographs that they took of the dump during a flyover. Muniz comments that in these photographs, taken from several thousand feet in the air, the *catadores* appear “just like little ants, you know, doing what they do every day.” This observation is in part a commentary on images shot at a distance, but it also fits a wider pattern of the ways outsiders treat the work of *catadores* in which their very humanity becomes a matter of concern.<sup>1</sup>

I first began conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Jardim Gramacho in 2005 and over the course of a decade of researching and writing about the work of *catadores*, I have been told innumerable times that the presence of people in garbage is inhumane. Sometimes the dump is seen as an inhumane place because it is perceived as pure abjection. This is Muniz’s initial view of the dump, prior to visiting it, when he tells Fabio in one of the film’s early scenes that *catadores* “are all drug addicts” and that the dump is the end-of-the-line “where everything that is not good goes, including the people” (00:10:05). It is also the implicit target of the joke by the *catadores* that they were being filmed much like creatures on *Animal Planet*. In other moments, there is instead an emphasis on recognizing and recovering the humanity of *catadores*, often expressed through a liberal denunciatory view that a state in which people pore through rotting refuse is necessarily dehumanizing. This is the view that Muniz and Fabio eventually come to upon examining the aerial photographs that make *catadores* appear like tiny ants. The problem with these photographs is not just scalar. Rather, the two artists reject these images taken from afar because they are missing what Muniz calls “the human factor” (00:24:47).

*What is this human factor?* In this essay, I explore parallels between representations of garbage and the racialized production of the category of the human. My aim is not to intervene in debates over the act of scavenging as dehumanizing nor is it to reaffirm the humanity of *catadores*. Instead, I am interested in the very conception of the human that is assumed in images of the Jardim Gramacho dump and of waste more broadly. That is, my question is not whether the humanity of a seemingly abject population is successfully portrayed but rather, *which* humanity is invoked in the portrayal?

To address this question, I draw on Sylvia Wynter’s (2003) analysis of what she calls “genres of the human,” as well as Alexander Weheliye’s (2014) reworking of this concept in his critique of the discourse of biopolitics. By “genres of the human,” Wynter is referring to the full range of conceptions and modes of being human in time and space. For Wynter, Western colonialism rested not only on economic and political sovereignty, but also and fundamentally on an ontological sovereignty that took a culturally specific configuration of the human—that is, one genre of the human—and overrepresented it “as if it were the human itself” (2003:260). This overrepresented genre of the human is what Wynter calls Man—a Western, white, bourgeois conception of the human. Rather than approach those who diverge in some way from Man as other genres or alternative modes of being human, Man’s overrepresentation of its own self-image meant that it could only perceive difference as lack. That is, anyone who does not conform to or live up to a white, bourgeois mode of being is seen as the negation of full human normality. For Weheliye, who extends Wynter’s theory of ontological sovereignty, this means that racial-

ization primarily involves categorizing humanity into “full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans” (2014:3).

Wynter’s and Weheliye’s critiques of Western humanism guide my analysis of various responses to the work of *catadores*. However, I am interested not only in the category of the human but in the ways its production is related to and made possible by theorizations of waste, especially in recent scholarship on “disposable life.” Here, I am referring to the now ubiquitous depictions of poor, jobless, and precarious populations as superfluous, from the perspective of states and markets, and therefore as effectively wasted life. This conceptual language has emerged from critiques of the biopolitics of neoliberalism and the precarity it has produced on a global scale. It has also become a way of defining the current historical moment, as reflected in Neferti Tadiar’s observation that “we live in a time when every day brings ample evidence of the disposability of human life” (2012:2). Rather than taking the language of (human) disposability as a given in today’s global political economy, it is worth asking why terms in the semantic field of waste have become key metaphors for theorizing inequality, deprivation, violence, and oppression. The discourse of disposable life has certainly drawn attention to new mechanisms of dispossession in contemporary capitalism, but, as I argue, it risks undermining its own critiques by relying on unexamined ideas of waste. One of these is the association of garbage with abjection, making it possible to represent those who reclaim material from waste as not only iconic of disposable life but also as a sign of the inhumane.

In what follows, I examine representations of waste through an extended analysis of Vik Muniz’s series *Pictures of Garbage* and of the documentary *Waste Land* that followed Muniz’s project. While I focus primarily on the images in these two related projects, my analysis draws upon long-term ethnographic research that I have conducted in Jardim Gramacho since 2005, including a continuous year of fieldwork (2008–2009) during which a portion of *Waste Land* was filmed. I write in more depth about this ethnographic work elsewhere (Millar 2018). Here, I examine Muniz’s project as it is portrayed in *Waste Land* not because it is unusual or extreme in its representation of garbage. To the contrary, I found *Waste Land* to be typical of the ways outsiders commonly approached and depicted *catadores*, the Jardim Gramacho dump, and waste more broadly. The fact that *Waste Land* quickly gained international acclaim and was nominated for an Oscar suggests that its representational choices had a wide appeal and resonated with two common tendencies that I have observed in renderings of waste, including in recent scholarship on the disposability of human life. That is, *Waste Land* is an especially vivid example of how images of waste tend to oscillate between rendering waste as brutal abjection or transcending garbage by giving it aesthetic value. Both perspectives’ refusal to actually engage with the materiality of waste and of the labor of *catadores* precludes different modalities of the human, thereby compounding the racialization of the mostly nonwhite bodies on the Jardim Gramacho dump.

Ultimately, I argue that a different theorization of garbage is necessary to recognize and make space for alternative genres of the human. In her exploration of what she calls “life in capitalist ruins,” Anna Tsing points out an inability to see the full range of world-making projects and modes of living that are all around us because so many of them do not conform to deeply ingrained

narratives of progress. This notion of progress, she writes, is embedded “in widely accepted assumptions about what it means to be human” (2015:21). Of course, this idea of what it means to be human is only one—the genre of the human that Wynter calls Man. To truly see and allow for others requires a different way of approaching what is understood, from within tropes of progress, as ruination—in this case, a garbage dump and the multitude of projects and livelihoods created in its midst. This means, first and foremost, refusing the conflation of garbage, abjection, and nonbeing. But it also means taking notice of what gets hidden by the category of the human. That is, a liberatory politics of waste might begin with the potentially uncomfortable act of seeing and taking seriously the lives of those *catadores* who insist on staying with and within the garbage.

### From Racial Categories to Racialization in Brazil

Race is never explicitly acknowledged or addressed in *Waste Land*, though I will argue that it is a film that is fundamentally about racialization. The film’s silence with respect to race is notable given that in several scenes the film explicitly aims to draw comparisons between Muniz’s social position in Brazil and that of the *catadores*. For example, about halfway through the film, the documentary shifts from the world of *catadores* in Jardim Gramacho to a scene that shows Muniz visiting his grandparents at his childhood home in São Paulo. As he gives a tour of the well-constructed, if simple, brick-and-mortar home in what is now a lower middle-class neighborhood, Muniz leads the filmmakers into his childhood bedroom and points out humidity stains on the ceiling that he used to stare at from his bed and replicate in drawings in his journal. He proceeds to tell the camera that his parents worked double shifts, which is why he spent so much time as a child with his now ninety-three-year-old grandmother with whom he is still close. The scene also includes an interview with his father, who explains that when they first arrived in the neighborhood in the 1960s, there were no paved streets, no sanitation, and no running water, and that he built their home from scratch.

It is a familiar story in urban Brazil. As James Holston (2008) describes in his historical ethnography of working-class neighborhoods in São Paulo, the periphery of the city was developed by residents who diligently worked hard to build their own homes and, over decades, gained property ownership and urban services through legal struggles that endowed them with a new sense of citizenship. The clear purpose of the scene at Muniz’s childhood home is to decrease the social distance between a high-earning, world-renowned artist and the *catadores* he photographs by showing that Muniz also came from a “poor” family and that if he were not “lucky,” as Muniz puts it, he too might have ended up collecting recyclables in a dump (01:29:32). The parallels to *catadores* that the narrative aims to draw pivot around class, not race. Indeed, in one of the film’s early scenes, Muniz states that what he finds disturbing in Brazilian society is what he calls “classicism” (00:10:35). Racism is not mentioned.

For anyone with a passing familiarity with race relations in Brazil, none of this would be surprising. Brazil has long been known for its ideology of “racial democracy,” the idea that a history of racial mixture and ambiguous racial

categories made Brazil a country with relatively little racialized discrimination. I say *relatively*, because Brazil has often been compared to the United States with respect to race. Numerous anthropologists and other social scientists have spilled a great deal of ink contrasting the sharp black/white dichotomy and the “one-drop rule” that defines racial identity through descent in the U.S. to the Brazilian use of a multiplicity of racial categories that are fluid and malleable and attributed on the basis of appearance. What some call the *myth* of racial democracy has certainly been challenged by social scientists and Afro-Brazilian activists, but it nonetheless continues to operate in what Jennifer Roth-Gordon (2017:5) describes as a “comfortable racial contradiction”—the paradox that racial inequality exists in Brazil alongside a national pride in racial tolerance. It is also possible to understand racial democracy as a silencing discourse that deems it improper to speak directly about issues of race. In her ethnography of racial discourse in Rio de Janeiro, Robin Sheriff (2001) shows how middle-class residents avoid talking about race because calling attention to the ugliness of race relations is perceived as a crude lack of etiquette. As a result, social difference and inequalities are instead commonly attributed to class. Whereas in the U.S. the myth of the American Dream makes it difficult to talk about class amid extreme economic inequality, Brazil’s notion of a racial democracy discourages discussions of race despite the clear presence of structural racism (Mitchell 2015; Roth-Gordon 2017).

This generalized silence on race is not just an attribute of middle-class discourse. During my fieldwork in Jardim Gramacho, I found it rare for *catadores* to talk spontaneously about race in the course of everyday life. It was certainly common for people to use color terms as endearing nicknames or as referents to a person whose name was not known—a discursive practice that is meant to describe a person’s specific characteristics rather than classify them according to a racial category (Sheriff 2001). If asked directly about racism in Brazil, *catadores* would immediately acknowledge its existence, often including an example from their own experience. Most of these stories occurred in what Livio Sansone (2003) calls “hard areas” of race relations—such as in the context of employment or in a middle-class shopping mall—where differences in skin color are noticed and carry consequences. For example, a *catador* who was involved in organizing a cooperative as part of the Association of Catadores complained that all their meetings with NGOs always took place downtown in “chic” areas of the city where he felt like his dark skin, clothes, and mannerisms made him conspicuous and a possible target of police. In contrast, in the “soft areas” of race relations in Jardim Gramacho, race was rarely a salient topic of discussion.

However, race in Jardim Gramacho matters in profoundly significant ways if we shift focus from racial categories to what Alexander Weheliye (2014) calls racialization. Weheliye argues that race is not a biological category, as the anthropology of race has long argued, but nor is it a cultural classification. The problem with conceptualizing race as a cultural classification is that it reduces race to a particularism that leaves the overrepresentation of Man-qua-universal-human intact. One example of this is the way identity politics is geared toward the inclusion of previously excluded subjects into the liberal humanist order rather than questioning the conception of the human upon which that order rests. Sylvia Wynter depicts this form of politics as “mistaking the map for the

territory" (2006:117). Originally attributed to the philosopher Alfred Korzybski (1933), the distinction between the map and the territory is meant to highlight the gulf between our models, abstractions, and representations of the world (the maps we create) and the world as it exists in all its complexity (actually existing territory).<sup>2</sup> While Wynter does not explicitly reference Korzybski, she borrows the map/territory distinction to argue that the struggle for inclusion within liberal humanism is mistaken in so far as it is merely a struggle over the location of blackness within a Western, bourgeois representation of the human. The map, for Wynter, is one particular representation of the human that is naturalized to be synonymous with the species *Homo sapiens*. To mistake the map for the territory is to tackle the map alone, to seek inclusion into one representation of the human by, for example, broadening it. Wynter contends that this will never be emancipating because it accepts one particular representation of the human as if this equaled all human possibility, while failing to attend to the social, political, and historical processes that gave rise to the model of the human as Man. Following Wynter, Weheliye's approach to racialization seeks to target this very "territory." That is, he understands racialization not as a category but as a set of sociopolitical relations that striate subjects according to the degree to which they conform to Man and are thus granted (or not) full human status.

One of the benefits of conceptualizing racialization in this way is that it allows us to see how the jobless, the homeless, the poor, the criminalized, and others perceived as the "wretched of the earth" are subjected to racializing discourses and practices. That is, these varied subjects are often perceived as not quite white or are associated with blackness regardless of individual phenotypical attributes. For example, in her study of regional inequalities in Brazil, Barbara Weinstein (2015) shows how the Northeast of Brazil became a region constructed in the Brazilian imaginary as poor and "backward," and therefore defined as "black" in contrast to São Paulo—an industrialized region that became synonymous with modernity, progress, European heritage, and "whiteness." These racialized regional identities in Brazil have resulted in seemingly contradictory cases of middle-class families in São Paulo being seen as having more racial whiteness than their live-in, lighter-skinned maids who are typically poor migrants from the Northeast (Roth-Gordon 2017:92–93). Brazil is not unique in its conflation of race and region. Weinstein cites Antonio Gramsci's (1983) description of regional stereotypes in Italy that depict Southerners as biologically inferior barbarians, as well as the economist Albert O. Hirschman's (1958) claim that the average Italian is all too willing "to declare that Africa begins just south of his own province" (cited in Weinstein 2015:1). The racialization of those who deviate in some way from the Western, bourgeois model of the human can be seen in other examples that go beyond regionalism, such as nineteenth-century depictions of all prostitutes as having African features (Gilman 1992), the exclusion of urban poor from whiteness in Victorian England (Bonnett 1998), the conflation of inner-city slums with Aboriginality in Canadian society (Razack 2002), and the use of the pejorative terms *índio* and *negro* to refer to those of an inferior status or way of life in parts of Latin America (Colloredo-Mansfeld 1998; Streiker 1995).

Those who deviate from the dominant model of the human are read as non-white not only because they are perceived in terms of lack but because this lack

is seen as innately biological. Wynter argues that every culture's "descriptive statement"—the principle that underlies, justifies, and naturalizes its social order—must be projected onto extrahuman grounds. In contrast to previous social orders that took the divine ordering of the cosmos as the projection of its own social order, Wynter claims that beginning in the nineteenth century, the West grounded its descriptive statement on the Darwinian scientific discovery that *Homo sapiens* is an animal like any other and is therefore subject to natural selection. All those who diverged in some way from the West's conception of the human as *homo economicus* were not just seen as different modes of being human. Rather, they were seen as naturally dysselected, as being an inferior kind of less evolved human, as having genetic or natural traits that prevented them from being the most (economically) successful (Wynter 2006:127). "Thus," Weheliye writes, "even though racializing assemblages commonly rely on phenotypical differences, their primary function is to create and maintain distinctions between different members of the *Homo sapiens* species that lend a suprahuman explanatory ground (religious or biological, for example) to these hierarchies" (2014:28).

If dehumanization is about depriving subjects of their full status as human beings, we can understand racialization as a mechanism that enables dehumanization to seem natural.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the hierarchical ordering of human beings requires something seemingly objective that can be its grounding or justification. Inequalities are read not as a result of sociopolitical relations but as arising from traits or characteristics that are seen as innately biological. Attributing blackness to a region, spatial zone, economic status, or form of living is a way of defining a group as *inherently* less than human. It is a way of mapping social hierarchies onto the biological by drawing upon the master code of the global color line, even when this process is irreducible to individual physical appearance.

This understanding of racialization demonstrates why the tallying of racial statistics (the percentage of *catadores* who identify as white, black, brown, etc.), debates over the significance of different racial categories, or the question as to whether race or class is the "real" source of social inequality in Brazil, while important, fails to do justice to the experience of race in Jardim Gramacho. I am not saying that skin color does not matter but rather, that it is one of the anchors upon which the racialization of *catadores* attaches. Another anchor, I would argue, is garbage. That is, the very act of sorting through waste on a garbage dump makes it such that *catadores* are perceived as not quite fully human, as evolutionarily dysselected, and therefore as "black." This is in part because garbage is often conceived as nonbeing, nothingness, or the very embodiment of lack. It is therefore not surprising that labor involving contact with dirt—which, like garbage, has long been perceived as nonorder and which is also often discarded—is commonly racialized. In Brazil, domestic labor involving cleaning up someone else's dirt has historically been naturalized as the work of black women (Goldstein 2003; Roncador 2014). Nonwhite bodies in various colonial imaginaries, including in Brazil, were often perceived as naturally filthy and smelly (Anderson 2006; Dawdy 2006; Roth-Gordon 2017). Moreover, the figure of the scavenger poring through waste not only evokes an image of dirty work but is also the antithesis of Man as the successful breadwinner who

conquers natural scarcity. All of this results in the kind of racialized response to *catadores*, depicted in *Waste Land*, in which the aim is to recover their humanity by transforming them into something else. As I show in what follows, it is not a coincidence that this transformation primarily involves the aestheticization of waste.

### Recovering the Human

Toward the beginning of the film, Muniz explains that he is compelled to do an art project in Jardim Gramacho because he wants “to change the lives of a group of people with the same material that they deal with every day and not just any material ... garbage” (00:06:34). I am interested in the two parts of this statement—the desire to change lives and the attraction to garbage. The first half of the statement is not so much about changing lives as it is about changing people, and despite the emphasis on garbage in the second part, the project’s goal is ultimately not to engage the materiality of waste but to transcend it by giving it aesthetic value. In other words, Muniz’s photographs are not images of *catadores* as *catadores* or garbage as garbage but instead, depict the liberal humanist figure of Man.

We see this most clearly in the fact that the final seven images that Muniz produces in this project are not photographs of *catadores* working on the dump or engaging in other meaningful activities in their daily lives. Rather, *catadores* are positioned in the images in ways that mirror famous pieces of Western art.<sup>4</sup> For example, a *catador* named Zumbi is photographed in a remote part of the dump—far from any garbage, garbage trucks, bulldozers, or other *catadores*. He is asked to take a sack in one hand while stretching out his other arm, as if he is scattering seed. The photograph that results is reminiscent of Jean-François Millet’s nineteenth-century painting, *The Sower*, which later inspired another painting by the same name by Vincent Van Gogh. Other *catadores* are photographed in stances that are mirror images of Picasso’s *Woman Ironing*, Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Marat* (also later painted by Picasso; see Figures 1 and 2), and Western icons such as the figure of Atlas holding the world and the religious depiction of the Madonna and Child. None of these photographs are taken in the unloading zones of the dump where the work of collecting recyclables occurs. In one case, Muniz and Fabio decide that the photograph would best be shot in their studio in downtown Rio de Janeiro, because the first images taken on the dump “aren’t quite right” (00:54:08) for reasons that they do not explain.

Indeed, the vast majority of the project actually occurs in the studio. After Muniz and his assistant Fabio take numerous photographic portraits of various *catadores* on the dump, they examine the prints in their studio and select seven *catadores* to be a part of the project according to the aesthetic qualities of the “best pictures” (00:53:47). As several dysselected *catadores* later told me, it was unclear to them what made some people’s “profile” or “look” (*perfil*) appealing over others. Muniz then invites a few of the seven chosen *catadores* to work on the project in his studio as temporary employees. (It is never clear in the film why some do not work in the studio—whether they were never invited to work on the project or, more likely, decided to decline the offer and remain working





**Figure 1.**  
**Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat*, 1793.**  
 [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

on the dump).<sup>5</sup> Each of the seven photographs of a *catador* as Western icon is then projected on a larger-than-life scale on the floor of the studio. The task of the *catadores* working in the studio is to fill in the lines and shadows of the image with various recyclables that were collected on the dump and brought to the studio. Muniz watches and directs this activity from above the *catadores*, on scaffolding that has been erected in the back of the studio. Once all the lines and shadows are filled in with recyclables from the dump, a photograph of this new image is taken and that photo becomes the final work of art in a series Muniz titles *Pictures of Garbage*.

The film analyst Pablo Gonalo (2011:101) argues that *Waste Land* seeks to be “politically correct” by presenting Muniz’s project as collaborative when it really was not. He suggests that the project was fundamentally asymmetrical in so far as Muniz retained full power in determining how it would develop and hired *catadores* to perform the tedious labor necessary for the project. The multiple images in the film of Muniz standing on the scaffolding and directing *catadores* from above and the fact that *catadores* call Muniz *patrão*, or boss, further attest to the project’s unequal power relations. Others have also noted that Muniz’s project fails to overcome the distance between Muniz and the *catadores*, develops a one-way relationship in which art transforms garbage but not the other way around, and ultimately commodifies the dump and the lives of *catadores* (Kantaris 2015; McKay 2016). While I certainly agree with these critiques, I am more concerned with the way Muniz’s project re-presents *catadores* through images that make their humanity recognizable and appealing to a



**Figure 2.**  
**Vik Muniz, *Marat (Sebastião)*, 2008, *Pictures of Garbage*. © VIK MUNIZ/  
 VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ SOCAN (2020).  
 [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]**

white, bourgeois audience. This involves selection and dysselection throughout the project.

Perhaps the most significant moment of selection/dysselection is the choice to send the picture of *Marat*, whose subject is Tião, to an auction in London. Though left unexplained, this decision is no coincidence. Tião is not your typical *catador*, not only because, still young in his late twenties, he is the president of the Association of Catadores in Jardim Gramacho (ACAMJG). The son of a shipyard worker who was active in the union, Tião grew up in a politically active family as the youngest of eight children. After his father lost his job, his mother began collecting recyclables in Jardim Gramacho and at different points, his older siblings helped his mother and worked themselves as *catadores*. By the time Tião was old enough to help, the waste management company Comlurb was launching a recycling cooperative in Jardim Gramacho in the attempt to stop collecting on the dump itself. Tião's mother and sisters became active leaders in CooperGramacho, and once Tião was eighteen, he also joined. As a result of the timing, Tião had relatively little experience collecting on the dump. He also was well schooled by his family in political leadership and organizing. This training was enhanced when he was invited by an international NGO to attend a youth program aimed at developing "political consciousness" among black youth from *favelas* (shantytowns). When I first met Tião in 2005, he was the vice president of CooperGramacho and, soon after, cofounded the

Association of Catadores with a group of family members and close friends. Long before Muniz ever set foot in Jardim Gramacho, Tião had traveled extensively to attend regional, national, and international meetings of the National Movement of Catadores (MNCR) and had even met Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

This part of Tião's life history is not presented in the film. Instead, Tião's story is a version of a bootstrapped narrative—one of individual struggle that is eventually triumphant (in part through the help of Muniz who is portrayed as almost "discovering" Tião). In one scene, Tião tells Muniz that he has read various books that have been found on the dump, including Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Because the social and familial context of Tião's life is never portrayed, this instance easily falls into the trope of the poor genius, who is innately talented and through self-education eventually achieves success. The scenes depicting Tião's trip to London reinforce this narrative. Prior to the trip, Muniz, Muniz's wife, and Fabio debate whether to take Tião to London out of concern that Tião has only known the world of Jardim Gramacho and that exposing him to London might "mess" with his thinking and make it such that he no longer wants to go back to the dump (1:10:48). Based on numerous inaccuracies about Tião and his life (that he has never traveled, left Jardim Gramacho, and that he currently works on the dump), this debate establishes an image of Tião as poor and deprived whose mindset/mode of thinking might (should?) be changed to be more like theirs. Once in London, the film shows Tião touring an art museum with Muniz, whose explanations of different pieces gradually help Tião to understand and appreciate the high culture of modern art. The London trip ends with the auction of *Marat*—deemed a risky move by the auctioneer because it is unusual for an artist to bypass the primary market and consign an unknown work. The piece is sold for US \$50,000 to the jubilation of Muniz, Tião, and later the other *catadores* involved in the project during a celebratory party back in Rio. It is as if the project was only successful once it entered the market, became a commodity, took on risk, and produced economic value. Tião's tears after he calls his mother from London to tell her the good news suggest that his life of struggle was now all worthwhile.

In his discussion of political violence, Weheliye points out that suffering, struggle, and pain are taken to be the defining features of the abject. That is, the subject excluded from full human status is also perceived as the subject who suffers. It is therefore significant that the more agentic elements of Tião's story are missing from the film, while scenes of tears are included, or that there are constant references to the wounding of *catadores* such as Muniz's comment during the debate over taking a *catador* to London that it is hard for him to imagine "doing something that would do much damage to them, do worse than what's been done to them already" (01:11:05). Despite Fabio's clichéd comments that he was surprised to find that *catadores* seemed happy, there is never any doubt in the film that the dump is a place of physical and emotional suffering, and that if given the chance or shown an alternative, *catadores* would leave in a heartbeat.

Yet paradoxically, Weheliye posits, suffering is also the very means by which a select few of the oppressed are granted recognition and inclusion by the liberal state. Didier Fassin (2005) makes a similar argument in his analysis of a

humanitarian politics in France in which subjects seeking asylum must show evidence of psychic or physical suffering in order to be given aid and a residence permit. Rather than asylum as a political right, the residence permit is awarded as a compassionate response to the subject as victim. This inclusion on the basis of victimhood, however, requires that one renounce or surmount prior suffering so as to take on the self-possessed personhood of the white, bourgeois figure of Man (Weheliye 2014:76). That is, abjection is meant to be overcome. Weheliye offers the example of the use of Christian boarding schools for Native American children in the nineteenth-century U.S. that were justified on the grounds of “killing the Indian to save the man” (p. 79). Weheliye further argues that not only does this inclusion reinforce the Western category of the human; it also incorporates certain select subjects while justifying the continued exclusion of other oppressed populations.

I do not know if I would go so far as to say that Muniz’s project required symbolically “killing” the *catador* in order to recover his humanity. But this analogy certainly resonates. None of the pieces are portraits of *catadores*—that is, pictures that capture something about their own lives, work, conditions, or stories. Rather, they are pictures of *catadores* being made to physically embody and perform the figure of a French revolutionary (*Marat*), a nineteenth-century peasant (*The Sower*), a Greek deity (*Atlas*), and a Christian icon (*Mother and Children*), among others. It is notable that several of these figures were subjects who suffered in one way or another—the peasant is often an icon of back-breaking labor, for example, while Jean-Paul Marat was assassinated during the French Revolution. Yet these suffering figures are ones that have become incorporated and legitimized parts of Western history’s redemptive, triumphalist narrative of itself. What is erased in Muniz’s *Pictures of Garbage* are dimensions of the life and livelihood of *catadores* that do not fit this narrative. Gone are the trucks carrying garbage from wealthy neighborhoods of Rio; the bulldozers that bury 8,000 tons of city waste every day; and the dump itself, which rises out of a mangrove wetland at the edge of Guanabara Bay. There are also no scenes of shared meals, soccer games, and makeshift camps where *catadores* relax under reclaimed beach umbrellas on the dump. Even the “garbage” in *Pictures of Garbage* is masked in so far as it has been carefully selected and arranged to make it aesthetically pleasing.

While the dump is the reason why *catadores* are included in Muniz’s project, the dump is what is ultimately erased. The “human factor” that Muniz sought to capture in his art only emerges by transcending its conditions of possibility. It furthermore depends on the selection of those *catadores* (and the pieces of their stories) that best conform to the European figures they are made to embody. Tião—who is chosen to be at the center of the project and the film—is able to act, dress, speak, and aspire in ways that emulate the white, bourgeois model of what it means to be fully human. Among the additional six *catadores* involved in the project, the film draws attention to those who choose to work in Muniz’s studio and who ultimately express narratives of transformation in the form of a desire never to return to the dump. All others—the 2,000 plus *catadores* who work on the dump and whose “profile” made them dysselected or never interested in the project in the first place—are completely left out. They are left out, not only from the project but from the category of the human that

the project seeks to recover. Thus, by incorporating a few into the figure of Man, Muniz's project legitimates the exclusion of those whose modes of being are not perceived as different "genres of the human" but rather can only be seen as lack thereof.

### Garbage as Viscera

At this point, I would like to return to a claim I made earlier in the essay that garbage racializes. Most *catadores* in Jardim Gramacho would be perceived as nonwhite not only because of their skin color and other phenotypical features but also due to their residence, dress, mannerisms, and linguistic practices that are read in Brazilian society as signs of blackness (Roth-Gordon 2017). Moreover, *catadores* are relatively poor and, by virtue of collecting on the dump, jobless. Their poverty and joblessness furthermore limit their income-generating prospects to forms of manual labor that would be perceived as dirty work.<sup>6</sup> Some have been through Brazil's notoriously abusive prison system. Any of these dimensions of their lives would position them squarely in what Sylvia Wynter (2003:321) has called "the archipelago of Human Otherness," populated by the jobless, homeless, poor, and criminalized.

Yet it is not the poverty, unemployment, or criminalization of *catadores per se* that make them the subjects of an art project and film. Rather, it is garbage that is both the object of concern in Muniz's project—as reflected in the titles *Pictures of Garbage* and *Waste Land*—and what gets erased in its production. Garbage unsettles. Its presence is the reason why Muniz initially assumes, when watching a YouTube video of the dump in his New York studio, that *catadores* are "the roughest people you can think of" (00:10:01). Garbage is also what Muniz identifies as needing transformation; he aims to change *catadores* by making garbage into art. Muniz's project, as portrayed in *Waste Land*, is not unique in this regard. The Brazilian "aesthetics of garbage" film movement in the 1960s, for example, similarly took garbage as a metaphor that "captured the sense of marginality, of being condemned to survive within scarcity" (Stam 1999:70). Alternatively, as in the final series *Pictures of Garbage*, images of garbage are stylized so as to convert detritus into something sublime and beautiful. This is just the flip side of the coin, in so far as the impetus to transcend waste is premised on its association with the deprived, debased, and degraded.

One reason why the mere presence of garbage so easily racializes is that theorizations of waste parallel constructions of the nonhuman—specifically, the association of blackness with nonbeing (Wynter 2006:162–163). Nearly all discussions of the ontology of garbage begin by referencing Mary Douglas's famous insight that dirt is "matter out of place" (1996:36). For Douglas, dirt is what gets eliminated in the human effort to create meaningful order out of what is an inherently chaotic world. From this symbolic-structuralist perspective, dirt/detritus/discards is understood as disorder in relation to order, formlessness to form, and nonbeing to being (p. 6). This means that waste can only be defined in reference to what it is not and therefore becomes the embodiment of lack.

Of course, this structuralist interpretation of waste-as-negation has not gone uncontested. Recent work in discard studies has examined the productivity

and generativity of waste (see Chalfin 2014; Hawkins 2006; Millar 2018), drawn attention to the specific material qualities of different wastes (see Bennett 2010; Gille 2007), and shown how waste is as much a sign of life as it is destructive and corroding (see Reno 2014).

Nonetheless, the assumption that waste is the “degree zero of value” (Frow 2003:25) remains powerful, as evidenced by today’s ubiquitous discourse of “disposable life.” By this, I am referring to critiques of global conditions of inequality that theorize how neoliberal capitalism has made the poor, slum dwellers, indefinitely unemployed, and other precarious populations redundant, superfluous, or even human waste. While there are certainly historical antecedents to the current disposable life discourse (Marx’s [1963:75] depiction of the lumpenproletariat as the “refuse of all classes” comes to mind), today’s use of waste metaphors to theorize precarity differs from past approaches in important ways. First, the superfluosity of vulnerable populations worldwide is now understood to be permanent. For example, Loïc Wacquant distinguishes between Marx’s concept of the industrial reserve army as a relative surplus population that can be expelled and later reabsorbed within capitalist production cycles and what he calls an “‘absolute surplus population’ that will likely never find work again” (2008:266). In his book *Wasted Lives*, Zygmunt Bauman makes a parallel distinction between the term unemployment whose prefix “un” implies deviation from a norm and today’s concept of redundancy that does not contain its own antonym and therefore suggests a commonplace, fixed condition. Redundancy, according to Bauman, “whispers permanence” (2004:11).

Not only is superfluity now seen to be a constant; the way in which capitalism wastes human life is also understood to be fundamentally different than in previous political and economic regimes. In his reflections on superfluity in the historical development of Johannesburg, Achille Mbembe (2004) shows how capitalist production in colonial South Africa wasted native life in the sense that it consumed, exhausted, and expended black labor. This observation echoes Marx’s arguments that capitalism “squanders” human lives and individual development” (1991:182), though it makes an important corrective to Marxist analysis by showing how race, and not just class, became a key mechanism of capitalist exploitation. Superfluity during industrialization in nineteenth-century South Africa was not a matter of excess labor but of devaluing black life so that a much-needed source of labor could be easily and thoroughly sucked dry. In contrast, in today’s neoliberal moment, Mbembe (2011) argues that the wasting of black life is not so much about squandering human material as it is about making people superfluous. A large portion of the black population in contemporary South Africa is neither employed nor has any hopes for employment. This leads Mbembe to argue that rather than wasting (as in using up or laying waste to) human material, capitalism has now turned idle, unexploitable black life into the human itself *as waste*.<sup>7</sup>

It follows from such accounts of surplus populations and their permanence that disposable life is life left to eke out an existence on the margins of capitalism. Mike Davis describes the income-generating strategies of surplus populations as “informal survivalism” (2004:24) the first part of the term referring to the so-called informal economy in which livelihoods are made outside conditions

of regular, wage-labor employment. The second part—survivalism—suggests that this work is a last resort, a form of making do on the edge of deprivation, abjection, and raw existence. It is not surprising that trash picking is often cited as one of the primary modes of livelihood of those deemed disposable subjects. In his reflections on the export of e-waste from Great Britain to various sites of the global South where tens of thousands of workers recycle obsolete electronics in neighborhoods-turned-junkyards, Bauman critiques such scenes as modernity's "necessary meeting of material and human waste" (2004:61). The black-and-white cover image of *Wasted Lives*, portraying a lone, hunched figure amid vultures on a garbage dump, is a powerful suggestion that the scavenger is representative of all disposable life.

While the literature on disposable life has drawn attention to the biopolitics of neoliberal capitalism, it adopts a conceptual language that risks undermining the liberatory politics it aims to make possible. The use of waste metaphors to theorize precarity only appears natural because of parallel assumptions that both blackness and waste equal nonbeing. The disposable life discourse inadvertently depends on and reinforces a degree-zero theory of waste in which garbage is either a sign of pure abjection or a source of sublimation. This is problematic for several reasons. First, in the case of Jardim Gramacho, neither of these two approaches resonates with the ways *catadores* perceived and treated the discards they encountered in their everyday labor. Newcomers on the dump often reacted to their first experiences of the dump with disgust to what they initially perceived as "garbage" (*lixo*). However, once a novice *catador* took home a bag filled with reclaimed foodstuffs or was paid for a sack of plastic bottles, they began to approach the contents of the dump as, in their words, "material." Becoming a *catador* meant learning to see garbage differently, not as an indiscriminate, formless mass but as a rich assemblage of things. It also meant learning to recognize the specific qualities of waste. As any experienced *catador* knows well, not all garbage smells, feels, sounds, moves, rots, shrinks, or weighs the same. Perceiving these differences, which is essential to the labor of reclaiming recyclables, means recognizing that all garbage is matter and that all matter has form even if it is not the form we might desire (Millar 2018).

The work of *catadores* was thus essentially about embracing the materiality of garbage—what *catadores* did every time they reached a hand into a ripped bag. This embrace of waste's materiality is a refusal to view garbage from the perspective of order (as nonbeing or lack) as well as a refusal to appropriate, glorify, or transcend its abject qualities. Instead, the work of *catadores* draws attention to what Weheliye (2014) calls *habeas viscus*—a phrase literally meaning "you shall have the flesh" (in comparison to *habeas corpus*, "you shall have the body")—but that can be understood in the sense of fully inhabiting or being in the flesh. Weheliye offers the concept of *habeas viscus* as a counter to what he sees as Agamben's (1998) disembodied concept of bare life. As life stripped of political significance and reduced to mere existence, bare life is meant to illuminate how contemporary biopolitics operates through the violent exclusion of certain populations. The problem with bare life, as Weheliye sees it, is that it is void of corporeality—first, because it is not fixed to particular racialized bodies and, second, because it circulates as a generic, abstract sign of absolute abjection. As a result, it becomes impossible to perceive humans deemed bare

life “as actual, complicated, breathing, living, ravenous, and desiring beings” (Weheliye 2014:122).

In contrast to bare life, *habeas viscus* draws attention to the flesh as both an experience of violence (as in woundings) and an entrance to other ways of being human (as in cravings). In this sense, the flesh is analogous to garbage in that garbage—from the perspective of *catadores* who rub salves on their skin to treat the occasional microbial rash while creating a livelihood from reclaimed recyclables—is at once toxic and life giving. It is worth noting that the original etymology of the word “garbage” is viscera. In fifteenth-century Middle English, garbage referred specifically to the discarded viscera of butchered animals and occasionally to human entrails. We might approach garbage then, not as nonbeing, but as a fleshy existence that defies domestication and transcendence. This conception of garbage poses a challenge to the disposable life discourse by shifting from frameworks of negation to a focus on substance, materiality, liveliness, and desire. In other words, it is not just the case that *catadores*, or any of the other millions of jobless poor in the world today, are disposed of—thrown out of neoliberal capitalist society. While coming from a place of critique, this emphasis on lack ends up reinstating Man as the universal category of the human. The limitations of the disposable life discourse must therefore be traced all the way down to the tacit conceptions of waste that underlie the very idea of the “disposable.” Once garbage is perceived not as the negative image of order but as a particular incarnation of *habeas viscus*, it becomes possible to ask how waste is not only an experience of abjection but also a source of alternative genres of the human.

### Conclusion: A Liberatory Politics of Waste

By the end of *Waste Land*, it is clear that the dump is a place to escape or transcend. This is the expressed purpose of Muniz’s project after all. He might not be able to employ more than a half dozen *catadores* in his Rio studio or take all of these *catadores* to an art auction in London, or make Tião’s London trip something more than a temporary excursion from his life in Jardim Gramacho. But the idea is that these experiences (along with the \$7,000 from the series’ proceeds that he gives to each of the seven *catadores* in the project) might be transformative in ways that will lead them out of the garbage.

Yet there are snippets of speech in brief moments of the film that elude this narrative. One of these is the joke about *Animal Planet*, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, in which a *catador* refuses to be interpolated in the project and instead mockingly attests to the project’s racializing practice. Another is a comment made by Irmã (her nickname literally meaning “sister”), who for decades has made meals for other *catadores* on the dump. Cooking over an open flame, Irmã makes roasts, pasta, potato salad, and stews from reclaimed foodstuffs, still not passed the expiration date, that garbage truck drivers and *catadores* kindly bring her. Irmã’s kitchen is makeshift, consisting of a tattered sofa under a couple of reclaimed beach umbrellas that shield diners from the relentless sun. It is also communal in that, as Irmã proudly explains, no *catador* who wants a meal goes hungry. This scene hardly fits the narrative of the dump as an abject zone given Irmã’s allusions to friendship, creativity, and enjoyment. Indeed,



Irmã sums up the explanation of her work to the filmmakers by stating, “I feel good here inside [the dump]. I feel very good here. In this water, in this garbage, I feel very good” (00:37:50).

This is not the only time that Irmã insists on the value of the dump. In the final scenes of the film, Muniz returns to the homes of the *catadores* who were involved in the project to give them a framed print of their photograph along with a portion of the proceeds from the sales of the pictures. While looking at the newly hung picture of herself as *The Bearer*, Irmã tells her family that she only became famous because of the garbage. “You know how I became world famous?” she asks, “There inside the garbage, there inside the dump” (01:32:17). Irmã goes on to say that she likes the dump, that everything in her life began there. In short, in the very moment that Irmã is staring at a reproduction of her portrait as a kind of culmination of Muniz’s project, she attributes any success, luck, or change that she might have gained not to Muniz, the project, her picture, or the film but rather to the dump.

As a veteran *catadora* with several decades of experience in Jardim Gramacho, Irmã makes these claims that she “feels good” in the garbage knowing full well—that is, having viscerally felt—the dangers and toxicity of the dump. At the time Irmã first started collecting, the dump lacked pipes to capture and burn off flammable methane gas, produced by decomposing organics; and fires were known to spontaneously erupt on the dump’s surface. Injuries were common—from broken glass and shards of metal, from top-heavy waste haulers tipping over onto their sides, and from bulldozers that flatten mounds of waste and anything else in their path. Then there were the daily physical exposures and demands: the scorching sun, the thick mud and deep puddles on rainy days, the heavy loads and hunched backs, the microbes that caused skin lesions or a rash, and even the lack of a toilet that often meant squatting beneath a soiled burlap sack. By insisting that she likes the dump, Irmã is not denying these dimensions of the dump. To the contrary, her statements seem to emphasize a dwelling in and with garbage and all that it entails. She feels good *there inside, inside* the garbage, *inside* the dump, *in* the water, *in* garbage. It is as if she refuses any escape or transcendence and instead insists on the importance of staying with the garbage—on fully inhabiting, residing with, or being present in the dump.

What does it mean to stay with the garbage, to say that one feels good inside of a dump? This question cannot be answered from within standard representations of waste as abjection in which garbage can *only* be an experience of disgust and degradation. Nor does this question make sense within representations of waste that sublimate it by turning it into something else—beauty, art, a politically correct social project. Irmã refuses both responses to waste by inviting us to consider how the very materialities of garbage—materialities that can be sharp, cumbersome, poisonous, and infecting and therefore wounding—are a source of livelihood, social relations, human creativity, and a way of making a life in the everyday that does not conform to bourgeois sensibilities.

Irmã’s statements thus defy efforts to incorporate (a select few) *catadores* into the category of Man, an effort premised on the perception of the *catador* as a status of scarcity and lack. To take Irmã at her word instead requires attending to other genres of the human. This means resisting the temptation to denounce the

presence of people collecting on a garbage dump as disposable life, a position that ends up reinforcing the universality of one particular (white, bourgeois) modality of the human. Instead, a liberatory politics of waste engages garbage not as nonorder but as an assemblage of specific materialities that can be both toxic and life giving. Doing so opens up the space to ask what other forms of living emerge in sites usually defined by their violence, oppression, exploitation, and exclusion. Such an inquiry is liberatory because it challenges not the map but the territory. That is, it upends the universalizing version of the human that lies at the very root of relations of domination and inequality.

## Notes

*Acknowledgments.* I thank the Critical Race Feminist Technoscience Reading Group at Simon Fraser University for helping to inspire this essay, and Ann Travers, in particular, for her key insights. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference, "Putting Dirt in its Place: The Contemporary Politics of Waste," at Cambridge University.

1. By noting slippages between *catadores* and animals, I am not implying that humans and animals are oppositional categories. Rather, this slippage illustrates how ideas of race depend upon hierarchical orderings of animacy (agency, liveliness, sentience, ability) in which animal is usually placed on a lower rung than human in the "great chain of being" (Chen 2012).

2. Korzybski specifically expressed this distinction in his famous phrase, "A map is not the territory" (1933:750, emphasis in original).

3. While racialization is one mechanism of masking sociopolitical relations of subjugation by mapping social hierarchies onto the putatively biological distinctions of the global color line, there are others. The gendering of subjects, for example, maps subjugation onto anatomical differences of reproductive bodies. As a black feminist scholar, Sylvia Wynter (2006; see also Scott and Wynter 2000) emphasizes that the root problem is not so much this or that form of oppression. Rather, it is the conflation of one specific model of the human with the human itself. To destroy this model—a white, bourgeois, heteromasculine conception of the human that Wynter aptly calls "Man"—is to liberate humans at once from multiple systems of oppression (see also Weheliye 2014:23).

4. The reproduction of famous pieces of art is a hallmark of Muniz's larger body of work.

5. See Millar (2014) for a discussion of why *catadores* decided to work on the dump, even when they had opportunities for stable waged employment.

6. Not only are certain forms of manual labor associated with dirt and that therefore become racializing, joblessness itself has also long been linked to dirt, filth, and contamination in colonial racial discourse. For example, in her analysis of a household management guide written by a free African-American butler named Roberts in the antebellum U.S., Kathleen Brown (2006) describes how Roberts suggests various ways that servants can distance themselves from "vagabonds" of the streets who were perceived as dirty and diseased. His admonitions that servants not wear boots from the streets and keep their hands and nails free of dirt and present themselves in clean attire in the presence of the families they served were partly intended to separate employed servants from the homeless and jobless on city streets. As jobless urban poor who perform a kind of dirty work, *catadores* are therefore doubly racialized.

7. For contemporary analyses that consider the relationship between surplus and expending human life, see Tadiar 2012; 2013; Wright 2006.

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