

ian society. This is, without doubt, an essential work for anyone interested in Brazilian history in general, and Afro-Brazilian history in particular.

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MICAH MCKAY. *Trash and Limits in Latin American Culture*. University Press of Florida, 2024.

Micah McKay's *Trash and Limits in Latin American Culture* approaches representations of trash, waste workers, and trash dumps in Latin American writing and film through a theoretical framework inflected by object-oriented ontologies and posthumanist new materialisms, on the one hand, and the rethinking of polity and community on the other. The book's introduction sets the scene with a discussion of Argentinean director Ernesto Livón-Grosman's documentary *Cartoneros*, which generates irony between images of people forced to garner a living picking through trash and a voiceover parroting neoliberal developmentalist talking points portraying Buenos Aires in terms of modernization and Eurocentric cosmopolitanism. Arguing that trash operates as the pivot point in making visible the failures in the neoliberal logic of development, McKay forges connections between neoliberal capitalism's ideological framing, production, distribution, and management of both waste and lives considered value-less and the conceptualization of the Anthropocene as the planetary "Era of Trash," defined by the integration of human waste—liquids and gases such as CO<sub>2</sub> as well as solids—into the geological record. Citing Myra Hird, he argues that trash has become the primary signifier of the Anthropocene, one that forces a reconsideration of the modern conceptual division between culture and nature (p. 6). In that sense, the representation of trash's affective properties would have the double effect of disrupting neoliberalism's foundational immunitary logic of management and containment, and potentializing alternative forms of community-building that rely on affectivity rather than the identification/exclusion dialectic.

The book's four main chapters analyze cultural production from Brazil, Central America, Mexico, and Peru that make visible "the limits of normative notions of the human, community, waste management, and environmental activism" (p. 4). Appearing between the 1950s through the 2010s, these works draw attention to the relations between trash production and waste management strategies and the implementation of neoliberal capitalism in the region during and following the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s. The book takes two primary approaches to trash. The first two chapters engage with theoretical

frameworks related to object-oriented ontologies and feminist new materialisms to draw out the agency of trash in terms of influencing specific forms of social organization, such as neoliberal managerial politics and the modern “ethos of disposability,” as well as modes of resistance and alternative community building from people categorized as “disposable” within neoliberal paradigms of production. In this interplay, the author shows how the affective qualities of trash destabilize the neoliberal discourse of development, rendering its failures visible by underscoring the ambivalence of the binary opposition between the useful/waste. At the same time, the human/animal divide is problematized through ambiguous representations of trash dumps simultaneously as “places of culture” and “places of nature,” in that they display processes of entropy and decomposition, as well as breeding wild creatures commonly viewed as threats to human populations (p. 9). In that sense, trash and trash dumps would constitute “threshold” or liminal spaces that not only force a questioning of discursive categories, but also potentialize affective relations and “forms of human community that are both on the margins and suggestive of ways of being together that move beyond normative conceptualizations of community” (p. 19). These affective assemblages would exemplify Agamben’s conceptualization of “inessential community,” that is, notions of commonality-in-difference that do not rely on essentialist identitarian discourses. While continuing to draw on this theoretical framework, the last two chapters focus to a greater degree on how representations of waste and “wasted” humans interface with neoliberal discourses of waste management and environmental rhetoric focused on “individual responsibility.”

The first chapter, “Excess and Lack: Trash and the Limits of the Human,” examines Latin American representations of human-animal interrelations coalescing around trash and trash dumps. The chapter opens with a discussion of Sebastián Salazar Bondy’s children’s book *El señor Gallinazo vuelve a Lima*, in which the titular vulture attempts and fails to help bridge social gaps between a young child who survives by gathering trash and the upper classes. McKay argues that this story simultaneously illustrates the exclusionary spatial divisions that neoliberalism implements between “essential” and disposable social classes, and, at the same time, hints at new forms of interspecies community arising from interactions within the dump. Trash thus becomes a “material manifestation of the threshold,” conceived of as a contact zone rather than a rigid borderline, between species as well as social classes (p. 28). While the author’s insistence that trash exists in “a stateless condition of indistinction” might be seen as a fetishization of the status and agency of trash in modern society, it is nevertheless true that a fundamental ambivalence arises between its cultural meanings in neoliberalism, its affective properties as a remnant

that never fully disappears and that has unexpected power to influence social and political structures, and the liminal social and political status of unofficial trash workers (p. 29).

This perspective is amplified in the discussion of Julio Ramón Ribeyro's short story "Los gallinazos sin plumas," whereby a seeming Hobbesian struggle for survival is belied by ludic elements. In this story, the adolescent protagonists' endless delving through trash to feed the family's pig transforms into a treasure hunt, thereby inverting the scale of values that had dehumanized the human protagonists and placed them in conditions similar to those of the pig. The titular description of those protagonists as "wingless vultures" thus transitions from a straightforward trope of dehumanization into a reimagining of the commonalities between humans and animals. Likewise, that the pig is named—Pascual—indicates a degree of family relationship. The final work analyzed in this chapter seems to pull away from this rapprochement with the animal, however. McKay's discussion of Brazilian director Jorge Furtado's short film *Ilha das Flores* centers on the meanings of freedom in a society in which pigs are given priority over humans in eating food waste from a trash dump in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The film's aesthetic develops powerful irony between the narrator's reproduction of the capitalistic rationality of technological and social development since the invention of money up to the film's present and images of atrocities like the atomic bomb, the discarded bodies of Jewish people during the Holocaust, and the women and children living in the trash dump. Overall, this first chapter succeeds in demonstrating how trash draws into question the symbolic division between the human and the animal; however, it doesn't fully delve into the ways in which trash reorganizes these interspecies relations or the cosmopolitical implications of such a reorganization with regards to the neoliberal social, political, and economic order.

The second chapter suffers to a certain degree from similar issues of abstraction in its discussion of "inessential communities" arising from living with trash; while Agamben's concept is certainly relevant and useful, the analysis of these alternative forms of community-building is lacking in specifics and, from my point of view, does not adequately address their real-world political implications. Fortunately, many of these issues are addressed in greater depth in the third and fourth chapters, which retrospectively fill in the gaps in the first two. As the case may be, the second chapter analyzes three works that represent trash not only as a threshold that simultaneously divides and binds together social identities, but also as a space of affective encounter and spontaneous community formation through shared work: Argentinean Alicia Dujovne Ortiz's *¿Quién mató a Diego Duarte? Crónicas de la basura*, Brazilian director Eduardo Coutinho's documentary *Boca de lixo*, and Mexican American essayist

Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Lake of Sleeping Children*. The author approaches the question of community-building primarily through analyzing how these authors/directors position themselves with respect to the inessential communities they portray in their works. From my point of view, the chapter might have been more compelling if, rather than focusing on the authors' positionality, it had drawn out to a greater degree how the limits of representation appear in these works, that is, the ways in which affective relations exceed symbolic (textual) representation, thereby potentializing forms of community not depending on demographic categorization.

The third chapter opens with a discussion of Mexican author Alfonso Reyes's *crónica* "La basura," in which he compares trash workers to knights on horseback in what McKay calls a "trash rhapsody." While the analysis of this story comes across as somewhat acritical, reifying the agency of trash in expressions such as "the world is constantly done and undone by and because of trash" (p. 74), the bulk of the chapter delves much more deeply into how the affective agency of trash transforms human lives and relationships. The central theme is the gendered dynamics of trash collection with respect to what the author views as neoliberalism's disruption of traditional forms of masculinity. The author analyzes six narratives featuring protagonists who are either employed as garbage collectors or become unemployed and scavenge trash to survive: Argentinean authors César Aira's *La villa*, Sergio Chejfec's *El aire*, and Andrés Neuman's *Barriloché*; Central American writers Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Baile con serpientes* and Fernando Contreras Castro's *Única mirando al mar*; and Mexican Álvaro Enrigue's short story "Ultraje." Each of these stories draws out the limitations of the neoliberal discourse of waste management, which come into question when trash exceeds containment strategies, such as the piling up of trash in streets during a waste worker strike in Neuman's *Bariloché* or the emotional weight of intimate waste such as used condoms and food residue in Enrigue's "Ultraje." As the author states, "the work in these trash works serves to foreground a number of the outcomes of the implementation of neoliberal rationality: feelings of estrangement, the inadequacy of community as a form of protection from economic misfortune, and labor as a daily struggle for survival" (p. 85). In this way, the characters' relationships with other people and trash become a way of making visible "the personal and professional crisis of masculinity in the neoliberal era. It is a symbol of how neoliberalism lays men low, unmooring them from their traditional roles and, in some cases, rendering them incapable as romantic or familial partners" (p. 86). However, McKay points out that some of these works propose alternative ethics of community rooted in an ethics of care, whereby even waste reacquires value.

Chapter four delves further into the individuality/community dynamic in relation to waste management, this time with respect to ethical norms in dealing with waste and recycling. Using Mexican director Tayde Vargas's short documentary *Los artilugios del Señor Tlacuache* as an initial example, McKay argues that even works designed to raise consciousness about proper waste management, recycling, and the dignity of trash workers often fall into the trap of representing trash management as an individual choice rather than a systematic problem. In this film, trash-recycling artist Jaime Jiménez demonstrates an ethics of care in repurposing discarded objects into art, but upon converting him into an inspiring hero, McKay argues, the film echoes the neoliberal political theology of freedom, in which environmental activism is fully centered on individual decisions rather than social change. As he argues, this mode of representation is highly seductive in that it offers individual agency and empowerment when confronted by seemingly insurmountable systemic issues, but it ultimately circumscribes that supposed freedom to choosing between greenwashed market solutions, effectively foreclosing the possibilities for systemic change (p. 120). McKay makes a similar critique of Lucy Walker, João Jardim, and Karen Handley's documentary *Wasteland*, which portrays the collaboration between Brazilian-American artist Vik Muniz and trash workers in Rio de Janeiro's Jardim Gramacho dump in producing his series "Pictures of Garbage." He argues that while the art project and the film are successful in drawing attention to the materiality of waste and waste labor, it also places them into a distinctly aesthetic sphere, implying that trash and wasted lives are only valuable when they are rendered artistic. At the same time, the seemingly empathic connection the film draws between autobiographical aspects of Vik Muniz's impoverished childhood in a favela and the lives of the trash pickers ironically has the effect of reinforcing the neoliberal ideology of individual initiative, since Muniz was able to become a successful international artist, while the trash pickers remain in the dump—thereby implying that if only they worked harder or were more talented, they could have similar achievements. As McKay drives home, "not only does Muniz's authorship of and control over the 'Pictures of Garbage'" contradict his insistence upon the non-hierarchical, collaborative nature of the undertaking, but also the seeming ease with which trash becomes art and art becomes commodity in the film ends up looking like an erasure of the problem of the landfill itself" (p. 131). In that sense, the film's treatment of trash and trash workers is cathartic, rather than offering any transformative solution.

From *Wasteland*, McKay moves on to a Peruvian multimedia environmental awareness campaign called *Gallinazo Avisá*, in which vultures were armed with GPS locators and cameras, and humans could track and view footage of their

movements on a website in order to identify illegal dumps. Supported by the government of Lima and non-profits, participation in the project was promoted with a slick advertising campaign in which an anthropomorphized vulture became the spokesperson. McKay argues that, despite recognizing animal agency to a degree, the usage of bland advertising strategies and the personification of the vulture severely limit what had the potential to become a much more transformative multispecies collaboration: “the vulture’s purpose is to gather intelligence for humans on humans’ terms, never communicating anything that exceeds or escapes the anthropomorphic projection of the human perspective to which the body cameras and voiceover subject them. They are domesticated into the iconography of an advertising campaign logo. It is expected that the autonomous, rational human individuals who come across the campaign video should use the intelligence gathered by the birds as the basis for their decision to take individual action. As the last end title suggests, the primary modality of action that the project envisions is online engagement” (p. 138). In each of these cases, the focus was on individual agency rather than the need for systemic change. In its conclusions, the chapter contrasts these projects with the Spanish-Latin American collaboration Basurama, which sponsored a series of public art works involving trash throughout Latin America. This program focused on the creation of collaborative networks and interventions in public space to make visible aspects of waste that neoliberalism looks to hide or contain. One such example was Basurama’s project in Mexico City, whereby participants reworked scavenged scrap metal to create fantastic, impractical versions of the carts used by trash collectors and then pulling them around the city in a parade, thereby making visible what is usually rendered invisible.

The book concludes with a meditation on the relations between literature and waste, in which waste functions as a literary device for deconstructing neoliberal rationality and making visible its failures, but literature itself also exists as waste, as excess and remnant, as an archive of material practices and affects that ties together diverse communities and material regimes (p. 148). Reiterating the themes of the multivalence of trash and its excessive affectivity with respect to neoliberal strategies of containment, McKay closes the book with a discussion of another Basurama project that materializes a famous work by concrete poet Augusto de Campos. This collaborative work inverted Campos’s poem “LUXO,” which originally consisted of a fold-out page on which “Luxo” (luxury) was written in huge letters composed of the word “lixo” (trash) written over and over again in tiny print. In Basurama’s artwork, the letters of LIXO were formed in a style resembling touristic place name sculptures from the repetition of the word “Luxo,” this time made up entirely of repurposed objects scavenged from the trash. This work thus ties together the themes of the

visibilization of waste and waste workers, the materiality of print culture, and collaborative work and community-building related to trash and waste management. Overall, this book proves an engaging and informative read and it will surely be worthwhile for anyone interested in the environmental humanities, waste studies, and/or Latin American cultural studies.

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