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In the Flow: Materiality, Value and Rubbish in Lagos

ABSTRACT

Through an ethnographic study of waste handling in Lagos, we follow the 'flow of rubbish' to explore the value entanglement between urban dwellers and the materiality of rubbish. We draw on a practiced theory of value creation/destruction to understand how object recursively move in and out of its 'rubbish' state.

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we invite consumer researchers to rethink the place of rubbish in the co-production of values in everyday life, with disposal conceptualised as a recursive practice which is inextricably entangled with the processes of consumption and production (Parsons and Maclaran, 2009; Hetherington, 2004). According to Parsons (2007) and Benton (2015), consumer researchers have tended to overlook disposal as an area of study, instead favouring studies pertaining to the acquisition and consumption of goods.

When disposal is explored, there is a tendency to consider such a practice to be a final act in a linear sequence following production, acquisition and consumption (see Gregson et al, 2010; Sherry, 1990). Such a view presumes that the value (of goods), once produced, is stabilised through consumption rituals and practices (e.g. be it through rituals of possession, gift-giving, sharing) until the onset of value exhaustion that leads subsequently to depreciation and disposal (Parsons, 2007). Rubbish is thus considered to be of ‘no value’ (Thompson, 1979) and is therefore a dirty post-consumption residual (Tudor et al., 2011; Douglas, 1966; Munro, 1992) that must be ‘moved along’ (Gregson et al, 2007; see Gabel, Mansfield and Westbrook, 1996; Phillips and Segó, 2011) and/or repurposed (see Cherrier, 2009; Trudel, Argo and Meng, 2016; Ture and Ger, 2011; Albinsson and Perera, 2009; Laitala, 2014). While the repurposing of rubbish (through practices of reusing and recycling) extends the value of goods – suggesting a ‘circularity in the movement of goods’ (Parsons and Maclaran, 2009: 301) – these studies nevertheless maintain the ‘absenting’ of rubbish from everyday life until they are given a new lease of life (Hetherington, 2004). Indeed, failure to ‘move things along’ is considered to be a disruptive act (e.g. hoarding, cluttering) that brings about disorder in domestic spaces and material culture (see Maycroft, 2009; Cherrier and Ponnor, 2010). These studies, thus, reflect a modernist agenda predicated on practices aimed at systematically managing the boundaries that hold rubbish in abeyance (Tomic, Trumper and Dattwyler, 2006). Such a modernist agenda is particularly prevalent in discourses on waste management and environmentalism in the developed worlds (Gregson et al, 2010). As Arnould (2014) observes, consumer studies’ pre-occupation with advanced capitalist market economies has blinkered our theorisation of value as being predicated on market exchange, and thus, has obscured human creativity (sociality) as the cornerstone of value creation. In short, a modernist view of waste management in advanced consumer society risks overlooking ‘rubbish’ as constitutive of value creation and production (O’Brien, 1999, 2008) whilst discounting the performative role of rubbish in generating the social and political dynamics of everyday life.

Through an ethnographic study of waste handling in Lagos, Nigeria, we follow the ‘flow of rubbish’ (Appadurai, 1986; Gregson et al, 2010) to explore the value entanglement between urban dwellers (which include householders and scavengers) and the materiality of rubbish. As in most developing economies, rubbish occupies a prominent material presence in the mundane spaces of everyday life in Lagos. Here, rubbish not only fuels the socio-economic lifeblood of urban dwellers, it is also integral to the formation of informal market that often shapes the social life of these actors (see Samson, 2015; Rogerson, 2011; Lepawsky and Billah, 2011). This paper, in some way, responds to Gregson et al’s (2010: 846) call to ‘follow the flow of things’ down the value chain to ‘less developed worlds,’ where the value

of things are never fully stabilised as they constantly undergo endless processes of assembly disassembly and reassembly.

In this paper, we ask what it is like to carve out a living amidst rubbish. To what extent has a modernist discourse of waste management infiltrated the everyday life of urban dwellers in a developing economy like Nigeria? How do values circulate, become contested and flow in such an economy? How do practices of disposal shape the social relations of those who are entangled with it? To address the above questions, we draw on Appadurai (1986) and Arnould's (2014) practice theory of value creation to shed light on how values are contingent upon the relational entanglement between social and material relations.

Towards a Practiced-Based theory of value creation

Most marketing and consumer studies that address the value of objects have built upon Arjun Appadurai's (1986) reappraisal of Marx's (1976) conception of value – i.e. as a product of the sum of labour required to produce things and with a focus on how such value might be measured in qualitative or quantitative terms. For Marx, the 'usefulness of things' does not necessarily translate into commodity; instead a thing only becomes a commodity if it produces use-value for others and, in a market system, this is predominantly transferred through monetary exchange. Appadurai (1986), however, cautions against limiting the conceptualisation of value creation to market exchange (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986). Instead, he calls for the need to attend to social and material relations by 'following the circulation of things', which at times also embrace other forms of value regimes (such as bartering, gift-giving or market relations).

Appadurai (1986) argues that value creation is contingent upon mundane social interactions and that it is through such a relational approach that objects animate and take on a 'social life'. Such a view problematises conventional understandings of use value in marketing as either residing in the object or in individual perception of said object (Karababa and Kjeldgaard, 2014; Arnould, 2014). It also calls into question the agency attributed to marketers, who appropriate use value as a resource for identity-construction as necessarily accomplished through a systemic top-down process of meaning transfer (ibid: 2014; see McCracken, 1986; see also Curasi, Price and Arnould, 1998).

Concurring with Appadurai (1986), Arnould (2014) proposes the need to employ a practice-based approach to studying value creation. Such an approach assumes value as an outcome that is contingent on practices of production and consumption, and that such practices are enacted through co-ordinating a web of human and material relations. In other words, it is practices, rather than individuals or institutions that assume the performative role as a 'carrier of values' (ibid.: p. 130) as well as (we may add) the producer/destroyer of values. For Arnould, 'the interaction of productive and consumptive moments is key to the realisation of use values' (ibid: 131). Productive moments involve the process where materials are offered as forms of resources while consumptive moments entail the reception of such resources. It is in these moments of cross interaction that active and inactive carriers of practice (subjects, objects and networks) come together to perform the work of value co-production/co-destruction.

As Arnould (2014) suggests, instead of asking 'who' and 'what system[s]' produce values, we should instead question what kind of values are produced in particular forms of regime. For instance, to fully capture the regimes of value creation in market economies, we must ask, what affords an object its commodity candidacy (Appadurai 1986)? For Appadurai, such a question must be addressed by tracing the social life, practices and politics that become

enmeshed with the commodity during moments of exchange. By attending to the cultural biographies of things (Kopytoff, 1986), researchers are able to observe how an object moves in and out of its commodity state. In the context of this study, we similarly ask, what regime of value shapes the movement of objects and commodities in and out of their ‘rubbish’ state? What values are produced in regimes where exchange is performed outside of formal market exchange?

Methods

This paper presents findings derived from a 6-months ethnographic study with six key stakeholders involved in the organisation of rubbish in Lagos (i.e. Lagos Waste Management Authority [LAWMA], householders, itinerant scavengers, dumpsite scavengers, junk artists and Wecyclers [a social enterprise promoting recycling]). Utilising multiple data collection methods, which include participant observations, self-reflexive observations, field interviews, diaries, photographs and videos, we traced the social life of rubbish, particularly its trajectory as it moves across different spaces (i.e. from households to landfill and sometimes recursively back to households). Our methodology follows a more-than-representation approach (see Hill et al. 2014), which emphasises the pre-reflexive and embodied immersion in the onflows of everyday life in the production of knowledge (Thrift, 2007). Through a more-than-representational approach, we incorporate both textual (representational) and corporeal (non-representational) accounts of how values are created, produced and circulated through different spaces in different interactional encounters.

Context and Findings

In this paper, we discuss two regimes of value in our ethnographic data: (1) the social shaping of the informal economy and (2) embodied categorisation of value.

The Regime of Value and the Social Shaping of the Informal Economy

As Lagos faced continual struggle with their handling of mounting waste in the city (Oyeniya, 2011), the Lagos State Government established the Lagos Waste Management Authority (LAWMA) in 1991. Through the Cleaner Lagos Initiative (CLI), LAWMA is entrusted with the responsibility to implement waste management policies befitting of a modern city, whereby Western practices of reducing, reusing and recycling of waste are reinforced (Ezeamalu, 2017; Akiyode and Sojini, 2006). Despite such an initiative, the crisis persisted as household rubbish remained uncollected, prompting urban dwellers to seek alternative channels to deal with the overflow of waste. This has spawned the flourishing of an informal waste industry, wherein cart pushers, scavengers and social enterprises step in to undertake waste collection for householders in return for fees (Araba, 2010). It is under such a condition that our ethnographic data reveals the emergence of a mutually beneficial relationship between the householders and the informal actors, which is predominantly driven by economic exchange, as exemplified by our observation of Mary:

“I tell my children to look out for the aboki’s¹ [itinerant scavengers] because they normally come to our street. So, we sell most of (the) rubbish to them...I reserve my plastic bottles for the bicycle boys [Wecyclers]² so that I can at least I get something

¹ Aboki is a Hausa term which means ‘friend’. It is also a word that is often used in a derogatory way to refer to poor migrant workers engaging in lowly paid jobs.

² Wecyclers operates a reward programme that is points-based. Households earn points for plastics given to Wecyclers and these points are redeemed quarterly by receiving items like toasters, irons and cooking utensils.

from them no matter how little... something is better than nothing. The rest we throw into the bush.” (Mary, slum dweller, on-site interview)

Living in the slum, Mary’s dwelling is often overflowing with rubbish. Although the handling of waste in her slum is ‘formally’ operationalised by LAWMA, however, this has often been neglected as the Lagos Government is more inclined to deploy resources to sanitise more prominent neighbourhoods (Ezeamalu, 2017). Most slum dwellers, like Mary, would often resort to ‘selling their rubbish’ to informal actors, particularly the itinerant scavengers, who are themselves economically disadvantaged. At the same time, Mary also attempts to extract value from rubbish by pushing it through social enterprises, which provide her with an alternative source of income. For these actors, rubbish assumes a recursive presence (Hetherington, 2004) that yields ‘a continuous return’, and therefore its value is unstable as it oscillates in and out between rubbish and commodity states interchangeably (Appadurai, 1986).

In the event where rubbish fails to ‘move along’ (Gregson et al, 2007) the formal and informal channels, they will then be removed from domestic spaces to interstitial spaces (which are usually located within close proximity – e.g. bush, kerbside, gutter) through practices of fly-tipping. In turn, such a space becomes a treasure trove for itinerant scavengers to retrieve rubbish and to resell it to actors with buying power (e.g. buyers, scrap-dealers). This is exemplified below by Jide:

“I started picking (in the streets) before I became the number one destroyer...This job is important because if you buy an engine (broken) and don’t know the difference between iron, metal, and copper you will not be able to extract the value...You have to take the objects apart piece by piece, everything... You need to separate (aluminium from iron) so that you don’t end up selling something worth N50.00 for N10.00. We sell in kilos so if you don’t destroy (dismantle) it, the entire engine will be sold as iron even though there is more valuable aluminium within it.” (Jide, itinerant scavenger, on-site interview)

According to Jide, an experienced itinerant scavenger would possess the know-how in distinguishing the values of different materials. In this instance, aluminium is considered by buyers/scrap-dealers to be more lucrative compared to iron as it commands better exchange value. To maximise their resell value, itinerant scavengers must also engage in the work of disassembly (see Figure 1) by segregating the valuable materials from the ‘not-so-valuable’, and the former will in turn be reassembled by the buyers/scrap-dealers into a profitable commodity (Gregson et al, 2010). As will be witnessed in Theme 2, informal scavenging would soon come under threat due to the privatisation of waste management.

Scavenging in the Landfill: Embodied categorisation of value and social hierarchy

In October 2004, the Lagos State Government privatised their waste management practices through a new reform, which saw the establishment of the Private Sector Participants (PSPs). The PSPs attract private businesses who receive remuneration from LAWMA to oversee the management of waste. Consequently, this instantaneously criminalised practices of itinerant scavenging. In an attempt to avoid prosecution, many informal scavengers were forced to retreat to state-owned landfills to eke out a living. From the government standpoint, such a move is welcomed as the once informal scavengers can be ‘hidden away’ in the spaces of the landfills as part of the initiative to remove the unsightly and the undesirable other from the streets of Lagos. Unlike scavenging on the streets, retrieving materials in the landfill is a competitive business that requires an embodied know-how in categorising objects and their

values. This is explained by Efe below:

“If you come to the business of scavenging (in) the dump...just with my eye, I will tell you this is gold, and this is not gold. If you look at this ring, to the ordinary eyes, they don't know what it is. But this is white gold, I saw it from the dump, and I just picked it in seconds. I can sell it for N20,000 (£41) depending on the area. If I don't want to go far, if I want to sell it in Ajegunle, I can sell it for like N6,000 (£13) or N7,000 (£15).” (Efe, landfill scavenger, on-site interview)

Efe emphasises how the cultivation of embodied skills become integral to identifying and categorising objects in the landfill. Such corporeal engagement with objects is necessary in a space where scavengers jostle for valuable materials. According to Efe, engaging with the tactile qualities of objects is conducive to deciding the geographical locations where the value of his foraging can be maximised. Once a landfill scavenger acquires bodily and territorial competence, they are likely to ascend the social hierarchy within the landfill, and for the successful few, go on to become a buyer.

Conclusion

This paper sets out to conceptualise the act of rubbishing as more than a final act of disposal, rather it entails recursive processes of value creation and destruction that shape the social relations between different actors. While many studies assume the absencing of rubbish from everyday life, our study reveals how the conspicuous presence of rubbish (in the developing world) becomes interwoven into the fabric of social relations, as evident in the market formation of an informal economy and landfill hierarchy. Unlike previous studies, we find that rubbish does not always constitute the destruction of value; rather its status as a 'valuable' object is always coming-into-being and its candidacy as a commodity is variously contested.

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TABLE OF FINDINGS

Themes	Descriptions	Participant Data
<p style="text-align: center;">The Regime of Value and the Social Shaping of the Informal Economy</p>	<p>This theme explores how rubbish circulates and moves along informal channels. Here, rubbish assumes a recursive presence in the spaces of everyday life, both as a source of economic return as well as a problematic object. This theme reveals the formation of social relations surrounding practices of disposal that bypass the formal channel.</p>	
	<p>Precarious social tension between informal actors (itinerant scavengers) and law reinforcement agents [i.e. police, LAWMA, Kick Against Indiscipline (KAI)]. The latter are charged with policing the informal activities of scavenging.</p>	<p>“(If you) look at this rim, it is damaged but if I pick it (up from the gutter to be wheeled to the scrap-dealer), the police will accuse me of stealing it ...if you think of the stress (of dealing with the police)... we just pay them.” (Bayo, itinerant scavenger, in-depth interview).</p>

		<p>“Our challenges are KAI, LAWMA, and (the) Police...they make life unbearable for us. KAI’s challenge is that they know that we are paying tax to the Lagos State Government. The Lorries we use in loading our scraps are paying revenue, do you understand? And our boys (itinerant scavengers) before they go to work they will buy a sticker from the state government that allows them to push the carts...If they see a scavenger without one, they will arrest him, and you will pay a fine of N4, 500 (£16) before they will give you your cart back. As the State Government know that each Local Government has their own sticker, they have to leave us to do our business because they are collecting money for the sticker. We pay our taxes, but we still have challenges...although, we have already solved the problem with KAI for up to 10 years now” (Idris, scrap dealer, in-depth interview).</p>
	<p>The informal dealings between householders and informal actors (itinerant scavenger, junk artist, social enterprise)</p>	<p>“I picked up this odo (discarded mortar) on the street in ‘Alagumeji’ (slum). I am not sure why I picked it...but...it would be useful for my work. I use it as a base for my painting brush and board and nothing more.” (Peter, junk artist, in-depth interview).</p>

<p>Scavenging in the Landfill: the embodied categorisation of value and social hierarchy</p>	<p>This theme explores how regime of values is contingent upon embodied and material interactions. In this theme, we observe the competitive nature of scavenging in state-own landfill and how possessing an embodied know-how in categorising the value of rubbish can enable scavengers to ascend the social hierarchy in the landfill. We also witness how such competitive scavenging in landfills is structured along gendered line.</p>	<p>“The practice of scavenging does not only require the expenditure of physical energy. Knowing the right tactics can make one’s life easy in the dumpsite. It is always better to have a sack quarter-filled with brass, aluminium, and copper than a sack filled with iron. It is difficult to move in the dump because of the soft, sinking and sloppy surface of the dump” (Field Diary – 29/08/2015, shadowing a landfill scavenger).</p>
		<p>“The women cannot stand that because if they try to go for the metals, copper, it’s too expensive. They won’t see it because the men are stronger, they will guide them and collect it. The boys leave the plastic and some of the cans and the nylons for them” (Ade, landfill scavenger, on-site Interview).</p>
		<p>“We are friends. But when we are working, there is no friendship because it’s a jungle. The dump is a jungle where the lion goes for the big kill. After the lion feeds, the hyenas and the vultures can then come in. In the dump, the lions are the strong boys. They go for the truck, they scatter, and they fight. We fight ourselves to get it. After that, the ones who are not that strong, who don’t like struggling, would stay behind. These are the hyenas. Some women still come close but when the truck leaves, the women will be crying to the boys, ‘Egba mi Fun mi eleyi, Egba mi Fun mi eleyi’ (meaning please give me this, please give me this). So these are the vultures because they feast on the remnants, they wait to take the food off after the lion is satisfied” (Efe, landfill scavenger, in-depth interview).</p>

FIGURE 1: Itinerant scavengers dismantling broken engines in a scrapyard

