The mobilizations in Dakar leading up to and following the contentious elections of 1988 hurtled Senegalese youth onto the political radar as key losers in structural adjustment, as an important new electorate, and as the greatest potential threat to the urban peace. Although they had been a visible force in the Independence struggle and then in the crisis of 1968 (Zeilig and Ansell 2008), youth had not previously been seen as the force for opposition politics that they became in 1988. The so-called casseurs (breakers)—Senegal’s version of the “lost boys”—who rioted after the 1988 elections inspired great fear amongst the Dakarois (Cruise O’Brien 1996). Overall, these events, and then the violence surrounding the Mauritanian crisis in 1989, served as potent testimony to the sinister possibilities of youth agitation and contributed to the political crisis that closed out the difficult decade. The old social contract between the state, religious authorities, and Senegalese citizens was crumbling and the problem of youth was front and center. Economic crisis and its disproportionate impacts combined with the impasse in the education system to give young Dakarois a sense of hopelessness and abandonment by the state. Students—who had formerly been special beneficiaries of the employer state—began to “face an astonishingly bleak set of circumstances” (Zeilig 2007, 2).

In this context, the now-famous Set/Setal social movement was spawned, inspiring a new chapter in the relationship between the Dakarois and their city. Part of a wave of grassroots movements across the continent aimed at taming and managing the urban decay from structural adjustment and its
uneven impacts (see Bond 2005), Set/Setal earned youth in Dakar a prominent place in studies of African social movements and democratic change (see Mamdani and Wamba-dia-Wamba 1995). The movement retains a special, almost fetishized place in the memories of the Dakarois—“rather in the way that Parisians remember May 1968” (Cruise O’Brien 1996, 62). A key missing piece of this legacy, however, is the way Set/Setal came to be instrumentalized by the state and international funders in the city’s new, more intimate, low-tech community-based trash infrastructure.

In the early 1990s, Dakar’s mayor replaced the city’s garbage sector with a participatory infrastructure built upon the Set/Setal movement and, in doing so, devolved infrastructure onto labor. Drawing on the analysis in chapter 1 of the institutional arrangements that have emerged out of the volatile politics of garbage since Set/Setal, this chapter takes a closer look at what these transformations have meant for the young people caught in their sway. The analysis is concerned with how new arrangements for garbage management reconfigure everyday lives and embodied materialities of labor and, along the way, communities, political subjectivities, and relationships to the city. Specifically, it unpacks how the turn to participatory infrastructural formulas for garbage collection resculpted the spaces, values, and material burdens of labor for young men and women from the early 1990s up through the precarious Abdoulaye Wade years in the 2000s. In this way, the chief intervention of the chapter is in literally fleshing out the vital ecology of trash infrastructures through foregrounding social and bodily technologies in relation to the wider political-economic, discursive, and material worlds they compose. Vital infrastructures emphasize the junctions between material technologies and human bodies and the intersecting precarities they engender.

Austerity works through reconfiguring the relationship between the body, infrastructure, and the city. The first section of the chapter chronicles the emergence of participatory trash infrastructures as a key element of urban reform in the first major wave of structural adjustment. New infrastructural formulas for trash collection, through the formalization of the youth movement Set/Setal in the early 1990s, entailed novel configurations of socio-technical and material relations. As new relations of social reproduction, these participatory infrastructures subjected young men and women to new forms of state discipline. This analysis shares concerns with notions of “people as infrastructure” (Simone 2004b), in conceptualizing infrastructure as a distinctive ecology that incorporates human labor. This places people at
the heart of infrastructural systems and foregrounds the everyday negotiations and bonds that form the scaffolding for building the city. However, the analysis counters overly optimistic and immaterial portrayals of participatory infrastructures with a more nuanced analysis that is attentive to the symbolic and material burdens invoked by infrastructures built upon precarious socio-technical relations of disposability. As AbdouMaliq Simone (2012) points out, infrastructures expend people’s capacities. Drawing on the specific force of waste and decay, this analysis emphasizes how this works in two senses—both through disbursing human capacities, and also through using them up.

The second section delves deeper into the social technologies animated by the new participatory trash-collection system, through examining how infrastructure emerges from and reshapes urban social systems and relations of belonging and sociality. Youth and women were differentially enrolled in the displacement of social reproduction into the public sphere through participatory cleaning. Gendered discourses of waste and cleaning in Senegal facilitated women’s entrance into the municipal cleaning sector for the first time and conditioned the particularity of men’s and women’s experiences of embodied precarity. Cheap waste work provided contradictory spaces that at once instrumentalized gendered stigmas in the service of disposable labor, and also afforded strategic openings for political participation, new economic roles, and claims to authority and expertise.

As a space of formalized bricolage, trash work requires incessant maintenance and improvisation that conditions creative but dangerous relationships between workers and the decrepit machines they depend on. The third section of this chapter characterizes the precarity precipitated by continued flexibilization of labor and degradation in working conditions and equipment, as the sector was brought into the fold of (neo)liberal president Wade’s institutional politicking in the mid-2000s. Here I focus on the way that residents’ and workers’ bodies are enrolled into new infrastructural formulas by considering questions of embodiment, corporeality, and performativity in the space of dirty labor. The devolvement of infrastructure onto labor works to constitute certain bodies as waste. Together, the sections of this chapter locate laboring bodies and the communities that bind them at the core of new infrastructural formulas, illuminating the ways that new political economic conjunctures recompose socio-material relations, political subjectivities, and spaces of citizenship.

Told from the vantage point of my fieldwork in 2007–8, much of the
People as Infrastructure

Set/Setal

In the late 1980s, garbage piled up and putrefied in city streets and public spaces, forming a barometer of political crisis. After the garbage workers’ strikes fell on deaf ears and the government stopped paying the bill, the para-statal trash company sias ceased full operations in the late 1980s and was fully bankrupt and nonoperational by the early 1990s. Set/Setal emerged in sharp contrast to the violent events of 1988–89, as youth from many walks of life united to clean the city. Building on the cultural and sporting activities organized during the navétanes (summer vacation months), and incubated within the formal youth groups (ascs, gies, and gpfs) that were expanding beyond their original focus on sports, the movement involved an unprecedented level of popular mobilization. Young people began to organize their own systems for cleaning across diverse spaces of the city. In Mamadou Dione’s (1992, 42; my translation) words: “Since July 1990, the juvenile violence has transitioned into a kind of intense madness that remains an enigma. Under the dumbfounded gaze of the adults, these former hunters of Mauritians, groups of young people put into action their new creed: order and cleanliness.”

Through painting elaborate murals, organizing local events, and cleaning up their neighborhoods, youth aimed to cleanse the city in a literal sense—in terms of sanitation and hygiene—but also morally in a fight against corruption, prostitution, and general delinquency. They drew from both meanings of the Set/Setal expression: set, which means “clean,” “the state of being clean,” and setal, which is the act of rendering something clean. Stemming from its roots in the neighborhood youth groups, Set/Setal assembled a cosmopolitan community of youngsters who were more or less representative of their own community demographics. Because young people generally participate in neighborhood associations regardless of their educational status, ethnic group, religion, class, or gender, the key feature of the movement was belonging to a neighborhood, regardless of other societal divisions. Given the continuing educational crisis, students were key activists behind the movement.
In the context of political paralysis and, for many, feelings of economic and social powerlessness, Set/Setal was defined by mobility, action, and potency. Animated by popular music and bubbling into the streets in organic bursts of activity, the movement was generally fun, sometimes frenetic, and, more often than not, purposeful. As one participant explained, “It was exciting to be busy, to know what we had to do and do it.” Often, whole neighborhoods joined in. High unemployment, the growing informal economy, and school closures had only enhanced the vibrancy of Dakar’s already busy street life. Whether cooling off on a street bench in the shade, trying to make a buck selling food or wares on a street corner, or simply passing the day chatting and drinking tea with neighbors, Dakarois spend much of the day outside of their homes. Where the insides of homes are often stuffy and overcrowded, and household courtyards get squeezed out by new construction for growing families, the street offers space, opportunity, and social connection. This vibrant public street life made for easy recruitment into Set/Setal.

Just like their brothers, young women left their houses on the days scheduled for cleanup events and set out to reorder space with their own hands. One key lacuna in the research on Set/Setal to date concerns the important role of young women as eager participants and, in some cases, leaders in the movement. Their participation stemmed from two major factors: women’s increasing involvement in neighborhood management, whether through “female” sections of youth groups or through their own associations (gies or gpfs), and their connection to the work of cleaning in the home. Sweeping, cleaning, and dealing with household wastes are key elements of women’s duties as managers of domestic space in Senegal. Waste work in the home is thus naturalized as intrinsically women’s work. Women at the lower end of the household social hierarchy—according to age, ethnicity, and marital status—are usually reserved the dirtiest and most onerous waste duties. For this reason, young women were not only well equipped to help with cleaning the neighborhood, but also keenly motivated to be part of the solution to the garbage crisis that precipitated Set/Setal. The fact that they were seen as the “cleaners” in their households legitimized their place out and about cleaning with their male compatriots (see figure 2.1).

The elaborate Set/Setal murals painted all over Dakar—of which remnants can still be seen today—tell of a youth imaginary that strove to deconstruct the nationalist imaginary that had dominated since Independence (M. Diouf 1992; Roberts et al. 2003). Carefully documented in the book Set Setal, published by the ngo Environnement et développement du tiers
monde (Environment and Development Action in the Third World; ENDA), and explored in probing detail by Mamadou Diouf (1992, 1996, 2003), the murals and other efforts of the movement’s youth drew from continuously reformulated ethnic, religious, regional, and national identities. Celebrating such diverse political and cultural icons as Bob Marley, Nelson Mandela, Amadou Bamba, and Martin Luther King Jr.—sometimes all on the same wall—the murals signaled a departure from the Afro-pessimism gripping the times, and a move toward constructive aspirations for unity, peace, and a reorientation of values perceived as having gone astray. Through literally cleansing and writing over the space of the city—coloring it with faces, messages, and symbols, and even renaming city streets and neighborhoods—youth tried to take possession of the city, to reorder it with their own references and values (M. Diouf 1996). Their political messages elided references to the current political context and politicians, proposing a different idea of politics from that of the 1988 mobilizations. In Set/Setal, the
neighborhood replaced the national territory as “the canvas for elaborating the symbolic and imaginary” (M. Diouf 1996, 248).

Youssou N’Dour’s famous theme song, “Set,” captures the movement’s fervor for cleanliness and spirit of self-improvement:

Xale yaangiy jooy, ëllëg di wóorulo. Lii moy ma tiis ye . . .

Cleanliness, oh cleanliness. Be clean, pure in your spirit, clean in your acts . . .
Cleanliness, cleanliness, cleanliness, cleanliness, cleanliness, cleanliness. This [new] day will come . . . I’m watching for it
The children are crying, the future is uncertain. This makes me sad . . .

Purity was an especially prominent theme. In striving to achieve purity, Set/Setal youth sought to cleanse their delinquent, even debauched reputations alongside those of their neighbors, families, and politicians. This new vision of moral urban citizenship was underpinned by a critique of the social and moral degradation that was perceived to be afflicting Dakarois society. To attack this head-on, the youth organized efforts intended to purify what they saw as a “sick” society, invaded by tobacco, alcohol, prostitution, and violence (Enđa 1991, 45). In addition to painting messages explicitly aimed at improving community behavior, they also organized activities through their associations such as school programs, vocational training, and sporting events. They even set up “vigilance” committees like the so-called Mafia Boys of Niari Tali neighborhood (Enđa 1991). The Mafia Boys and the like were groups of young locals whose job was not only to help clean up the neighborhood, but also to provide a sort of neighborhood security force to counteract social dislocation and violence. Ideas of cleanliness in Set/Setal also often drew on values of faith and piety connected to Islamic traditions.

Set/Setal’s ordering efforts strove to clean up the local environment through education campaigns as well as operations aimed directly at trash and sanitation. Their educational activities were manifested in a preponderance of murals dedicated to exposing populations to the dangers of pollution and the origins of diseases like malaria and diarrhea, and outreach to sensibiliser (educate) local populations (see figure 2.2). Many groups also had explicitly environmental missions and framed their activities through
discourses of sustainability that were gaining traction internationally. Dirt and trash provided both a metaphor for the general filth and degradation that the movement saw in the city, and a practical way to combat those forces with clear results. The groups’ physical efforts to clean up their neighborhoods constituted an increasingly essential element of local environmental management, especially in those hard-to-reach neighborhoods with severe sanitation issues. At the same time, their educational efforts allowed them to assert their authority and expertise around the operations of the city.

Living in a world of worthless diplomas and little available work, Set/ Setal youth repudiated their social impotence and rejected their superfluity in the urban labor force. In refusing their position at the bottom of the social hierarchy, they departed from the gerontocratic traditions they were supposed to have inherited from times past. No longer waiting for permission or direction from their elders, youth took ownership of their neighborhoods. “Our neighborhood is ours,” stated many murals in diverse neighborhoods across Dakar. Through inhabiting new spaces and reordering the urban en-

![Figure 2.2. A Set/Setal mural aiming to educate about poor hygiene and disease, with a caption that reads “How we get diarrhea.” ENDA, Set Setal, des murs qui parlent. Reprinted with permission from ENDA Tiers Monde.](image)

**Figure 2.2.** A Set/Setal mural aiming to educate about poor hygiene and disease, with a caption that reads “How we get diarrhea.” ENDA, Set Setal, des murs qui parlent. Reprinted with permission from ENDA Tiers Monde.
vironment, they exercised their power and creativity and transformed their relationship to the city. In the words of Makhtar, a former Set/Setal participant and present-day trash worker: “We woke up, and we wanted to change our lives. We were tired of just sitting around, drinking tea, and waiting for things to happen. Who were we waiting for? Set/Setal was a revolution—it was the youth growing up and deciding to clean up their lives. It changed us, Dakar, and this country forever.”

Reacting to the dearth of safe, unsullied, or uncorrupted public space, Set/Setal youth insisted on their rights to the city by claiming and rehabilitating public space, not just with their presence and visibility, but with their labor. Central to this message was an insistence on the value of work and a rejection of the laziness and boredom they saw as epidemic. They cleared out spaces of leisure like soccer fields and playgrounds, built monuments, and planted gardens—emphasizing not only their right to occupy the city but also their ability to mold it to their own desires. This imaginary signaled a departure from previous eras where work was something doled out by elders and politicians. For Set/Setal youth, the city became a do-it-yourself workplace, where formal labor receded into history and opportunity presented itself around every corner (see figure 2.3).

Dakar’s New Trash Collectors

The participatory trash sector brought in these young men and women activists as new political clients and the fresh face of the nation and its orderly development. In a broader sense, the system responded to the exigencies of austerity through reconfiguring the relationship between labor and infrastructure. Prior to 1988, trash collection was fairly regularized. The trash workers of the parastatal company Sias were mainly adult men from outside of Dakar who had decent salaries and were unionized. However, the system had collapsed under the financial and political constraints of austerity, and by the early 1990s Set/Setal youth’s cleaning activities had become indispensable in filling the gaps. As previously mentioned, Dakar’s Socialist Party mayor, Mamadou Diop, fired the sector’s workers and incorporated Set/Setal volunteers (including many women) into a citywide participatory system in the early 1990s that lasted until 2001. This dramatic reconfiguration of the city’s trash infrastructure represented a shrewd political calculation by Mayor Diop that helped him to cope with shrinking budgets, flexibilize the labor force, and shore up political support in the face of intensified electoral competition—especially amongst the wildcard youth electorate.
A key function behind the new trash sector was the escape hatch it provided for the government in the face of the emerging labor movement of the SIAS workers. The previous system was not only much more expensive; it was also organized. Dissolving SIAS and replacing the workers with youth allowed Mayor Diop to remove the nuisance of union organizing in the trash sector. Although he offered to integrate former SIAS workers into the new system, in practice only a small minority made the transition (less than two hundred). Most preferred to leave the sector altogether given the pay cut and lack of benefits, or because they did not want to work with the youth. Others chose to leave or were impeded from joining because they were considered rabble rousers or were not members of the Socialist Party. In the words of a SIAS union activist regarding the workers’ treatment by Mayor Diop: “Personally, I knew that [he] wanted to erase us!” The activist believed that his application to work in the new sector was rejected because he was not a socialist.

Diop wanted to use the system not only as a forum for mobilizing support for his party, but also as a reward for his political clients. As mayor of Dakar,
he was keenly interested in shifting the trash sector jobs to the Dakarois. Although most of the Sias workers probably spent much of their lives in Dakar, many came from non-Dakarois families or had moved to the capital for these jobs. The Sias director, moreover, had shown a preference for hiring from within his family, his region outside of Dakar (Saint-Louis), or his own ethnic group (Toucouleur). The switch to hiring youth was a way of redirecting this pattern in the interest of Diop’s urban constituents.

The decision to hire youth was explicitly targeted, moreover, at this newly visible constituency of Dakar youth, as illustrated in the workers’ recollections. One worker looked back, stating: “Yes, there were political motivations because this was the beginning of the revolt of the youth. Because the youth wanted change. The authorities felt that these youth wanted change . . . and they really wanted to convince them that the system was still good.” Similarly, the ex-president of the Coordination des associations et mouvements de la communauté urbaine de Dakar (Federation of the Associations and Movements of the Dakar Urban Community; CAMCUD) and current department chief stated, “In 1988, there were all those troubles . . . and Mamadou Diop, when he saw all those youth, he said to them: ‘Don’t throw those stones.’ He judged well to jump [at the opportunity]. It was he who said that if you don’t occupy yourselves with the youth, they will occupy themselves with you. He was right.” Urban youth had come to represent a threat that needed to be contained and brought into the state’s hegemonic fold. In the context of a growing awareness of the undue burden they bore and their resultant volatility in the face of structural adjustment, Set/Setal offered the state the opportunity to channel—and thus pacify—the youth mobilizations that had been its greatest nightmare just a few years earlier. Negative associations with waste work served to discipline youth and, in so doing, diffuse the threat they might have posed to the nation. As restive, unemployed youth activists, they were dangerous, but as dirty workers on the state’s payroll, they could be more easily ordered and controlled.

Through orchestrating Journées de Propreté (Days of Cleanliness) across the city, Diop began to tap and scale up Set/Setal youth’s cleaning activities (M. Diop, n.d.). In addition to their neighborhood cleaning activities was added the job of collecting and loading garbage onto the dump truck and delivering it to the dump on the outskirts of the city. Initially volunteers, then paid day-labor rates (one to two U.S. dollars per day), the youth lacked all protections and benefits. Soon, Diop’s interest in the youth dovetailed with that of a powerful international actor: the World Bank. Besieged by
criticism of the dire social consequences of structural adjustment condi-
tionalities, the World Bank was beginning to consider policies that comple-
mented reform with more attention to social safety nets. The Dakar riots
of 1988–89—a shocking event in a place considered a model of peace and
development—had garnered the bank’s attention and led to this policy shift.
Though initially composed of volunteers and self-organized, the youth trash
sector was soon managed by a new World Bank–funded public works agency
modeled after Bolivia’s Emergency Social Fund, centered in Dakar, and coor-
dinated by the municipality.10 The World Bank–funded Agence d’exécution
des travaux d’intérêt public contre le sous-emploi (Public Works and Employ-
ment Agency; AGETIP) was formed in 1989 and rolled out in the 1990s in two
phases, with the goal of generating a significant number of mainly manual
and temporary jobs for unemployed youth.11 Part of a global paradigm shift to
a kinder, gentler, “revisionist” neoliberalism in the face of widespread social
dislocation (Mohan and Stokke 2000), the agency’s projects were officially
aimed at improving living conditions in poor urban neighborhoods, in order
to satisfy certain basic needs that had been eroded with adjustment policies
and, in so doing, to keep the social peace (World Bank 1992, 1997). The con-
text and motivation behind the AGETIP projects are laid out clearly in the
following excerpt from the World Bank’s Project Appraisal Report:

In 1988, Senegal faced serious economic and political problems. Despite
a decade of structural adjustment, economic growth had remained weak
throughout the 1980s (2.1 percent per year), and unemployment had in-
creased (official unemployment rates rose from 16 percent in 1976 to
30 percent in 1989). Unemployment was most severe in urban areas,
especially among the young (two-thirds of the officially unemployed
were 25 or younger). The public blamed the structural adjustment pro-
gram imposed by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund,
and France for the situation, and Senegal’s political parties exploited
public sentiment in order to build voter support. Then, in February
1988, the young urban unemployed took to the streets in violent ri-
ots and protest. . . . It soon became clear that existing government
agencies and public enterprises would not be able to deliver such pro-
grams speedily and efficiently. Another type of agency was needed. . . .
The World Bank and the government of Senegal worked closely to-
gether to find the solution that ultimately became AGETIP’s trade-
mark: delegated contract management. (World Bank 1997, 7)
The first in a wave of similar projects in Africa funded by the World Bank, agetip became a key partner in the youth-based trash sector in the early 1990s. A formal convention was signed in October 1995, ushering in the trash system that would replace that of sias (Chagnon 1996), and agetip was hailed as a success by the World Bank for being “lean and efficient” (1997, 16). By February 1996, the agency had executed more than 1,250 sub-projects and created more than 19,000 “person-years” of employment (World Bank 1997, 14–15). These estimates included the 1,500 trash jobs “created” by the new system. During this time, the unit of organization at the local level continued to be registered community organizations (gies) and youth received only temporary-contract benefits and day-labor pay rates. As compared with the previous system, in which the salaries often made up half of the total trash budget, the amount paid to the gies accounted for less than 20 percent of the new budget (M. Diop, n.d., 99). The ability to minimize state expenditure, tap youth labor, and independently manage World Bank funding at the municipal level were key features of the system for Mayor Diop as he fought to enhance his power vis-à-vis the national state through the trash sector (see chapter 1).

Through its official ngo-like organization, agetip was intended to avoid the politicization that was seen as running rampant in the public sector. And yet, doling out new jobs was explicitly based around a political calculus. Beyond the strategy to diffuse the increasingly mobilized youth and engage them as a low-cost, flexible labor force, formalizing Set/Setal provided a direct forum for the mayor to rally political support. Participants remember the Journées de Propreté as overt Socialist Party political rallies. The youth understood that Diop was recruiting people directly for his political electorate. One current zone controller from the Niari Tali neighborhood remembered the period as follows:

You had to do politics, by force. I remember it very well, there were celebrities, I think it was a French senator, and we were required to go to the welcome event. If not, you’d be fired that day. Because the system had become purely political. . . . It was politically motivated because if you wanted to be a part of the system, you had to be a Socialist first. . . . They gave us Socialist Party T-shirts, or else you wouldn’t be paid at the end of the month. . . . So even if you were affiliated with another party, you had to follow this rule to stay in the system.
Workers had their identification cards collected by their sector leaders, who had to show them to the politicians to prove that they were filling recruitment quotas for the Socialist Party. The formalization of Set/Setal thus functioned directly to reward and recruit new Socialist Party members from the ranks of the youth.

As the previous quote suggests, however, this political calculus was not just about votes; it was also about Mayor Diop’s philosophy and image, both at home and abroad. Diop was a celebrity politician who as mayor was very active in international development dialogues and networks. He mobilized the Set/Setal–based trash system as an important demonstration of his commitment to youth and to an ideal of participatory citizenship—two issues that were taking center stage in debates about African development and democracy. When interviewed for this research, Diop went so far as to repudiate the idea that the movement was at all grassroots and claimed to have invented Set/Setal himself. He said, “No, it wasn’t spontaneous; it was generated, part of our plan. I was elected mayor and there was garbage everywhere in Dakar and we didn’t have the financial means. After some reflection, I said to myself, why not engage the population [of Dakar]? We went down to the neighborhoods and discussed it with the youth. They each started to clean their own neighborhood. It’s like that that it began. It was deliberate.” He went on to pronounce the participatory system as the ideal system through which to clean the city and engage its residents. He critiqued the formalized system that followed on its heels: “[Today’s workers are] simple employees! Whereas, the idea behind Set/Setal was voluntary participation. It was the people that came to participate. The new system makes it so that the workers are paid by the month and that’s the spirit now. You no longer feel the engagement of the people, but before, in the neighborhoods, the people got together on Saturday and Sunday to clean. The youth now are paid . . . formalized . . . it’s not good.”

Mayor Mamadou Diop won some acclaim in international development circles through the new trash system. In a “best practice” case study for a prominent international NGO, the system was credited with “beginning to restore healthy and sanitary conditions . . . It has already increased garbage collection coverage by 15 percent, created approximately fifteen hundred jobs, and proven to be more efficient than systems in the past” (ICLEI 1997). It was also celebrated for its remedy of a “major weakness” of the previous system: the lack of engagement by local people (M. Diop, n.d.).
even gained Diop and some of his most active youth notoriety in various international conferences. One trash worker from Médina looked back fondly on his experience as part of a youth delegation at the Global Forum on the theme of “Cities and Sustainable Development,” held in Manchester in June 1994: “[The system] even won us medals at the national and international levels! We were knighted with the National Merit Badge. Me, I remember, I did England—Manchester—with the Global Forum . . . just to talk about the [youth-based trash] system!”

In his memoir written about his experience as mayor, *My Combat for Dakar*, Diop (n.d., 70) hails the Set/Setal trash system as one of the most “exceptional and exemplary” accomplishments of the city of Dakar under his leadership. He also describes it as a key strategy toward “the construction of democratic urbanism,” rooted in principles of decentralization, good governance, and community participation. In my interviews with Diop in the late 2000s, he waxed nostalgic about the system, calling it his greatest pride as mayor and insisting that the issues of youth and environment were—and remain—concerns close to his heart. He compared his Set/Setal system with the more formalized system under Wade with dismay, emphasizing the more communal approach as not just more budget savvy, but also an opportunity to draw on and foster urban civility:

Well, now they [the Wade government] pay a lot [to clean the city]. For me, with 200 million [CFA] per month I managed to clean the city and the region [of Dakar]. And now they are almost to a billion [CFA] and it is not clean. Thus beyond even the system of management, there is the participation of the population and their cleanliness—cleaning [the city] starts there. People . . . have to do their share of cleaning, to be engaged in maintaining the communal areas. You clean your house but you throw your refuse in the street—that isn’t good! It should be understood that one must be clean but also that one must also take part in management of the street. It is a whole new behavior—the education of the citizen. It is important because here it is said that the municipality has to deal with it. . . . That’s not the case.

Urban infrastructure was, for Diop, to be much more than just a technical system. It was to be a social system built on an entrepreneurial moral urban politics.
The advent of participation in the garbage sector was about more than budgetary constraints or a simple calculus for how to shore up party votes. The participatory trash sector aimed to foster a whole new ethic of citizenship through building a more intimate infrastructure. The intimacy of that new infrastructural system seized upon the moral urban politics that had animated Set/Setal and claimed those resources for the city. It forged a public service in which the resources previously supplied by the state were to be mobilized by workers, families, and communities. The rest of this chapter aims to flesh out how that transition was lived, experienced, and embodied by the young people caught up in that new infrastructural system—or how it was forged through social relations of belonging and their moral architectures. It begins with the transition from Set/Setal to the participatory trash system, and carries through the precarious years that followed under Abdoulaye Wade before the workers were able to reverse these trends through labor organizing.

Transitioning from cleaning up their neighborhood trash voluntarily as part of an exciting youth-driven movement to being paid low wages as the city’s trash collectors was not automatic. As mentioned above, the Set/Setal activists had mobilized their communities in an explicit rebuke of the state in the wake of the political crisis of 1988. Fed up with what they saw as the neglect by politicians of the real needs of their communities and disappointed in the failure of the opposition party in the elections of 1988, these youth had rallied communal support in an exercise in self-management and autonomy from the state. Although most were relieved to have access to employment, even at day-labor rates, it took significant effort for them to reconcile the shift from activist to trash worker—especially for young men. This group of social juniors had to contend with not only poor salaries and dangerously precarious working conditions but also all of the negative associations of dirty labor.

Because the new trash collection force was built upon the Set/Setal movement, which was a cosmopolitan movement that drew from all sectors of Dakar’s social sphere, this cross section of upstanding, even educated youth had never dreamed of working in garbage as their profession. The trash workers before them had been considered outsiders, not true Dakarois. As a trash-sector leader put it: “Before us this work was often done by people
who were not Senegalese. In the beginning it was the Bambaras . . . then the Toukouleurs. . . . In the beginning, no one [in Dakar] wanted to do it because it was seen as unclean and unhealthy to work with trash.” In his view, the sias workers were not even Senegalese citizens, let alone Dakarois, by virtue of the fact that they came from other regions of the country. At that time, garbage work was extremely negatively viewed, with garbage collectors described derogatorily as buujumaan¹⁴ and seen as crazy, dirty, or even criminals.

Most young men I interviewed talked about being embarrassed at first when they began to work in the sector. They covered their faces to avoid being recognized and some refused to work in their own neighborhoods. These were notable differences from the time of Set/Setal when, in a spirit of patriotic civic duty, anyone and everyone contributed to cleaning their own neighborhoods. Getting paid—however little—to be a trash worker was altogether different, as recalled by one trash worker in the Médina neighborhood:

> It was not at all certain that the youth of Dakar would accept working in household garbage. That was the first challenge. When we signed the first contract, they asked everyone there to come work in the trash sector. Well, there were some who accepted and others who refused. Among those who accepted, there were those who hid their face in order to be able to do trash work. Because this was not a job for a youth! At that time, for youth, this was really not an acceptable job. They had girlfriends, neighbors, and everyone . . . it was out of the question to collect trash where you lived. If you lived in the Médina, you would prefer to collect trash in Grand Dakar. If you lived in Grand Dakar, you went to Pikine. This was to protect these guys. But after some time, the youth saw that this was a job like any other job and there was nothing to hide. So, there was a revolution. At a certain point, all of the youth wanted to work in garbage.

The term youth, in this passage, refers to young men and the particular implications of working in the new municipal trash system for the young men of Set/Setal. However, this stigma was different for women than men, due to cultural associations of domestic cleaning duties as women’s work, as will be discussed in the next section.

As much as youth were, at first, suspicious of the state’s involvement, it
lent legitimacy to their work from the perspective of community members, and they couldn’t help but be proud to be key players in the big production of the Journées de Propreté. The mayor himself made frequent personal visits to these events, and he often provided the youth with snacks, sound systems playing popular music, and T-shirts, in addition to brooms and wheelbarrows. Competitions were held and rewards given for the cleanest neighborhood at the end of the day. Mayor Diop constantly appealed to youth’s responsibility toward their city and the value of their entrepreneurial spirit. In the end, the excitement surrounding the events and the sheer pressure young men felt to exploit the opportunity for work to support their families amid conditions of economic crisis outweighed the work’s stigma. The opportunity to gain some political voice and connections through the sector, despite their fears from 1988, moreover, was a compelling reason to stay in the sector and watch what would unfold.

Wearing the Pants

“That day was one of my first days on the job. The mayor had brought in some trucks and we were doing the collection. I wore pants that day, so I could climb onto the truck. My family saw me leave the house and said, ‘What . . . ?’ But I just left. That day I rode on the top of that truck all the way to Mbeubeuss [the dump]. Was I scared? Yes, but I was also proud.” This quote is from a woman who was one of hundreds who, in the early 1990s, donned trousers and baseball caps and, in plain view of their shocked families and friends, climbed onto garbage trucks in order to collect their neighborhood trash. An integral element of Set/Setal, these women were transformed alongside young male activists into the city’s low-paid trash collection force. In most zones, early on in the new system, women trash workers did exactly the same tasks as men, including riding on the trash trucks for the collection. At first, the trucks were open top, not the rear-opening conventional trucks we associate with the job today. Many women were wearing pants for the first time in public, a nontraditional style of female dress that enabled them to more easily conduct the work (especially mounting the trucks), but which could have been controversial at the time. Wearing pants, baseball caps, and gloves, armed with shovels, rakes, and whatever other scant materials were provided, these women were, according to my respondents, quite a sight to see out in the public space. The following account from another trash worker who eventually became a section manager is illustrative:
At the beginning, people watched us and were surprised to see us working in the sector as women and exclaimed: “That one’s a woman!” It’s only because of my earrings that they recognized me, because I would wear sunglasses and a head wrap, then on top of it a baseball cap and all of that with the goal of protecting myself from the dust. With this outfit, it was difficult for people to distinguish the sex of the worker.

Before, the men had a complex and were bothered about working in trash, but with the integration of women, that disappeared. Eventually, I felt proud when I climbed onto the trash-collecting truck with my work clothes on. Even more than all of that, there was a sort of unity and complicity between us, the workers of Parcelles Assainies. We didn’t have a complex about the work—that really was more of a problem for the men.

A pioneering group of women in the central Dakar neighborhood of Gueule Tapée earned the nickname Les Amazones (The Amazons) from their colleagues for their strength and fearless dedication to their new jobs. When I spoke with these women, they recalled with intense pride the new radical spaces they had occupied and their mastery of these material practices. Contrasting trash labor with another form of stigmatized, “dirty” labor outside of the home—prostitution—they emphasized on countless occasions the upstanding moral qualities of “earning their bread with the sweat of their brow” and how much it meant to them to be able to work to support their families. Les Amazones of Gueule Tapée were often invoked many years later as key personalities in the sector’s exceptional origin story. As such, women workers defended their foundational contributions toward building the new garbage system.

Despite the radical nature of some of their new labor practices, women’s participation in Set/Setal and transition into the participatory trash sector was facilitated by their connections to domestic waste management and the stigma associated with dirty work. In contrast to their male compatriots, who had not previously borne the brunt of associations with waste, for women the job was not a new or mysterious one. They dealt with household garbage every day and were accustomed to the stigma of the work. In the words of a male section manager:

The people closest to this problem are women. These are the same women who sweep\(^5\) at home so they don’t have any complexes about trash. A man who sweeps, well, that’s rare. In general, it’s women.
was difficult [to get the men to work], but we succeeded all the same in getting rid of their complexes to have them work in the system. Now each day there are people [including men] who come to see if they can work in the trash sector.

As can be seen in this and many similar accounts, in the beginning, women were much less ashamed of working in trash publicly than men. In contrast with men's embarrassment about being recognized in their communities, women had no qualms—they were often the first to climb onto the trucks and refused to hide their identities.

One of my respondents in the Parcelles Assainies neighborhood, Aissatou, had started working in the new trash sector through her local youth group in 1992. With a small baby at home, she joined the sector in the hopes that it would help her to care for her family since she had quit school and couldn't find work. Sixteen years later on the job, she recalled how proud she had been at the beginning. Aissatou and her female colleagues, moreover, had quickly understood how important their work was to the effectiveness of the overall system. She described how their participation, alongside men, in the formalized trash system actually encouraged the men, dampening their embarrassment and enhancing community acceptance:

At the beginning, we [women] were separated and placed as surveyors [on the ground]. . . . Then after a while, we noticed that the people acted differently toward women and men [collectors]. We decided that it was necessary to put a woman in each truck as a “security guard” to do the collection with the men. . . . Because if a woman who came to dump her garbage saw another woman in the truck, she would re-examine her behavior compared with how she would have acted with men. By this time male collectors were abused, tired. It was seen that integrating the women in the trucks was going to facilitate the work of the men. Thus, we became “security guards” and went with the trucks to Mbeubeuss [dump].

What’s interesting here is the sense of moral authority extended to Aissatou and her colleagues, owing to their perceived expertise around waste and cleaning. This expertise was called upon as an important resource for the new sector, to ensure its smooth running and forge the required intimacy with the communities served. Women’s “intrinsic” commitment to cleaning and authority over cleaning practices was thus constructed as a moral
architecture on which to build the participatory infrastructure. Their more intimate ties to their colleagues and to household women—the key interface between the home and street collection systems—would facilitate the community collaboration that was now at the heart of the new system. Drawing directly on the moral paradigms advanced by Set/Setal, the new trash system employed community policing and collaboration as the fundamental grease to lubricate the system’s gears.

Gendered subjectivities deeply shaped trash workers’ perceptions and experiences of the new material labor practices and community spaces mobilized by these jobs. For men, although their participation in Set/Setal cleaning activities was legitimized because it was seen as an altruistic deed for their communities, the implications of the work changed with its professionalization. Once they were paid, they faced the stigma attached to being a trash worker and doing the dirty work—in all of its feminized connotations. As we shall see in chapter 4, men have demanded respect for their trash labors in the difficult years to follow through explicitly defending the work’s value in religious terms. For women, conversely, the professionalization of Set/Setal actually enhanced their standing because of its lack of gender differentiation: they did all of the same tasks as men did and got paid for it. In this respect, their occupation of the same roles as men, and the relatively equal consideration of their labor in relation to men’s, can be seen to have appreciated the value of women’s cleaning labor in the period following Set/Setal. The system acted as a platform for women to occupy new roles as financial breadwinners, often for the first time, and to extend their domain of moral authority into the public sphere.

Women seized the trash jobs in order to expand their economic and political influence. By the 1990s, though there remained significant barriers to women’s participation and power in the political process, they had made important headway in gaining visibility and representation. In the context of increased electoral competition in the 1990s, women were becoming increasingly important as voters and political activists and their neighborhood associations had become a dynamic forum for mobilizing voters and placing specific interests on the political agenda (Beck 2003; Callaway and Creevey 1994; Creevey 1996; Gellar 2005). Through funneling the early trash-collection activities into political rallies centered on neighborhood associations and offering the trash jobs as a form of political patronage, Mayor Diop aimed to transform women activists into political clients and thereby update the image of the local state. Though some described the recruitment
of women—and women’s organizations—at these rallies as more for their “applause” and votes than their leadership, in other areas they were key leaders. In certain neighborhoods, women’s associations were the central body around which the trash collecting activities were managed and their leaders the new sector’s on-the-ground coordinators. The Set/Setal–based trash system thus enhanced women’s visibility and provided them with what seemed to be a direct entrée into politics. In exchange for their participation in these political rallies, women received jobs in the shrinking public sector, a public forum for their activities, and, in theory, access to the mayor’s office.

The particular history of women’s emergence in the trash sector makes clear the paradoxical spaces that may be opened up by participatory infrastructural systems. On the one hand, it shows that discourses naturalizing gendered responsibility for dirty work can be deployed to further entrench women into dirty forms of labor built upon naturalized connections to waste and impurity. At the same time, it shows how women’s connection to waste is reconstituted in different settings, allowing them to gain some political voice within this strategic essentialism. Women’s connection to cleaning in the home facilitated their role as key participants in a gender-radical movement through which they seized on new modes of engaging with the city. This challenges the historical legacy of Set/Setal as a male youth movement and raises some key questions as to where young women fit into understandings of youth politics in Senegal and beyond. The trash case thus illustrates the complex implications of the simultaneous liberalization of the economic and political fields during this time and the shifting terrain on which young men and women are constituted as political subjects. The gendered implications of the crisis of social reproduction and the extension of domestic “life’s work” (Meehan and Strauss 2015; Mitchell, Marston, and Katz 2004) into the public sphere through participatory labor can condition the production of new, sometimes surprising, political subjectivities.

The next section will examine what the advent of participatory waste infrastructure has meant for the bodies of laborers doing the dirty work over the long period of entrenched precarity that was to last into the mid-2000s.

**Salvage Bricolage**

The participatory trash sector instituted by Mayor Mamadou Diop continued until the early 2000s, when a new mayor came to power with the wave of gains by the opposition party that brought Abdoulaye Wade into the presi-
dency. The trash collection system at the heart of Mayor Diop’s municipal government was eliminated, beginning a long series of transformations in the institutional arrangements for garbage over the next decade. Though some improvements accrued for the workers in certain areas during this time, most continued to suffer under extremely precarious working conditions that had become even more acute as the collection equipment finally faltered in the face of increased urban growth, consumption, and discard. This period of politicking and neglect solidified trash work as a space of formalized *bricolage* which conditioned new but often risky relationships between garbage *bricoleurs* (residents and workers), and the waste systems they managed.

Aside from a brief “golden era” from 2003 to 2005, when the workers were officially hired and extended benefits by the international company *ama*, their labor was again rendered temporary and insecure when Wade revoked the contract in July 2006. During the early to mid-2000s, the trash workers began to organize through their union and vociferously demand better working conditions through strikes and other measures to get the state’s attention. By the time I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork in 2007–8, the system’s dysfunction was acute and most people were characterizing the trash sector as in crisis. Though increasingly more organized and audacious with their striking, the workers found themselves in a state of limbo as their cries fell on deaf ears. No new equipment had been provisioned for some time and no new workers were hired, despite Dakar’s explosive growth. Everyone, including the workers and the residents, found themselves waiting for what would come next.

**Neighborhood Disorder**

Much of the burden of insufficient waste services fell onto household members, as the relations of social reproduction were respatialized and the everyday duties constituting life’s work were placed more firmly on neighborhoods and, especially, household women. I spent a lot of time during this period chatting with women about how they managed with spotty collection caused by the system’s insufficiencies and the workers’ strikes that were becoming increasingly frequent. I found household women across Dakar to be intensely preoccupied with the vexing daily question of where their waste would go. They were eager to talk to me about garbage and the elaborate systems they had developed to mitigate the risks it could pose to their families. Managing household garbage is a thorny task in Senegal that is exacerbated by its
composition, the warm Senegalese climate, and most households’ inability to afford or access adequate storage and disposal materials. In contrast to the garbage of more affluent countries, which is primarily composed of paper, plastics, and other nonputrescent items, garbage in Senegal comprises a significant amount of organic matter such as fish guts, animal entrails, and plant refuse, which can get rank and dangerous fast.

The specific content of everyday garbage varies by neighborhood and by the socioeconomic profile of the community, but richer households in Dakar generally produce a greater volume of garbage overall and their garbage contains more paper and plastic. For poorer families, everything of possible value is reused. Plastic water bottles become containers in which to sell homemade juices like bissap and bouye.20 Newspapers can be used to wrap fattaya (fried fish or meat fritters) or as starter for old-fashioned cooking stoves. Organics may be separated out for domestic animals or urban livestock. The cost-conscious will choose glass soda bottles over cans and return them for a deposit. Most households struggle to dispose of a few problem items like used cooking oil and ash from charcoal stoves. Big families and those butchering their own chickens and goats have particular challenges. Meticulous sweeping practices—in the daily battle to keep the encroaching Sahelian sand from dusting salons and messing neat courtyards—mean that a considerable amount of refuse is simply sand. Though sand can help to slow the stench and rate of decomposition when mixed with organics, garbage sacks can become heavy fast and damage compactors, frustrating the disposal process.

In times past, accumulating garbage could simply be kept at a distance from the house so as not to pose a nuisance, but Dakar’s increasing density and vertical growth have made this a less viable means of storing trash until the next collection day. Most families cannot afford trash bags or cans and instead use materials such as baskets, rice sacks, plastic bins, or flimsy plastic grocery bags to transport the waste to its storage place or the arriving truck. In most neighborhoods, the custom is not to leave the garbage in anonymous piles for later collection by the trucks but involves the storage of garbage by households and a handoff between household members (usually young women) and collectors on pickup day (see figure 2.4). This is a key building block of the intimacy in the sector: collectors and residents know each other personally and often communicate at the moment of collection. Trucks signal their route with loud, rhythmic honking as they slowly move through the neighborhood. Breakdowns, traffic, and other unforeseen cir-
cumstances make their arrival time unpredictable, and so “catching” the garbage truck on its rounds becomes a key challenge of accessing disposal services. If a household misses the horn for some reason, this could mean waiting a few more days before the truck comes again. In tough times with little service, it was not unusual to see young women chasing trucks out of desperation, with garbage in tow. After periods of trash crisis and striking, the rhythmic honking offered strange relief to exhausted residents at their wits’ end over what to do with their waste.

In theory, the garbage truck is supposed to make the collection rounds approximately five to six times a week. In practice, during the dysfunction of the Wade years, the truck would only pass through certain neighborhoods a couple of times a week and, in the case of workers’ strikes or vehicle break-

FIGURE 2.4. The point of collection in sicap Liberté 1. Signaled by the honking of the garbage truck, household women hand over their household trash in reusable buckets or bags to collectors who deposit the waste into the truck. Photo courtesy J. W., 2017.
down, sometimes not for a week or more. With reduced service, household women were forced to resort to less-than-optimal strategies to eliminate the waste and protect their families from pollution, including reducing, storing, burying, or dumping their garbage. A favorite solution from times past, burying had become less and less tenable as appropriate land diminished and, in many neighborhoods, as flooding became more frequent due to unusual rain and urban development patterns. In many cases, storing and burying in backyards precipitated intense friction between neighbors and arguments over property lines. Dumping was often people’s only way to rid their homes of garbage. They had the option of finding dumping spots or paying private charrette (horse-cart) operators to dump their garbage out of sight. Enterprising charrette drivers flocked into Dakar from rural farming areas during garbage crises and charged sometimes 10,000 CFA (roughly twenty U.S. dollars) or more to a single household to cart away a load of garbage. During this time, empty lots, sewage canals, beaches, and roadsides were increasingly used as dumping grounds and the poorest neighborhoods became the most encumbered by garbage and its insidious risks. Market spaces were particularly problematic. Street markets—whether for clothing, food, or other items—are high-density refuse-generating events. The trash from street peddling and intense pedestrian traffic builds up and, by the end of market day, clogs already-hard-to-navigate sidewalks and city streets. The periodic trash crises left many spaces of the city littered and foul-smelling, periodically subjecting certain residents to the noxious consequences of waste, pollution, and disease.²¹

The infrastructural solutions developed by households were highly creative and well calibrated to the “toxic vitality” of waste (P. Harvey 2016). One woman named Mariama with whom I spoke at length about her waste-management challenges in the neighborhood of HLM Fass described herself as “obsessed with trash! I’m constantly thinking about what we’ll do next, where it will go, and how we can stay clean.” A fifty-five-year-old mother who ran a small vegetable stand, Mariama had three daughters who helped her to manage the household garbage. Their humble, two-bedroom home had been built in 1962 as affordable housing for civil servants. Though they were lucky enough to own the property, she and her husband had never been in the financial position to expand the house, and lived there with their six grown children and occasional other relatives. Like most of the working-class families in their increasingly dense neighborhood, the living quarters were cramped. With this many mouths to feed and progressively less and less
outdoor space, trash management was a worrisome daily challenge. When I asked her what they did when the trash truck didn’t come, she didn’t hesitate before giving me a day-to-day rundown:

On the first day, we separate out the rice, vegetables, and banana peels and feed these to the goat. For the fish remains, we lay them out in the sun on plastic bags to dry out. The second day, we wrap up the old fish remains and bag it with the sand and plastics swept from the house. They sit out in the back, where there are no windows on the house. Day three gets harder because the bag begins to stink and we’ve already got many more remains piling up. Then we tie up the garbage again if we have enough plastic bags and move it out under the neighbor’s tree. Usually my neighbors are doing the same by that time but we have to make sure it’s OK. If we get to day four or five, then we’re really in trouble and have to think about where to dump without making anyone mad. It’s hard work for my girls because sometimes they have to walk far and often people yell at them. The saga begins again the next day until, finally, word gets around that the truck is coming. Alhamdulillah [thanks be to God].

Mariama’s finely tuned strategies were aimed, in essence, at slowing, stifling, or boxing the dangerous internal processes of waste’s decomposition. The longer the strike, the more unruly and difficult-to-control these ordinary waste materials became.

Neighborhood women were also well attuned to the challenges faced by the garbage workers. Since the system’s founding in Set/Setal, many trash workers still collected their own neighbors’ garbage. Years of dealing with insufficient materials, remuneration, and service had inspired detailed coordinating systems between households and trash collectors in many neighborhoods. Many workers would give their communities advance warning before the truck passed or warn them about breakdowns. To ease the struggle with collection delays, neighborhoods and workers would sometimes agree on collective dumping spots that the truck would pass as soon as it was up and running. Given the relationships between workers and their neighborhoods and an awareness of the difficulties faced by the workers, residents were often keen to support the workers in whatever way they could. At the least, this meant coordinating with the workers so as to smooth the collection process; at the most, it meant expressing solidarity with the workers’ strike campaigns through coordinated dumping events (see chapter 4). The
respatialization and devolution of life’s work, in this way, can be seen to have precipitated more intimate management relations between households and their waste, as well as more intimate ties between waste workers and the families they served.

**Formal Bricoleurs**

The garbage workers faced profoundly precarious working conditions during this time. Years of institutional wrangling, poor salaries, and degrading equipment quickly dashed the optimism and enthusiasm they had felt at the dawn of the new system. Those who found other opportunities quickly got out, but most workers had little choice but to continue to collect garbage for what little opportunity it still represented, a professed “love of garbage,” and an avowed commitment to keeping their communities clean. The period from 2005–9 was particularly grueling. In the face of rapid urbanization and, with it, a massive expansion of the city and its garbage challenges, combined with an institutional management vacuum that left the sector paralyzed, they found themselves laboring under increasingly difficult working conditions. Still without formal contracts or benefits (including health care, sick leave, and vacation), most workers cleaned streets and collected garbage with only minimal equipment, if any at all (see figure 2.5).

During the weeks in 2007 that I spent with the sweepers and collectors of the Niari Tali neighborhood, life’s normal challenges combined with delays in payment to make life extremely difficult for the sector’s twenty-odd workers. Many workers lost their homes as a result of payment irregularities, and many spoke of strain and dislocation in their family lives due to the stresses on the job. One street sweeper, Ahmed, was evicted from his apartment because of late rent payments. With nowhere to live, his wife had moved back to the country with her parents while Ahmed slept on the floor of his cousin’s apartment. Unable to see his wife regularly and ridiculed by her family for not being a good provider, Ahmed’s marriage eventually failed and he found himself lonely and disgraced. When a gastric infection left him compromised at work, he went further into debt, borrowing money from colleagues to see a doctor. He described his situation to me as “completely ordinary. We all live like this. What kind of existence is this?”

Workers’ basic pay had stagnated at around 60,000 CFA per month (about US$120 per month) in 2007. Combined with steadily increasing work burdens, stigmatization, the rising cost of living in Dakar, and, for many, extensive family obligations, they found themselves struggling to survive with no
means to envision their futures. Once celebrated as youth for their vitality, energy, and innovative citizenship practices, young men instead languished in their inability to graduate into adulthood. Unable to properly support their relatives and often powerless to establish their own homes and families, many felt trapped as social juniors, even though they may have been well into their thirties or forties.22 Ahmed and others believed, moreover, that the designation of youth had become a disciplinary ploy by the authorities to keep the sector informal and exploitative. He explained, with frustration: “Yes we are young and that makes us proud of our energy and ideas. But they use it as an excuse not to pay us normal wages!”

Many women also left the sector as soon as they got married or had children but a good proportion stayed in the system, with no other choice than to squeeze all the opportunity they could from these rare jobs (see figure 2.6). Though they had been transferred out of the more “physical”

FIGURE 2.5. A trash worker in Niari Tali during one of the long periods in 2007 without pay. Author’s photo, 2007.
duties—like collecting on the trucks—into street sweeping, women workers faced particular strains throughout this precarious period due to such challenges as lack of bathroom access and child care. Their positions, moreover, became increasingly insecure as the jobs became more sought after with the progressive deterioration of the job market in Dakar. Women workers’ perceived inferiority as household breadwinners was sometimes invoked to legitimize replacing them with men. Quite in contrast to the legend of Les Amazones, at these moments women were described as being poorly suited to the tough demands of the work. As we shall see in chapter 3, the firing of all of the female trash workers in the neighborhood of Yoff during a round of downsizing was justified as making room for the “real” breadwinners: male heads of household. Soon after, these women were conscripted into a purely voluntary, NGO-led, horse-drawn-cart trash-collection experiment that was framed through a discourse of empowerment.

*Figure 2.6.* Women trash workers from the Niari Tali neighborhood at their usual hangout in the median. Author’s photo, 2007.
The material practices of the degraded labor process mattered profoundly for the bodies of the workers doing the dirty work. They bore the brunt of this labor-intensive infrastructure through the onerous physical demands of the work itself, associated diseases (including injury, heat exhaustion, and illness from exposure to microbes), and the stigma of laboring in filth. Most wore tattered work clothes and open-toed shoes like plastic “jelly” sandals, and many gathered garbage with their bare hands. Generally lacking protective clothing like masks and gloves and provisioned only with minimal instruments of collection like brooms and wheelbarrows, the workers stood vulnerable to an array of harms. An outbreak of tuberculosis in 2007 was but one dramatic expression of their disproportionate burdens of disease.

Both male and female workers faced the challenges of poor, degrading equipment and the incessant maintenance activities they required. The material intimacy between filth and labor actualized not just the relations between households and bodies, but also those between workers and the machines they depended on. The central pillar of the material technology was the garbage truck, but the trucks were a precariously weak link in the chain. Many, if not most, trucks arrived in Senegal from Europe used and already in disrepair, and once put to work in Senegal they faced the wear and tear caused by poor roads, lack of maintenance, and overcharged loads. One look at the collection fleet illuminated the serious challenges posed by this rickety, dilapidated material scaffolding (see figure 2.7). At any point in time, at least a third of the collection fleet was broken down, and many of the trucks were used despite not being fully functional. The disintegration of the infrastructure’s steel precipitated incessant expert labors of salvage bricolage.

Like bricoleurs all over the continent, the workers had no choice but to transform someone else’s rubbish infrastructure into new utility. These material practices signaled the ingenuity required by incessant relations of maintenance, fixing, and making do—as well as their inherent dangers (see Graham and Thrift 2007; Mavhunga 2013b). From tinkering with or disabling the mechanical arms and crushers to physically maneuvering broken mechanical parts, the collectors were infrastructure hackers, navigating and manipulating the system’s steel architecture through fastening their own bodies to the trucks’ dysfunctional steel plates. The bodies and the machines conformed to each other’s labor as the workers employed their own arms as artificial limbs for the ailing trucks. The dangers of such intimacy were cleanly written on the bodies of the collectors and their scars, bruises, even missing limbs.
Amadou and Saliou had worked together as collectors in the Grand Yoff neighborhood for some time when I met them in 2007. They were experts in the particularities of the route, the “mentalities” of the people in the neighborhood, and they were no strangers to the strenuous and sometimes dangerous conditions of working with broken-down old trucks. They knew where people dumped, the homes with potentially the most-valuable materials, and the ever-present risks posed by the trash compactors. Amadou told a sobering story of one day when the compactor malfunctioned just as they had finished loading a large pile of garbage left from the weekly market. The machine jerked unexpectedly as it compressed a bag that apparently contained a broken lamp, shattering the glass and spraying it at Amadou. He turned away as soon as he could but not before a large shard embedded in his arm. The blood was everywhere. Not wanting to leave Saliou to finish the route on his own, he kept collecting but by the time the day was over,

**FIGURE 2.7.** A trash worker in Niari Tali who detailed many of the challenges he faced working with rickety equipment. Author’s photo, 2007.
his arm was throbbing and swollen. Amadou eventually had his uncle remove the shards and bandage the arm but he couldn’t afford to see a doctor. Though Amadou was back at work the next day, Saliou did all the heavy lifting and through teamwork they were able to get through the difficult period. “I was lucky,” he said, when he showed me the scar. “God spared me.” These conditions of salvage bricolage illuminate the intersecting precarities of labor and infrastructure. Infrastructural systems devolved onto labor can be downright hazardous for workers’ bodies but can also be imperiled by their reliance on labor. The more advanced the state of decay of these steel technologies, the more precarious their intersections with working bodies.

Though much of their lives were spent contending with the difficult material practices of the actual collection, an even larger slice of workers’ daily lives was spent simply waiting. When I visited workers on the job during the tumultuous 2007–8 union battle for recognition by the state, they were stuck in a state of limbo. Having been again rendered temporary laborers under the management of a confusing set of institutional power-sharing agreements, they dreamt of any change that could improve their daily lot. But in the end, nothing had happened for years. So, they waited and waited. No equipment and often no pay meant little incentive and sometimes not even the means to work, but they needed to stick around to make sure their precarious jobs didn’t disappear.

When I interviewed the team in Niari Tali, the workers had not received their salary for several weeks. Each day, the team dutifully showed up for work, swept the streets, and did the household collection, but it was hard not to wonder if the work was futile. They bided their time sitting on benches and mats in the shade provided by trees in the large, sandy median between the parallel roads that are the center of the neighborhood (niari tali means “two roads”). Here, the workers blended in with the other human threads of this dense urban fabric. Many people walking by on their way to work, the market, or a family visit took no notice of the parked trash truck or the chatty workers as they debated the merits of union strategy or simply discussed the daily news. Other people accustomed to sharing the space with the workers—like the used-refrigerator salesman who waited patiently for someone to buy one of his old machines, the taxi drivers who washed their cars in the median, and the various vendors also taking advantage of the shade—were all too aware of the workers’ plight. They checked in here and there for updates on the situation, always keen to offer their opinion.
The Yoff trash workers had been lent an old abandoned building by a neighborhood association, which they transformed into an imaginative headquarters where they bided time in between shifts and held union meetings (see figure 2.8). With all manner of reclaimed objects meticulously placed about—mats to lay on, an old radio, a fan that limped along, an old map of the United States—it struck me as a kind of secret fort, a hideaway for those who knew something mysterious and special. Making tea in the shade, they passed the time chatting about local gossip and waiting for word from the union. Other sectors had less glamorous hangouts, squeezed on the side of the road or in empty lots with little shade. And the patience at being stuck in this state of “waithood” (Honwana 2012) was not universal. Mbaye from Médina summed it up as follows: “I can’t stand it anymore. What am I doing here but waiting? All I want is to do my job—to clean this city for the people who live here. Where is my dignity?” His words are a prescient commentary.
Conclusions

Labor and infrastructure have become powerfully conjoined through the turn to labor-intensive, participatory waste infrastructures as a central pillar of governing practices in Dakar. This chapter has shown how the incessant political maneuvering charted in chapter 1 worked to unevenly distribute precarious, dirty work through infrastructures devolved onto labor. A close look at the micropolitics of these infrastructures illuminates “the complex and contingent ‘constructed-ness’ of technological systems” (Ferguson 2012, 558). The socio-material technology at play here—community participation grounded in a moral paradigm of purity and architectures of belonging—emerged as a radical alternative to politics as usual in Set/Setal. These vernacular expressions of participatory development were then transformed and harnessed in the interest of cheap, neoliberal urban management solutions with explicit political utility for ambitious Dakar politicians. Just as new, advanced technologies reconfigure social relations, this history shows how gaps in infrastructure and the devolution to low-tech solutions also operate as means of discipline and control.

New infrastructural formulas interface with communal identities and spaces to mobilize political subjectivities in novel ways. The labor of participatory trash management illuminates the way that neoliberal rationalities of community and individual responsibility produce highly gendered and generational political subjectivities. Both young men and young women found themselves operating in new political spheres through novel material labor practices that reconfigured their positions within their communities. The formalization of Set/Setal into a participatory trash collection system diffused and domesticated the threat these young people had posed and placed them as pawns in a political battle between different politicians and echelons of government jockeying to control the urban space. In harnessing youth labor at meager rates through a moral discourse of participatory citizenship, it offloaded the burdens of austerity more firmly onto community systems. And yet, the very same reliance upon belonging and intimate community relations was what, in the end, would nurture workers’ power when
they were to raise their heads again in the form of the trash-workers union (see chapter 4). Participatory trash management was, thus, a contradictory infrastructural arrangement: it enabled new spaces of citizenship while producing and reinforcing other inequalities and power relations.

Beyond just trucks and the city dump, infrastructures of disposal comprise a complex ecology of material objects and human labor, tethered together through their affective registers and political actualities. The things, living bodies, and values that make up trash infrastructures operate as performative vehicles of emergent agendas of technology, discipline, and rebellion, gaining force through their animation and interaction. In this setting, the symbolic associations and material force of garbage intersect with human labor to order specific bodies and geographies. The force of garbage derives from its associations with waste, disposability, the opposite of value, and the impure, as well as its sticky material properties which vex those charged with its orderly disposal. The vitality of the decomposition process makes household garbage management especially risky during times of crisis but gives waste its power as a matter of rebellion (see chapter 4). Decaying machines, furthermore, can wreak havoc on the bodies of the bricoleurs charged with managing and disposing of garbage. Garbage illuminates the ways that material matters in its encounter with human bodies and the intersecting precarities that are bred when infrastructures rely increasingly on laboring bodies.

A materialist reading of garbage politics in Dakar lays bare the contradictions ushered forth in the era of austerity that can be deciphered in the urban landscape. In so doing, it contributes to an updated formulation of emergent geographies of “life’s work in crisis” that is attentive to bodies, spaces, and material social practices (Meehan and Strauss 2015; Mitchell, Marston, and Katz 2004). Participatory garbage management represents a formula of governing the city that is premised on tapping and respatializing relations of social reproduction. A focus on waste exposes the dirty, messy burdens this imposes on workers and how different bodies come to disproportionately shoulder these burdens. It thus allows us to see how neoliberal assemblages work through disposability, highlighting the full range of their material violences. Decay in physical infrastructures has precipitated an intricate ecology of improvisational social systems and material practices premised upon intimacy between households, workers, waste, and machines of collection. The burdens of bricolage are borne—invisibly and visibly—on workers’ and
residents’ bodies in the scars, impurities, and stigmas they carry along. Discard labor, as the animation of trash’s matter, crystallizes the values manifested in structures of vulnerability. The next chapter will explore the intensification of participatory infrastructures in the city’s outskirts and how this further displaced the burdens of dirty work onto gendered laboring bodies.