Garbage Citizenship
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At 11 a.m. on Friday, April 27, 2007, in a large, bare-bones meeting room, a crowd of trash workers waited anxiously for their union’s general assembly to begin on “Senegalese time.” I had arrived with my research assistant when the meeting was officially convened at 10 a.m. and was excited to witness the gears behind the movement’s strike campaign. This was just the beginning of my being brought into the fold of the union’s inner workings and I was impressed by the energy in the room. Some of the workers had come straight from work and still wore the tattered remains of old uniforms from a company long since disappeared and plastic sandals that offered minimal protection on the job. The union’s leaders sat at one end of the room’s huge table, mostly dressed in respectable boubous (traditional West African sleeved robes) or button-up shirts. The anticipation was palpable and the temperature continued to rise as more and more workers filled the poorly ventilated room.

The crowd hushed as the union’s secretary general, Madany Sy, entered the room. An attractive man in his early forties, he wore smart glasses and a commanding presence. Sy’s demeanor demanded respect, yet he appeared humble and approachable. A gifted public speaker, he spoke to a rapt audience that occasionally erupted into applause. The following excerpt from his speech is translated from the Wolof:

All of you are incited to march on May 1 because this is the day for workers. Even if [the event] is a celebration, it’s a celebration without
joy. It’s a chance for us to show our discontent and our disagreement. . . . Despite the fact of our great difficulties, we are muted, we work in the shadows. . . . Comrades: the authorities of this country do not respect the cleaning workers. They do not take us into account. We have really been deceived. . . . We are the left out, the forgotten of the republic. They treat us like garbage. This must stop today! We must take responsibility for ourselves. . . . The most important thing is that we go together to the end. That we are united. . . . We have worked in this sector for years without being hired on because it was a passage we were obliged to make. This is why, I tell you, we keep working. Each one of us does his job. This is all we’ve got, and it’s a way of living our religion. But if our work is oppressing us, of course we have the right to rise up within the rules of the game. We have addressed ourselves to everyone, and none of them have met with us. We thank the religious leaders because they pray for us. . . . The problem we have is with the politicians. A politician never says where he is going. . . . They have been fooling us for years. That should push each and every one of us to take up our responsibilities. . . .

If they arrest me during the week, I call for you to keep fighting! [The crowd erupts into murmurs and noise, then applause.] My father used to say: “When I am in front, follow me; when I move back, kill me; when I die, avenge me.” [Rowdy applause.] I want that to be our slogan because we are doing the most dangerous work that there is. [Someone interjects: “We are all dead.”] We are no longer living. We are stressed. Before you receive your salary, you have to fight for it. This needs to stop. Now, we have taken all the other paths we could, without a response. The mayor of Dakar asked me to warn him before I spoke on the radio. He didn’t want to hear his name, so I accepted. I waited a year, then I called him. He ignored me. I write to him, without response. He says bad things about me. . . . I don’t have much, but I have my dignity. He has more money than me but he is not more dignified. We all have the same dignity, my friends. We are the same as the mayor. We are all human beings. A man has the right to rise up when he feels oppressed by another man. We have the right to speak the truth. If people are afraid to tell the truth to his face, we will do it. . . .

In view of this critical situation, today we launch the second plan of action. We have decided to radicalize the movement from Dakar to Yène [the farthest periphery of the Dakar region]. [Applause.] Com-
rades, please understand that when I speak of radicalization, that does not mean acts of vandalism, destruction, or fights. Don’t forget that we are republicans. . . . The people will support us. . . . The state needs to fulfill its responsibilities and solve the problem of the trash sector. . . . It’s thanks to you that Dakar is a nice city to visit, that the people don’t fall ill. Do you know this? Do you know that, thanks to you, development is possible in this country? You play a major role in the [protection of the] environment. . . . We, my friends, are strong, thanks to God. We believe in our profession. It’s a passion. We are dignified and we do this work for God. We have been sacrificing for this work for fifteen years. . . . God willing, we will be victorious in the end.

Sy’s speech was perfectly calibrated to the mood of the moment. It gave voice to the suffering of the workers and praised them for the efficacy and spiritual value of their work, while conjuring the sense of injustice that would be required to wage an audacious strike that would paralyze the city’s waste infrastructure—and, by extension, the city as a whole. By taking on the “politicians” who had ignored them for so long, he made it clear that they had exhausted all avenues for a negotiated solution to the crisis. After a few more short speeches and then responses from the crowd, the meeting was adjourned with a short blessing from a religious leader. The workers gradually filed out. The crowd was riled up, but serious; they knew what they had to do and were ready. After the May 1 march, Sy called for a general strike and most of Dakar’s sixteen hundred trash workers did not collect the city’s trash for two weeks. In solidarity, whole neighborhoods coordinated “trash revolts” of their own, dumping their accumulated household waste into public squares and streets to compel the state to respond to the workers’ grievances. As the city choked on its own refuse, the union received its first meeting with Dakar’s then mayor, Pape Diop. Within a short while, the union had received two months of back pay and a number of significant concessions. After more than seven grueling years of mobilizing and negotiating, they finally signed their collective bargaining agreement in 2014. Winning formal contracts, medical care, and other benefits, the trash sector pioneered the reversal of austerity management trends, heralding the possibility of a new era of urban governance in Dakar.

Previous chapters have examined the devolution of infrastructure onto labor in Dakar’s garbage sector through different formulas of participation as a mode of governing through disposability. This chapter examines how
the people who constitute these vital infrastructures refuse their conditions of precarity. Since 2006, the trash-workers union has catapulted trash management and the plight of the city’s trash workers to the center of the municipal and national political stage, despite an environment strongly prejudiced against those working with garbage and a political climate generally hostile to labor. I trace here the trash-workers union movement as it gained steam in the 2000s, in order to explain the dynamism of the workers’ tactics of refusal and illuminate the intimate communities of affect that forge infrastructures. Through examining their identities as workers and strategies as a union, I show how the particular resonance of their cleaning labor and their refusal to clean through striking have validated garbage work, earned them widespread public support, and, in turn, allowed them to stem the tide of labor flexibilization.

The material and symbolic resonance of waste sculpts the meaning of cleaning labor and, in turn, prefigures the power of trash as a political force. Waste’s powers to disrupt and the salience of its opposite—cleanliness—as a symbol of faith and piety are key features of the political valence of trash in Dakar. The counterhegemonic force of trash rebellion in Dakar was forged out of the specific subjectivities conditioned by the corporeal practice of cleaning and manifest in the creative animation of the material itself in rebellion. This chapter begins with an examination of the workers’ main lever, the general trash strike, as a powerful disruption of the proper function of disposal infrastructure in organizing the orderly flow of waste out of the city. It then considers the communicative channels that enabled the neighborhood trash revolts to scale up workers’ critiques and bestowed meaning onto trash work and protest. Finally, it explores the architectures of faith undergirding the workers’ movement, built on the conviction that the labor of cleaning the city is an act of piety. Waste and spirituality are powerfully connected and Islam is central to sculpting the moral geographies surrounding waste work in Dakar. Rooted in the value of purity in Islam and the embodied practice of cleaning, associations between cleaning and virtue evoked a shared moral compass which motivated workers to persevere, won over ordinary residents to their cause, and validated this vital infrastructure on an ethical level.

Chapter 1 explored the representational logic of trash infrastructure, or the political address of different infrastructural assemblages in the performance of governing-through-garbage. This chapter unpacks the values and vernacular moralities through which these infrastructures are felt and un-
derstood by the people comprising the social systems they are built upon. In doing so, the chapter expands the definition of what is usually taken into account in studying infrastructure to further demonstrate how the social and affective components of infrastructure matter. Infrastructures are complex ecological arrangements that include feelings and modes of understanding, ritual practices, and spiritual systems of order. The structures of feeling that waste infrastructures evoke emerge out of the material practice of cleaning work. The bricolage labors involved in caring for broken-down machines and a degrading city are bound up, in other words, with bricolage modes of meaning making—a sort of art of conservation of the self in a landscape of disrepair. I describe this art as a piety of refusal that operates as a personal resource as well as a strategic platform for union organizing.

Spirituality is not usually seen as the purview of conventional urban studies nor of studies of infrastructure. However, new materialist scholars and ethnographers of infrastructure are increasingly paying attention to the relevance of spirituality for fully grappling with the force of matter and the wide gamut of relationships embodied in infrastructure. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa draws on Susan Leigh Star in her development of an approach to studying infrastructure that “is not only about materials but also about meanings that are neither separable from, nor reducible to, what we usually conceive as materiality.” She argues for spirituality to be taken into account as a key but often overlooked element adhering between the socio-natural communities that make up infrastructures. This conception of “material spirituality” is useful for thinking about Dakar’s trash infrastructures because it emphasizes that spirituality is intertwined with material practice but is also something that inspires a “spirit” of community.

Within the growing field of ethnographies of infrastructure, there is an emerging literature on ritual practices animated by infrastructures and the spectral modes through which they are understood and valued. Though this work is important for investigating the vernacular valuations of infrastructure, much of the Africanist literature interprets spiritual understandings (particularly occult imaginings) of infrastructure as reactionary critiques of capitalism, globalization, neoliberalism, and other elements of contemporary modernity. However, as Miho Ishii (2016, 4) points out, reducing spiritual understandings of infrastructure to modes of venting anxieties about modernity is inadequate for fully grappling with the rich “ways in which [people] are entangled with, or encompassed by, nature and divinities.” Much more than simple moral panic at neoliberalism’s violences, the
piety of refusal represents a constructive striving to align moral and material economies in the wake of the failures of the secular nationalist project.

The significance of spirituality in Dakar’s waste infrastructures is consistent with the well-documented role of spirituality in making urban publics across diverse African contexts. There is a long tradition of scholarship examining the historical relationship between religious identity and the public sphere in Africa, and it is well recognized that the widespread failures of secular development and patterns of millennial capitalism have catalyzed the rising influence of Christian and Islamic networks in urban areas. A growing literature takes up the shifting role of religion in anchoring urban populations and mediating contests of urban citizenship in the contemporary era. The intensification of religious identification, visibility, and associations in urban areas calls into question normative models of the secular public sphere and long-held associations between secularism, modernity, and democracy. Scholars of Islamic modernities emphasize the increasing role of Muslim civil societies in furnishing a forum for the development of the public sphere and sparking reasoned discourse on modern problems such as labor rights, gender, and democracy. This is a far cry from a view of religious movements as mere self-help initiatives that act to buffer or channel the radicalization of the discontented, or of spiritual conceptions of neoliberal infrastructures as simple modes of venting anxieties about modernity, and offers an important critique of the assumed incompatibility between Islam and forms of public life. Most of the research on Islam and politics, however, focuses on reformist or radical Islamic movements or heightening divisions between communities of faith. Less attention has been paid to movements conjuring a more expansive Muslim identity that aim to reform the state, or, moreover, to how Islam may provide the language for constructively contesting neoliberal austerity.

In the Senegalese context, there is an extensive tradition of scholarship examining the interpenetration of Islam and the political sphere. The thrust of Senegalese Islamic studies, however, has been dominated by perspectives focused on the role of the Sufi brotherhoods and the power of the marabouts. The main current of this research has been concerned with explaining Senegalese “exceptionalism” through rooting the Socialist Party state’s hegemony from Independence in 1960 to 2000 within its mutualistic links with the Mouride brotherhood. Instead of privileging the historical social contract between the state and the brotherhoods, the economic utility of Islamic organizations, or the direct involvement of religious leaders in political con-
tests, this chapter joins with other recent interventions that move beyond a preoccupation with the functional aspects of Islamic institutions to a concern with quotidian experiences of religious identity. Building on the work of Mamadou Diouf, Mara Leichtman, and others, I am interested in the way that modes of religiosity craft new communities, political cultures, and moral geographies. In this way, I prioritize deeper investigation into Muslim disciples’ identities and experiences of religiosity to foreground the importance of the cultural roots of political consciousness and citizenship practices. The piety of refusal is a lived, embodied, and material mode through which spiritual practice becomes civic virtue.

**Striking Disorder in Dakar**

Madany Sy and his fellow workers founded their union, le Syndicat National des travailleurs du nettoiement (National Cleaning Workers Union; SNTN), in 2000 in anticipation of the changes under way with the election of President Abdoulaye Wade (known as Alternance). The head of his local youth group in a central Dakar neighborhood, Sy had been intensely involved in the Set/Setal movement, and then had emerged as a tireless advocate and leader among the trash workers starting in the mid-1990s. The passion and time that Sy put into the trenches of dirty work as a trash collector was a major element of his popularity. After languishing in informality during Mamadou Diop’s participatory sector, the unionists’ goal was to reverse the flexibilization of trash labor. In the words of Sy’s longtime comrade and union cofounder, Noumou Ndiaye: “The workers were treated more or less like slaves! It was necessary to fight to eradicate all of that!”

One of their key goals in forming the union was to avoid the politicization that had soured their experience of working for Mayor Mamadou Diop. Though many of the union’s members and founders (including Sy) were originally active in the Socialist Party during the 1990s, in forming their union they made the important choice to affiliate with an autonome (independent) union federation in order to retain their independence from political parties. Their choice of la Confédération des syndicats autonomes du Sénégal (Federation of Independent Unions of Senegal; CSA) was a decision taken explicitly to avoid the influence of political parties. It did not, however, immunize the union from government intervention, which continued in different form under President Wade (Ndiaye 2010). Overall, the 2000s was a period exhibiting what labor scholar Alfred Inis Ndiaye (2008, 2010,
Chapter Four

2013) described as a blocked negotiation process and the intensification of conflict between labor and the state. As political parties and government officials continued to try to meddle in unionized labor, and unions had no recourse but to use “hot” strategies (strikes) to resist these and make their voices heard, new labor relations were being forged with difficulty.

After an initially hopeful period in the first half of the decade, with the institutional reconfiguration in 2006 the workers found themselves thrown into another intense period of job insecurity and difficult working conditions. In the otherwise grueling period from 2006 to 2009, they waged a series of strike-based campaigns that maneuvered the question of trash labor to the center of the political stage in Dakar. Waging periodic general strikes that held the city captive to its own garbage, tirelessly educating and agitating over the radio waves, and even reaching out to international observers and activists for their cause, the union won the support of the Dakarois they served and gained the attention of the local and national state. By 2009, they had emerged as one of the most visible and dynamic unions active in contemporary Senegal and had won some key concessions. For the Dakarois, this period was experienced as a full-on trash “crisis” characterized by frequent service disruptions, the accumulation of garbage in the public space, and government inaction.

A series of strikes in 2007 just after President Wade was reelected were particularly important toward crystalizing the union’s visibility and public support. Wade was reelected that year to little fanfare as his popularity faded in step with a series of controversies and growing disappointment in his vision for running the country. When the contract with the private waste-management company AMA had been revoked months before, the workers had hoped for a new institutional arrangement for garbage that would put an end to their insecurity once and for all. As months passed and their labor conditions continued to deteriorate, however, they called for a series of trash strikes that wreaked havoc on the city to bring attention to their plight and force the government’s hand. In many cases, strikes were called at union general assemblies like that described at the beginning of the chapter, but at other times they were announced by the leadership and radiated out to the workers by word of mouth. The usual directive was simply to refrain from collecting the trash the next day. Often, workers still gathered together at their normal workplace hangouts to discuss the events as they transpired. From the most central Dakar district to the farthest reach into the city’s periphery, workers stayed home for as many as two weeks in a row. Garbage accumulated everywhere—in homes, yards, roadsides, drainage canals, con-
struction sites, and empty lots. Neighborhood women went to great lengths to carefully manage their accumulating garbage to avoid dangerous insalubrious conditions, but—as we’ll see in the next section—many became fed up and were driven to take drastic action.

Star (1999) describes infrastructure as most visible when it breaks down; similarly, Dakar’s labor-intensive infrastructure was most visible during a strike. Given the propensity for quick putrefaction, to maintain urban order the proper functioning of a solid-waste system requires unrelenting daily evacuation out of homes, into the waste grid, and finally to the city’s dump in the outskirts of the city. The modern city is a clean, sanitized space where waste is carted out of sight, out of mind, allowing production and consumption to continue. The blockage of that disposal process and the accumulation of urban waste in public spaces is the ultimate indicator of crisis and dysfunction. As Sarah A. Moore (2009, 428) reflected on waste strikes in Oaxaca, “because garbage is inherently misplaced, waste represents a risk to modern urban societies,” and a politics of “manifestation”—or rendering garbage visible through striking—becomes an effective political tool because of its potential to destabilize institutions of modernity.

Striking, moreover, is not just an ordinary technical breakdown of infrastructure; it is the purposeful sabotaging of the proper functioning of infrastructure. Trash strikes render infrastructure the “political terrain for the negotiation of moral-political questions” and garbage itself a vibrant “protagonist” of protests (von Schnitzler 2013, 671, italics in original). Much in the same way that prepaid water meters in Soweto (von Schnitzler 2013, 2016) and water pipes in Mumbai (Anand 2011) became the material tools of rebellion, so did garbage infrastructures take center stage in wider modes of critiquing logics of governing the city. Such disruption was particularly resonant in Dakar because it exposed the laboring bodies onto which the infrastructure had been devolved. Strikes are the flip side of the performative mode of infrastructure; they are the way that the living components of these socio-technical systems invert the representational logic of governing through garbage by withdrawing their labor. Workers’ refusal to be the castaways of society was embodied in their refusal to labor. As the primary technology of the infrastructure, in other words, the laboring body itself became the political terrain of refusal. For those few workers who went so far as to wage hunger strikes in protest, the withdrawal of their labor went even further in manifesting the violences of an infrastructure devolved onto labor.

These were not, furthermore, just any strikes. The material and symbolic
force of waste made it a particularly potent matter of rebellion. Those who are associated with garbage are keenly situated for disruption, as not only the most impure in society but also the bridge connecting the outside—which can be “rubbished”—to the clean inside (see Chakrabarty 1991; Furniss 2012; Scanlan 2005; Searle-Chatterjee 1979). Following Mary Searle-Chatterjee’s (1979) study of the Benares street sweepers in India, this can be seen as the “power of the polluted,” or the capacity of abjected waste workers to trouble the divides between order and disorder. In Dakar, trash workers manifested their power through their strategic alliances with natural processes of decomposition. Festering piles of decomposing garbage amplified workers’ grievances, producing a kind of lively, unofficial infrastructure that competed with public rights of way, obstructed other public goods, and obliged new ways of living in the city. The stench and filth of rotting garbage, combined with its resonance as impurity, rendered the city dangerous and called for the resolution of associated risks with urgency. The longer the trash was left to fester, the more hazardous it became. As described in the next section, trash strikes in Dakar exerted particular force because they were multiplied and made manifest by the supportive action of neighborhoods across the city.

**Manifesting the Public Secret of Waste**

On a warm morning in May 2007, the central Dakar neighborhood of HLM Fass was far too quiet. As household women went about their usual morning cleaning activities, they were well aware of the eerie absence of a sound that usually hastened them along: the incessant honking of their neighborhood trash truck as it did the rounds, emptying this dense neighborhood of its most dangerous product. It was day ten of the trash workers strike, and while most of the Fassois were aware of the conflict between the union and government from the frequent radio coverage of the drama, this was no consolation as they tried to keep their homes clean and their children safe. The smelly remains of the week—including fish guts and goat entrails, plastic bags, and vegetable matter—were building up in the piles, rice sacks, and buckets used as trashcans in the working-class Dakar neighborhood. Although HLM Fass was originally planned to accommodate functionaries in Dakar, with the collapse of state employment in the 1970s and 1980s it came to house a diverse set of mostly working-class families. By 2007, the ill-maintained multistory buildings were home to a mix of renters and owners who made do with the cramped three-room apartments (see figure 4.1). Though they
FIGURE 4.1. One of the main high-rise buildings in HLM Fass, before the trash strikes of 2007. Author’s photo, 2007.
added ash to the garbage to mitigate the stench and tied it up in multiple plastic grocery bags, the waste overflowed, cluttering courtyards, balconies, soccer fields, and the local sewage canal (Canal IV) and stinking up homes and public meeting areas.

By sundown, a few neighborhood residents were inspired to tell the government that the problem had continued long enough. After the evening prayer, they gathered more residents together and discussed the idea of a revolt. As midnight approached, the idea spread like wildfire. Mothers, daughters, sons, and fathers alike left their homes that balmy night and went about their task quickly and quietly, piling their week’s refuse high in the middle of the boulevard on which they knew the politicians would be traveling the next morning on their way downtown. As a targeted message to the local district mayor, they also sculpted a special tower of detritus directly in front of his dilapidated office in the heart of HLM Fass, a short walk away from the capital’s Independence obelisk. Across the city, other neighborhoods did the same, ridding their homes of their dirt and decay and depositing it into the public space. In Tonghor, Yoff, where the pilot participatory garbage collection project had long since disappeared, women and girls’ only recourse was to defy a community ordinance and dump their garbage on the beach, where it would inevitably wash into the ocean and tangle their fishermen's nets.

An older female resident, Demba, who was an active participant in the dumping in HLM Fass, explained her motivation for mounting the trash revolt:

We realized that the trash trucks hadn’t come for two weeks. Fass is not very spacious; there was a nauseating smell throughout the neighborhood. People couldn’t even breathe normally. What’s more, there were children who were playing next to the trash where worms were starting to come out of the ground. They could have gone back home to eat without washing their hands. . . . There was a risk of disease! [Dumping] was the only solution that we had since the mayor refused to resolve the problem. It was our way of letting him know that we were not happy with the situation, of forcing him to react.

Demba’s explanation marshaled her authority over household matters and family well-being in order to justify her rebellion through dumping. It was a last resort, she explained, one that any upstanding citizen would take. One of the key organizers, Samba—a young law student born and raised in HLM Fass—described his experience as follows:
One day my older sister said “Don’t you smell that odor?” I decided to do something about it. . . . Around 11 p.m., I couldn’t wait any longer. . . . I grabbed brooms and sacks [of garbage]. At the beginning, we were two or three people, but then other people passed and saw us and then, all of a sudden, everyone came out. We did it right here [by the mayor’s office] and there was also an enormous pile there on the road. [The dumping] was hard work and we finished at the earliest around 3 a.m. . . . But, it worked!

As Samba notes, the trash revolts that day did work: the mayor of Dakar intervened immediately to clean up the trash blocking the streets by noon (see figures 4.2 and 4.3).

Only after the trash workers continued their strike with a second plan of action, however, did the mayor finally meet with the union to resolve the dispute. A few days later, the workers were finally paid two months’ back pay and went directly back to work, until the next round of strikes held a couple of months later for other grievances. The media coverage of the neighborhood revolts was extensive (e.g., M. Fall 2007; Nettali 2007; Sud Quotidien 2007). The following passage from an article entitled “Insalubrité: Dakar (ré)envahie!” (Insalubrity: Dakar [Re]invaded!) characterizes much of the reporting:

Insalubrity has again taken over the neighborhoods. The Senegalese capital is invaded by heaps of rubbish dumped by angry populations. . . . Colobane, Fass, Gueule Tapée, Médina, hlm Fass are under the yoke of the garbage. Outraged by the inaction of the authorities, the residents have reacted. The week-long strike [by workers,] who claim two months of back pay for a total of 24 million [CFA], seems to be at the source of this situation. . . . We are attacked by the nauseating odors of Dirtiness, queen of the capital. The residents, discontented to see the waste continue to pile up in front of their homes, before our eyes, dump their trash onto the road.16

The trash crisis was a lens through which many residents registered their disenchantment with the state of Alternance, the new political era ushered in with the election of President Abdoulaye Wade in 2000. April 2007 was just one month after the recent presidential elections, in which Wade won again with an overwhelming majority but this time little jubilation from the Dakarois. It was generally accepted that these elections signaled not a vote
FIGURES 4.2 AND 4.3. The remains of a 2007 trash revolt in HLM Fass, a few hours after the mayor sent in a special collection force to remove the garbage directly blocking the roads. Author’s photos, 2007.
of support for Wade, but rather a vote of no confidence in his rivals, and were a consequence of having many candidates in the final rounds. Support for Wade was dwindling, as Alternance had brought little opportunity to most Dakarois while the cost of living skyrocketed.

The only signs that Wade was “working” were the massive infrastructure projects that had transformed Dakar into a messy construction site. The extensive road-network project in the capital was a central part of Wade’s preparations to show off for the international community at the 11th OIC summit to be held in Dakar in spring 2008. “We cannot eat overpasses!” was a common response of residents asked to comment on these investments. Offering up a litany of critiques of Alternance, many jokingly referred to it as “Alternoos”—a play on words disparaging government officials’ reputation for partying (noos), instead of working. Wade’s acceleration of neoliberal reforms in many sectors was further dismantling welfare services, enabling unprecedented wealth accumulation, and exacerbating social inequalities. Urban infrastructure was the material manifestation of these disparities and the object and symbol of urban protest.

Two of the organizers of the neighborhood trash revolts in HLM Fass—Babacar and Ibrahima—were especially outspoken about their disillusionment with Alternance. Having worked for part of the year in Spain, they were back for a few months to spend time with their families. Becoming embroiled in the trash crisis was far from how they had planned to spend their vacations. Both had been active organizers for Wade’s party in 2000, but they admitted that the last seven years had been overwhelmingly disappointing. Interviewed together, they gave an uncensored critique of Alternance: “This problem [the garbage crisis] is the result of a lack of political will. During all of this, they are bypassing the media, buying the presidential airplane, placing government officials in the most optimal working conditions. Really, those people [government officials] are Europeans over there—in an underdeveloped country!” Similarly, the head of the HLM Fass neighborhood association described Alternance in these terms: “What is going on? While [the politicians’] lifestyles improve, the people are dying of hunger! We are talking about [people making] billions! The Senegalese people are still hungry! And what do we have to show for it? A few roads?” These perspectives highlight the injustices of neoliberal accumulation through describing the excesses that came to characterize the ruling regime. President Wade’s performative investments in infrastructure had become the signals of uneven development, and garbage in the public space the symbol of political dysfunction.
Though the HLM Fass neighborhood is far from the most disadvantaged district in greater Dakar, accumulating garbage represented for residents their marginalization with regard to urban public services and, more broadly, the landscape of political patronage in the city. For many, it fueled their disenchantment with politics in general. As one HLM Fass resident summed it up, “La politique est poubelle [politics are trash].” Samba (the young law student), for his part, reflected on the garbage crisis by saying he would never, ever, get involved in politics. “All I do in this neighborhood is for God. It’s to have grace, never profit.”

Like the trash strikes, public dumping by residents deploys the power of waste to contest ordering paradigms. Through a politics of manifestation, residents reveal the public secret of waste, relocate the blame for polluted living conditions, and repudiate their abjection. In the words of one neighborhood revolt organizer who had piled his garbage in the street, “They think we’re dirty because we live here. But, we are not dirty! This is the mayor’s trash, so we gave it back to him.” The act of externalizing the garbage that they had struggled to manage in the home was a refusal to be sullied by the state’s negligence. If the proper flow of waste is out of sight, out of mind, then the dumping worked to disrupt the privilege that comes with forgetting and thus the division between those who can discard and forget and those who cannot. Trash strikes and dumping gain their creative power through rendering trash—as dirt—“matter out of place” (Douglas 1966).

Beyond their power as a creative lever of contestation, the trash revolts also reveal the social infrastructure binding the workers and the residents they served. Participants in the HLM Fass revolts were strikingly unified in their support of the trash workers. In aiming their action precisely at “the politicians” (the local district mayor, the mayor of Dakar, and the other political figures who drive along the boulevard to get to their offices downtown), their goals were twofold: to convey their larger discontent with being neglected and to force the government to resolve the dispute with the garbage workers. The following statement by the two main trash-revolt organizers, Babacar and Ibrahima, is illustrative:

What we did was a total revolt. Because we are revolted by the attitude of the state! It’s the state that should fix this problem. We noticed that this was a recurring problem that had returned again. These workers are not well paid. They are the heads of households who live a pitiable existence facing three months without pay. We think that is terrible. . . .
It’s revolting [revoltant]. Revolting. Revolting. This is a fundamental public service. . . . It’s the state’s responsibility. It’s the state that pays the workers, that pushed them to go on strike. Here in Africa, a father can’t go three months without receiving his salary. That’s totally impossible! We think that the state is responsible. When we did the “dumping” of the trash on the main road, we knew that was exactly where the [government] authorities passed. The next morning, they went and got people to collect that trash. That goes to show that the only language those people understand is, in the end, violence. When the people don’t revolt, [the politicians] don’t even think about the people. Before we dumped the garbage on those roads, they had stayed more than two weeks without doing anything. . . . We are not savages, we are citizens. We are educated.

Viewing poor garbage services as a demeaning personal affront, these residents summoned their civility and education to emphasize the irresponsibility of the ruling elite. Invoking their citizenship, moreover, as a right to fair public services and, for the workers, fair wages, rendered Wade’s approach to government illiberal and undemocratic.

These statements also illuminate how the union’s campaigns to validate their labor had worked to gain the support of many Dakarois. One trash worker’s perspective on the revolts echoes many of his colleagues’ views toward the neighborhood action:

The people were with us. God made it so that we live in the same zones as we work. They knew us; they were our neighbors. They asked us why the truck no longer came to do the collection. We informed them that we had gone two months without being paid. They felt that wasn’t just and that if it had been them, they also wouldn’t have accepted it. They pay their garbage tax and are not going to accept to live with garbage in their homes. So, they threw it all in the main arteries where the authorities drive. Therefore, we can say that the people supported us 100 percent.

Beyond striking, the trash workers union had set out from its inception to transform the stigma entailed in working with garbage and to inform ordinary Dakarois of their poor working conditions through a savvy public relations campaign. In an effort to valorize the profession, the union launched a campaign to promote a new language within the sector, insisting that the
regular collectors and sweepers who make up the bulk of the sector’s workers be called techniciens de surface (surface technicians) in lieu of the negatively associated terms éboueur (rubbish collector) and balayeur (street sweeper) or even the extremely derogatory term buujumaan (see chapter 2). Through tireless radio shows, press conferences, and newspaper interviews, the union and its leader, Madany Sy, became household names (see figure 4.4).

Because the activists from the Set/Setal movement were employed as the trash collectors in their own neighborhoods and these relations still persisted in many areas, workers were intimately connected to the neighborhoods they served. Many still collected the garbage of their own families, neighbors, and friends. Even for those who did not serve people they actually knew, the interactive system, which involves direct contact between the workers and residents at the moment of collection in the street, forged communicative channels and spaces of intimacy between workers and the communities they served. As a result, though many respondents admitted to having been prejudiced against the workers before they became familiar
with their plight, by 2007 many residents frequently described the workers’ labor as “noble” and “dignified” and regularly prayed for them. Although some examples of disrespect persisted, workers equally recounted stories of special consideration they received from their communities. One worker from Yoff recounted this story: “I was collecting the trash with my bare hands. An old man who was teaching the Qur’an nearby to some children stopped what he was doing and came to help me. Afterward, he said, ‘My son, you underestimate the importance of the work you are doing.’ He knew we knew it, but this was his way of encouraging us to persevere.” Many residents were also remarkably informed about the details of the union’s grievances and negotiations with the state, and explicitly intended their trash revolts to be an expression of solidarity.

The communicative channels mobilized by participatory waste management provided the basis for the effective mobilization of popular protest and refusal of neoliberal logics. Like roads, bridges, or telephone lines, the practices of sociality encompassing quotidian trash disposal thus served as a social infrastructure that functioned as an affective and symbolic commons that could be “formatted as a public good” (Elyachar 2010, 452). The trash strikes and revolts were the creative product of the flows of “reputation, information, and emotion” (Elyachar 2010, 459) that such infrastructures enabled and, in turn, would serve as the catalyst for new agendas in the garbage sector. The next section will explore the architectures of faith that underpinned these intimate infrastructural relations.

The Piety of Refusal

I sat down with the young, charismatic leader of the trash workers union, Madany Sy, during the heart of the garbage crisis in 2007. Beneath the roar of the only fan in the tiny windowless office at the back of the union headquarters, Sy explained with emotion why he—an articulate, educated Dakarois—was so committed to cleaning the city. He said:

If I’m here [in the trash sector] to this day, it’s because of my beliefs. Because they say that to be a true believer, a true Muslim, one must be clean. One must not be sullied; cleanliness is essential. Thus those who collect the trash of the markets, hospitals, the households, they have a surplus with regard to God. They are like a priesthood... I sacrifice myself today so that people don’t have to be contaminated

The Piety of Refusal 141
by illnesses. . . So, it’s a very strong gauge of beliefs. If it weren’t for the faith, if it weren’t this religion, well, we would have quit long ago. But . . . sooner or later, God will pay us for our efforts. . . . It’s God that wanted this.

This statement captures Sy’s usual passion but it also illuminates a key shared value that has deeply shaped the trash workers’ movement. Despite the lamentable circumstances under which they have labored since the early 1990s, the trash workers of Dakar have maintained an intense unity and camaraderie (see figure 4.5). In addition to the shared history and bonds from Set/Setal, the trash workers’ solidarity is buttressed by their common faith and conviction that the labor of cleaning the city is a pious act. This architecture of faith undergirds their shared infrastructures of bricolage, serves as an important personal and collective resource, and gives the trash work-
ers’ movement its moral authority. Sy and his workers frequently articulated this credo of trash work as God’s work and used the idea as a platform from which to demand better conditions. If cleanliness is godliness, they argued, then those who work day in and day out to purge Dakar of its impurities should be rewarded in the here and now. The reward due is simple: respect, job stability, and fair pay. In this way, the workers articulated a refusal to be refuse which inverts the stigma of trash work.

Purity in body and spirit is an indispensable element of Islamic faith. The ablutions performed before praying, including the washing of one’s face, hands, and feet, are just one of the myriad ways that cleanliness is essential to Islamic faith and ritual practice. Because a state of purity is a precondition for worship, Muslims cannot offer their prayers with an unclean body, with unclean clothes, or on premises that are seen as polluted. The emphasis on physical cleanliness as a signifier of spiritual cleanliness thus does not stop at the body but is also implicated in the domestic and public space. One’s home should be kept clean as a symbol of one’s purity and there is an emphasis in specific passages of the Qur’an on the cleanliness of the streets and public spaces. Beyond the cleanliness of the body and environment, moreover, notions of purity in Islam ascribe particular importance to the act of cleaning. The cleansing of holy Muslim sites, for instance, can be understood as an act of deep worship, as demonstrated in the biannual ritual washing ceremony of the Kaaba (inner navel) of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Saudi dignitaries and similar washing rituals in mosques throughout Senegal. And yet, the act of purging everyday public spaces of their dirt and garbage often comes with immensely negative associations in Islamic settings, as in other contexts.

Perhaps the most well known example of the social stigma of waste work as degraded labor is the connection between sanitation and caste in India. Dalits (lower-caste groups) in traditional Hindu society have historically been assigned sanitary work deemed polluting by other castes, “enabl[ing] the higher castes to be free of bodily impurities” (Douglas 1966, 152–53; see also Prashad 2000). In Mary Douglas’s formulation, caste was a key example of ritual pollution through which discourses of dirt and danger maintained social categories. In Muslim societies, waste workers can be particularly stigmatized because of the religious associations between waste work and impurity. As a result, in certain places, Christians dominate the waste sector. In her research in Pakistan, for instance, Jo Beall (2006) shows how minority Christians retain a monopoly over sanitation work because of its
undesirability to Muslims. Similarly, as marginalized Coptic Christians in a majority Muslim culture, Zabaleen trash collectors have retained an almost exclusive monopoly over Cairo’s garbage collection for decades.\textsuperscript{19} The cull of all of the Zabaleen’s pigs during the H1N1 virus outbreak in 2009 dramatically illuminated the “purity and danger” (Douglas 1966) implications of their waste work.\textsuperscript{20}

In Dakar, trash workers are almost exclusively Muslim, mirroring the population at large. Before Set/Setal, however, the majority were workers who came from outside of the city and were considered low-status by Dakarois (see chapter 2). These workers migrated to take positions that, in better times, Dakarois would not deign to consider. When the vast majority of workers were replaced by Set/Setal activists in the early 1990s, the demographics of the sector changed dramatically. With this development, Dakar’s garbage sector came to comprise a fairly representative cross section of Dakar society. Women entered into official trash work for the first time and represent a significant minority of trash workers to this day.\textsuperscript{21} As mentioned earlier, it took some time for many of these urban—and, in some cases, educated and otherwise privileged—workers to come to terms with the stigmatization of their new professions, particularly for men. However, facing the evisceration of the public sector accompanying structural adjustment and, with it, the prospects for regular work in Dakar, they had little recourse but to persevere in these low-paid but increasingly rare jobs. Many of these workers turned the stigma of trash work on its head through describing their job in terms of its value as religious service.

Trash workers in Dakar have made connections between their work and its spiritual value since they began cleaning in the Set/Setal movement in the late 1980s. Reflecting back, some of the trash workers cite the importance of cleanliness in Islam as a key personal reason why they originally became involved in Set/Setal. As they continued on as workers in the new municipal trash system, the work’s religious value served as an inspirational resource in the face of difficult working conditions. For example, Babacar from Médina proudly explained that he had stopped wearing protective gris-gris when he started in the profession in the early 1990s because he knew that he was already blessed for his work. Gris-gris are talismans often worn on the body to ward off evil spirits and bring good luck. Although originally derived from African religious practice, gris-gris are commonly incorporated into Senegalese Muslims’ spiritual practice. His words sum up the sentiments of many trash workers:
I often say that it’s no longer necessary for me to wear gris-gris to protect me. . . . God preaches cleanliness and thus we who make places clean are blessed by God. . . . This is one of my principal motivations in this work and I’m not the only one to think that this is a manner of practicing his religion. In the same way that people pray, we are also endeavoring along the Islamic pathway that preaches cleanliness, one of the precepts of the Islamic religion. Places of worship are ubiquitous in the street, so cleaning the street is a way of reinforcing one’s faith. And even if we miss some prayers, we know that God blesses us for the work that we’re doing because nothing is more noble and commendable than to clean.

Babacar’s practice of piety through cleaning broadens the definition and geography of worship beyond conventional worship practices (e.g., praying, fasting). More provisional and subversive than conventional conceptions of piety, piety through cleaning is the everyday work of bricolage. As a mode of piety, cleaning labor becomes a way of living one’s religion, developing personal capacities to endure suffering, and persevering in the face of difficult conditions. Brought to life in the vibrant spaces of the everyday, it involves a moral geography that is centered on the body and deeply rooted in the corporeal practice of laboring. Framed as a collective resource, it becomes a performative practice to lobby for fair labor and better state protections.

Though the spiritual value of cleaning was frequently emphasized in my interviews with trash workers across Dakar as well as in compelling statements made by the union in its work to nurture public support, these responses clearly divided along gendered lines. None of my women respondents volunteered an articulation of the value of their labor in religious terms. When asked directly about the religious value of cleaning, most female respondents did insist that cleanliness was a key element of their spiritual practice and that this was part of why their work was so valuable. However, the key difference was in the force with which men versus women insisted on this value in a public forum. This raises some important questions regarding the gendered space of spirituality and expressions of faith, as well as the gendering of stigma associated with the profession. Because the labor of cleaning in the home is exclusively considered women’s work in Senegal, trash work out of the home was not only considered dirty (and thus polluting) but feminized (see chapter 2). Male workers wore masks and tried to hide from their families and girlfriends out of embarrassment. For women, who had always
been cleaning in the home, on the other hand, entering the profession was not stigmatizing in the same way. Public articulations by male workers of the value of their labor in religious terms served to at least partly offset some of the stigma of becoming garbage men.

Since the mid-2000s, the trash-workers union has begun publicly articulating religious service through cleaning as a key part of its platform for improved conditions. It centers this positioning on a generic, unifying idea of a common “Muslim” identity that is explicitly not framed in terms of Sufi brotherhoods, specific marabouts, or any other divisions. In fact, when I tried to inquire as to individual workers’ affiliations with particular brotherhoods, they went to great lengths to avoid answering the question, insisting instead that they were “all just Muslims” and that which mosque they frequented didn’t matter. Conjuring a generic Muslim identity worked to cement solidarity between workers and their communities through downplaying their differences and emphasizing common values. In this way, it inspired a cosmopolitan ethics calling for just treatment to be accorded to all workers, regardless of other divisions. It also conferred moral authority on an otherwise abject population in order to justify claims made on the state. Sy often asked government officials to allow their moral commitments of fraternity with their Muslim brothers to guide their management of the sector.

Forging an understanding of trash work as a service of purification validates trash workers’ labor and creates a platform for voicing their grievances. In an era when politicians are strongly distrusted and party values rendered almost meaningless, but where faith and communal religious identity remains an enormous personal and collective resource, they appeal instead to commonly held Senegalese moral values. This renders their grievances difficult to refute and apparently apolitical. Appealing to Islamic morality thus casts a sharp ethical critique of the state’s role in the flexibilization of labor and provides a new language through which to understand the value of infrastructure.

Conclusions

Through disrupting the orderly flow of waste out of the city and intentionally externalizing private trash into public spaces, workers and residents manifest disorder to contest the governing prerogatives of government planners and officials and all of the associated dimensions of stigma and abjection implied by living and working in filth. The effectiveness of the trash work-
ers’ campaign is evident in the public support the workers have garnered since their campaign ramped up in the mid-2000s and the attention they have finally received from the government over the last few years. Framing their work in religious terms not only acts to validate otherwise stigmatized labor and laborers, but also serves as a platform for making claims on the state. Since that time, the workers have won some important battles, and, as detailed in chapter 1, the sector has figured into important political contests between the mayor of Dakar and the president. During this time, the union was received many times by the mayor and representatives of the national government. From 2006 to 2009, they received a number of concessions, including back pay and indemnities, and then in 2009 their conditions improved markedly when the mayor officially hired on the workers, conferring on them formal contracts, medical coverage, and access to banking services. After more years of hard lobbying, they finally earned the objective of much of their campaigning in 2014 with the signature of their collective bargaining agreement. Although the sector continues to be politicized and workers continue to battle to further improve their working conditions, their grievances have been significantly attenuated over the last few years. The sector represents a pioneer in reversing austerity logics. In the context of continued liberalization of the economy and flexibilization of labor in diverse sectors, this is no small feat.

This chapter has traced the moral geographies of citizenship that emerge from the piety of refusal and that have enabled these transformations. If infrastructure is composed of people, then central to grappling with infrastructural politics is contending with the meanings and values that people place on those infrastructural systems. For systems devolved onto labor, the value of infrastructure derives from the value placed in that labor. The analysis has focused on modes of self-valuation through the embodied cultivation of piety-through-cleaning and the deployment of those values in a public forum. At the same time, it has explored the power of striking, or the withdrawal of infrastructural labors in intentional acts of dirtying. Because waste can be dangerous, trash work has a specific power. The intimate vitality of Dakar’s participatory trash collection system and the vibrancy of the material relations of garbage gives the critique its force through rendering politically salient not just the discard process, but also, importantly, its interruption. The natural forces of decomposition take on new meaning as they intersect with the vibrant actions of persons. The spiritual value of trash work is grounded in both the meaning of cleanliness in Islam and the
embodied practice of cleaning. As a practice of purification, the labor of cleaning provides a powerful ground on which to contest relations of disposability and lay bare the ethics of infrastructure. In this way, the labor union movement levels a powerful critique of the erosion of the rights and rewards of the city and lays claim to dignity through insisting on the value of labor as an essential infrastructural ingredient.

The piety of refusal raises important questions for the horizon of politics in urban Africa. This study moves away from an exclusive emphasis on religious institutions to emphasize the ways that religious identity shapes individual consciousness and collective organizing. The story of trash workers’ religious convictions is not one of marabouts, brotherhoods, Islamism, or instructions from on high about how to wage politics. Instead, the research raises some questions for the critical understandings that may be mobilized through religious identity or the “dialectics of political and spiritual agency” (Diouf and Leichtman 2009, 12). The role of faith and communal religious identity in providing the political consciousness that undergirds oppositional movements is of course not new. Workers’ faith has been shown to be crucial in building a strong oppositional culture, both in helping workers to critically reflect on their situations and in legitimizing popular struggles in diverse settings (e.g., Billings 1990; Lubeck 1986). But the piety of refusal offers a novel and significant language for contesting neoliberal austerity and reframing the value of infrastructure.

Given the rising importance of religious movements in African settings, particularly in urban spaces, it has become even more important to ask about the possibilities for critical understandings to emerge through spiritual practices in that context. In Dakar, religious convictions have incited trash workers and their communities to stand up for fair treatment and better jobs. Insisting on the spiritual import of cleaning allowed these workers to find some salvation in a “trashy” job as well as to fight for a measure of respect from the state and populations they serve. The piety of refusal constitutes a mode of bricolage of the self that buttresses the practices of salvage bricolage through which workers forge, maintain, and, sometimes, break down the city’s infrastructure. The associations between cleaning and virtue shape the value of the infrastructure and allow citizenship claims to be persuasively staked on a moral-ethical level. Architectures of faith, then, become the scaffolding through which politics and piety are enmeshed and through which new, more ethical infrastructures can be crafted.