**Untangling Translocal Urban Textures of Trash: plastics and plasticity in Addis Ababa**

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**Abstract**

Dirt is never an isolated event: ‘where there is dirt there is a system’ Mary Douglas (2004:44) incisively declared. But rather than being the *by-product* of a systematic ordering, I argue that dirt is one of the places where urban assemblages and lives, of an improvised and ad hoc kind, are rigged together. Not matter out of place then, but matter *making place*. In this paper I explore the analytic potential of trash as a lens onto city making, and conclude that it is one of the mechanisms generating the distanciated and hyperlocal social textures of urban social morphology. Picking through the social morphologies of trash on the Koshe Landfill site on the fringes of Addis Ababa, I trace some of its local and translocal social textures.

**Keywords: translocality, urbanism, plastic, trash, lifeworlds**

**Introduction**

From Mumbai to Rio de Janeiro images of waste pickers scouring cities’ castoffs in search of subsistence powerfully illuminates, albeit in quite different social formations, the urban relegation and marginality Loic Wacquant (2008) articulates in his inspiring *Urban Outcasts*. Images of children grappling with the toxicity of decomposing trash agitate environmentalists, humanitarians and urban planners, while providing iconic images of abjection as dominant tropes of marginality. A number of anthropologists (Millar 2008, Drackner 2005, Gutberlet & Baeder 2008) have unpacked the logics and lifeworlds of trash pickers, often advancing arguments aimed at recuperating them as useful members of their societies, rather than as abject outcasts. Millar’s (2012:167) analysis of Rio de Janeiro’s rubbish lifeworlds unsettles the link between garbage and urban marginality, insisting that the Rio operatives activate the interstices of transitioning modes of production. Richard Girling (2005:209) points out that trash is intrinsic to capitalist production, and thus deserves a more central place in its analysis. Martin O’Brien (2007) too recuperates trash from oblivion and acknowledges its significance. And John Scanlon (2005:13) points out that trash is part of how we make the world in which we live. We can conclude from these scholars’ efforts that trash is neither an incidental by-product nor an invisible endpoint of consumer practices, but a central site in making the world in which we live.

But the potential of trash in the fabric and fabrication of the social textures of urban life is yet to be fully realised. Without seeking to valorise or romanticise trash, its informal labour practices and workforce, it is here more tightly drawn into the analysis of cities by tracing some of the social textures it generates in the localities of Addis Ababa, and, in the translocalities passing through, and consequently, I will argue, constituting the city.

**City thinking**

Inevitably my understanding of cities implicates particular conceptions of them as assemblages (McFarlane 2011:650-2); spatial grammars of urban learning articulated through the practice of urban life itself in finding a way through it (McFarlane 2011:1); meaning that cities are gathering processes, combining human and non-human elements, architectures and peoples, literally *built* in the Heideggerian sense which sees building as part of dwelling, through everyday practices of city life (Lefebvre 2000). Conceptions of cityness – as vibrant moving kaleidoscopes of routine and reinvented quotidian activities – involve ideas of making, making do and living, making things up, improvisation (Amit and Knowles 2016) and constant emergence, so that cities are always in the process of being made. Here outlined in cryptic form, so as to give a sense of the city thinking inspiring this paper, these conceptions of cities are more fully elaborated in the work of theorists such as Colin McFarlane (2011, 2012), Doreen Massey (1999), Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift (2002), and Dan Swanton (2010); while de Certeau (2011) advances conceptions of space as constituted in social activity and practice.

Borrowing selectively from Catherine Malabou’s (2005:5) reworking of Hegel (and Aristotle) provides for our purposes here a useable conception of ‘plastic’, derived from Greek, to suggest a conception of cities as moulded and modelled; being susceptible to changes of form, as well as giving or bestowing form – sculpting – as I am suggesting we think of the relationship between Addis Ababa and its (largely plastic in the material sense) landfill site as co-constituting each other. Plastic materials are particularly relevant here because of their dominance in the fabrics and fabrication of the landfill site. Thus plastic serves as a metaphor, as a material, and as a set of moulding-practices through which to think about cities.

Michael Peter Smith (2005:237, 235), who explores cities’ simultaneously ‘distanciated’ and ‘situated possibilities’, addresses the task at hand particularly well, which is to explore the ways in which trash contributes to city-making, through both intensely local and translocal processes and assemblages. In Smith’s framework too, human agency is both the *medium* and the *outcome* of transnational social networks, underscoring the significance of city’s human fabrics in making and carrying-on city life as improvised repertoires of practices. Enactments of urban life through human agency are always important in developing conceptions of cityness, and in unfurling the logics of city making, but they have a heightened importance in African contexts.

As AbduMaliq Simone (2011:358-9) observes, ‘ In Africa, ordinary citizens have a major role in producing the built environment …personal effort alone is the vehicle of survival …’. In the absence of formal provision, of infrastructures of various kinds, of facilities and of structures of opportunity, urban Africans must make something of their cities; they must know how to enact them, interacting with multiple provisionalities, ‘rigged together from whatever is at hand’ (Simone 2011a:356) and make cities work for them; make a life for them, in collaboration with them. Trash, as I hope to show, is one of the things ‘at hand’, one of the resources capable of carrying some of the provisionalities of urban life; activated as a resource in their making, through the creativity of (some of) Addis’ citizens.

**Koshe**

Koshe, which means ‘dirty’ in Amharic, is the giant landfill site on what was the SE boundary of Addis before the city expanded to meet it. A leper colony sits beside it, suggesting in the arrangement of the built landscape, popular conceptions of contagion and abjection. A highway runs alongside this thirty-six hectare, murky, grey-brown raised area of partially decomposed rubbish, with occasional bright specs of plastic colour. It is patrolled from the air by large birds of prey, diving into the rubbish. Motley crews of wild dogs snatching at the soft ground patrol it at ground level. Smoke rises in several places, adding a layer of haze to the murky colour scheme. It is a stark reminder that trash literally fabricates the urban landscape physically, as well as socially as I hope to show. Trash creates the way things look and smell in this suburb which it dominates, and it creates the way the city itself looks, litter strewn or litter-free. As its substances leech into the soil so trash becomes part of the physical environment it shapes (and poisons), and of course, the siting of dumps, are matters of fierce contention in urban planning. Between the foraging dogs, the smoke, and aerial avian bombardment, heavy machinery operates. Yellow bulldozers nose the heap and shift and level it; municipal rubbish trucks and flatbed trucks with skips arrive from all over the city and discharge their contents. Between the dogs, the birds and the machines are people, dressed in the in the same murky hues as the rubbish dump, backs bent, hooks in hand, working on its surface. They shape the dump and the dump shapes them.

The activities of the dump peak to a frenetic pace with the arrival of new loads, and then fall away, leaving a continuous stream of activity at a slower pace, and a legacy of dust and smoke. As rubbish trucks turn off the main road onto the edge of the site, a group of five or six young men jump on the back and ride to the dumping area with it. This gains them an advantage in grabbing the best items as the truck discharges its load onto the tip, but not without risk. The mechanism that crushes the rubbish occasionally catches a young man in its deadly and disfiguring grasp. As the young men jump off with the rubbish and begin picking items that catch the eye, a line of men and women, that has formed along both sides of the truck, spring into action, grabbing treasure and stashing it in woven plastic sacks. The moment of discharge unleashes a tense scramble for the most valuable items; a competition in which masculine physical strength prevails, and young, agile, women put up a good fight. Scratchers, as I later learn they call themselves, then go on searching, or rest until the next truck arrives, or regroup around the bulldozers unearthing new bounty.

The site has temporal rhythms. Scratchers know what time the trucks arrive from different parts of the city. From eight am through the morning is the busiest time. The dump is geared to the rhythms of municipal collection and transportation and this is one of the ways in which the municipality and the landfill site are mutually constitutive. By five pm things are dying down as the trucks stop for the night, and the scratching continues with fewer scratchers at a slower pace. Scratching is a twenty-four-hour activity I discovered, with people arriving to scratch after their working day is over. Some scratchers’ work throughout the night wearing torches attached to headbands.

**Material textures: plastic**

Sorting through the trash reveals its material and object textures. There are discarded mineral water bottles, bits of packaging and carrier bags. Other plastics include shoes, especially flip-flops, bowls, buckets and plates. There is wood too – broken bits of furniture and other household items. There are lumps of metal, old bits of cars, parts of buildings and other domestic items; even nails are not too small to attract the keen eye of the scratcher. There is leather and other waste from the tanning factories around the city: Addis has a long established leather shoe industry. Dogs gravitate to this part of the dump. There are fabrics from cast-off clothes like jeans, and disused shoes; household objects and other oddments: the occasional rubber tyre. There is waste airline food, plastic glasses and cutlery in plastic bags (still more plastic), the uneaten food of airline passengers providing grazing for a herd of goats on one of my visits.

The content of landfill sites are at one level an inventory of a city’s material culture, a collection of objects gathered for disposal because they no longer provide value for their owners, hinting at broader, shared, social, conceptions of value. These are inevitably linked with both levels of wealth and its distribution in the city and beyond. Ethiopia, where a large proportion of the population live on less than $2 a day, produces lower volumes of rubbish, and rubbish of a different type and character than is produced in richer countries with higher living standards, where cycles of disposal and replacement are shorter, and objects are made from higher quality materials. Landfill sites express and reveal local social inequalities too. It is not hard to imagine the cast offs of affluence and poverty in Addis Ababa are quite different in quality and value from each other, and reallocation between these social categories, from the better off to the poor, is one of the efficiencies and social logics of landfill sites. And so it is at Koshe.

Instead of inventorying *objects* of material culture – there is a growing literature on this anyway, Colloredo-Mansfield (2003) Miller (2008) Appadurai (1986) Maclean (2013) – I want to focus on the *materials* aspect of material culture, which has received far less attention in anthropology which tends to focus on objects. Materials are important for a number of reasons. They are crucial in shaping environmental calculations and concerns about toxicity. They organise the dominant activities of the site, which are about the reclamation of value through recycling, process in which materials trump objects as repositories of value; as in recycling, objects are unmade in order to reclaim their materials for future use in making more objects. While wood and especially metal hold greater value in reclamation, and are niches dominated by men, the dominant material of the dump, in volume terms, is plastic: bottles, bags, packaging, plates, bowls, shoes, stools, chairs. A world of plastics lives on the dump, and, for that matter, other landfill sites, worldwide.

A modernist material invented in the early twentieth-century (1909 as Bakelite), plastics are the dominant material fabricating the world in which we live. Plastic is made into spectacle frames, interior car trim, bumpers, baby seats, electrical wire coating, all kinds of packaging, buckets, bowls, biro casing, telephones, speakers, computers, telephones, shoes, insoles, light fittings and more: it is injected into fabrics made into clothes. Few objects are made without plastic. In places like Ethiopia, where people live on low incomes, cheap plastics compose an even larger proportion of household objects as they are used as seating, for cooking, storage, cleaning and carrying; as well as for shoes, especially flip-flops.

Plastics come in a vast array of molecular structures: arrangements of hydrogen and carbon mixed with chemicals to produce more or less rigid or malleable material for different uses. These are the product of hydrocarbons derived from cracking oil into its components and then combining them with other substances in petrochemical plants, to produce the array of substances from which different kinds of plastics are produced. Only some plastics are recyclable, or, for various reasons recycled; others sit in landfill sites for up to 100 years. The North Pacific Gyre [[2]](#footnote-2), a clockwise spiral current of plankton and a vast amount of trapped waste plastic measuring twenty million square kilometres, is not just the world’s biggest plastic garbage dump, it is the point by which plastic enters the food chain, as fish feed on plankton and people feed on fish, taking plastic into the fabric of human bodies. Plastic could not be a more important material, reason enough for making it the subject of a paper.

Ethiopia has one of the world’s fastest growing economies, growing at more than 10% a year for the last decade [[3]](#footnote-3). But it has no oil and no capacity to turn oil into petrochemicals, meaning that the plastics in the landfill are one of the city’s *translocal* textures. Ethiopia combines a low GDP with relative political stability and a high population (94 million in 2013) [[4]](#footnote-4), factors that make it an important market for cheap plastics, produced in China. Addis Ababa routes a product chain that runs through the Middle East, which dominates the oil supplies used to make Chinese plastics; to places like South Korea, which dominates the global petrochemical industry; to Eastern Chinese factories, churning out vast quantities of plastics; to Ethiopia, one of the key markets globally for cheap plastics. When plastic use values are exhausted they are deposited at Koshe. As Girling (2005:3) suggests: ‘every possession is a piece of junk in waiting’. Addis is connected to China by other translocal conduits too. Koshe is located next to a corridor of Chinese factories making shoes and other things, many of them involving plastics, on Chinese made machinery. Addis Ababa’s ring roads, and other significant infrastructures, are built with Chinese money, technology and labour. Here is just a small fragment of the vast Chinese footprint in Africa (Knowles 2014), an important stimulus to economic growth.

Trash embeds its own forms of geopolitics in disposal and dumping; in being offshored from the global north to places in the global south with lower labour costs for sorting it and weaker environmental protections (Alexander and Reno 2012:1) that overlook scratchers’ health and land pollution. Trash is connected to global markets in recycled material, and these connect Koshe to places where trash has new life as new objects. As Millar (2012:182) suggests, the global connections that compose cities are in part forged through the modality of waste.

Darker trash-making translocal processes are routed through Addis too; processes which raise Ethiopia’s geopolitical significance. What are widely understood to be unstable political circumstances in neighbouring Eritrea and Somalia, as well as broader threats in the region from Islamic groups like Ai-Shabaab, puts Ethiopia on the front line in what George Bush called the ‘war on terror’. Ethiopia along with Djibouti[[5]](#footnote-5) has become an important base for US military operations in Africa, and, relatedly, a major recipient of USAID and UK bilateral aid. Ethiopia is suspected of cooperating with US and UK rendition programmes. Its capital city invisibly routes these translocal processes and their personnel through its airport and hotels.

**Getting by on small money**

The improvised socio-economic logics of getting by in Addis make trash one of the opportunities passing through what has recently become one of its suburban neighbourhoods in Koshe. Two hundred plus scratchers search for items that they can use, sell on salvage markets, or sell to the recycling operations on Koshe’s perimeter. Women dominate the world of plastic recycling leaving the more valuable materials -wood and metal - to men. Plastic bottles – referred to by the women by their brand name ‘Highland’ – the dominant plastic objects on the dump are collected and sacks full of them are carted to the recycling trucks at the edge of the dump to be converted into cash at the end of the day. Although Highland is a precarious source of subsistence, Adina says she earns 120 birr a day or $5.50, which is a lot more than she would make in comparable jobs available to women in her position in the city. Less valuable, bundles of blue and striped plastic bags are gathered for recycling too. Older women and women disabled by dust and blindness and years of bending and scratching, work the bag niche.

This kind of personal effort in sorting trash, often in the face of infirmity, is the only vehicle for survival (Simone 2011:359-60) in the absence of other jobs and family and social support. Adina is only 20, and the city’s high youth unemployment rate, reflecting the lack of formal employment across sectors and underscoring the significance of personal effort, launches her on what Simone calls a ‘repetitive search for small money’. Alexander and Reno (2012:20,1) argue that this kind of scavenging is one of the most important sources of informal employment in the world: and that the remaking involved in recycling remakes us all. In the absence of structures of opportunity ‘opportunistic manoeuvres’ (Simone 2011:357) of various kinds enact and secure the means of survival for Adina and the other scratchers. In providing opportunity and small money, trash produces urban lives *in particular terms*, of which more later.

**Social relationships constructed by trash**

Tensions of various types and textures run through Koshe’s trash, manifesting themselves in the social relationships of scratching and in patterns and types of housing, which also mark differences between the long settled and newer arrivals at the site. Evident in my description of the arrival of the trash trucks and the scrabble this unleashes among scratchers, is the inescapable point that scratching is a highly competitive set of activities. One scratchers prized item deprives another of her living. Men fare better in the scrum than women; the young do better than the old, in these struggles demanding brute strength, speed and agility.

There are two kinds of shelter. As Simone (2011:358) says, ordinary Africans play a major role in producing the built environment. There is a long established village with stable, simple, housing, in family compound arrangement, occupied by a population who once farmed the land with which they have deep and longstanding connections. Relaxing at home in the evenings, the scratchers are unrecognisable, scrubbed and pristine in their non-working clothes, cooking, tending children and animals. Access to the village for newcomers is brokered through a complex network of connections that stretch back to the villages of Koshe’s rural hinterlands; as settled resident farmers were once rural migrants. The village contrasts sharply with the makeshift constructions that look like tents made from plastic and stick that edge the landfill site. These house new arrivals from the countryside and those without the right connections in the village. They house the very old and disabled without other means of support, and those who intend temporary, stopgap, use of the trash until other strategies for survival appear. This is evidently a moving landscape interacting with a mobile stream of people passing through it, as well as a settled population who were once mobile and will be again as the trash fails to sustain them.

Amsalu’s story reveals some of these tensions in the social relations and conceptions of entitlement and connection cohering around Koshe’s trash. He is 38 years old, unmarried because he can’t afford to support a wife and children, and still lives with his parents. He grew up in the village, which lived on subsistence farming, and herded goats from early childhood. Although he still keeps goats, he has always survived on the opportunities that present themselves *near* his village, rather than *move towards* assemblages and circumstances that might sustain him in different ways. He started collecting trash as a young boy when an encampment of Cubans was set up for a time in the vicinity of the village in circumstances he cannot illuminate. Later, he worked as a labourer on the construction of the Chinese highway that runs past the village and the landfill. Once the Chinese road construction was completed he returned to the possibilities offered by trash. Once one of the strong young men of the site, he earned what he describes as a good living by salvaging metals. Now he says, there is less rubbish because it is picked out of the city skips before it is transferred to the dump; and anyway the rural migrants who swell the scratching labour force mean that there is less trash to go around. Those who are more centrally placed in the city than he is in the suburbs are skimming off the valuable trash and impacting his means of survival. The swelling band of new arrivals from the countryside also competes with his survival prospects and makes life for him more difficult to piece together. Consideration of belonging and entitlement and their underlying calculations shape the ways in which he sees the world; these splinter the scratching population and draw their own, shifting, parameters of consociation and competition.

**Comprehending the social geographies of the city**

Trash is the medium through which scratchers understand the social geographies of Addis Ababa. The social hierarchies of the city, read through neighbourhood, are literally materialised in trash. Areas with upscale housing used by Addis’ wealthier residents, the Bole area near the international airport, for example, which has big suburban houses, malls and restaurants, produce some of the city’s best trash. The wealthier segment of translocals passing through the city leave valuable traces in trash too. Airport waste is prized. So too is the waste from hotels like the Hilton and from the compounds on which wealthy temporary residents and trans-nationals working for the African Union, Headquartered in Addis, live. Addis doesn’t have much tourist traffic, but its diplomatic and military significance washes through its restaurants, four star hotels and spas, and thus contribute to trash and the lives of those who live on it.

Scratchers can identify the sources of trash by the colours and markings of the trucks. Different sub-cities use different contractors, which are easily identifiable. They also recognise the sources of trash by the truck drivers who keep to the same routes through the city’s pick-up points. Scratchers know when a collection from Bole is due, and tensions run high as a scramble for the most highly valuable items builds. And so scratchers rework the social geographies of the city from the standpoint of its trash: the standpoint from which they need to understand it in order to get by; the city makes trash, and trash makes the city and their lives.

**Trash and transnational migration**

Discussion of Amsalu’s life (above) also reveals the significance of Koshe as a gateway to the city, to urban life, to its many possibilities for getting by, for rural migrants from all over Ethiopia, with particular kinds of financial and social resources. These are migrants without a family member or co-villager with a business in the city, or with a connection with a business in the city capable of absorbing an extra person. This could be as humble as a coffee stall or a niche in the market as an errand runner, informal and self-generated possibilities. Scratching for some – but not for Amsalu - is a city starter job for new arrivals that provides subsistence until better possibilities arise. These are the people Amsalu complains of. One of them is Adina who came from a village 160 km from Koshe. She says she was ‘introduced’ by someone from her village, which, she says is the only route into the world of trash, entry to which is fiercely guarded.

Less obvious are the translocal migration routes passing through Koshe, and Adina, it turns out, is travelling one of these, and not, as she at first appeared to be, just looking for a way into the city from her village. When I first met her she was new to scratching, grubby and mildly irritated by my questions, like the others. She keeps her mobile phone in a plastic bag to keep it dust free while she works. She collects the plastic bottles that pay her well. Adina already has a passport, but she is saving her money to get a visa so that she can apply for a job as a domestic, a household maid, in the Middle East. She favours Dubai. She says that she plans to work in Dubai for five years and then return with the finances necessary to start her own business. Accumulating even small amounts of capital locally is otherwise impossible for someone in her position. The dump for her is a platform from which she launches herself, sequentially, first as an urban resident and then as a transnational domestic worker. This is, of course, a route taken by other young women she knows.

I have interviewed several domestic workers, once they returned to Addis, about their lives and experiences in the Middle East. One in particular, I’d known for five years and before she left, was transformed by this experience. Returning with the capital to start her own coffee business, she was more confident and cosmopolitan than before she left. With funky cropped and coloured hair and skinny jeans, she was sending her son to school – she is a single parent - and looking after her mum, buying her a TV, a sofa, armchairs and a fridge, all squeezed into her small house near Addis’ central market. She, and the other young women who have travelled these routes, are highly knowledgeable about which are the more liberal regimes and countries to work in; and they are adept at navigating the domestic sensitivities and gender politics of Middle Eastern families. Leaving children, if they have them, with their families in Addis, they intend short stays in order to make money to ‘lift the situation’ of their family, as one of them described it. As domestic workers from the Philippines become organised and demand higher wages and better working conditions (Knowles and Harper 2009), so new streams of global domestic labour emerge to replace them. Adina wants to be one of them; her journey from her village to Dubai passes through the Koshe trash which makes it possible.

**Trash as a mechanism for municipal regulation**

Koshe routes the municipal authorities’ regulatory ambition for the city, making trash important in remaking the city as a more formal space. This ambition consists in a number of layers, which are worth unpicking and examining.

First, is the ambition of disciplining the trash habits of the citizens of Addis Ababa, who are accustomed to making their own arrangements for disposal as in other areas of their lives; often dumping it around the streets, in unused spaces in the city, or in river beds; in consequence certain parts of the city are covered in trash. This has a corollary in the authorities patchy efforts at providing skips and collection points and transport to the landfill site. In poorer cities of the global south, in the context of more pressing needs, trash is rarely a priority.

Secondly, Koshe is regarded by law enforcement agencies as a wild and ungovernable space, over which the authority of a shadow organisation, or mafia, prevails. A band of local ‘strong men’ control the site and grant permission to those who scratch there, most likely in exchange for fees. They informally police its more violent eruptions of competitive behaviour, settling the most serious and lethal disputes between scratchers. The local police, with some success, was contesting this ‘outlaw’ control of the site at the time of my visit. Arrests and successful prosecution of key shadow operators were in process. The police believe that this ungovernable space, run by and for ungovernable subjects, harbours the criminal end of the informal spectrum. Between the municipal authorities and the police, asserting control over the site would incorporate it into the fledgling structures of urban regulation and formalisation. Ultimately, these will bring significant changes in the character of the city and the ways in which it operates.

Control of the site is being shifted to those scratchers who have been brought onto the municipal payroll, like Amsalu. He says:

 ‘I get a salary as a guard of the compound. They hired me, and on my off times I can find things. I have a sense of belonging to the things that happen around this place so if something bad happens I will help out with that. Also organising where the trucks will dump things. I have spent twenty-five years here. The (municipal) government pays me five hundred and twenty-five birr ($24 US) a month. I can sell up to five hundred or a thousand in (recycling) in three months. I oversee the machines. I try to normalise things when people are in disputes, as a human and as a senior person here, not as a guard…

 If I get a very serious fight with blood running I will separate them and ask them not to do it again. But if they go beyond my capacity I leave them to do what they want. But often the cause of conflict is a language barrier …when they communicate with each other they misunderstand. This is the starting point for the conflict most of the time. … Since we have the right to take what we want, we can stand where we like. We don’t have a place to stand…. There is no opportunity beyond this for the time being… so it is better to come here. Even the government don’t leave us in peace; because we are jobless they might consider us disobedient guys so they will smash us and put us in prison’.

Amsalu reveals his lack of options and his fear of the police in what is essentially an authoritarian state – which imprisons its journalists and sometimes its professors – and it’s in this context that he has chosen to become part of the official apparatus governing the site. His boss, the site supervisor, who has an office made out of a container housing office equipment of a rudimentary kind, also employed by the municipality, directs the garbage trucks and the bulldozers and controls access to the site overall. He reports to the city office responsible for organising trash, the Addis Ababa City Government Solid Waste Recycling and Disposal Project office.

The site supervisor and the City Government Solid Waste and Recycling Project collaborate in their regulatory efforts with an NGO, referred to by scratchers as ‘the association’ that does neighbourhood community work. The association brokers links directly with the recycling factories, cutting out the middlemen on the edge of the site, which many scratchers sell to, and thus securing them higher pay. The association also facilitates the rotation of jobs on the site around people’s capacities. This makes it unnecessary for older, disabled or unwell scratchers to be involved in the competitive scrum for materials. Instead they can sort and bag – allowing them work they can do in support of those who are equal to the scrum. Wages are pooled among team members so that all benefit from the work to which they contribute.

But scratchers are suspicious of these initiatives and they were, and still are, fiercely resisted. The men refused to be involved. An NGO worker told me that they ‘took the money and ran’. And sometimes they beat up the NGO workers. The only scratchers who will co-operate with the association are women who need to feed their children. This creates further tensions among scratchers along the axes of gender, age, strength and need. It gives the municipal authorities further control over the scratching workforce as it stabilises and formalises it into a regulated recycling enterprise.

Municipal government plans for the future will create further tensions as they propose to close the site completely and establish a new landfill site to the North of the city 40km from the centre. During my last visit work was underway preparing and fencing the site. The city is growing and the dumpsite must move. Large detached houses have been built close to Koshe and the land is clearly of interest to developers. Four transfer sites serving the city, where rubbish will be sorted to identify what can be recycled, will feed the new site. Through the association there are plans to re-employ ex-scratchers in these new rubbish enterprises. But this will involve them moving to different parts of the city. It is unlikely that the men will co-operate with these moves either, and privately the authorities confess that they are nervous about unleashing this ungovernable, unmoored population on the city when Koshe finally closes and two hundred and more scratchers are deprived of a living with few alternatives, leaving them to improvise new, as yet unimagined, manoeuvres in order to get by. These moves are part of the instabilities of uncertain futures.

**Conclusions**

From the standpoint of the municipality these uncertain futures include turning the Koshe landfill site into a biomass electricity plant. One of material’s most interesting properties is their instability; the ways in which one material substance becomes another (Bennett 2010) entirely, shifting alongside the mutating landscape they co-compose and the insecurities people will live in navigating it. As materials unwind and decompose in the landfill they emit lively streams of methane gas as one form of matter becomes another, reminding us that the objects in the landfill, all objects, are fragile and unstable: they belong to a temporary moment (Crang, Gregson, Ahmed, Ferdous and Akhtel 2012). Trash trashes the land (Girling 2005:71) at the same time as it provides a means of subsistence. As the biomass electricity-generating plant is intended as a joint venture in co-operation with a UK company based in Cambridge, this opens a further strand of translocality, while closing the route that brought Adina to Koshe on her way to the Middle East. Disused plastic objects that cannot be recycled will be turned into electricity, servicing local households domestic requirements, running appliances.

Rubbish dumps are, indeed, one of the places where urban locales and translocalities are generated, as I hope I have shown. In this paper I have endeavoured to show the significance of rubbish in the co-production of urban form, suggesting that the Koshe landfill site is one of the places where Addis Ababa is made, and where the regulation of informality is practiced by the local state. In many ways this replicates and rehearses similar regulatory practices attempted elsewhere in the city around other processes of urban-making and the population that must get by on the ad hoc informalities the city offers. I have shown how the practice of urban life and the making of its lifeworlds are co-produced, and continually so, by rubbish. I have argued that far from producing solidarities among scratchers the activities of the dump produce their own tensions in social relationships and fracture the scratching workforce along competitive lines, only some of which can be overridden by the association. And finally, I have identified some of the substance of the urban translocalities that pass through and compose the site, and which include transnational migration, the outputs of Chinese plastic factories, and translocal markets in recycled materials. What we have here is one of the humbler junctions through which translocality is composed.

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 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [www.education.nationalgeographic.org](http://www.education.nationalgeographic.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [www.afdb.org](http://www.afdb.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [www.ethiopiapopulation](http://www.ethiopiapopulation) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/8c33eefc-f6c1-11e5-803c-d27c7117d132.html>

checked 28.04.2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)