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## Dump

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By Anne Berg

South Africa, 1994. Apartheid before, democracy after. Nonetheless, obstinate continuities stretch across this important rupture. Bisasar Road Landfill, the largest registered landfill on the African continent, constitutes a site of such a continuity, inviting obstinacies of various kinds. It is these obstinacies that have lured me to this particular “dump.”

Dumps, along with landfills, incinerators, waste-to-energy plants are technologies of concealment. I wonder what they hide. Most environmental activists, scholars, entrepreneurs, politicians, humanitarian aid workers, and journalists focus on the technology – crude as it is in case of a dump – and its myriad failures to successfully deliver on its promise to lastingly disappear the “stuff.” Yet, dumps merely disappear wastes politically. Materially, wastes become altered, shrunk, transformed, archived. What disappears are histories – histories of local tensions, collaborations, struggles, injustices, opportunities. As contentions over waste technologies escalate, as social forces mobilize and polarize, the entangled histories of these dynamics remain in the muted background. They would only complicate the agendas of the numerous interest groups who fight over what the dump signifies, whom it serves, whom it injures.

Bisasar Road Landfill opened in 1980, in the northern part of Durban. Over its 35 year lifespan, it has accepted roughly 19 million tons of waste in total. In 2008 the landfill was approved as a United Nations CDM (clean development mechanism) project, which enabled the collection of landfill gas (methane) and its subsequent use in the production of electricity. The CDM was controversial, to say the least. Bisasar Road Landfill ceased operations on January 18, 2016. Closed to commercial customers, the site continues to accept garden refuse, cover material and construction debris. And of course, the landfill will continue to produce methane gas for roughly thirty more years, promising to extend controversy for at least as long.

From the perspective of eco-feminist Sajida Khan, Bisasar was a racist dump. Sited in one of Durban’s predominantly Indian and “colored” communities under the Apartheid regime, the dump placed unwanted substances with unwanted people. The facilities accepted not only

household waste, but sewage sludge, industrial, toxic and medical wastes, the latter of which were burned in a clandestine incinerator. In 1994, residents in the Clare Estate neighborhood had reason to hope that the end of Apartheid would suspend landfill operations. Instead, the post-Apartheid government extended the permit in 1996. Led by Khan, who had just been diagnosed with cancer, local activists in Clare Estate mobilized in opposition. Khan continued her fight against municipal authorities until her death in 2007.

The arrival of global players on the scene, however, changed the dynamics. Introducing a new mechanism for carbon reductions with the Kyoto Protocol of 2007, which Heidi Bachram provocatively called “permits to pollute,” the United Nations essentially created carbon trading schemes that allow signatory countries to meet their carbon targets by outsourcing CO<sub>2</sub> reductions to non-signatory countries. The UN goal was simple enough, and lofty: To link green politics with development.

But red and green agendas did not easily align. Soon, Khan found herself in a fight over South African’s “highest profile CDM-project” (Bond, 7). The CDM supported by the municipality of eThekweni and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development promised to “reduce an aggregated 2,650,359 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> in the first 7 year crediting period.” Part of this reduction would be achieved by flaring and combusting landfill methane, converting it to CO<sub>2</sub>, a less potent greenhouse gas. The CDM further envisioned that the electricity generated and fed into the grid could replace coal fired power plants.

Khan’s story is told in scholarly articles and books, on websites of environmental and social justice activists. By the time the CDM was implemented in 2008, Khan had already died from cancer. For some, her story became emblematic for the exploitation of Third World. To others, Khan’s story is evidence for the green-tinged petro-imperialism of the World Bank and the United Nations. The global players tell a story not of death and exploitation, but of sustainable visions and moderate success. Even though the World Bank had pulled out of the Bisasar Road Landfill project, it continues to advertise the successes of gas recovered via CDM at similar sites in the area. Corporations, too, are green-slapping their own backs. Siemens AG reported in 2011 that Durban is among Africa’s greenest cities, and highlights the planting of 62,500 trees before the 2010 World Cup. The trees, insists the report, were not only more pleasant to look at than the rubbish they hid from view, but also improved the lives of low income residents around dump-sites by encouraging “wildlife to flourish” and potentially “absorbing some of the smells from the landfill.” (Siemens, 61)

While the Siemens’ report deliberately ignores (hides) the social and

environmental inequalities that pervade greening projects, the United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) at least made the effort to incorporate the views and concerns of local stakeholders prior to the implementation of the CDM. Stakeholders – mainly organized groups invested in the beautification and protection of their natural (and propertied) environments – raised numerous concerns, ranging from odor control and health risks to property values and community involvement.

Around the same time as the municipal dump was opened on Bisasar Road, poor black Africans from rural areas, fleeing racial violence or searching for opportunities, covertly built shacks and gradually formed the informal settlement now known as Kennedy Road. Squeezed between Clare Estate and the dump, the settlement has now about 10,000 residents. Although officially forbidden from entering the landfill, many residents have not only relied on the dump for building materials, but also retrieved and sold recyclables (Pithouse, 35-61). Armed guards would keep waste pickers out during regular operating hours, but registered pickers were allowed to enter the premises for “controlled scavenging” after hours (Johannessen, 14-15). With the end of Apartheid, the rights of the shack dwellers were formally recognized and hopes rose for access to adequate housing promised by the Constitution.

But like the hopes of the eco-activists in Clare Estate for a closure of the dump, the shack dwellers’ hopes for secure tenure and improved sanitation, water, and electricity were disappointed. By 2005 this disappointment, which was hardly limited to the shack dwellers on Kennedy Road, had begun to articulate itself as a movement. Abahlali baseMjondolo originally crystalized at Kennedy Road but now represents over 30,000 shack dwellers across South Africa. Fights over evictions, slum clearance, and access to water and electricity continue. The “slow violence” of everyday living is occasionally interrupted by repression, armed attacks, and police violence (Nixon). In the shack dwellers’ story, the dump blends into the background and serves merely as a marker to describe the geographic and social location of Kennedy Road residents.

Similarly, the shack dwellers are barely worth a footnote in the CDM design protocol. Only a tiny entry records the Settlement Association’s concerns, which the UN was quick to brush aside, claiming that the implementation of the CDM would affect community opportunities for scavenging and collecting recyclables. The neighboring communities — or in UN lingo, the stakeholders – had conflicting interests. The middle class residents hoped to enforce the closure of the dump and the installation of a buffer zone to residential areas. To them, the “informal residents” and their potential “negligence and theft of equipment” were the problem, not potential allies. As Khan opined on one occasion, they might better “be moved off the land, to areas nearby” (Bond, 49). The shack dwellers in

turn accused Khan of jeopardizing their very livelihoods. From the perspective of the eco-activists, the closure of the dump would benefit all. The shack dwellers did not concur.

For one community the rotten smells and toxic environments are clearly associated with the dump. For the other, the dump is merely one of many toxic manifestation of everyday realities. The UN, international NGOs, investors, and banks played a role in amplifying the conflict, and as a result were able to legitimize their continued local involvement. In the eyes of the eco-activists, the shack dwellers appeared to make common cause with the global agents of carbon colonialism. Charges of environmental racism continued, even though they were complicated by the documented support of poor black Africans for the CDM project. The poorest of the poor hoped that the presence of global organizations and the resulting media coverage would lend weight to their demands for adequate housing, access to sanitation and electricity, and safety from police and other violence. The underlying conflict between various stakeholders allowed the UN, the international NGOs and financial organizations to cast their interventions not only in a greener light, but also as a response to social pressures on the ground. By implication, the fight against the dump and the carbon trading scheme appeared insensitive to the exacerbating inequalities within post-Apartheid South Africa, which no longer neatly mapped onto lines drawn by race and color.

Environmental justice groups, such as GroundWorks and the researchers affiliated with them, try to account for the competing perspectives of the different communities involved. They stress the links between poverty and environmental degradation and place the blame for the waste problem and its envisioned techno-fixes at the feet of global capital and its numerous avatars who extend the “system.” The “system” in turn renders the tensions between various local interest groups and social classes mute, directing the focus toward the global climate regime powered by the dominant mode of economic production – capitalism.

Capitalism may be a logical culprit, but it’s an evasive target. In such a story, waste and wastefulness become the chief global problem against which local differences in access to power appear less crucial and largely disconnected. Instead of classed and placed interests, GroundWorks and others offer a unifying vision. A vision that – lest it surprise us – is sponsored by international NGOs, too. I can’t help but wonder when NGOs will feel compelled to follow the lead of tobacco giants, and advertise new initiatives with qualifiers such as “sustainability seriously harms you and others around you.”



[Anne Berg](#) is a lecturer at the University of Michigan, where she teaches courses on the History of National Socialism, World History and the History of Garbage. Trained as a historian of Modern Germany and Europe, Berg increasingly ventures into more global terrain. She studies cities, war, public leisure, film, popular culture, and is most deeply interested the global politics of waste and recycling. Berg's research proceeds along a number of parallel tracks, connected by a sustained interest in the visual, the spatial and the material. The manuscript of her first book *Urban Legends the Making of the Nazi City* is currently under review and she is now working on a second book project entitled *Empire of Rags and Bones: Waste and War in Nazi Germany*. Most recently, the dump has captured her historical imagination...

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