# Body

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By Joshua O. Reno

It is increasingly impossible to think of the problem of waste, or discarded and denigrated materials, separately from the problem of race, or discarded and denigrated people. There are at least two ways to think about this association: in terms of proximity or consubstantiality and in terms of resemblance or metaphorical substitution. On the one hand, people and communities of color are more likely to be exposed to the toxicity of waste disposal sites, which represent the slow violence of accumulated bodily risks. On the other hand, people and communities of color are more likely to be affected by direct violence from law enforcement and the legal system. In both cases, black bodies are at risk, but where the former involves proximity to toxicity and waste, the latter involves being dismissed and dehumanized as if they were nothing but human waste. These twin ways of assessing the relationship between waste and race have arguably led to two distinct social movements in response, including the environmental justice movement and Black Lives Matter. In this paper, I link these twin approaches to black bodies and/as waste, which I suggest are mutual products of shared historical and material conditions.

Consider these two familiar scenarios.

- An African-American boy is shot and killed by a police officer who claims he was resisting arrest. Polls indicate that more than half of white Americans believe race has no impact on the use of deadly force by police officers (Dalia 2015). Despite the efforts of Black Lives Matter and other social movements to challenge this view, millions still blame the child for posing a danger to the police officer, their family for not raising them properly, or their neighbors for allowing crime in their community. Furthermore, the "Blue Lives Matter" movement argues that it is really police who are at risk from criminals and deadly force is therefore justifiable.
- An African-American mother-to-be is told by a physician that her offspring will likely be at greater risk of hypertension and diabetes because of their West African genetic ancestry. The likelihood of acquiring these conditions increases as a result of poor diet and lack of exercise, which are also blamed for a growing "obesity epidemic" nationwide—and the largest category of people

considered obese or overweight are African-American women, at 80%. According to some conservative commentators, therefore, black people represent a greater burden on the American health care system, forcing everyone else to assume the risk of their "inherited" traits and poor habits.

In these seemingly disconnected examples, a person of color is considered dangerous to others or to themselves. In both cases, the vulnerability of a black body is associated with the vulnerability of a larger, unmarked (i.e. white) social collective, whether that of the city or nation. In each case, furthermore, the geo-historical conditions that made possible these tendencies and associations are obscured from view. Consequently, that black body seems as if it were inherently vulnerable and threatening, rather than the product of racializating processes and policies reaching across the Atlantic.

If all communities draw boundaries between who belongs and who doesn't, modern states and global formations go further. They tend to identify certain subjects as socially excessive and expendable as a result of their marginalized or "outsider" status. In these cases, people are treated as if they were mere waste. The idea of human waste in this sense is central to everything from secure borders to capitalist labor markets (see [Caverly](#)).

Racial classification has long served as a global technique for enfleshing and exploiting persons as waste. On the one hand, I want to argue that geo-historical relationships produce racialized structural violence. Moreover, I want to argue that the way in which they do so—in terms of "Race"—helps to dissimulate and conceal the systemic nature of this process. I focus in particular on polices that materialize black vulnerability and superfluity imperceptibly, such that their causal role in black suffering and death in less often remarked upon.

Put another way, black bodies are made to appear as if they were *iconically* disposable as waste, meaning that they appear to be so not as a result of explicit symbolism (e.g., racist state propaganda) or indexical causality (e.g., historical circumstance) but in and of themselves. In this way, the hidden and uneven distribution of harm and neglect across various scales begets Race—a historically derived yet apparently "natural" form—the acceptance and spread of which only worsens the uneven distribution of resources and harms, laying waste to black lives.

**Collateral Damage**

In the contemporary U.S., many consider black deaths at the hands of police allowable, if regretable, as if it were a sacrifice made on behalf of the population as a whole—mere collateral damage. Those who seek to account for the disproportionate number of black men and boys processed through the justice system commonly appeal to high rates of urban black poverty. While it seems like a neutral, sociological explanation, this equation runs the risk of re-naturalizing black asociality on a collective scale, as in "culture of poverty" arguments.

There is another side to the ongoing crisis of black deaths, including those of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice and many others, which has to do with the increasing militarization of police and their discrimination against African-American boys and men. The dialectical relationship between the military and police, blurred by their respective position viz. the nation-state, becomes apparent through the spread of securitization as domestic and global policy.

The prison and military industrial complexes of the U.S. work in concert to produce surplus masculinities (terrorist/criminal) that embody risks to the social collective (Cowen and Siciliano, 2011). This blurring of the relationship between police and military is not merely institutional or ideological but technical. It involves new tools of discipline, new weapons and tactics, and new harms to those disciplined. While the social impact of the privatization of prisons has received more attention recently, the "wars" on drugs, crime, and now terror have also led to a massive "weapons transfer" from the military to the policing sector (Kraska, 2007).



U.S. Marshal Service Tools. Source: U.S. Government, Wikimedia Commons

Weapons manufacturers that lose out on contracts for the US military, increasingly target other uniformed personnel, whom they seek to equip with the latest and most powerful weaponry. This literal transfer of military weapons, suggests a shift toward a more militarized conception of policing and public space. And this weapons transfer is increasingly directed to private citizens as well, some of whom take the law into their own hands to protect themselves from people they deem to be threatening. It was on the basis of this justification, for example, that George Zimmerman was found not-guilty for killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012.

Debates about police killings of citizens focus so much on whether black bodies are a threat to police safety or victims of police aggression, that they typically avoid the question of whether police should be armed at all and with what. But one of the reasons for the deaths and injuries to suspects and protestors at the hands of police (and private citizens) has to do with the proliferation of weapons to aid in securitization and the increasing lethality of even "non-lethal" tools like the taser. As a more heavily armed police force, increasingly trained in urban pacification and riot control, confront systematically disenfranchised communities of color, the predictable result are violent and racialized confrontations, as in the escalating number of black civilian deaths or the violent crackdown against Ferguson protestors in 2014.

And the victims of this violence can be abstracted from wider geo-historical relations and corporate profits and be interpreted instead as a supposedly disobedient and unruly Race.

**Junk DNA**

Being black in America is bad for your health, and is made worse by the persistence of a racial-genetic model in biomedicine. Many more African-Americans die from diabetes and cardiovascular disease than white Americans and infant mortality rates are also much higher. The epidemiological literature has a tendency to make these comparisons without necessarily accounting for them, which is one of the reasons that arguments persist that it is the different ancestral genes of blacks and whites that accounts for these massive disparities in health outcomes.

Clarence Gravlee argues that the apparent biological evidence of real racial difference is better accounted for as the consequence of exposure to racism, which has been demonstrated to enhance the stress experienced by black adults, including pregnant women (2009: 52). The toxicity of racial prejudice and inequality quite literally seeps into the hearts and wombs of black bodies, worsening health and reproducing—for some

medical professionals—the problematic belief that black bodies are inherently vulnerable.

In this sense, the embodiment of Race in the form of ill health represents, not familiar instances of structural violence, but a form of what Rob Nixon calls *slow violence*: "[a] violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed in time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2011: 2). Nixon focuses on environmental catastrophes that occur outside the ordinary spatio-temporal rhythms of human experience, but this is no less true of health outcomes, like obesity. Slow violence is linked with and similar to structural violence, which Nixon points out is similarly resistant to critique and analysis as a result of spatio-temporal distanciation between cause and effect, agent and outcome.

There are other causal influences that are not normally associated with the slow violence of embodied toxicity. Insofar as diabetes and cardiovascular disease are also caused by poor diet, one can also trace the slow violence of racialized health outcomes to the proliferation of High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS) in the food market (Johnson et al., 2007). Corn Syrup was an artificial replacement for imported sugar as a result of the Cold War embargo on Cuba and a related subsidization of domestic corn-producers. The cheapest foods are now the unhealthiest. The consequence is the same as with weapons transfers: the impact is born disproportionately by black bodies, who carry a record of the toxicity strategically placed into the food supply as part of international and domestic policy.



Corn tassels in Warren County, Indiana, 2008. Source: Huw Williams, Wikimedia Commons

And the toxicity of that slow violence can be abstracted from wider geo-historical relations and corporate profits and instead be interpreted as

a product of their supposedly genetically inherited and culturally learned Race.

## Conclusions

The leftover detritus of Cold War histories have resulted in the differential embodiment of vulnerability and expendability along racial lines. Made unhealthy and killable, black bodies become human waste, offering apparent proof 'in the flesh' of racializing imaginaries.

It is no different, arguably, with West Africans blamed for the spread of epidemics like Ebola virus, whose medical infrastructure has crumbled as a result of the withdrawal of Cold War funds they once relied upon, or African dictatorships and wars blamed on ancient tribal divisions, despite their complicated emergence from colonial and post-colonial global relationships. In all of these cases black subjects are inherently blamed for the violence done to them, which is re-encoded as Race.

One could argue that scholars are also complicit in this process. As philosopher Tommy J. Curry writes, provocatively:

> Far too often Black men and boys are recognized only as summaries of raw sociological data: idle collateral, figureless subjects vacated in person and defined by number. These Black males are thought to be little more than the numbers which indicate that Black males are social problems: on the street, inevitably dead, or permanently locked away. Black males are not imagined as living human beings…Their lives are not seen, because death is normal for him; he—they—are disposable (Curry 2016).

Following Curry, one could argue that the implicit iconization of black bodies as Race runs parallel to the explicit symbolization, by scholars, of black bodies as nothing but an empty series, one victim's name listed after another, after another. We may list names and cite figures, but show nothing of their subjective particularity. They are pure number: form emptied of content. By contrast, an emphasis on the singularity of specific subjects is evident in one prominent response to racialized violence associated with Black Lives Matter, which is the reproduction of particular names, photos, and speech (e.g., "I can't breathe").

Protesters at a "Justice For Trayvon" rally, Staten Island, 2013. Source: Thomas Altfather Good, Wikimedia Commons

In claiming continuity between these examples, am I—a white, male scholar—evacuating the excess of actual, black bodies, voices, and lives? Is my analysis similarly toxic in its equation of blackness with ill-fated mass death? We need to remember that the lived reality of black lives will challenge the apparently "natural" iconicity of Race itself. This is necessary lest their formal rendering in sociological accounts reproduce black disposability in another register. That we cannot resolve this tension entirely is part and parcel of the shared, violent origins that bind together the co-production of Race and seemingly "neutral" scholarly accounts, including this one.

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*on various types of waste, mammalian, municipal and, most recently, militaristic, particularly their significance for political movements and global markets and their emergent entanglement with human and non-human life. With Catherine Alexander he co-edited* Economies of Recycling *(2012) on the myriad social relations and informal markets that develop around the reuse of waste. His ethnography,* [Waste Away: Working and Living with a North American Landfill](#) *(2016), is based on fieldwork as a paper picker at a large landfill in the rural outskirts of Detroit, as well as an associate of local activists opposed to the landfill. He is in the process of writing a new book,* War Machine Waste*, on the waste of the American military industrial complex, based on research with abandoned and reused military equipment and forgotten sites of destructive creation.*

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