

*Waste Matters: Urban Margins in Contemporary Literature*

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*Waste Matters* examines the depiction of waste management in slums and locations situated on the margins of urban centres, in novels, non-fiction narratives, films, photographs and visual artworks. This text is situated within the interdisciplinary field of Waste Studies and it draws on a wide range of theories and disciplines. The relationship between social justice and environmental justice is evaluated throughout the book, as Harrison builds on Mary Douglas's seminal text *Purity and Danger* (1966), which examines purity and taboo. In *Waste Matters*, Harrison evidences how literary criticism in the field of waste studies shows how waste is 'figured as both a physical problem and unwelcome social status' (5). Harrison discusses urban waste, which she defines as 'things, places and people that have commonly been discarded' (6). Literary criticism in waste studies has hitherto been limited to American texts but Harrison goes beyond this by analysing contemporary postcolonial texts. In doing so, Harrison brings together postcolonial theory and ecocriticism. This monograph will be invaluable not only for post-colonial and ecocritical literary scholars but also for waste studies researchers more broadly – particularly those studying art, film, media, sociology and urban geography.

*Waste Matters* opens with Harrison's arresting description of Kwei Quartey's novel *Children of the Street* (2011), which portrays Agbogbloshie slum in Accra, Ghana. The slum dwellers in the novel are exposed to toxic chemicals as they sort through electronic waste. Harrison's analysis compares the treatment of the discarded e-waste with the treatment of the slum dwellers. This introduction sets the tone for the rest of the book, which does not shy away from harshly condemning the treatment of those living on urban fringes.

Chapter one focuses on Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco* (1992) set in Fort-de-France, Martinique. *Texaco* has much in common with Quartey's novel in its depiction of gleaning. This literary text, however, is, as Harrison notes, 'polyphonic' and 'self-reflexive' (23) as Chamoiseau includes the oral history of the founder of Texaco slum in the fictional narrative. Referencing Chamoiseau's work as both an author and an activist, Harrison makes

it clear that many authors who discuss urban waste often go to great lengths to research real-life slums and they take seriously the task of raising awareness of local environmental and social issues. Harrison states that ‘in his unique attempt to historicise slum existence, Chamoiseau depicts a local experience with increasing global resonance’ (24) and she likewise draws attention to the importance of both the local and global contexts in *Children of the Street*.

Harrison’s comparative global analysis makes it clear that although each novel is speaking to a specific local context, there are many shared themes across the texts in relation to environmental and social conditions. This strongly supports Harrison’s claim that these texts can offer insights into environmental and social issues in urban cities around the world. In chapters two, three and four, Harrison analyses Chris Abani’s novel *Graceland* (2004), set in Lagos, Nigeria; Dinaw Mengestu’s novel *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007) set in Washington DC, USA; and Suketu Mehta’s novel *Maximum City* (2004) set in Bombay, India. All the novelists Harrison discusses in *Waste Matters* set their novels either in their birth country or in a country that they have close connections to. There is a clear sense that the authors are consciously choosing to highlight marginalised people and places known to them, in order to make these people and places more visible internationally.

In the final chapter, Harrison examines two documentaries: *Waste Land* (2010) directed by Lucy Walker and *Trash Dance* (2013) directed by Andrew Garrison. *Waste Land* portrays Vik Muniz’s ‘transformation of Rio de Janeiro’s trash pickers into mixed media portraits’ (117). *Trash Dance* depicts Allison Orr choreographing a dance involving garbage workers in Austin, Texas. Harrison includes these documentaries to ‘complement the literary representations’ (117) discussed in the previous chapters. These documentaries showcase how artists and performers can include and collaborate with local refuse workers in creative pieces that highlight urban waste. Although Harrison acknowledges that some commentators argue that these public engagement pieces are exploitative, she also states that in both cases the local workers involved had positive experiences. Again, these artistic pieces and documentaries, like the literary texts examined, highlight the relationship between creativity and activism in waste studies.

In *Waste Matters*, Harrison synthesises a wide range of critical theories and cultural objects, providing an astute commentary on the throwaway culture and its impacts both social and environmentally. The clear and direct writing style ensures that students and non-specialist readers will be able to understand and learn from this text. In the last few years, there has been more environmental fiction that discusses urban waste published. Many of

these texts are set in, and written by authors from, the global south. These include: Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017), Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* translated by Ken Liu (2019) and Chinese sci-fi short stories in Ken Liu's anthologies *Invisible Planets* (2016) – most notably Hao Jingfang's Hugo award-winning “Folding Beijing” – and *Broken Stars* (2019). By exploring literary and creative pieces from around the world, Harrison has paved the way for future scholars to further examine the local and global implications of urban waste in contemporary culture.