

# Changing Registers of Visibility: Immigrant Labor and Waste Work in Naples, Italy

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## *Abstract*

In recent years, growing emphasis on green economies and green capitalism have brought renewed attention to the waste practices of all places of work, including ones that are not directly linked to neither production nor waste management, such as schools, offices, and stores, as well as households, which European countries, in particular, are increasingly depicting as key sites of intervention for recycling economies. This trend represents a departure from historical waste management policies, which tend to view waste and waste work as separate from main economic and household activities, but is consistent with market economies' trend of outsourcing dirty, demeaning, and dangerous labor to precarious and informal workforces, while at the same time granting them only limited legal access to waste materials and trash collection sites. The new forms of waste labor emerging from green capitalism's emphasis on private and small-scale recycling behaviors are largely invisible and unpaid; however, unlike more documented forms of global environmental racism denouncing the outsourcing of toxic materials to the Global South, they take place in industrialized countries where they are pushed upon disenfranchised minorities, such as informal workers, racialized ethnic minorities, and low-income women. In this article we examine women's participation in waste work through the lenses of waste, (in)visibility, and intersectionality. We draw on ethnographic and archival data collected in the city of Naples, Italy, an area with a prolonged history of toxic waste contamination and waste mismanagement which in recent years have drawn renewed scrutiny to public waste management as well as to everyday waste practices performed in households and workplaces, predominantly by women of different race and citizenship backgrounds. Through these experiences, we highlight how the increasing visibility of waste generated by green capitalism, coupled with the stigmatization and criminalization of informal waste collection and recycling, is generating new forms of social inequalities and exclusion.

## *Introduction*

"Some people will shout things at you in the street—because you have dark skin, you are a woman or because you are carrying a garbage bag. Whatever the reason, I don't acknowledge them, and move on" (Anne, July 23, 2014).

This quote introduces how a migrant from the Dominican Republic experienced moving through public spaces in Naples, Italy, and how these experiences reflect considerations of environmental justice, as well as widespread

but better-known issues of xenophobia and gender inequalities. Starting from the mid-2000s, the entire region of Campania, in the South of Italy, has been suffering from prolonged interruptions of trash collection in the region's densely-populated urban areas, and of illegal dumping of toxic waste in more remote rural peripheries.

Faced with such challenges, both in cities and rural peripheries, many locals sought to increase their recycling habits both at home and at work. However, as is often the case with work that is deemed dirty and dangerous, taking out the garbage or recycling materials is a task that more privileged members of society gladly outsource to disenfranchised workers. Anne had migrated to Italy in the 1990s in search of a better-paying job. She had secured work as a live-in personal assistant to elderly and chronically ill individuals, a line of work that comes with the expectation that she would also be a housekeeper for her employers' family. Increasingly, in recent years such chores include the handling of domestic waste—a chore that augmented the scrutiny she already received in public places as a working-class woman of color in a middle-class, white-majority host society.

In this article we analyze waste labor through the matrix of waste, (in)visibility, and intersectionality. We focus on an unexamined sphere of waste labor: female domestic migrant workers.\* We do so for several reasons. First, we want to acknowledge and contribute to the recent trend in discard studies to look further upstream from downstream sites of treatment and disposal. This is necessary for policy reasons, namely due to the need to incorporate interests, practices, and spatial and temporal limitations to waste reduction and sorting. This upstream focus is also necessary because with the “greening” of capitalism, waste work now invades all workplaces, even those that are not about waste recovery and are not even in manufacturing. Schools, hospitals, libraries, and corporate offices have adopted various rules that range from the formal to the more informal through the intermediate “best practices” that prescribe proper waste handling actions to employees. Like the recycling labor expected of households, this too is largely invisible and unremunerated. Second, we want this field to reflect that waste labor is increasingly performed not only by geographically distant Others in the Global South, as especially the research on e-waste export shows, but by spatially proximate ethnic and religious Others in the Global North. In this we are following in Nicky Gregson<sup>1</sup> and her research team's footsteps, as they showed how Polish immigrants do the dirtiest part of waste work that allows Britain to make progress towards “the circular economy.” Third, we want to engage with the concept of intersectionality. Waste has certainly been shown to operate with its own intersectionality to the extent that variables of race, class, and gender have all been demonstrated to correlate with exposure to toxic waste and with low status jobs of waste picking and sorting, as well as cleaning in general. Our intention is to “thicken” the concept of intersectionality by showing that the usual sociological categories of difference and inequality manifest and exert their influence differently when viewed in the context of waste work and when paired with varying forms and degrees

of visibility. To put this differently, gender, ethnicity, legal status, and nationality will make for different social experiences and make possible different forms of control over one's life depending on how these social dimensions are made to matter in waste work and depending on the gaze a waste worker is subjected to.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The relationship between waste and work has received a lot of attention in the budding waste/discard scholarship. Historical studies have demonstrated the ways in which different societies and cultures included or excluded waste from main economic and household activities,<sup>2</sup> and the shifts in the prestige attached to this work of displacement<sup>3</sup> as the value of the discarded materials changed.<sup>4</sup> By doing so, these studies demonstrate a familiar pattern in which the status of the actors collecting and sorting the waste is closely tied to the value of the material wastes they manage: for example, informal collectives and workers tend to be left with the least profitable types of discards. State socialism was no exception to this trend. In centrally planned economies, where the state was the main owner and operator of production facilities, strategic waste materials, primarily metal scrap, had been strictly regulated and their collection, distribution, and reuse severely regulated, while less strategic, mostly consumer good discards, such as leather, rubber, and textiles, were left for the secondary cooperative sector.<sup>5</sup>

Recently, as supranational, national, and local governments began placing a greater emphasis on reuse and recycling within global environmentalist frameworks, this trend can be found in the coercive replacement of scavenging, non-profit, and non-governmental waste collection entities by for-profit professional and high-tech waste management firms, a process that frequently goes hand in hand with the criminalization of informal waste labor.<sup>6</sup> This global trend in professionalization has been hailed as increasing the efficiency and hygiene of waste operations, and has often merged with the social engineering efforts of municipal governments to break the waste-criminality nexus that is so common,<sup>7</sup> not only in the Global South.<sup>8</sup> Some scholars and activists critique these claims because of professionalization's disenfranchising impact but also because they are incomplete and distort reality. Manual collection and sorting can be more precise than mechanized sorting,<sup>†</sup> and the blue-collar criminality that is attributed to informal waste pickers and scavengers is often replaced by the white-collar criminality by which waste management contracts are awarded and enforced, creating new environmental problems.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, privatized and allegedly high-tech waste reprocessing facilities, such as anaerobic digesters, have failed to deliver the promised efficiency and energy conversion ratios.<sup>10</sup>

Most of the literature investigating waste-related labor focuses on the (mostly informal) workers engaged with the collection of household waste and with sorting waste at municipal solid waste dumpsites, and to a lesser extent at recycling sorting facilities. This scholarship has grown exponentially in the last ten years and amassed a tremendous amount of empirical evidence

on how informal labor conditions at these facilities are synergistic with neoliberal economic and urban policies, struggles for collective representation that often resulted in the formation of cooperatives, and the ways in which sustainable environmental policies are parasitic upon their invisible labor.

Yet, such studies sit uneasily in the traditional social science or historical scholarship on labor, which in its classical canon has focused the most on formally and legally employed, trained blue-collar workers in traditional settings of manufacturing, mining, and services. In contrast, waste workers in the more recent discard studies field are reported to be informal, often illegally engaged in waste collection and sorting; untrained, if by training we mean formal credentials, but not without deep material knowledge and experience; and often itinerant, under-age, and living on the margins of society.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, they are not paid by wages, or at least their wage is not the only or main source of their livelihood; rather, they make ends meet by selling recovered materials. This makes them resemble smaller, self-employed traders or entrepreneurs rather than traditional members of the working class. We have tended to ignore them not only because the value they generate from waste is negligible in comparison with the main productive industries and the service sector, but also because their labor is rendered in this uncomfortable, undignified, and hard-to-classify form. However, as the rest of the economy, the real economy, the real sphere of surplus production, and real employment, to which waste work has been a mere footnote, is itself starting to resemble the waste sector, we must re-examine our categories of labor and value. Labor is less and less formal, less steady, and requires training (other than on-the-job training). As we look at people taking on multiple jobs and changing them frequently, often with long hiatuses of any employment, one comes to see that the word “job” should be replaced by “gig” (see the concept of the gig economy) and the words “working class” should be replaced by what Standing calls the “precariat.”<sup>12</sup>

With regards to race, it is not just that racial and ethnic minorities are over-represented in waste work, especially in the dirtiest and most dangerous settings; more importantly, waste-dependent forms of livelihood are subject to racialization. Individuals engaged in most waste collection, sorting, or transportation tasks are seen as dirty, uneducated, and thus disposable themselves, categories often productive of racialization, by which we mean their recasting as non-white, worthless, and uncivilized.<sup>13</sup>

As for gender, feminist scholarship, even unrelated to waste, has enormous implications for the gender-waste work nexus. Marxist feminist scholars have critiqued the devaluation of reproduction in capitalism, as well as the separation and negligence of reproduction as a concept in theoretical analyses of market societies and development projects.<sup>14</sup> Ecofeminism blamed this marginalization of reproduction for capitalism’s inherent tendency to destroy nature: Capitalism takes for granted and assigns no value to either the reproductive capacity of nature or the reproductive labor of women.<sup>15</sup> More recently and more closely related to waste, Irmgard Schultz claimed that household recycling is an

additional burden on women,<sup>16</sup> and Lucy Norris showed that women's reuse of waste fabrics produces a feel-good philanthropic green job opportunity, albeit, one with little ecological benefits.<sup>17</sup>

Within U.S. environmental sociology, empirical studies of waste-related inequalities have tended to limit race, class, and gender to statistical variables, while intersectional feminist perspectives indicate the need to see them in a multi-dimensional way and understand them as social relationships.<sup>18</sup> Inspired by these studies, we engage with intersectionality not by bringing in an additional variable—citizenship status—to the mix of inequality present in waste work. Instead, recognizing that intersectionality is a matrix of relationships rather than merely a mix of statistical correlations, we demonstrate how the unique nexus of race, gender, and citizenship status articulates with waste labor and registers of visibility for immigrant female domestic workers.

Waste work's intersectionality, its patterning with various overlapping social inequalities, have implicitly or explicitly rested on waste's invisibility. To be sure, waste is not out of sight on its own accord. There is labor to be performed in order to render it invisible, and it is precisely the above-mentioned marginal and minority social groups who have historically performed this labor. With the increasing environmental consciousness in the Global North, however, environmental policies and municipal regulations have had to make waste visible again. How else can we manage something, reduce it, and reuse it if we cannot see it or otherwise acquire knowledge about it? Foucault has probably been the most influential theorist to demonstrate the crucial connection between this need to manage and control and the need to render visible. He argued that power operates by various micro-level, optical and spatial techniques that construct and reproduce an unequal gaze—the Panopticon being the most well-known version.

Interestingly, however, much of twentieth-century social activism—from feminism through gay rights to environmentalism—have earned their success by shedding light on problems, identities, inequalities, and abuses previously obscured by various power structures. Disclosing women's second (and even third) burden, “coming out of the closet,” and uncovering myriad of environmental harms are all optical techniques of political resistance. One could also argue that not going to the back of the bus or insisting on sitting down in whites-only restaurants are also ways in which African Americans refused to remain hidden, silenced, and thus marginalized. To complicate the gaze-power nexus further, informal domestic workers too have struggled with different effects of visibility. While being unseen in the informal sector brings the advantage of avoiding taxes and detection by immigration authorities, it also creates vulnerability to abusive employers. The MacArthur Award-winner and activist Ai-Jen Poo's efforts to organize informal domestic workers in the United States and to create collective structures for enforcing their rights and interests have succeeded primarily by uncovering the tremendous amount of dependence of society on these women for care work. The jobs of cooking, cleaning, and shopping for children, the sick, and the elderly in their own homes are not only

privatized, as they take place in the private realm of employers' homes, but are also low-prestige and unseen.<sup>19</sup>

One's position in a relationship of power therefore depends not on the asymmetry of the gaze and on a simplistic visible/invisible binary, but on the terms by which one is rendered visible. Our research subjects, migrant domestic workers in Naples, Italy, whose chores now increasingly include waste-related tasks—sorting, packaging, and delivering waste to their various locations of collection—have a similarly ambivalent relationship with visibility. Waste work simultaneously allows escaping certain types of scrutiny while being exposed to new ones. In what follows, we explain how immigrant and domestic working women's control over their labor, time, and movement is complicated by society's changing attitude to waste's visibility.

### *Methodology*

This study draws on critical ethnographic research addressing the role of gender, race, and migrancy in women's experiences of waste-related problems and politics in Campania. The research protocol comprises participant observations of community members' participation in waste work, including in everyday recycling and waste disposal habits, as well as participation in townhall meetings, community efforts, and protests addressing waste issues. Ethnographic interviews feature thirty-two semi-structured, in-depth interviews with an equal number of Italian and foreign-born informants, in addition to fifty shorter (less than fifty minutes) and more casual interviews. Participants include an equal number of Italian and foreign-born individuals. Questionnaires focused on informants' experiences of how waste affected them personally, politically, and at work. Initially, informants were recruited with the assistance of entities and NGOs focused on issues like migration and environment, then by snowball sampling. All interviews and observations were conducted in Italian by one of the authors, who is Neapolitan herself, between July and December 2014. We selected a short number of narratives to cite in this paper based on the breadth and commonality of the experiences that they reflect.

We focus on the experiences of foreign-born domestic workers for two main reasons. First, although women's domestic work and migrants' concerns are important for environmental justice and political ecology, existing scholarship tends to separate these two issues, overlooking how they intersect in the experience of female labor migrants. Second, the invisibility of domestic labor in Italian society is disrupted by the spillage of waste into the public sphere: By drawing attention to migrant domestic workers, we can thus demonstrate the role that intertwined concerns for gender, race, and citizenship play in these emerging politics of visibility. The women interviewed in this study are a rather heterogeneous group in terms of age, race, and nationality, with informants hailing from Eastern Europe, North Africa, Central Asia, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia. All had been living in Naples for at least one year, seven in average, and recounted changing jobs approximately every two or three years, depending on the age and health

of the seniors or children they were hired to assist, and on their relationships with their employers. Mindful of the sensitive information that participants shared, all informants have been assigned a pseudonym.

### *Invisibility and Migrant Labor in Southern Italy*

Immigration to Southern Italy is a relatively recent phenomenon that started in the 1980s, with a significant expansion of the service industry and of Italian women's participation in the paid labor force. As of 2018, Campania accounted for approximately five percent of Italy's 5,144,440 documented migrants, of which women make up approximately fifty-two percent.<sup>20</sup> Key origin countries include Ukraine, Romania, Sri Lanka, Morocco, and China. Most of Campania's female labor migrants work in the domestic sector and are recruited primarily through word of mouth and Catholic charities, with recruitment and governmental agencies playing only a minor role.<sup>21</sup>

Since the early 2000s, Italy's immigration policy has become increasingly restrictive and is predicated upon short-term, employment-based visas that must be certified by individual employers who acquire immense power over their employee's livelihoods. In the case of female domestic workers, overwork and underpay are both extremely common, even among documented workers.<sup>22</sup> Faced with growing life expectancies and a rapidly-growing senior population, Italian families are increasingly relying on migrant women to work as full-time caregivers to aging, chronically ill, and semi-independent family members. This practice is consistent with Italy's home-based care regime, by which semi-independent and disabled individuals are entitled to a government subsidy of approximately five hundred euros per month for personal assistance.<sup>23</sup> As these subsidies are not universally accessible to Italian families, and also well below the legal minimum wage for most types of care-jobs, some Italian families have taken to hiring full-time and even live-in domestic workers through contracts declaring the labor as "part time" and/or "home cleaning," as the reduced number of hours, as well as the job category corresponding to "home cleaning" require far lower minimum wages and benefits compared to the ones the Italian law indicates for full-time workers and for personal assistants. This top-down, informal arrangement also allows employers to maintain control over the workers' visas, thus guaranteeing themselves a stable employee, while paying them well below the minimum wage for the work that they actually perform.<sup>24</sup> The misleading nature of such contracts results from, and further contributes to, the invisibility of migrant domestic workers: On the one hand, the indoors nature of domestic work makes it virtually impossible for officials and activists to verify migrants' working conditions; on the other, the amount of time migrants may spend outside of their employer's home is contingent upon the employer's demands.

Studies addressing women's migration to Italy through an intersectional perspective show how virtually all foreign-born women find themselves being scrutinized and racialized by host society members. White, predominantly

Eastern European women can attempt to circumvent such scrutiny by actively trying to “disguise” themselves as tourists or international students, in the hopes that being mistaken for a more “acceptable” Other will keep them safe.<sup>25</sup> However, this is not an option for women of other races, who are forced to be more strategic and deliberate about how they navigate the public sphere and deal with more frequent microaggressions.<sup>26</sup>

### *Campania's Waste Crisis*

Campania's waste crisis refers to the frequent interruptions of residential trash collection and the growing practice of abandoning toxic waste in the region's rural peripheries, which commenced in the late 1990s and have continued on and off (particularly in the region's lower-income agricultural areas) until the present day. The crisis results from the interplay of transnational, national, and local forces seeking to profit from the growing demand for inexpensive waste transportation and disposal options. However, mainstream political and even some earlier academic commentators have approached the waste crisis from the standpoint of methodological nationalism; that is, they have investigated and discussed (sometimes with little evidence) only its national and local causes. These include inefficiencies and corruption within the local administration, as well as local citizens' inability or unwillingness to recycle, an approach that is rooted in stereotypes of southern Italians as “uncivilized” and fails to note important recycling achievements in the southern regions.<sup>‡</sup> A transnational and intersectional lens enables us to identify the interplay between transnational, national, and local forces and to determine how this widespread and routine waste crisis is affecting the lives of different social groups depending on their class, gender, and race.<sup>27</sup>

From a transnational perspective, the first relevant issue is that while seeking to regulate the transportation and disposal of industrial wastes, global environmentalist frameworks, such as the Basel Convention of 1989 and the EU Waste Directives of 2006, do not ensure that corporate entities will be held accountable for illegal dumping and toxic waste contamination. This renders waste trafficking a profitable business for both industries and criminal organizations, such as Campania's camorra (mafia-like syndicates), who set up illegal waste transportation and disposal services that industries in the north of Italy and in other European countries could hire for as little as twenty percent of the market price.<sup>28</sup> Smuggled materials were then disposed of either in caves and fields in Campania's low-income peripheries, or in legal urban landfills. This situation led to a dual problem of saturation of local landfills and toxic waste contamination in the region's peripheries. In 2017, there were 1,357 known cases of waste crimes related to criminal organizations, almost nineteen percent of the nation's mafia-related environmental crimes for that year.<sup>29</sup> It is also worth noting the role that the Italian national government has played in aggravating the waste crisis by proposing and installing additional waste treatment facilities in Campania, facilities designed to contain much larger



volumes of waste than the region's needs.<sup>30</sup> Although these types of government interventions will be familiar to students of the history of political ecology and environmental justice within Europe itself, it must be kept in mind that they constitute a direct violation of the EU Waste Directive's proximity principle, by which waste materials must be disposed of and treated as close as possible to the place where they were generated.

### *Visibility of Waste and of Waste Work*

Campania's waste crisis disrupts the invisibility of waste. As uncollected garbage accumulated, and even burned in spaces such as residential, landmark, and even agricultural districts, it is no longer possible to remove or hide waste from everyday life and politics. Residents are forced to deal with the congestion, odor, disgust, and health hazards of refuse accumulating in their communities, next to their homes and workplaces—a situation that all informants found aggravating and humiliating. However, as waste can no longer be hidden, neither can citizens and governments hide from waste. The visible, tangible presence of waste in public spaces elicited different responses from stakeholders, including local community members and environmental organizations, as well as various government offices at different scales, such as the regional administration, the national government, and the European Commission. Here, we touch upon each of these briefly, to introduce the social, civic, and political contexts underlying migrant women's waste labor.

### *The gaze of the nation-state*

Faced with the scrutiny of public opinion and of the international community, the Italian government sought to intervene as swiftly as possible in restoring a state of apparent normality within the shortest possible time. One of the earliest implemented measures was the centralization of Campania's waste governance in the hands of a centrally-appointed officer or commissioner.<sup>31</sup> An effective and long-term solution to the area's waste troubles would require a major restructuring of the region's limited recycling capacities and a greater control over the transportation of industrial waste over national territory. In practice, government efforts focused exclusively on removing trash from the more visible parts of the region, such as tourist and landmark neighborhoods in Naples and Caserta, and installing additional landfills in rural peripheries that were already bearing the brunt of toxic waste contamination. This move by the authorities was met with resistance from peripheral communities, which began mobilizing to raise awareness of this hidden, invisible face of Campania's trash emergency.<sup>32</sup> However, the Italian state reacted to these protests with a massive media campaign blaming Campania's waste crisis on criminal organizations' involvement in waste trafficking and on the local populations' inclination to litter and alleged inability to recycle. The government could then proceed to gradually limit the extent to which private citizens, apparently having failed some waste civility test, can legally handle discarded materials beyond their

doorsteps. Such strong restrictions on access to waste tend to be rare in Western societies, whose recycling schemes rely heavily on the involvement of community and grassroots actors. However, policing access to waste is more common in the Global South and is symptomatic of discriminatory regimes criminalizing poverty and ethnic minorities.<sup>33</sup>

### *The gaze of the European Union*

In 2008, the European Commission (EC) also involved itself in Campania's waste problems due to concerns that the situation there violated Directive 2006/12, which requires that member states provide "an appropriate disposal network ensuring a high level of protection for the environment and public health in the region" (EC 2008). An investigation began and upon discovering several violations in terms of the structural integrity of the dump sites and numerous instances of improper disposal of toxic wastes, the EC pursued legal action against the Italian government through the EU Court of Justice (EUCJ) and charged it with failure to "ensure that waste is recovered or disposed of without endangering human health, to prohibit the abandonment or uncontrolled disposal of waste, and to establish an integrated and adequate network of disposal installations." Under articles four and five of Waste Directive 2006/12, the EUCJ fined the Italian government for a sum of twenty million euros, plus another 120 thousand euros per each additional day of non-compliance.<sup>34</sup> These inspections mandated by the EC represent a rare instance in which a Waste Commissioner's, and indirectly the Italian government's, handling of waste in Campania became the object of scrutiny from a supranational authority.

### *Grassroots activism and making waste labor public*

Civil society actors responded to the waste crisis by mobilizing through protests but also with educational campaigns on sustainable waste. For example, the Volcano Mothers, a zero-waste group active in various towns along the slopes of Mount Vesuvius, describe in their memoir how they established a yearly recycling laboratory on a roundabout they routinely occupied to prevent garbage trucks from reaching a controversial landfill. With this lab, an activist group that had spent the better part of fall 2010 trying to prevent the military police and trash collectors from accessing a landfill in Mount Vesuvius National Park came to advocate for effective recycling regimes and to publicize their success in educating children and the community in environmentally benign uses of recyclable materials.<sup>35</sup> Because it involved the handling of recyclable materials as well as the education and entertainment of children, this lab made visible the environmental and political value of the reproductive labor that women perform for their families. Once public, waste and refuse made the connections between the private sphere and environmental politics evident. While reinforcing the traditional and heteronormative gender division of labor, the initiative created a new space for working- and middle-class

women to voice their concerns and claim leadership roles, and thus opened a door to their civic engagement.

### *Migrant women*

In the light of Campania's prolonged waste problems, the proper handling of waste materials became central for various individuals' and groups' sense of civic duty. This visibility of waste is not limited to people's private habits, as it also involves a greater scrutiny of how others handle waste: While environmental organizations monitor infrastructure and administrative strategies, residents keep an eye on other people's, and particularly ethnic minorities', handling of waste in their neighborhoods. Here, we address three areas in which the visibility of waste is most relevant to migrant domestic workers, in their own neighborhoods and in their places of work.

First, low-wage migrants are vulnerable to well-known problems of environmental injustice, namely the over-exposure to toxic waste, and inefficient sanitary services plaguing low-income and ethnic minority communities. Two Dominican-born informants, for example, recalled how:

The trash was really everywhere—it is the first thing you see when you go outside, when you go work, even at home, you cannot even open the windows for the stench. I live near the Cathedral. It is a beautiful neighborhood, and affordable, but among the last ones to be cleaned up after the trash emergencies. So, it gets really humiliating, not just for us migrant workers, for everybody. We try our best to recycle, but the recycling bins are far. If I walk all the way up the hill and it's not there, then I'll just leave all (the recyclables) in the grey (landfill) bin, and maybe the collection company will sort it all later. I don't like doing this, but this is the government's fault (Georgia, July 23, 2014).

Overwhelmed with the experience of living in urban neighborhoods that on occasion would basically turn into large open-air landfills, people tried their best to reduce the amount of waste they produced by sorting materials for recycling and by reusing domestically. While these efforts were largely palliative—as people kept waiting for government agencies to provide more substantial and enduring infrastructural solutions—informants still felt compelled to partake in such measures, both out of a genuine sense of civic duty towards their neighbors and out of a concern for their perception by community members.

I take the trash out in the evening. I take as many bags as there are, and drop them off a few blocks away ... as my employers want, as the house needs. On the way back, I stop sometimes, for a phone call or to say a quick hello to a friend. Sometimes, if I go in the afternoon a store owner will complain that I cannot bring down the paper, but they are wrong. I told my employers and they supported me. But now I go in the evening most of the time, after they close the shop (Amelia, July 7, 2014).

Amelia, a Georgian-born woman, was working as a live-in housekeeper and personal assistant to an aging Neapolitan woman and her family. Faced with long days of claustrophobic work, Amelia did not mind leaving the family's apartment to deliver waste and recyclables in containers to different parts of the neighborhood—quite the contrary, she welcomed the opportunity to be able to meet up with friends working in the same neighborhood, or to make a personal call. However, Amelia had recently found herself having to work around the business hours of a nearby store, as the managers had taken to calling her out, accusing her of not following the neighborhood's legally prescribed recycling schedule. As Amelia pointed out, that was incorrect—in 2014, clean paper and packaging could be left in the designated bin at any time of the day, as the material was deemed inert. Her employers had confirmed this with her and had tried to intervene on her behalf, but despite their support, Amelia preferred to avoid these store owners' scrutiny and resorted to taking the garbage out in the evening. This helped her address her concerns for being (unduly) rebuked in public, while not giving up on a precious opportunity to leave the employers' home, stretch her legs, and have some personal time.

Being a low-income ethnic minority woman, Amelia often encountered various forms of street harassment and occasionally, threats. However, based on the information she shared, these incidents usually involved men—Italian- and foreign-born—that she did not know. Once charged with taking out the garbage and recycling, her visibility in the street increased, so that people known to her and her employers also came to subject her to greater scrutiny. Drawing on Goffman's sociology of public spaces, street harassment of women can be defined as acts of violence by which perpetrators object to the presence of unaccompanied women in public spaces: Through comments on their physical appearance, demeanor, and practices, harassers seek to redefine public places as the domain of men, accessible to women only under male supervision.<sup>36</sup> Migrant women working in upper- and middle-class districts are particularly vulnerable to this type of street harassment, and carrying out household chores, such as lugging around groceries or garbage, in a way reemphasizes their position as low-status workers vis-à-vis more powerful host-society members.

At a time when the waste practices of the white, European host society are being questioned and consequently, as Italians are denigrated for their lack of "civility," a low-income migrant woman's proper handling of recycling materials destabilizes the racialized binary depicting host society members as more "developed" and "civil" than migrant workers from the Global South. In addition to this, ethnic minorities, including migrant workers and Naples' Romani communities, are particularly scrutinized by host-society members seeking to diffuse and externalize the blame. The visibility of waste work can thus threaten migrant domestic workers' ability to turn the task of taking out the garbage into a small-scale socializing opportunity with fellow migrant workers—thus far an important coping mechanism. In fact, the isolating and secluded nature of live-in domestic work is such that short of taking out the garbage, there are few other chores affording workers similar opportunities.<sup>37</sup>

Amelia's experience is one where she was clearly able to identify waste and the handling of waste as a trigger for a new form of racialization on the part of host-society members. The same, however, cannot be said for migrant women subject to more frequent instances of harassment and public confrontation, such as the one provided in the vignette that opened this paper, where a Dominican informant commented that "some people will shout things at you in the street—because you have dark skin, you are a woman or because you are carrying a garbage bag. Whatever the reason, I don't acknowledge them, and move on" (Anne, July 23, 2014). While acknowledging that, particularly in a neighborhood where trash collection is unreliable, performing waste-related work exposed her to additional forms and risks of being pestered, in Anne's experience, harassment is so widespread that there was little she could do to avoid it, nor was she willing to neglect sorting her household waste, which she perceived as her duty to her neighborhood.

While we maintain that imposing unpaid work on migrants is unacceptable, Amelia's experience indicates that migrant women can take advantage of waste chores in the context of claustrophobic work environments. These opportunities, however, are contingent on the specific arrangement domestic workers are subject to that do not necessarily entail them performing chores outside the home, as demonstrated in the quote below. Anika, a Romanian woman who was hired by a woman working full-time to take care of her aging mother, explained that, "I just put the different (waste) bags together, then my employer's daughter takes the materials out on her way to work" (Anika, July 23, 2014).

In this case, the division of waste work in the house is such that a migrant worker performs the "dirtiest" tasks, which involve the sorting, rinsing, and packaging of different materials, in the secluded space of her employers' home, leaving the visible, socially desirable act of recycling to her employers. If this division of waste work entails a smaller amount of labor on Anika's part, compared to domestic workers tasked with carrying and disposing of materials, it also preserves the invisibility of migrant workers' contribution to household recycling.

### *Conclusion: Waste Work Between Invisibility and Scrutiny*

Campania's waste history places waste work in an ambivalent position. While our study corroborates the common finding in waste studies about the stigmatization of waste work, this stigma is moderated, in our case study, by the possibility of the redemption it offers to the region's inhabitants. Recycling materials and keeping public spaces clean now, in the wake of prolonged trash crises, becomes a moral act implicitly performed for the benefit of a larger, national audience to counter the regions' negative portrayal in government media. When this civic duty is fulfilled by the members of the host society and especially by environmental activists, waste work is valued, honorable, and even exhibits collective-mindedness. However, when it is carried out by domestic immigrant workers, some host-society members seem to see it as

a lowly job and a polluting nuisance. What is the difference? Host-society members are citizens, often actual owners of their homes, gardens, and stores, and they carry out these ethical waste chores in plain view of the public without monetary compensation. Their waste work is a manifestation of civic stewardship. Migrant domestic workers clean, sort, and pack waste materials in the homes they work in that are in private space, as part of their jobs. When they are also tasked with taking the bags of trash and recycling to the street their otherness and lowly social status renders their waste work and presence in the public a pollutant and a reminder to the host society of its dirty image in the national imagination. To this extent, we echo Nguyen's finding in contemporary Vietnam: Migrants who work with waste are perceived to be absorbing the lowliness and dirtiness of waste labor and to be transgressing the divide between the civilized urban and its uncivilized rural Other; their bodies of disorder cannot be separated from the labor that removes dirt and waste to establish order.<sup>38</sup>

However, in Campania, waste work is also performed by the host-society members and when that is the case, it is a clean, dignified, and high-minded civic activity, rather than instrumental paid work that requires neither training, nor a sense of citizenship. In way what we see here is the opposite of the trend familiar from decades of labor sociology, by which the more a profession is feminized the lower its status and less it is monetarily compensated. When waste work is performed by white host-society members enjoying full citizenship, this labor comes to be endowed with values that normally belong to civil society rather than to the realm of physical paid work.

## NOTES

\* A few exceptions to this negligence of domestic waste work are: Douny 2007; Bulkeley and Gregson 2009; Gregson et al. 2011.

† This is the point the Zabbaleen, the Christian minority in Cairo, made when faced with being replaced by mechanical collection and sorting by a European waste management firm (*Garbage Dreams*. Documentary by Mail Iskander, 2009).

‡ As of 2016 for example, Campania recycled forty percent of all its waste, and the fourth highest volume of recycled plastic (Il Mattino, 2016)

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