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Understanding informal waste picking
using an agonistically transgressive
appropriations framework.

+ Introduction

- Waste pickers are guided by logics beyond meeting their daily needs.
- High and increasing numbers of waste workers despite the low status of waste work as an occupation suggests there might be other logics used to rationalise their work, especially in the face of other informal work opportunities.
- (News story about unemployed man and sister).



+ Research Question



- Research question: what justificatory logics do informal waste pickers use in order to appropriate waste?
- To do so, I foreground the everyday practices of waste pickers.
- I will understand the experiences and processes that informal actors embark upon as well as the negotiations, contestations and agreements that take place.

+ Literature Overview

- Literature on informality is confined to trade and housing but there is a growing body on waste.
- Research shows that both formal and informal waste workers are stigmatized because of their association with waste.
- Literature states that stigma is only partly from connection with waste.
- Waste work might not be the least desirable income-generating opportunity available.
- There are a plethora of informal livelihood opportunities.



+ Theoretical Framework



- I will not start with established theory.
- To address my research, I inquire into the relevance of theories developed elsewhere (**right to the city, quiet encroachment**) which are often used in studies of informality.
- I elaborate on a third, emergent framing which may well provide new grounds from which to theorize waste picking.

+ Quiet Encroachment



- Quiet encroachment is a framework developed from empirical cases in Iran.
- It is widely considered a suitable analytical framework for understanding informal activity in the global South.
- Quiet encroachment speaks back to literature that constructs the poor as passive victims or acting in resistance against the State.

+ The Right to the City

- Analysts, academics, activists and development practitioners alike frequently use the right to the city (RTTC) to understand informal activity, particularly informal urban settlements.
- Many who work and labor in the city, particularly the poor and marginalized only inhabit the city, they do not have *a right* to the city.
- The concept is usually used by scholars who investigate urban disenfranchisement.
- Also used by activists who hail it as a political slogan.



+ The Right to the City...

- As a concept, it comprises two dimensions:
 - The right to participate in the design and governance of space.
 - The right to appropriate space, the latter of which is most relevant here.
- The right to appropriate space involves allowing urban inhabitants to utilize space in ways that meet their needs.
- The most common empirical frame through which the RTTC is utilized is informal housing
- Most studies including those in South Africa usually use the term to suggest the adoption of a formal right.



+ Agonistically Transgressive Appropriations



- The concept of ‘agonism’ is drawn from Laclau & Mouffe, to describe situations that are ongoing and always in the making.
- It is drawn from the Lefebvrian concept of appropriation.
- It draws from Bayat’s quiet encroachment which is used widely to analyze the global South.

+ Agonistically Transgressive Appropriations...



- Agonistic transgressions addresses one of the criticisms leveled at quiet encroachment, that it is apolitical.
- Bayat's take on South Africa is a clear misreading of the circumstances under which the appropriations he references took place.
- However, in agreement with Bayat, Lawhon et al, this is not to read radical and revolutionary intent into everyday activities.

+ Agonistically Transgressive Appropriations...



- Additionally, the RTTC and quiet encroachment do not consider the nature of the conflict, the adjudication process, the winners and losers and the ways in which the different actors win and lose.

+ Findings so far

(As of August 2018)

- Actors act in a strategic manner in terms of accessing garbage: selection of items, high value items, who to sell to, etc.
- Actors also partner strategically.
- Waste picking is more lucrative than some types of informal labor due to high value items such as phones and jewelry.
- Waste picking is more stable than some types of informal labor.



+ Findings so far

- Many waste pickers enjoy autonomy.
- Issues of dignified labor, where to sleep, keeping in touch with trends and post-waste work security raised.
- Turf wars- protecting turf from state actors (or state sanctioned actors), other waste pickers.



+ Questions?



■ Thank you!