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Reshuffling Responsibility: Waste, Environmental Justice and Urban Citizenship in Cambodia

COLLECTION:
MULTIPLICITY IN THE WORLD OF WASTE

RESEARCH

KATHRIN EITEL

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ABSTRACT

'Responsibility' is the new buzzword in environmentalism and climate change discourse. Regarding the waste 'crisis' in particular, responsibility is understood as pertaining to individual actors, thus undermining the prevailing perception of an interconnected world. This article argues for a processual perspective on responsibility as entangled conditioning of life, which has the potential to embrace more-than-human politics of responsibility, that is crucial to facilitate an environmentally just transition 'from the margins'. Exploring three sites of waste responsibility—in the form of responsibility politics, in the public sphere, and on haphazard city wastelands—the article examines different waste relationships that provoke multiple forms and notions of responsibility that respond to Cambodia's recalcitrant and seemingly unmanageable waste situation. The revelation of responsibility as a processual and temporally diverse phenomenon permits the emergence of new forms of responsibility that contest the predominant notion of 'waste responsibility', which forms the basis of numerous waste reduction models worldwide. The local implementation of such programs universalizes and standardizes waste responsibilities as they are implemented in alignment with long-established ways of doing politics and waste fantasies. However, local waste pickers have already assumed a significant proportion of the responsibility for waste. By collecting and reselling waste on a daily basis, they enable a sovereignty-through-waste, which reclaims urban citizenship and promotes an environmentally just transition that resonates with the relationships waste undergoes in unruly sites, hinting at possible future politics.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Kathrin Eitel

Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies (ISEK), Zurich University, CH

kathrin.eitel@posteo.de

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The smoke pursues us as we drive directly into the malodorous miasma that has settled over the city. Indistinct black swaths are visible in the direction of Phnom Penh's garbage dumping ground, which is burning once again. Nothing unusual in a city whose unprocessed waste ends up in landfills and often catches fire. Like ominous portents, soot particles cling to the walls and houses that lie adjacent to the landfill and that are home to the city's marginalized; places to which the wind did not have far to carry the stench of waste, the stench of objects whose places of origin often lie far beyond Cambodia. Inscribed in these waste outcomes are (post)colonial experiences of violence, as well as desires for wealth and freedom. The disposal of such waste immediately exacerbates climate change through the production of copious volumes of methane gases. Who, I ask myself as we pass the landfill, should actually be held responsible for that misery and its devastating contributions to climate change?

The stench of waste and the smoke demonstrate that single waste objects can no longer be attributed to individual human beings and 'recaptured' within the framework of climate protection policies. Rather, they are interwoven with and embedded in sociomaterial relationships, including their temporal and spatial entanglements, precluding the straightforward delineation of responsibilities for individual things. This has prompted ethical and epistemological reconsiderations, whereby philosophers have argued for an interlinkage of ethos, ontos, and episteme. Appealing to an 'ethics of entanglement' (Barad 2011: 150; Wolff 2017), this perspective foregrounds the conscious and occasionally unconscious entanglements of humans and non-humans alike. With a particular focus on waste, Kim de Wolff (2017: 42) exhorts us to pursue an understanding of the material politics of waste that may elucidate how together we can forge 'ethical associations and responsibilities'. In times of dying species and climate change, this ethics of entanglement becomes even more pressing by virtue of its potential to illuminate how responsibility is enacted in a deeply entangled world that is ruled by the omnipresence of waste. In such circumstances, as James Ferguson (2012: 562) has noted, it is a challenge to bring 'the material and the moral into a more satisfactory alignment'.

Although anthropological disciplines and research inspired by science and technology studies (STS) typically perceive the world as patchy, 'a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled life' (Tsing 2017), realpolitik continues to assign responsibility to single actors in a neoliberal manner. Climate policy programs aimed at curbing climate change as it is articulated by the European Union's 2030 Climate Target Plan are exemplary of this approach. The Climate Target Plan's goals are to be supported by so-called Green Deals, joint ventures, and programs that involve economic and non-governmental actors seeking to work within the framework of a controlled emissions trading system (EC 2020). Global waste management, as a means of reducing synthetic waste, has emerged as a key objective in the pursuit of these goals. Meanwhile, China has recently published its long-awaited white paper, 'China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era', in which the country defines its role and its position in relation to global responsibilities. These programs have both direct and indirect consequences for several countries in the Global South, including Cambodia, and for local approaches to the implementation of climate and waste policies. With regard to the untamable existence of synthetic waste (in particular) that is never merely a local issue, the question of who should be held responsible for waste has become the subject of increased debate on a global level as predominant modes of assigning responsibility have become successively normative.

Although the question of when responsibility begins to be responsibility has been vigorously debated both within and outside academia for several years and has been further galvanized in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, empirical and situational ethnographic research that can illuminate different responsibilization settings and practices is now warranted. Here, I follow Susanna Trnka's and Catherine Trundle's attempt (2014: 136) to reclaim the multiple meanings of the responsibility-concept, going beyond a neoliberal understanding toward an *anthropology of responsibility*. However, despite the publication of ethnographic research on this topic, ethnographic studies that address the responsibilization of waste in Southeast Asia are lacking. Drawing on studies from anthropology and STS, I argue that responsibility is a process that is shaped by the understanding of one's position in a more-than-human world that emerges along the trajectories of legacies and one's visions of the future in relation to particular sites. In this context, 'more-than-human' denotes something that is shaped and produced unequally by an intertwined constellation of human and non-human actors. At the same time, the conditions for which responsibility is assumed are not static and temporal, as the terminus presumes, but should rather be understood as an entangled condition*ing of* worlds and that *for* which responsibility is taken.

To fully comprehend the distinct notions of responsibility that are enacted, it is to ask how and when responsibilities for waste are produced and established on situated—and, in this regard, ethnographically graspable—sites that emerge as 'sites of responsibility and effect' (Gabrys, Hawkins & Michael 2017: 5; cf. Wolff 2017). Emerging from material waste politics and the various relationships and encounters that waste undergoes, these sites of responsibility become research sites for investigating the multiple forms of responsibility and for determining what is worthy of acknowledgment and what not.

This article, therefore, interrogates how different notions of responsibility are produced, how they multiply enacted, and how various responses to the omnipresence of waste provoke the emergence of new forms of responsibility at different sites. Moreover, it examines how far the conditions for which responsibility is to be assumed are more than statically defined conditions embedded in a singular temporality. Generally understood as being disentangled from 'an outer', responsibility is typically perceived as the result of a causal cause-and-effect mechanism and as something distributed along top-down biopolitical processes. With the aim of illuminating the material politics of waste and contrasting the different forms that responsibility assumes, the article explores multiple notions of responsibility through three particular sites of responsibility: (1) a transnational site in which a politics of waste responsibility has emerged; (2) Phnom Penh's public space; and (3) the city's unruly wastelands. In this context, I will first examine theoretically the concepts of responsibility in anthropology and STS before turning to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, as an empirical example. This study is based on ethnographic field research that was conducted between 2017 and 2019, in which I collected data on the local recycling economy with the help of participant observations, qualitative interviews, and collaborative methods, such as mental mapping and sound recordings. In particular, I gathered data from various waste picker groups in Phnom Penh, non-governmental and governmental organizations (N/GOs), and transnational organizations that deal with waste management issues.[1] As such, I followed the material waste in its trajectory through the different environmental, economic, and social settings in which it unveiled its relational character.

In this article, I shall investigate how the waste reduction attempts of management programs and strategies come into the world as part of long-established practices of doing politics in the form of waste fantasies. In the section that follows, I examine how the production of responsibility—responsibilization—takes place transversally rather than merely neoliberally and how urban spaces are interlinked with responsibility for waste as an aspect of citizenship. However, a return to that which is neglected and ignored, namely graspable on wastelands, yields insights into a future politics of waste response-ability.

ENCOUNTERING RESPONSIBILITY THEORETICALLY

Media images of mounds of refuse, children playing in landfills, and turtles that have ingested plastic bags stand figuratively for the demise of the planet's nature and the environmental crisis that functions as the emblem of our epoch. However, that which is deemed valuable and worthy of recognition (and thus worth assuming responsibility for) is generally considered apparent: the land, the children, and the turtles all represent nature's purity and precious intangibility, the environment that needs to be safeguarded. This is underpinned by a growing politics of responsibility that has established measures, structures, and policies designed to blame subjects, from entire nations to individual citizens, into behaving responsibly. In this respect, responsibility for the causation of climate change in general, and for the proliferation of global waste in particular, is unevenly distributed (e.g., Todd 2014). The terminus, however, derives from a juridical background, defining either the actual condition to which an agent must respond (i.e., liability) or the *potential* conditions that govern response or reaction in the event of a wrong (i.e., responsibility) (Etymonline 2022).

However, waste per se is materially difficult to grasp and is not easily addressed for the purposes of responsibility, as is always something in between, something that is ambiguous or ambivalent. Waste is queer, belonging neither to nature nor to culture; sortable into neither this nor that dimension of responsibility (e.g., individual- or state-claimed). Moreover, waste's materiality is unstable, underscoring its indeterminate status (Alexander & Sanchez 2019). Its ontology is ambiguous. Waste and the ways in which it is conceived with regard to its handling, its attribution of meaning, and its (re)utilization are often construed as antagonistic to a nature that must be preserved at all costs. Ironically, waste, which spontaneously changes place, form, and content, behaves idiosyncratically, emulating the characteristics typically attributed to nature as something wild, unruly, and recalcitrant. As a highly relational material, waste becomes tangible only in open-ended assemblages, such as capitalist production and economic value systems, environmental pollution, or waste-handling procedures. Engendered in global inequality structures, markers of (post-)colonialism and environmental injustices (Davies & Mah 2020; Dillon 2014; Laser & Schlitz 2019; Taylor 2014), waste points to both historical realities and future imaginaries (Harvey 2017; Hawkins 2009). As waste tells us stories about our society and the culture in which we live, recursively influencing our practices through our interaction with refuse (cf. e.g., Hawkins 2006; Spelman 2016), it also unveils global political legacies and how it should be addressed.

To this end, it helps to ask not what responsibility is as it pertains to waste but *when* responsibility *comes into being* as a result of sociomaterial relations of waste with others on site: when it is classified as responsible action, when it becomes a political tool, or when it provokes hitherto-unacknowledged responses (e.g., Bowker & Star 1999). However, the infrastructures that have developed as outcomes of such waste reduction policies, structuring the ways in which waste is handled and

defined amid climate change, are closely interlinked with violent outreaches (e.g., Anand 2012; Appel 2012). These violent outreaches may be unforeseen and vast and, at the same time, may function in both biopolitical and necropolitical ways, emerging in the '(...) subjection of life to the power of death' (Mbembe 2019: 89). Responsibility, in this regard, is the result of preceding distributional mechanisms that manifest as the infrastructures through which both waste and citizenship are governed through (Fredericks 2014) and that also reveal avenues for the analysis of slow violence relational to questions about environmental justice. The notion of slow violence captures the unfolding toxic effects on life in places that are neglected (e.g., by policy) and/or directly affected by infrastructural facilities, such as landfills, that are destructive to both bodies and urban identities (Nixon 2013; see, e.g., Liboiron 2021).

This violence not only affects people, animals, and plants, and jeopardizes life, but also bends and extends sociomaterial relations between waste and the others, ultimately inducing them to act, behave, and respond in multiple ways. It is thus crucial to understand responsibility as 'response-ability', a more-than-human endeavor that focuses on relations, rather than on individual actors. Response-ability is '(...) the ability to respond to the other [and that] cannot be restricted to human-human encounters when the very boundaries and constitution of the "human" are continually being reconfigured and "our" role in these and other reconfigurations is precisely what "we" have to face.' (Barad 2007: 392). Response-ability is an integral part of the process of becoming and simultaneously more than a reaction to the world; it is a possibility of response. In a world where social realities and physical matters are co-constitutive and, thus, intra-actively operational, responsibility—as a moral intervention in the world's reformulation, implying a relatively autonomous decision regarding whether and how to take responsibility for something—is contractionary (e.g., Norris 2016). In this relational mélange, therefore, self-knowledge in a more-than-human world is essential as a driving force of responsibility. This implies an 'iterative (re)opening of responsivity' to new possibilities (Higgins 2021: 274). Thus, responsibility may be fully comprehended only if the ability to respond to something is understood as a conscious action that is rooted in the understanding of oneself as entangled with the world.

By examining three different sites of responsibility to unravel the manifold approaches to responsibility-making with respect to waste (i.e., what appears to be given or incontrovertible), this paper aims to irritate the presuppositions under which the production and distribution of responsibility presumably operate. In this way, it will be possible to go beyond the binarized relationship between the 'neoliberal work of blame' (Storey 2020: 3), whereby responsibility is distributed in a top-down fashion, and the attribution of responsibility in a relationship that omits non-humans, based on the presumption of a dichotomy between those who take responsibility (human) for something (non-human) in an act of domination. Jane Bennett (2010) has described this precise form of political accountability as demystification, a tool that is used in democratic and pluralist politics and that perpetuates power inequalities and maintains the moralized politics that distinguish between and judicialize in terms of good and evil. Considering 'vibrant matter,' as well as the idea that the world is in the process of intra-actively becoming, will enable the unveiling of individuals or enclosed entities/actors as 'incapable of bearing *full* responsibility for their effects' (Bennett 2010: 37). In this regard, agency is understood as distributed and confederate, opposing the described politics of blame and opening up possibilities to conceive responsibility relationally.

Cambodia is currently an arena in which multiple waste management programs and waste solution ideas are being trialed, and this paper unravels the power of responsibilities in their becoming through materialization processes in the context of global waste management policy programs. Drawing on responsibility as the dominant approach to ordering good behavior in a supposed world of consensus can shed some initial light on how environmental problems emerge in the first place. The first site at which the politics of response-ability for waste are operationalized is closely intertwined with Cambodia's history and international politics, as the discussion that follows will demonstrate.

SITE 1: DISENTANGLING THE CONVENTIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR (PLASTIC) WASTE

Life in Cambodia is characterized by the country's colonial past, in which British, US, and Vietnamese colonizers struggled for supremacy, as well as by the dark period during which the Khmer Rouge sought to 'educate' the country and its people according to a Maoist-communist peasant state while simultaneously eradicating approximately 25% of its population between 1975 and 1978. Having been wholly isolated from the rest of the world, the country eventually had to face the rampant marketization of its economy in the 1980s after its liberation from the Khmer's regime. The resulting rapid marketization of the country not only facilitated the sudden import of products from transnational corporations, such as Coca-Cola, but also connected desirable new social values to wealth and prosperity, which swiftly became entrenched—as did the abrupt accumulation of synthetic waste, including aluminum and plastic. While Cambodia's neighboring countries

were able to slowly adapt to plastic and aluminum packaging production that had developed successively since the 1960s, Cambodia was forced to deal with these 'new' packaging materials within a short period of time (Eitel 2022).

Resonating with the argument set out in the introduction to this Special Issue on "Multiplicity in the World of Waste" that wastes are embedded in organizational infrastructures and in practice in multiple ways, Cambodia developed its very own way of determining what might be considered waste and how it should be disposed of. Because the government had long felt disempowered in terms of taking action on this issue, the opportunity to make use of recyclable waste as resource was first overlooked. As such, a genuine bottom-up recycling infrastructure developed, which today, together with its widespread network of—mainly female—waste pickers, depots, and intermediaries, represents the only functioning recycling economy in Phnom Penh and in Cambodia overall. The parallel existing waste infrastructure on site, however, focuses exclusively on solid waste. The absence of policies and the omission of waste in political deliberation rounds over several years has not only created fertile ground for a genuine recycling economy in the country but has also given rise to diverse organizations that assert the existence of an objectively right and responsible approach to dealing with waste in the aftermath of capitalism.

International organizations, such as the United Nations (UN) and the EU, have prominently imposed a politics of responsibility that advocates the assumption of greater responsibility in the waste crisis on the part of the state (e.g., in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework or in the form of Green Deals). The most recent strategy has been to advise the Cambodian government on (semi-) formalizing the waste management sector, particularly with respect to organic waste and plastic. Specifically, policy negotiations between the Ministry of Environment (MoE), national policy advisors, and international organizations are ongoing. The first round of consultations has already resulted in the MoE's articulated commitment to formalizing the plastic recycling sector in the near future. This will be supported by a circular economy model that has not only become the new global flagship model for tackling global waste misery but also stands as the representative for a new politics of responsibility that explicitly place responsibility on single actors in the context of the waste crisis. The Cambodian government has responded with an expression of interest in developing such a model in the form of a pilot project in the country's capital.

By adding on an Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) that seeks to assign responsibility for waste and its processing to producers rather than consumers, the adjusted CE model not only enacts a prevailing form of responsibility that is assigned to single actors but also provokes a mainstreaming politics to respond to it. In this regard, EPR has already become an integral aspect of numerous reports and policy recommendations that are intended to extend the CE approach (e.g., EC 2015; UNEP 2020). As it is defined in the Basel Convention, EPR entails '(...) producers taking responsibility for the management of products after becoming waste' (UNEP/Basel Convention 2018). However, this assumption of responsibility is assigned to companies' greenwashing activities and thus is not omitted from the scope of value creation processes. Although it is expected that recycling costs will be reconferred onto the production company, the responsibility for ensuring that this can happen at all remains with policymakers, who are required to design paid incentives. In other words, responsibility remains the concern of those who govern. However, the distribution of those same responsibilities is also incumbent on the government. Finally, both the EPR and the CE approach of which it is a part imply an assumption of responsibility for nature and the environment.

In this regard, the concept of responsibility is based on the problematization of waste as a matter of concern that is defined in the context of certain Westernized imaginings about environmentalism. The reification of nature in sustainability and climate change discourse has further established an understanding of caring for the environment whereby environmentalism, which proclaims that nature is something separate from humans and, in this case, worthy of protection, provides humans with their supposed superior position vis-à-vis this nature. In the Cambodian context, the problematization of environmental pollution has led to increased international pressure on politicians to act responsibly. The ability of international actors to exert considerable influence on how problems are viewed and handled and thus how policies are pursued lies in the country's colonial past.

This implies that the process of responsibilization is a consequence of long-established policy and decision-making practices, which are founded on political infrastructures. Cambodia's colonial past plays a decisive role in the way politics is done with foreign actors. Because of these explicitly practical infrastructures of doing politics that have been established over several decades, it has also been possible to transfer uniform ideas about environmental protection, pollution, and waste treatment into local political forums. Based on these ideas and on the assumption that waste has universal attributes and can be decontextualized from its sociocultural background, various imaginaries pertaining to waste (handling) have been established, something I have called 'waste fantasies' (Eitel 2022). Conceived together with a global politics of responsibilities, unified waste-responsibilities are formulated and defined along established policy decision-making structures relational

to environmentalism and based on scientific knowledge. This ultimately leads to the standardization of knowledge regarding waste responsibilities that ignore sociocultural aspects, as well as the power formations of international politics, and thus not only continues to perpetuate existing (urban) inequalities but also reinforces them, as we shall see below.

However, as Justin Lau (2022) has recently elicited on the 'Phnom Penh Waste Management Strategy and Action Plan 2018–2035,' reports do not only manifest certain knowledge about waste (and responsibility) and assign responsibility to single actors. Rather, the waste management report that Lau analyzed embraced a shared response-ability that enables mediation processes between the government, non-state actors, Phnom Penh citizens, and more-than-human entities *in response* to waste. However, the responses that the overwhelming presence of waste in the city provokes are offered not only in terms of the establishment of norms and prevailing notions of responsibility for waste, but also in terms of other sociomaterial processes that are at work, which adopt the prevailing notion of responsibility as the starting point for their local endeavors, but are by no means only locally situated.

SITE 2: MAKING RESPONSIBILIZATION VISIBLE

THE TRANSVERSAL WAYS OF DEALING WITH WASTE-RESPONSIBILITIES

As knowledge regarding correct and responsible behavior with respect to waste also resonates on a local level in Phnom Penh, many aid initiatives and NGOs perpetuate predominant notions of responsibility by enacting them anew in public spheres. In this way, waste reduction attempts that take the form of waste policies, programs, and initiatives are commonly enacted, for instance, in the form of posters that remind people to take care of their waste. The poster in the image below (Figure 1), for example, requests that the public refrain from disposing of waste 'here'. This strategy is aimed at reminding people of their responsibility for their waste, as (Bora, June 2018), a local NGO worker, explains: 'What we can see is that they [the city] have a lot of educational videos, educational posters for the people so that they can manage their waste very well.' In this respect, education, as Bora seems to understand it, corresponds significantly with the notion of a morality of citizenship that mandates the assumption of responsibility for one's

Figure 1 "Let's take care of the environment. Do not dump garbage here. Thank you". Source: Author.

own waste. The location that is visible in the image is a small market area, which is typically littered with colorful packaging, bags, and organic waste in the aftermath of the dismantling of the market stalls that are present in the morning. Whether the location's cleanliness in the image is ultimately attributable exclusively to the placement of the poster may be doubted, but the poster clearly creates a vision of a modern citizen who knows how to tidy up after themself. In this way, public spaces not only reflect prevailing and uniform definitions of responsibility for waste, but also assign and stylize the attributes of urban citizenship.

As Meas, who is part of an NGO initiative that implements educational programs concerning waste disposal in poor urban communities, astutely observes, 'People have to be responsible for themselves. That is not mandatory, but they [the people] have to work together [to tackle the waste crisis]' (Meas, August 2018). That which Meas considers appropriate and suitable, and inappropriate and unsuitable, with respect to disposal practices reflects the intentional response of waste reduction incentives that echo prevailing notions of waste responsibility from above. As the NGO worker Bora states,

> So, we train them [poor urban residents], we make them aware, and then we distribute the message, and then we launch a campaign. The campaign mobilizes people together and then we have a message, or slogan, or something that teaches people how to work together for waste management, for a good environment, for good hair, for hygiene, or something.

The training delivered conveys the idea that humans should exercise responsibility for themselves. In line with this understanding, being reflexive to one's own actions can lead to responsible action for all; 'all' thereby corresponds to the simulacrum of a normative sovereign subject that is oriented toward the division of the world into binary opposites. Bora's statement omits to mention that NGOs can more readily access development aid funding if their programs address topics that are current priorities for the UN or EU.

In this regard, waste responsibilization is intertwined with socioeconomic interest (such as tapping international funds that also ensure the organization's own survival) and transforms one's fundamental understanding of oneself as entangled with the world into a commodity. Practices of responsibilization are enacted through programs and campaigns at the hands of the city government and international aid initiatives and NGOs alike while promoting a right way to manage waste. They thus confer individuals with responsibility for their environment and urge them to act accordingly. In doing so, they co-constitute and participate in distributing responsibility as a neutral and universal concept and as a commodity that can be bought and sold according to market mechanisms. Individuals thus become responsible for something that they did not directly produce (the misery of the economic mode) but which they are required to manage. One example of government intervention in this regard is the so-called burden book—that is, the sub-decree on Management of Urban Garbage and Solid Waste, No. 113 (implemented in 2015)—which encourages city residents to report violations against waste policies. Two citizens who had been hired by a joint program implemented by an international funder and a local NGO told me when I visited their neighborhood, 'We tell them [the citizens] that we have a regulation of fining whoever is not managing their waste, starting from 20,000 to 40,000 riels and thereafter from 40,000 to 400,000 riels. If they don't heed our warning, we'll let the environmental authority to deal with them.' This statement not only attests to the indisputable relation between responsibility for waste disposal and legitimate punishment, it also unveils the prevailing notion of waste responsibility that circulates as a commodity.

However, although these programs and their implementation appear to symbolize a seemingly neoliberal strategy that aims to educate citizens accordingly, the practices of making responsibility—that is, bringing responsibility into being—are exceedingly transversal: first, they transcend national boundaries, as Fechter (2020) has demonstrated in small-scale aid initiatives in Cambodia that are affected by transnational active ethical citizens. Collaborations between aid initiatives and international expats that emerge in beach clean-ups or World Clean-Up days are not unusual in Cambodia and unveil the transnational relations that are at play. Second, because the biopolitical attempt, which is closely intertwined with neoliberal blame, fails to grasp the multiple sociomaterial relationships that are at stake and on response. What is overtaken are prevailing forms of responsibility that have also been visible in global waste management programs but for which the implementation follows different trajectories rather than a government-induced top-down mechanism; for instance, there are a number of local initiatives and startups that adopt this prevailing notion as the basis for their environmentalist endeavors.

The politicization of responsibility both in Cambodia and globally has resulted in a blurring of systemic accountability, whose feedback loops, which are oriented toward the maintenance of economic growth, threaten to implode, regardless of political attempts to assign responsibility for waste production and disposal. What is actually under threat is the long-held political sovereignty over capitalism rather than the imminent demise of nature. However, the question of the universalization and commodification of waste responsibilities prompts

questions relating to justice, which has hitherto been disregarded in attempts to save the world from its waste through the creation of waste responsibilities.

RECLAIMING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FROM THE MARGINS

As the empirical examples above may elicit the transversal responsibilization processes that oppose linear politics of blaming, public spaces are simultaneously sites of struggle over recognition and the acknowledgment of subjects and bodies. This includes their right to participate in and shape the city (Harvey 2013). Identifying citizenship not as a possession but rather as a capacity brings into sharper focus the diverse practices of claiming rights to the city, including labor and access to resources, such as basic infrastructure, housing, or health care (e.g., Hess & Lebuhn 2014). As a basis for urban citizenship, labor shifts the attention back to the city's numerous recycling workers who clean the city by reclaiming waste as a resource. Through the constant recursive repetition of their quotidian practices, they are socially recognized as being responsible for the city's recyclable waste to the extent that people living in the city sell their waste to them. At the same time, the responsibility and importance of their collection activities are invisible to others and continue to go unrecognized for the very reason that they are practiced daily and thus become mundane. This is also reflected in waste management reports, in which such laborers often go almost entirely unmentioned (cf. PPCA et al. 2018). Moreover, these workers are often perceived as being as dirty as the waste they collect and thus they are relegated to a minor status in society. A leading policy consulting engineer stated, 'They [the waste pickers] have a kind of attitude, like that they don't want to work under anyone. (...) They don't want to be responsible for anything. That's a bad thing' (Chankrisna, February 2018).

However, it is precisely these female waste pickers who, by caring for waste and their surroundings, respond most adequately and adaptively to their environment. By concretely returning waste materials to the capitalist cycle of exploitation from whose wealth-generating effects they are excluded, waste pickers—so-called *Ed Jais*—both value and access material from different perspectives on responsibility. That is, they respond to both the actual and potential conditions of which they themselves are integral components. Waste, food, the empowerment conferred by the ability to feed one's family, and the disclosure of citizenship all describe a condition that does not exist in detachment from themselves and cannot be separated into a contemporary present or the calculation of a future condition. The prevailing conceptions of responsibilization described above are rooted in the notion of responsibility for the *current* waste crisis or climate crisis, but the *Ed Jais* have demonstrated an entangled condition*ing* of the condition. Responsibility for waste is thus linked to the ability to claim this entangled process of conditioning (for responsibility) and to occupy it as a concrete space of possibility for urban belonging that also demands environmental justice (i.e., justice that is concerned with the potential for all to live well and healthily in the city).

This form of responsibility-overtaking not only resists the mechanisms of transversal-yet-dominant responsibility-distributions, it also contrives a sovereignty-through-waste. It renders the configuration of waste collection somewhat resistant to waste management formalization tendencies, as the city's genuine recycling infrastructure is both dynamically engaged in outreach and flexible with respect to time shifts. In this regard, responsibility is connected to the notion of care for waste and the environment by simultaneously contesting normative responsibilization practices and predominant forms of responsibility that are rooted in the one-sided usurpation of the material relation between waste, knowledge, and climate change. In this regard, *Ed Jais* in urban Phnom Penh proclaim their right to the city through caring for waste, the environment, and themselves. Similar to Fredericks' (2018) example of garbage laborers who proclaim 'garbage citizenship' in pursuit of fair working conditions while disrupting the normative order, Phnom Penh's waste workers reclaim environmental justice through the establishment of an urban belonging that is legitimized by their labor and access to waste as a resource. In this regard, the waste workers also create a form of urban citizenship that is rooted in an alternative understanding of responsibility that connects the urban environment with one's own needs. However, some waste materials are not worth collection for waste pickers, as they deteriorate and fragment into the debris that shape urban wastelands.

SITE 3: WASTELANDS AS COUNTERSITES

What initially appears unworthy of acknowledgment becomes visible when looking at waste responsibility that is addressed primarily in relation to clean urban spaces, the dying of species, or capitalism. Waste in relation to others that remain unacknowledged in terms of the potential for a shared and truly transversal future that takes more-than-human entanglements seriously remains unaddressed in these transversal distribution processes of responsibility. Wholly apathetic with regard to anthropogenic questions of responsibility for waste, the material politics of waste forges its own path through the city. Assuming supposedly ignorant forms (Liburkina & Otto 2020: 232), waste relates to the other elements of life in mischievous ways: plastic bags straightened by the wind, clinging to lamp-posts, cavorting in street puddles of broken plastic particles and rusted aluminum cans, and allowing themselves to be woven into piles of Styrofoam

stacked on top of one another, among road users and the sizzling summer afternoon heat, becoming fluid, volatile, and virulent in configurational comradeships. In the process, they produce wastelands, spaces of urban ignorance symbolized by their slowly decomposing waste and their consequent worthlessness. Even the waste pickers do not collect garbage from these spaces because it is too dirty and not sufficiently valuable for resale. Such wastelands are the product of the politics of waste responsibility that clearly classifies what is worth consideration (i.e., sites that are classified as natural and thus worthy of protection in public spaces) and what is not.

The garbage bags visible in Figure 2 can still be combed through by waste pickers in search of valuable waste; a moment later, however, they may have become worthless for the *Ed Jais*. Forced into reconfigurative constellations comprising monsoon rains, heat, and stray dogs, for instance, these waste materials will change form and matter and symbolize to the outside a state of irresponsibility. Perceived as neglected and carelessly discarded, waste vegetates in its unnatural form and, in addition to the toxicity that results from such constellations, comes to life. Plastic fragments function as a breeding ground and means of transport for diverse organisms, which ultimately transform the sewer into a mirror that reflects the passing clouds (cf. Figure 3). The synthetic habitat, as a waste landscape transverse to the norm, is then composed of more-than-natural entities under which the inscribed human capital relations and desires for prosperity are overwritten with new modes of functioning. Co-shaping the urban transformation, the material relationships of synthetic waste redefine what actually constitutes nature. This leads to the dichotomous divisions from which capitalist life is knitted ad absurdum, similarly to the unified waste reduction models that are implemented in a top-down process and that occur without adaptive possibilities.

In this regard, this site of responsibility that initially conjures thoughts of places and situations that are abandoned and adrift, places and situations with respect to responsibility-claims, exhibit countersites that adhere to their own rules amid the ruins of capitalism. Wastelands are thus sites of unruliness and inter-species meetings that counter prevailing notions of waste responsibility by simultaneously doing waste work, too. In this regard, they are the ghosts of the Anthropocene, as Anna Tsing has noted; specters in ruined landscapes and pericapitalist sites (Tsing 2017; Tsing et al. 2017: G1) that remind us of the fall-out from normative

Figure 2 The picture shows the street that is 'in front' of the poster above. Source: Author.

Figure 3 Part of the sewer making its way along the road and the sign shown above. Source: Author.

and mundane (waste responsibility)'forms' (e.g., Eitel & Meurer 2021). As such, these sites may extend or compress both spatially and temporally. Disregarding the marginalized social and material waste relations that are the repressed other (which counts for waste, for wild natural habitats, and for humans), these sites run the risk of overlooking responses that are crucial for acting sensibly to situated circumstances resulting from the effects of climate change. At the same time, wasteland's material politics can grow, and already have grown, to a significant size that may exert a powerful impact on how climate change develops and on the life that we can expect to live in the future.

Acknowledging and valuing these sociomaterial relations, including their potential and their responses, may contrarily create new forms of responsibility, understood as an entangled process of conditioning life that also comprises multiple temporalities. Taking them seriously as urban belongers, too, reshuffles understandings of what is considered and classified as worthy of preservation and what is not and of what shapes the future city and the world. As material countersites, they are profoundly reminiscent of Foucault's heterotopias, which are situated between normality and utopia, prompting a reconsideration of how we choose to understand the (normative) ordering of urban life and events such as climate change. The *production* of space that is always '*hanté de fantasme*' (Foucault 1967: 48) is, thus, haunted precisely by waste fantasies that preformulate the world's waste responsibilities. Reflecting predominant visions of how to handle wastelands creates the possibility of envisaging responsibility for an entangled environment (surpassing the singular understanding of waste) as an act of re-conditioning that resonates with a new era of politics in an epoch of open-ended assemblages.

CONCLUSION: A RESPONSE

This article has unveiled various notions of responsibility and has also demonstrated how different forms of responsibility are enacted at different sites. The first site revealed a predominant form of waste: responsibility that is primarily ascribed to subjects and thus both standardizes the definition of responsibility and supports its commodification. Rooted in problematizations, such notions of it are enacted on the ground along already-established political infrastructures, perpetuating waste fantasies.

Although the dominant form resonates and is thus further perpetuated in other non-governmental encounters, it nevertheless exceeds a neoliberal (top-down) distribution and temporal-sequential mechanism. Rather (and this becomes visible at the second site), the disentanglement of responsibility measures reveals that responsibilization processes are transversal and connected to a sense of urban citizenship and belonging that is also based on ideals of responsible behavior. This demand conjures an idealized image of how good citizens should behave within the urban citizenship framework. In this regard, it is the public space that reveals how different understandings of responsibility contest with one another in the form of urban citizenships. On the one hand, the predominant and standardized form of responsibility is visualized in the form of posters and (prohibition) signs that enact an image of the proper urban citizen. On the other hand, other forms of urban citizenship are enacted in forms of responsibility for waste that are based on distinct notions of responsibility with respect to oneself as being entangled with the (urban) environment. In this regard, Phnom Penh's waste pickers keep the city clean through their daily practices of collecting and purchasing recyclable materials. In this way, they decode responsibility as a conscious process of positioning oneself in relation to the (surrounding) world, revealing that responsibility refers not to a condition but to the entangled condition*ing* in which we are always participants. By caring for their own environment, they create a sovereignty-through-waste, which simultaneously facilitates their participation in and shaping of the city through their claiming of urban citizenship.

The city's numerous wastelands, which were explored herein as the third arena of responsibility, are completely indifferent to solid waste management programs and capitalistic value productions based on anthropogenic waste responsibilities. As abandoned dump sites or spontaneously created wasteland, they follow their own rules. No political response has yet reached these sites, thus creating worthy habitats for more-than-human-encounters that accommodate waste, animals, microbes, and many more organisms that silently transform the entire city. In this regard, countersites function as correctives to anthropogenic politics. The recognition and acknowledgment of the sociomaterial relationships affecting these sites would be essential to the foundation of a future politics of waste response-ability. By establishing a form of responsibility that encompasses multiple responses and that can be understood as an entangled process of life conditioning spanning multiple temporalities, future politics may be simultaneously collaborative and just.

However, the multiple forms of responsibility examined across the three sites must be situated in relation to the described spatial dimensions and in terms of temporality. In this regard, responsibility is always affected by diverse temporalities that contest linear cause-and-effect mechanisms. This became evident through the dominant forms of responsibility that are linked to deeply entrenched political infrastructures and waste fantasies, the pollution and simultaneous marketization of public spaces (which is relevant to the creation of social identities and urban belonging as played out in different temporal contingencies), and the material relationships at play in wastelands, which memorialize both the past and the present. At the same time, they are the fingerprints of urban futures. The condition for which responsibility must be assumed is thus not temporally static and calculable, and responsibility for this condition (which must first be captured through problematizations) is not transported along biopolitical and mere neoliberal trajectories. While the standardization of dominant concepts of responsibility promotes an 'ontology of the vulnerable' (Evans & Reid 2013), which frames citizens as initially vulnerable and thus eager to become resilient to harmful climate impacts, the examples presented herein have elaborated a positive understanding of responsibility. This viewpoint, which is based not on a preconditional deficit of humanity but on the strengths and capabilities they possess, allows the focus to shift toward sociomaterial relations that have hitherto remained out of sight, with respect to both climate and waste management policies.

A shared or distributed responsibility—or even an extended responsibility—cannot address a (environmentally) just form of responsibility, given an equal distribution. An understanding of responsibility as a process that is also linked to belonging and participation, by contrast, promotes new imaginings regarding the future politics of response-abilities that surpass the provision of (bio)political response patterns to crises and wars. It does this by foregrounding care and solidarity and, thus, sovereignty through conditioning as a response to current climate effects and infrastructural violence. Through its situated alignment, this approach to responsibility is able to create equity. This paper has demonstrated how we might dispense with the passivity, vulnerability, and defensiveness attached to notions of response while turning toward an active shaping of the world that can alleviate inequalities.

NOTE

1 All interviewees have been pseudonymized. Participants' informed consent was acquired prior to the interviews.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Kathrin Eitel orcid.org/0000-0001-8200-9495
Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies (ISEK), Zurich University, CH

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