A VALUABLE LIFE

Seeing transformative practice among Phnom Penh’s waste pickers

VOLUME I

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Australian National University

April 2014
This thesis, including parts thereof, has not been submitted to any other university for the award of any degree or diploma. Except where due reference is made in the text, this thesis is entirely my own work.

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24 April 2014
Acknowledgements

I am eternally grateful to the families, dealers and buyers at Stueng Mean Chey for sharing so much of their lives with me, their continued patience during my attempts at learning their trade and the many interviews I conducted. I will always value our friendships.

There were many people in Cambodia beyond Stueng Mean Chey who helped me during my fieldwork, especially the staff at the Community Sanitation and Recycling Organisation (CSARO), but also those at Indochina Research, the Cambodian Education and Waste Management Organisation and the Centre for Khmer Studies. Friends provided support and encouragement and many of the aid groups allowed me to observe their activities and interview staff for which I am also grateful.

A very special thanks and acknowledgement rests with research assistants and interpreters Suong Samphou, Oum Chariya, Sorng Sophat and Taing Sopheap, along with my dear friend Tim Purcell, who was incredibly generous to my husband and I while we lived in Cambodia, and who has since passed away.

In Singapore I am grateful to the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS) where I became a visiting affiliate, and the many scholars at NUS who provided support and advice, especially Ian Harris. I have also benefitted from the opportunity to participate in, and exhibit photographs at, the Recycling Cities Inter-Asia Roundtable held at NUS in 2011, organised by Tim Bunnell and Michelle Miller, both of whom subsequently provided further assistance.

I gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance provided by the Australian National University (ANU) and, as a recipient of an Australian Postgraduate Award, the Commonwealth Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education. Particular thanks are due to the scholars and staff at the Research School of Humanities and the Arts, the School of Archaeology and Anthropology, School of Art and the wider ANU community, with special mention of Martyn Jolly, Paul Pickering, Assa Doran, Rick Kuhn, Chris Gregory, Nicolas Peterson, Ashley Carruthers, Christine Helliwell, Patrick Guinness, Melinda Hinkson and Pip Deveson, among many others. Professor of cultural studies Gay Hawkins at the University of Queensland and Emeritus Professor Robin Jeffrey at the University of Melbourne have also provided encouragement and inspiration.

I am indebted to my supervisor, Professor Howard Morphy, who has continued to be helpful, assiduous and supportive over the years, providing invaluable comments on multiple drafts of chapters and constructive theoretical advice.

Thank you to my family and friends in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra who have provided abundant encouragement and support, not to mention much-needed
childminding during the more frantic writing periods. Thank you to Simone Ford for carrying out the final proofread.

Most of all I thank my husband, Ian, who read multiple drafts of the thesis and who bore the brunt of my emotions in the face of what sometimes felt to be an overwhelming project. To our children, Veasna and Chamroeun, I thank you for your understanding and support when I was busy writing, anxious or absent.

Without the friends and family I have mentioned, what follows could never have been written. This thesis, nonetheless, is dedicated to those who have lived the stories told in this dissertation.

There is no single standard system of Romanisation for Khmer and I have applied either the most commonly used spellings or those that best fit with English pronunciation. Most of the names of people (with the exception of government officials) have been changed, furthermore, I have chosen not to identify the exact village in which much of this ethnography is based.
Abstract

This thesis is a visual and textual ethnography about the lives of waste pickers on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Though much is presumed about the socio-economic situation of waste pickers in developing countries, this thesis seeks to dispel common stereotypes of picking being merely a means of survival for poor and transient populations, and provides detailed analysis of the economic and social situation of the people who worked on the dumpsite and lived in the nearby waste picker communities. By weaving together rich empirical research, embodying visuals and critical analysis, I highlight the pickers’ agency, an effect seen in the choices that they made at the most mundane level when acting upon objects on the dumpsite, and at the most complex level in their relations with outsiders.

Specifically, in drawing on the theoretical work of anthropologist Nancy Munn, I explore how positive and negative value and values were created through social actions of reclamation of discarded objects on the dumpsite, including an analysis of symbolic processes of ownership and the broader contestation of rights to an urban commons. In the capitalist recycling economy in which the waste pickers participated, the inseparability of their actions from the materiality and social life of the objects they acted on resulted in value transformation processes being enmeshed with politics of property relations.

This study also highlights how their everyday acts on wasted objects manifested a distinct local social world governed by values regarded as important and significant for the community’s sustainability. There was a visible yet often unspoken orientation by autonomous individuals to reinforce largely egalitarian communal values that enabled individual pickers to create and realise personal, social and economic value from waste. At the same time their acts on waste also created negative potentialities, most evident in acts to confront anomalies and prevent sickness and injury.

Nevertheless these value creation processes were largely autonomous of outsiders. While the processes articulated closely with those of their recycling dealers, by and large, they cut across other value creation processes operating in different domains, some of which were fundamentally disconnected from that of the waste pickers. This is clearly represented in the stigma the waste pickers endured, their lowly status and the impact these devalued states had on intersubjective experiences with outsiders, including but not limited to aid workers, tourists and people seeking to attain merit who frequented the site. The waste pickers’ communal value/s were further evidenced by their continued resilience in the face of ridicule and humiliation within wider processes of disarticulation, and their ability to largely maintain their values as others attempted to subvert them.

As the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite closed during my fieldwork, the thesis concludes by exploring the transformations and interventions that impacted the waste pickers when a new sanitary landfill opened in the city.
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Acronyms

ANU  Australian National University
CCF  Cambodian Children's Fund
CD   compact disc
CIDS  Cambodian Institute of Development Study
CINTRI  CINTRI (Cambodia) Ltd (not an abbreviation even though it is capitalised)
CSARO  Community Sanitation and Recycling Organisation
DVD  digital versatile disc
GAIA  Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives
GAWPA  Global Alliance of Waste Pickers and Allies
GFC  global financial crisis
ID   identification (ID card)
JICA  Japanese International Cooperation Agency
kg   kilogram
KKPKP  Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat
km   kilometre
LED  light emitting diodes
LGQC  Local Government of Quezon City
MPP  Municipality of Phnom Penh
NADC  Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
NUS  National University of Singapore
PIO  People Improvement Organisation
PPWM  Phnom Penh Waste Management
PSE  Pour un Sourire d'Enfant (For a Child's Smile)
r   riels
r/kg  riels per kilogram
SMCDS  Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite
TI   Transparency International
UN   United Nations
UNTAC  United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
US   United States
WB   World Bank
WIEGO  Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising
WHO  World Health Organization
YU   Yale University

Tables and figures

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6
Introduction

The starting point for this thesis is 17 April 1975, when forces loyal to the Communist Party of Kampuchea, labelled the Khmer Rouge by former King Norodom Sihanouk, entered Phnom Penh and overthrew the military-led government of General Lon Nol.\(^1\) Up until this time, the Khmer Rouge had been an insurgent force led by Paris-educated leftists such as Saloth Sar (later known as Pol Pot), but was comprised primarily of young and mostly illiterate peasants. On taking control of the country, the Khmer Rouge instigated a radical economic, political and social revolution, beginning with an immediate evacuation of Phnom Penh and other provincial towns and the abolishment of all forms of money, private property and markets. Over a few days Khmer Rouge units forced the city's occupants to leave with only the barest minimum of possessions and began looting for things that held value to them, such as vehicles, wristwatches and tools (Short 2004, pp. 266—279). The city was stripped of its value system; objects formerly transacted and possessed were discarded or revalued in a newly imposed system that sought to efface everything that distinguished the urban elite from the rural peasantry. As the city's value system was levelled down, private property and material goods were swept away over the months by Khmer Rouge units refacing the city as just another functioning part of their agrarian ideal (Short 2004, pp. 278—279).

In the three years, eight months and 20 days that the Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia, some 1.7 million people died of starvation, malnutrition, illness or murder as they were forced to work on the land with little food or medical supplies (Yale University 2010, para. 1). During this time, Phnom Penh was populated by roughly twenty thousand people comprising the governing elite, factory workers and those considered traitors to the revolution who were kept at Tuol Sleng, the regime's interrogation centre (Chandler 1991, pp. 286, 304). In January 1979, the United Front for the National Salvation of Kampuchea backed by the Vietnamese army ‘liberated’ the city and over the proceeding decade governed the country as a client state. Under the watchful eye of Hanoi, Phnom Penh was repopulated throughout the 1980s and a period of reconstruction and revaluation began.

Survivor accounts of the events on 17 April 1975 tell of how the city’s residents were asked to leave their homes and how many joined the sea of people slowly walking out of the city by the late afternoon. Unable to take larger belongings very far, many hid smaller valuable items such as gold ingots and jewellery under their clothing or simply buried them rather than hand it over to Khmer Rouge soldiers (McCormick 2013, p. 26; Short 2004, p. 279). Others had to leave their valuables in whatever safe hiding spot they had at home in the hope they really would return within three days as promised by the Khmer Rouge soldiers (Kiernan 2008, p. 43).

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\(^1\) Sihanouk always referred to them as the ‘Khmer Rouges’, but the collective pronoun more commonly used is Khmer Rouge (Sihanouk and Burchett 1973, p. 28).
It was not until 1979 and 1980 that former residents and survivors headed back to Phnom Penh to reclaim their homes or take up residence in the dilapidated city. The Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite, located five kilometres from the centre of the city, began operation prior to the onset of civil war in 1965 (JICA 2005a, p. 2-1). Little is known of the Khmer Rouge's use of the dumpsite during their time in power, however it continued to be the site for waste disposal up until 2009.

Sopheap was among those that returned to the capital with her mother in 1980, taking up residence in a small home close to the dumpsite. She told me about the day someone found gold jewellery on the dumpsite and how her and her mother quickly rushed to the dumpsite to try their luck. Their efforts were soon rewarded and over many months hundreds of others joined them each day to mine for valuables on what became known as the 'golden field'. Sopheap said:

I came to find gold at the dumpsite every day. Some people were able to find a lot of gold. We dug a two metre square pit, as deep as our chest and then we would dig in a new place.

Sopheap said she found gold, silver and platinum bracelets, necklaces and earrings, and gemstone such as sapphire, garnet and tourmaline. A buyer, by the name of Yay Mao, visited her every day to buy the precious metals and gemstones she had found, while another buyer, Chay, bought the metal. How the precious metal and gems ended up on the dumpsite is not clear. Sopheap said:

I heard elders say that the golden field was the dumpsite during the Pol Pot regime [Khmer Rouge period]. They dumped their waste there. The place that was left from the Pol Pot regime was full of valuable things.

The gold seekers, like Sopheap, were the first waste pickers to extract value on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite. Over the following 29 years, waste pickers continued to work on the dumpsite, slowly transitioning from searching for precious metals and stones to searching for recyclables.

The transition to collecting plastic and metal-based recyclables was in part a result of the gradual adoption of a market-oriented economy by the Cambodian government, shortly after Prime Minister Hun Sen obtained executive power in 1985. Private capitalists were invited to form joint ventures with the state, land tenure systems were introduced and laws were drafted to attract foreign investment (St John 2005). At the time, however, the United States and their allies had placed sanctions on the country, ensuing a period of neglect by the international community.

As small-scale civil war still continued in pockets until the early 1990's, Cambodia remained largely isolated from the world until the establishment of a United Nations (UN) sponsored intervention known as UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia). From 1991 to 1993, almost 40,000 westerners descended on Cambodia to support the peaceful transition to a new democratic government. Along with the UN
personnel came new sources of wealth and new technology (Rehbein 2007, p. 75). Phnom Penh’s transformation was described by Winter and Ollier (2006, p. 8):

> In a few short months, satellite dishes, Toyota Landcruisers and advertisements for imported electronic goods would appear in Phnom Penh. International standard hotels would open, offering Australian wines, steaks and French cheeses.

The benefits of this new wealth and flow of capital, as Boike Rehbein (2007, p. 27) observed, were seized by the ruling elite that had formed quasi-patrimonial leadership structures under the influence of Hun Sen. Globalisation and modernity had suddenly (re)arrived as well as new forms of inorganic waste. The waste pickers at Stueng Mean Chey went from being opportunists taking advantage of the waste from a city stripped bare of its value, to informal entrepreneurs making money from the growing amounts of plastics and metals discarded in the developing city.2

Since 1993, a significant rise in neoliberal policies coupled with a system of patronage and clientelism has continued to preserve the economic and social position of the elites to the detriment of the poor (Rehbein 2007, p. 77). At least half of the annual national budget has been funded by foreign sources, including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Slocomb 2006, p. 393). The international lender and donor supported program of rehabilitation prioritised reform of the state and its public service and encouraged private entrepreneurship and formal land registration (St John 2005, p. 409). From the 1990s, the gap between rich citizens and poor citizens has widened, even as the country experienced unprecedented economic growth on the back of tourism, textile trade and rice harvests during the 2000s. Incomes for the top 20 percent of the population rose by 45 percent compared to just eight percent for the poorest of the population (World Bank as cited by Kazmin 2007, para. 14).

When I commenced fieldwork in early 2008 urban Phnom Penh was growing rapidly in both population and inequity. Phnom Penh was the country’s largest population centre, breathing in large numbers of rural residents for construction projects and exhaling them during the rice planting and harvesting seasons. Corruption was pervasive with Cambodia ranking 166th out of 180 countries in Transparency International’s (2008) Corruption Perceptions Index. The World Bank (2013) also reported in 2008 that 38.8 percent of the Cambodian population was living at the national poverty line.

Media representations of the waste pickers at Stueng Mean Chey depicted them as being the poorest of the poor in the city. I wondered whether the waste pickers were a transient group of vulnerable persons with little choice but to work on the dumpsite, or if they were trapped in Stueng Mean Chey by long-term, unequal patriarchal relationships, alike to a form of forced labour.

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2 Stueng Mean Chey is an area within Mean Chey District in Phnom Penh, and is sometimes written as Stung Meanchey or Stung Meanchay. I have used the spelling provided by the Municipality of Phnom Penh. I have similarly used the most common English term being ‘waste pickers’ to describe the recycling gatherers in Phnom Penh.
What I did not know at the time, however, was that the waste pickers first started to work on the dumpsite in 1980 because they considered it to be a locus of immense value potential. Nor did I anticipate that the waste pickers would consider it in the same light 29 years later, even though the modern-day waste pickers predominately earned an income from recyclables and not gold. There had not been a long-term ethnographic study undertaken with the waste pickers at Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite, and when I began in 2008, the most recent long-term ethnographic study of a waste-picking community I could find had been completed in Indonesia by geographer Daniel T. Sicular in 1991.3 There seemed interesting comparisons with earlier ethnographies, most notably by Sicular and Chris Birbeck (see Chapters 2 and 3), to warrant an ethnographic study of the waste pickers on Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite.

**Theoretical frame**

Examining the social world of waste pickers through the conceptual lens of value is not unique to this study. Within the recent rise of academic research on waste, recycling and excrement, the discussion of value and values has been at the centre of several anthropological, culture studies and sociological texts. Most notably is the work by Australian material studies professor Gay Hawkins, who had published two books prior to my fieldwork: *The Ethics of Waste: How we relate to rubbish* (2006) and *Culture and Waste: The creation and destruction of value* (2003) (edited with Stephen Muecke). Both books inspired me to examine value and values during my fieldwork, along with the seminal works by Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (1966), and Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory* (1979).

As I was re-editing this introduction, the *Hau Journal of Ethnographic Theory* published the first of a two-part special issue on theories of value in anthropology. In the opening pages of the issue, the editors, Ton Otto and Rane Willerslev (2013, pp. 1, 9), acknowledge the absence of a contemporary anthropological theory of value and point to three conceptual divergences in their review of the papers selected for the issue; in one, value is created within varying types of exchange, in a second, value is based on distinctions and comparisons (referring to work by Louis Dumont 1977, 1986), and a third connects value with action.

It is the latter – specifically, theories of value centred on meaningful action (Graeber 2001, Munn 1986) – that I use as a framework to explore value-creation processes on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite. Nancy Munn’s theories regarding positive and negative value tensions developed within her ethnography *The Flame of Gawa* (1986) are of particular relevance to my study, for reasons I explain below. As a visual and textual ethnography, my theoretical focus on people and actions may seem at odds to readers who instead

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3 At the time I began my fieldwork, other students had or were undertaking research at dumpsites or with waste pickers for the fulfillment of similar Masters or PhD programs, the most notable submitted work by Kathleen Millar (2011).
expect a material culture studies approach. While the focus of this thesis is on relations had between and with pickers and non-pickers, the thesis does not overlook the complex interdependencies of waste picker acts and things (Knappet 2005), nor the location of such actions (Tilley 1997, 2004). In the chapters ahead, I explore how value and also counter-value were created within different spaces, with diverse things and involving relations with different people: the waste pickers’ social world at the dumpsite involving waste and dealers (Chapters 2 and 3); in the village concerning personal belongings and food (Chapter 4); and interactions with externalised others and gifts (Chapters 5 and 6).

Two significant ethnographic studies of waste-picking communities by Sicul (1991, 1992) and Birbeck (1978) explore power and exploitation within exchange practices of waste pickers, framed within Marxian analysis of relations and modes of production, and I contribute to these debates by offering an examination of the mode of production present on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite (Chapters 2 and 3). Secondary theories involving gift exchange and aid, transnational governmentality and stigma are introduced and analysed within individual chapters, as and when applicable to the discussion.

**Marx’s labour theory**

Marx developed the concept of modes of production as a framework to categorise the way a society is organised to produce goods and services (Marx 1867). He ascribed a mode of production as distinguished by the relationships and arrangements between human labour and knowledge with the means of production such as the raw materials, machinery and tools required of the person/s undertaking the labour. For example, in the foraging mode of production, generally found in hunter-gatherer societies, no one person owns the means of production and the goods created by the labour of members of the society are communally owned, shared and consumed, with little to no surplus being produced. In the capitalist mode of production, however, capitalists privately own the means of production and the final products or services created by waged human labour belong to the capitalist. Accordingly, any surplus value created by the worker is similarly owned by the capitalist.

Marx claimed that value is created by human labour and that the value of things was equal to the amount of labour (action) that went into producing the things, including all of the labour that went into producing the tools and machines and extracting the raw materials. In a capitalist mode of production, the wages of the workers generally do not match the value of their labour. This is the foundation of Marx’s theories of exploitation within capitalist economies, whereby human labour generally from the lower classes becomes a commodity to be purchased by the ruling classes. Capitalists use their power within subordinate relationships with their workers to pay them little while extracting as much value from the workers’ labour as possible. Whereas foragers produce enough goods to

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4 An example of which are theories of value developed by anthropologist Daniel Miller (2003, 2008, 2010, 2011) who places things, such as saris, blue jeans and personal belongings in the home, at the centre of his ethnographic investigations.
sustain life, the capitalist’s intentions are to make money or increase their ownership of the means of production.

Graeber’s action theory

Marx’s labour theory of value lies at the centre of David Graeber’s (2001) book entitled *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. In his book, Graeber explores conceptual discussions on *value* and *values* collectively in an attempt to create a theory of value that encompasses both. In his review of literature, he proposes that the term *values*, in a sociological sense, is understood to be an abstract conception of what is good and bad, what is proper and unacceptable behaviour, and what is desirable in societies. In an economic sense, *value* reflects the degree to which objects (or people) are desired, measured by how much others are willing to give up or sacrifice to get them. Lastly, in a linguistic sense (citing Ferdinand de Saussure [1966]), *value* is understood by Graeber (2001, p.2), as ‘meaningful difference’, stating that ‘it is no coincidence that they should all be called the same word. That ultimately, these are all refractions of the same thing’.

Graeber attempts to move beyond the economic understanding of value as only a measure of desire that is actualised in exchange by critiquing the works of Georg Simmel (1907) and Arjun Appadurai (1988). He finds support for his theory instead in an exploration of the work of two interrelated yet diametrically opposed theories presented by Marilyn Strathern (1981, 1984a, 1984b, 1987, 1988, 1992) and Nancy Munn (1986). From Strathern’s work, Graeber (2001, p. 41) deduces that the singular value he seeks is created when objects and people are ascribed meaning within a larger system of categories, which implies the importance of social relations. On the other hand, from Munn’s work, Graeber (2001, p. 44) concludes that value is created by actions that are meaningful to those involved, and emphasises not relations but the potential that exists everywhere within objects, things and people.5 In his own attempts to create a singular theory of value, Graeber (2001, p. xii) arrives at a middle ground between Strathern and Munn that favours action over meaning-making:

> Value, I’ll suggest, can best be seen ... as the way in which actions become meaningful to the actor by being incorporated in some larger, social totality – even if in many cases the totality in question exists primarily in the actor’s imagination. This argument turns on a rather idiosyncratic reading of the ideas of Karl Marx.

Graeber’s ‘idiosyncratic reading’ extends Marx’s concept of human labour power beyond its roots in a critique of capitalist production to include all forms of creative action, whether they be in a workplace, home or anywhere else. This creative action can never be separated from things, objects or people (2001, p. 54). To Graeber, creative action creates value within social relations whereby the action has meaning because it involves

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5 I loosely make a distinction between an ‘object’ and a ‘thing’, with the latter being an item that has an identifiable form in the local context and can be used in its current physical condition, such as a plastic cup. Objects are items in which form and function is not immediately evident, or which has been destroyed, i.e. a piece of a broken plastic cup.
recognition and comparison by others, even if the objects themselves are in the person’s subconscious. These actions become complex patterns in an open-ended process (2001, p. 58, 76).

However, in my own observations regarding value creation (in the social and economic senses) on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite, I felt his book did not adequately explain the ways in which multiple meanings and values can emerge from action, and the ways in which action may not always create value of the positive kind (that is it can be perceived negatively). In the few pages where Graeber reflects on negative value (pp. 83–84), he predominately refers to the work by Nancy Munn (see below), as well as British anthropologist Maurice Bloch, who found that social values were best represented by rituals that emphasised the negative, such as moral evils. In concluding, Graeber (2001, p. 84) calls for further research on negative value.

**Munn’s positive and negative value theory**

Skipping past Graeber, a closer reading of Munn’s work in Papua New Guinea addresses these concerns. In her book *The fame of Gawa: A symbolic study of value transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) society* (1986), Munn not only includes both positive and negative potentialities within her exploration of value creation, but that acts of value creation could extend into the social world of others.

Value creation viewed in this wider sense is a complex symbolic process, both a dialectical formation of the symbolic system of meanings constituted in sociocultural practices and an ongoing dialectic of possibilities and counter possibilities — explicit assertions of positive and negative value potentials — through which the members of the society are engaged in an effort to construct and control themselves and their own social world. By means of this process *taken as a whole* a community may be said to act ‘as an agent of its own self-production’ (Munn 1986, p. 3, quoting Touraine, 1977, p. 4).

This explanation of value creation is better explored by referencing Munn’s work in more detail. Her ethnographic study of Gawa was focused on three interests: first, why Gawan preferred to share food rather than consume it; second, their fame in the surrounding islands; and third, their assumptions regarding witchcraft, all three of which are interconnected (1986, xiii). For example, internal acts of resisting consumption (that is storing food for feasts with visitors) allowed for a greater amount of food to be shared with guests, which in turn allowed villagers to enter into exchange relations, engage in *kula* and ultimately create inter-island fame and reputation. If, however, a Gawan was to excessively consume food, it was believed that this could create negative possibilities, invite witchcraft, and counteract positive potential.

Negative potentials are in a kind of ongoing tension with the positive transformations, and in their stronger forms threaten the capacity to produce the desired value and the ideal construction of self and social relation this value entails. In the extreme (which in the present Gawan case, take the form of acts of
positive value is not simply negated but subverted and envisioned under the sign of its own destruction (Munn 1986, p. 3).

Although she acknowledges that there are ongoing complex tensions created by positive and negative value transformations, her case studies suggest that certain acts or objects are considered to have negative potentialities and vice versa. Through a more detailed analysis of forms and mediums of value potential in the coming chapters, I aim to show how these positive-negative value potentials and tensions also existed on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite. I do so by exploring the forms and mediums in which value or counter-value was expressed, represented and realised.

Munn’s value theory is influenced by the field of symbolic anthropology, for which she names Bourdieu (1977), Geertz (1973), Rabinow and Sullivan (1979) as her inspiration (Munn 1986, p. 6). Yet she expands the traditional field of study from myth and ritual to incorporate the analysis of meaning within sociocultural processes involving action. Munn (1986, p. 7) writes:

The practices by means of which actors construct their social world, and simultaneously their own selves and modes of being in the world, are thought to be symbolically constituted and themselves symbolic processes.

While in the case of the Gawans these symbolic processes worked in unison to create communal value in the manner the Gawans held most dear, i.e. fame and renown throughout the Trobriand Islands, this was not the situation for the Stueng Mean Chey waste pickers.

Unlike the Gawans, the process of transforming the value of rubbish on the dumpsite was relatively autonomous. As I show in Chapter 3, the process was nonetheless one that articulated closely with aspects of other people’s lives, such as the dealers, and cut across supplementary value-creation processes operating in different domains from the local, some of which were fundamentally disconnected from that of the waste pickers. In the local world of the waste pickers, there were processes of articulation and ones of disarticulation. Mary Douglas’ pollution theory aids in understanding by what means the symbolic representation of waste resulted in processes of disarticulation that negatively impacted the waste pickers’ communal value and identity.

**Douglas’ pollution theory**

In her seminal text *Purity and Danger* (1966), Mary Douglas similarly speaks of creative action, potentialities, and symbolic and sign value of waste. While ultimately she uses the discussion of purity and pollution as a means of exploring comparative religions, her observations and theories regarding waste, dirt and pollution have been significant within the anthropology of waste. Douglas argues the manner in which waste is treated is not only related to fears concerning hygiene. Instead, waste is a by-product of attempts to order the environment. This by-product requires rejecting, and unattended waste and dirt becomes ‘essentially disorder’ and ‘matter out of place’ (1966, pp. 2, 35). Douglas (1966,
p. 2) argues that creative actions to order the environment realise positive potentialities:

Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment... In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea. There is nothing fearful or unreasoning in our dirt-avoidance: it is a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience. In the desire to create order and stability, Douglas (1966, p. 95) argues that not only is disorder condemned but that disorder also has ‘potentiality’. She contends that ‘it symbolises both danger and power’. In this regard, Douglas similarly found positive and negative potentiality within creative actions of ordering as well as within wasted matter, objects and things, just as Munn did in 1986. In addition, Douglas (1966, p. 4) also addresses how creative action involving disorder and waste can result in sign and symbolic value.

It is not difficult to see how pollution beliefs can be used in a dialogue of claims and counter-claims to status. But as we examine pollution beliefs we find that the kind of contacts which are thought dangerous also carry a symbolic load. This is a more interesting level at which pollution ideas relate to social life.

In the chapters to come, I too attempt to explore pollution beliefs in the village concerning the waste on the dumpsite, and oppose these beliefs with those held by the wider Cambodian society, as well as visitors to the dumpsite. Similar to Douglas, I found claims and counter-claims to status and conflicting symbolic representations of worth.

Contemporary theories of ownership

Ideas of ownership have been conceptualised by anthropologists as a relationship between people that assigns particular rights to one person or a group over an object or thing, but not as a person entering into a relationship with an object (Macpherson 1978; Hann 1998, 2005; Humphre and Verdery 2004 as cited in Busse and Strang 2011; Hoebel 1966; Davis 1973 as cited in Hann 1998). Graeber (2011, p. 499) explains this straightforwardly:

... property is simply a social relation: an arrangement between persons and collectivities concerning the disposition of valuable goods. Private property is one particular [sic] that entails one individual’s right to exclude all others—‘all the world’—from access to a certain house or shirt or piece of land, and so on. A relation so broad is difficult to imagine, however, so people tend to treat it as if it were a relation between a person and an object.

C.M. Hann, a prominent anthropologist who has studied economic organisation and property relations within socialist economies in Europe and Asia, broadly describes property as ‘the distribution of social entitlements’ (1998, p. 7). In the introduction to an
In contemporary ordinary language usage, property commonly refers to the ‘thing’ over which a person claims more or less exclusive rights of ownership. Sometimes this thing is in fact an activity, as in statements like ‘he made his fortune from (buying and selling) property’. However, in established Western theoretical and academic usage property is not an activity or a thing at all, but the rights that people hold over things which guarantee them a future ‘income stream’. They ‘own’ only incorporeal rights, not the thing itself. Property relations are consequently better seen as social relations between people.

Although property relations are conceptualised as social relations, traditionally theories of ownership have been based on labour or, in other words, action. In a groundbreaking paper published in 1994, Professor Emeritus of Law and Organisation Carol Rose interrogates the philosophical work of John Locke, who in 1689 theorised that ownership originally comes about when a person mixes their labour with a thing (Locke 1689 as cited in Rose 1985, 1994). Rose instead contends that there must first be a communal understanding of ownership that assumes labour is owned by the person performing it. To her, there must also be others who agree to the concept and rules of ownership. Rose (1994, p. 18) writes:

> It is not enough ... for the property claimant to say simply ‘It’s mine’, through some act or gesture; in order for the statement to have any force, some relevant community must understand the claim that it makes and take that claim seriously (also cited in Busse and Strang 2011, p. 4).

This broader concept of ownership as action within social relations constituted by others was investigated at an international conference held in 2008 entitled Ownership and Appropriation. Key proceedings were compiled and edited by Veronica Strang and Mark Busse in a 2011 book. In their introduction to the edited volume, Busse and Strang (2011, p. 4) reflect on Rose’s proposition and come up with their own understanding of ownership:

Ownership is a culturally and historically specific system of symbolic communication through which people act and through which they negotiate social and political relations. This perspective highlights ownership as a set of processes through which people assert and contest rights rather than a static bundle or structure of rights. The acts which constitute possession – which announce it and continue to assert it – need not be verbal, but their intelligibility is critical to their success, as is the power and social positions of the actors making such statements (emphasis added).

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6 The joint conference was organised by the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth, the Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa/New Zealand and the Australian Anthropological Society. It was held at the University of Auckland, New Zealand.
Ownership, Busse and Strang (2011, pp. 6, 9) summarise, is an ongoing process of ‘social communication and symbolic action’ within relations with others and in respect to things. The concept of appropriation is the initial act through which ownership rights are asserted. They extend the concept of appropriation to more broadly include processes of exchange as well as claims on previously ‘un-owned’ things. In their review of literature, Busse and Strang (2011, p. 4) contend that the process of appropriation ‘covers a range of actions, from those that can be framed positively in terms of agency and creativity’, as I witnessed at Stueng Mean Chey, and ‘others (such as theft) that are more negative’. There are interesting overlaps between Munn’s value theory and Busse and Strang’s understanding of contemporary theories of ownership. For instance, both theories position action at the centre of a range of symbolic processes involving self-other relations. Both detail in what way acts can be positively or negatively considered. Further, both speak of the connection between types of action and identity and personhood. By using both theories in parallel, I argue that the waste pickers created value during their production processes through a multitude of single social acts of ownership (that in themselves were symbolic and communicative) within wider self-other relations on the dumpsite (Chapter 2). The conflicting external political processes regarding waste as property is discussed briefly at the end of this thesis. As the closure of the dumpsite looms, it becomes evident that the pickers local moral claims of ownership of objects and things found within the waste becomes contested.8

Methodology

During 2008–09, I was fortunate to spend 17 months conducting fieldwork in Cambodia’s capital city, Phnom Penh. Over the first three months, I researched the broader recycling economy in the capital to provide some context for waste picking at Stueng Mean Chey. This included interviewing and observing roadside scrap traders as they conducted their business as well as recycling buyers who pushed carts around the city. I also visited workshops where used glass and plastic containers were being cleaned before being re-used within local production (see Photoessay 3).

During this time, I also became associated with two of the country’s not-for-profit organisations involved in waste management and recycling programs. One of these allowed me to participate in and observe their programs, as well as introducing me to residents of the many small villages surrounding the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite. It was by way of this introduction that I first came to meet my informants and locate their village, one of the small waste picker villages in close proximity to the dumpsite that became the focus of this study. I subsequently spent the remainder of my fieldwork period either in this village or with its residents working on the dumpsite. I did not live in the village itself but leased an apartment close enough to enable me to arrive in the early hours of the morning and leave late in the evening. I interacted with the members of the

7 I prefer to use the term ‘reclamation’ and ‘reclaiming’ rather than ‘appropriation’ and ‘appropriating’ when referring to actions on the dumpsite, due to the negative connotations of the latter term.
8 Time constraints have limited my ability to adequately detail theories on property and processes of privatisation and enclosure. Readers are advised to refer to Verdery and Humphrey (2004) as a starting point.
village on an almost daily basis. This enabled both the villagers and myself to gain a close familiarity with each other and allowed me to slowly learn of their practices and values.

I employed a range of ethnographic research techniques during fieldwork, though principally participant observation. I conducted a detailed household census, several genealogies with key informants, life history interviews, a demographic and lifestyle survey, a survey on the range of support families received from aid groups, a range of focus groups, and both structured and informal in-depth interviews. In addition, I recorded the transactions between waste pickers and two dealers over several days to gain an understanding of dealer profits and waste picker incomes. I employed several short-term research assistants over the duration of my fieldwork, predominately to assist during interviews and focus groups and create transcriptions of audio recordings.

One of the research assistants was a young male living in the village, Samphou, who had learned English through an education program offered by an aid group. Sometimes Samphou accompanied me to the dumpsite when the villagers considered it too risky for me to go alone. Other times he conducted waste picker counts on the dumpsite and collected data on daily incomes. Although I speak and understand Khmer language at an intermediate level, I was always appreciative of my assistants' translations when discussing more complex topics with villagers. From early in my fieldwork I came to understand the waste pickers' work processes on the dumpsite by working alongside my informants every day, and several times a week thereafter. I helped to sort the large collection of recyclables we had amassed at the end of the workday and participated in the exchanges the waste pickers had with dealers and buyers, with my informants taking home the additional income I generated each day.

My photography came later, a creative yet informed process whereby I sought to document these practices and the people involved. I used cameras and documentary processes more as a means of exploration than as a tool for gathering data – with the intent of using both words and photographs to convey research findings within this final dissertation. The camera was not just a collecting tool like written notes that were later processed into paragraphs on a page; as a trained photographer it was a way of seeing people and things intuitively (naturally, instinctively) and therefore allowed me to experience their world in ways beyond merely looking and documenting. The act of seeing through a frame and a lens for me triggered ideas, arguments and narratives about the lives before me that were principally visual. In this mode I was not simply collecting images but seeing, interpreting and understanding in what can best be described as a revelatory process. I therefore endeavoured to have a camera with me at all times. At the same time, I used my photographic training and experience to creatively frame and compose images with the intent that the resulting body of images and photoessays would not be mere visual representations or illustrations for this text but that they be visual arguments in themselves.

Sometimes an event or chance find prompted me to pull out a camera from my bag, and other times I designated entire days to photography, gaining permission from those in the village in the days before to photograph them as they went about their daily practices. At
other times I focused my photography on faces or details of their practices and the things people acted on. I sought to photograph actions on the dumpsite and in the village as they happened. I chose never to artificially pose informants, even when I had missed an opportunity. In addition, I would always ask permission before taking a photograph and this would sometimes lead to the person standing more formally for a portrait, as is the custom in Cambodia. The action shots within homes shown in this thesis were a result of a relationship of trust and a discussion prior to the event on how I wanted to photograph their practices as they happened. In addition, I continually had photographs printed and gave copies to my informants so they could see what I was capturing of their lives.

I had three cameras with me: my main camera is an aging Mamiya twin-lens medium-format camera; a digital SLR camera (Nikon D7000); and a 35mm film SLR camera (Nikon FM2). The medium-format camera is heavy, its film rolls contain room for only 12 images, it takes several minutes to load the film, and because it does not have an internal light meter, its use can be a cumbersome process. Nonetheless, these constraints allowed my informants the time to compose themselves and thereby enabled them to participate in the process of representation.

I regularly used the digital SLR camera to photograph events and objects in order to take advantage of the metadata it collects. I also used it in low-light situations as I could confidently view an image on the screen to determine if I had the exposure right (unlike the medium-format film camera). Finally, I used the SLR film camera as a piece of clothing, a symbol representing my role as a photographer and ethnographer, strapping it over my shoulder in the beginning of my fieldwork on the dumpsite even when I had no intention of taking photographs. This usage resulted in me taking no photographs with it.

I acknowledge the subjectivity of my research practice and I constantly grappled with my awareness of my orientations and influences, and the impact these had on my relationships with informants and on the analysis of the data and my findings. In the field I felt aware of the politics of representation, the use of photography and the very real risks of objectifying and exploiting my informants. To this end, I obtained consent from my informants and I incorporated ethical considerations in my decision-making both in and away from the field. My approach, as urged by anthropologist Marcus Banks (2001, p. 179), was to be humanistic and analytical, and I viewed my research as an opportunity for an engagement in the lives of my informants, not merely an exercise in data collection.

Making images

It would not be a generalisation to state that most anthropologists embarking on ethnographic research today take a camera with them into the field, usually a digital one, with the aim of collecting images to be used as illustrations within their published documents. As a trained photographer, I was keen to explore the use of the camera (two different cameras, for that matter) as a kind of tool, one that could be used for both quantitative and qualitative research outcomes. I was intrigued by three prominent ethnographic filmmaker-photographers who approached the use of the camera very differently. John Collier used photography to establish a quantitative baseline for material
culture in a Peruvian Indian community. Every eighth house was systematically sampled by photographing every wall in every room, providing a reliable measure of affluence and poverty, public health practices, literacy and religious affiliations (Collier 1995, p. 242).

Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead studied Balinese cultural attitudes and social relationships in 1936—38. They produced 28,000 photographs and 22,000 feet of 16mm film (MacDougall 2006, p. 241). Where Mead used the camera to record information for later analysis, Bateson used the camera intuitively. As visual anthropologist David MacDougall (2006, p. 216) writes, ‘Bateson believed a camera should be an extension of a process of thought, a way for the filmmaker to explore a subject and for the viewer to follow that exploration’.

The Collier, Bateson and Mead examples highlight two approaches to documentary photography within anthropological studies I wish to briefly discuss, one allowing for quantitative and informational measures and the other enabling qualitative analysis. In the first approach, as illustrated separately by Mead and Collier, the camera can be used for its ability to extract information (Collier 1995, p. 245) and collect data through systematic methods (Pink 2001, p. 8). Photographs captured in this manner assume the role of an index or mirror reflection of reality that can be analysed for anthropological knowledge (discussed below). Describing a social gathering, Collier (1995, p. 245—48) claims photographs of the event enable a scientific measure with more details than an anthropologist taking field notes. Practising visual anthropologist Sarah Pink (2001, p. 24) claims such realist uses of photography may be appropriate to analyse the ‘field away from the field’, but anthropologists need to situate photographs reflexively regarding the limits of the camera to be a direct measure of truth.10

The second approach, as illustrated by Bateson, values the camera as a tool of exploration. This approach embodies a different way of looking, allowing possibilities to create new ethnographic knowledge through images. In entering a subject through the camera's frame, photography becomes an intuitive experience and the photographer's sense of sight enters a heightened state. Following the lead of Bateson, my photography in the field was less about extracting information and more a sort of experiential state of seeing, a form of enhanced observation in which I saw the abstract and the exact, the distorted and the clear.

Reading images

The images produced by my photography are therefore complex and I expect the reader will require some guidance in their interpretation. Although the cameras I used recorded light reflected off a scene onto light-sensitive film or a sensor, it is too simple to read the images in this thesis as a direct imitation of a moment or reality. Making meaning from

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9 Other anthropologists have experimented with photography through the use of models, actors, constructed sets and collaborative portraits, whereby informants have been involved in the construction of their self-image (see examples in Silva and Pink 2004).
10 Banks (2001) provides a historical summary of the notion of photograph-as-evidence, from anthropometric uses to its use as evidence in court cases, situated within colonialism and repressive projects. Both Marcus Banks (2001) and Sarah Pink (2001) highlight that the notion of 'photograph-as-truth' is socially constructed, as also demonstrated by Chris Wright (1998). Pink (2001) continues to discuss the strengths and limitations of a realist approach in greater depth.
them is not a straightforward translation of the referent. Photographs in general acquire meaning through an interactive process enacted by the viewer, who considers the content of the image and the context in which it is presented through their own social, cultural and lived experiences. While an individual image consists of the index or trace of the referent, bound to the world by the mechanical action of the camera, this index, as argued by Roland Barthes (1977, p. 17), is a ‘message without a code’, and each image ‘connotes’ culturally coded meanings through an identification with the objects within the image as either signs, icons, symbols or values. The composition, tone and texture of the image also play a part in the generation of meaning. There is a complex interrelation between subjectivity, meaning and cultural determinants enabling both informational and symbolic meanings to exist at the same time.

To magnify the mystery of photographic meaning further, Barthes (1977, p. 54) deduced that there may be a third element, a third meaning, a ‘supplement my intellection cannot succeed in absorbing’. Barthes (1977, p. 54) named this third element ‘the obtruse meaning’, describing it as ‘persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive’ (Barthes 1977, p. 54). Later in his most celebrated work, Camera Lucida, Barthes (1980, p. 25–26) introduces the notion of the ‘punctum’ – the ability of a photograph to pierce the viewer and evoke intense emotions and surprise, above the symbolic meaning of the photograph (the ‘stadium’). The punctum, he revealed, was highly personal and subjective, and it troubled Barthes that it could not be manifested or mass reproduced (1980, p. 73).

It can be argued that photographs are suspended in webs of meaning. Events, objects or people featured within a photograph can never be, as Pink (2001, p. 19) writes, ‘just one thing, but may be redefined differently in different situations, by different individuals and in terms of different discourses’. Photographs in this thesis could therefore yield multiple meanings in multiple readers and viewers. It is for this reason that I have structured the photoessays within a framework, a context that anchors both words and photographs in a discourse of my making. I do this because, as Sekula argues, context is of pivotal importance to photographic meaning – only when the image is imbedded in discourse can it yield ‘a clear semantic outcome’ (1981, p. 457).

Attaining a clear semantic outcome is most practicably achieved through the use of text captions adjacent photographs (Killion 2001, p. 50); a practice that has tested theorists including Sekula, Benjamin and Barthes. For instance, in their review of the biology and the neuro-psychology of vision, Sherwin, Feigenson and Spiesel (2007, p. 155) describe the rapid processes involved in visual thinking and how ‘perceptual judgements are prone to social influence’ through the written and verbal word. Captions can, in a sense, interfere with meanings within the image. On the other hand, Schonberg and Bourgois (2002, p. 388) maintain that a caption or written context is essential due to the multitude of meanings inherent in a photograph. In pursuit of their point, they state: ‘letting a picture speak its thousands words can result in a thousand lies’.

But a thousand lies without a caption is still a thousand meanings, except of course in disciplines such as anthropology and other social sciences where a need for veracity and authority is important. Nonetheless visual anthropologist Lucien Taylor (1988, p. 17)
argues that by recognising the ‘opacity’ of the visual we can begin to discover the possibilities, rather than focus on the deficiencies of the medium. McQuire, a visual sociologist, similarly argues that the arbitrariness of visual meanings can act as a transformative force for ‘culture and society, self-identity and memory and social science itself (as paraphrased by Pink 2001, p. 13). The visual, according to MacDougall (2006, p. 222), is like poetry to text, offering a pathway to other senses and embodied experience. Combining psychological, kinaesthetic and interpretative modalities, viewers can immerse themselves in the photographs, critically analysing and interpreting by using their own perceptions and experiences (MacDougall 2006; Sherwin, Feigenson and Spiesel 2007).

Still, in the absence of guidance towards a clear semantic outcome, there is also the risk that images can be used to misrepresent and be misappropriated by others. MacDougall (2006, p. 223) writes that visual anthropologists have a moral responsibility not to allow this to happen. Photography’s strength, I believe, comes from its ability to evoke feelings, embodied understandings and emotional responses. Due to the relationships of trust embedded in good ethnographic fieldwork, consideration and care to protect the use of images, and the meaning they create, is of crucial importance.

Photographs in context

For the reasons outlined above, I have chosen to use my photographs in this thesis in two ways: as visual arguments and as illustrations. Firstly, within or following each chapter are photoessays that provide alternative analysis, findings and conclusions to those made within the text of the chapter. I do not consider these to be illustrations nor mere records (although they may serve this purpose); in their placement and context they are visual arguments, enabled by those willing and able to engage with visual ethnographic data as a different mode of understanding. For all of the photoessays, except the last, which sits within the text in Chapter 6, I have provided forewords or ‘artist statements’ to guide the reader/viewer when interpreting the photographs and providing background as to how they were made. In some instances these forewords may seem overly prescriptive, but I do so with the intention of reducing any uncertainty of their meanings.

The photoessays were selected and arranged so that they are deliberately sequenced to convey, arouse, argue and ultimately an attempt to create an embodied understanding of the experiences of the waste pickers. In doing so I was influenced by art critic and painter John Berger, who wrote extensively on the study of images and on compiling photographic essays in his book Another Way of Telling (1972). He advocated for the photoessay, arguing that the form’s worth is in the complex development of meaning gained by deliberate sequencing, but warned, however, that ‘the meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it’ (Berger 1972, p. 29). I have endeavoured to keep this in mind when ordering the photographs. Similarly, renowned social documentary photographer W. Eugene Smith brought attention to how meaning may be directed by the sequencing, arguing that meaning making is ‘something that is optical and mental at once. One photograph says something about the subject. The next photograph may amplify on that subject, or the picture may add its own dimension to the subject’ (as cited in Kobre 1979, p. 3). So in the
context of visual anthropology, I believe the possible ambiguity of a single photograph and its potentiality for multiple meanings warrants the narrative approach.

I consider the photographs to be documentary images, made and selected with an ethical commitment to ensuring respect for the rights of my informants. The photographs are not digitally altered in post-production to eliminate or falsify evidence, nor were they selected to construct an untruth. The night-time sequence in Photoessay 2, however, uses time-lapse photography techniques, which convey my own subjectivities of collecting on the dumpsite. What is seen in this sequence is still documentary photography, however the long exposure on the camera allowed the movement of lights to record action and as a consequence the sequence appears to be more within the genre of abstract photography. Visual anthropologist and historian Elizabeth Edwards (1997) is an advocate for the incorporation of these more expressive forms of imagery in ethnographic representation. Edwards (1997, p. 54) proposes two categories: the more ‘realist’ documentary photograph and the ‘expressive’, which aims to ‘question, arouse curiosity, tell in different voices or see through different eyes’. I use these expressive photographs as visual metaphors.

Secondly, on the illustrative approach, small thumbnail-sized photographs are placed in the margin of the text chapter pages as corresponding illustrative images directly related to a detail within the text. Rather than interrupt the flow of the text, I have chosen to keep the illustration images thumbnail sized with larger versions placed in an appendix. This usage to me reflects practice advocated by Collier and Mead in that the image’s referent is in the adjacent text, ensuring its illustrative meaning is clear and apparent.

**Summary of chapters**

The first chapter provides a background to the community of waste pickers on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite including one of the waste picker villages where I spent most of my time. Findings from quantitative and qualitative research methods provide an insight into the socio-economic composition of the community, as well as key demographic data. I also begin to detail the waste pickers’ actions on the dumpsite and describe a typical day in their lives. This follows with various accounts of the waste pickers’ past experiences and an exploration of their reasons for collecting recyclables on the site. I conclude by comparing this community with those of other waste-picking communities in different parts of the world. Photoessay 1 continues to set the scene with a series of portraits of waste pickers and landscapes of the dumpsite and the village.

In Chapter 2, I explore in detail the work practices and processes of the waste pickers on the dumpsite, from the tools they used and the types of recyclables they collected to the social organisation and relations among pickers. The chapter is structured using a Marxian political-economic framework, outlined above, with the intent to inform the discussion had in Chapter 3 regarding the waste pickers’ mode of production, as well as analyse how value was created by their actions. It is in Chapter 2 that I outline my thinking regarding positive and negative value transformation, as informed mostly by Nancy Munn’s value theory. Photoessay 2 comprises three sequences exploring the materiality of waste, the
social organisation on the dumpsite and my own phenomenological subjectivities of working on the site.

Chapter 3 focuses on exchange practices through detailed descriptions or vignettes of the various dealers and buyers in the community, including an analysis of their expenses and profits. I explore the dynamic of relationships with dealers and buyers and their customers, the waste pickers – evident is the centrality of these exchange relationships in the creation of economic value. I summarise the anthropological work of two scholars who studied waste-picking communities in Indonesia and Colombia, with differing positions regarding the mode of production within waste-picking communities, and propose my own interpretation for the community at Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite. This continues to resonate with my ongoing focus on agency and value. Photoessay 3 is both a photo-collage and document of the exchange practices on the dumpsite and a glimpse of the extensive recycling economy in Phnom Penh.

While the previous two chapters are focused on actions and relations on the dumpsite, the next chapter takes us back to the village, with an exploration of what the waste pickers did with things found on the dumpsite. As the title suggests, Chapter 4 looks at acts of consumption. My analysis explores the manner in which members of the village created positive social value through actions of gifting and sharing, but also how acts on certain things found on the dumpsite also held negative potentialities, with ritualised practices performed in an attempt to avert any negative consequences. Photoessay 4 is a sequence of triptychs of life in the village.

In another shift in emphasis, Chapter 5 considers the intersubjective experiences the waste pickers had with outsiders to the community, namely members of the wider Khmer society, tourists and people seeking to attain merit who visited the dumpsite and the many not-for-profit organisations who were founded over the years to provide aid to the waste-picking community. While a greater part of the chapter is devoted to examining the latter, that is, the relationship dynamics between members of the village and the aid groups, the chapter begins by exploring concerns of social identity, stigma and the impact of random gift-giving on how the waste pickers valued themselves. Photoessay 5 is not a sequence of images like the other photoessays but is instead a record of photographs taken when tourists arrived in the village and dumpsite to hand out gifts of food.

Lastly, Chapter 6 is an account of the events leading up to and following the closure of the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite and the opening of a landfill ten kilometers away. It focuses on the political processes relating to property relations concerning waste in Phnom Penh, and to do so, I give a historic account of waste politics and intersubjective experiences between waste pickers, the municipality and representatives of a foreign state. I also summarise conflicting positions in literature regarding the role of waste pickers within waste management systems in growing cities. The final photoessay is a short sequence taken at the new landfill.
Chapter 1

Socio-economic and demographic characteristics

Introduction

My first day of fieldwork with waste pickers involved attending a handicrafts program organised by a local environmental organisation on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. I had heard that the organisation was providing alternative livelihood training for a dozen or so women over a two-week period and asked if I could join the group each day. Sitting together on the organisation’s cool office floor, the women and I were instructed by a female staff member in how to make picture frames and baskets from discarded newspapers. We toiled quietly, seldom talking while enjoying the repetitious process of twisting thin strips of newspaper around a bamboo stick to form slim paper tubes, which we later glued and wove together.

During the two weeks, the women volunteered little information about themselves and although I asked only a few questions, in most cases the female staff member answered on their behalf. Her statements intrigued me:

We give them money and rice to attend the training, and once they have learned how to make the handicrafts they won’t need to work on the dumpsite anymore because we will pay them for each handicraft they make from their home.

Further, the female staff member always spoke with authority, claiming detailed knowledge of the waste pickers’ daily life:

They work all through the night, only sleeping for a few hours in the morning before cooking for their families and coming to the program for three hours in the afternoon.

I questioned how the women were surviving on only a few hours of sleep a night, but the staff member became adamant, convinced it was the truth. Her position, which she steadfastly maintained, got me thinking about the role of such organisations and the circumstances in which they established and maintained their relationships with the community of waste pickers.

The women were dressed in clean clothes with their hair neatly done. Despite popular perceptions of waste pickers, none in the group appeared particularly starved or malnourished, nor excessively tired. Everybody seemed alert and generally comfortable with each other and their surroundings. Each afternoon over the two weeks we continued our handicraft activities on the floor of the environmental organisation, learning each new
step in making the picture frames and baskets. The women were diligent and obliging with
the organisation’s staff, quietly reciprocating the relationship, an arrangement that I was to
witness on numerous occasions with other similar organisations over the next year.

Towards the end of the second week, we took a break from the monotony and I
explained my research project to them in more detail. After I had finished, they invited
me, encouragingly, to visit their village. The staff member offered to take me on her
motorbike in two days.

With this invitation began my relationship with the community of waste pickers
represented in this thesis. In this chapter, I continue my description of first arriving in the
village and dumpsite, and foreground much of what I discovered about this strong group
of women (and their families) that invited me into their lives. The data presented here is
drawn from both qualitative and quantitative research methods. I profile their socio-
economic and demographic characteristics and provide detail about their common work
practices and motivations for becoming a waste picker. Also included is a description of a
typical day in the village, as well as recited personal stories of past hardships, deaths and
births. Through these narratives I show just how the village members shared a connection
to one another greater than their chosen occupation. I conclude by arguing that for many
of the waste pickers in Stueng Mean Chey, picking was not merely a survival strategy but a
form of self-employment for those with limited formal skills and social networks, offering
comparatively sufficient incomes and autonomy.

**First impressions**

Sure enough, two days later I found myself on the back of the staff member’s motorbike,
riding through the densely populated suburb of Stueng Mean Chey, thick with markets
and factories. At the fork in the road we turned into a backstreet lined with residential
housing, then rather suddenly crossed over onto a muddy road and into what could have
been a rural village. The road was lined with small concrete houses intermixed with
wooden shanties, clearly an area inhabited by urban poor. Up ahead I could see a hill, and
I sensed it was the dumpsite. In a short while we turned left after passing a small home
selling various groceries and stopped outside the entrance to the first home on the right.
It was a small, two-storey residence enclosed by a tall brick fence.

The homes directly opposite were considerably smaller and built about one metre off the
ground, supported only by an array of uneven, skinny wooden posts. Walls were
constructed with a random assortment of materials and roofs covered with plastic
tarpaulin. The staff member pushed her motorbike inside the two-
storey residence, where the owner, Sopheap, was busy with
handicrafts she had learned to make at the training. She quickly
jumped up, fussing about, offering us chairs and giving money to a
child to buy us drinking water.

We thanked her and sat down. As Sopheap resumed her work, she told us a little about
her situation. She said 15 members of her family and extended family lived in this
residence, although only a few years before they lived in a much smaller home like the families opposite. When her husband began to work as a guard at an aid group, the family were able to borrow money to self-build the small double-storey residence. Sopheap said she stopped collecting recycling on the dumpsite a few months ago after she fell into a disused well on the fringe of the dump. She described the water as black and hot, scalding her skin, and making her ill for over a month. Scared that she might fall into the water again, she decided to stop collecting recycling on the dumpsite and learn how to make handicrafts. Later, Sopheap would be the only woman in the village to continue making recycled handicrafts after the two-week training was completed.

During this first visit I also met the community’s leader, a man by the name of Bonarith, who himself lived in the centre of the first row of houses (there were two rows). Bonarith had lived within the small community of roughly 20 homes since it first moved from its original location closer to the dumpsite. Previously the residents paid no rent and simply squatted on government land. But over the years, the adjacent dumpsite grew larger, so an aid group, worried about the health and safety of the children, suggested and negotiated a rental agreement for the land opposite Sopheap’s house.

Bonarith explained that a few families in the village, such as Sopheap, owned their land and house, while those in the small homes opposite rented a piece of land, two metres by three metres, for 10,000 riels (US$2.50) per month. After renting the land, each family was then required to build a temporary house, typically made from cheap wood and salvaged materials from the dumpsite. He answered my questions thoroughly, explaining how the families did not have running water, bathroom facilities or sewage. Instead, they needed to buy water by the bucket from nearby homes connected to the state-owned piped water system.

I saw electrical wires weaving from the larger homes used to power single fluorescent bulbs inside at night and televisions in two or three homes. Bonarith said the other families without connection to electricity used kerosene lamps in the evenings and battery-powered radios for entertainment. He added that families collected firewood from the dumpsite and used this wood to cook meals over small ceramic stoves.

In a quick display of his good humour, Bonarith, who looked much older than his 56 years, said he wasn’t married. As proof, he opened his mouth, exposing his almost toothless gums, and claimed he was still a child and too young to be married. His wife, Dara, appeared from inside their home, affectionately laughed at his joke, and proudly announced that four of their ten children were already married. I’m glad I laughed at his joke too, because he was essential in approving my research with local authorities.

At my request, both Dara and Sopheap offered to take me to visit the dumpsite. Fearful that I would be robbed, they made me leave all my belongings with the female staff member who stayed behind. Their desire to protect me throughout my research often

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11 At the time of my fieldwork 4000 Cambodian riels (r) equaled one US dollar. Both US dollars and Cambodian riels are used in Cambodia, although riels are generally used for smaller amounts.
Finally, unlike the Harijans (Dalits) who form the largest population of waste pickers in India (Medina 2005, p. 9), the waste pickers on Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite were not members of a lower caste, an oppressed ethnic minority or marginal religious group. In terms of ethnicity, almost all identified themselves as Khmer and practiced Theravada Buddhism, the national religion in Cambodia.

Light versus night

There were an average of 253 people collecting recycling on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite between the daylight hours of 6am and 5pm. Children made up roughly one fifth of the population working during these hours. At its busiest, there were up to 396 waste pickers working at the site, and the dumpsite was most quiet during peak holiday periods or on days with extreme weather. The dumpsite was operational 24 hours a day and those waste pickers who chose to work at night did so using battery-powered head-mounted torches. Night-time offered respite from the heat of the day with the added bonus of less competition from other pickers. Nevertheless, there was a greater risk of injury from unseen syringes and broken glass, and many preferred to collect during daylight hours as they were afraid of youth gangs and drug addicts who were said to frequent the site at night. Only three males in the village consistently worked at night (see Photoessay 2 – Sequence 3).

In contrast to what the female staff member from the environmental organisation told me at the handicrafts training, I soon realised that the women who had attended the program rarely worked at night. My data showed that their working hours seemed relatively healthy, a finding that left me wondering why the women in the training session let the female staff member persist with her misinformation regarding their working hours. Indeed, the flexibility with working hours produced great variability, allowing some families to work whenever they felt the need. Sina, a mother of five children living in one of the smaller homes, said:

Two to three months ago my husband and I collected at night because in the daytime it was hot but this month we stopped. We also went to collect at night because I wanted to stop my daughter from breastfeeding during the night.

During the hotter months of the year, two single mothers also tried working at night, sleeping from 7pm until 1am then heading to the dumpsite at 2am when there was known to be a steady flow of fully laden garbage trucks entering the dumpsite. These two women resumed working in daylight after one week as they felt scared about leaving their children unattended in the home at night.

Although the waste pickers could start at any time of the day or night, they generally worked in what would be the equivalent of a shift in a factory. On average, each shift was typically ten hours in duration, including sorting and selling to dealers and buyers. The shifts were structured around the availability of the dealers, who only bought from the waste pickers in the morning (for those working at night) and in the evening (for those working the day shift). It appeared to me that the effort required in sorting the recyclables
and waiting for dealers meant that most waste pickers chose to work these long hours, allowing more days of rest, rather than shorter shifts.

**Work days and rest days**

Although they worked in what appeared to be shifts, the number of days worked within a week varied considerably between individual waste pickers. Overall though, waste pickers in the village worked an average of 18 days per month, breaking for a rest day sometimes only once a week and at other times three or four days in a row. Each family, it appeared, had their own method of accumulating income, while juggling family responsibilities. For example, Sina said:

I normally rest on Saturday, Sunday and Thursday. At least I rest three days per week but my husband normally rests four or five days per week.

With five children, the youngest being three years old, Sina and her husband generally took it in turns to work on the dumpsite, with Sina working one day more because she was not able to earn as much as her husband in a single day. As a family unit, it was important for them that each adult contribute equally to the family income, while allowing each to have time with their children, family and friends. In another family, however, the husband, Heng, worked almost every day, only stopping for a rest every second Sunday, while his wife, Nuon, stayed at home to care for their first-born. Nuon admitted that Heng was able to earn much more than they spent, allowing them to accumulate savings.

Flexible working hours were valued greatly by village families, especially when a family member became ill. In my analysis of data obtained through daily work diaries, I found that women were five times more likely than men in the village to take a day off due to illness. Apart from sickness, other reasons given for not working were numerous, ranging from looking after children and completing chores at home through to wanting to take a rest and watch television. Sometimes the waste pickers had a meeting at an aid group, school or government office, and even though the meeting might only be short they generally took the whole day off, most often only working on the dumpsite if they had a full day available.

**Sundays and holidays**

With adults generally resting on Sundays, often sharing wine and food together, the dumpsite was less crowded, attracting children to the site to earn pocket money. As I discovered, many older children in the village enjoyed collecting on the dumpsite and I witnessed some of the younger children pleading with their mothers to let them collect on Sundays and during school holidays. Throughout Cambodia, public primary schools only offer classes for half the day, either in the morning or afternoon, Monday to Saturday. Child waste pickers often worked on the dumpsite before or after school, in shorter durations.
As a result, many aid groups had set up schools surrounding the dumpsite to offer education programs in the alternate periods, in part to dissuade children from going to work on the dumpsite. It appeared that the aid groups’ programs were successful in helping a substantial number of children to supplement their education rather than collect pocket money on the dumpsite. I also witnessed the manner in which parents in the village highly valued the free additional schooling available to their children, otherwise unavailable in the rural provinces of Cambodia or for that matter in other areas of the city.

Sunday, however, was a school-free day for the children. Those older children (tweens or teenagers) who ventured out on the dumpsite to make a small amount of spending money for themselves ran the risk of being seen by aid group staff who routinely conducted surprise visits to make sure their students were not working (see Chapter 5 where this is discussed in more detail). In spite of the risk of facing consequences from the aid group, I witnessed children eager to earn some pocket money on Sundays and others who wanted to fulfil their duty to their families by assisting during periods of financial hardship.

**Rural migrants to the dumpsite**

Almost all waste pickers interviewed at the village and on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite were first- or second-generation urban in-migrants from surrounding rural provinces in the south of the country. Two thirds had migrated to Phnom Penh specifically to work on the dumpsite. When asked, many said they learned about the opportunity to make money on the dumpsite through their relatives or a neighbour in their village of origin. Within the dumpsite village, almost all of the families in the small homes opposite Sopheap were connected, either by birth or by marriage, to a single rural village in the nearby province of Prey Veng, situated on the flood plains of the lower Mekong River and 78 kilometres to the east of Phnom Penh. Prey Veng’s close proximity allowed those villagers to return to visit kin with relative ease, and this connection to what was referred to as their ‘homeland’ was integral to village solidarity, offering residents what can be described as social protection during times of hardship. It was the social ‘glue’ that held the community together, although at times this close familiarity also fuelled arguments that triggered significant upheavals.

Consideration of such factors as the access to social support networks was important in making the decision to move to Stueng Mean Chey. While a good number waste pickers I interviewed said they were attracted to waste picking by the prospect of ‘earning more income easier’, when I asked how long they took to decide to migrate, nearly all said they deliberated for a few months before travelling to the city to give it a try. As Leakena, mother of two and waste picker for more than 20 years, described:

> Before I used to sell dessert and I did this job for a long time. When I was a seller someone said to me, ‘You should go to work on the dumpsite because you can earn more money than selling dessert.’ When I heard that, I had to think about it for two to three months before I decided to go and work on the dumpsite. The
reason I changed jobs was because I could see that collecting recycling was easier
to earn good money than selling dessert.

Viewpoints which favoured waste picking over other accessible livelihoods were
supported by tales of chance finds on the dumpsite. As it is common for Cambodians to
return to their homeland during religious holidays, stories of people finding gold and
diamonds on the dumpsite became legend and a few waste pickers I interviewed admitted
they came because of the exciting possibility of ‘becoming rich’. Those in the village with
school-aged children prioritised more practical reasons, stating they had heard about the
additional support and education programs provided by the aid groups (Chapter 5).
Nonetheless, my analysis of quantitative survey data found that roughly two thirds of the
waste pickers were formerly farmers who migrated to the city specifically to become a
waste picker. Of these, some were able to maintain both an urban and rural life, enabled
by their close proximity to their homeland, which allowed return for the rice planting and
harvest seasons when their relatives required assistance.

When they arrived for the first time, many admitted that the work was not as easy as they
envisioned. Bonavy, another long-term waste picker and mother of six children, said:

The first time I came here, I could not bear the smell or the sight of the maggots.
My husband became ill because of the smell. We spent ten days trying to learn
how to collect the recycling and we only got 400 riels (US$0.10) each day because
we did not know how to collect. But day-by-day we slowly made more money.

Bonavy, like others, eventually gave up because of the smell, and returned to her home
province for a short period. She did however return, reflecting a common trend of toing
and froing as options are weighed and assessed. Sombath, Bonavy’s husband, added:

When we came back, at night I wished tomorrow would come soon so I could go
to the dumpsite to make more money.

Universally among the waste pickers I interviewed, prospering and therefore satisfaction
on the dumpsite came with experience in learning the values of things through looking,
touching and listening. The economic fundamentals were clear to all, though some more
quickly developed the skills needed to detect the value of what lay before them and what
lay hidden in the newly arrived garbage. Others too said that it took them a period of
adjustment to develop forbearance against the stench and smoke, as well as the physical
strain of the work.

Some villagers supplemented their income from waste picking by
undertaking ad-hoc chores in the village, such as making tools for
waste pickers to use on the dumpsite, cutting children’s hair, sewing
blankets, sharpening knives, drying leftover rice for sale as pig food
or catching frogs and fish in the nearby swamp to sell as food. The
activities were done not out of necessity but more as an exchange of
services in the village.
Besides avenues to supplement their income from collecting, there were other livelihoods available to the population of waste pickers at Stueng Mean Chey. I met people who lived close to the dumpsite but were employees elsewhere, including but not limited to holding jobs in garment factories, hospitality, construction and the military. Finding a job on a construction site, I was told, can be easy, but it didn’t pay as much as working for yourself on the dumpsite. Borin, a 24-year-old divorced male, admitted to being able to earn 15,000 riels (US$3.75) per day working on a construction site, but could earn 20,000–25,000 riels (US$5–$6.25) per day on the dumpsite. Kunthea, a single mother of five, also tried working in construction. She said:

Collecting recycling is better than working for someone. Working in construction is tiring and we are not given any time to rest, but as a waste picker I can take time to rest when I’m tired.

In addition to time for rest, women in the village also said they valued working on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite because its very close proximity to their homes meant they could prepare lunch for their children (students return home for lunch in Cambodia). Apart from the relatively good income, autonomy and flexible work arrangements, waste pickers also benefited through finding objects they could use in their homes (Chapter 4).

Others commented that the work held less risk to loss of capital than other self-employment. Chenda said:

I tried being a seller and I sold fish bones to other people in my village. I had 70,000 riels (US$17.50) of my own capital. But my business failed because my neighbours always bought my fish bones, maybe two or three kilograms, without paying me any money.

Chenda’s unsuccessful business attempt was probably due to the close-knit ties between the community, whose members resisted typical market exchanges with her in place of longer-term gift exchanges.

**Salary and income**

Possibly reflecting the flexible work arrangements, daily income earned among the waste pickers was also highly variable. There were differences in the income generated by each waste picker each day and there were at times vast differences in the amount one waste picker earned compared to another. The reasons for this are numerous, ranging from differing levels of skill, knowledge, personal motivation, stamina, strength and risk-taking behaviour through to differing amounts of rest versus work time during a shift and garbage content, to name but a few (Chapter 2). Additionally, the price of recyclables was impacted by local, regional and global markets, a reality that was most evident during the global financial crisis (GFC) in 2008 when recyclables prices dropped overnight by as much as two thirds (Chapter 3).
About midway through my fieldwork (post-GFC), when I understood how varied individual incomes were, I asked all of the waste pickers in the village if they would volunteer to report their daily earnings to me. I wanted to understand more about the variability and the ways they managed their income in light of it. In the end, nine individuals consistently reported their daily income in a diary over a five-month period between mid-November 2008 and mid-April 2009 (hereafter ‘the study period’).

Over the study period, bearing in mind that this was when prices for recyclables were low, the average daily take-home income for the group of nine waste pickers at the end of a workday was 11,123 riels (US$2.78) (see Table 1.1). After prices started to rise again in late February 2009, the daily average reached 14,357 riels (US$3.59) during March. This increase in daily income of 30 percent was interesting but it did not reflect the higher levels I had anticipated based on anecdotal evidence. For instance, based on the pre-GFC prices for recyclables and the product traded in March 2009 figures, I estimated that the daily average would have been roughly 18,200 riels (US$4.55).

### Table 1.1: Average Daily Take-Home Earnings for a Group of Nine Individuals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Waste pickers in study between November 2008 to April 2009</th>
<th>Waste pickers in study during March 2009</th>
<th>Waste pickers estimated pre-GFC earnings using March 2009 data</th>
<th>Cambodia minimum wage for garment, textile and shoe industry based on a typical factory work week of six days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11,123 riels (US$2.78) per working day</td>
<td>14,357 riels (US$3.59) per working day</td>
<td>18,200 riels (US$4.55) per working day</td>
<td>9400 riels (US$2.35) per working day (Associated Press 2012; Launey 2012)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite what I believed to be missing income from the daily figures accounting for sales to dealers, the figures illustrate that even during the lean time following the GFC, waste pickers were still on average earning more than those who worked for minimum wage. This is a remarkable finding in the context of Cambodia, as even two years after my study in 2011, 46 percent of workers in a national study reported earning a daily income below the minimum wage.

Thinking more broadly about the gap between what was reported in daily dealer-based income and what I believed were still higher weekly and monthly incomes per waste picker, I looked for other sources of income. The most common is what I had perceived as a sort of short-term savings scheme, which paid dividends on a weekly basis. At the end of each workday, the waste pickers would return to the village with a various assortment of hard metals, which they would store under their homes (Chapter 4). On their rest or sick days when they needed money, they would often sell this stockpile to pay off debt and for large expenses. The average financial amount generated (generally once a week exchanged on a rest/sick day) was 19,856 riels (US$4.96).

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14 The only minimum wage the Cambodian Government has set is for the garment, textile and shoe industry which is set as US$61 per month, henceforth this is referred to as the ‘minimum wage’ (Associated Press 2012; Launey 2012).

15 A report by the Cambodia Institute of Development Study into wages in 2011 found that of 1500 urban and rural respondents 46 percent of workers earned below the minimum wage. Poorly paid workers came from industries such as construction, food, machine maintenance and repair, beauty and agriculture (CIDS 2011, p. 4).
Including this additional weekly amount and extrapolating the daily amount over months during the study period, the total average monthly earnings during the GFC was slightly higher than the minimum wage at US$64, however as prices started to rise again in late February 2009 this average figure increased to almost US$100 in March (see Table 1.2). Following my earlier calculation for estimated average pre-GFC monthly income, the monthly total would be approximately US$170. Considering the fact that the waste pickers in the study worked an average 18 days per month in contrast to the 26 days worked by garment factory workers, there is certainly strong evidence to support statements of sufficient earning potential at Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite.16

Table 1.2: Average Monthly Total Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Waste pickers in study between November 2008 to April 2009 (on average 18 working days)</th>
<th>Waste pickers in study during March 2009 (on average 18 working days)</th>
<th>Waste pickers estimated pre-GFC earnings using March 2009 data (on average 18 working days)</th>
<th>Cambodia minimum wage for garment, textile and shoe industry (on average 26 working days)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>257,292 riels (US$64.32) per month</td>
<td>395,650 riels (US$98.91) per month</td>
<td>678,158 riels (US$169.54) per month</td>
<td>244,000 riels (US$61.00) per month (Associated Press 2012; Launey 2012)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.3 provides a comparison and discussion of the earnings for four waste pickers to show the variations between individuals, as well as the number of work, rest and sick days. I also include details of the variations in their average earnings before and during the GFC. In this table I provide a comparison of two extreme cases: one father who worked tirelessly almost every day earning significant income for this family (‘to build for their future,’ he said) and a single mother heavily supported by aid groups who only worked on average every second day.

In conclusion, while there was significant variation among the daily incomes of waste pickers, the daily diary data shows that they were able to earn on average the equivalent to or more than the minimum wage during lean times such as the GFC and significantly more when recycling prices were not negatively affected by external global forces.

A day in the village

A typical day in the village started at first light (Photoessay 4 focuses on activities in the village). Waste pickers would put on their work clothes, typically an oversized long-sleeved shirt and thick trousers or jeans usually sourced from the dumpsite, together with a hat and rubber boots. As the daytime workers trickled out of the village at varying times in the morning, the few young men who worked at night wandered back in. Those residents who remained in the village during the day included women with young children, the elderly and those taking a rest day. The women would be busy in the mornings, helping the older children off to school, tidying their homes, and beginning to prepare the first meal of the day generally eaten between 10am and 11am. Around this time, the daytime workers would return, removing their shirt and rubber boots to eat their first meal and take a short break before returning to the dumpsite.

16 The waste pickers chose the number of days they wanted to work in a week or month, apart from sickness. The dumpsite was open every day and garbage trucks dumped waste from the city on all days of the year with the exception of only a few of the significant public holidays.
Small children, generally older than three years but not yet old enough to attend school, simply wandered around the village looking for entertainment. Often there was no one assigned carer for these toddlers; those in the village looked out for them and the children never wandered too far. After the first meal was finished and the dishes washed, for those not working it was usually time for a short sleep. Following this, women often gathered together during the afternoon to chat and tend to each other’s hair while looking through magazines found on the dumpsite. The men generally gathered together in one or two homes, often sharing food and alcohol together. By mid-afternoon, the older children returned from school or other education programs run by aid groups. Finally, the daytime workers would return from the dumpsite after 4pm when everybody would eat their second and final meal of the day before darkness. Some families enjoyed gathering at one of either two homes to watch television after the meals, but the televisions were rarely kept on for long periods. Sharing leisure time with other villagers, most often kin related, was an important element of the villagers’ sociality. Leisure time was valued and they often spent it in the village rather than outside it. Parents encouraged children to play with their cousins and friends in nearby open spaces and food was often shared across families.

Past experiences

The villagers’ interconnected lives provided much needed social support to individuals and family units. This support was valued all the more because many in the village had each separately experienced deep suffering and trauma in their lives. Below I describe and recite the upsetting experiences of a single mother, including the events that led her to become a waste picker and her struggles when her marriage broke down. Following this account, I provide examples of the experiences of the older waste pickers during the period when the Khmer Rouge came to power, and younger waste pickers’ experiences of forced labour.

Chenda’s story

In my first few visits to the village, I was keen to seek out a young woman by the name of Chenda, one of the single mothers living in the village, who I had met during the handicrafts training. I thought she would make a good key informant. Although she had been one of the youngest in the group of women, she was the designated leader. She sat next to me a few times and I was confident that she would remember me. Indeed, over the many months of my fieldwork, she became my teacher, offering her time to help me learn how to collect recycling. In Chapter 2 I detail my many months of apprenticeship. Although only 26 years old when I met her, I learned that Chenda’s short life had already been difficult. She was exposed to addiction, abuse and poverty from a young age. One day we found a quiet spot and she told me her life story.

Born in 1982, Chenda grew up in a small rural village in Prey Veng province. At the age of five, she was sent to live with one of her older brothers, a not uncommon occurrence in Cambodian society, where the raising of children is not only considered to be the role of birth parents. Unfortunately, Chenda felt she became a maid or servant in the eyes of her
senior sister-in-law, and their relationship was fraught. For a few years, Chenda was able to attend school in the mornings and work at the farm, house or store in the afternoons. She said:

She always cursed me when my older brother went fishing and she said bad words to me behind his back. My niece, Bopha, told her father not to believe her mother, she said, ‘Aunt does everything and cleans the cows too.’ But my brother just kept silent.

Eventually, Chenda decided to stop studying after her sister-in-law’s provocations became unbearable.

She used to tear up my schoolbooks. I had to go to school without books. One day I stole 300r (US$0.07) to buy a book so she beat me. I felt so sad so I asked her if I could quit school.

At the age of 12, Chenda decided to leave her older brother and live in Phnom Penh with her parents. On arriving at their home near the dumpsite she quickly set out to help her mother with chores in the home and eventually asked her to teach her how to collect on the dumpsite. At the time, the dumpsite was surrounded by rice fields and during the farming season Chenda and her mother also worked as farmers, planting seedlings and harvesting rice. Her father was a heavy drinker, rarely working and eventually her mother decided to leave him to live with one of her older sons.

My father was a drunk and he always mistreated my mother. I decided to live with my father because he never harmed me. I made money from collecting recycling and gave it to my father. He always argued with my mother when he was drunk, that’s why she left us.

Chenda lived alone with her father, earning enough money for food and daily expenses for both of them, her father working only when his money ran out between drinking sessions.

When Chenda was 14 years old she was wounded by a used syringe while collecting recycling on the dumpsite. When her injury became infected, her father took her back to Prey Veng province for traditional medical treatment. When she recovered, her father returned to drinking again, and Chenda was forced to find work to feed them both.

He was drunk and tried to dig for worms. He was so drunk he couldn’t do anything. He let me work as a farmer and I made money for him to buy things to eat. When I came back home, I saw the worms, and asked him, ‘Why did you catch the worms?’ He said he wanted to cook them to eat. I said, ‘Father, please throw the worms away. I have caught two frogs to cook with pepper for you.’

After two months Chenda begged her father to return back to Phnom Penh.
My father said, 'Go for what, your mother doesn’t care for us.' I said, 'Let me talk to her. Did she really divorce you?' I suggested to my father that he stop drinking and go back to live with my mother at Phnom Penh. So he stopped drinking and they have lived together happily ever since.

Chenda fondly remembers this period of her life, when her father stopped drinking and her parents moved back to the dumpsite and somehow fell in love again.

About a year later, when Chenda was only 15 years old, her mother thought it would be a good idea for Chenda to get married. A waste picker on the dumpsite had fallen in love with Chenda and asked his parents to send a present to her parents to announce his intentions to marry her. Chenda had mixed feelings: at once excited by the romance, but nervous about her future. Following a small wedding ceremony, Chenda worked hard on the dumpsite to save money for her new family. Her new husband, however, began drinking heavily at beer gardens with his friends and spent the money they saved on prostitutes. The marriage lasted less than two years before they divorced.

As a last effort to keep my marriage, I sold my wedding jewellery to buy a motorbike for him to drive but he sold it to another person and he bought a girl to hurt me. When I blamed him, he got angry with me. When he sold the motorbike, I said to him, 'I married you to help earn money together, why do you destroy me?' And he said, 'If you're not satisfied please divorce me.' I was happy to hear that and then I asked him to go to the village chief's house to apply for a divorce. I couldn’t stand to be with him any longer.

By this point, Chenda had just given birth to their daughter.

The marriage was already strained during her pregnancy. Chenda had to support herself during the nine months. She bought glass bottles from children who collected them on the dumpsite [two bottles for 100 riels (US$0.02)] and then once her sack was full, she carried the heavy load on her head to the market.

My mother-in-law saw me and took pity on me and told me to be careful about my pregnancy. I said, 'Mother, I can’t survive if I don’t try to earn money by myself.' It wasn’t easy to get support from my husband. He started to collect recycling in the city and bought nothing except a girl and only brought me worries and hurt. From that time onwards he always cursed me.

Chenda went to live with her parents towards the end of her pregnancy.

One day my mother-in-law saw my face and asked me, 'What’s the matter, child? Maybe you will give birth soon. You should stay at home for a day, please don’t go and collect the recycling.' Then I said, 'I'll have no money to buy food if I don’t go out.' She replied, 'I’ll buy food for you.' I stayed at home and I gave birth that day. My husband stayed with the other girl. He never cared about me. My
baby’s weight was 2.7 kilograms. I felt so happy. My husband said that if I gave birth to a son then he would have come back home.

Chenda never went back to her husband and he married another woman three years after they divorced. Chenda has raised her daughter by herself for nine years by working on the dumpsite.

If someone tells her about her father she only knows him by his name. She never met her father but I have a photo of our wedding day for her to see. When she looked at the photo one day she said, “Mother, this looks like our uncle, I used to know him. Every time I saw him, he gave me 5000 riels [US$1.25].”

Chenda’s past is not dissimilar to other young women in the village born after the Khmer Rouge period. Due to the limited infrastructure present after the civil war ended in 1979, which ushered in the period of Vietnamese administration, many children never attended school, or dropped out at a young age, rarely completing primary school. For some children, the decision to attend school or not was one they made themselves and some chose to assist the family in earning income or helping to care for younger children and tend to the home. Some, such as Chenda, were separated from their birth parents to be raised by relatives, sometimes involving physical or verbal abuse. Three of the women in the village recounted their stories of being trafficked as children. In their separate stories, the parents of each were persuaded by families living in the city to let their daughters live with them, ostensibly to have a better life and go to school. Soon after the girls arrived in the city they became servants to their new families.

Older women remember the hardship they faced during the Khmer Rouge period. Those over seven years old in 1975 were forced to undertake hard work in labour camps. Some families were separated, children from parents and husbands from wives. All of the women and men I spoke to about this period remember the sensation of hunger and exhaustion, and many lost immediate relatives due to starvation or sickness. Everyone feared the retaliation of the soldiers if they stepped out of line. Sopheap told me of her intense fear when she was caught stealing a single potato to feed her hungry younger sister. Another woman, Bonavy, stole some rice and was woken in the middle of the night by an ally suggesting that she and her brothers flee or risk death. With her three brothers, all under the age of 15, they walked hundreds of kilometres over many months, surviving only on foraged food to finally reach their home village only to find out they had become orphans, both parents had died.

As I listened to the life histories of the women and men in the village, I was made aware of the loss individuals had come to experience at different points in their lives. Some had experienced abandonment by a parent or spouse, the hurt bringing tears to their eyes as they recounted their experiences. Others, whose parents had died during the Khmer Rouge period, expressed sadness at no longer being able to recall their faces. Four of the older women I talked with felt hurt and betrayed by adulterous husbands, eventually divorcing and being left to care for their children, as in Chenda’s case.
Some of the women, both young and old, felt they were forced to marry at a young age, while men in their teens struggled to dodge the authorities in fear of being conscripted into the army. Women in general in the village had endured many miscarriages and high rates of child mortality; Sina has given birth to eight children, but only five survive today. There seemed to me to be many stories of death in the village: a woman's husband died after a drinking session with his friends, the wife believing that somebody poisoned his drink; a mother of four died three weeks after giving birth inside her small home; and a loved father of five children was run over and killed by a garbage truck when he fell asleep while drunk on a path used by the trucks. These widows and widowers have since raised their children on their own, though often with the help of their extended families.

The hardships experienced by the waste pickers in the village were not unique to this group. Cambodia’s horrific past has left physical and emotional scars on much of the population. I wondered, however, if there was something else that tied this community together, perhaps their common experiences of betrayal by or loss of loved ones. Was it this that caused this group of families to choose a life that much of Cambodian society stigmatises? Or was it simply that the allure of earning better incomes, gifts from aid groups and stories of riches within the waste were too great an opportunity not to give it a try? Both are certainly valid motivations that I believe work together to strengthen community bonds, which in turn better equipped community members to deal with the stigma of being waste pickers.

**Necessity versus possibility**

I often think back to the handicrafts training sessions held at the environmental organisation where I first met some of the women in the village. The female staff member had felt confident she was providing training in a sustainable alternative form of employment for the women, certainly one that was without daily danger and without the shame or indignity of working with waste. In conversations with the organisation’s staff I felt they had come to believe that people like Chenda were only working on the dumpsite because they were unable to find work elsewhere; it was simply a last resort. In light of this, it seems they were motivated by a presumption that the women would leap at the opportunity to instead earn income in the safety and comfort of their homes. While the presumption could have been disavowed by a thorough socio-economic analysis, it was regularly reinforced in media coverage that continually depicted the waste pickers as the poorest of the city's poor, forced into a daily struggle for survival (Chapter 5).

I certainly do not wish to suggest the work of the waste pickers was somehow easy, without sweat and exertion, discomfort, danger, risk or shame. Nor do I want to suggest that their incomes were stable and significant enough for them to be able to adequately

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17 If the organisation had conducted research on the income levels of the waste pickers they would have been in a better position to judge the success rate of their training program. The income earned from the handicrafts work was, in comparison, inadequate, roughly only $30 per month, paid only when the staff member visited the village sporadically, sometimes only once a week. Sophoap’s husband worked as a security guard with an aid group earning in excess of $120 per month and that is why she was the only woman in the training group to earn an income by making handicrafts. The work enabled her to watch over the many children living under her roof. She often complained at the low level of income she received from each craft she made and how particular the organisation was regarding the quality of each piece.
afford to live in larger, more permanent homes. Nevertheless, as I have shown, they were generally able to earn more than their peers working in unskilled labour on construction sites, farming and garment factories. They were able to enjoy the autonomy of self-employment and consequently they worked fewer days in the week. Their minimal expenses meant they were able to work less and participate in more hours of communal leisure time, which was valued highly by the village with its close ties to kin and rural neighbours. Alternatively, they could save money by working more days. Their children also had the opportunity to attend free supplementary education programs run by aid groups and they received regular donations from these groups and visitors to the area (see Chapter 5).

Over the past few decades, many scholars have argued that waste picking is a survival strategy for the poor (Betancourt 2010; Choudhary 2008; Dias 2000; Furedy 1984; Huysman 1994; Keyes 1974; Klundert 1995; Masocha 2006; Medina 2000; Rouse and Ali 2006; Samson 2010; Teveera 1994; Samson 2011). Recent studies of communities of waste pickers in Pakistan by Jonathon Rouse and Mansoor Ali (2006), South Africa by Melanie Samson (2011), India by Bikramaditya Kumar Choudhry (2008), Brazil by Sonia Diaz (2000) and Colombia by Andrea Alejandra Betancourt (2010) all state that waste-related informal work, be it on dumpsites or on the streets, is a survival strategy, or alternatively, an element within a multi-level survival strategy. Writing on Pakistan, Rouse and Ali (2006, p. 746) state, ‘[t]he assumption that people are only driven to such work by extreme poverty was confirmed by the research’.

Many also argue that working as a waste picker is due to a lack of alternative employment options. Samson (2011, p. 16) writing about waste pickers in South Africa states:

In a context where neoliberal restructuring has made formal employment an impossibility, reclaimers turned to salvaging recyclable material from society’s physical detritus as a means of survival.

I found, however, for the majority of waste pickers in the village, waste picking is better represented as a form of self-employment rather than a last-resort survival strategy. Until the announcement of the closure of the dumpsite, the waste pickers at Stueng Mean Chey considered picking a relatively reliable and long-term occupation. As I have already discussed, they were not without options for employment and most chose waste picking over other possibilities due to various perceived benefits picking presented. In support of my finding, a similar example of choice is discussed by Nzeadibe and Ajaero (2011), who found informal recycling workers in Nigeria earned incomes higher than the minimum wage.

Other authors, such as Steven Gauley (1999) and Josh Reno (2009), have highlighted this contrast in findings within the waste-picking literature. On the one hand it is represented as a livelihood for survivalists, and on the other one that offers poor individuals hope and possibility (Gauley 1999). In researching notions of value at a dumpsite in Michigan, Reno found that there was a ‘politics of value’ surrounding scavenging practices by garbage
workers that defined not only what was considered to hold value but also who was valued. In his discussion Reno (2009, p. 33) writes:

To say that scavenging waste is about possibility rather than necessity, about what people make of waste rather than what they must do with it, is not to deny the very real constraints and indignities often associated with the practice. Rather it is to recognise the agency and creativity of scavengers.

For the waste pickers in the village I came to know so well, this agency and creativity was not only evident in their relationship to waste on the dumpsite (Chapter 2) but in the ways they lived their everyday lives. I came to see that agency and creativity was reflected in their chosen mode of shelter, temporary homes costing very little in rent each month and cheaply constructed from a mixture of found objects and minimal building materials (enabling them to cope during lean times or simply rest and socialise when times were not as hard). I witnessed the same agency and creativity in the community’s ability to adapt common Khmer customs and social practices to incorporate found things from the dumpsite, as I discuss in detail in Chapter 4. I witnessed it in their non-passive patron–client relationships with dealers and aid workers (which I also describe in more detail in Chapters 3 and 5). Mostly, I heard by what means they had practised it throughout their lives, often to overcome significant hardship. Their agency and creativity, not forgetting their ability to adapt to their environment, however, often left me worried that they put at risks their longer-term health, safety and wellbeing. But I was a foreigner and they often said I did not properly understand the connections between risk, illness and tragedy with the role of faith, fate, spirits and ancestors (which I also attempt to unravel in Chapter 4).
This two-part photoessay is created from photographs I took in the village and on the dumpsite. It is placed here as an extension of Chapter 1 to further develop a sense of these spaces and the people that lived in them. As discussed in the Introduction, my use of images in this way is calculated to deliver a more embodied understanding. As the participant reader/viewer, the photoessays require that you abandon assumptions and presumptions regarding this community and that you develop your understandings through seeing and experiencing the spaces for yourself.

This photoessay comprises mainly portrait photographs with some landscapes. In taking these portraits, I was influenced by traditions within the genre of social documentary photography, with particular emphasis on portraits of industrial workers taken by Milton Rogovin. While my compositions differ from that of Rogovin, my technique was analogous. I used a similar camera as him (see Introduction) and chose not to direct individuals when creating the images; for example, I never told individuals where to stand or sit, where to look, how to hold their hands or what to wear. I did not ask them to smile or be straight-faced. The subjects of the images did as they felt at the time. Some remained in the languid soft poses in which I had found them in and others arranged themselves more formally, standing or correcting their posture.

This technique allowed me to witness cultural conventions and social norms regarding portrait making in the village and on the dumpsite. As I had witnessed earlier when working as a photographer in Cambodia, in many instances subjects chose to look thoughtful and serious when posing for portraits. Straight faces were more the norm than smiling faces, even in impromptu portraits with friends and family. There were exceptions to this norm but it involved the participation of others beyond the lens jokingly goading the subject to break their straight face. I also include such images as they represent the often playful atmosphere in these spaces.

Although I sometimes asked to take a subject’s portrait, they would more often ask me, an act that was probably more opportunistic than representative of some cultural propensity. I regularly gave prints back to individuals I had photographed and this in turned spurred on more portrait requests. Evidence of this is in Plate 35 where the woman on the right holds prints I had just handed her of a relative.
In most of the portraits in the village and on the dumpsite, the subjects looked directly into the lens of my medium-format camera, which was held at chest height in a manner in which I was not looking directly at the subject. They were in a sense on their own, momentarily disengaged from me while I tilted my head down to my viewfinder. The moments captured in these instances, to me, show subjects tethered to the ground, anchored through the intensity of their gaze. Left alone, the subjects are dignified, exuding an air of calm confidence, their commanding presence an assurance that they know who they are in this place. They are at once in possession of themselves, their destiny, and seemingly invulnerable to the danger and insecurity that surrounds them. This strength, or agency, is evoked through images of individuals and groups. The single portraits capture something of their individual resilience in what seems like an overwhelming physical environment, and the group shots emplace these individuals in a communal, interconnected space that maintains their separate identities while fostering a sense of collectivism that wards off insecurity.

Sequence 1

This sequence begins with landscapes of the village followed by portraits of residents. In these introductory landscapes, I position the village as the non-human subject in order to illustrate that families constructed their homes with an eye on function rather than form. The images catalogue the ways they used, re-used and discarded material objects and things in their everyday lives—such as the manner in which the residents of the village built their homes from a mixture of found materials and irregular wooden beams; the result is a patchwork of panels and irregular supports. Common household things and industry waste are among the materials reappropriated as building resources; evidence is seen in the use of woven floor mats and flattened tin cans as wall panels, advertising banners used as awnings. Rather than replacing worn-out panels on walls and roofs, images show the way homeowners opted to layer additional materials instead.

Their elevated homes, raised on thin posts, both protected and separated residents from their own waste beneath. Like many villagers in flood-prone locations, the garbage of daily life is consciously discarded on the ground to strengthen the walkways and ensure passage is possible. Consequently, you can see all types of found things abandoned between the homes, items left over from their daily consumption and fragments broken off their homes, tossed or placed there to elevate the walkways.

The portrait images in this sequence offer intimate encounters with village residents as they sit in the comfort of their homes or stand in their self-made village. The portraits reveal self-confidence in their demeanour. In some plates I have captured workers on their day off, wearing the latest fashion trends and accessories. In Plate 18, two young adult males wear the latest
then in urban chic: baggy denim jeans and shirts with dragon motifs, while a young mother chooses the more flattering skinny jeans and tight-fitting designer t-shirt. A resident also shows off her newly painted fingernails and toenails, using cosmetics retrieved on the dumpsite. These images caught at moments of leisure diverge from the portrait of a male worker who has returned home as seen in Plate 11, where the residue of his labour can be seen in the accumulated dirt on his trousers.

The clothes worn by the residents also reflect in what way the village was simultaneously regarded as both a private and communal space. Some individuals are captured in clothing usually reserved for the privacy of home life; men in only a thin chequered scarf, chests bare; women in loose-fitting clothing; and children only in shorts. The inside of homes was regarded as private, as evident in the many portraits where individuals sit at the entrance to their home, symbolically blocking entry, and also evident in the small locks and chains on doors. The homes were not anchored to one another (they are each structurally freestanding), as Plate 6 shows, reflecting the nature of the communal yet individual rental agreement with the landowner. Meanwhile, the images show exactly how the pathways were public spaces in which the private life of a household was often played out: householders’ buckets placed on the pathway to collect rainwater for private use, ladders into homes jutting across the walkways, awnings and hammocks stretching from one home across to another, to name but a few.

This sharing of public space emphasises the interconnected relationships among the residents. As I detailed, most of the householders were related, or shared a connection to a single rural village in Prey Veng province. Capturing something of these familial relationships and the village’s crowdedness, the portraits often include the arms or faces of others creeping in at the edges or as prescient beings looming in the backgrounds. For many of the portraits, the subjects sit or lay at the entrance to their elevated homes, looking out at chest level on their neighbours and those passing by who often stopped for a chat. These framing doorways were at once portals between public and private space but also a common site of communication and the place from which conversations with neighbours were held. The relaxed poses in these portraits reveal a sense of contented belonging to place, perhaps even a deep fondness for the physically rickety, yet psychologically secure structures they call home. They appear at ease and comfortable in their environment; they are of course at home.
Plate 6
Sequence 2

This sequence comprises mostly portraits of people on the dumpsite, with some landscapes of the place and the waste that transforms it. The themes of individual and collective identity are again explored in these, as is the public-private dichotomy regarding the use of space. On the dumpsite, portraits were taken as subjects rested either between or at the end of their working shifts. At times they were standing by their collection of recyclables during the final stages of sorting, and at others they had stopped while carrying their sacks from one location to another.

Although the subjects are not collecting at the moment the photographs were taken, the portraits emphasise their identity as workers. Clear in the images is the worker’s standard uniform: long shirt, long trousers, rubber boots and a hat. This is not the everyday clothing of the villager but the trade dress of the waste picker, which represents the functional deliberateness and intentionality in which they approached their work. The organisation and pre-planning required in assembling this uniform is further evidenced in Plates 22, 37 and 40, as waste pickers are seen wearing the essential head torch of the night-shift worker. I am also drawn to the telling signs of their endeavour, marked on their clothes where the greasy indelible residue has accumulated. Most telling is the dirtied section of just one favoured shoulder on which waste pickers choose to carry their soiled sacks. Such marks across their uniforms also tell of the repetitive nature of the work.

The variety of hats worn by the pickers – usually collected from the waste – offer compelling symbols of the pickers’ personality and in some instances illustrate ways in which the pickers expressed their individuality. The images show young men and women wearing baseball caps befitting their generation and older women wearing more functional bucket hats or broad-brimmed bonnets to protect their skin from the sun. In Plate 42, a tyre collector wears a beret, a hat typically worn for reasons of form than function, perhaps worn as a gesture saluting or mocking Cambodia’s colonial past or simply one conveying an expression of the exotic and foreign.

In contrast, many of the women are captured wearing a krama around their face. The krama is part of everyday cultural costume in Cambodia and is typically worn by men, women and children in both rural and urban areas of Cambodia (also evident in the village photos). The krama is also a telling cultural distinction, clearly placing the photographs’ subjects in Cambodia and not Thailand, Vietnam or Laos. This adornment then, in ensemble with hats and the uniform, can be read not only as expressions of individuality but also expressions of cultural belonging.
The landscape images interwoven between the portrait images show the dumpsite as both a space of intense and crowded activity and as an expansive space of solitude. The images provide multiple views of the waste mountains that form the terrain of the dumpsite and its many undulating surfaces, gullies and plains. For example, in Plate 21, the freshly dumped waste at the edge of one mountain sits in contrast to the nearby mountain that billows smoke into the distance — the older dry waste combusts in the heat causing smoke to rise.

The vastness of the site allows for workers to retreat away from their labour and gather together in small groups, as seen in Plate 20 where a group of workers have gathered in the early hours of the morning. Others have moved from the crowds to sort their recycling collections away from the noise and bustle of the main collecting areas (such as Plates 23, 25 and 26). In these out-of-the-way spaces, some of the waste pickers erect makeshift shelters to escape the heat of the sun. These shelters are often left standing as places of retreat long after the dumpsite operators have ordered the trucks elsewhere to unload in another area of the dumpsite. It is one way that the waste pickers mark out a private area within a very public space.

Another way of demarcating space on the dumpsite is evident in the waste pickers’ use of found mosquito nets and large rice sacks as markers of personal ownership. In Plate 26, a woman has pegged a mosquito net upside down to create a space in which to store and sort her collection of recyclables gathered during a shift. The space within and around the mosquito net is regarded and respected by others as her space. In Plate 23, the female waste picker has instead used a large rice sack to store her belongings. Both methods of space creation, I believe, were considered legitimate and authoritative means for establishing private spaces during the time of their use.

From another aspect of the dumpsite, some of the photographs demonstrate the manner in which spaces are used as public sites of production, with large machinery, trucks dumping waste and masses of waste pickers at work. This topic is explored further in Chapter 2, but Plates 29, 30 and 32 are included in this photoessay to communicate the contrast in spaces and how the waste pickers utilised them. Yet these landscapes are not the only photographs that depict the outcomes of the waste pickers’ labours. In Plates 33 and 34, waste pickers sit among sacks filled with recyclables as they are sold to dealers. These photographs say something of the amount of recycling dumped by residents of the city and the opportunities in value creation afforded to the pickers working at the site.
Finally, photographing on top of the mountains (of sorts) has made the sky in the images appear expansive. Sky blue and sun-drenched white backgrounds in portraits are in contrast to the dark spaces of the village. It lends a mood of freedom and possibility to the photographs captured on the dumpsite that perhaps the village images are missing.

Much of the visual and textual representation of waste pickers in the media and on the internet depicts them as victims of urban poverty, destitute and forced to undertake a form of ad-hoc and unorganised scavenging. I believe these photographs, on the contrary, convey the waste pickers as productive workers and perceptive villagers, living and working in an environment that while dangerous, crowded and unpleasant, proves the foundation of a complex and dynamic social world.
Chapter 2

Production and the creation of value

Introduction

I couldn’t sleep well the night before my first day collecting on the dumpsite with Chenda. When I met her in the early morning she was already half dressed in her work clothes, so I excitedly rushed to Sopheap’s house to put on my new pair of rubber boots, oversized second-hand shirt and hat. With my boots on, I looked up to see Sopheap’s furrowed brow and clear dark eyes staring intently at me. She was worried about me going on the dumpsite and even more so when I attached a small camera bag around my waist. She had heard many stories of tourists who had their cameras stolen on the dumpsite. Holding her arm, I reassured her that I would keep it strapped tightly to my body. I was carrying an old 35mm single-lens reflex film camera then, which I could afford to lose, but I also had no intention of taking photos for at least a month. I wanted to always have a camera with me in order that I normalised my role as participant photographer/ethnographer.

Chenda reached Sopheap’s house and waited for me in the doorway. Sopheap ran to the back of her house and pulled out her old collecting tool, the essential instrument used by most of the waste pickers at Stueng Mean Chey. It was a thin L-shaped metal rod, sharpened at the corner end with a point and a smooth wooden handle on the straight end. After admiring my new tool, Chenda handed me a small empty rice sack and we set off for the dumpsite as the glow of the morning sun on my face eased away the nervousness I felt at venturing into this new world. Questions swirled in my mind; most especially I wondered what people would think of me, a foreigner, picking recyclables that they could have and thereby possibly lessening their daily income.

As we walked further from Sopheap’s house towards the dumpsite, I put my head down and matched Chenda’s pace stride for stride. My attempts to blend in were futile; shopkeepers and women sitting out the front of their homes quizzed Chenda about her new partner. When Chenda explained I was going to collect, they let out a little chuckle, thinking the idea funny. My nervousness returned. We made our way across the polluted stream and headed towards the closest mountain. Chenda went first, giving me her hand to pull me up, and once on top she guided me to a place away from the bulldozers and garbage trucks on the edge of the unloading area. With me by her side, both of us hunched over, eyes on the ground, she started poking the layers of waste around our feet with her collecting tool.

In this chapter, I focus on the waste pickers’ work processes, answering questions such as how and why they worked in the manner that they did, what tools they needed, the ways they organised themselves in what was at times a dangerously crowded area and how they created value from wasted matter. Initially I continue with my own observations as an apprentice waste picker working beside Chenda, then turn to tease apart the various
components of their work under the rubric of 'production'. In this analysis I use the
discursive lexicon provided by Marx to frame my discussion and answer the questions just
posed through a systematic analysis of waste pickers' means of production, factors and
patterns of production, organisation of production, as well as determinants of output.

I am not the first scholar to examine the work practices of waste pickers using a Marxian
framework. In the next chapter I examine two significant studies that analyse waste
pickers' means and modes of production: an early study by Chris Birbeck (1978) in Cali,
Columbia, and a later study by Daniel Sicular (1991, 1992) in West Java, Indonesia. The
outcomes of my analysis in this chapter on the work practices and organisational
structures of waste pickers in Phnom Penh are used in the next chapter to argue my
position regarding their mode of production.

Although Marxian approaches to examining work had a revival in the 1970s,
anthropologist Roy Dilley (2004, p. 708) argues that within social theory, market exchange
and consumption have recently attracted more attention than studies on production. His
study of Senegalese craft producers and their exchanges highlights in what manner
different forms of value can be created not only through exchange but also production, a
sentiment similarly expressed by anthropologists Nancy Munn (1986) and Terence Turner
(2008). In his study, Dilley (2004, p. 799) defines production as:

The act or instance of the manufacture of things (broadly conceived) from a set of
raw materials (again broadly conceived): that is the act of bringing things into
existence.

In the same way, I show how the waste pickers used the waste unloaded on the dumpsite
as if it were a raw material to be acted upon. They turned waste (unvalued and discarded
mass of matter) into individual commodities (objects and things with potential value in
exchange or use). It is the latter point of Dilley's definition, the bringing objects and
things to life, that I propose is what the waste pickers' actions symbolise; individual pieces
of discarded matter became subjects of self-other relations, and thereby came into
existence once again. At the end of the chapter, I analyse the waste pickers' processes of
production within the framework of Marxian theory and their individual actions within
the context of social theory.

An apprenticeship

Looking down at my feet, a mixture of crushed garbage was soaked in a muddy dark
green liquid. I could see mostly food scraps: corn husks, coconut shells, wilted leaves and
masses of crushed sugarcane stalks, the by-product of a popular cheap sweet drink
typically purchased from vendors lining the city's streets. I could not see a single object I
would call 'recycling' at home in Australia. To my astonishment, the first few objects
Chenda picked out and put into her sack were a couple of clear ordinary plastic bags and a
flimsy, crushed plastic cup.

\(^{18}\) I pointed to a red plastic bag and she shook her head, indicating that I was not to collect
bag she would open it to check inside for recyclables and other valuable things. I watched
as other people stabbed the sides of the bags first to hear or feel if anything metal or
plastic was inside before opening them, but Chenda took a more thorough approach and
always opened the full bags. Holding them with one hand, she seemed to instinctively
know exactly where to pull and tear the plastic in order to ensure the contents spilled out
quickly.

We worked in small sections, only moving to the next when we had searched through the
top layer of waste. We did not dig too deep as our tool was only suited to pick up light
objects, rather than moving heavy layers of garbage. Everybody kept a respectful distance
from each other, never retrieving anything in front of another’s feet. Chenda retrieved
objects quickly. By the time her large sack was full, my much smaller sack was only one
third filled. She heaved the heavy sack onto her back and, motioning for me to follow her,
we headed for the always bustling storage and sorting area. There waste pickers selected a
spot on the sidelines of the bulldozer and truck zones to store their daily collection while
they continued to work. Among the crowd, Chenda spotted her younger male cousin who
had just finished sorting through his collection after the night shift and asked him if she
could use his mosquito net. About half of the waste pickers use
abandoned mosquito nets to store their collection during their shift.
The nets are pegged to four makeshift wooden posts and often a
plastic mat, which is also found at the dumpsite, is placed at the
bottom of the net to cover the ground. Others make or buy a large
sack comprised of many smaller cement sacks that have been sewn together. Chenda
cleaned the mat of rubbish and then emptied all of the objects she had found inside the
net. I emptied mine. She gathered a few rice sacks to lie over the top to protect our
collection from wind and we set off again to refill our sacks.

At one point during collecting I came across a metal fuel cap from a car. When I showed
it to Chenda she was very impressed, holding it in her hand to assess its weight. She said it
would be worth at least 2000r (US$0.50). Whenever she opened a bag with second-hand
clothing inside she paused from her work, inspecting the condition of the garments
before deciding if she would take them home. We found a few other things that also
excited Chenda: a kitchen knife, two forks, a pair of shoes that looked as though they had
hardly been worn and a 100r note. She cleaned the note and put it in her pocket. I asked
her if she had ever found a US$10 note and she said once. I responded with glee and then
asked if she had ever found a US$100 note, to which she answered, ‘Not yet.’
Although we worked as a pair, we often ended up collecting close to other people from the village. On a few such occasions when we were around familiar faces, Chenda sternly told me to stay with the villagers while she hurried over to a garbage truck as it was emptying.

I watched as she found a spot in a line of waste pickers surrounding the back end of the garbage truck. As the back door of the garbage truck lifted the line of waste pickers inched their bodies away from the door, and as the waste came tumbling out everybody reached in with their sticks for anything of value they could spot: aluminium cans, rice sacks, large bags of garbage or plastic bottles. After the truck drove away and before the bulldozer started up, they quickly sifted through the pile with a sense of urgency that saw a few climb on top. Soon, everybody quickly moved out of the way as the bulldozer pushed the pile of dumped waste out of the way and the next truck arrived.

The bulldozer driver distributed the pile across the surface of the dumping area, making small piles on the edge of the mountain. Occasionally the bulldozer came towards us but Chenda and the other villagers were quick to yell out my name and ensure I got out of the way in time.

Throughout that first morning, Chenda filled her bag four more times before we headed back to the village at 10am for her first meal of the day. I think I barely collected one sack full. Mostly I found clear plastic bags and white plastic spoons, the most abundant yet lightweight objects. Although nobody spoke to me directly, with the exception of those who already knew me from the village, Chenda said she got many enquiries later that day. One lady asked her, 'Why do you have such a good foreigner friend who will help you?'

I'd made it through my first few hours of collecting and felt confident that I could continue my lessons. My back was a little sore from bending over and the hand that gripped the collecting tool was red. The rubber boots had protected my feet despite walking on broken glass. My hands were unharmed and I was able to wash them outside of Chenda’s home, using lots of soap. I followed Chenda’s lead in picking the waste out of my nails with a small stick and washing my hands a second time. Many of the women in the village gathered outside of Chenda’s house, excited to learn how I did. She told them fondly the ways the other waste pickers had helped me, tossing recyclables my way and how I said ‘awkmnt’ (thank you) to them. This seemed to make everyone laugh. After a simple meal, I returned to my house to write up my notes and she headed back to the dumpsite. Hours afterwards I could still distinctly sense the smell of garbage even though I had bathed and changed clothes. It felt like the stench was stuck inside my nose and being emitted from my skin. Lying in bed that night I was puzzled by the economics of the work and wondered if all those small pieces of plastics and metal we collected really amounted to much. Was it worth the effort?

I concede that my first week working half days on the dumpsite felt like a sensory overload. The rancid smell of the dumpsite continued to overwhelm me during those first few mornings collecting with Chenda. It was so pungent, it felt like it had taken physical form and was permanently stuck at the back of my throat, making me continually thirsty. Within a week this sensation subsided and I grew accustomed to the smell. The next
challenge was coping with the loud noise produced by the bulldozers and trucks. By this stage, I had become so absorbed in the hunt to find objects and things that the loud noises from the engines began to grate on me. Compounding this discomfort, my body remained sore despite only working a few hours every morning.

My apprenticeship continued over the following weeks as I enthusiastically worked beside Chenda, eventually gaining the stamina to work a full shift. After several months I felt confident that I could tap on an object only partially in view and by listening to the sound I could register if it had value or not. Given enough time, experience and practice, I found the work to be rewarding as I could generally find something every ten to 20 seconds; even if it was something very small, it still gave me a sense of satisfaction. Scanning the ground around my feet for valuable items required concentration and I often forgot where I was and that there were other people around me. My mind pondered whatever came into my head and I often hoped I would stumble across money, a mobile phone or jewellery to give to Chenda. In such moments I was occasionally pulled from my trance by Chenda’s protective scream alerting me to the presence of an approaching bulldozer.

It took me many months to develop the knowledge and skills required to retrieve sufficient quantities that would equal an average daily income. The work proved much more physical than I had initially thought and many nights I dreaded getting up early the next day to face the dumpsite. Away from the site, I was detached from it, at times feeling contempt for it, but often when I was standing on the surface, facing a day of work, a different feeling came over me, one of anticipation and possibility. Subjectively, sometimes the work became somewhat compulsive and I found it difficult to stop. Even at the end of a shift, when my body was aching and I felt exhausted, I still wanted to bend down and pick up that last small piece of hard plastic on the ground next to me.

Eventually Chenda taught me not only how to retrieve objects and things on the dumpsite as I describe above but also how to sort, pack and sell these ‘products’ to dealers/buyers. In Chapter 3, I describe the system of exchange of these products including the relations between the waste pickers and their dealers/buyers. In this chapter, however, I focus on the waste pickers as they engage in processes of production. My premise here is that abandoned waste (recyclable objects and things made with past human labour power) was captured by the waste pickers through their production processes (retrieving, sorting and packing) and made into products to be exchanged and used in future production or consumed in their village.

**Means of production**

In this section, I focus on the means of production; that is, the tools and resources that are used within the waste-picking production process. By means of production, I refer to the non-human elements such as the instruments of labour (that is tools) and the subjects of labour (that is waste). Following a Marxian analysis, I posit principally that the waste pickers either owned the means of production or had reasonable access to it, thereby giving them independence and authority within the value-creation system.
**Instruments of labour**

In my account above, I describe many of the waste pickers’ instruments of labour: their tools, clothing and equipment used to retrieve, store and sort found objects and things. The primary tool was a thin L-shaped metal stick with a handle (hereafter the ‘collecting tool’). These collecting tools were used by most of the waste pickers, with the exception of those who only collected one type of recyclable. For instance, the few waste pickers who collected tyres used a larger, stronger version of the collecting tool that could support heavier weights. All of these tools were handmade, often from found objects and things from the dumpsite, or the components bought from a recycling trader. The tools were also traded within the wider community of waste pickers or shared among kin. Moreover, maintenance of the tool was easy; I often witnessed pickers retrieving smooth-faced rocks from within the waste to sharpen the pointed end. Such rocks would typically be passed around and shared with others before being discarded again. If the handle became loose, pickers purchased cheap superglue to repair it. Although it was the waste pickers’ primary tool, these instruments were easily obtained and maintained by the waste pickers. Waste pickers who worked at night used battery-powered headlamps they bought from local stores or rented from other waste pickers for small amounts.

Similarly with regards to clothing and personal protective equipment, waste pickers sourced and owned their trade dress. In most cases their work clothing was found on the dumpsite and cleaned before use. This included shirts, trousers, hats, socks, gloves and scarfs. Alternatively, street-side markets sold cheap second-hand clothing (a shirt could be purchased for 500 to 5000 riels). Protective rubber boots were bought from nearby stores along the road to the dumpsite for under 8000 riels (US$2.00). As rubber boots deteriorated quickly on the dumpsite, typically lasting under six months, they were the most costly of all instruments of labour to replace. I often saw boots shared within families and kin, and they were a common item gifted by aid groups.

The equipment used to construct a waste picker’s daily storage and sorting area was sewn by the waste picker, gifted by a dealer, found on the dumpsite or purchased for a small amount. The waste pickers also required a smaller rice sack to collect and earn7 the objects as they worked in the dumping area. As rice sacks were one of the objects the pickers retrieved and sold to dealers, they were abundant on the dumpsite. Overall, individuals required relatively few instruments of labour within their processes of production and these instruments were easily accessible within the community.

**Subjects of labour**

Within Marxian theory, the term ‘subjects of labour’ is used to account for natural resources and raw material acted upon within production. For the waste pickers on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite their subject of labour is comprised of the newly arrived and unloaded solid waste from the city. As this waste contained objects and things
produced and abandoned by past human labour power, I posit that this waste is a raw material that was used in their processes of production. The waste pickers at Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite, however, did not need to purchase these raw materials nor did they pay to access them.

Although the trucks transporting the solid waste to the dumpsite were owned and operated by a private company, the Phnom Penh Municipality (hereafter the ‘municipality’) owned and operated the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite during the period of my fieldwork (see Chapter 6). The municipality, however, did not block the pickers’ entry onto the dumpsite or charge them a daily fee to access the solid waste. Nor did the municipality block entry to the waste pickers’ dealers and buyers. The municipality operated the dumpsite as a storage site or final destination for the solid waste generated in the city and did not convert or use the waste as a raw material itself. Although the abandoned objects and things were on municipal property, the municipality’s tolerance of the waste pickers on the dumpsite meant that the newly arrived waste became a ‘semi-public resource’ upon an ‘urban commons’, to use terms advanced by Sicular (1991, 1992). This was largely based on local perceptions and was rather ambiguous, in light of the absence of a legal framework that determined ownership of the actual waste on the site.

I found that this perception of waste as a semi-public or common resource was not only observed at the dumpsite but it extended throughout the city; waste was sifted through by many others prior to it arriving at the dumpsite, including consumers, recycling traders, city pickers, street cleaners and the garbage truck workers themselves. Many households in the city sold their recycling to informal street traders who roamed the city with pushcarts yelling ‘adji’ (recycling). Then there were city pickers and private street cleaners who searched through rubbish bags left on the curb or rummaged in dumpsters. Furthermore, when the waste collection company collected the waste on the curbs the privately employed workers searched for recyclables as they loaded the bags onto the trucks. One evening I travelled with the crew of one of 55 of the city’s garbage trucks and observed as the crew collected many bags of recyclables amounting to more than 20,000r ($5.00) in one shift (Plate 163).

A study conducted by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in 2003–04 (refer to Chapter 6), estimated that 45 tonnes of recyclable materials were sold each day in Phnom Penh to recycling depots by pushcart operators, garbage truck workers and city pickers (JICA 2005a, p. 3.37). The most common raw material sold to recycling depots was paper (40 percent) and metal (21 percent) (JICA 2005a, p. 3.37). Waste pickers on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite also gathered these items but in addition retrieved the lower value objects such as plastic bags, rice sacks and tin cans. The JICA study (2005a, p. 3.5) further estimated that over 200 tonnes of recyclables was generated in the city each day, resulting in potentially two thirds of recyclables being unloaded at the Stueng Mean

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20. The methodology of the JICA study leads me to think that this figure may be underestimating the total amount of recyclables bought and sold in a given day as there are hundreds of small junk shops and recycling depots throughout the city.
Chey Dumpsite. If these figures are correct, the city’s solid waste was an abundant and freely accessible source of raw material for the dumpsite’s waste pickers and many others throughout the city.

While access to this raw material was unlimited, it was by its very nature dangerous and exposed waste pickers to long-term health risks. Studies have shown that working on dumpsites is detrimental to waste pickers’ health as they face exposure to hazardous materials and diseases spread by flies or rodents, and risk infection or poisoning from faeces, syringes, insecticides and chemicals (Hunt 1996; Wachukwu, Mbata and Nyenke 2010). These studies also show that waste pickers suffer from frequent cuts caused by sharp objects and have respiratory problems from long-term smoke inhalation. Additionally, the continuous arrival of garbage trucks and heavy machinery such as bulldozers were a constant hazard. In the municipality’s operation of the dumpsite, the garbage trucks and bulldozers had preferential right-of-way. Although the waste pickers had free access to the dumpsite and its abundant raw material, it was at their own risk and cost to their health and safety.

Factors of production

As I have detailed in the section above, the means of production required minimal financial capital — the largest ongoing monetary expense was the purchase of rubber boots. In this section, I explore human capital (labour power) as a principal requirement within the waste pickers’ system for the production of value. Here I am using human labour power in its Marxian sense to capture the capacity or ability of waste pickers to apply their labour in production.

The longer I participated in the work of waste pickers, the more I appreciated the skills of picking as well as the various mental and physical attributes needed to undertake the work. Along with the requisite physical forbearance or resilience, experienced waste pickers developed keen senses in order to find things of value within the waste. They could quickly scan an area and from a mere fragment recognise hidden objects. They could perceive differences in sounds that recyclables made when they are tapped and the distance between themselves and machinery without looking up. They also had a well-developed sense of smell that could distinguish which items of food were still edible. As I learned, it also took time to master how to manipulate the collecting tool in order to quickly and nimbly pick up items with a stabbing motion and rip open plastic bags to empty the contents. Waste pickers also needed to understand what items held value, if they could be sold to recycling dealers or speciality buyers and how to sort and prepare

21 There have been conflicting reports of the levels of dioxins and heavy metals such as mercury, cesium and cadmium found at the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite. A study by Dr Shinsuke Tanabe of Japan’s Ehime University Center for Marine Environmental Studies in 1999 reported that people living and working at the dumpsite face critical health risks, however the Cambodian Ministry of Environment challenged the study on the basis of flawed methodology (Kaye 2001; Chandara 2001). In 2004, a study of the levels of contaminants in human breastmilk in women living next to the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite reported that the levels were not significantly different from breastmilk in women at reference sites not near the dumpsite (Kunisue, Someya and Monirith 2004). However, an earlier study found various toxic chemicals including dioxins and related compounds in some soil samples from dumpsites in the Philippines, Cambodia, India and Vietnam exceeded environmental guideline values, suggesting potential health effects on humans and wildlife living near these sites. The estimated intakes of dioxins for children were higher than those for adults, suggesting greater risk of exposure for children in these sites (Minh, Minh, Watanabe et al. 2003).
the materials for sale. While this knowledge came through time and practice, creativity played a big part in gaining additional value from objects and things, as did one's relationships with others to enable access to buyers and pricing information. In concert with these attributes, I found that courage was essential and had a direct bearing on the levels of production of any one individual.

Through observation of the activity of the more experienced waste pickers on the dumpsite, I recognised that courage and the willingness to take risks played important roles in productivity levels. Waste pickers had more chance of finding higher quality recyclables such as plastic bottles or aluminium cans that could be exchanged at higher rates when they were the first to search through newly arrived rubbish. That meant being beside or behind the truck when it first opened its doors and began to unload waste. Most of the pickers surrounding the trucks were young men and to a lesser extent women. Rith, a strong and fit father of five children, often collected alongside the heavy machinery and was able to earn almost double that of his wife, Sina, who kept to the sidelines and only occasionally ventured into the more dangerous zones. Another way of collecting higher quality recyclables was to follow the bulldozer as it turned over the waste, potentially revealing new objects previously hidden. Some pickers even rode the bulldozer and others climbed into the trucks that were waiting to unload. This willingness to take risk was certainly tempered by calculations, and risk-taking behaviour varied depending on how a waste picker was feeling on a particular day, the number of waste pickers on the dumpsite that day or sometimes if they had friends who were willing to take the risk with them. Generally older people and those less nimble and experienced worked away from possible danger, while the young and fit took more risks in the line up behind the garbage trucks.

So human labour power had a direct correlation with production but, as I detail further below, there were other obstacles that limited production output quantities. Before moving on to these limits, I describe next the individual collecting priorities on the dumpsite in order to further develop an understanding of the personal choices waste pickers made to match their own attributes and make the most of their competencies.

**Patterns of production**

Not all waste pickers worked in the same patterns or specialisation. Common to those who worked full-time was their focus on a daily payment, which was earned by collecting combinations of recyclables, such as those I collected with Chenda. Alternatively, some waste pickers chose to collect only one type of recyclable, the most common specialities being coloured plastic bags, tyres (which are burned for the metal inside) or during the dry season some people collected pillows (they sold the stuffing inside to speciality buyers who made new pillows), among other things.22

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22 The different methods for gathering the various types of recyclables, for example the unique tool needed to gather a large number of tyres, meant that most people decided prior to departing for the dumpsite what they would be collecting and took the appropriate tools. In some cases, a waste picker might pick up a random tyre or pillow whatever
The decision regarding a person's speciality depended for the most part on their relationships with their recycling dealers (explored further in Chapter 6), although families and in some instances entire villages tended to collect in a similar manner. In Chenda and Sopheap's village, for example, most people collected all four of the base recyclables (random metals and plastics, rice sacks and plastic bags), but in a neighbouring village they collected only plastics and metals. When I explored these specialities through a quantitative survey, I found that over 45 percent of waste pickers surveyed collected random plastics and metals, and an additional 35 percent, including Chenda, also collected plastic bags and rice sacks. Only 20 percent collected just one type of recyclable.

Table 2.1: The Pattern of Production According to Type of Recyclable Collected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of objects and things retrieved</th>
<th>Plastics and metals</th>
<th>Plastics, metals, plastic bags and rice sacks</th>
<th>One type of recyclable, such as plastic bags, tyres or pillows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of respondents</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The techniques of retrieval were slightly different depending on what was being collected. Most waste pickers used a collecting tool. Those who collected coloured plastic bags instead used both hands to quickly gather the bags in bundles. Conversely, the tyre collectors had a larger metal implement to both extract and then carry the heavy tyres.

I tried to work out what criteria waste pickers used to choose their pattern of production. Chenda, as a proficient and experienced waste picker, said collecting multiple types made her more money, i.e. she was able to have higher production outputs and financial returns. She had social networks with two separate dealers, which enabled her to sell the various types of recyclables she retrieved at the end of her shifts. One male waste picker who only collected tyres claimed that his abilities were better and more efficiently used if his concentration was focused on one type of recyclable. One older lady who collected only coloured plastic bags said it was physically easier than collecting a variety of recycling materials and she could finish earlier as she didn't have to sort her collection at the end of the shift. I also presume that there was less competition for these speciality items on the dumpsite and they were in turn not required to take as many risks.

Overall, there were three main patterns of production, with little difference between them besides the type/s of recyclables retrieved and the varying levels of sorting required of each. Waste pickers made personal judgements about their pattern of production based on existing social relations and personal attributes.

Production constraints

Although there were many external factors affecting waste picker production levels, such as home-village obligations, in this section I briefly discuss three primary constraints: climate, quality of waste arriving on the dumpsite and structural changes in the

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their specialty was, but it was less common. It was too time-consuming to carry the tyre back to their collections, nor worth their time to burn a single tyre for the metal inside. Amassing a large quantity of each type of recyclable meant that the time spent sorting, preparing and selling the recyclable was worthwhile.
municipality’s operation of the dumpsite. I discuss these here because they impacted on the amount of recyclables the waste pickers were able to retrieve on the dumpsite in a day or night.

I begin with the most evident, the weather. Cambodia’s distinct monsoonal wet and dry seasons bring either exceedingly hot or wet conditions that made work outside on the dumpsite difficult, and forced many pickers to reduce their hours during periods of extreme weather. Secondly, it was generally understood that on a daily basis there would be variation in the quality of the raw material. This variation was not completely random though, as some truckloads could predictably contain a higher percentage of recyclables, notably those having just come from wealthier neighbourhoods or tourist areas. Still, there was no certainty as to what would arrive at the dumpsite each day, a factor that was compounded by the activity of cart-pullers and street pickers who also bought and collected recyclables in the city. Indeed, the waste pickers’ production levels were limited to what they could find on the dumpsite during their shift and what was available in the delivered load. This randomness suggested to me that chance or luck must also play a part in determining which waste picker would find the most valuable objects over others in any given day. Nevertheless the villagers I came to know well instead believed unexpected rewards and higher outputs were a result of the support bestowed by a spirit of the dumpsite or an ancestor or due to good deeds from a past life (see Chapter 4).

The third principal constraint on waste picker production was changes in the operation of the dumpsite by the municipality. As the dumpsite had exceeded capacity many years earlier, municipal government workers were increasingly changing the dumping area location to other zones due to impassable access roads and uneven, dangerous surfaces. Each change of area, especially during a waste picker’s shift, was a major setback, because the pickers had to carry their collection to the new area. In those first few hours at a new dumping area, there was less fresh waste to pick through and it was often overcrowded. In the second half of 2008, the dumpsite manager was ordering a change of dumping area almost daily, especially as the access roads into the different dumping areas were in poor condition and causing trucks to become bogged. This constraint eased substantially in December that year when the municipal government installed a new concrete road to two of the dumpsite’s mountains. From this point onwards there were planned switches between the two dumping areas, resulting in less disruption in the workday for the waste pickers.

Organisation of production

From the outset, it is important to reiterate that waste pickers did not divide the dumpsite or the dumping areas into territories; waste pickers were able to collect wherever they wanted. But when a picker found an object, I was intrigued as to what guaranteed that it was theirs to claim. In general, pickers were polite and respectful of each other and the items each had collected and made their own. I rarely had another picker grab an object that was within my personal space, although personal space was determined by the
number of people working in an area at any given time. For those working close to the trucks, pickers grabbed whatever they could as quick as they could as the waste tumbled out of the truck, but they still formed an often ordered line around the back of the truck as they waited for it to unload. It became clear that production on the dumpsite was highly organised and based on a few core norms that kept the system in working order.

I found that the dumpsite and the raw material upon it were regarded by the waste pickers as a common resource comprising objects and things abandoned by previous owners. Thus, once a person found an object or thing on the dumpsite and picked it up, it was from that point forward considered to be their property. This principle is similar to the law of finds found in English common law, but is often simply called ‘finders keepers’. In his review of property laws around the globe, Lior Jacob Strahilevitz (2011, p. 127) confirms that abandoned property typically belongs to the ‘first person to find it and take possession’. Strahilevitz (2011, p. 127) warns, however, that legal treatment of such claims of possession differs if the property is instead considered as lost rather than abandoned.

He further states that if something lost is found by somebody, the finder is given priority over anybody other than the true owner. It is safe to suggest that the majority of waste unloaded on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite was deliberately abandoned (that is not lost), and if something that ended up on the dumpsite was instead lost, there would be little possibility of knowing the original owner/s. It follows then that the waste pickers were able to claim possession of whatever object or thing they found on the dumpsite. In the absence of property law or inscribed rules on the dumpsite by the municipality, these were locally based moral claims (Ferry 2005).

Moreover, these newly acquired possessions were able to be placed in a defined space of storage away from the bulldozers and trucks while the waste pickers continued to work. Their property rights extended even though they were not in close vicinity to the property, but only for as long as these owners were seen by others to be taking care of the property. For example, most waste pickers left their new possessions in their storage areas while they worked and even when they went home for meals. If, however, a picker left their storage site untouched for a few days, it was generally considered to be abandoned once again and others were free to claim it. These basic principles and norms allowed for the dumpsite to be relatively free of disagreements between pickers.

There was, nonetheless, one way these basic rules could be circumvented by waste pickers themselves. In collusion with the truck drivers, government-employed dumpsite workers accepted an informal payment from a waste picker to ‘buy a truck’, thereby possessing the right to be the first to pick through the contents of the truck once it unloaded at the dumpsite. Waste pickers paid up to 10,000 riels (US$2.50) per truck and the money was shared between the truck driver, the dumpsite controller and the bulldozer driver.

23 At yet, there are no laws relating to relinquished property in Cambodia. Cambodian laws on the whole are derived from civil law emerging from Europe.

24 In her study of a silver mining cooperative in Mexico, Ferry (2005, p. 424) similarly found a moral code existed for miners who were able to claim minerals they found as their own while they mined for silver whose value belonged to a cooperative.

25 This informal payment was accepted without a receipt, otherwise called a bribe.
Covertly, the dumpsite controller directed these ‘bought trucks’ to unload off to the side away from the main group of pickers. The controller generally gave the waste pickers who bought the truck (hereafter ‘truck buyers’) up to one hour to quickly pick through the mound of waste before the controller instructed the bulldozer driver to shift the pile out of the way and distribute the waste evenly over the wider area. The rest of the waste pickers could then pick through whatever was leftover. On days when space was limited, the truck buyers generally had less time to pick through the pile, or the controller sometimes decided that the trucks could not be bought on such days.

There were roughly 20 to 30 truckloads that were bought in this way each day (out of more than 200 truckloads). Truck buyers were generally unrelated to each other, although they typically had an extended kin relationship or friendship with a garbage truck driver, dumpsite controller or bulldozer driver. The waste pickers I spoke to who bought trucks said they could generally make more than 10,000r profit from a single truck. Only the very large garbage trucks that had just come from hotels, restaurants and hospitals were sought after, as they were believed to have a higher ratio of quality recyclables. Truck buyers rarely worked alone. The piles were too big for the short time frame, so they usually worked with their immediate family to sort through the pile.

One member of the village, Sothy, a widowed mother of five children, regularly bought trucks. As I briefly discussed in Chapter 1, Sothy’s husband was accidentally run over and killed by a garbage truck when he was drunk and passed out on a path used by the trucks. Before he died, her husband had been friends with one of the truck drivers and since his death this truck driver allowed Sothy to buy one of his truckloads each day. The truck often collected from restaurants and Sothy said the driver collected cooked meat and food from within the waste to sell to market sellers before he arrived at the dumpsite. He gave Sothy whatever meat and food was leftover, and Sothy shared the food with her extended family and neighbours. While she was able to earn a higher income than other women in the village, she felt obligated to the truck driver, often spending time and money to prepare lunch for him.

Many of the waste pickers told me that they could not collect as much as before truck buying started, which was sometime in the last decade. As an extension to the rules, it was up to the truck buyers to defend their right of prior access, which promoted exclusivity and in this regard contradicted the notion of commons. Pickers complained and felt upset when a truck buyer used ‘bad words’ when defending their right to the bought pile. Vichara said:

Waste pickers sometimes buy the waste from a truck and collect the waste alone. And when I collect the waste with them without knowing that they own that waste, they always blame me and use bad words or make problems for the other waste pickers and me, without respecting each other. So I don’t like those kinds of waste pickers that buy the trucks at the dumpsite.

Many other waste pickers said they unknowingly started to pick through a bought pile
only to be faced with verbal abuse. Such incidents between the truck buyers and pickers broke the rule of not interfering with anybody else and disrupted the peaceful atmosphere on the dumpsite. It even happened to me on a few occasions and I was shocked by the abruptness of the reaction of the truck buyer. Waste pickers, however, acknowledge that the truck buyers own the waste. As Chenda said:

I don't collect the waste when someone has bought the waste from the truck already. If we collect the waste when someone has bought the waste from the truck already, we are stealing the waste from someone.

Rather than being an exception (or circumvention as I suggested above) to the law of finds, truck buying became a normalised extension of it. The basic rules (that is the law of finds) kept order on the dumpsite, but if a waste picker had both financial and social capital, they could enhance their potential to increase their production and therefore generate more income. There was skill in truck buying too, as buyers needed to know which truck to choose based on where it had originated. In turn, truck buyers were similar to the garbage truck workers who retrieved recyclables from their loads before they reached the dumpsite commons. So while truck buying limited what was available in the common pool, over time it was incorporated into the rules that organised production.

Discussion

Using a Marxian framework, I have described by what means the waste pickers owned or had easy access to their instruments of production. Furthermore, in examining their work patterns I have demonstrated the ways in which the waste pickers could choose the types of recyclables they wanted to specialise in and utilise a range of methods to adapt to environmental and social constraints. The organisation of production, based on a moral code, meant that each individual picker was able to work independently of others and norms in place created an environment largely free of intra-picker conflict (even with instances of truck buying). I have also explored the manner in which the raw material they required (that is the waste on the dumpsite) was freely available as a common resource for pickers to claim until the dumpsite was closed. I, therefore, concur with the findings of Sicilar, who similarly found that the waste pickers had access to possess their means of production.

With access to their means of production, they were consequently not trapped within a capitalist wage labour situation, as similarly argued by Sicilar. Yet their ability to create wealth (money) was contingent on relationships with dealers that were unequal and laden with obligation. I continue this discussion in the following chapter in the context of the waste pickers' mode of production and the ways they sought to rebalance these unequal exchanges and secure surplus value from their labour (Chapter 3). This examination of the waste pickers' production processes in conjunction with their exchange practices allows an analysis of the political relations within their work, more of which will follow in the chapters to come.

The reason I have detailed the waste pickers' complex actions, patterns and processes on
the dumpsite in this chapter is not only to contribute to political-economic debates on waste picking by researchers such as Sicul and Birbeck (refer to Chapter 3). I am also interested in exploring the manner in which value was created on the dumpsite.

It appears that all the expert skills and knowledge individual waste pickers had gained over time, that I detail in this chapter, enabled them to increase the return they got in any one shift. Nevertheless, even the single act of picking up an object, be it an aluminium can or a child’s dress, and claiming it, created value. In suggesting this, I do not wish to discount the waste pickers’ skills and knowledge, other than to pinpoint the action within the process which is the moment of value transformation.

In an unowned state, an object is outside of self-other relations. When the waste pickers found and picked up an object they were establishing culturally recognised and acceptable social entitlements to, or ownership of, that object for themselves within social relations to the exclusion of other waste pickers on the dumpsite. It was this social act symbolically inferring ownership that created value and brought the object back within self-other relations.

This contention adheres to theories that position symbolic action as central to value-creation processes (as theorised by Munn – see Introduction); it also highlights the significance of ownership theories within value-creation processes on the dumpsite. Nonetheless, the choice a waste picker made in selecting which object to pick up and claim emphasises the importance of both local, societal and global value-creation processes on the value-creation processes at the dumpsite. I will now briefly explore these lines of reasoning, beginning with a look at Munn’s theories with the intent to elucidate what is essentially a multifaceted process.

Munn (1986, p. 14) reasons that action does not necessarily create value in isolation but instead within complex symbolic processes that comprise self-other relations. Munn argues (1986, p. 8) that action can have ‘culturally defined capacities’ but these are ‘mere key potentialities’, that some may have ‘latent capacities’ that might be undesirable, hence the positive and negative potential of action. Such outcomes of transformative action need not all be immediately signified and realised. Instead outcomes can transcend time and space and involve others and finally be realised in another place at a later date. Munn (1986, p.10) refers to this as an extension of ‘intersubjective spacetime’. In addition, Munn (1986, p. 11, 14) argues that transformative action ultimately results in formations of identity for the person performing the acts, they are ‘producing themselves or aspects of themselves in the same process’.

For instance, by reclaiming particular objects waste pickers knew they could sell to dealers—such as aluminium or tin cans and plastic bags—they were performing an act that could yield potential positive capacities in the future, i.e. the objects could be exchanged for money with their dealers and thereby create positive exchange value. There were, however, unique power and social relations between the pickers and dealers that impacted on the positive capacities of such acts. The dealers were clearly linked into a value-creation chain in the wider economy but were disconnected socially from the waste
picker’s world. The dealers did not have the social commitment to operate in the interests of the waste pickers, unless it coincided with their own. They were, instead, able to emphasise their separateness from the waste pickers while exploiting the increase in value of the resource that the pickers’ actions created. I explore these unequal exchanges in greater detail in the next chapter.

By reclaiming things to use, gift or share from the dumpsite they formed and maintained key aspects of their identity and personhood within the social totality of the village. As I explore in Chapter 4, appropriating certain foods could yield potential positive use or social value, but failing to share this appropriated food could instead yield negative capacities. In the rare moments a waste picker had the opportunity to appropriate a highly valuable object or thing, such as a precious gem, metal or jewellery (also explored in Chapter 4), I examine how the waste pickers felt both excited and apprehensive at the same time. The find could yield positive capacities as it could be exchanged for a large financial sum, but if rituals were not conducted, the act could enrage a spirit or ancestor and result in sickness or even death.

Finally, although these various acts of reclaiming objects on the dumpsite for the most part created positive value for the waste pickers within the social totalities of the village and dumpsite, externally these same acts were perceived negatively by others, such as tourists, aid workers and the general public. This was because these practices cut across value-creation processes operating in different domains from the village and dumpsite, some of which were fundamentally disconnected from that of the waste pickers. In the wider Cambodian society and globally were symbolic processes and values related to beliefs about pollution that instead viewed waste and the pickers’ actions negatively. In Chapter 5 I explore the waste pickers’ experiences of being stigmatised by the wider Cambodian society and the ways the waste pickers negotiated the revaluing of their identities to attempt to create positive value in the form of aid and gifts.

Munn and other scholars, such as Terence Turner (2008) and Diane Elson (1979), also highlight in what manner transformative action enables a community to create the values it regards as important and significant for its sustainability, which Munn (1986, p. 8) refers to as ‘communal value’. Turner studies social and political organisation among the Kayapo people in Central Brazil. In his interpretation of Marx’s value theory and drawing on the work of economist Diane Elson, Turner (2008, pp. 48, 51) posits that action within production both creates commodities as well as the social relations and structures that enable these commodities to be created.

On the dumpsite, there was a visible yet unspoken orientation and motivation by autonomous individuals to reinforce the social norms that structured the organisation of single acts of reclamation as well as the repetitive practices and overall organisation of production. Communal value, therefore, was expressed as the continued appreciation of and conformance to these social norms. Munn (1986, p. 20) states that ‘the community creates itself as the agent of its own value creation’ (emphasis in original). In the accompanying photoessay, I use documentary images to explore what I saw as the egalitarian nature of this communal value, with no visible division of labour and a disposition towards equity.

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(with the only exception being the instances of truck buying). In the sequencing of the images I show the communal dynamic of social relations and the values they contain.

While waste picker values such as individual autonomy, equality and equity were communally valued and practised on the dumpsite, negative tensions and processes of disarticulation external to their social totality sought to position them on the bottom of a hierarchy of status in the city. Within these tensions, Munn (1986, p. 3) argues that individuals 'are engaged in an effort to construct and control themselves… and the value imbued within social relations resting on such identity constructions'. While the actions of Gawans resulted in value-transformation processes that all worked together to create fame for individuals and the community, this was not the case for the waste pickers. Instead, wider societal and global processes of disarticulation subverted and negated their identities and value in the wider world. Towards the end of this thesis, it becomes evident that the waste pickers' uncertain position as reclaimers of objects and things that no-one else wants begins to change. As preparations are made to close the dumpsite, it becomes clear that the waste pickers lack the recognised rights in the wider society to reclaim waste and instead become identified as exploiters of a valuable commodity that others, including the municipality and international recycling companies, want to assert ownership over.
In this three-part photoessay I attempt to bring you, as the participant reader/viewer, closer to the various experiences within the waste pickers’ processes of production. Firstly, through a sequence of still-life close-up photographs, I explore the abstract disorder of waste that pickers look at every day on the dumpsite and, in these random assemblages, the presence and absence of value. In the second sequence I use documentary images to explore social relations on the dumpsite. In the third and final sequence I use visual metaphors and abstract images to inspire a more intimate understanding of my subjective thoughts of picking on the dumpsite.

Sequence 1

The still-life and close-up images in this sequence allow you to study the diverse, often unusual, sometimes dangerous and highly assorted nature of waste the pickers looked at everyday on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite. These visual meditations are selected in consideration of the waste pickers’ learned ability to pinpoint value within such random assemblages, where colour, shape and texture of objects and things come to signify measures of positive or negative value. In some of the images there appears to be nothing of positive value within the frame, in other images, such as Plate 46, filled garbage bags lie in wait to be opened by a picker. Although we are unable to see inside these filled garbage bags, the unopened bags represent a sense of possibility and positive value potential waiting to be acted upon.

On the other hand, the abandoned used syringes in Plates 57, 59 and 60, hidden menacingly within the waste, are representative of both negative and positive value potential — the uncovered syringe point exposes the picker to the risk of being infected by a communicable disease. Faced with this threat of negative potentiality, another function of the waste pickers’ collecting tool becomes evident — to poke within and under layers, to move the top-layer waste to see what lies beneath. Fingers and hands are only used to pick and pull a previously identified object or thing.

Yet the syringe’s form holds exchange value as hard plastic — some waste pickers chose to ignore this positive value potential and avoid the syringe while others acted on this potential, breaking off the point to claim the hard-plastic and its exchange value. In the same manner, what looks to be a new, brightly beige, teen brassiere lying on the surface in Plate 55 symbolically calls out for somebody to realise its positive value potential.
In some of the photographs, things such as abandoned shoes, straws, glass bottles and plastic labels lie at odds alongside organic matter, punctuating the picture with the visual equivalent of an exclamation mark. Evident are leftovers of production and consumption, histories and tales of value creation and eventually destruction. In Plate 51 empty yellow noodle packets fill the frame, almost certainly from a street-side breakfast vendor. In Plate 62, however, maggots writhe close to two empty glass jars unclaimed and separated from their metal or plastic tops; this is due to the apparent lack of demand for glass within the local, regional and global glass recycling industry, henceforth, only the positive value potential within the plastic and metal jar tops can be realised.

As many theorists of waste have argued, objects, things and matter are never locked into one category, but constantly change as a product of people-thing relations (Douglas 1966; Hawkins 2006; O'Brien 1999). The physical appearance, purpose, composition and past life or even category that we assign an object or thing does not dictate the use of the object or the way we interact with it. Objects and things are able to shift between and through categories (Appadurai 1988). In this regard, what is waste or recycling in some situations is not in others, and what we now classify as waste or recycling may not always have this classification applied to it. Even at its smelliest and dirtiest, waste is still not a locked category.

Sicular (1992, pp. 26, 27) contends that there are people who classify ‘waste-as-waste’ (he uses the example of garbage workers) while waste pickers reclassify ‘waste-as-ore’. Waste pickers instead see a mass of objects and things with potential value and examine it. For the most part, Chenda claimed recyclable objects in whatever form they appeared. In Plate 49, you can see broken Coca-Cola plastic cups that lie amidst rubbish from a local takeaway stall. Whether crushed or twisted, it did not matter; Chenda collected these plastic cups, plates and cutlery and, together with the rest of the plastics she had retrieved that day, sold it all according to how much it weighed, by the kilogram. Rather than identifying the objects recovered from the garbage on the dumpsite by name, such as a plastic cup, bottle, spoon or drink can, the waste pickers referred to such objects by their composition – calling out ‘joah’ (plastic) or ‘dayke’ (metal). What mattered was the object’s intrinsic materiality, the essence. The process of disposal had transformed the objects from one with a purpose to simply one with an essence; a plastic spoon used to eat takeaway food became soft plastic.

On the other hand, while observing the waste pickers I noticed that their actions changed when they found ‘things’ rather than ‘objects’. Chenda, who always worked fast, would sometimes pause, pick something up, hold it and examine it, often calling me over to have a look at it. She liked finding things for her daughter, perhaps a child’s dress she could mend or a toy her daughter might like to play with. On two occasions, Chenda found a mobile phone, proudly calling me over to see if it might still work. Chenda never
stopped to examine objects, but things grabbed her attention. On the 
dumpsite, some objects and things seemed to have differing agentive effects

In most instances finding things to claim on the dumpsite was a joyous 
moment providing an unexpected bonus. Occasionally, the pickers also 
found things of substantial financial value, such as gold rings, silver 
bracelets, diamonds earrings and money. Such remarkable finds were only 
ever spoken about in hushed tones. At other times, when pickers thought 
they had found such treasures, they had in fact found faux things, such as 
imitation jewellery and the representations of wealth used in traditional 
ceremonies.

For now rather than only viewing waste-as-waste and waste-as-ore, I 
contend that in some instances you could regard waste-as-treasure. 
Treasures, things to re-use and valuable items to resell were not only 
exchanged differently, as I show in Chapter 3, they also offered different 
forms of value in the village, as I discuss in Chapter 4.
Sequence 2

These documentary images were taken as I collected alongside the waste pickers. By way of an introduction, the sequence begins by following one of my informants from the village as she works. It starts as she pauses for a moment while considering a pair of men's trousers and looks out to find her husband. She then begins to collect recyclables again away from her peers, but gradually she moves closer to others until she has joined the line of waiting pickers as the truck opens. Her facial expression as she works is one of stern concentration and focus.

The sequence then takes a broader view of the waste pickers' processes of production, showing the actions of individuals within the community of pickers on the dumpsite. Here I am trying to explore the order I experienced. These photographs repeatedly feature rows of pickers working closely together, often encircling and moving in communal flow in orchestra with the large machinery.

In the absence of municipal regulations or supervision on the dumpsite, the waste pickers abide by a set of unwritten rules, based on values such as equal access and opportunity, common courtesy, concern for peers and a focus on production. Globally, waste pickers are commonly called 'scavengers', a derogatory label that invokes images from nature documentaries in which animals fight over a carcass, often in a scene of chaos. Such scenes and the chaotic symbolism they entail are at odds with the social organisation I witnessed on the dumpsite. Although there was some competition among the younger male waste pickers, there was generally a shared understanding and respect for order and systems, fairness and communal safety.

Within the photographs, there is an absence of visible hierarchy among the waste pickers as well as any evidence of a division of labour, either gender or age based. Instead, overt expressions of gender or sexuality are almost non-existent; both men and women dress similarly and often collect in the same patterns. Waste picking offered single mothers and teenagers an avenue through which to earn an income and a degree of self-sufficiency and independence. This informality was at odds with the dominant Cambodian society, offering an egalitarianism not commonly seen in the streets beyond the village.

In his study of a community of waste pickers in Cali, Colombia, Chris Birbeck believes the dumpsite is analogous with an informal factory. Within the images in this sequence, it is easy to see why. In my eyes, the waste pickers have converted the space into a roofless factory or manufacturing plant, the dumpsite becoming the initial point in a new production value chain, a slightly incongruous perspective as the dumpsite is supposed to be the end point of the consumption process. In doing this, I believe the waste pickers, once again, reveal themselves to be producers, actively controlling
the transformation of the space as their actions create positive value. Present in almost all the images is the sky, once again, providing an immense backdrop to the open-air factory atop a mountain, a view only obstructed occasionally by the always-temporary mounds of recently arrived rubbish that are soon levelled by the working bulldozers.
With heightened senses and piqued emotions I photographed the dumpsite at night, a world of cool blue pickers and warm yellow-orange machines streaking across a landscape of multicoloured waterfalls and glittering mounds of precious things. Juxtaposing this sequence of images with the previous sequence taken during daylight is not contrived to reveal a distinction between picking at night versus during the day. Instead, this sequence explores visual metaphors through abstract images of working waste pickers taken in the dark of night. The absence of light allows for revelations not evident in the harsh light of day. Exposed through the stark contrast of artificial light in darkness and the technical liberties found in night-time photography are moments of realisation and a more nuanced sense of the mood and feeling of collecting on the dumpsite. This highly subjective sequence is an exercise in abstraction aimed at eliciting metaphors that would help me see something else of the value I was looking for, and finding, at Stueng Mean Chey.

Before venturing into the darkness, my conversations with villagers about working at night had centred on themes of danger, mostly involving fear of drug-affected youth roaming in gangs. Looking at these images, I remember first walking towards the dumpsite at night and feeling scared, but as I hesitantly walked into the darkness I was struck instead by the scene's beauty. Ahead of me, the main collecting area was lit up in the warm glow of a stationary bulldozer's halogen lamps. Working within its generous arc, waste pickers by night did what their day shift colleagues did, but it was only in this scene that I witnessed the focus of their concentrated effort. Searching through the waste in the darkness, the waste pickers use common battery-powered headlamps comprising a small array of light emitting diodes (LED). In many of the images, the pickers' movements are captured as thin blue lines of cool light through the long exposures of the camera. These lines track the pickers' movements over the seconds it took to make the photograph. Close to the trucks, the jagged blue lines show the intensity of the workers' frantic movements (Plate 96), while in images made away from the heavy machinery, the blue light reveals the focal point of their search. The long exposures also show the trace of graceful bodies moving throughout the dark space, as well as the flow of waste as it tumbles out of the trucks like a scenic waterfall (Plate 96).

By using long exposures at night, an inversion takes place not only between light and dark but also between the repulsive and the beautiful, the disgraced and acclaimed, as well as trepidation and action. With the world turned upside down, an abundance of metaphorical potential opened up before me creating hitherto unknown understanding of my own moods, feelings and emotions while collecting.
Unlike the day images where the waste appears dirty, visibly unpleasing and dangerous conveying negative paradigms such as stigma, pollution and contagion, in these night images the waste shimmers in the artificial beams of light like a seam of precious gemstone in a rock face, figuratively transforming into positive value potential. The pickers themselves are transformed too, becoming spotlit actors in an open-air theatre, flanked by the machines as their large props.

In Plates 107–20, the bulldozers and garbage trucks take centre stage. The large bands of warm yellow light show the machines’ linear movements against the silhouettes of the waste pickers, simultaneously warning the pickers of its presence and calling them to action. In Plates 124–31, these images of night-time industry sit in contrast to the peaceful abstract photographs of the lone waste picker lit under the glow of a headlamp. The movements of the headlamp are written with blue light with the occasional glimpse of the waste being searched through. In these images, there is a sense of the picker’s almost intimate interaction with garbage, their singular focus on reclaiming objects and things, and for me, an introverted and solitary peacefulness of mind.

The sequence ends, however, with the seemingly unceremonious burning of motorbike tyres, an action performed to retrieve the thin metal wire cast within the rubber. Overseen by the lone wire collector, the lit pyre of tires sends thick plumes of toxic smoke into the atmosphere. While practised by only a few, it was an act that left me questioning the environmental benefits of some aspects of their production process that otherwise was mostly environmentally beneficial.

The available light within the darkness seemed to highlight, even pinpoint, many of the facets of the collecting experience I had come to think about, just as a spotlight gives presence to actors in a play. Symbolically and in actual representation, the images reveal my own feelings of doing, such as how insular I felt the practice of collecting to be, how the machines appear both to be menacing and enticing at the same time, and ultimately how rubbish lost its stigma.
Plate 123