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Salvage Acts: Asian/American Artists and the Uncovering of Slow Violence in the San Francisco Bay Area

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Abstract

This essay excavates geographies of environmental injustice and racial violence in San Francisco, California using the artwork of Asian/American artists Weston Teruya, Michael Arcega, and Stephanie Syjuco made during their residencies at Recology (the city's privately-owned waste management facility). At Recology's Artist-In-Residence program, cultural workers salvage materials from the dump, transforming the city's waste into objects with educational and artistic value. Reading the visual lexicon deployed in, and the conditions of production and circulation of, these assemblages, I trace the wastelanding of communities of color across the Northern California region through processes of incarceration, toxic exposure, displacement, and labor exploitation. These artworks, I argue, assist in uncovering the terrain of slow violence in the region and across scales, or what Rob Nixon has called "landscapes of temporal overspill that elude rhetorical cleanup operations with their sanitary beginnings and endings" (2011, 8).

Keywords

Visual studies; critical geography; American studies; urban studies; Asian American art; Black geography; waste; recycling; California; slow violence

Introduction

Since 1990, the Recology Artist-in-Residence (AIR) Program has been a pioneer in supporting artists who wish to make art out of waste, or to craft beautiful objects from what 2015 AIR participant

Michael Arcega calls "the memories that [people] wish to forget."[1] Most unique is its siting in the San Francisco facilities of Recology, an ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan) that holds monopoly contracts for the city's waste disposal, recycling and compost programs. Known colloquially as "the dump," Recology has been in continuous operation in the Bayview Hunters Point District for decades. Recology has held a monopoly contract for the entire city's waste disposal, recycling and compost programs since 1987, and has been a presence in the Bayview for much longer: beginning in 1932, Recology's parent companies, the Italian-run scavenger companies Sunset and Scavengers Protective Association (SPA), have held city contracts, the beneficiaries of cronyism at all levels of municipal governance.[2] For the duration of their three-month residency, artists are given a monthly stipend, dedicated studio space and 24-hour access to Recology's dump sites; as per program rules, 100% of the final artworks must be made from raw materials or found objects reclaimed from the dump. Artists give weekly tours of their studio and works-in-progress over the duration of their residency, which culminates in a weekend-long final exhibition of their completed artworks. For this, Recology's Artist-in-Residence Program has become nationally renowned, and is the company's most arresting public education initiative promoting recycling, upcycling, and reuse.

Even as Recology AIR is a success story for visiting artists, what of others more permanently impacted by Recology and its larger project of waste management? With this question in mind, I turn to the assemblages, installations, and sculptures made by three Asian/American artists—Weston Teruya, Michael Arcega, and Stephanie Syjuco— who participated in the Recology AIR program between 2013 and 2016.[3] All artists continue to be based in the San Francisco Bay Area, a region with one of the largest and longest established Asian/American populations in the nation. I argue that, even as Asian/American communities have been represented as "model minorities" since the Cold War, complicit in projects of white supremacy and anti-Black racism, these three Asian/American artists-in-residence produced an alternative optic of waste and violence through creative acts of salvage (Maeda 2005, 1083). That is to say, I argue that their artworks do not simply celebrate the beauty of recycling initiatives, but also serve as powerful material witness to processes of environmental racism that have disproportionately impacted Black, Asian immigrant, Indigenous, and Latinx working-class communities in San Francisco and across regional, national, and global scales.

Considering ruins, visual studies scholar Lane Relyea defines trash the "byproduct of a classifying and ordering structure, the name of that which doesn't fit, what's unnamable and inappropriate" (2013, 195). They argue that, while some trash can be rehabilitated as collectibles or souvenirs— or in the case of Recology AIR, as artworks—its transvaluation is largely dependent on *who* enacts this transformation. Recology AIR gives license for artists to play with trash, a practice that would otherwise be criminalized as scavenging, salvaging, or even stealing were it unhoused or poor people engaged in such acts (Humes 2013, 195). Recology conscripts Asian/American artists— a racialized group imagined to be the "model minority," proximate but not equivalent to the dangers of Blackness—into this project, allowing for the company to appear politically engaged while simultaneously containing real threat. Yet even as the participation of Asian/American artists into Recology AIR can be easily co-opted into the banal narrative of recycling as a universal good, the artworks' messages can, and do, exceed their conditions of production. Working through these contradictions, Recology artists like Michael Arcega, Weston Teruya, and Stephanie Syjuco reassemble the ruins and remains of the San

1 Conversation with the artist, February 2, 2016.

2 In 1935, SPA and Sunset organized the Sanitary Fill Company as their jointly owned subsidiary to handle waste disposal at a tidelands site south of the city, in the Bayview (Perry 1978, 26).

3 My use of the / in "Asian/American" follows David Palumbo-Liu (1999), who writes: "As it once implies both inclusion and exclusion 'Asian/American' marks both the distinction between 'Asian' and 'American' and a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement between them" (1).

Francisco Bay Area and force viewers to reconsider the ethics of "zero waste" championed by the City and by Recology itself. They turn the gaze back onto Recology as a polluting and displacing presence in the city, sited in and harmful to the Black and brown neighborhood of the Bayview, and thus challenge the company's self-framing as a progressive site of social good.

Using artworks as my interlocutors (Rogoff 2000), this article locates instances of what Rob Nixon (2011) has dubbed "slow violence," or "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, and attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all," with casualties both human and environmental (2). Methodologically, I begin by close reading the artworks' visual lexicon, excavating palimpsestic histories of environmental and racial injustices which these pieces reference implicitly and explicitly; I draw primarily from the literature of Black geographies, visual cultural studies, and American and Ethnic Studies to inform my reading practice. Tracing the life cycle of the materials which comprise these artworks, I then follow and analyze the trajectories of these objects' production, circulation, and eventual dumping at Recology. Finally, using these artworks to salvage disparate histories and geographies of the Bay Area region, I critique the modalities of waste management undertaken by City and state governments, corporations, and Recology itself that racialize working-class communities as disposable lives in wastelanded places.

Race and Waste: The Production of Wastelanded Environments

As a regionally-based waste management firm, Recology is exceptional on the national scale, celebrated as a model program by leading scholars of urban waste and recycling and by municipal governments from Chicago to Paris that wish to emulate San Francisco's efficiency in curbside waste, recycling, and compost collection (Johnson and Fagen 2017). Hand in hand with Recology, San Francisco is working towards becoming "zero waste" by 2020, and leads California cities in its green initiatives.[4] The company's website boasts of its impact on making San Francisco "the Greenest City in North America," buttressing its claims with impressive statistics such as: the City diverts a minimum of 78% of all waste away from landfill disposal through source reduction, reuse, and recycling and compost programs, with the percentage of diverted waste increasing yearly (Recology 2011). Recology's environmental vanguardism, furthermore, extends to its preservation of the national arts ecology through its innovative, longstanding Artist-in-Residence Program.

Enabling artists to extract value from the city's waste stream in order to create beautiful objects, Recology simultaneously buries the truth about the company's polluting presence in the Bayview, a district in southeastern San Francisco missing from the City's map of its "waste-free zone." Bayview's exclusion from this "waste free zone" by both the City and Recology naturalizes it as an industrial zone, discursively evacuated of its existing residents who are daily exposed to the dump's smells, sounds, and polluting side effects. This exclusion and evacuation is not a new phenomenon in the Bayview, but is a continuation of slow violence or of "wastelanding" discourses and practices applied to this 3.95 square mile swath of land since the mid-1950s by the US military, the City, and corporate interests.

As environmental studies scholar Traci Brynne Voyles writes in *Wastelanding* (2015), capitalism requires environmental inequality, places where raw materials are extracted and places where toxic waste

4 "The City began regulating waste collection in 1921, and by ordinance, Sunset and Golden Gate received exclusive refuse collection licenses in 1932, a license Recology holds today. An employee-owned company, Recology is today involved in the collection, hauling, sorting, recycling, composting and transfer of San Francisco's waste. The companies are regulated by the Department of Public Works, which issues a rate order once every five years establishing the monthly fees they may charge customers for collection services. The City also sets year-over-year diversion goals for Recology, to further boost recycling" (Tam 2010).

must be dumped. The wasteland becomes the "other" through which this treadmill of production is constituted, a "racial and spatial signifier that renders an environment and the bodies that inhabit it pollutable" (9). In the United States, a nation founded on land extraction and genocide (settler colonialism), wastelands are places complexly constructed as "already belonging to the settler—his manifest destiny—or as undesirable, unproductive, or unappealing" (Voyles 2015, 7). Like the wastelands of Voyles's research—Diné lands made toxic through uranium mining— the wastelands of the Bay Area are racialized places made to seem "unimportantly inhabited, represented as worthless," and are "systematically stripped of their material and ideological worth" (Voyles 2015, 10-11). Identifying wastelands in the larger Bay Area region thus necessitates an investigation of what environmental justice and ethnic studies scholars including Laura Pulido and David Pellow dub environmental racism (Pulido 1996; Pellow 2018). To do so requires an analysis of cultural discourses, state and corporate policies and practices, as well as the physical objects and detritus which produce racialized communities as waste— its residents as disposable and its land and water as pollutable.

Across disciplines and approaches, environmental studies scholars have extended the claims of environmental justice movements, who as early as 1982 claimed environmental racism a core civil rights issue in campaigns against PCB-laced soil in Black communities in Warren County, NC (Pulido 1996, 144). Foundational social scientific accounts of environmental racism such as Robert Bullard's *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States* (1987), Julie Sze's *Noxious New York* (2007), and Dorceta Taylor's *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (2014) link race and waste; they analyze the siting of toxic waste facilities in communities of color throughout the United States, providing evidence of the unequal distributions of environmental benefits and pollution burdens based on race (Sze 2007, 13). The linkages between processes of racialization and wastelanding are not containable to the United States but are global; for example, in *Slow Violence,* Nixon identifies as "war casualties" the Iraqi, Kuwaiti, American, and British victims of uranium poisoning in the decades following the 1991 Gulf War (2011, 200).

This article extends these prior studies of waste, race, and place with an emphasis on analyzing how cultural productions along with empirical objects produce "a representational criterion by which ideas about [wastelands] have been formed" (Voyles 2015, 8). It takes up David Pellow's charge for critical environmental justice scholarship to jump scales, by tracking the material and discursive production of environments of disposability in the city, region, nation, and globally (2018, 20-21). Artists involved with the Recology Artist-in-Residence Program transvalue discarded objects and materials into fine art, allowing the public to celebrate recycling in San Francisco even as slow violence against communities of color is naturalized in places outside of the city's designation of "waste free zones." Yet, such artworks exceed their conditions of production, and are a guide to uncovering the multiscalar histories and geographies of wastelands in the Bayview, the Bay Area, the United States, and across the globe.

The Space Left Behind: Weston Teruya's Fragile Histories

Figure 1: Weston Teruya, *Extracting Gold in the New City*. 2016, paper sculpture from recycled office supplies, building paper, wrapping paper, and start-up brochures, 92" x 71" x 47." San Francisco: Recology Artist-in-Residence Studio.

Weston Teruya's paper sculptures, made at Recology AIR in 2016, play with the city's history of converting waste into wealth at the expense of Asian immigrants, Black workers, and other communities of color. *Extracting Gold in the New City* (a paper sculpture made from recycled office supplies, building paper, wrapping paper, and start-up tech company brochures) features a faux wrought iron gate pinning down an Oriental rug and a prospector's pan filled with gold nuggets and coins. Just behind the larger-than-life-size gate are comically small chairs and tables suggestive of mid-century mass-produced suburban conformity; the owners of these chairs, inverted and stacked high, must be in the midst of a hurried relocation. In the *Accretion of Lives, Lessons Learned*, and *The Space Left Behind*, Teruya wraps and stacks paper objects en masse, signifying the repetitive cycles of exploitation and displacement of migrant workers in the city. Delicate yet resilient, these recycled paper artworks invoke the recycling of discourses employed by the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency (SFRA) to justify the wholesale removal of Asian and Black neighborhoods proximate to the city center: between the 1940s and 1980s, Nihonmachi, Western Addition, and Manilatown were labeled as blighted, its residents socially disorganized and thus subject to mass eviction of residents and demolition of buildings (Quiray Tagle 2017). In their chaos, we no longer know which moving boxes in *The Space Left Behind* came from Chinatown apartments, and which may be from families in the Fillmore. Whose toys, house keys, and shoes are on the shelf in *Lessons Learned*? Unpacking the boom and bust cycles of real estate speculation in San Francisco, Teruya's sculptures invoke the lives of those lured to the city with promises of quick fortune over the past century: from Chinese migrants and Italian trash scavengers to the Black families recruited onto military installations in Alameda, Richmond, and Bayview Hunters Point.

Figure 2: Weston Teruya, *Lessons Learned*. 2016, paper sculpture from recycled office supplies, building paper, construction signage, playing cards, tissue paper, children's play blocks, and holographic paper. San Francisco: Recology Artist-in-Residence Studio.

Of these areas, Bayview Hunters Point offers a unique case study of the ways that a wasteland spatially confines yet simultaneously offers opportunities for some migrants at the expense of others. With no standard trash collection protocol in the Gold Rush boomtown of San Francisco in the early 1900s, Italian immigrant laborers turned waste into profit by consolidating scavenging crews in the far southern district of the Bayview (Perry 1978). Italian scavengers were able to "clean up their image" and increase their access to the social and spatial mobility of whiteness by picking through the city's trash and dumping it in this designated dump site; the Bayview was far from residential areas considered too valuable to expose to such noxious odors and waste (Lipsitz 2007, 12). In stark contrast, the yellow press, sensationalist short stories, and films linked Chinese laborers to influxes of foreign diseases such as malaria, smallpox, and leprosy, and to a host of vices including gambling, opium addiction, and prostitution (Shah 2001). This biopolitical technique produced the Chinese as a wasted population, diseased of mind and body and needing to be contained within the borders of Chinatown.

By the mid-20th century, Bayview Hunters Point housed more than just the waste collected by Sunset Scavengers (the name for the Italian-run predecessors to the present-day Recology). This district, site of the naval shipyards and its grounds made toxic by decades of nuclear decontamination, also became home to African American workers able to afford the government housing-turned-public housing projects left behind after the Second World War. Many Black San Franciscans flocked to the Bayview in the 1960s, during the era of San Francisco Redevelopment Agency Project A-1, a project so blatantly racist in its targeting of the Fillmore and Western Addition that it was colloquially known as "Negro Removal." By 1974, the Bayview's population was 69% African American, coinciding with the dismantling of the naval shipyard that year (Dillon 2014, 1212). Unlike their Italian predecessors in the district, the Bayview's Black residents have been unable to profit from waste, and have been unwillingly subjected to environmental hazards and toxic exposure; they share this experience with communities of color in cities like Los Angeles, who similarly inhabit toxic environments left behind by deindustrialization and the global outsourcing of the defense and energy industries (SCOPE LA 2017, 7). The outsized burden versus benefit to Black residents of the Bayview is evident from the conditions allowing Teruya to make his valuable paper totems at Recology, a place that is an otherwise harmful body for those who reside there much longer than the visiting artist.

Looking alongside and beyond Teruya's sculptures for creative oppositions to slow violence in the Bayview, one finds a multitude of Black civil rights and environmental justice activists and organizations who have worked in the area for decades. Bayview Hunters Point Mothers and Fathers Committee, Greenaction for Environmental Health and Justice, and the United Council of Human Services have long advocated for brownfield cleanup at the Hunters Point Naval Shipyards Superfund site, and have won campaigns including the closure of the PG&E Hunters Point power plant (Kelly and Harrison 2018). These organizations were the first to link toxic contamination, gentrification, climate change, racism, and real estate speculation as intersecting settler colonial forces which have produced the district as a wasteland; they were the first to document the lasting health impacts on Bayview residents made precarious by the city's vastly restructured economy and geography. The disappearance of Blackness from the Bayview and from the larger ecology of the city is not simply discursive: as of 2017, the entire Black population of San Francisco is estimated at 5%, while the Bayview's Black community hovers at 12% with its population now primarily Asian (47%) and Latinx (28%) (U.S. Census Bureau 2012 and 2017). Teruya's paper sculptures, ultimately, are *memento mori* for displaced peoples and for residents wastelanded in place, and gesture towards both liveliness and loss; where many of the Bay Area's Black residents have been forcibly moved— or remaindered— is taken up by another Recology artist-in-residence, Michael Arcega, as part of his exhibition *Recologica: A Nacireman Excavation.*

***Pri-Sohn Map*: Michael Arcega's Carceral Cartography**

Figure 3: Michael Arcega, partial installation view from *Recologica: A Nacireman Excavation*. 2015. San Francisco: Recology Artist-in-Residence Studio.

While Weston Teruya's delicate paper sculptures map the trajectories of multiple communities "displaced in place" on the scale of the city, Michael Arcega's *Pri-Sohn Map* jumps scales to plot California's state-wide carceral geographies (Nixon 2011, 18). During his 2015 tenure at Recology, Arcega salvaged milk jugs and other objects from California's second-oldest prison, Folsom State Prison (FSP); deemed by the prison as historically insignificant during its latest expansion campaign, these objects were discarded at the dump, where they were fortuitously found by Arcega. Inspired by these remains, Arcega created *Pri-Sohn Map* in the style of an indigenous Pacific Islander stick map; rather than mark discrete islands in the sea, however, each shell signifies a California state prison as a site where surplus populations are managed by the state. Installed adjacently to this stick map were other castoffs made by prisoners working on factory lines within Folsom State— messages in bottles (or, in this case, milk jugs) evidencing the unwaged or low wage labor of incarcerated people, labor that the state does not recognize as such. In what follows, I use *Pri-Sohn Map* functionally to track the continuum of dispossession and resettlement-through-incarceration for people of color in the 20th and 21st centuries; I focus on the ways Folsom State Prison in particular has profited from the economic and political respatialization of Bay Area cities at the expense of African Americans and other wastelanded communities.

Geographer Ruth Gilmore, among others, has argued that the State of California operationalized a "prison fix" in order to use "idle" or surplus land beginning in the 1970s, to invest capital via public debt, and to take surplus populations (more than 160,000 low-wage and primarily non-white workers) off the streets through incarceration-as-incapacitation (Gilmore 2007, 88). The growth of the state's prison industrial complex continued apace as urban areas throughout California—such as Bayview Hunters Point— rapidly deindustrialized in the decades after World War II (Davis and Shaylor 2001;

Rios 2006). While US prisons were not created simply to capture cheap labor or Black populations (Gilmore 2007, 21), industrial production within the California prison system remains consistent: since the 1930s, all California state license plates have been manufactured at Folsom State Prison, now under the auspices of the California Prison Industry Authority (CALPIA). It also remains lucrative: CALPIA products— which include over eighteen hundred goods and services such as office furniture, packaged food products, state flags, and highway signs made throughout the state— recorded $233.5 million in revenue with gross profits of $59.9 million in fiscal year 2016-2017 (Heiner 2015, 18-20; CALPIA 2018, 15). Even as they have been incapacitated by the judicial system, incarcerated men and women that are conscripted into work are disproportionately exposed to industrial and environmental toxicities, with little to no environmental protections afforded them.[5]

Toxic exposure is a primary form of slow violence applied at Folsom State Prison, where incarcerated individuals are seen as less valuable than other humans and non-human beings in the regional ecology. In a 2012 Environmental Impact assessment conducted for the prison's proposed infill expansion, pages upon pages of the EIR are devoted to the construction's potential impact on endangered and indigenous flora and fauna in the Sacramento Valley (CDCR 2013, 3.2.1-29). Meanwhile, the toxic burden that would be placed onto FSP inmates and staff is obfuscated: even as the report documents excessive "criteria air pollutants" in the Sacramento Valley more broadly and at the prison specifically, its long-term impact on prisoners' health is omitted in the report's narratives and charts (CDCR 2013, Table 3.1-2). Prisoners are written of, instead, as a potential *cause* of new environmental damage: "inmate population growth is not, in itself, a physical environmental effect, although it has implications related to increased demand for public utilities such as water and wastewater" (CDCR 2013, 3.4-4). This gross devaluation of life and health of those warehoused in prisons wreaks its havoc on these wastelanded people and places; the incarcerated are casualties of the domestic War on Drugs, War on Poverty, War on Terror, and toxic exposure that are not counted in what Rob Nixon refers to as the "ecologies of the aftermath" (2011, 200). As he writes: "the calculus of any conflict need to at least acknowledge such environmental casualties, even if they cannot be quantified. Such casualties may suffer slow, invisible deaths that don't fit the news cycle at CNN or Fox, but they are war casualties nonetheless" (2011, 201).

5 Prisoners working for the computer recycling factory in Marianna, Florida's Federal Prison Camp, for example, were found by the DOJ to have been repeatedly exposed to toxic cadmium and lead without adequate protection or monitoring (Thompson 2012, 43). Such patterns have been documented elsewhere, as industrial firms contracting with US prisons are more able to sidestep environmental protections and health and safety workplace regulations.

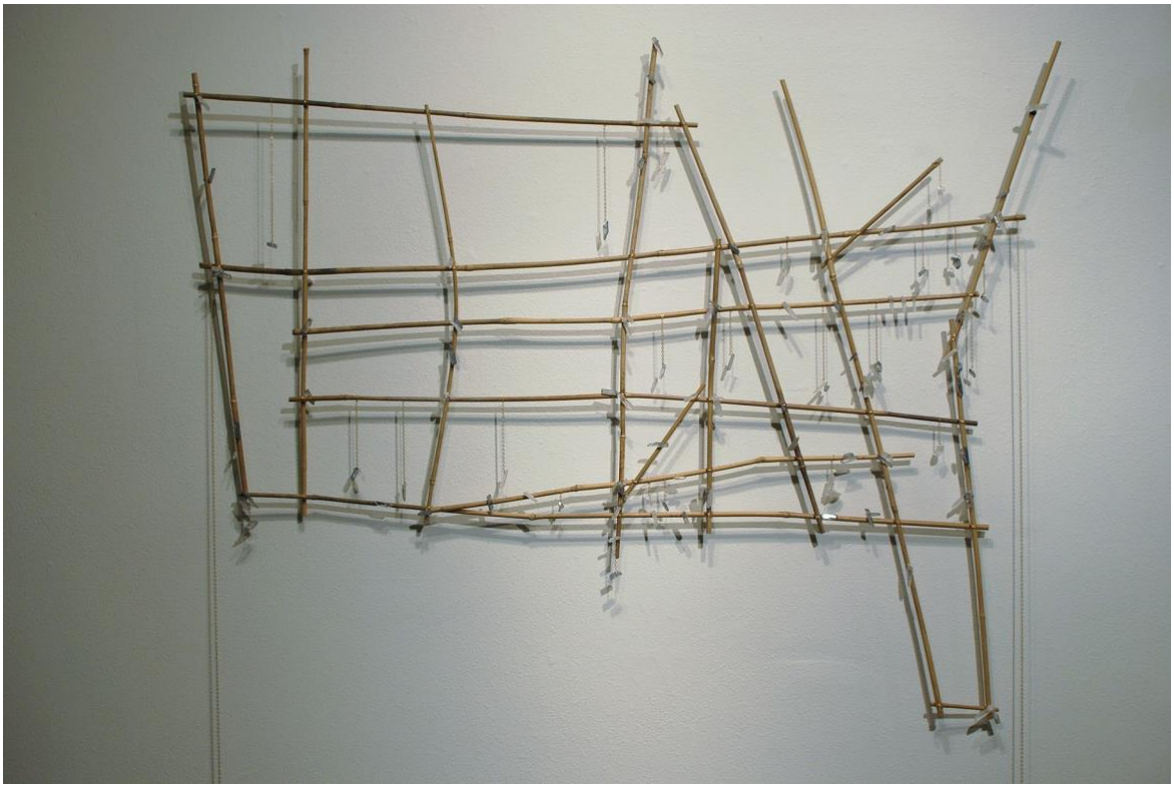

Figure 4: Michael Arcega, *Pri-Sohn Stick Chart (Map of Isolation Chambers)*. 2015, bamboo, metal, quartz crystals, 60" x 48" x 3." Oakland: Johansson Projects.

Dumped on seemingly-disparate prison islands, incarcerated people's presence is mapped in Arcega's *Pri-Sohn Map,* and their labor sedimented into the very commodities which served as the raw materials for this assemblage. *Pri-Sohn Map* is not only geographic, but ontological, mapping a chain of islands in what philosopher Sylvia Wynter would call the "ex-slave archipelago."[6] Wynter's ex-slave archipelago, as one part of a global "archipelago of poverty," demarcates the geographic, ontological, ideological, and socioeconomic boundaries between Man and the inhuman. The US prison system is "the analog form of a global archipelago, constituted by the Third- and Fourth-World peoples of the so-called 'underdeveloped' areas of the world" (Wynter 2003, 261); those who inhabit these archipelagoes are disproportionately Black and Latino, jobless, homeless, and 'underdeveloped'" (2003, 317). Appropriating indigenous Pacific Islander mapping technologies, *Pri-Sohn Map* connects the California state prison system to the larger Pacific Rim archipelago of poverty, whose inhabitants are exposed to the slow and spectacular violences of labor exploitation and environmental destruction. Jumping scale, the shell islands on this map could designate the maquilas of Tijuana or the export processing zones of the Philippines as much as they mark the prisons of California state. Places trapped within archipelagoes of poverty across the globe are the constitutive outside of modernity— and become the subject of Stephanie Syjuco's *Modern Ruins,* exhibited at Recology in 2014.

6 Sylvia Wynter argues that the "ex-slave archipelago" are places whose first slave labor form has been indispensable to the formulation of the modern world system in the post-1492 Caribbean and the Americas (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 39, 42).

Stephanie Syjuco's *Modern Ruins*

Figure 5: Stephanie Syjuco, partial installation view: showroom area, from *Modern Ruins (Popular Cannibals)*. 2014, double-sided installation using all scavenged materials. San Francisco: Recology Artist-in-Residence Studio.

Stephanie Syjuco's archetypal mid-century modern furniture, exhibited as *Modern Ruins,* are counterfeits made from salvaged woods, cardboard, and fabrics; they are also what Toni Morrison, reinterpreted through Avery Gordon, would call "furniture without memories."[7] Syjuco's constructions play with the western history of modernist art and design by approximating iconic designs which are coveted even in the Global South capitals whose exploited workers create the knock-off versions of said commodities. These pseudo-luxe couches, tables, bureaus and lamps are empty signifiers of progress and modernity, impressions that dissemble upon closer glance with their frayed edges and cracked woods. According to Syjuco, *Modern Ruins* "speak[s] to the shoddy materials and cheap labor used to produce affordable contemporary modern furniture, and like the remnants of a dying civilization, suggest societal and environmental collapse" (Recology 2013). Subjecting viewers to visual and linguistic puns, *Modern Ruins* uses otherwise "inert furniture" to dismantle the facade of a cohesive, "monumental social

[7] "Furniture without memories" is one in a list of where and why dreams die in Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye*, according to Avery Gordon's students in an anecdote opening her own text, *Ghostly Matters* (2008, 3-4). Gordon writes that "this turns out not to be a random list at all, but a way of conceptualizing the complicated workings of race, class, and gender, the names we give the ensemble of social relations that create inequalities, situated interpretive codes, particular kinds of subjects, and the possible and impossible themselves… It asks us to move analytically between that sad and sunken couch that sags in just that place where an unrememberable past and an unimaginable future force us to sit day after day and the conceptual abstractions because *everything of significance happens there among the inert furniture and the monumental social architecture* (Gordon 2008, 4, emphasis mine).

architecture" which overdetermines the chances for some lives to prosper while others are made disposable (Gordon 2008, 4).

As interdisciplinary scholar Sarita Echavez See writes of Syjuco's 2011 series *RAIDERS*, *Modern Ruins* similarly "invites us to consider the significance of the surface and the aesthetic politics of the flaw" (2017, 152). While the front-facing portion of *Modern Ruins* is imperfect yet visually brilliant in its construction, Syjuco invites viewers to consider modernity's darkness by revealing the installation's literal backside. Behind a wooden partition, the detritus or the excess materials unused in Syjuco's creation of faux Eames loungers and Noguchi tables coalesce into a messy pile. Unlike the vibrant furniture in the front of the studio, the backroom objects—paint canisters and scrap materials— have been painted a monochromatic matte gray. Their proximity to the "real art objects" is a threatening one, with these precarious piles threatening to topple over or spill through the hastily built partition wall at any moment. This uncomfortable proximity between waste and value mimics the spatial relations of global megacities such as Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, and the artist's birthplace of Manila, where slums abut walls concealing multimillion-dollar mansions; it is a growing epidemic in San Francisco and Oakland, the only two US cities named in a 2018 report by the United Nations Special Rapporteur Leilani Farha on global informal settlements as a human rights violation (United Nations 2018, 12). This accumulation of excess and discards in Syjuco's piece is synecdoche for the most prevalent form of slow violence in San Francisco since the 1960s: the City's displacement of poor people and people of color, and their subsequent dumping into wastelanded sites like the informal settlement or the prison, in order to make room for new real estate developments and the expansion of tech industries.

Figure 6: Stephanie Syjuco, partial installation view: neutralized objects, from *Modern Ruins (Popular Cannibals)*. 2014, double-sided installation using all scavenged materials. San Francisco: Recology Artist-in-Residence Studio.

Ultimately, *Modern Ruins* intentionally fails at verisimilitude, refusing to be assimilated as banal, beautiful staging for upper class domestic interiors. Syjuco's assemblages, instead, mimic the strategies of reappropriation performed by the displaced, the incarcerated, and other disposable communities in the region and across the globe. Art historian Kellie Jones writes of the power of assemblage as practiced by Black artists in mid-twentieth century Los Angeles: "The adoption of found and discarded materials could also be translated as the embrace of the outcasts who inhabited society's margins… The found, the random, the accidental, the ruined became key partners in authorship" (Jones 2017, 70). Inherent to assemblage is "the concept of transformation, the alchemy of taking a thing discarded and changing it into a thing of (re)use" (Jones 2011, 18). Akin to yet not duplicative with those assemblages, Syjuco's cardboard castoffs illuminate state redevelopment agencies' and private developers' modernization campaigns as intentionally failed projects that leave messy trails. Her project repurposes cardboard and commercial packaging to "make do" in ways both practical and visually arresting: these objects are more celebrated yet less perfected than those crafted by unhoused and displaced peoples in the Global South and, increasingly, in the Global North. This, perhaps, is the greatest strength— and most challenging element— of not only *Modern Ruins*, but of the Recology AIR program as a whole: its elevation of the artist-as-salvager who wages a social critique of slow violence while being located within an institutional and built structure responsible for such violence.

Conclusion: The Political Work of Salvage

Re-viewing Stephanie Syjuco's *Modern Ruins*, together with Weston Teruya's fragile yet resilient paper sculptures and Michael Arcega's *Pri-Sohn Map*, this article salvages disparate, multiscalar histories and geographies of the San Francisco Bay Area by identifying places and times since the early 1900s where Black, brown, and poor communities in the San Francisco Bay Area have been disposed to wastelands. I followed the material and metaphorical routes generated by these three Asian/American artists during their time in the Recology AIR program, and in doing so, uncovered "landscapes permeated by slow violence, landscapes of temporal overspill that elude rhetorical cleanup operations with their sanitary beginnings and endings" (Nixon 2011, 8). The places where Black, Indigenous, and brown communities have been disproportionately impacted by environmental racism are local, regional, national, and global; across scales, practices of displacement, incarceration, toxic dumping, labor exploitation and modernization campaigns continue to produce racialized peoples and landscapes as pollutable and disposable. While these forms of environmental injustice and racialized violence can be, and are often, missed for their *longue durée* and dispersed effects, the assemblages of Asian/American artists Teruya, Arcega, and Syjuco remain as material witnesses. This is the political and aesthetic work of salvage as an analytic and creative practice that labors to transvalue disposable lives and landscapes into sites of worth, no longer waste.

Permissions

Image permissions granted by Michael Arcega, Stephanie Syjuco, and Weston Teruya.

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