metropolitics

The Slow Violence of Planned Obsolescence

Elise Mason

Series: Urban Wastes, Present and Future

Elise Mason critiques planned obsolescence as a form of slow violence. She argues for an ethic of care, rooted in Black feminist thinking and writing, to transform waste and our relationship to it.

> <quote>"We are all entangled. And the fact that entanglement is a slow death doesn't make it any better; it in fact makes it more gruesome. And I mourn the parts of you that lost feeling today" (Gumbs 2020, pp. 103–104).</quote>

I have spent my adult life amid the oldest cities of colonized North America—Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Providence, Washington, DC—and these places have shaped my identity and comforted my nomadic soul. But, with each move from city to city, I was confronted with the stuff I had collected that I could not carry to my next home. These were things my loved ones and I had coveted, labored for, and spent our well-deserved income on. Only to end up in a bin, dumped into a big green truck, taken to some unseen place. To sit, and wait, and be buried by time and more stuff.

I am unsettled by my entanglement with consumption, but what unsettles me most is the invisibility of our collective entanglement, across US cities and globally. I write as a biologist, a student of environmental policy and management, a Black woman from the Northeast United States, raised in a city along the fertile banks of the Connecticut River, on the stolen traditional homelands of the Indigenous Algonkian people known as "Agawam." From this perspective, I confront *planned obsolescence*—the economic strategy of designing consumer goods with limited useful lives to encourage frequent replacement (Rivera and Lallmahomed 2016, p. 119)—as a form of slow violence (Nixon 2013) against "the consumer" across urban landscapes. Planned obsolescence threatens urban presents and futures by maintaining a power structure that profits from the extraction of our land, labor, and humanity. I argue for a societal transformation that reconstructs individual and collective behaviors and ways of knowing waste enabled by Black feminist care ethics and practices (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011).

What is planned obsolescence?

The practice of planned obsolescence[1] has matured over decades into a central feature of modern manufacturing. American real-estate broker Bernard London published the pamphlet *Ending the Great Depression through Planned Obsolescence*[2] in 1932, introducing the strategy and framing it as a brightly lit path out of dark economic times. By that time, one in four Americans were

[1] See: www.iheart.com/podcast/105-stuff-you-should-know-26940277/episode/planned-obsolescence-engine-of-the-consumer-46411733.

[2] Available online at the following URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/27/London_%281932%29_Ending_the_depression_through_planned_obsolescence.pdf.

unemployed,[3] while production had outpaced buying power, and folks were opting to (or were required to) make do with what they had rather than purchasing newly manufactured products. To stimulate replacement buying and the predictable purchasing patterns consumer capitalism[4] requires to thrive, London proposed "the Government assign a lease of life to shoes and homes and machines, to all products of manufacture… After the allotted time had expired, these things would be legally 'dead' and would be controlled by the duly appointed governmental agency and destroyed if there is widespread unemployment" (London 1932, p. 3).

The fundamental flaw in London's plan was the blindness to the environmental and social consequences of producing "in unlimited quantities" (1932, p. 1). London's waste management plan for "obsolete" commodities? "To be thrown into a junk pile" (p. 6). And this is exactly what we do. American consumers dispose of 416,000 cell phones per day,[5] and that e-waste is shipped to sacrifice zones in cities and rural communities in the Global South (Davis and Garb 2015). Planned obsolescence ensures that consumer goods are essentially waste before they hit the shelves; but these "terms of existence" are actively hidden from consumers. Waste management campaigns instruct individuals to "reduce, reuse, recycle," while economic policy continues to incentivize production. These practices remove the scale and violence of consumption from local perception, but they do not eliminate waste already produced nor unburden city-dwelling bodies from the plague of pollution. In just under a century, planned obsolescence has inundated the globe with constant waves of waste to which most urban American communities are effectively blind.

Planned obsolescence is slow violence

Rob Nixon defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2013, p. 2). Planned obsolescence meets this definition uncannily. Its violence, perpetrated against the consumer on which it depends, is as mundane as it is ubiquitous.

Gradual and out of sight

A critical analysis of the management of wasted stuff within urban American environments reveals a unique network of colonial, Western, Christian, and capitalist ideologies of ownership, production, individualism, and growth. These ideologies permeate everyday interactions with the land and each other, reinforcing a powerful political infrastructure that has constructed "invented (national) traditions" (Kallis *et al.* 2018, p. 294) of buying and wasting (think Black Friday/Christmas shopping, back-to-school shopping, Labor Day sales, tax-free holidays, etc.).

Urban pollution in US cities is enabled by a weak waste-recycling regime that deploys technologies such as curbside trash collection, landfills, and waste incinerators, solving the aesthetic problems of waste by making it invisible (Pollans 2017, p. 3). In the making of "junk," aka consumer goods, waste producers assume unbarred access to land, both to extract materials for production and to dispose. Assumed access to Indigenous "land" is a fundamental characteristic of settler colonialism (Liboiron 2021)—one that muddies the waters, so you don't see the settler stealing land and selling it back to everyone as waste.[6] The invisibility of slow violence is a major

[3] See: www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/great-depression-and-world-war-ii-1929-1945/americans-react-to-great-depression.

[4] See: www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-is-consumer-capitalism.html.

[5] See: www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2018/12/11/right-to-repair-nathan-proctor.

[6] As Hernandez has observed: "Settler colonialism is the systems that continue to grant settlers the power to lead political regimes, government institutions, and natural resource allocation over the Indigenous peoples who used to coexist with the lands that are now colonized" (Hernandez 2022, p. 3). Within these systems, perpetual allocation of life-giving natural resources toward producing "junk" is harmful toward current and future communities and the urban

obstacle to our collective ability to mobilize against the environmental injustice of consumption. However, Thom Davies reminds us that this is not invisible to everyone equally, but is tangible to "communities who inhabit toxic spaces" (2022).

Delayed across time and space

Western religious teachings insinuate that the Earth exists primarily to serve human needs, which creates a rationale for the constant extraction required to satisfy planned obsolescence. Additionally, moral messages emphasizing our individual responsibility for urban pollution grew out of the mainstream US environmental movement of the 1970s (Dunaway 2015). Consumption's impacts became recognizable, the cause less so. This intentional emphasis on individual consumers minimizes the obligation of waste producers to engage morally with the land and its inhabitants while perpetuating pollution at unfathomable temporal and spatial scales (Nixon 2013).

Planned obsolescence's legacy of waste radiates through cities across not only the nation, but the globe. Most waste that already exists cannot be eliminated, only relocated. Due to the current waste-management regime, there is a vast difference in the time spent in proximity to waste and the amount of time solid waste material may persist through geological time (Gray-Cosgrove, Liboiron and Lepawsky 2015, p. 2). The scale of waste production is "at once too vast and too mundane" (Jones 2019, p. 81) to be solved solely through individual actions, or even to be communicated with dominant contemporary environmental rhetoric targeted at the individual consumer.

Not viewed as violence at all

The invisibility of the slow violence of planned obsolescence is a major obstacle to our collective ability to address the scale of the problem. However, Thom Davies reminds us that the slow violence of pollution is not invisible to everyone; it is tangible to the "communities who inhabit toxic spaces" (2022). But planned obsolescence's strategy maintains demand for production by "instilling in the buyer the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary," actively separating the consuming from its consequences, both temporally and spatially. This conditioning of the "willing" consumer who is individually responsible for disposing of the remnants of our consumption—that's planned obsolescence's violence, too. The profound desire for novelty and "improved performance" is constructed by the current capitalist economic growth paradigm and we are the willing participants, validated as cooperative members of society. This manipulated sense of obligation to consumerism is socialized in cities through audio and visual cues and media messaging, such as the Keep America Beautiful campaigns (Dunaway 2015). The reality is that you and I as "consumers" are not equipped with the resources to keep ourselves protected from the threat and harm of planned obsolescence to our individual and collective health and safety, so we buy into it, literally.

Transforming waste through an ethic of perpetual care

Considering how planned obsolescence has influenced our collective ways of knowing and perceiving waste, "slow scholarship"[7] and slow witnessing are vital to making its toxicity sensible in urban space (Davies 2022, p. 11–12). Planned obsolescence gradually and constantly extracts from our individual capacities to practice care—toward things, each other, and our environment. As we consume, we have a responsibility to be vigilant to notions of waste and obsolescence and challenge disposability wherever possible, maintaining a commitment to neglected things. I look to

spaces we all occupy "as settlers, unwelcomed, or welcomed guests on colonized lands" (*ibid.*, p. 3).

[7] See: https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1058.

Black feminist theory and care ethics for strategies to foster transformed relationships with waste and urban space.

"[We] must take care of things in order to remain responsible for their becomings" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011, p. 90). Caring involves actions of *doing* and *intervening* to build knowledge of and responsibility to "assembled things" as land transformed. It is the land that sustains us, not consumerism. Waste and consumption can and must be re-evaluated through a lens of care, from seeing connections between waste and planned obsolescence, to feeling and sensing a deeper responsibility for assembled things at ever-increasing scales. Care is necessary. Care work and care economies are the actions and networks by which life is sustained, and the reality is that "racialised difference affects care practices and therefore care ethics" (Raghuram 2018, p. 1). Black feminist thinking and writing demonstrates ways of conceptualizing and practicing care as action. Breya Johnson calls on us to use Black feminist writings to find ways to reorder the self and to move beyond selfhood. I echo her call here in re-evaluating our roles and power as a collective of more than just consumers. We can interrupt cycles of planned obsolescence with strong, collective political power that reorders our relationships with land, "junk," and each other.

Build knowledge through witness. Care enough to observe.

Bibliography

Clark, Josh and Bryant, Charles. 2019. "Planned Obsolescence: Engine of the Consumer Economy", *Stuff You Should Know* [podcast], 25 June. Accessed 19 September 2022, URL: www.iheart.com/podcast/105-stuff-you-should-know-26940277/episode/planned-obsolescence-engine-of-the-consumer-46411733.

Davies, Thom. 2022. "Slow violence and toxic geographies: 'out of sight' to whom?", *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 409–427; first published online on 10 April 2019. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654419841063.

Davis, John-Michael and Garb, Yaakov. 2015. "A model for partnering with the informal e-waste industry: rationale, principles and a case study", *Resources, Conservation and Recycling*, vol. 105, part A, pp. 73–83. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2015.08.001.

Dunaway, Finis. 2015. *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gray-Cosgrove, Carmella; Liboiron, Max; and Lepawsky, Josh. 2015. "The Challenges of Temporality to Depollution and Remediation", *Surveys and Perspectives Integrating Environment and Society*, vol. 8, no. 1 (November), pp. 1–10.

Gumbs, Alexis P. 2020. *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, Oakland: AK Press.

Hernandez, Jessica. 2022. *Fresh Banana Leaves: Healing Indigenous Landscapes Through Indigenous Science*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.

Jones, Madison. 2019. "(Re)placing the rhetoric of scale. Ecoliteracy, networked writing, and MEmorial mapping", in S. I. Dobrin and S. Morey (eds.), *Mediating Nature: The Role of Technology in Ecological Literacy*, pp. 79–95. London: Routledge. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429399121.

Liboiron, Max. 2021. *Pollution Is Colonialism*? Durham: Duke University Press.

Library of Congress. [n.d.]. "Americans React to the Great Depression", *Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress > US History Primary Source Timeline > Great Depression and World War II, 1929–1945* [en ligne]. Accessed 19 September 2022, URL: www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/great-depression-and-world-war-ii-1929-1945/americans-react-to-great-depression.

London, Bernard. 1932. Ending the Depression Through Planned Obsolescence. Available online at Wikimedia Commons, URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/27/London_%281932%29_Ending_the_depression_through_planned_obsolescence.pdf.

Nixon, Rob. 2013. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Pollans, Lily. 2017. "Trapped in trash: 'modes of governing' and barriers to transitioning to sustainable waste management", *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 49, no. 10: pp. 2300–2323. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0308518X17719461.

Puig de la Bellacasa, Maria. 2011. "Matters of Care in Technoscience: Assembling Neglected Things", *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 85–106. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312710380301.

Rivera, Julio L. and Lallmahomed, Amrine. 2016. "Environmental implications of planned obsolescence and product lifetime: a literature review", *International Journal of Sustainable Engineering*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 119–129. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/19397038.2015.1099757.

Zimring, Carl. 2011. "The Complex Environmental Legacy of the Automobile Shredder", *Technology and Culture*, vol. 52, no. 3, pp. 523–547.

Elise Mason (she/her) is a graduate of the University of Rhode Island's College the of Environment and Life Sciences (CELS) with a master's degree in environmental science and management and a graduate certificate in community planning. She currently works as community engagement manager with the Transportation for Massachusetts coalition, focused on fighting transportation and environmental injustice across the state. She facilitated a panel session at the 2021 Inclusive SciComm Symposium titled "Communicating hidden histories to increase understanding of colonialism and racism in science: storytelling through metaphors, analogies, and media."

Her LinkedIn page: www.linkedin.com/in/elise-mason-9465ba126.

To cite this article:

Elise Mason, "The Slow Violence of Planned Obsolescence", *Metropolitics*, 20 September 2022. URL: https://metropolitics.org/The-Slow-Violence-of-Planned-Obsolescence.html.