

THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF VALUE



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Drawing on several years of ethnographic research of informal waste economies as well as life histories of working-class women of rural origin in Indian cities, my talk considers how waste pickers and migrant women, in different ways and at different scales, engage in effaced forms of 'infrastructural labor' that are vital for producing capital's material conditions of production – personal, communal, and external. My talk further considers the intimate entanglements of violence and value-making in an urban economy marked by informal employment, uncertainty, and attrition. The exigencies of survival and the pulls of aspiration in present times require families to be increasingly mobile and inventive in locating income streams. Households are stretched in space as social reproduction becomes multi-sited, translocal. Women now not only subsidize capital through the reproduction of labor power, they must also negotiate an intensification in the (physical and psychological) labor of care and repair as the prospect of 'wageless life' becomes a permanent threat for family members. While this moral economy of care is commonly sustained by patriarchal and caste violence, it may – unexpectedly – create wiggle room for women to disorient normative hierarchies, and even become agents of petty accumulation. There is a larger lesson here for our age of informality: how one builds a life when perched between the fatigue of reproduction and the renewing desire to be more.

