

Vague Terrains and Refusées: Feminist Waste Ecologies in Mina Loy's Work

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the connection between women and waste in Mina Loy's modernist oeuvre. It specifically reconsiders her feminist project through the metaphorical and material presence of refuse in her work. Drawing on texts such as the "Feminist Manifesto" and *The Child and the Parent*, it first examines how Loy conceptualizes women as 'dumping grounds' for societal expectations and as 'wastelands' of self-obscurity, all of which culminates in her calls for demolition as a radical intervention in gendered social structures. Against this background, the article then analyzes Loy's late waste assemblages *Snow Crop* and *Househunting* as well as the poems "Hot Cross Bum" and "Film-Face" as a critique of women's devaluation through disproportionate waste dumping in a trash-producing Capitalocene. The article, alongside the deconstruction of value hierarchies disregarding waste, women, and the environment, also takes into view the assemblage *Prospector I* that explores Loy's role as a female artist-ragpicker whose distinctly feminist waste aesthetic articulates a sharp ecofeminist critique.

KEYWORDS: Loy; feminism; ecofeminism; women; waste; consumerism; Capitalocene

Introduction

"I'm a litterbug," exclaims Mina Loy in view of her mid-twentieth-century artworks fashioned from collected waste (qtd. in Burke 429). The remark is deliberately ironic because, unlike a litterbug who disperses trash, Loy's oeuvre gathers refuse—both material and conceptual. Waste surfaces across her writing, from her feminist manifesto's critique of established gender norms as a "rubbish heap of tradition" ("Feminist Manifesto" 153) to the literal refuse employed in her late trash assemblages depicting life in spoiled U.S. metropolises. This paper argues that Loy's figurative references to waste in her earlier feminist writing are intricately connected to her later engagement with material refuse. Tracing waste as both trope and physical phenomenon across her writing and visual art, it reconsiders Loy's oeuvre as an anticipation of the ecofeminist critique of capitalist consumer culture disproportionately burdening women.

While continuously gathering waste in her oeuvre, Loy stays true to her self-description as a litterbug when dispersing the motif across her multifaceted practice. As a cosmopolitan British American modernist who was never bound to a single form of aesthetic expression, waste recurs throughout her poetry, fiction, essays, and assemblage art. It forms part of her “aesthetic itineraries” (Bozhkova, *Between Worlds* 8) across Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, also traversing boundaries between the tangible and figurative dimensions of waste. In doing so, Loy’s oeuvre prefigures what waste studies would later come to establish: that waste, as “matter out of place” (Douglas 2), is never self-evident but always socially constructed. Because the logic of devaluation is social rather than material, it can attach itself to people and ideas as readily as to physical objects, rendering waste a metaphorical as well as a material phenomenon (Hawkins vii-viii; Morrison 8). Reading Loy’s broad engagement with waste through this lens makes her early figurative linking of waste and women and her later engagement with actual waste legible as a structural feminist critique that predates ecofeminist arguments while operating in a distinctly modernist context.

Loy’s ecofeminist anticipations build on the fundamental notion that waste is matter that has lost its value (Brantlinger and Higgins 460). The rise of planned obsolescence in Western, mid-twentieth-century consumer economies considerably expanded the range of such objects considered worthless (Strasser 17–20). Much of the production surplus entered and continuously enters natural environments, accelerating environmental destruction and widening the metabolic rift, a separation of humanity from nature through the shift of waste as disregarded ‘matter out of place’ into ‘places of no matter’ (Foster 370). This leads Jason W. Moore to relabel the era of massive human interference in Earth’s natural systems “Capitalocene” (77), an age in which not humans most broadly, but especially humans’ capitalist aspirations, shape environmental conditions. Ecofeminism finds that, within Moore’s capitalocenic framework, capitalist exploitation exceeds that of the Earth, eventually affecting women as similarly disregarded objects (Mies 71). Especially the dynamics of waste disposal weigh most heavily on marginalized groups, with women bearing a particularly disproportionate burden (UN-Habitat “Women in Waste”). Against this backdrop of an uneven impact, material and figurative registers of waste merge. Discarded matter, disposal

sites, and the individuals concerned with its disposal are treated as equally negligible. In her work, Loy moves fluidly across this semantic range, treating trash not only as accumulating physical residue that she witnessed in mid-century New York, but also as a conceptual figure describing her experienced societal disregard of women, which makes broader patterns of continued sociocultural devaluation visible.

Loy's writing and artistic negotiation of the experienced devaluation of women's bodies, often through the employment of waste tropes, pave the way for a new feminist reading of her late trash assemblages. Her much-discussed feminism extends beyond the works in which it most explicitly surfaces, underscoring the centrality of feminism to her oeuvre as a whole. Loy herself articulates this preoccupation, as does her critical reception, which identifies feminism as a defining characteristic of both her person and her artistic practice. In a letter sent to her editor, Carl Van Vechten, during her Florence residency in the 1910s, Loy accordingly confessed: "What I feel now are feminine politics" (qtd. in Burke 187). The *New York Evening Sun* yet again profiled her as the quintessential "modern woman" (qtd. Burke 224). Loy's feminist vision is highly intricate, while deeply rooted in a perception of women as material commodities. Natalia Lusty fittingly observes that Loy's 1914 "Feminist Manifesto," the densest expression of her convoluted feminism, fuses "materialist philosophy, New Woman ideology, radical sexual politics and quasi-eugenic moralism" (256). As Loy's complex feminism unfolds, both in her manifesto and across her artistic practice, she consistently situates women within the logic of a patriarchal consumer society, figuring them as material commodities and, by extension, disposal sites of societal expectations. Her repeated turn to the semantic field of waste in negotiating this disregard and exploitation—a connection ecofeminists later theorize explicitly—allows for linking her figuration of women as commodified, disregarded bodies to her artistic engagement with actual physical waste. This extends Loy's feminism not only across her entire oeuvre but also into the ecofeminist realm which, in all likelihood unconsciously, it anticipates.

In the following, I argue that Loy's frequent figurative references to waste in her feminist writing provide a crucial interpretive framework for understanding her later engagement

with material refuse. Her focus on actual trash in the texts and visual productions of her late career can conclusively be read as a feminist critique of the disproportionate effects of consumer culture's waste production on women in the Capitalocene. Likewise, situating Loy's trash-based art within the context of her feminism illuminates a distinctive feminist aesthetic of waste in her work. To this end, I first turn to Loy's "Feminist Manifesto" and her prose text *The Child and the Parent* to explore Loy's figurative conceptualization of women as 'dumping grounds' of societal expectations, 'wastelands' of self-obscurity, and demolition sites for an aspired new self-definition. Second, I examine Loy's waste assemblages, *Snow Crop* and *Bums Praying*, in dialogue with her late poem "Hot Cross Bum," to show how they reveal the sociocultural construction of waste and the connected capitalist devaluation of marginalized groups. I then consider Loy's waste assemblage *Househunting* and her poem "Film-Face" as a translation of the discussion of women as dumping grounds into the material realities of their degradation within capitalist waste economies. Finally, I read the assemblage *Prospector I* as an embodiment of Loy's feminist aesthetic practice and as a site for conceptual reflection on capitalist societies' devaluation of women.

Vague Terrains: Mina Loy's Feminist Politics of Waste

In her early works of the 1910s, Loy employed waste exclusively in a figurative sense. Her metaphorical engagement with waste unfolds in the context of her devotion to the feminist cause, likely shaped by her experience within the misogynistic Futurist milieu of Florence. Her borrowings from the semantic field of waste are indebted to Loy's generally vivid expressions but they also form a crucial register through which she articulates her feminist ideas in both fictional and non-fictional writing. Her figurative engagement with waste then provides an interpretive framework for her later works involving literal refuse, which can likewise be read as advancing feminist arguments. In this context, Loy's feminist writings draw on waste in three formative ways: they critique using women as a 'dumping ground' for societal expectations; they suggest that as a result of social dumping, women emerge as 'wastelands' of vague self-understanding; and they envision the ideal space for women's self-realization as a 'waste-land,' or demolition site.

Loy's notion of women as dumping grounds of societal expectations first appears in her 1914 "Feminist Manifesto," a text published posthumously in 1982 (Conover 216). In her "Feminist Manifesto," she depicts women's role in society as a threefold choice between "Parasitism, & Prostitution, or Negation" (154). By "Negation," she refers to first-wave feminist efforts focused on what she calls "economic legislation" (153), a means that she radically rejects, asking, "Professional & commercial careers are opening up for you, is that all you want?" (153). She characterizes first-wave initiatives as "Inadequate" (153) and as merely "scratching on the surface" (153), with gender equality through legal means being a "pathetic clap-trap war cry" (153) and a "glossing over Reality" (153). Within this framework, Loy finds, women cannot be remedied through legislation but remain trapped in commodified positions like marriage, labeled parasitism, or in prostitution (154). In doing so, Loy proves highly innovative, projecting concerns later articulated in second-wave material feminism, in which Christine Delphy similarly points to "the appropriation of [women's] labor within marriage" (71). In the "Feminist Manifesto," Loy critiques these entrenched structures, calling them a "rubbish heap of tradition" (153). In this context, her figurative reference to rubbish builds on waste, like traditional gender norms being marked by a distinct valuelessness (Viney 56). Through her register, Loy critiques established gender norms and articulates her refusal in terms of refuse, emphasizing the persistent devaluation of women configured as 'dumping grounds.'

The imposing of societal expectations on women as if they were dumps is also evident in Loy's autobiographically inspired prose fragment *The Child and the Parent*, first published in Karla Kelsey's *Lost Writings: Two Novels by Mina Loy*. This autofictional text, just like the "Feminist Manifesto," addresses women's role in capitalist patriarchies. In *The Child and the Parent*, Loy writes: "[The womb] . . . whose facade is woman, which being very often empty would seem to give out a strange impersonal invitation to all irrelevancies — — — or a *terrain vague* that invites the dumping of all irrelevancy—the detritus of logic—debris of Ethics" (66; emphasis in the original). In this quote, women are identified as the dumping grounds of societal expectations, figured as "irrelevancies" (66), "detritus of logic" (66), or "debris of Ethics" (66). Like the "Feminist Manifesto," *The Child and the Parent* denounces

the external forces imposed on the commodified female body. The narrative underscores a physical dimension of women's economic entrapment by identifying the womb, especially the empty womb, as the feature through which women are assessed.¹ However, in her manifesto, Loy does not reject motherhood per se but asserts that "Every woman has a right to maternity" ("Feminist Manifesto" 155). If not forced upon women, using their womb as a dumping space, chosen motherhood represents for Loy an empowering "gesture of bodily control" (Walter 668) and a means of "self-creative fulfilment" (Burke 179). Elsewhere, Loy undermines this by denying women freedom from reproduction, pointing out an alleged "race-responsibility . . . in producing children in adequate proportion to the unfit or degenerate members of [their] sex" ("Feminist Manifesto" 155). In doing so, Loy remains within the prominent social Darwinist rhetoric of her time and the imaginative horizons of many early white bourgeois feminists. She advocates women's liberation while being fixated on the patriarchal commodification of the female body, which she reproduces in her eugenic visions. In an attempt to grant women power over their bodies, Loy, with an exclusive focus on white bourgeois women, advances the devaluation of working-class women and women of color, whom she deems "unfit or degenerate" ("Feminist Manifesto" 155). She intervenes in the bodily autonomy of women she considers fit, while ascribing working-class women and women of color the very 'waste' position she seeks to dismantle. Her manifesto's call for women's liberation from bodily exploitation is thus effectively reserved for white, Western, bourgeois women, while other women are rendered as sites of dumping and disposal through internalized patriarchal consumer logic. Ironically, this internalization makes Loy's call for women's liberation, if extended to all women, all the more urgent.

Loy's *The Child and the Parent* expands the initial link between waste metaphors and selected women's bodies to the devaluing imposition of societal expectations that significantly shape their self-consciousness. Loy's prose fragment continues to toy with figurative notions of waste, repeatedly speaking of women as a "*terrain vague*" (66–69). In

¹ Although Loy elsewhere views gender as shaped by societal norms, here she advances an essentialist notion of the female gender defined by reproductive anatomy. This framing excludes transgender women and cisgender women without wombs, while paradoxically including individuals with wombs who do not identify as women.

doing so, she points to societal dumping but also elaborates on women's consequential self-consciousness, stating:

In a sufficient mist this *terrain vague* with all its litter may even become confused with those cruelly geometrical acres of crosses that spring up in the burial grounds of interrupted warriors; for it is nothing but the common plot whereon those women lie; shrouded in the teeming silence of their history. Of an eroticism seldom discharged, an idea that is seldom defined, an outreaching seldom taking hold . . . (69; emphasis in the original).

Here, women's self-consciousness is depicted as vague or misty, which is directly linked to the process of being littered by societal expectations. Loy highlights a lack of psychological and intellectual self-understanding, evident in a historical "teeming silence" (69). She also bemoans a lack of sexual self-understanding expressed in the narrator's observation that women's "eroticism [is] seldom discharged" (69). *The Child and the Parent* thus points to the ironic outcome of societal dumping rendering women externally 'littered' yet internally empty. Loy underscores this insight through her use of the French term *terrain vague*, translating to 'vague terrain' or 'wasteland.' As a homophone of 'waste-land,' denoting a 'trashed land' or a 'dumping ground,' Loy eventually reinforces the claim that a patriarchal commodification of women produces a condemnable psychological, intellectual, and sexual self-obscurity.

This framework of conceptualizing women as 'littered' yet empty illuminates why Loy's "Feminist Manifesto" advocates the elimination of virginity through the surgical destruction of the vaginal hymen at puberty (155).² Loy suggests women's sexual desires remain stunted when chastity is socially valorized, condemning sexual self-discovery, especially before or outside of marriage. By calling for a structural medical suspension of what is configured as virginity, she envisions a space in which women no longer face this bind. The *terrain vague* metaphor also explains why the "Feminist Manifesto" ends on a visionary, sex-positive

² Loy likely borrowed this idea from a case study by Havelock Ellis (Harris 19). However, the notion that virginity can be proven through the existence and condition of the hymen has been proven scientifically inaccurate (Mishori et al. 2).

notion, asserting that “there is nothing impure in sex—except in the mental attitude to it” (156). Here, Loy challenges the “fictitious value of woman as identified with her physical purity” (Pozorski 53). Loy ultimately urges women to free themselves from the stigma of sexual intercourse as, fitting the waste metaphor, a ‘dirty’ activity. Even if only homophonically, Loy’s *terrain vague*, or ‘wasteland’ metaphor, also repurposes waste to advance feminist calls for women’s sexual self-realization, which Loy frames as knowledge that is anything but impure.

Her signature linguistic intelligence eventually pushes the metaphorical alignment of women with waste even further. This becomes apparent when reading Loy’s *terrain vague* metaphor in dialogue with her manifesto’s call for “Absolute Demolition” (153). The pairing turns the notion of ‘wasteland’ into ‘waste-land,’ expressing Loy’s feminist vision of a complete renewal of gender roles. The image of a wrecking ball, one that does not merely skim the public façade of gender equality but forcefully dismantles all structures behind it, aligns with Jack Halberstam’s work on the logic of demolition as resistance to the “sinister strategy of repairing shiny surfaces” (“Broken Windows: The Art of Demolition”). Loy accordingly refuses pre-configured classifications, calling to demolish “[t]he division of women into . . . mistress[es], & . . . mother[s] [because] every well-balanced & developed woman knows that is not true” (“Feminist Manifesto” 154). In doing so, she innovatively suggests a new order in which women may “express[...] [themselves] through all [their] functions” (154; emphasis in the original). For Loy, demolition then appears as a means to the end of reaching a state in which women can “[l]eave off looking to men to find out what [they] are” (154). She alternatively urges women to emancipate themselves and develop an “introspective clear-sightedness” (156). Reading her *terrain vague* metaphor as a ‘waste-land’ of demolition then opens up possibilities for a woman’s “renovated consciousness,” as scholar Rowan Harris fittingly calls it (25). The witty, linguistic transformation of ‘wasteland’ into ‘waste-land,’ a space of rubble after demolition, ultimately arises as the culmination of Loy’s figurative engagement with waste. It once more highlights Loy’s awareness of women’s societal devaluation and her call for a radical transformation of that condition.

Refusées: Mina Loy's Feminist Ecologies of Material Waste

Loy's mediation of feminist concerns through waste tropes eventually allows for a new outlook on her late visual art and poetry that engages and addresses waste in its physical form. Her works of that kind stem from the 1940s to 60s, which Loy spent in financial constraint in New York City and Aspen, Colorado. In her trash assemblages, Loy experiments with waste in abstract pieces and artworks that portray street scenes for which she molded refuse into figurines affixed to painted backgrounds. Her late poems, which in her private notes she subsumed under the label "Compensations of Poverty," similarly depict urban street scenes in which odorous trash clashes with the glare of billboard-lit shopping malls (Conover 207). In the past, scholars have productively read Loy's focus on actual trash as aestheticized documentation and a general critique of mid-century U.S. consumer culture (Małkowska 225; Kinnahan 127). However, viewed against the backdrop of her earlier engagement with waste as a trope for explicitly feminist calls, Loy's waste-engaged art can be reconsidered as a more explicit ecofeminist critique of consumer culture's waste production disproportionately impacting women.

The key to reinterpreting Loy's late works as a feminist critique of waste economies lies in her preference for the visual medium of the waste assemblage, a form widely practiced in twentieth century art. With her three-dimensional trash constructions, Loy contributes to the long Western tradition of waste assemblages, prominently explored by Futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists (Vergine 51).³ Because the medium of the assemblage inherently destabilizes subject-object positions (Seitz 81–84), in her works Loy casually deconstructs established signification processes. For waste assemblages, this means that discarded matter sheds its original meaning and is reinterpreted within the artwork into which it is integrated. In doing so, waste assemblages challenge the hierarchy between art and refuse, assigning renewed value to waste as part of the newly created aesthetic object (Bianchi 35–36). By turning to this medium, Loy fundamentally interrogates the socially constructed nature of

³ Controversially, Loy was never included in the major exhibition of assemblage works, titled *The Art of Assemblage* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1961.

waste and the value imposed on those to whom it is relegated. Drawing on this principle, she playfully labels her trash works "Refusées," punning on 'refuse,' 'refugees,' and 'refusés' as in the French *Salon de Refusés* (Burke 420; Ades 165).

Building on the effect of the waste assemblage, an ecofeminist reading of Loy's later art initially rests on the sociocultural construction of waste, particularly waste understood as an object projected into an imagined strict division between culture and nature. This dynamic becomes especially apparent in Loy's rarely discussed abstract assemblages, such as *Snow Crop*, created during her final years in Aspen, Colorado. This work reveals how John Bellamy Foster's Marxist notion of the metabolic rift, a separation of humanity from nature through capitalist economies, operates as a constructed formation that contributes to the systematic disregard of women. In *Snow Crop*, Loy utilizes the lids of silver cans, one of which bears the titular print "Snow Crop," and glues or cramps them onto a white board. The title itself puns on the challenge of the signification at play. It alludes to the brand *Snow Crop Orange Juice*, the label on the central lid, while it also designates the trash as a natural plant, a crop that might grow under extreme wintry conditions. Framed by this pun, the assemblage renders the can lids as circular crops emerging from a snowfield viewed from above. As the assemblage destabilizes the configuration of the can parts as such, trash becomes one with nature, or more radically, becomes nature. *Snow Crop* thus visualizes both the constructed nature of waste and the construed devaluation of natural environments frequently relegated to dumping grounds.

Loy's figural assemblages of metropolitan street scenes eventually extend this logic. They show how the hierarchization of value that shapes the nature-culture-divide also structures social relations in consumer societies. Works like *Bums Praying*⁴ reveal not only how waste production disproportionately impacts certain groups of individuals but also how this constitutes a social devaluation, mirroring the hierarchized division of culture from nature. Many of Loy's assemblages and poems, like *Bums Praying* or "Hot Cross Bum," foreground

⁴ In this article, I adopt the term 'bum' in singular quotation marks and when referencing specific artworks. However, I would like to point out that 'bum' is a derogative term that must not be reproduced unnecessarily.

the disproportionate impact of waste on the homeless. Read against her feminist calls mediated through waste tropes, this runs parallel to Loy's artistic interest in women, similarly devalued within the socio-material hierarchies of consumer cultures. Loy's linking of women and homeless people, an identity not mutually exclusive but thought of separately in her oeuvre, is biographically motivated and visible in an untitled assemblage from the 1950s. In this work, a female figure and a homeless person are depicted as actively conversing. As they are both modeled from waste in Loy's signature fashion, they recall a scene from her life in the Bowery, where she encountered homelessness while scavenging for waste materials for her art in the streets. Yasna Bozhkova additionally observes that the typescript of Loy's poem "Hot Cross Bum," marked with Loy's own addresses, places the artist beside the Bowery homeless ("Icognito" 35). This highlights Loy's emphatic, close observation of homelessness, which allows for an investigation of the homeless and female figures in Loy's oeuvre alongside each other.

In *Bums Praying*, an artwork lost but photographically documented by Berenice Abbott, Loy underscores the artificiality of waste's valuation by showing how refuse is literally and symbolically dumped onto the homeless of the Bowery. This is achieved through her deliberate conflation of the destitute and the divine. The assemblage depicts figures with hands folded in prayer and shawls fashioned from detritus so that they become wings. The delicately cut-out paper silhouettes of the displayed homeless are arranged around an ecclesial arch set into the background, which highlights the tension between sacrality and degradation. Loy's recurring 'angel-bum' figure mirrors her poetic apotheosis of the homeless, who, in the poem "Hot Cross Bum," appear as "[b]lowsy angels" (134) and "prophet[s] of Babble-on" (135–36). The depiction, however, does not glorify the conditions of homelessness. Instead, it ironizes and satirizes them, exposing the constructed social disregard that reduces certain groups to 'trash'. The artwork connects this to their material marginalization within the metropolis, where they inhabit liminal, cluttered sidewalks. Like subjecting natural environments to capitalocenic trashing, the homeless, in analogy to women, are then directly exposed to the degradations of a consumerist society.

This critique also comes into sharp focus in the following stanzas of the poem "Hot Cross Bum," in which homelessness is described:

Collecting refuse more profuse than man
the City's circulatory
sanitary apostles
a-leap to ash-cans
apply their profane ritual
to offal

Dust to dust
Even a putrescent Galaxy
could not be left where it lay
to disgust

Scrapped are remains
empty cans remain. (142–43)

The homeless of New York City are here described as "sanitary apostles" (142) and as waste pickers who desperately "scrap . . . cans" (143). They occupy spaces near "ash cans" (142) and "offal" (142) within a so-called "putrescent galaxy" (143), an extensive 'waste-land' created by a throwaway society. A transferred value judgement from matter to people is especially evident in the ironically used phrase "dust to dust" (142). On one level, Loy's reference to Scripture points to consciously dumped, undervalued matter, and on another, it suggests that also the devaluation of the homeless is socially constructed. This is because eventually all matter returns to dust in death. As Loy demonstrates the instability of meaning, she points to the constructed nature of refuse, conclusively and unjustly affecting selected social groups in a disproportionate manner.

In analogy to the physical and figurative devaluation of the homeless, a distinctly feminist critique of consumer culture becomes evident in Loy's waste assemblage *Househunting*. In

this work, famously photographed by Berenice Abbott in 1959, Loy's finding that women are, figuratively speaking, 'dumping grounds' for societal expectations and ultimately self-obscure 'wastelands' is linked to their material degradation within capitalist waste economies. *Househunting* makes this claim when depicting a woman's upper body and head, from which a huge thought bubble emerges like a basket or a crown. While the woman's upper body and the cardboard cutouts of houses in the background appear two-dimensional, the thought bubble features a three-dimensional ball of wool and needles, a teapot, and a clothesline, all modeled from found detritus. The assemblage here picks up Loy's critique of societal dumping as a "rubbish heap of tradition" ("Feminist Manifesto" 153), for the displayed female seems disproportionately occupied with the gendered expectation of fulfilling household duties. In *Househunting*, these responsibilities, including hosting, washing, or crafting, are literally made of trash. This displays not only Loy's judgment of this gendered tradition but also the constructed nature of material waste. The assemblage then operates against both the gendered demands of household labor and against women being disproportionately more affected by actual waste dumping on natural environments.

Loy's late poem "Film-Face" underlines this argument, testifying to yet another dumping of expectations on women, who are relegated to what Loy configures as "prostitution" ("Feminist Manifesto" 154). "Film-Face," an undated poem presumably written after the death of the comedy actress Marie Dressler in 1934 (Conover 212), describes the restrictive reduction of women to predefined roles imposed by consumer society on actresses such as Dressler. In Loy's poem, the societal dumping of expectations is linked to physical waste dumping when an advertisement of Dressler's face is described as hovering above "the garbage-barge / loaded with clouds / of sanitation's chaos" ("Film Face" 125). Dressler's face is thereby looked down upon by patriarchal "Gods . . . on Olympus" (125) while appearing in close proximity to the homeless, "the poor people" (125), who mingle in littered streets. Loy here extends the range of societal expectations, unveiling the gendered demand to cater to imposed roles. This is especially visible in the coda of "Film-Face," in which the worn-out bodies of the trashed homeless are set side by side with Dressler's face. The poem reads, "the enduring face of, / the ruined body of, / the poor people // on Marie Dressler" (125).

Stressing the physical impact of waste dumping on the homeless, Dressler's reduction to a comedic film star, a role that entailed the devaluation of her non-Hollywood-conforming appearance, ultimately underlines the parallel impact of figurative and material waste dumping on women.

The assemblage *Househunting* picks up on Loy's feminist insight that, due to an overload of societal expectations, women's mental space is overly occupied, leaving little room for self-recognition. The displayed cramped thought bubble in this regard alludes to women being hindered from thinking beyond household tasks. Given that the symbolic elements of gendered domestic labor are made from actual waste, Loy's artwork engages with the notion of women as *terrain vague*, as a 'vague terrain' or 'wasteland' of self-obscurity (*The Child and the Parent* 66–69). It condemns the societal excess of expectations that prevents women from psychological and sexual self-discovery, an effect similarly found in actual waste dumping. This reading is reinforced by the title and the background of *Househunting*. On the one hand, the assemblage embodies the demand Loy utters in "Aphorism of Futurism," namely to "FORGET that you live in houses, that you may live in yourself" (149; emphasis in the original). It alludes to Loy's hope for women to free themselves from a commodified entrapment in societal gender roles and to search for alternative spaces of self-visualization. These are represented in the torn-out paper images of homes surrounding the displayed female figure's head (Karabolut 24). On the other hand, the assemblage points to the material implications of women being affected by material waste when making conscious choices about the materials employed in the artwork. While the woman's headspace is littered, the alternative housing of the background is presented as neatly cut out and delicately painted. Loy's material choices thus reveal that a life beyond literal and figurative trash is possible, but, given the artwork's title, achieving such requires the effort of proactively hunting for it.

Artist-Ragpicker: Mina Loy's Feminist Waste Aesthetics

Loy's feminist waste ecologies, her artistic reference to the disproportionate dumping of material refuse onto women, are ultimately amplified by her feminist aesthetic practice.

With her constructions, Loy takes up her “Feminist Manifesto’s” demand for the creation of a self-reflexive space, a figurative ‘wasteland’ or demolition site. The assemblage *Prospector I* is especially illustrative of this logic, as it visualizes the established artist-ragpicker trope, which in her artistic practice Loy reworks in a feminist mode. *Prospector I* emerges from Loy’s late life in Aspen, Colorado, in the 1950s and 60s, where she began a new series about the area’s prospectors and miners (Burke 429). While her artwork engages with the capitalist exploitation and commodification of Aspen as mining space and a booming alpine resort, *Prospector I* can also be read as a visualization of what Roger L. Conover terms Loy’s late identity as a “poet-ragpicker” (208).

This is visualized in the artwork *Prospector I*, in which a carefully crafted cutout head hovers over unevenly distributed, pressed cans glued onto a piece of brown cardboard. The figure depicted in the work appears as an embodiment of the artist-ragpicker trope discussed by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*. Drawing on Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin’s fragment conceptualizes the artist as a ragpicker, a municipal scavenger who transforms refuse into artistic treasure (368). This is especially visible in the pressed cans of Loy’s work resembling both coins and purses, which the sprawled-out hands reach for. Viewed through the lens of Loy’s feminist waste politics, the assemblage acquires a distinctly feminist dimension, introducing Loy as a female version of the displayed artist-ragpicker. In this role, she advances a consciously feminist approach to waste aesthetics and highlights the socially constructed nature of waste, transforming trash into treasure while challenging the entrenched practice of casting women as both figurative and material dumping grounds. Her art also blurs the boundary between disposable nature and treasured culture because, unlike the miner of *Prospector I*, who exploits nature in the way patriarchal, consumerist societies exploit women, Loy valorizes urban refuse, elevating it from the littered streets. In doing so, *Prospector I* disrupts the distinction between treasured art and trashed world while opening up a space for rethinking gender roles, as does Loy’s assemblage work at large.

As a self-identified female artist, Loy’s waste constructions also function as feminist resistance against patriarchal conceptions of women’s art as merely decorative. By artistically

engaging with waste, Loy not only becomes, as Bozhkova notes, a figure resisting consumer culture ("Incognito" 37), but also resists externally imposed expectations of artistic standards. By actively selecting which socially constructed waste elements to incorporate into her work, Loy asserts authority over both her domestic and imaginative space. Similar to the visualization of that action in *Househunting*, Loy creates a moment of feminist aesthetic resistance, actively choosing which materials to incorporate into her headspace, life, and art. Her collapsing of the identities of the vagrant ragpicker and the artist in *Prospector I* conclusively emerges as a deliberate feminist strategy, emphasizing the socially constructed valuation of women, waste, and art. *Prospector I* embodies this with the central figure's head and hands merging seamlessly with the spilled trash-turned-treasure elements. Layered by the assemblage's complex play of signification, *Prospector I* ultimately becomes the epitome of Loy's visual art that consciously ruptures patriarchal aesthetic conventions.

Loy's visual art must finally be considered a productive site for reflecting on the constructed nature of trash, literally and figuratively dumped onto women. Loy speaks to this reflective potential in her poem "Apology of Genius," in which she describes artists as "[t]he watchers of the civilized wastes / [who make spectators] reverse their signals on [artists'] track" (77). Here, she emphasizes the evocative power of art, which, in *Prospector I*, manifests as a reflection on the value of waste and on those who collect it. Given Loy's engagement with coin-shaped can lids that also merge with the displayed human features of the assemblage, *Prospector I* arises as a site of indistinguishable rubble, a demolition site that, in Loy's feminist writings, functions as a metaphor for a necessary clean break in redefining women's societal role ("Feminist Manifesto" 153). Against the backdrop of aesthetic deconstruction of entrenched assumptions about waste, women, and value, Loy's assemblages function as promising demolition sites. They can enable women to contemplate their self-obscurity in a society that burdens them with societal expectations as well as material waste.

Conclusion

Mina Loy's continuous engagement with figurative and material notions of waste reveals how her work persistently interrogates the devaluation of women as commodities

entrenched in consumer society. By exploring the full semantic range of waste throughout her decades-spanning and varied oeuvre, she conflates metaphorical and physical waste, showing that both are linked through the constructed devaluation of objects onto which waste, in either form, is projected. In her “Feminist Manifesto” and her autobiographical prose text *The Child and the Parent*, Loy conceptualizes women as figurative dumping grounds for societal expectations, which turns them into littered but empty spaces as they are left unaware of their selves and desires. It is for this reason that she ultimately calls for the dismantling of established gender roles and their reconstruction from the ground up. Loy’s feminist appeals through waste tropes may, in turn, serve as a framework for reading her late engagement with material refuse in her waste assemblages. In these works, her turn to physical waste then becomes a commentary on the ways women’s bodies and lives are shaped by both social and economic discard. In this sense, in the assemblages *Snow Crop* and *Bums Praying*, as well as in her late poem “Hot Cross Bum,” Loy not only exposes the sociocultural construction of physical waste but also the analogous devaluation of marginalized groups. Against the backdrop of her earlier feminist calls, the waste assemblage *Househunting* and the poem “Film Face” similarly function as a translation of the notion of women as dumping grounds into the material realities of their degradation within capitalist waste economies. By reclaiming waste in her artistic practice, Loy ultimately can be found to perform a feminist act. Especially, her assemblage *Prospector I* illuminates how her waste art reasserts agency over discarded materials and creates an aesthetic space for rethinking societal structures that bind women to both metaphorical and literal refuse.

Loy’s sustained engagement with waste presents her as an early, if perhaps unconscious, ecofeminist thinker whose literary and visual art anticipates the disproportionate impact of waste on women in the Capitalocene. Reading Loy through the theoretical frameworks of twentieth- and twenty-first-century ecocritical and especially ecofeminist waste scholarship reveals how her much-discussed feminist aesthetics extend not only across her entire oeuvre but also into the ecofeminist realm. This is not without its limitations as Loy’s feminism, which is deeply rooted in the corporeality of white, Western, bourgeoisie women, contains classist and racist hierarchizations and promotes eugenic visions that remain far behind the

intersectional sensibilities of contemporary ecofeminist waste scholarship. What makes her work nonetheless worth recovering is that her witty modernist poetics and aesthetics illuminate how the association of women with waste is not a contemporary phenomenon but has a long, complex history of devaluing women—one that art reclaiming waste material may critically challenge.

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