



Harm and Hope : How we relate to our rubbish

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Harm and Hope: How we relate to our rubbish

Kavita Thanki

Supervised by: Dr James Ward and Dr Stephen Butler

This paper asks the reader to engage with questions about their conceptualisation of and relationship with waste, drawing attention to the ubiquity and in/visibility of it. It considers how waste is, variously, a source of disease and danger; a material resource which is enfolded into our financial and cultural economies; and a fundamental element in the formation of self. The paper gives a brief overview of the ethical, economic and ecological issues with recycling before moving on to explore reuse and repurpose as waste management alternatives, emphasising the radical difference in favouring these processes. Finally it considers indigenous Australian approaches to rubbish, discussing the ways in which these challenge the binary between nature and waste. By muddying this distinction we can shift our thinking towards a creative, positive, compassionate understanding of the past, the material world, the place these have in the future,

‘Whatever your vantage point, you may not look the other way.’ I quote here from the call for papers put out for this issue of *Intersections*. I quote it because this line, of the many lines that struck me, hit hardest. There is very little we can say about waste that is fixed or independent of context, but one of those rare, absolute truths is this: everybody, regardless of any geographical, social, or ideological position, produces waste. And yet we all look the other way. Do you know (or care), for example, where exactly the bin lorries go after they complete their rounds on collection day? When was the last time you contemplated the contents of the toilet bowl before flushing? Have you ever tallied up how much carbon dioxide you produce per year simply by breathing? To live is to waste, and yet we have organised our society in such a way that our interactions with waste are so cursory we need seldom think about what waste is, what it reveals about us and our values, what place it holds in our present, and in what ways it can come back to haunt us.

Kristeva has ideas about the reasons for our deliberate waste-blindness (1982), just as Freud offers clinical diagnoses for those who pay it too much (of the wrong sort of) attention (Brown, 1960, pp. 179-201). Marx would say that capitalism requires us to ignore our waste as otherwise we could not continue with the excessive, exponential consumption which it needs to survive. Of course, there are those of us – the migrant workers who clean our offices (Forde, 2011, pp. 1-2), the manual labourers who scrape the fat from the arteries of our sewers (George, 2011, pp. 157-9), the children who are killed by diarrhoea in the slums of Shanti Nagar and Kibera (George, pp. 150-2), the urban poor who live and die off landfill in Ethiopia (Agence France-Presse, 2017), Guinea (Samb, 2017), Mozambique (BBC News, 2018) and Sri Lanka (ABC News, 2017) – who are put in a position in which there is no choice but to look. I would like to put you in this position, for a while at least, and from the comfort of your own, dangerless chair. I want you to look at waste, to look at it as something both infinite and finite, both destructive and creative, as a part of our past which continues into the future – whether we like it or not, whether we see it or not. For waste is always there, vibrating with peril and potential.

The CFP also asks, 'what do we take forward, and how?' Another way of asking this is to consider: "what do our discards say about us?" Dirt, as Mary Douglas outlined, is a process of ordering – a process which necessarily involves categorising, evaluating, valuing and rejecting. To engage, then, in 'dispossession, or the active decision to remove something from one's life and discard it, is as complex a process as possession' (Hawkins, 2006, p77). Findings from *The Garbage Project*, a research group which applied scientific and archaeological techniques to the study of rubbish, provide a good example. Rubbish is homogenised by its unwantedness: a bin bag unifies materials as disparate as, say, a broken mug, a crisp packet and cat litter. Yet, as the research of *The Garbage Project* found, there were certain general waste items for which people made distinctions. Socially transgressive materials such as pornographic magazines were kept out of privately owned curb-side bins and dumped instead at public disposal sites (Scanlan, 2005, pp. 137-9). The more damning the dirt, it seems, the further the distance we put between it and ourselves. In this way, rubbish has 'the power [...] to compromise one's carefully constructed identity' (Scanlan, p140). How comfortable would you feel with somebody looking through your rubbish?

Or perhaps, dear zero-waste warrior, you are proud of your discards. Processes of disposal not only expose the things we feel ashamed of, they can also be a means of claiming and signalling our virtue. While recycling has been a means of constructing the ethical self since the 1960s, and waste economies have been in operation since long before that (O'Brien, pp. 58-81), anxiety around plastic pollution was popularised and mainstreamed over the last decade – in no small part a result of David Attenborough's nature series *Blue Planet II*, released in 2017. Waste had been seen as 'part of a complex network of transactions between burgeoning industry, household cultures of reuse and scarcity, and underdeveloped governmental systems of removal' in the nineteenth century (Hawkins, p. 97): today there are differences in the scale of rubbish production, the materials which constitute it, and the outsourcing/privatisation of waste management. More significant than these differences, however, is the way in which we are now made to believe that we are, individually, responsible for the current ecological breakdown, and that the solution to climate change is a change in our personal (read: consumer) behaviour (O'Brien, pp93-95). Environmental concerns framed in this way compel the conscientious citizen to make recycling (financially) cost effective for governments by taking on the free labour of cleaning and sorting waste. In other words, we are willing to pay for 'more restricted waste services that involve more personal effort' (Hawkins, p. 107) to assuage our guilt that seagulls' stomachs are full of bottle tops.

At the same time we ignore the violent and dirty origins of plastic as a by-product of the refinement of crude oil and gas taken from countries forced into the destructive extraction and pipeline transportation of fossil fuel (Marriot and Minio-Paleullo, 2013, pp.171-183); the 'cheap labour that went into making [single-use plastic goods]' (Dini, 2016, p. 145); and the fact that 'recycling, as it exists today, does not in fact save ecosystems in a way that matters on the whole ecologically or socially' (MacBride, 2019). Recycling comes relatively low in the waste hierarchy, being part of the management category, and is therefore less environmentally sustainable than avoidance practices which call for re-designing before production, and re-thinking production itself (Downes, 2017). Even within the management category, other practices such as re-purposing and re-using have less environmental impact: unlike recycling these practices do not require energy-consuming processes for transformation, nor do they transform materials into degraded versions of the original. Re-use and re-purpose offer 'redemptive, practical, aesthetic, ecological' alternatives: they are a radical means of resistance to 'a world that runs on desire and speculation' (Dini, p. 156; 197).

Another alternative is to look askance at waste: to conceptualise it differently. Hawkins turns to Australian Indigenous thinking of waste to examine the importance of living with our remainders and the positive implications this can have for our engagement with them. In the Aboriginal cultures she discusses, 'remains are evidence of the reciprocity between country and people. In contrast [...] self-erasure [is seen] to be the equivalent of sneaking around the country' (p. 89, emphasis in original). Thinking of waste in this way can alter our ideas about the waste/nature binary that posits nature as a passive entity which man masters (and destroys) through the dumping of our rubbish (Hawkins, p. 8; 61). In this way rubbish is not unnatural, not antithetical to nature, and not a source of shame which must be buried out of sight to be forgotten: it does in fact 'express a personal longing for fixity and stability, for a meaningful link with past actions and relationships' (O'Brien, 2008, p. 118). It is a way of 'bearing witness' to a peoples' presence in a place, and renders waste 'always available for transformation' (Hawkins, pp. 87 – 90). Waste shifts from being the uncanny, with its provocation to fear and disgust, to being the 'potential to charge, catalysing ethical behaviour and profound insights, even compassion.' (Morrison, 2015, p3, emphasis in original).

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