

# The Ethics of Waste



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## How We Relate to Rubbish

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# Preface

When you confess to writing a book about waste, people start telling you stories. Hilarious and horrifying stories about encounters with blocked drains; desperate searches through a very full garbage bin looking for one lost Barbie doll shoe; the almost new bed taken to a landfill after an acrimonious breakup. Waste can generate powerful emotions. And not just bodily or organic waste—things don't have to be slimy or foul smelling to disturb us. The empty Coke can just quietly biding its time can really upset the order of things when it's encountered on a hike into pristine wilderness. You've made all this effort to get to a place where the ugly, shit end of capitalism won't be present, only to discover that your quest has been futile. A bit of rubbish has found its way into paradise and exposed all your yearnings for purity as doomed to failure.

The simplest definition of waste is discarded, expelled, or excess matter. But the stories above show that this doesn't get anywhere near the minefield of emotions and moral anxieties that waste can provoke. Waste is much more than what we want to get rid of. While terms like "rubbish" or "litter" describe the random by-products of daily life, "waste" invokes a much more complicated set of meanings. When it is used to describe a certain category of things, like "nuclear waste" or "medical waste," the wasted material gestures back to the economy that produced it. When "waste" is used in a normative sense, as a category of judgment, meanings proliferate fast. We aren't meant to waste

our time, our money, our efforts, our lives; we are advised to “waste not, want not.” Waste is at the heart of so many moral economies that it’s difficult to find any sense in which it isn’t bad. To be unproductive or to excessively expend is a sign of poor discipline and irresponsible conduct. Minimizing waste in the interest of efficiency is regarded as evidence of an effective economy: industrial, moral, and psychic.

The paradox is that in among all this moral opprobrium being wasteful in the ways we live is encouraged, expected and, in many instances, impossible to avoid. Your DVD player breaks down after fifteen months of occasional use and the repairer says it will cost \$150 to fix, *if* he can find the parts; “Cheaper to buy another one,” he advises. Your children refuse to wear their siblings’ outgrown, perfectly fine jeans because they aren’t the latest fashion; they must have new ones—everybody else does! Explanations of how wasteful this is are met with a blank stare. In the commodity relations that touch every aspect of life, waste, as conspicuous consumption, is an invitation most find difficult to refuse. Not because they lack moral fiber but because this particular habit is embedded in the character of social life. Constant serial replacement works because a fashion system and certain forms of identity underwrite it. When who you are is thoroughly caught up with what you own—with the things you display on your body or in your home—conspicuous consumption becomes central to the cultivation of a self and to structures of social value and distinction.

Commodity cultures show how waste as a practice of excess can be free of negative connotations. The invitation to shop, shop, shop suppresses any mention of waste. The desire to possess and accumulate things is completely disconnected from the issue of how commodities are produced and where they end up once we decide they’re valueless. Constant consumption is framed as an expression of personal freedom and choice. But the other side of it is the freedom to waste, to discard things that are still perfectly useful.

There’s a moralism creeping into my account of commodity cultures that is hard to avoid. My aim in this book is not to moralize about waste. I don’t think anyone who has access to television or a newspaper or a recycling bin needs to be reminded about the devastating effects of waste matter and of exploitative and wasteful economic practices on the planet. Nor do I want to use these brute realities as metaphors for the shape we’re in—much as I like the biting precision of the term *affluenza*. Rather, I want to think about waste as a



flexible category grounded in social relations. A category that acquires its meanings according to the different contexts and ways in which it has been historically put to work.

My interest is in the ways waste is implicated in the making of a self and particular ethical sensibilities. How does waste feature in our everyday habits and practices? We spend a fair amount of time each day managing waste: washing ourselves, going to the toilet, taking out the garbage, sorting out the packaging from the latest purchase into recyclable and nonrecyclable, taking the compost down to the garden, emptying the trash in our e-mail, picking out clothes for the charity bin. There's lots of different waste here—biological, material, informational—and lots of different techniques and bodily practices involved in eliminating it. There's also a whole swarm of thoughts and feelings about why these practices matter and what their effects are. Waste obviously has a vital role to play in the care of the self.

Feeling clean and purified are obvious outcomes of our everyday waste habits, but so too is feeling good. This sense of goodness, of having done the right thing for the environment, shows that contemporary waste habits have become connected to the practice of virtue or a sense of obligation to particular rules and moral codes. This experience is relatively new. The idea of recycling and composting as virtuous is a product of significant transformations in the ways waste has been framed. The problematization of waste as environmentally destructive is part of our recent history. It has informed numerous changes in governmental programs for waste management—particularly, mass education campaigns designed to change personal and domestic conducts. These campaigns have changed the ways we behave around waste, the meanings of wasted things—from rubbish to recyclables—and the moral economy of waste. They have implicated waste in the formation of new circuits of guilt and conscience and practices of self-regulation.

This book explores the intersections of habits, bodies, ethics, and waste matter. My curiosity about waste comes from a desire to understand how it might be possible to change ecologically destructive practices without recourse to guilt or moralism or despair. I feel all these things in relation to waste. And while these feelings have prompted me to change my behavior they can also immobilize me in certain ways. Sometimes they generate resentment, a sense of irritation that I have to rinse cans that I used to just chuck out. At other times these feelings can produce such an overwhelming sense of mourning for

the state of the planet that it is difficult to find the energy and inspiration to sustain an ethical practice, let alone imagine better ones.

What often undoes these responses is waste itself. When you start writing a book about waste people start telling you stories *and* you start noticing waste. An innocent drive down the street on council trash night becomes an exercise in the recent history of home gym equipment. A trip to see the current Hollywood hit movie is disrupted by an extraordinary scene of dancing rubbish: How can an abandoned plastic bag have such an effect on you? A visit to a friend's house for dinner finds you going through the mess on their front verandah: "Are you really throwing this out?"

Waste is provocative, as much as we might like to think that it is just the redundant and rejected context to our lives, it can catch us in networks of obligation that reverberate across our bodies and invite us to live with it differently. I'm grateful to waste and the ways it's challenged me. And I'm grateful to the thinkers whose work has inspired me and helped me reflect on the ethics of waste, how they exist in the present, and how they might be transformed.

I am also grateful to numerous people and institutions for their help in completing this book. In the second half of 2003 I was awarded a writing fellowship from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). This gave me the time and space to make significant progress. I presented drafts of two chapters at the Institute for Humanities at the University of Michigan while a visitor in the Department of English Language and Literature. On both occasions the comments and questions proved to be immensely stimulating and helpful, as was the intellectual environment of this lively department. Thanks to Elspeth Probyn I was able to present another chapter at the Wasted Bodies Seminar she organized in the Department of Gender Studies at the University of Sydney. Emily Potter invited me to present my work at the Environments and Ecologies Symposium in Adelaide. In both these forums the discussion and feedback were invaluable. Support for research came from the Australian Research Council Small Grants Scheme. Thanks to Carly Harper for her great research assistance and to Shaun Ankers and John Fox at Vermitech for information about worms. I'm also appreciative of my friends and colleagues in the School of Media and Communication at UNSW. They have tolerated my obsession with waste with patience and generosity. Julie Miller's calm and efficient administrative help was especially valuable.

This book has been written over a number of years, and during that time my thinking has been enriched by the ideas, support, and stimulation of a number of friends and colleagues. Thanks to Stephen Muecke, Liz Jacka, Simone Fullagar, Lee-Anne Hall, Anne Brewster, Maureen Burns, Emily Potter, Warwick Pearse, and Katrina Schlunke for reading drafts of various chapters and giving me thoughtful comments and proposals, as well as some tough editing suggestions. I've tried to take up most of their recommendations. Conversations with Ross Chambers and Patsy Yaeger were great for making me think again. Thanks to Kathy Gibson for introducing me to the work of William Connolly and Jane Bennett. And thanks to Akinori, Mituyo, and Mami Dansako for organizing my visit to the Kasaoka Recycling Centre in Japan and for being so generous and helpful during my time there.

For ongoing intellectual generosity and friendship I particularly want to thank David Halperin and Kane Race. Kane kept me up to date with contemporary theory and continually challenged me to take my thinking further. His comments on several chapters were incisive, as were innumerable lively conversations in which he helped me figure out what I was trying to do. His help teaching with me during the period of this book was great and made the classes so much better. Thanks, especially, to David, who has supported this project in so many ways. He knew what it was about long before I did. Our long and wonderful conversations by e-mail and in person, and his astute comments on my work, helped deepen my understanding and appreciation of Foucault's work on ethics, and see how it could be used to think about the ways we live with waste. He also facilitated two visits to Ann Arbor, where he provided me with the most idyllic conditions to write and think. To be able to work in such beautiful surroundings was a gift that helped this project enormously; his hospitality, generosity, and friendship are immensely appreciated.

I write in the context of a family, extended and immediate. My sisters, Merry and Rob; brother, Andy; and parents, Pam and Jim, have always supported my work—despite all the jokes—and I am grateful for their love, humor, and encouragement. I became fascinated with waste not long after the death of my father. I'm not sure what the connection is between the profound loss of a loved parent and small everyday losses like putting out the garbage, but I'm sure there is one. Endings, big and small, make you think about transience and how to live with loss in ways that affirm life. I thank Jim for all the

lessons in living well that he gave me, and for teaching me about the productive power of grief. Thanks, finally, to Nina, Louis, and Warwick who've lived with the day-to-day reality of this book. My children have tolerated my distraction with humor and goodwill. Their love and sense of fun kept my feet on the ground and reminded me of the messiness of everyday life. Warwick Pearse has been always encouraging and supportive; his kindness, sharp intellect, and unfailing patience inspire respect and enormous thanks for the life we share.

# An Overflowing Bin

The garbage bin is already full and there are two more days until pickup. It smells. And it's in your way. Before you begin pushing and shoving or clandestine dumping in another bin—what if you stopped and wondered about the contents of the bin? Let your waste register as more than just a nuisance. Perhaps you'd feel disgusted at its messy visibility, or guilty about the amount of rubbish you generate, or annoyed that government waste services have been cut back in the name of budget cuts or environmental reform. Whatever the response, in that momentary flicker of feeling waste is making a claim on you.

When waste is noticed something shifts in the mundane landscape of domestic habits. The stench and confusion of the garbage bin can no longer be ignored—that rubbish needs some attention! In cultures that pride themselves on being technologically “advanced” catching a glimpse of the brute physicality of waste signals a kind of failure. After all, dual-flushing toilets and garbage contractors and In-Sink-Erators are meant to protect us from our waste; to hide the disgusting and the valueless with streamlined efficiency. This is how the elimination of waste became a marker of civilized modernity. And this is how the elimination of waste became implicated in the formation of a certain kind of person with distinct habits and beliefs as to what constitutes waste and how to get rid of it.

As much as putting out the garbage may feel like one of the most ordinary and tedious aspects of everyday life, it is a cultural performance, an organized

sequence of material practices that deploys certain technologies, bodily techniques, and assumptions. And in this performance waste matter is both defined and removed; a sense of order is established and a particular subject is made. Waste, then, isn't a fixed category of things; it is an effect of classification and relations.

There's nothing new in this claim; Mary Douglas made it years ago in her celebrated book *Purity and Danger*.<sup>1</sup> For any study of waste this book is of singular importance. It shows how the structuring capacities of culture come to classify things as waste. Douglas denaturalizes dirt and waste and places them firmly within the terrain of cultural rituals and their symbolic meanings. She shows how the values of purity and danger become lodged in specific material forms and that dirt is not outside of order but what makes systems of order visible. Who could forget her most quotable quote, "Where there is dirt there is system"?<sup>2</sup>

But there is only so far that you can get decoding a culture by going through the garbage. At some point the gritty materiality of waste gets under your fingernails, and the limit of classification and social construction is felt. The mountains of cheap and broken consumer durables signify an economy utterly dependent on disposability. The greasy fast food packaging reveals the decline of home cooking. Waste becomes a social text that discloses the logic or illogic of a culture. It becomes subordinated to human action, a slave to desire and manipulation. In the demand to show how waste is a result of cultural practices—from religious taboos to consumer capitalism—the active connections between humans and wasted material in which *both* are produced are hard to see. The action seems to flow all one way. Waste is reduced to a product of culturally and historically variable human practices; what we want to get rid of tells us who we are.

This is true. But what we want to get rid of also *makes* us who we are. Social constructionism generally begins with the binary of waste versus human; these determinate forms are the starting point for analysis. What becomes harder to see is the actual movement of sociality. Or the process whereby waste emerges and becomes recognizable and representable as the dead matter that affirms our living subjectivity, or sense of self. Sociality foregrounds how waste becomes present to us, how it is encountered and experienced. Its focus is on relations and interaction. And it is in the dynamics of these relations that it is possible to see the mutual constitution of human subjects and

inanimate wasted objects. These relations are culturally mediated; they don't take place in some presocial zone called raw experience. Sociality, then, is a field of emergence that Brian Massumi has described as "open-endedly social. It is social in a manner 'prior to' the separating out of individuals and the identifiable groupings that they tend to box themselves into."<sup>3</sup>

If human waste relations are dynamic, open-ended social entities, in the sense that new meanings and practices are always immanent—the ethical and political question is, how might new waste practices emerge? How might a different ethos of waste surface that is less destructive of the planet? These are the questions I explore in this book.

But as soon as I mention "the planet" there is an automatic expectation that I will launch into an account of the global waste crisis. This is not my intention. Though the politics of the environment inform and to a large extent motivate this book, I want to open up another way of making sense of waste beyond the trope of environmentalism. My concern is with our most quotidian relations with waste, what they mean and how they might change. I've started with the garbage bin and I pretty much want to stay there, though I will be making some detours to the bathroom and the open landfill. I want to think about the habits and practices that shape what we do with waste. How waste is implicated in embodiment and styles of self, the norms and codes that underpin waste management, and how these might, or might not, register as ethical obligations.

A lot can happen when waste is noticed, and thinking about the effects of the acute attention waste can sometimes provoke is another aim of this book. When I first began work on it I turned to psychoanalytic explanations of disgust and abjection as an important source.<sup>4</sup> This proved to be of limited use. While psychoanalysis is useful for explaining the visceral power of disgust in relation to bodily waste—the ways contact with shit or blood or pus can horrify and overwhelm us—most of the waste we encounter is not bodily and nor is it experienced as abjecting. The detritus of urban life congealed in gutters or dumped on the street doesn't destabilize the self. It just hangs around largely ignored. The centrality of abjection in accounts of the self-waste relation seems too ahistorical and subjectivist; too blind to the social and political frames that mediate how all waste is subject to classification. The focus on waste as a threat to the psyche ignores how historical changes in the micropractices of the self influence unconscious orientations to the disgusting. Psychoanalysis doesn't

help make sense of the shifting place of waste in everyday life and material culture; how our ordinary encounters with it are implicated in the making of a self and an object world. It reduces waste to a phobia, understanding it only as a threat to self-certainty.

Waste's materiality is not the only thing that gets left behind in this approach. So too does any recognition of the self's creation in and through relations with waste matter. Waste doesn't just threaten the self in the horror of abjection, it also *constitutes* the self in the habits and embodied practices through which we decide what is connected to us and what isn't. Managing its biological or material reality is part of the way in which we organize our self and our environment, keep chaos at bay. This is why styles of waste disposal are also styles of self and why waste management, in all its cultural mutations, is fundamental to the practice of subjectivity. It is part of the way in which we cultivate sensibilities and sensual relations with the world; part of the way we move things out of our life and impose ethical and aesthetic order. No matter how insignificant putting out the garbage may seem, the way we do it reflects an ethos, a manner of being. And, as Michel Foucault has shown, an ethos is intimately connected with ethics; it is how a manner of being becomes implicated in the conduct of bodies.<sup>5</sup>

Of course this shift from the big dramas of the psyche to a focus on relations, habits, and ethics could become just another version of subjectivism that also sidelines waste. This is a danger I am well aware of. In the concern to understand the actions and practices that shape what becomes classified as waste and how it will be managed, waste will not necessarily get much chance to speak for itself. This is not to give waste a spurious autonomy. Rather, it is to be aware of the problem of subordinating waste to the vagaries of human uses and social construction so that it is difficult to capture the actual processes whereby something is perceived as waste and then rejected. I want to avoid this by focusing on how waste mediates relations to our bodies, prompts various habits and disciplines, and orders relations between the self and the world. This implicates waste in the action of ethics and embodiment as a key player. By paying constant attention to how waste impresses itself on us phenomenologically, I want to foreground the relational processes that bind us to waste even as we seek to be free of it. To reduce waste to an effect of human action and classification is to ignore the materiality of waste, its role in making us act; the ways in which waste is *both* a provocation to action and



itself a result of that action. I take my lead from Bill Brown's account of the relational dynamics between persons and things. He argues that habits constitute the material world for the perceiving subject at the same time as they constitute the self. And in this process the possibility of an unnerving conflation between nature and culture, subject and object, and what we call persons and what we call things is ever present.<sup>6</sup>

This focus on minor acts and habits might seem trivial and indulgent in the face of a world drowning in garbage, but it opens up another way of thinking about waste that many forms of environmentalism have nurtured but never seriously analyzed. In the familiar slogan "Think globally, act locally" we have been urged to start with our own backyards, to save the earth by transforming our everyday practices. Choosing a paper bag rather than a plastic one, composting, recycling, all indicate important shifts in our relationship to waste matter, how we manage it, and how guilty or righteous it can make us feel.

There is no doubt that over the last thirty years, in the face of escalating amounts of waste, the rules surrounding putting out the garbage in late capitalist countries have changed. The question is: What are the impacts of this? At the level of daily experience the impacts are not as insignificant as they may seem. For a start, waste has been problematized, it has become a domain of life in which our taken for granted practices have been subjected to scrutiny and deemed in need of new attention and care. The rise of governmental campaigns imploring us to "reduce, reuse, recycle" haven't just implicated our everyday household practices in the global waste crisis, they have also implicated our bodies. In problematizing what we should do with our waste, these campaigns have also subjected *who* we are and *how* we should be in the world to scrutiny. It is impossible to change waste practices without implicating the self in a process of reflexivity, without asking people to implicitly or explicitly think about the way they live. This is the terrain of ethics, or the terrain of ethics that I am interested in. It links the historical specificity of moral codes and ideals with an embodied sensibility, with repeated practices and habits that shape how our bodies feel and the forms of reason that make these actions and affects meaningful. And in these changes in the governmental rules surrounding putting out the garbage waste has also changed; it has been revalued and recoded from rubbish to recyclable resource, it has moved from the bin to the compost heap, it has insinuated itself into our lives in different ways and with different effects.

However, recognizing a moral code and living it out are not automatic. Moral injunctions are not necessarily what underpin laudable acts. Many people have changed their waste practices because they have simply had no choice. Changes in local waste removal services, punitive measures, and economic imperatives have all coerced people into modifying their practices. They have also, no doubt, generated a sense of resentment and irritation at yet another incursion of the government into private life and domestic space. When people complain about not even being able to chuck things away without “the state” or “mad greenies” breathing down their necks they are experiencing changes in the administration of waste as a form of repressive power. They are not expressing a sense of obligation to their rubbish. Rather, they are expressing a victimized anger and frustration at underserved restrictions on their individual right to make as much waste as they please.

But resentment is only one response to these changes. Many evaluations of the implementation of more sustainable domestic waste practices document a deep moral attachment to these practices, a sense that people are concerned and willing to do their bit for the environment. This response shows not only that environmental campaigns that connect the global waste crisis to aspects of everyday life have resonated with sections of the population, but also that people have agreed to act on themselves, to change their habits. When people recycle or compost or refuse the plastic bag because they feel that this minor gesture will make a difference, they are accepting their obligations not just to the planet but to waste. They are enacting a different relation to waste, letting it register in the dimension of the ethical.

Big deal! As if that’s going to change the catastrophe of ecological destruction; the global trade in waste from north to south; the excesses of unregulated, dirty capitalist production; or the obscenity of overconsumption. Recycling is just another opportunity for the righteous middle class to bleat on about how good they are, how virtuous they feel sorting the paper from the glass.

I can set down this vitriolic response with ease because I’ve heard it plenty of times when speaking at various environmental forums. And, rather than get defensive, I want to take these critiques seriously. While I accept much of their content I don’t accept how they frame the political, or their blindness to questions of bodies, ethics, and the materiality of waste. In many senses I think this response is part of the problem. The dismissal of changes in personal practices as tokenism perpetuates the idea that politics is restricted to

macroassemblages like the state or capitalism, and that real social transformation is possible only via wholesale revolutionary change. This approach doesn't just oppose the personal to the political, making it difficult to see the multiplicity of relations between these spheres. It can also, too easily, lapse into creating moralistic blueprints for changes in consciousness. These moral imperatives take no account of how bodies and feelings are implicated in thinking, often below the threshold of conscious decision making.

In contrast to this I want to investigate politics as a process of "active experimentation."<sup>7</sup> According to political philosopher Paul Patton, these experimental practices are played out *in between* large-scale political and economic institutions and the subinstitutional movements of affect, desire, and minor practices.<sup>8</sup> If active experimentation involves minor practices and the intensities of the body, then the everyday actions of cultivating a self would seem to be crucial for understanding how new waste habits and sensibilities might emerge.

My theorizations of politics adopt this poststructuralist perspective precisely because it is attentive to the relations between styles of embodiment and various regimes of power.<sup>9</sup> Poststructuralism's rejection of totalizing conceptions of control leads to a focus on the qualitative dimensions of deviant minor practices and how they can make trouble for all sorts of normativity. And it is precisely in these minor practices, like dealing with your waste, that experiments with new practices and sensibilities are most needed and most possible. William Connolly puts it like this: "Micropolitics and relational self-artistry shuffle back and forth among intensities, feelings, images, smells, and concepts, modifying some of them and the relays connecting them, opening up, thereby, the possibility of new thinking and alterations of sensibility."<sup>10</sup>

## WASTED ENVIRONMENTS

Feeling uneasy about the structure of much environmentalist critique does not mean that I can avoid analyzing it. When it comes to waste, environmentalism's discursive impacts are significant. Environmentalism in all its varieties dominates representations of wasted things. And while some of these representations are positive, most are not. This broad discursive field has to accept full responsibility for using waste to stage the destruction of the planet. While it's easy to say I want to take a different approach to thinking waste, clearing a space for this has to begin with a careful investigation of how we already *know*

waste. Existing representations don't just use waste to organize our fears about the end of nature; they also limit how we might respond to this. Fredric Jameson is absolutely right to point out that it's easier to imagine the destruction of the earth and of nature than the destruction of capitalism.<sup>11</sup> Our imaginations are overflowing with the horror of waste.

In much environmentalist discourse both humans and nature are configured as sites of loss. Nature is represented as the passive victim of gross exploitation and contamination, a realm of lost purity and sanctity. Humans, meanwhile, are alienated from the natural world, having lost their connection to the physical environment on which their very survival depends. The modern world is a place of dearth and meaninglessness; it has lost touch with community and with noninstrumental forms of reason. Everything is rationalized and calculable, systems of meaning have fractured and fragmented to the point at which people experience an absence of belief. Little wonder, then, that in much mainstream environmental politics waste is a central character in an already well-established disenchantment story.<sup>12</sup> Dumping waste is an expression of contempt for nature. Humans establish their sense of mastery over and separation from a passive desacralized nature by fouling it. The story then goes on to show how this has involved a profound shift in moral outlook from a more connected interaction with nature, in which the status and classification of waste was vastly different (perhaps there wasn't even such a category?), to our current state, in which global pollution and gross wastefulness, or "first world affluenza," signal a profound moral bankruptcy.

What are the effects of these familiar disenchantment stories? Obviously, they are various and complex. I just want to single out those that are relevant to the question of waste and how it is configured. Disenchantment stories shape the representations through which we make sense of the world; they are performative.<sup>13</sup> Our consciousness is full of these stock images, symbols and metaphors that form a kind of waste social imaginary. This imaginary provides a set of frameworks and ideas that operate in the background to our everyday practices. How that background is experienced is eminently variable; it might lurk as a constant source of guilt or sadness or it might be completely unacknowledged. Social imaginaries are akin to the operations of "discourse" or "mentality." They shape how we come to know and do things, the terms in which the world is made meaningful, but their presence is muted or backgrounded by the effects of embodiment and naturalization.<sup>14</sup>

Social imaginaries play a crucial role in the formation of our subjective understandings of waste and the environment. When we hear stories of dying rivers or see images of mountains made of garbage, nature is framed as dead or definitely on its last legs, and it's difficult not to feel a sense of despair or grief. While the political intention of these stories might be to shock us into action, their impact is often overwhelming and immobilizing. They can perpetuate the very relation to nature they seek to challenge: alienated distance and disinterest. When the exploitative force of economic power and human destruction is so overcoded why bother contesting it? You may as well just keep shopping.

My point is not that we need some positive messages as a counterbalance to current waste social imaginaries that will reenchant nature and inspire us. Social marketing has already discovered that feel good messages are more effective than feel bad. Rather, my point is that the very terms in which the culture-nature relation is framed in much environmentalism limit how new relations might be imagined. Disenchantment stories presume a fundamental dualism between human culture and nonhuman nature. No matter how they configure the relation between the two sides, each ultimately stands as ontologically distinct from the other. Each is seen as possessing an essential material difference from the other. This dualistic thinking inhibits any serious consideration of the specificities of waste and our relations with it. It posits a fixed identity for things that has to be protected if that identity is to remain pure. In the opposition of humans to nature that disenchantment stories sustain, waste functions *not* as what undoes this opposition but as what contaminates both sides. The capacity of humans to destroy nature with their waste renders them morally bankrupt, and the capacity of nature to function as a dumping ground renders it passive and denatured. The destruction of paradise happened not when Adam took a bite of the apple but when he dropped the core on the ground.

Waste can only be bad in this framework; it can only function as that which destroys the purity of both sides of the opposition. It is the thing that has to be eliminated in order to reestablish the essential identity and difference of each category. This tendency to blame waste uses a moral framework to explain the effects of destruction and contamination. Waste makes us feel bad, its presence disgusts and horrifies us, it wrecks everything—in these familiar sentiments badness is located in the object that disrupts purity rather than in

the relation between the person having the affect and that object. In the quest to purify, which Bruno Latour describes as a typically modern strategy, waste has no generative capacities, only destructive ones.<sup>15</sup> No wonder it is so easy to use waste to stage our anxieties about the collapse of purified categories and clear boundaries.

Yet, as Latour also argues, purification goes hand in hand with the rise of translation, or the emergence of hybrid categories that are mixtures of nature and culture. The greater the demand for sharp distinctions between nature and culture, the more inevitable it becomes that an increasing number of things will not fit easily into either category. Could we think of waste as evidence of translation, as part of this proliferation of hybrids? It certainly shows us how mixed up the categories of culture and nature are, how everything contains elements of both. The abandoned car body rotting quietly in the landscape is alive with the activity of corrosion, it's become a habitat, it looks perfectly at home, it's both organic and machinic. The shifting and contingent meanings for waste, the innumerable ways in which it can be produced, reveal it not as essentially bad but as subject to relations. What is rubbish in one context is perfectly useful in another. Different classifications, valuing regimes, practices, and uses, enhance or elaborate different material qualities in things and persons—actively producing the distinctions between what will count as natural or cultural, a wasted thing or a valued object.

If disenchantment stories deny the complexity of waste at the same time as they blame it for contaminating both culture and nature how, then, do they imagine political change? What sorts of ethico-political strategies do they propose for saving both humans and the nonhuman world? In some versions of environmentalism the strategy is to get rid of the bad thing altogether. Banish waste from the new ecological order, because when humans understand their profound connections with a resacralized nature there will be no need for waste, it will become meaningless. Nothing will be wasted; it will be reused and reintegrated into the cycle of life and endless renewal. This approach idealizes nature as a transcendent entity excluding any relation to the immanent realm of bodies and dirt.<sup>16</sup>

But would a different culture in which we lived in harmony with nature do away with waste altogether? Doesn't this simply reproduce the idea of waste as phobic objects, as essentially bad? When people declare that there should be no such category as waste a niggling question remains: Don't we need it? What

about the question of otherness or alterity? Isn't the demarcation of a world outside the self how we come to know who we are? Isn't the physical world and its alterity the "very basis for accepting otherness as such"?<sup>17</sup> Versions of environmentalism that emphasize merging with nature make it difficult to understand the function of separation as a distinct relation. Surely, what we reject is as important as what we identify with. Denying the possibility of separation in favor of connection does not allow for the possibility of having different relations with things that we frame as ontologically other. It forecloses the possibility of creating better ways of living with things that we reject as both different and redundant to our lives.

Ultimately, this vision of political change does not help me think about how our everyday ethical relations with waste might be transformed. It privileges a sacred nature as the impetus or motivation for change, and this displaces any serious consideration of how it might actually be *waste*, rather than "nature" or "the environment," that triggers new actions, that inspires us.

But the sacralization of nature is only one scenario for political change; there are plenty of others that are more modest and more familiar because they are the stuff of social marketing in the name of "environmental awareness and education." How do these campaigns represent waste? How do they configure the political? My aim here is not detailed genealogy. It is simply to examine the place of these strategies in framing or reframing our relations with waste. Across all the different genres of social marketing aimed at changing everyday waste management the mode of address presumes an autonomous subject in possession of free will and reason. This subject is seen as the owner of certain beliefs, opinions, and imaginings that need to be discarded and replaced by better, more ecologically sustainable ones. You might believe that empty bottles and newspapers are worthless rubbish, but they are really potential resources. You might regard food scraps as repulsive decaying matter, but they could be feeding your garden. The waste-making subject is invited to change his or her mind about the status of rubbish and then voluntarily transform his or her actions. These requests for change don't exist in a vacuum. They are meaningful only because of the wider context of disenchantment narratives that are deployed to morally problematize existing practices and beliefs, to justify changes—do it for the environment! And to offer the subject the experience of virtue when he or she does.

We are in the realm of voluntarism here and the assumption that opinions and beliefs are possessions that can be replaced with an act of will. The problem with this approach is that it represents reason as an exclusive property of the mind and denies the place of the body in modes of knowledge. Beliefs and opinions are embodied, they are inscribed in the ways we behave, experience, and feel. Any appeal to change our ways of living that does not take account of how we *feel* rather than just think about waste, that ignores bodies and the affective sphere, will be seriously impoverished. Responsibility and bodily responses are inextricably linked; modifications in reason alone will not change the character of social life.

Similarly, the invocation in many environmental campaigns of an abstracted “nature in crisis” that we are now morally obliged to rescue can impose senses of duty and obligation on the waste-making subject that can easily slide into resentment. Campaigns driven by the logic of moral imperatives can trigger victimization or despair: a sense that the world is unfairly imposing restrictions on your freedom and individuality; or a feeling of being impossibly overburdened with too many things clamoring for your sympathy. But it’s not just the fact of people experiencing an excess of moral claims—or *compassion fatigue*, to use a trendier term—it is also the way in which these claims are made. When nature is represented as dying we are inevitably confronted with finitude. Even when this message is tempered with images of beauty and abundance or yet another spectacular documentary on whales, it takes only one newspaper report on the last three remaining brown-nosed wombats to get that sinking feeling again.

Witnessing nature’s demise inevitably reminds us of our own. Whether this is acknowledged, even unconsciously, is impossible to guarantee. The forces of repression are powerful, especially in relation to that which threatens us most. It is easy to remain blind, to turn away, when we have so many fictions to keep death at bay: arrogant self-centeredness, nihilism. Then there is the option of converting the thing that reminds you of mortality into an object of contempt, converting the anxiety and vulnerability that something triggers in you into resentment, and thereby managing its threat—or thinking that you are. Environmental education strategies that identify waste as one of the key culprits in the demise of nature walk a knife edge between activism and resentment. Rather than inspiring positive action and generosity they can easily fuel a politics of fear and loathing, a cavalier disregard for nature that is often ex-



pressed through defensive reassertions of its status as a resource, as that which exists simply to remind humans of their superiority.

While environmental hard-liners reject educational approaches on the basis that they individualize what are really structural and institutional problems—thereby letting government and capital off the hook—my concern is with how a politics based on the imperative to reform the self in the name of nature can easily slide into moralism or resentment, distracting attention from how we actually live with waste and blinding us to the ubiquity of ethical work. In the appeal to make a grand gesture and do your bit to save the world, not only is nature once again subordinated to humans but the absolute ordinariness of managing waste is lost in a haze of righteousness.

Poor waste; environmentalism infuses it with a metaphysical dimension that makes it stand for death. Images and stories about its horrifying presence are used so constantly to stage our fears about the end of the world that its vital place in the care of the self and everyday life is consistently overlooked. In this book I want to redress this situation, to give waste the attention it deserves. My motivation is different from environmentalism in the sense that I do not see a closer analysis of our waste relations as a chance to get in touch with nature. I don't want to explain the need for changes in ways of managing waste in terms of fear and moral imperatives. Nor do I want to recuperate waste, invert its negative value to positive—though I do want to consider examples of its generative role. Standing on the edge of a landfill gives me nausea, not inspiration. Rather than rail against the effects of excessive consumption and a disposable culture (which I could easily do) or let my melancholy take over, I want to take notice of all those abandoned things. I want to think about the complexity of our relations with the material world that wasted things carry as traces on their scratched and broken surfaces. I want to investigate the ways in which objects become waste, the practices of valuing and classification that render them useless. I want to consider the historically specific network of political and cultural relations that organize the open landfill, the sewer, and the recycling bin as distinct technologies of waste management whose effects reverberate across our bodies in our daily rituals of dealing with our selves and our rubbish. The minute you start paying attention to waste a different relation with it is enacted; the chapters in this book enact that attention. They examine the effects of noticing waste, letting it confront us not as worthless detritus but as provocative things that just might make us consider what we do.

## HABITS AND ETHICS

How then to think about waste not as phobic objects but as things we are caught up with? Things that are materialized or dematerialized through actions, things that work on us and help us constitute a self? Focusing on how waste figures in our relations with our body and the world means taking seriously dispositions and sensibilities around waste. This makes it possible to see how *other* relations might surface that make new claims on us, that inaugurate different habits. Recycling and composting are already doing this in their own small way. In the demand to handle our empty bottles or newspapers differently, our relations with these formerly useless things have changed. They have now become residual resource and we have become “environmentally aware.” The ritual of rinsing and sorting has produced a new network of obligations and identities that show that the material specificities of waste are never fixed, and neither is the ethical constituency that feels implicated in it. Waste and bodies and habits are all open to immense variation, and in the emergence of new waste habits, an experiment with another social imaginary, whether it’s explicitly identified or not, lurks in the background.

What then are habits and how are they implicated in the formation of an ethical sensibility? Habits are bodily dispositions. They are the way a body is organized and moves; the way corporeality has a social and cultural memory. Pierre Bourdieu describes habits as practical techniques based on a nonspontaneous principle of spontaneity.<sup>18</sup> They are nonspontaneous because memory, social circumstance, repetition, and environment shape how our spontaneous responses and practices emerge. Habits emerge in the relational imprints of meaning back and forth among levels of the body and its environs; their sedimentation confronts us as a kind of second nature. Habits and their repeated performance help form identity, they remind us that a self is made through actions and that different bodies and selves emerge in different practices.

My aim is not to moralize habits, to insist that we change our bad practices. I don’t think that bringing morality into play with habits gets you very far. It simply infuses habits with the language of compulsion and demands that we call up our conscience and free will and control ourselves. Habits don’t work like that. Habits have a materializing power on both persons and things. They bind us to the world at the same time as they blind us to it. And this is the problem and the possibility of habits: when they break down, when some-

thing goes wrong in their routine operation, we are launched into a new relation with the world. A moralized language of habit assumes that these new relations come from a rational self who has “seen the light.” My claim is that waste and our interconnections with it, rather than abstract human reason, might have more of a role to play in disrupting habits than we ever give it credit. The waste that suddenly claims our attention, maybe by its repulsive smell, maybe by its ephemeral presence on the side of the road, can disrupt habits and precipitate new sensations and perceptions.

This movement of the senses and perception signals the terrain of micropolitics. It reminds us that this is where new techniques and capacities could emerge that change how we relate to ourselves and waste. For philosophers Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze ethics revolve around embodied practices and micropolitics of the self. They are grounded in actions and bodies rather than transcendent moral codes, and this incessant activity foregrounds the perpetual instability and ambiguity of norms, morality, and identity. Ethics are fundamental to the multiple processes of subjectification; they allow us to cultivate and organize ourselves not simply in relation to wider rules and moral interdictions but also in relation to “askesis,” or cultivated sensibilities that establish the range of possibilities in perception, enactment, and responsiveness to others. Styles of waste disposal, then, are also styles of self; in managing waste we constitute an ethos and a sensibility. Our waste habits—all those repeated routines—leave their traces on our bodies and our environment.

The world of things and the pragmatic demands they make on us are central to the formation of an ethos. And with the rise of consumer cultures we have come to live with an enormous number of things. The scale of goods for sale and the amount of objects people accumulate have produced very distinct personal and domestic habits. Caring for the self has become complicated and intensified by the sheer density and diversity of possessions. While analyses of the social and economic impacts of consumption have been great for understanding the dynamics of exchange, circulation, and use, they have been less valuable for understanding our relations with the things we get rid of. For all the talk about how we occupy consumer culture there has been a cavalier disregard for the all wasted things that form an enormous part of this way of living. This book argues that it is crucial to make sense of the distinct ethos of waste that underpins consumption, to acknowledge that how we eliminate things is just as important as how we acquire them.

This does not mean that all our waste practices can be reduced to the cultural logic of consumer capitalism—person-thing relations are mediated by a multiplicity of forces. It simply means that commodity relations are one of the significant influences shaping habits of dispossession. And the general character of these waste habits is informed by relations marked by *distance*, *disposability*, and *denial*. Consumer cultures and the technocratic logics of efficiency and concealment have produced a distanced relation with wasted things even as amounts of waste have escalated phenomenally. External systems of removal from garbage trucks to sewers have dramatically reduced the demands waste makes on us. It simply gets taken “away,” and while we know generally where it goes, the invisibility of these places, their location underground or on the margins of cities, facilitates denial or active not knowing. How exactly do the habits that distance us from wasted things become implicated in particular forms of embodiment? What sort of self do these habits shape? And in what ways could an ethos of distance, denial, and disposability be challenged?

I pursue these questions in the following chapters. The answers I develop come from close analyses of a series of strange encounters with waste. What unites these analyses is a desire to think about how unexpected experiences of waste can disrupt habits and trigger new relations and perceptions. My perceptions of waste, what it is, and what we do with it have been challenged by the examples I explore in this book. Sure, I was on the lookout for waste examples, but their impacts could not have been predicted. In trying to make sense of my responses to various wasted things, from the dancing plastic bag in *American Beauty* to thousands of perfectly rinsed and flattened milk cartons in a recycling depot in Kasaoka in Japan, I have drawn on a diverse set of conceptual and methodological tools. While some might find this heterogeneity unsettling or messy, the examples of waste explored here demanded it. This heterogeneity is a powerful reminder of the range of questions that waste provokes.

Poststructuralist political theory has been immensely important for helping me think through the relations between ethics and affect, and how our waste habits might be changed without recourse to guilt or moral righteousness. I use it in chapter 2, “Plastic Bags,” to compare affective responses to waste (from disgust to enchantment) with the moral rhetoric of a recycling education program. In chapter 3, “Shit,” the history of the sewer and Fou-

cault's concept of biopower provide important tools for examining how our bodily waste mediates the public-private distinction and produces distinct forms of embodiment. I then analyze how waste becomes a political object. Using the examples of Bondi Beach's famous POOO Parades and the toilet festivals in the slums of Mumbai, I explore how privacy is publicly constituted and how a changed ethics of waste might involve new meanings for the intimate self. Chapter 4, "A Dumped Car," looks at person-thing relations using the practices of gleaning and making do. Through the example of two remarkable documentaries about different ways of living with waste, this chapter pursues the question of what might make us notice wasted things and invent different ways of living with them. My analysis draws on recent work in studies of material culture and thing theory to investigate how waste's materiality might become present to us. In chapter 5, "Empty Bottles," the rise of recycling is the focus. I look at recycling as a distinct cultural economy that has "enterprised" both waste and subjects. The creation of a new set of socio-technical relations around empty bottles and newspapers involves new habits and bodily performances, new calculations of value, and new discourses about the environment. Finally, in a chapter called "Worms," the idea of transience is examined through the example of the humble earthworm. What worms and their endless labor breaking things down show is how biological functions can have ethical resonance. In facilitating the transition from decay to renewal, worms display an exemplary relation to loss: they show how waste can be generative. How might we adapt the earthworm's arts of transience to our own lives? How might we live in a less destructive relation with waste and loss?

So it is on various durable practices and experiments in living with waste that I want to focus in this book, small everyday gestures rather than big political campaigns. This is not to abandon environmental politics but to come at it from a different angle, to ask different questions about configurations of "the political" and to use different tools.

I want to take seriously what it means to "act locally," and this means opening up a pathway from politics to ethics that makes it possible to consider the place of minor actions and tactics in living with waste. I want to examine the ideas and beliefs that shape social behaviors around waste and how they operate as a kind of second nature, an internalized, embodied set of dispositions that organize practices in certain unconscious ways. This should

make it possible to give putting out the garbage the attention it deserves as a habit and, potentially, an ethic.

## NOTES

1. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).
2. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 35.
3. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham, NC: Duke, 2002), 9 (emphasis in the original). Massumi's argument about the distinction between social determination and sociality is especially relevant here. Sociality demands a focus on the relational, or the processes of formation in which the social is determined.
4. The work of Julia Kristeva is crucial here, specifically *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
5. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans R. Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 25–26.
6. Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 54.
7. *Active experimentation* is a term Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet use in their discussion of “Many Politics” in *Dialogues 11*, trans H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (London: Continuum, 1987), 137.
8. Paul Patton, *Deleuze and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2000), 7.
9. I take my lead from poststructuralist political theorists like Michel Foucault, Jane Bennett, Moira Gatens, Rosalyn Diprose, Paul Patton, William Connolly, and Gilles Deleuze, who all, albeit in different ways, investigate the political as a dynamic field of practices with the potential to contest dominant codes rather than a repressive hierarchy of social domination.
10. William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 176.
11. Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xii.
12. The term *disenchantment stories* comes from Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
13. Bennett, *Enchantment*, 9.

14. This is Moira Gatens's argument in *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (London: Routledge, 1996), viii.
15. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10–12.
16. Thanks to Simone Fullagar for this important point.
17. Brown, *A Sense of Things*, 18.
18. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 59.