

Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate To Rubbish* (ISBN 0868409391), Auckland, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2006, reviewed by Dr Lisa McDonald, Media Discipline, Adelaide University.

I am standing in the local supermarket while renovations are made around me. I scan my list. Things have been moved: shelves, boxes, all kinds of items. Entire walls have disappeared. I stare at grime newly exposed which has set into some type of resin. Its crusty heritage contrasts in silent relief the otherwise polished architecture of supermarket things. A woman walks past and traces the direction of my eye. She winks this at me as I catch hers: “Tsk.” And all this right here in the a/isle of bleach, inside the colony of clean. Waste is nothing if not perverse, I think.

I’ve been reading chapter two of six chapters in Gay Hawkins’ latest book. It’s called “Plastic Bags” and suggests the social life of things and ways to encounter waste which refuse the often crudely formed “command moralities” of recycling narratives (23). Out shopping I am forced to consider the spaces of plastic up close. I realise I distrust the motives behind bright green shopping bags, and not least their aesthetics—the over-code of environmental “good.” I am hopeful for intellectual support so it is a relief to be back inside plastic, to recall the pastel hues and rustling soft whites of what encase my new belongings, at times a gift for a friend, at others my garbage. My grandfather once carried flowers to my grandmother’s grave cradled within the cobalt shades of a grocer’s bag. The poetics of portability are chemically contrived, and I need this chapter.

But I do above what it appears many of us do with this type of waste: eulogise its restorative value in our lives, return it to social function and credibility, mostly to help us feel good, to make us think that our recycling habits count. I want to know that my small contribution will make a difference to the enormous problem of living in a waste-ridden world in which my waste matters. Middle-class consolation? Perhaps. With these kinds of examples, Hawkins’ text reminds me that I am caught between the “moral b(l)ind” of acute alarm over environmental pollution, a sense of intense dismay, and the sensual connotations of simple things. I want to trust the imperatives of environmentalists, but what do I do with affective synthetic inflections?

This book infuses the formation of environmentalist arguments with impetus for their interruption. But cynicism has no place. Nor is there time for stasis, for the end of waste. What happens proposes interpretive criticality alongside conceptual risk, an ethics of invention. Relations between self and waste are reconsidered at the molecular level of negotiation: a micro-heuretics for ethical movement. Can we live ethically *with* waste? And can we still dance?

In the “bags” chapter, to suggest one example, the mobility of waste is introduced through two apparently opposing moments. One reprises the affective charm of the buoyant plastic bag in the film *American Beauty*, the other tells of the Environmental Protection Authority’s call for the abolition of plastic bags. The opposition is tested by moving ethics away from the universal and transcendent model into relational practice, and by suggesting disposability as the edge of difference, as the zone of variation between self and object. Thus ethos is embodiment and differentiation, a wavering conjunction, and a moment which emphasises “paradox and ambiguity ... our shifting relational sensibilities with [waste]” (23).

In its most majestic sense, western environmentalism makes many assumptions which gesture towards a “cleaner, greener” world that is too large to grasp, too panhuman in focus. *The Ethics of Waste* articulates a vocabulary for reconsidering small waste practices as ethical in and of their singularity, and for conceiving disposability as part of our ongoing relations with “self,” with becoming-self. A notion of ethics is offered without recourse to redemptive harping by putting ethics to work, making ethics accountable to the reproductive qualities of waste where it matters: conceptually and materially, in and of our bodies—“relations between being and the world” (25). But following Deleuze, interiority is rethought as a “historically contingent discontinuous surface” (33), and disturbs the notion of interiority as the essence of being, as metapsychological consecration.

It is right, then, that this text demands pause to reconsider the intricacies of our relatedness to waste, and *if* relatedness can work in its current formation. Thus the rejection of essentialised subjectivity, and elsewhere of psychoanalysis, as good to think with are useful and assure the usually parenthesised object some play, a way to tempt objectlessness. We become entwined with “the thing,” its potent materialities are plugged in and fully charged. We are wired into dynamic withness and it works.

The compelling “thingness” of waste is considered through the films *The Gleaners and I*, by Agnes Varda, and Walpiri Media’s *Bush Mechanics* in chapter four, “A Dumped Car.” Acts of gleaning and restoration are shown to deploy a specific kind of micro-ethics, an engagement based on need yet articulated through pleasure and poignancy (*Gleaners*), and through transformation and interactive alterity (*Mechanics*): “rubbish isn’t rubbish [but] ... a literal trace” (89). And in chapter five, “Empty Bottles,” an acoustic logic invites us to listen to waste, to hear its collision with economic location through the intangibility of sonic spaces—“crash,” for example, as bottles fall into collection. Called forth is an economy of multiple choruses that urges a “shifting register of value, a *beginning*, not an ending” (93, original emphasis) to the worth of waste and the agile nature of its becoming.

In this text we learn that common waste narratives impel the dualism of enchantment or horror. We are asked to rework that binary into an ethics of inquiry and invention, and apply an organic order to the working which makes it impossible to read this book from a distance. This writing performs a poetics for considering waste drawn not from the reticent tradition, from that which would romanticise the inarticulations of waste narratives, their objectless actualities. Rather, it is vital, often mischievous writing which gets under my skin and into my bones and enables an altogether different kind of clearing, a spatial density that tells of waste as material and in(ter)corporeal, and waste as resonance in and of itself, and in and of our lives.

You can bring this text with you as you acquiesce to found objects and still come out smiling, knowing that in the process you are practising an ethics of accountability to waste and thus to yourself as agent in the real smallness of the world.