

Globalization, Consumption, and Media

Why Rubbish Matters

Most people on the planet have two things in common, both deeply embedded in the inescapably material nature of the human condition. The first is that we aspire to accumulate or possess things that, thanks to the power of market exchange in the global neoliberal economy, most often manifest as commodities. The second is that through our use, possession, and eventual utilization of those things, we produce some form of waste, which must then be disposed of. Wherever there is consumption, there is waste.

All people, from the most impoverished to the obscenely wealthy, through the day-to-day and often automatic decisions that we make, acquire things, use them, and throw what's left of them away. To date, much critical consumer culture theory has devoted attention to questions linked to the accumulation and use of things (be they defined in the material, virtual, or experiential sense). This book aims to understand the culturally shared meanings attached to the detritus that is left behind once consumption has taken place, and thereby to expand our critical thinking both about consumption and about rubbish. By better understanding the two in relation to one another, new insights will be gleaned into the futures of consumption and material culture, the latter increasingly defined by the waste that it creates. Scholars have deployed frameworks from a wide range of disciplines in order to under-

stand what objects mean to people, how and why they acquire and exchange them, and how their consumption practices fit into the bigger picture of a world shaped by the economics of late capitalism. In previous writing, I have contributed to these understandings by revealing the role that media texts, discourses, and narratives play in shaping popular, often “taken-for-granted” ideas about consumption and the individual’s place and role in the neoliberal economy. Some scholars have written about the ethics of consumption and questions of environmental sustainability in relation to consumption (Harrison, Newholm, & Shaw, 2005; Guido, 2009; Barnett et al., 2010; Smart, 2010; Carrier & Luetchford, 2012; Lewis & Potter, 2013), and others have written about the role of waste and garbage in material culture studies, media studies, geography and anthropology, and cultural philosophy (as the rest of this chapter explores in detail). However, not enough theoretical work has yet been done about the role of postconsumer trash in the neoliberal age, and specifically about how that role—or those roles—are narrated in such a way as to enter the popular imagination and shape and define cultural discourse.

This book aims to fill that gap. It focuses on the question of what waste means in relation to consumer culture. More specifically, it asks how popular media narratives about postconsumer waste create and share specific notions about consumption and neoliberal culture. Through this intellectual project, the book makes an original contribution to the areas of consumer culture studies, visual culture, media and communications, and cultural theory, through a critical analysis of the ways in which waste and garbage are visually communicated in the public realm. Although building on and speaking to much important work in a wide range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary spheres of knowledge, this book is the first to explicitly link media discourse, consumer culture, and the cultural politics of garbage in contemporary global society. Each of these things has been written about individually at length, but the current moment in cultural theory and the politics of survival—which some theorists summarize as the age of the Anthropocene (Steffen, Crutzen, & McNeill, 2007; Smith & Zeder, 2013; Zylinska, 2014; Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016; Wark, 2016; Dellasala & Goldstein, 2017)—calls for an attempt to bring together the big questions that scholars are asking about media, waste, and consumption into an exploration of how waste is mediated, and to what extent those media narratives connect consumer culture with the environment and the sustainability of the human species.

This chapter provides a review of key literature dealing with garbage from

a variety of disciplinary perspectives, and makes the argument that there has been a lacuna in theorizing garbage from the cultural, media, and discursive perspectives. Although garbage dumps, recycling systems, and the various individuals and communities who live in and off them, have been studied in detail from sociological and anthropological perspectives, in media studies little has been written about representations of garbage, save the use of “trash” as a metaphorical category for analyzing issues of class, for example, in talk shows (Manga, 2003). Building on my previous work, which examined the mechanics of consumerist discourse (Iqani, 2012), and the complex meanings of consumption in the global south (Iqani, 2016), this book will continue to politicize consumption, in global and cultural context, by turning attention to what is left behind after consumption has taken place. In the context of rapidly dwindling natural resources and increasingly extreme attempts to extract the fossil fuels that remain in the earth and under the oceans, a global population that is projected to have grown by another two billion souls within the next twenty years, and the many, intensifying ways in which consumption is being centered in narratives of what development and the “good life” means, it is increasingly important to consider the “other” side of consumption: those material formations of waste, garbage, and trash that accrue once human actors have accessed, enjoyed, and disposed of the many commodities that they want and need in their lives.

Waste interjects not only into our material spaces and experiences, but also into our mediated lives and representational spaces. When we look around us, at the highly mediated cultures in which we exist, it may seem that narratives of production, wealth, commodities, and their consumption dominate popular culture narratives. But arguably, with an increase in environmental awareness, knowledge about climate change and the growth of what could be termed an apocalyptic mentality (often reflected in dramatic films, novels, and television shows imagining the world in some state of postcollapse), the materiality of trash is becoming less hidden and more visible. Admittedly, narratives about the waste created by consumer culture are not a particularly overriding theme in popular media. Our screens, retail spaces, and virtual experiences remain dominated by narratives of celebrity, sexiness, and a world of glossy artifacts calling out to us to own them and achieve happiness, no matter how fleeting. But still, through this clatter of consumerist discourse, constantly being shaped and reshaped by economic and political power, constantly being integrated and deployed in different ways in personal psychologies, lifestyles, and

identity projects, we can easily find a number of narratives in which postconsumer trash takes the stage. It is these narratives—purposefully selected for analysis—that form the material explored in this work.

At the end of all commodities' lives (and therefore consumption trajectory) are obsolescence, abandonment, and waste: the trash heap. It is arguably impossible to consider a culture of waste apart from a culture of materialism and consumption. To what extent do narratives about the material detritus of overconsumption fit into—and disrupt—glossy, hyperreal neoliberal discourses about consumer culture? Increasingly, through lifestyles centered around ethical consumption, popular critiques of hyperconsumption, and the rise of green consciousness (at least among the middle classes that most media forms serve), narratives about waste are coming into the public domain through various forms of representation, from fine art to popular culture. Waste enters the public imagination through a number of media forms and genres, often closely linked with particularly moralizing discussions about ethical consumption and the sustainability of the planet. What other narratives link waste and consumption? And, what else can be learned from looking at different ways in which garbage and waste are visualized and narrativized in popular media and culture?

Through the focus on the mediation of postconsumer trash, this book aims to explore pressing questions about the sustainability of consumer culture and by extension the entire system of global neoliberal capitalism. This takes place through the examination of three discrete, yet interrelated, thematic realms, each dealt with in a separate chapter. The first asks about the possibilities and limits of individual agency and action in relation to sustainable modes of consuming, producing, and working with waste. To what extent is the “problem” of trash something that can be solved by individual attitudes and deeds? How do these possibilities and limitations shift, depending on the geographical, class, and social context of agency and activism? These questions are explored through case studies relating to media narratives about recycling and waste reduction undertaken by diverse subjects in diverse locations. The second theme asks how the waste produced by luxurious consumption and hedonistic cultures is both talked about and denied in popular communication narratives. In what ways is waste talked about and represented in relation to pleasurable consumption? This question is explored through case studies linked to pleasure-seeking entertainment and music festivals as well as tropical island tourism, specifically Western media narratives about beach cleanups. The third theme aims to explore the media aesthetics of wide-scale

environmental devastation, asking how complicity and hope are integrated into narratives about oil spills and plastic islands in the oceans, and how these are related to ideas about consumer accountability or recklessness. To what extent are optimistic and pessimistic attitudes, along with invitations for imagining responsibility, affect, and scale, integrated into media narratives about these planet-wide issues? And in turn, how is consumer culture included or excluded from this bigger picture?

Together, the focus on these three themes—individual agency and recycling, hedonistic consumption and its aftermath, and huge-scale devastation and the shadow of consumerism—allows for a new set of arguments about waste and its place in the popular imagination and the media matrix of consumer culture to emerge. In each thematic chapter, a number of different case studies are selected, dealing with media narratives and discourses linked to each theme, ranging from stories of agency in relation to recycling, different ways in which waste is aestheticized when it is used as a raw material for art making, how hedonistic practices of luxury island tourism and festival going are narrated in relation to waste, and how fossil fuel-based forms of environmental devastation are visually narrated. These case studies are purposefully selected from a variety of global contexts, allowing the analysis to travel from New York City to Pune to Johannesburg, from the Tankwa Karoo in South Africa to tropical Indian Ocean islands to the pastoral hills of Glastonbury in England, and into unpeopled ocean-scapes littered with oil or plastic. What links these case studies is that they are in some way *mediated* (Silverstone, 2005; Chouliaraki, 2006a)—that is, brought into the public eye through technological forms of communication and mass dissemination—and that they in some way include garbage in their narratives. Through these case studies, this book offers a “tour” through some of the key ways in which garbage has been mediated in recent years.

At this point it is useful to address the methodological and analytical approach taken in the book. The work reported on here draws on media discourse analysis and an ethnographic sensibility in order to develop narratively grounded cultural theory. Rooted in a qualitative epistemology, and seeking to explore big conceptual questions, specific case studies of media representation were selected for analysis in each thematic chapter. These case studies were purposively chosen on the basis of their relevance to the themes of individual agency, hedonistic consumption, and the aesthetics of environmental catastrophe. The content of each case study—comprised of specific media texts drawn from specific publicly available media sources—was then interpreted using

tools of visual, multimodal, narrative, and discourse analysis, and put into dialogue with one another. In general, it is worth noting that wherever possible, these analyses were socially contextualized, sometimes through my own lived experiences relevant to the particular case study (for example, in chapter 2, media texts about Afrika Burn and Glastonbury Festival are discussed, but I have attended both festivals and was therefore able to add a little observational detail to the analysis), but mostly by making links between the case study and the cultural politics of the society in which the case study is embedded. It is certainly not possible for qualitative analysis to be objective; arguably it is the very subjectivity of its approach, and its grounding in a reflexive sensibility, that brings much of its analytical power. Of course, it is inescapable that my own intellectual and social predilections will have had some influence over the analysis offered in these pages. Many of the case studies I encountered through my own lived experience, both social and intellectual, and indeed my choice to focus my academic efforts on understanding them represents an important opportunity for the theoretical and the personal to come together in a meaningful way. It is very difficult to write about consumption and waste without reflecting on what consumption and waste mean to one's life, person, household, and community. Precisely because this book theorizes and politicizes the mediation of waste through an analytical framework tied to big philosophical questions about the role of consumer culture in human life, and the concomitant role of human consumption in the devastation of the planet, it requires a degree of personal involvement. In the same way that consumption is inherently tied to ideas of agency and individuality, so too is the waste produced by consumption. No theorist or author can be considered apart from the topics of which they write, especially those that are so closely tied to notions of the self and its place in the world. These big questions can be hard to hold, both in terms of the multiple theories and philosophical traditions that they call up and in terms of the deep emotional anxiety they inevitably touch (about the futures of the planet, the human race, other species, our own families and friends). Although I cannot claim to have fully resolved these theoretical complexities and anxieties, in this book I have explored them as thoroughly as I am able to, by bringing the methods of media discourse analysis into dialogue with auto-ethnographic and reflexive sensibilities. My intention was to write as critically and honestly as I could about what the stories of waste that we tell ourselves in turn can tell us about what consumption means to the self and to the environment and to the relationship between the two. The work presented here is therefore at once reflective, analytical, and exploratory, and it is aimed

at opening up new avenues of theory and discussion about the links between consumption, waste, and the environment.

The rest of this chapter is devoted to constructing a theoretical framework that offers philosophical orientation points within which we can position ourselves intellectually and ethically in relation to garbage, in both media form and content. The discussion is also aimed at contextualizing the case studies and analyses that follow, and making a broader case for the importance of including questions of mediation in intellectual work aimed at making sense of this critical moment in which humankind finds itself: the Anthropocene.

There are many words that are used to describe the leftover matter that marks human life and activity. As such, it is necessary to consider the terms that will be used in this book. According to Rathje & Murphy (2001: 9), in the American context the words “garbage,” “trash,” “refuse,” and “rubbish” each have specific meanings, and are not interchangeable. In line with technical definitions used by municipal workers and council waste collection systems, *trash* is defined as dry waste (that is, any item that is inorganic, such as discarded packaging), while *garbage* refers to wet waste (that is, most often the remains of food as well as other kinds of organic detritus). *Refuse* refers to both wet and dry items (that is, a mix of trash and garbage), while *rubbish* refers to refuse that has been combined with construction debris. Although these precise terms are useful in a technical sense, they are most relevant to the bureaucratic systems designed to collect and dispose of various forms of domestic and industrial waste in urban environments. To the nonspecialist, the terms are likely used interchangeably in everyday talk. Users of American English are likely to prefer the terms *garbage* and *trash*, while users of British English are likely to prefer the term *rubbish* or *refuse*. Considered together, the “simplest definition of waste is discarded, expelled or excess matter,” and “while terms like ‘rubbish’ or ‘litter’ describe the random by-products of daily life, ‘waste’ invokes a much more complicated set of meanings” (Hawkins, 2006: vii). *Waste* is often used to gesture back to the excess matter produced by various industries, such as nuclear, medical, or construction waste, whereas *litter* is often characterized as the individualized dropping of excess matter in public space (rather than a dustbin). In this book, at times the specific meanings of each term as outlined above will be deployed in relation to discussions of specific case studies. But in more general theoretical observations and explorations, the terms *rubbish*, *trash*, and *garbage* will be used more or less interchangeably, to mean in the general sense the excess matter produced by various forms of human production and consumption. After all, the aim of

this book is not to describe in detail the technical processes and bureaucratic vocabulary deployed by those whose task it is to dispose of waste, but to think through the broader cultural and consumerist implications of how narratives about waste enter the public realm through media, and what this in turn can tell us about the current moment in the human condition.

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF GARBAGE

This book focuses exclusively on media representations of garbage. As such, it is necessary to clarify how media representation is defined and deployed, and why media images and narratives of garbage specifically matter. Much important work has already been done, bringing together the realms of media studies and environmental studies in different ways. Some take a focus on matters of political communication in relation to risk and environmental pollution (Hook et al., 2017), while others focus on the impact of the infrastructures of media technology on the environment (Cubitt, 2005; Gabrys, 2013; Rust, Monani & Cubitt, 2015; Starosielski & Walker, 2016). Other works explore the ways in which media texts and technologies impact on and intersect with environmental activism and communication (Pickerill, 2010; Graf, 2016; Newlands, 2018). Another important link between media studies and environmental studies is work that looks at *greenwashing*—when corporations seek to make their brands seem environmentally friendly or aligned to sustainable values (often without a direct link to their actual practices and actions on the ground) (Greer & Bruno, 1998; Pearse, 2012; Bowen, 2014). Some companies use “tokenistic” eco-projects to improve their image to environmentally conscious consumers, and these corporate branding efforts need to be firmly theorized as a media practice. Furthermore, it is arguably important to consider practices of “greenwashing” and corporate social responsibility as linked to longer histories of paternalistic philanthropy and patterns of public relations strategies aimed at benefiting the bottom line (Littler, 2008: 57–60). As Jussi Parikka writes, media technologies themselves have a “geology,” that is, were partly made from compounds extracted from the earth (Parikka, 2015), and leave behind on and in the earth very material, often toxic, remnants (Jucan, Parikka, & Schneider, 2019). It also worth noting that the term *media environment* is often deployed to mean the totality of mediated texts, technologies, and interfaces that surround individuals in their everyday lives, particularly in the digital age (Press & Williams, 2010). Of course, this specific correlation between the terms media and environment is not the one intended to be ex-

plored in this book, though an argument could be made that it is precisely in the all-encompassing media environment that representation about the environment can be said to matter more than ever.

This book concerns itself with representations of rubbish rather than actual garbage. It has been observed that “it would be a blessing if it were possible to study garbage in the abstract, to study garbage without having to handle it physically” (Rathje & Murphy, 2001: 9). This wistful observation comes from the leaders of a long-term research project based at the University of Arizona, in which they studied, quite literally, trash. The researchers systematically collected a wide variety of household rubbish and industry waste from the landfill, and took it to a specialized research site at the university in order to carefully comb through it to learn more about domestic habits, patterns of consumption and disposal, and what those things in turn said about the condition of humanity in the United States. The physical waste produced by human activities is very repellent: it is comprised of decomposing and rotting materials. Every manner of waste produced by us combines, over time, into one quite abhorrent materiality in the garbage dump. There, things decay over time: foodstuffs rot and give off foul odors, attracting rats, flies, and other vermin; metals rust and become toxic; papers and cards become soggy and disintegrate; and other materials, such as plastic, change shape and become dull and broken (although not breaking down into constituent matter for many hundreds of years). The approach taken by the Garbage Project was to look at, touch, smell, sort through the garbage that they collected, and to try to return the otherwise assimilated state of the garbage into clear typologies and categories in such a way that light could be shed on the scope of American material culture. This approach is not altogether alien to those researching and doing media and cultural studies. Indeed there was a time when paparazzi journalists would go through the bins of celebrities in New York city (Rathje & Murphy, 2001: 17), seeking clues for stories that could be written that would shed light on the hidden secrets of their private lives. Indeed, some became so adept at the “art” of going through the garbage cans of celebrities and finding “gold,” such as a half-written letter from Bob Dylan to Johnny Cash, that they began to refer to themselves as “garbologists” (Weberman, 1980).

Although the Garbage Project researchers (Rathje, 1984; Rathje & Murphy, 2001; Lehmann, 2015) might consider it an extremely timid approach to developing critical understandings of trash, this study focuses instead only on rubbish in the abstract, that is, on representations of rubbish. This is not to say that studies of actual garbage are no longer relevant—indeed they are, es-

pecially in the current moment in which awareness about trash, and the fact that there is no “away” to which we can throw anything, is growing. Rather, it is to note that garbage is not only a material experience, but it is also something that enters very strongly into our popular cultures and shared social discourses. Theories of representation hold that forms of narrative and visual communication do not merely “reflect” the “real” world, but are deeply involved also in constructing it (Hall, 1997). In other words, a social constructionist theory of media representation requires an acknowledgment of the important role that communication plays in producing shared understandings of reality, the things that are “taken for granted” as “common sense” within cultures. From this perspective, the argument needs to be made that media representations of garbage are a key site in which the social reality, and therefore the cultural politics, of garbage is produced. The link that I am making here between garbage and discourse is not new: “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 [. . .] akin to the operations of ‘discourse’” (Hawkins, 2006: 8).

In her important 2006 book, Gay Hawkins considers a range of cultural and media representations of trash, looking at case studies of images of plastic bags as well as documentaries about sanitation, as part of a project aimed at considering the ethics of waste, and how more public orientations can be introduced into private practices. Undoubtedly, “waste has become visible, a landscape in its own right” (Hawkins, 2006: 30). Some scholars of the Anthropocene have given a little attention to media narratives about waste. For example, Tim Morton comments on the animated film *Wall-E*, in which a lonely little robot is the last sign of life on a future earth overrun by garbage, to the extent that the humans exiled themselves to live on corporate-sponsored space ships (Morton, 2013: 23; 2016: 147). Brian Thill writes about the place of waste in science-fiction narratives, arguing that even though waste is aesthetically eliminated in most of the fantastical worlds constructed by authors and makers of television, in more postapocalyptic narratives, such as Neil Blomkamp’s film, *District 9*, “waste serves as a useful counterweight to the genre’s own longstanding interests in exploring the limits of those gleaming futures” (Thill, 2015: 47). Edward Humes claims that one of the “enduring effects” of “the golden age of television and mass marketing” was “helping bring about an American trash tsunami” (Humes, 2013); in other words, he

argues that it is the consumerist messaging of mass media that contributed to disposable culture. Much attention has also been paid to various art forms constructed with waste, or commenting on rubbish (Vergine, 1997, 2007; Scanlan, 2005; Whiteley, 2010; Pájaro, 2015). Environmental activists usually consider media to be an educational or activist tool, which should be deployed in order to raise awareness about environmental problems among citizens, and pressure governments into creating better policies (DeLuca, 2012). These various existing perspectives on the links between media and waste are quite minimal, and more work needs to be done in order to explore the various ways in which rubbish is integrated into narrative and artistic forms. As such, it is necessary to pay more attention to the precise ways in which media discourses talk about and show garbage. This will allow the extension of the project of considering the ethics of waste and wastefulness as Hawkins argues we should, not simply as a tool for changing policy and educating people, but so as to be able to consider how very powerful discourses about consumption interface with those ethics and co-construct broader social understandings about the links between what we consume and rubbish.

It is also crucial to recognize that media texts and technologies themselves produce inordinate amounts of rubbish, from the mountains of unsold newspapers and books that are sent for pulping to the tonnes of obsolete electronics destined for specialized dumps, where they may be stripped and recycled—or not. As Jennifer Gabrys writes in her important book about the material and cultural formations of waste created by the disposal of obsolete electronics, or e-waste (Gabrys, 2013), the tools that we use to access and consume a wide variety of media content produce many types of material residue. Indeed, the media industries, broadly defined to include all forms of technological manufacture of the devices that we use to compute data and communicate and share information, in combination with consumer culture and planned obsolescence in production of tech gadgets, is a primary cause of material waste. This is perhaps one of the most poignant places at which the real and hyper-real intersect (arguably a key feature of the world according to media theory). Without the material devices that we use to download and upload; publish, share, and like; watch and stream; comment, troll, and interact; the “hyper-real” world of representation would not be possible. It relies on the material devices as well as the material networks of communications (the servers, cables, routers, transmitters, and power chargers) to exist. And in turn, without our growing dependence on mediated forms of culture, politics, and econom-

ics, and increasingly interlinked forms of textuality and communications, the mountains of obsolete and broken television sets, keyboards, monitors, tablets, and so on would not be accumulating on the surface of the earth.

Alongside this important understanding of the direct link between media and waste, this book makes the claim that it is crucial to consider discourse and representation in the study of garbage in contemporary culture, drawing on cultural and media studies perspectives on visual communication (Matheson, 2005; Machin & Leeuwen, 2007). It is necessary to center media narratives in the intellectual project devoted to explicating and forging an ethics of waste, rather than consider them peripheral or tangential to it, because a significant proportion of public life is socially constructed through a wide variety of media practices. This media-centric view is something that some scholars, particularly those working within the disciplinary frameworks of sociology and anthropology, may disagree with. But the number of writers from those disciplines regularly drawing on media-based material, without methodological rigor or application of media theory, reveals at best an unwillingness to engage rigorously with media studies and at worst disciplinary snobbery. Media representations, and practices linked to the ever-proliferating range of media spaces, platforms, and technologies, are inherently social and play an active part in the production of social, political, economic, and cultural systems (Silverstone, 1999, 2013; Couldry, 2000, 2010). As such, focusing on media discourses about garbage allows us to open a window into shared ideas about what they mean, and also consider how ideas about waste are collectively produced and disseminated. Rather than consider the media simply as playing roles of education (Rathje & Murphy, 2001: 5), in which trash is seen as a social problem and communications campaigns are seen as a solution to changing people's behaviors, it is crucial instead to think dialectically about representation and materiality. Waste is both real and represented, and the representation of trash contributes to its realness, and vice versa. As such, examining how rubbish is represented allows for the meanings encoded in those messages to be analyzed, and for insight to be gleaned into how broader social meanings about garbage are constructed and disseminated.

History always tends to globalize reality into its own form, but as soon as the possibility of waste is taken into account, it seems that some sort of mediation becomes necessary, that some linkage and narrative desire are in turn produced. The result is a proliferation of stories, of narrativity without

linearity, multiple narratives within singular voices and without ultimate agency. (Neville & Villeneuve, 2012: 5–6)

The rest of this chapter offers a theoretical framework for analyses of media representations of garbage. This framework is constructed from a wide variety of scholarly work, drawn from multiple disciplinary sources. There are four aspects to the framework, which can be thought of as nodes in a conceptual network spanning from ideas of selfhood through to ideas about universality: materiality and morality, identity and individuality, toxicity and domesticity, and space and time.

MATERIALITY AND MORALITY

Linked to theories of the Anthropocene (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016; Wark, 2016), and revisiting theories that all human cultures are inherently material (Miller, 1994, 2010, 2013), a synthesis of work on garbage from the social sciences helps to sketch out the place of waste and trash in human societies writ large (Rathje & Murphy, 2001). In consumer culture studies, waste and garbage are flagged as indicators of the unsustainability of wasteful, Western modes of consumption (Littler, 2008: 1). Often Western-style consumption is held up as an example of the environmental and ethical dangers of consumer society, and much angst is expressed about the move of the global south toward intense industrialization and how consumer markets are growing rapidly postcolonial societies. Green or ethical consumption (Brown, 2013; Haenn, Harnish, & Wilk, 2016) centers a responsible moral position in relation to waste and is often held up as the most viable solution to overconsumption and the growing rubbish-islands in oceans and piles of trash on the peripheries of cities. As Jo Littler writes, ethical consumption runs the gamut from choosing “fair trade” products, to boycotting certain brands, to recycling, and it is necessary to explore how “radical” these forms of consumption actually are, or whether they offer a sop to the middle classes and a convenient new form of branding (greenwashing) for big corporations (Littler, 2008: 2). Littler’s contribution to cultural theory allows us to see the direct link between environmental problems (including the mess created by waste) and consumption, and shows how various forms of ethical behavior or messaging are tied into to the existing political-economic structures of mediated consumer culture. Her work invites us to explore the extent to which individual actions and moral positioning can “solve” the problem of overconsumption in a world with finite resourc-

es. In particular, it begs the question of how trash can be morally positioned, and understood to be linked in different ways, to larger structures of power.

Rubbish calls up, perhaps most acutely, the material condition of consumer cultures. Although huge amounts of effort and resources are invested by corporate actors into creating glossy fantasy worlds and narratives of hyperreal commodity perfection, in garbage we encounter the detritus of the commodity. In the crushed plastic water bottle littering the street side, we see the truth of the object that the branding tried to obscure, claiming it to be pure and sourced from unblemished nature. We see an item, used once and discarded, perhaps to be recycled, more likely to sit in a rubbish dump without decomposing for hundreds of years. Similarly, in the wrecked carcass of a crashed car, we can recognize the inherent fallibility of that shiny object marketed to fulfill all dreams and transcend all limitations. Precisely due to its extreme materiality, garbage reminds us how important it is to center theories of material culture in our analyses of consumerism. The study of material culture is rooted in archaeology. Interestingly, archaeology is more or less the study of trash: “the discipline that tries to understand old garbage” (Rathje & Murphy, 2001: 10). “The creation of garbage is the unequivocal sign of human presence” (Rathje & Murphy, 2001: 10) and as such the study of garbage holds the key to past (Rathje & Murphy, 2001: 11). The material detritus left behind by past civilizations functions as data that can be analyzed in order to gain deeper insight into how those societies organized themselves and what daily life was like in a different age.

As archaeologists and anthropologists have long recognized, material culture provides evidence of the distinctive form of a society. It provides this evidence because it is an integral part of what that society is; just as the individual cannot be understood independently of society, so society cannot be grasped independently of its material stuff. (Dant, 1999: 2)

Materiality then, is a key to unlocking the secrets of how a society is structured and what values it prioritizes. But, even though “material culture is never distinct from language or interaction,” it “ties us to others in our society” (Dant, 1999: 2). Each human collective forges ways of being through the things that they make, use, exchange, and dispose of. In the same way that the contemporary archaeologist sifts through the leftovers of past civilizations in order to glean insight into their workings, our contemporary societies are also “always in the process of becoming the past” (Rathje, 2004: 406). “The archaeologist must work back and up from the material remains” (Knappett,

2011: 3)—but this raises the questions of how we work with those “remains” when they surround us in the immediacy of our lived present. Some scholars have considered these questions and have initiated studies on the archaeology of the garbage that lives on the dumps at the edges of our cities. For example, archaeologists have bored into the Fresh Kills rubbish dump in New Jersey in the United States (Rathje & Murphy, 2001; Melosi, 2016). The deeper they drilled into the landfill, the further back in time they went as each deeper layer of the dump revealed—like time capsules—items from the 1970s, then the 1960s, then the 1950s, then the 1940s . . . What this shows is that archaeological methods focusing on material items, often discarded, can be examined in order to gain insight not only into times long passed but also into our current lifestyles. In addition, it reminds us that despite the constant focus we give to the aesthetic, psychological, and intellectual aspects of our lives, still they are ultimately constituted materially through the various objects that populate our everyday lives. How then can we theorize the materiality of trash?

The things we call our waste exist in an interzone between two states of mind and two structures of feeling about the glittering, shattered object-worlds we have built around ourselves. These relics float between the poles of desire and discard. (Thill, 2015: 8)

The commonsense understanding of garbage is that it is the substance we usually want to remove from our sight. In contemporary cities, this equates to taking it away to landfills on the peripheries where the material is piled up, sometimes covered with earth, but more or less just left to slowly decay. But we did not always seek to have our detritus removed far from our sight, or seek to distinguish ourselves as moral, ethical, or radical consumers on the basis of much or how little waste we create. There is archaeological evidence that humans used to live with their waste—that is, simply leave it on the floor of their abode and when it became too much, it was simply covered it up with more clay, thus raising the levels of the floor surface (Rathje & Murphy, 2001: 35). In some cities in the world, trash is a daily visible presence (consider the perpetual piles of black trash bags on street corners in New York City, or the litter that patterns road verges in Mumbai). In other cities, any trace of detritus is systematically removed in an obsessive way, such that not even a scrap of paper is visible to the naked eye (e.g., in Singapore, where it is illegal to import and sell chewing gum and tossing a candy wrapper on the street can lead to a \$300 fine). Precisely due to the bureaucratic, spatial, and technical systems that modern humanity has invented to remove garbage from our homes and

cities, “contextual analysis of our material products will be extremely difficult for future archaeologists” (Rathje, 2004: 404). The taking away of trash from everyday life means that it is more challenging to use trash to understand it; and as such the impulse to examine media representations of rubbish becomes all the more compelling.

Rubbish presents not only an opportunity to understand material culture, but also to expand our theorization of it. To do this, we “need to review the relationship between mind and matter, between agent and artefact” (Knappett, 2011: 3). We need to recognize that “objects are routinely, mundanely part of everyday existence” and that in tandem with this mundanity is the capacity of “even the most commonplace object to symbolize the deepest human anxieties and aspirations” (Woodward, 2007: vi). Indeed, “to study the objects themselves, and people’s relations with them, is an effective strategy for understanding modern consumption and indeed culture broadly” (Woodward, 2007: vii). This is arguably even more the case when considering the materiality of trash. “The age of these things and the very fact of their having been used may make them unattractive to others but does not mean that for us they are no longer useful” (Dant, 1999: 38). Trash can be put to use in order to help us learn more about our deepest anxieties and aspirations than can be made possible by analyzing the new commodities in their original forms, because it is in expenditure that the true emotive and material value of an object becomes known.

With the rise of consumer culture we have come to live with an enormous number of things. [...] For all the talk about how we occupy consumer culture there has been a cavalier disregard for the all the wasted things that form an enormous part of this way of living. (Hawkins, 2006: 15)

A culture of disposability was one of the main legacies of the Industrial Revolution and the growth in middle classes and consumption opportunities particularly in the West (Strasser, 1999). Disposable culture originated in the nineteenth century (Rathje & Murphy, 2001: 41) and it remains to be seen whether it will persist into the twenty-first. The increasing visibility of trash, both in public spaces and in media narratives, means that there is also a growing awareness about the moral implications of that rubbish—that it links in very tightly with our accepted ways of life, and is not simply something that needs to be managed by urban and city bureaucrats but toward which entirely new collective and individual orientations need to be forged.

In other words, it is the very materiality of wasteful consumer culture that requires some kind of moral response. It is no longer acceptable or possible to lack consideration about the scale and type of waste produced by consumption, and 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” (Hawkins, 2006: 15). This new ethic has emerged partly thanks to the rise of environmentalism (Haenn, Harnish, & Wilk, 2016). Prior to this, waste was framed as a “*technical* rather than a *moral* problem” (Hawkins, 2006: 29). But it has increasingly become framed as a problem that can be solved by individual consumer choices. As Jo Littler writes, ethical orientations toward consumption are one of the popular culture responses to the moral problem of, among other environmental problems, rubbish. While some consumers may seek to differentiate themselves from the problematic aspects of consumption through the choices that they make in relation to fair trade, the environment, recycling, and so on, they are still using “consumption as a means of self-fashioning” (Littler, 2008: 8), and thus remain embedded within the strictures of neoliberal consumer culture. And, while ethical consumption may indeed allow new ways to think about social responsibility, it also introduces questions about whether the labeling of certain forms of consumption behavior “ethical” empties out the notion of ethics entirely (Littler, 2008: 11). In the same way that certain consumption behaviors can be theorized within ideas of ethics and morality, as Littler shows, so too can certain behaviors oriented toward rubbish, be considered. And these need to be understood in dynamic tension with the materiality of trash itself, as it is its precisely overwhelming and apocalyptic materiality that forces the moral dilemma into consumer behaviors and identities.

Questions of materiality and morality are central to examining the different ways in which trash, and narratives about it, are made visible and invisible in different ways. Part of this project requires a commitment to dissecting the moral complexities inherent in that in/visibility. Precisely because “material culture ties us to others in our society providing a means of sharing values, activities and styles of life” (Hawkins, 2006: 2), thinking about materiality forces us to also think about morality in more concrete ways, because when the cause of the moral dilemma is material, then so too should be our responses to it. And this takes us toward the question of how to theorize the roles of identity and individuality, specifically forms of subjectivity and agency, in the mediation of trash.

IDENTITIES, INEQUALITIES AND INDIVIDUALITIES

How does the individual fit into the system of consumer culture and its inherent inequalities? More specifically, how does the individual fit into the economics of disposability and waste? And how, in turn, might identity be shaped and influenced by theorizing the cultural politics of rubbish?

Contemporary commercial and advertising discourses privilege the idea of newness, and encourage people to see themselves as supremely deserving of any and every pleasure for which they might find a whim (McCracken, 1990; Mattelart, 1991; Goldman, 1996; Nava et al., 2013). There is a strong sense in contemporary consumerist theory that commodities play a role of helping to define identity, and that individuals exercise agency when they choose which commodities and items they introduce into their lives. The processes of accumulation and consumption have been well theorized and explored in the literature in relation to identity (Du Gay, 1996; Slater, 1997; O'Dougherty, 2002; Iqani, 2012). In short, we are what we consume. In a similar vein, Gay Hawkins argues that practices in relation to waste also forge subjects: "what we want to get rid of also makes us who we are" (Hawkins, 2006: 2). If both of these propositions are true—that subjectivity is forged both through what we acquire and enjoy and what we use and dispose of—then we can find an important conceptual overlap between practices of acquisition and disposal. It is arguably our "ordinary encounters" with both commodities and waste that "are implicated in the making of a self" and that "mediates relations to our bodies, prompts various habits and disciplines, and orders relations between the self and the world" (Hawkins, 2006: 4). It is crucial, especially in the current moment, that studies in consumer culture and consumption integrate the materiality of waste into theories of consumer subjectivity, in a way that lets us get past moralistic arguments about consumption as the root of all environmental evil. Conscious individual choices are made not only in relation to which commodities and services to acquire, which brands with which to form relationships, which celebrities and social media influencers to follow or emulate, but also in relation to how we dispose of (or repair, reuse, gift, or recycle) the things we no longer have a use for. "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" (Hawkins, 2006: 5). The affect of waste—that is, the at once emotional and embodied politics of how waste makes us feel and our actions in relation to it—is also a key area in which new theories are needed,

both in order to understand how to drive positive change at the individual (and ultimately collective) level, and to deepen our understandings about how the material worlds within which we are rooted shape our notions of self. Consumer-centered forms of activism have been theorized as “a form of affective citizenship, an ethos of egalitarianism and a shift in the political mindset from public to private spaces and actions” (Lekakis, 2013: 141). Conceptualizing rubbish as a materially part of, not apart from, consumer culture, requires an expansion of theories of affect in relation to rubbish to encompass not only disgust but some kind moral response.

Although neoliberal culture profits off the fantasy that accumulation can be limitless, and encourages consumers to center that idea in their relation to the many commodities on constant offer on the shelves, web stores and media representations—which I have termed the *world of goods* (Iqani, 2012)—there are only so many of each thing that a person can own. Extreme inequality means that many people are too poor to afford even the most basic necessities, which are increasingly privatized and marketized rather than made available through public services. Meanwhile, the one percent are so wealthy that they can afford to collect multiple versions of similar items, from shoes to cars (Dorling, 2015). And those in between find themselves in a constant effort to both climb the social ladder of accumulation and not slip down to a more precarious condition. There is a strong class association with consumption (Bennett et al., 2009; Baviskar & Ray, 2011; Brosius, 2012; Alexander et al., 2013), but we also need to theorize the class aspects of disposal. It is no accident that the rich rarely have to deal with their own rubbish, while the poor have to deal not only with their own but with everyone else’s, too. As such, when considering the links between identity and garbage, we need to take into account social status; class; socioeconomic conditions, both historical and contemporary; and other social power structures that shape economic opportunity, such as race, gender, caste, religion, and sexuality. Speaking rather parochially of the American context, it is argued that “everyone seems to realize that we can’t just keep consuming—and discarding—more and more commodities; everyone seems to realize that if the rest of the world were to follow our consumerist lead, we’d be in disturbing straits indeed” (Rathje & Murphy, 2001: 2). What is being alluded to here is a situation in which every human being on the planet consumes and throws away as much as the average American. The United States arguably taught the world that “more” is “better” (Smart, 2010: 224). The reality of the garbage-ification of American culture is not something that exists in a vacuum. Part of the reason that Americans

have been able to create and dispose of so much trash with so much impunity has to do with the inequalities of the global political economy in which the wealthy West enjoyed the fruits of a consumer economy built on the exploitation and suffering of citizens in the rest of the world. If every country in the world evolves into a consumer-driven economy in which even modest aspirations for social mobility and the improvement of life are wrapped up in commodity and material cultures (Iqani, 2016)—as seems to be the case in more and more locations—then we are looking at future urban landscapes defined by growing garbage dumps, litter, and wildly unsustainable forms of consumption. As I have written about elsewhere, in the global south, increasingly a “better life” is being defined in public media spaces as one that provides full access to consumption opportunities (rather than, say, forging a society in which collective needs are provided for through good-quality public resources and institutions). This is not to suggest that all consumption is “bad,” but, rather, to sound the call for the need to consider the geopolitical implications of endless growth in production and consumption. If the current trajectory continues, then we can conceive of a future in which every person on the planet has full access to middle-class style consumption. This means unimaginable quantities of waste. The more we consume, the more rubbish we create, and thus it follows that questions about what to do with that trash will become central to various consumer individualities and identities. This is not to suggest that it would be preferable for those aspiring to middle-class lifestyles to be denied the opportunity to fulfill those aspirations, which they surely deserve just as much if not more than those privileged by histories of exploitation, but to insist that as scholars we have a responsibility to retheorize what subjectivity, individual responsibility, inequality, and agency mean in relation to trash-based consumer cultures.

While some people are hoarders, and have a psychological block against throwing anything away (Humes, 2013: 13–15) and others, often the extremely rich, enjoy increasingly elaborate collections of stiletto shoes, sneakers, toys, clothes, or even cars, most ordinary consumers have a limit—financial and spatial—to how many things they can own. Production-oriented capitalism comes up against the problem of too much supply and not enough demand. The solution devised for this problem of overproduction was advertising—a sophisticated form of communication aimed at emotionally and psychologically manipulating people to believe that they wanted or needed certain items (Ewen, 2008), and to form relationships of aspiration with certain brands and products. In addition to this, strategies of built-in obsolescence (Zallio & Berry,