

***Is there an emancipatory ontology of matter? A response to Myra Hird***  
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As a long-time member of the waste studies fan club, I read Myra Hird's "Knowing Waste: Towards an Inhuman Epistemology" with great interest, and I hope readers of *Social Epistemology*, and Myra herself, will forgive me a polemic tone for the sake of inciting discussion. Such debates can only be good for waste studies and for scholars interested in developing nuanced understandings of materiality.

In this article, Hird demonstrates that one of the key definitional aspects of waste, trash, garbage or litter,<sup>1</sup> is that it is indeterminate — essentially never fully knowable — and that when determinacy is foisted upon it environmental problems ensue. She argues that the significance of waste for feminist epistemology is in illustrating the environmental and political advantages of recognizing indeterminacy by rendering matter/nature/waste/the body an active partner in the knower-known relationship.

This argument is made in three parts:

1. To know waste is to make this indeterminate object determinate.
2. The way to demonstrate that trash is indeterminate is to describe the materiality of landfills, and how they are indeed not containable in both senses of the term.
3. Feminist epistemology advances by knowing as a nonhuman, but that knowing is never complete: meaning and matter co-constitute each other. This inhuman epistemology has emancipatory potential.

Let me attend to each in their turn.

**The indeterminacy of waste**

Anthropologists and sociologists have long talked about waste's indeterminacy. They did this primarily in terms of liminality, namely its easy slippage from one to another side of key dichotomies: efficiency/inefficiency; usefulness/uselessness; order/disorder; gain/loss; clean/dirty; alive/dead; fertile/sterile, etc. (Gille 2007). For Hird however the indeterminacy comes not from the social and cultural registers in which waste is interpreted but from its ontology: its constant "liveliness" and thus its never-fully-predictable material nature.

Hird argues that to know waste — or anything, really — is to make it determinate. That something is determinate, in this context, means that it is fully knowable, rather than fully assignable to one or another side of the binaries listed above. As we know from the Frankfurt School and, more recently, from governmentality studies, the reason to insist on knowability is to render practices aimed at mastery over nature, in this case waste

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of consistency I will follow the author in treating these terms as synonyms.

management, possible and legitimate. Already in 1992 Gourlay identified what I would call a penchant for operationalism (Marcuse 1964) in our conceptualization of waste: most lexicons have no general entry for 'waste', instead they immediately refer the reader to other entries such as radioactive waste, air pollution, etc. What Gourlay (1992) found problematic in this practice was that by breaking up the concept of waste — which he preferred to simply define as "material we failed to use" — and spreading it over dictionary entries on distinct tasks of 'waste management', the waste problem was presented as not only manageable but already being managed, thus always potentially solved.

For me, as a sociologist, producing this type of knowledge about waste is problematic for another reason as well; namely, that this expertise implies that what is at fault is the material: it is toxic, it is useless, it is stinky and there is just plain too much of it. This is what Hird refers to when she quotes others stating that "waste is not, it becomes," and I have called "waste fetishism" (Gille 2010).

However, unlike Gourlay and the Frankfurt School for whom forced and false determinacy was one mode of knowing — applied in the interest of a particular intervention, for Hird, it is knowing *per se*. That is, rendering determinate is the only way to know. I disagree with this implicit definition. There are many other modes of knowing that take place outside laboratories: that of so-called lay people coming into contact with waste: scavengers and, really, anyone who consumes and thus discards.<sup>2</sup> Statistical (see below), spiritual, religious, or artistic ways of knowing matter and waste are not necessarily interested in denying or reducing indeterminacy. In fact one could say that artists who come to know waste by enrolling it in their various aesthetic projects do so exactly because they want to interrogate the nature of its indeterminacy both as material and as signifying object (See the excellent documentary *Waste Land* or Ilya Kabakov's oeuvre). But we don't have to call on the exceptional to refute this definition of knowing. The kind of experimentations with waste in which consumers engage in their various ways of grappling with its materiality, worth, temporality and spatiality — of which we have wonderful ethnographic accounts from Gregson (2007) and Evans (2012) — all testify to the existence of other modes of knowing.

Besides the reduction of all knowing to making determinate, the other problem with focusing on waste's indeterminacy is that it eliminates waste's uniqueness so that the author's promise to use waste as "an epistemologically privileged resource for understanding what individuals and communities are all about" (Spelman 2011 quoted on page 456) remains unfulfilled. If all matter is "always-already" indeterminate what is it that waste offers to our understanding of matter or to advancing feminist epistemology? Rather than reducing waste to matter (even if to one with a redefined ontology) what we need (exactly because of the waste problems Hird lists) is not less but more specificity and more concreteness.

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<sup>2</sup> On the relation between consuming and discarding see Hetherington and Gregson.

## **Waste vs. landfills**

So why the focus on landfills? Don't wastes have this stated exuberance in other spaces as well? Or is the focus on landfills because of the greater number of factors contributing to and constituting this vibrancy (bacteria, hydrology, humidity, temperature, etc.), which in turn makes the ontological point (about indeterminacy) easier to prove? Or, is it because with landfilling Hird can justify the focus on scientific rather than other modes of knowing? If we focused on the kitchen, other parts of our homes, or workshops and plants where reuse and recycling are the main activities, and where scientific modes of knowing are not hegemonic, would we still be correct to reduce knowing waste to making it determinate?

Waste exists in many spaces and places, and there are those social constructionists who say that what makes waste is not its particular materiality (such as dirtiness or toxicity) but its spatiality. Mary Douglas's (1966) definition of dirt as matter out of place indeed inspired many of us in waste studies. So, arguably, there could be a theoretical justification for this switch from matter to space. Without such a justification, however, it is problematic to use landfills to demonstrate waste's indeterminacy exactly because landfills are where waste is no longer seen as out of place. If waste is not by essence waste but it becomes waste, then what is needed is to demonstrate by what practices in what other places the matter that ends up in landfills was made into waste to begin with.

## **The Emancipatory Potential of Indeterminacy**

While Enlightenment thinkers saw an emancipatory potential in the presumption of total knowability, the Frankfurt School — whether through Horkheimer and Adorno's (1944) concept of Myth, Adorno's (1966) concepts of non-identity and negativity, or Marcuse's (1964) concepts of operationalism and one-dimensionality — instead demonstrated that this presumption is easily adaptable for new modes of domination. Hird is in implicit agreement with this argument. But she takes it too far: rather than calling for and making space for other modes of knowing for emancipatory purposes she argues that we "simply" need to recognize and give voice to the inherent nature of matter as always-already indeterminate. That is, she shifts the weight of the argument from epistemology to ontology and she does so despite her gestures in favor of transcending that (yet another) dubious binary.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps this is not unique to Hird: there is a powerful lineage of feminist theory — from Fox Keller's (1985) project to erase the subject-object hierarchy in more relational ways of knowing, through Haraway's (1991) Coyote/trickster, Butler's (1990) heterosexual

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<sup>3</sup> There are two arguments that tell me she is interested in dissolving the epistemology/ontology dichotomy: one is the claim, following Barad, that what we encounter as matter (solid, finite, concrete, obvious) is always just a particular and temporary way in which meaning sutured matter. Another is a call for knowing from the inside of matter/waste, and the only way to avoid this becoming another instance of human exceptionalism is to say, as she does relying on Barad, that matter also "knows" in the sense of making (others and itself) determinate. Which is why she calls this inhuman epistemology. However to say that matter can and does do this is already an ontological claim.

matrix (which, after all, is a matrix of intelligibility), or Bennett's (2010) concept of the aleatory — that has created a favorable predisposition in us feminists to approaches that see in various embodiments of indeterminacy — such as hybridity, liminality, creolism or indeed the figure of the queer — an inherently transgressive positionality. So to paraphrase the slogan of the 1980's standpoint epistemology (women have a privileged access to truth), this new foundationalism would put another claim on its bumper sticker: "indeterminables have a privileged access to truth".

I fear however the unintended theoretical and practical consequence of prejudging the political valence of these ontological positions. Of the theoretical danger we were warned already in the 1980s by Harding, who noticed a striking resemblance of the epistemologies of the oppressed: "people (men?) of African descent and women (Western?) appear to have very similar ontologies, epistemologies, and ethics, and the world views of their respective rulers also appear to be similar" (1986, 165). They all seem to share a penchant for particularity, for irrationality or multiple rationalities, for the local, for relation (rather than detachment), etc. Are we now adding indeterminacy to this list? And more importantly, by equating human/male exceptionalism with forcing determinacy on the inherently indeterminate haven't we painted ourselves in the corner so that now we have no choice but to ally ourselves with indeterminacy?

As for the practical unintended consequences, embracing indeterminacy could not be more consequential and potentially more disastrous than in the field of waste studies and waste policies. A key source of powerlessness of residents, activists and some policymakers in their dealings with industrial waste has been exactly that what is determinate has been made indeterminate rather than the other way around. Let me elaborate.

Toxic wastes, nuclear wastes, and a host of industrial by-products are actually quite determinate: while they may never be fully known in some theoretical sense, we certainly know *enough* about the dangers some of them or some of their key components pose. The question is not whether they are made determinate but whether they are made determinate enough to warrant regulation. Producers of waste, however, are interested in keeping the exact composition, the exact effects, and the exact amount of these by-products unknown. What are the concrete instances of making the determinate indeterminate in waste politics?

First, just like climate skeptics, producers can postpone greater scrutiny or even just more thorough testing by arguing that there is no scientific consensus on the matter at hand. Second, when asked to provide formulas or samples to establish a consensus there's a swift declination citing industrial or trade secrets or security risks arising from the disclosure of technological information. Third, it is common for producers to dilute or temporarily change the chemical or physical properties of effluents and wastes before inspections. Fourth, statistical data on wastes is based on producers' self-reporting. Fifth, different countries have such widely different ways to classify, identify, and "count" their wastes, that any national or temporal comparison is rendered haphazard. Without making wastes more determinate in these ways, international action on regulating the production

and distribution (or better said dumping) of wastes is difficult if not impossible. Sixth, these incommensurate classifications are constantly subject to change, which further hinders the collection of data necessary for regulation and new policies. The data published by OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) and the European Environment Agency have so many qualifying footnotes that their explanation takes up more space than the tables themselves. Two different teams in the European Environment Agency drew the conclusion that the respective waste data are not sufficient to allow valid comparisons either cross-nationally or longitudinally (Brodersen, Crowe, and Jacobsen 2001; Weinbach 2001).

Embracing the indeterminacy of waste thus cuts both ways: it can be used to point out the limits of waste management experts' haughty reassurances, which is how Hird proceeds, but it can also undermine the popular epidemiology (Brown 1992) practiced by victims of toxic landfills.<sup>4</sup> What they need is more, not less determinacy.

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<sup>4</sup> For a particularly incisive look at the ontology of those bodies and their political effects, see Richard Newman's (2012) essay.

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