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Ocean or Oubliette?

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Ocean or Oubliette?

Abstract

There is now enough plastic in the world to wrap the entire planet. Plastic is now so pervasive scientists are saying that it is a new geological marker. And no part of the planet has been more affected by the spread of plastic waste than the ocean. Eventually the things we dispose of will dispose of us. We are suffocating the planet in our toxic waste. The ocean, as vast as it is, has somehow slipped from view-it is used as a dumping ground for all kinds of waste, and it is steadily dying, but no-one seems able to raise a hand to help it. In part this is a problem of sovereignty. All nations claim their piece of the ocean, but none own it outright. And now that it is in trouble we must ask who is responsible for fixing it? Global warming is a problem of rubbish-it is caused by the by-products of what we do in our daily lives. We generally expect others to change so we can stay the same, but what would get us to change everything, including ourselves? In critical theory there are essentially only two answers to this question: we either do what we know we must (Kant's categorical imperative is the sine qua non of this position); or we do what we feel we must (Bennett's vital materialism is in many ways the sine qua non of this position). Adherents to the latter view of things describe it as either embodied or material and they castigate adherents of the categorical view for being either disembodied or immaterial. The limits of the former are that it is idealist and, in being so, implicitly tyrannical because the set of things we must do are not defined or decided upon by ourselves. They are instead imposed from the outside and often without any awareness of or interest in history or indeed culture.

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■ Ocean or Oubliette?

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Abstract

There is now enough plastic in the world to wrap the entire planet. Plastic is now so pervasive scientists are saying that it is a new geological marker. And no part of the planet has been more affected by the spread of plastic waste than the ocean. Eventually the things we dispose of will dispose of us. We are suffocating the planet in our toxic waste. The ocean, as vast as it is, has somehow slipped from view—it is used as a dumping ground for all kinds of waste, and it is steadily dying, but no-one seems able to raise a hand to help it. In part this is a problem of sovereignty. All nations claim their piece of the ocean, but none own it outright. And now that it is in trouble we must ask who is responsible for fixing it? Global warming is a problem of rubbish—it is caused by the by-products of what we do in our daily lives. We generally expect others to change so we can stay the same, but what would get us to change everything, including ourselves? In critical theory there are essentially only two answers to this question: we either do what we know we must (Kant's categorical imperative is the *sine qua non* of this position); or we do what we feel we must (Bennett's vital materialism is in many ways the *sine qua non* of this position). Adherents to the latter view of things describe it as either embodied or material and they castigate adherents of the categorical view for being either disembodied or immaterial. The limits of the former are that it is idealist and, in being so, implicitly

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tyrannical because the set of things we must do are not defined or decided upon by ourselves. They are instead imposed from the outside and often without any awareness of or interest in history or indeed culture.

Keywords: assemblage, ocean, matter, plastic, waste, pollution

There is now enough plastic in the world to wrap the entire planet. Since the end of WW2 five billion tonnes of plastic has been produced and it is expected that by the end of this century the total output will exceed 30 billion tonnes. Plastic is now so pervasive scientists are saying that it is a new geological marker. They used to look at gas rings in the ice; henceforth they'll look for layers of plastic. And no part of the planet has been more deeply affected by the spread of plastic waste than the ocean (McKie). The ocean is so vast many people seem to think there is room enough in it, like the oubliettes of ancient times, for all the toxic things we want to forget we ever manufactured or needed. Today it is used as a dumping ground for all kinds of waste, and it is steadily dying, but no one seems able to raise a hand to help it. In part this is a problem of sovereignty. All nations claim their piece of the ocean, but none own it outright, so none are willing to take on the responsibility of saving the ocean.

There can be few messier or more urgent problems facing the world today than the state of its oceans. Eventually the things we dispose of will dispose of us. We are suffocating the living creatures on this planet with our toxic waste. Global warming is itself a problem of rubbish—it is caused by the by-products of what we do in our daily lives. How urgent is the situation? Callum Roberts provides some context: “The last two hundred years have seen marine habitats wiped out or transformed beyond recognition. And with an ever-accelerating tide of human impact, the oceans have changed more in the last thirty years than in all of human history before it.” Needless to say that change has been anything but beneficial. Indeed, it has been nothing short of devastating, and the carnage continues. “In most places, the oceans have lost upwards of 75 percent of their megafauna—large animals such as whales, dolphins, sharks, rays and turtles—as fishing and hunting has spread in waves across the face of the planet.” For some species numbers are down by as much as 99 percent and there are dozens more that have literally disappeared (3). And that doesn't even begin to cover the full extent of the destruction. One must also mention algal and jellyfish blooms, acidification, coral bleaching, the appearance and spread of deoxygenated “dead zones,” rising water temperatures, and the incredible volume of biological and non-biological pollutants and rubbish that has been pumped into the ocean without a second thought for either the present or the future. “Yet outside the world of marine science, this global catastrophe pass[es] largely unseen and unremarked” (2).

One might say the same of that other global catastrophe that very few people in power want to see, but the sad fact is the destruction of the ocean is only partly attributable to climate change. This is not to say climate change isn't wreaking havoc on life beneath the world's blue expanses, because it most certainly is, and its effects have been amply documented. But long before scientists noticed that

the earth's atmosphere was heating up, the ocean's biomass was already failing rapidly due to a deadly combination of chronic overfishing and unchecked pollution. If we focus on climate change and ignore overfishing and pollution, it will be disastrous for the future of the ocean because, even if we were to attenuate or better yet halt climate change, the ocean would still be in desperate need of our help. Fish stocks have fallen so dramatically that in many cases they will never recover, regardless of what we do. Indeed, in most cases it has reached the point where only a long-term moratorium on fishing would be sufficient to begin to reverse the effects of population decline. And even then, that would only work in places where the ocean hasn't been rendered toxic either by the presence of pollution or an overpopulation of predators such as jellyfish, which under bloom conditions can exterminate all other lifeforms in their vicinity as they have done in the Black Sea.

The islands of rubbish floating in the oceans today have gotten so outsized they are literally beyond remedy. If we do not address these issues on a planet-wide basis, then irrespective of what we do on the climate change front the ocean will die. It is no exaggeration, then, to say that today the ocean needs us, particularly when it comes to the already insurmountable, but steadily worsening, problem of rubbish, where the scale of the problem has grown so large it is difficult to comprehend, much less imagine, a workable solution. The gyre in the north-east Pacific is now known as the Great Eastern Garbage Patch. It has become an enormous meshwork of flotsam—largely plastic rubbish—the size of Texas. “Just like the mats of floating seaweed that so amazed the sailors of old, great rafts of plastic, fishing line, nets, ropes and a thousand and one other bits of junk have accumulated within the gyres” (Roberts 144). This cesspool of waste spells death to the marine creatures forced to try to live in its midst. Leatherback turtles and Laysan albatross, to name but two species, are steadily vanishing from the earth because they cannot distinguish between inedible plastic and nutritious food.

Closer to shore, the problem is just as great, and though this land-based rubbish is undoubtedly more visible than the rubbish-choked gyres in the middle of the Pacific, it does not appear to have attracted any more attention, much less urgency of action. Again, the scale of the problem is difficult to comprehend. For example, a 2001 survey of the beaches in California's Orange County estimated that there were 150,000 items of visible rubbish for every kilometre of beach. For the county as a whole this amounted to over 100 million pieces of rubbish. But this is barely the tip of the iceberg because most plastic rubbish is too small to be seen by the naked eye. Sometimes referred to as mermaid's tears, billions upon billions of micro-sized pieces of plastic, the raw materials of the plastics industry, are washed into the ocean every day, some remaining at the surface, forming “strange attractors” for all the toxic scum floating elsewhere in the ocean, some falling to the

bottom, some just drifting endlessly.¹ Microplastic is in many ways an even more pernicious problem than the regular-sized plastic rubbish problem because it means toxins are entering the eco-system at the bottom of the food chain which means, as Rachel Carson instructed us half a century ago, its effects are multiplied exponentially at every step up the food chain. By the time it gets to humans it has become many times more toxic and deadly (50-60).

We are often told that the problem with plastic rubbish, in particular, is that it takes thousands of years to degrade, the implication being that plastics might be tolerable if they were to break down more rapidly. But it turns out this isn't true. Plastic does break down, and much faster than we've been given to expect, particularly in seawater, and when it does it amplifies the problem of ocean-borne rubbish by serving as a kind of magnet for toxins. The particles of biodegrading and fragmenting plastic

are not just harmless roughage. They concentrate toxic compounds on their surfaces, sometimes to levels a million times or more above concentrations in the seawater around them [...]. In one Japanese experiment, polystyrene beads soaked in seawater for several days picked up PCBs. When they break down, plastic particles release toxic compounds like flame retardants, styrene, phthalates and bisphenol A into the sea. (Roberts 147)

The latter is used to coat the inside of cans used for food, but has been banned in most first world countries because it has been discovered to have endocrine-disrupting properties. Marine life eats this plastic and then at some point enters our food chain, thus completing the vicious circle of toxins out and toxins in.

To address any of these problems we need to—as Naomi Klein puts it—*change everything*.² Neither climate change nor the death of the ocean can be averted by individuals—not even millions of individuals—shopping for “sustainable” commodities and being conscientious about reducing packaging and recycling the recyclables. We're not going to be able to shop our way out of this slow-motion catastrophe. We need to change the way we think about what life means—we need to ask ourselves what we owe the planet and act accordingly. If we take seriously the imminent threats to life on earth, then we are called to change our understanding of how our lives on this planet can and should be lived. This goes beyond individual life-style choices. It has to do with the premise and structure of the global economy and the imperative to grow, to put profit before everything else, including life on earth. As Klein puts it, everywhere on earth our economic system, contemporary capitalism,

¹ “An alarming new twist is that most cosmetics manufacturers now add sub-millimetre-sized plastic granules to hand lotions and face creams. They are too small to be filtered out by sewage works, and most particles are washed to sea, where they can be ingested by tiny plankton, which mistake them for food like copepods or fish eggs” (Roberts 148).

² From the title of Klein's book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*.

is at war with the planet. Unfortunately, it seems Fredric Jameson was correct in quipping that we find it easier to imagine the end of the earth than the end of capitalism because we seem to prefer to do nothing to change the way things are.

That failure of imagination may well be the death of us all as a species. And Jameson is doubtless correct in insisting that failure of the imagination is one of the more pernicious ills blighting contemporary society. We seem to be incapable of imagining something better than what we have, except in the highly localised sense of a new commodity. The irony of this is that our imagination is impeded by an unwillingness to give up on the world we have—we are deeply attached to all the apparently “good” things capitalism has to offer, from smart phones to refrigerators and cars. It isn’t hard to understand why we should be so attached to these things capitalism has provided; they offer a great many highly desirable affordances. They have enabled us to create a world in which the needs and especially the comforts and conveniences of individuals are uppermost. It is against this that we have to measure our demands on individuals to change their behaviour—when even separating one’s own trash is made to seem like too much of an ask, then what hope does the planet have?

Thus, there is probably no more important critical and political question today than this: What prompts us to act? What would get us to change everything, including ourselves? In critical theory there are essentially only two answers to this question: (1) we either do what we know we must (Kant’s categorical imperative is the *sine qua non* of this position); or (2) we do what we feel we must (Bennett’s vital materialism is in many ways the *sine qua non* of this position). Adherents to the latter view of things describe it as either embodied or material and they castigate adherents of the categorical view for being either disembodied or immaterial. The limits of the former are that it is idealist and, in being so, implicitly tyrannical because the set of things we must do are not defined or decided upon by us. They are instead imposed from the outside and often without any awareness of or interest in history or indeed culture. Not only that, imposed rules are not rules that we necessarily feel ought to be heeded, so they do not necessarily compel action. They are dry and abstract and often feel outdated and in need of revision, so we ignore them (Hawkins 1-18).

Against the categorical imperative, materialism in its many guises has tried to elaborate a theory of ethics built on the idea that “we” respond to things and that our response to things contains the seeds of a new way of thinking about contemporary life. This is the position of Gay Hawkins in *The Ethics of Waste*. This position unsettles me, however, because I cannot bring myself to trust in the idea that a global feeling for rubbish will arise to save us from what we throw away. And though this is a slightly glib—throwaway, if you will—way of putting things, there

is nonetheless a serious point here. The material turn in contemporary critical theory stakes our future on the collective “us” noticing and responding to things, but it is by no means clear that this can be relied upon to motivate us to act, much less inform us how we should act. One of Hawkins’s key theoretical touchstones is the work of Jane Bennett who, as it happens, opens her book *Vibrant Matter* with an anecdote about rubbish. Doubtless her remarks are only intended to set the scene for her discussion of what she calls vital materialism rather than carry the weight of that discussion, but to me it’s precisely the throwaway way she treats the problem of rubbish that is the problem. Bennett writes:

On a sunny Tuesday morning on 4 June in the grate over the storm drain to the Chesapeake Bay in front of Sam’s Bagels on Cold Spring Lane in Baltimore, there was:
 one large men’s black plastic work glove
 one dense mat of oak pollen
 one unblemished dead rat
 one white plastic bottle cap
 one smooth stick of wood

Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick. As I encountered these items, they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing—between, on the one hand, stuff to ignore, except insofar as it betokened human activity (the workman’s efforts, the litterer’s toss, the rat-poisoner’s success), and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits or projects. (4)

She goes on to say that the debris caught her eye in the way it did

because of the contingent tableau that they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather that morning, with me. For had the sun not glinted on the black glove, I might not have seen the rat; had the rat not been there, I might not have noted the little bottle cap, and so on. [. . .] In this assemblage, objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them [. . .]. (5)

Unfortunately, she does not say anything more here about the nature of the relationships between these items and the street, or the weather, or indeed herself, save the way they caught her eye. In point of fact, the only reason she thinks of the items as an assemblage is because her glance happened to take them all in at once. Bennett attributes her perception of these objects to a happy combination of her own perceptual openness and what she calls the “thing power” of the objects themselves.

The somewhat surreal-sounding concept of thing power is said to call “to mind a childhood sense of the world as filled with all sorts of animate beings, some human, some not, some organic, some not. It draws attention to an efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve” (20). Bennett experiences an epiphany of sorts to the effect that, as she puts it, it hit her “in a vis-

ceral way how American materialism, which requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever shorter cycles, is *antimateriality*" (5). This idea is echoed in Hawkins's work. Hawkins argues that humans consume as though their consumption is immaculate and does not produce waste. We delude ourselves into thinking that, when we throw trash in the bin, it is somehow thereby "taken care of" and we don't give a second thought to the eventual resting place of that trash. Not only that, we tend to think of trash "as simply a natural outcome of human existence; life inevitably begets rubbish" (Rogers 27). Therefore we are not really obliged to think about it, any more than we think about the many other facets of human existence that in the first world (at least) we assume we are entitled to and tend to take for granted—the air we breathe, the water we drink, the sunshine on our backs, and the ground beneath our feet. We assume all these things will be life-sustaining, but that assumption no longer holds. The reality is that our disregard for what happens to our trash is jeopardizing our existence to the point where, as Paul Virilio so memorably puts it: "One day the day will come when the day won't come" (vii).

Bennett's work raises several questions, besides the question of whether or not a contingent tableau can truly constitute an assemblage, which I'll leave aside. To begin with, there is the idea of "thing power" itself, which strikes me as an oddly inert conception of power inasmuch as it does little more than call attention to itself, and even then only when our perceptual apparatus is properly primed to notice it. If thing power depends on perceptual priming, then it is hard to see how one can maintain the idea that it is in fact a power. By the same token, if we only notice things because they have thing power, then what must be said of all the things that we do not notice? Are they without thing power? If so, who decides? Is it only in the eye of the beholder? Can powerless things acquire thing power on their own or does it require a perceiving subject to bestow it? Even if we set aside these questions, for which no obvious answer appears to be forthcoming, it is still hard to see what actual purpose it serves, in a critical sense, because all it seems to do is point in a very conditional way to a process by which we become aware of a thing's existence. Given this rather banal function it is somewhat surprising to find that, for Bennett, thing power is the central plank in the ethics of what she calls vital materialism. Ethics, she says, begins with "the recognition of human participation in a shared, vital materiality. We are vital materiality and we are surrounded by it, though we do not always see it that way. *The ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality*, to become perceptually open to it" (*Vibrant Matter* 14; italics mine).

The ethical significance of the perceptual openness and heightened "awareness" of nonhuman vitality that Bennett calls for here is debatable because there is no

clear link in her thinking between awareness and action. But more to the point, and this is my real concern, it is hard to see how this could be scaled up to a planet-wide action. As several commentators have pointed out, particularly with respect to social media, raising awareness is not by itself either an ethical or political act because it does not entail any specific form of action. There can be few people in the well-informed first world who are not aware of such major issues as climate change and the steady destruction of the earth's habitats from the Amazon rainforest to the deep sea, yet little or nothing is being done or even demanded at a geopolitical level to change this situation. This is not to dismiss the occasional victories won against this or that development, whether it is a new coal mine in a heritage listed rainforest or a new channel dredged through a delicate estuary, but it is to say these campaigns all fall a long way short of the general uprising required to "change everything." Even if one concedes awareness is a necessary precursor to action, it is not the same thing as saying it is a sufficient cause of action. Interestingly, Bennett herself seems rather unsure of what vital materialism's ethics in fact is because elsewhere in her book she says—in a puzzlingly tentative way—that perhaps "the ethical responsibility of an individual human now resides in one's response to the assemblages in which one finds oneself participating" (*Vibrant Matter* 37). This is in many ways far less satisfactory than the original formulation because all this amounts to saying is that perhaps one ought to look out for oneself.

The key question, for me, is what does Bennett mean by "participating" when she says the "ethical responsibility of an individual human now resides in one's response to the assemblages in which one finds oneself participating" (37), because it seems to suggest that the assemblage is always somehow pre-given, an existing arrangement of things that one enters and responds to like a player in a virtual reality game such as *Second Life*. Bennett's political sympathies are clearly reformist not revolutionary. She can envisage changing things and upsetting the status quo, but not overturning everything and starting again as some more radical environmental thinkers, Naomi Klein among them, are beginning to demand. This was made clear in an earlier work, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, written a decade before *Vibrant Matter*, in which Bennett wrote that she believes that "a modified organisation of commodification and advertising could respond to the structural injustices in existing patterns of consumption [which she acknowledges includes the production of waste] without seeking to eliminate the enchanting effects of commodities. It is the form of commodification, not the fact of it, that is problematic" (114). Her rationale is that commodity capitalism is not the "totalizing power" it is said to be by its critics and defenders alike and that within it there is always a positive ethical potential that we can exploit in order to move it in a direction more in tune with the needs of environmental sustainability, and

what might be termed social justice (115).

The idea that there is such a thing as an ethical form of capitalism is surely the most pernicious of all the social and political fantasies circulating today because it obscures the most basic of Marx's lessons, namely that capitalism is inherently exploitative inasmuch as the employers always derive greater benefit from labour than the people who perform that labour. There is no way round this basic fact. Inequality is the engine that drives the machine of capitalism. And false consciousness is what prevents us from seeing this. To which we must add David Harvey's important insight that significant sections of contemporary capitalism derives its profits by externalizing its costs—it doesn't pay either a full or fair price for the resource it extracts; it doesn't pay either a full or fair price for the infrastructure it relies on for its business (e.g., roads, railway lines, and ports); and it certainly doesn't pay either a full or fair price for the waste it produces, or the environmental damage it causes.³ Climate change is seen as the price "we"—i.e., all the living creatures who dwell on planet earth—pay for economic prosperity. These are old lessons, to be sure, but as Naomi Klein's recent writing on climate change makes clear, they're as fresh and as relevant now as they ever were. As she puts it,

Ours is a culture of disavowal, of simultaneously knowing and not knowing—the illusion of proximity coupled with the reality of distance is the trick perfected by the fossil-fuelled global market. So we both know and don't know who makes our goods, who cleans up after us, where our waste disappears to—whether it's our sewage or electronics or our carbon emissions. (168)

If the ethical task is to respond to the assemblage we are participating in, then that surely means we have to start with the assemblage we are all participating in, namely the planet as a habitable place. What does responsibility entail in this context? On big questions like this, vital materialism's ethics is anaemic, particularly when compared to more didactic and unforgiving systems such as Kant's "categorical imperatives." If things have thing power—why don't these things awaken any ethical feeling of responsibility? Indeed, why don't they awaken any feelings at all? Awareness is not a feeling. It may be a precursor to a feeling, but by itself it is blank, nothing more than a general preparedness to feel. One can see this clearly in the way Bennett speaks about her awareness of the objects encountered on Cold Spring Lane in Baltimore. Not a little surprisingly, it does not awaken feelings of grief or sympathy for the dead rat, which is treated as detritus (like all the other objects in her contingent tableau) and evidence of an unknown rat poisoner's success. But not as a once-living creature whose death is

³ This is a recurrent theme in his work, but for a succinct explanation of his position see Harvey.

to be mourned, or at least pitied. Given that the central goal of vital materialism is to perceive the life of all non-human things, including those things which are not usually considered to have a life, such as inorganic matter (e.g., bottle caps and plastic gloves), it is perhaps to be expected that it would not single out the rat as a once-living creature and thereby accord it “special treatment,” but that does beg the question: what is the ethical value of the heightened perceptual awareness Bennett associates with thing power if it fails to perceive a difference between the living and the non-living?

What I find most frustrating in Bennett’s account of her encounter with rubbish on Cold Spring Lane in Baltimore, however, is the complete absence of any discussion of the ethical implications of the fact that what she encounters *is* perceived as rubbish. She says nothing about the fact that the items are perceived as not only being without any value in themselves, but as having no possible value in the future or any possible further use. They are simply there and one expects nothing of them, neither to remain there nor to disappear. In describing the items as debris she explicitly frames them as the by-product of some kind of destructive episode that drained them of their value. And though she attempts to recall, dimly, some of the processes that might have led the items to being there, she does not thereby endow them with value. They are simply a “heap of fragments” to recall Jameson’s discussion of contemporary art in *Postmodernism*. In Jameson’s view, art no longer requires us to reimagine the lifeworld of its representations as we did, say, in the case of Van Gogh (6-10). Nowadays art objects are simply there and we make sense of them, or not, according to our own lights and not by power of our historical imagination. At the back of this then is Jameson’s diagnosis of the contemporary world that it has forgotten how to think historically. I am tempted to say the same diagnosis can be made here because Bennett’s analysis of the objects she encounters displays the same lack of interest in history that Jameson diagnoses in postmodern art. And while she offers an oblique acknowledgement that contemporary consumer culture is a frame—in Butler’s sense—in which one has to situate any possible discussion of these objects, she does not make the obvious connection that as a participant in consumer culture, however conscientiously, she is nonetheless a cog in the machine that sustains what she refers to as American materialism.

The unasked ethical question here is this: Are we responsible for the rubbish we encounter? Although she doesn’t take up this question herself, Bennett’s vital materialist ethics would suggest that we are responsible for the rubbish we encounter. However, she does not specify where that responsibility begins and ends. Although Judith Butler’s project is quite different from Bennett’s, I want to suggest that it is nonetheless instructive to read their work together here because Butler’s concep-

tion of ethics also turns on the power of things to capture our attention, but in contrast to Bennett she prioritizes the living and she attaches action to awareness. She writes:

If certain lives are not perceivable as lives, and this includes sentient beings who are not human, then the moral prohibition against violence will be only selectively applied (and our own sentience will only be selectively mobilized). The critique of violence must begin with the question of the representability of life itself: what allows a life to become visible in its precariousness and its need for shelter, and what is it that keeps us from seeing or understanding certain lives in this way? (*Frames of War* 51)

Consistent with the vital materialist way of seeing things, Butler's ethics places the onus on the perceived object to awaken in the perceiver the ethical sense of responsibility and obligation to act. The difference is that the ethical task for Butler does not stop with merely opening oneself to an awareness of nonhuman vitality, but also insists that an awareness of any form of vitality must also entail taking on responsibility toward that vitality and a general acceptance of the proposition that all forms of life are inherently precarious and requiring of our care. This ethical task is thrust upon us, unbidden from a "nameless elsewhere," interrupting the normal course of our lives, binding us to act in spite of ourselves (*Precarious Life* 130). Butler's name for this feeling is grief. But we may generalize and simply say that it is a mode of ethics that the world *demand*s of us the moment we perceive that some part of it *needs* us.

This is perhaps the moment to turn to the issue of what advantage there is to be had in calling Bennett's "contingent tableau" an assemblage. It seems to me Bennett's insistence on the randomness of both the encounter and the things encountered functions as an explanation and alibi for the fact that neither the encounter nor the things encountered excite any kind of a response from her. She is unmoved by the death of the rat and she is uninterested in the source of the items she finds with the rat because she does not think of herself as either the cause of the objects being where they are or responsible for and before the objects that she encounters. She is willing to acknowledge that her perception of the contingent tableau is central to its existence as an assemblage, but not that the objects have any claim on her save her attention. If this is the case, if the elements in her assemblage make no claim on her, if they are merely random objects randomly encountered, then there is nothing to separate them from a heap of fragments. In other words, it cannot really be considered an assemblage. The elements in an assemblage are never contingent or purposeless. This is why I have suggested that "arrangement" is better translation of *agencement* than assemblage (Buchanan 383). It foregrounds more obviously the strong element of agency that underpins Deleuze and Guattari's original conception of the term.

We cause our assemblages to be the way they are inasmuch that, if they were arranged differently, we would not be able to endure them. The only contingency she seems interested in is the one that led her to see the objects, not the more consequential set of contingencies that led to them being there in the first place.

The larger point I am trying to make here is that, although we all inhabit a planet that is 70 percent ocean, the reality is that except in very precisely defined cases it is not part of our lives in any meaningful—i.e., ethical and political—way. It is there, we notice it, but noticing it makes no claim on us. And I'm not convinced that "noticing" is sufficient to compel action. Indeed, it strikes me that we need to return to a Kantian position of doing what we know is right regardless of how we feel about it. We don't even recognize or give thought to the myriad ways in which our everyday activities—showering, washing dishes, laundry, sewage, and so on—all impact on the ocean's health via pipes that lead directly from our homes. Nor do we think about, much less act on, the fact that our cars and other fossil fuel-powered machines are steadily choking the life out of the ocean by contributing to the greenhouse effect which is raising ocean temperatures and acidifying its waters. Every time we place rubbish in the bin we reiterate that our assemblage has no place for the environment in it. And until that way of thinking and acting changes, the planet remains in peril and we as its inhabitants continue to live in a fantasy world.

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海洋還是大牢？

摘要

當今世界上的塑膠已多到足以纏繞全球。塑膠的氾濫程度到了科學家聲稱塑膠已成為新的地質標誌，而海洋又是地球遭受塑膠廢棄物危害最嚴重的地方。我們所遺棄的終究也會毀滅我們。我們用有毒廢棄物使地球窒息。儘管海洋遼闊，我們卻視而不見。海洋被當作各種廢棄物傾倒場，海洋正逐步走向死亡，卻似乎無人能阻止悲劇發生。一部份原因是主權的問題。所有國家都宣稱海洋的某部分是該國領土之一，但沒有任何國家擁有海洋的全部。現在海洋出問題了，我們必須追問：誰又該負起解決問題的責任？垃圾問題導致全球暖化，也就是我們日常生活的所作所為而造成的副產品。我們都期待別人能做出改變，這樣自己就可以保持不變，但是什麼才能促使真正的改變發生，包括我們自己？批判理論面對此問題時基本上只有兩種回應：我們不是去做那些我們知道自己必須做的（此立場的前提是康德的絕對命令），要不就是我們去做那些我們覺得自己必須做的（在許多方面此立場的前提是班尼特的生命物質論）。班尼特觀點的擁護者視事物為具體化或物質性的，嚴厲批評了康德觀點脫離實體或非物質性。康德觀點的侷限在其唯心、過於理想，又因我們必須做的事並非由我們自行決定而顯得略為專制。必須做的事便是由外部強加在我們身上，並且時常忽略了歷史或文化的重要性。

關鍵字：裝配、海洋、物質、塑膠、廢棄物、污染