

BOOK REVIEW

Warwick Anderson, *Spectacles of Waste*

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In 1978, Robin Gibb of the Bee Gees collaborated on an album for Jim Henson's *Sesame Street*. *Sesame Street Fever* is a wondrous relic of disco, and its song 'Trash' is one of its heartwarming moments. 'Trash, I love it!' is the constant refrain of Gibb and Oscar the Grouch. Those less fortunate do not see trash in the same way as those born with silver spoons: 'You see I wasn't born with much / 'Cept the Sun and the Moon and such / so I handle it all carefully / Trash is everything to me.' The next year, disco itself was made into trash when the radio talk show host Steve Dahl destroyed disco records as part of a publicity event at Comiskey Park, to the chant of 'disco sucks'. Dahl's stunt implicitly attacked the multiracial, sexuality-inclusive disco audience, contrasted with the traditional white cis masculinity of rock music. After 1979, both the inclusive message of disco and Gibb and Oscar's message to see in trash the potential for repair, reuse and restoration stalled. But the fraught discourse around waste has continued, with the most recent sally taking the form of Warwick Anderson's wonderful book *Spectacles of Waste*, on perhaps the most confronting and intractable incarnations of waste – 'shit'. What would it mean, in Gibb's phrasing, to make shit everything to us?

From the very Australian opening of Anderson's book – 'My subject is shit' (p. 1) – we see that shit is indeed everything. The book is a synthesis of Anderson's long interest in, and work with, shit. Shit is offered as a colonial problem, an epidemiological problem, a cultural problem, even a theological problem. Shit, its realities and its imaginaries, underlines Anderson's claim about what it is to be modern. Beshiting Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) yields the assertion that we have never been toileted (p. 32).

Among its important insights is that the colon-izing process stigmatized and subjugated othered peoples by imposing the binary of shit upon them. The world is divided into shit and not-shit; the colonized and the colonizer. Building latrines meant building the colonized and the colonizers. Through their waste practices, the colonized became pathological data of the colonizer because they viewed shit as disgust, disease and degeneration and thus their response was to catalogue, classify and order. Anderson's exploration of waste is really about the exploration of 'structural dichotomies'. Anderson highlights passionate anthropological studies of shit among the 'world's poor' but also the 'complete indifference' among white people (p. 87). The stunning silence about shit speaks volumes about its cultural importance.

To Anderson, shit is 'perhaps the most persuasive and compelling spectacle' of modern life (p. 10). He follows Laporte's *History of Shit* (2000) to make the point about how the erasure and silence of the unseemly covers dissent and reality with a veneer of politeness and cleanliness. Thus better histories come when we look with realism at normal bodily

functions like shitting, while shit itself is a normal biological substance no different from genes or leaves or hair. Of course, its cultural meaning is very different, and that is the point: the cultural meaning of shit is so valent compared to leaves or hair or genes that if we want to get to the meaning of being modern, it is to shit that we must turn.

Anderson's fixation on shit to the exclusion of other wastes, even other bodily fluids, does isolate his survey from Mary Douglas's larger themes of waste and danger – though, in the conclusion, he notes that shit is the 'archetypical matter out of place' (p. 125) in a clear nod to Douglas. Still, through shit he shows that civilization is about putting matter in its place, with shit being the most challenging of waste matter. The message from Anderson, then, is to embrace the faecal turn. Just when the book could not get more remarkable Anderson turns to the biomedical history of shit.

I would have liked more physiology and less psychoanalysis. The latter permits puns on the 'anal' that appears within it, but it is the former that opens up discussions of shit in fertilizer and the attempts, outlined by Donald Reid in *Paris Sewers and the Sewermen* (1991), to reuse human excrement on agricultural fields. One also gets its role in identifying disease: until her death, Mary Mallon (Typhoid Mary) was quarantined on the evidence of her infected stool samples. Finally, through physiology, one gets the example of NASA trying for over a decade to convert biological wastes into nutrients to support living in space long-term. Only by understanding that waste recycling really is everything to astronauts can humanity finally move to space, instead of just visiting.

To delight in discussing waste is to revel in the revolting and invites puns about putrefaction. Such shit is on every page, and indeed keeps you turning the pages. On another level, it is also the point: waste is culture, it is always there just below the surface, an inuendo or wry comment away, a second or third meaning to so many words and phrases. Those who cannot face their waste through constipated embarrassment or anal retentiveness cannot hope to fully live in and understand any culture. Without embracing our own waste and transforming the endless shit we consume back into (hopefully) better things, we are digging our own planetary latrine-grave. In the end, I recall a great scene from the Netflix *Fyre Festival* documentary, where one of the organizers tells the camera that he knew the festival was in trouble when it was 'time to stop thinking about models and start thinking about toilets'. Anderson has given us plenty to think with.