

*I don't think that bringing morality into play with habits gets you very far. It simply infuses habits with the language of compulsion and demands that we call up our conscience and free will and control ourselves. Habits don't work like that. Habits have a materializing power on both persons and things. They bind us to the world at the same time as they blind us to it.*

– Gay Hawkins

# Ethical blindness: plastics, disposability and the art of not caring

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Gay Hawkins  
Western Sydney University

## TWO IMAGES

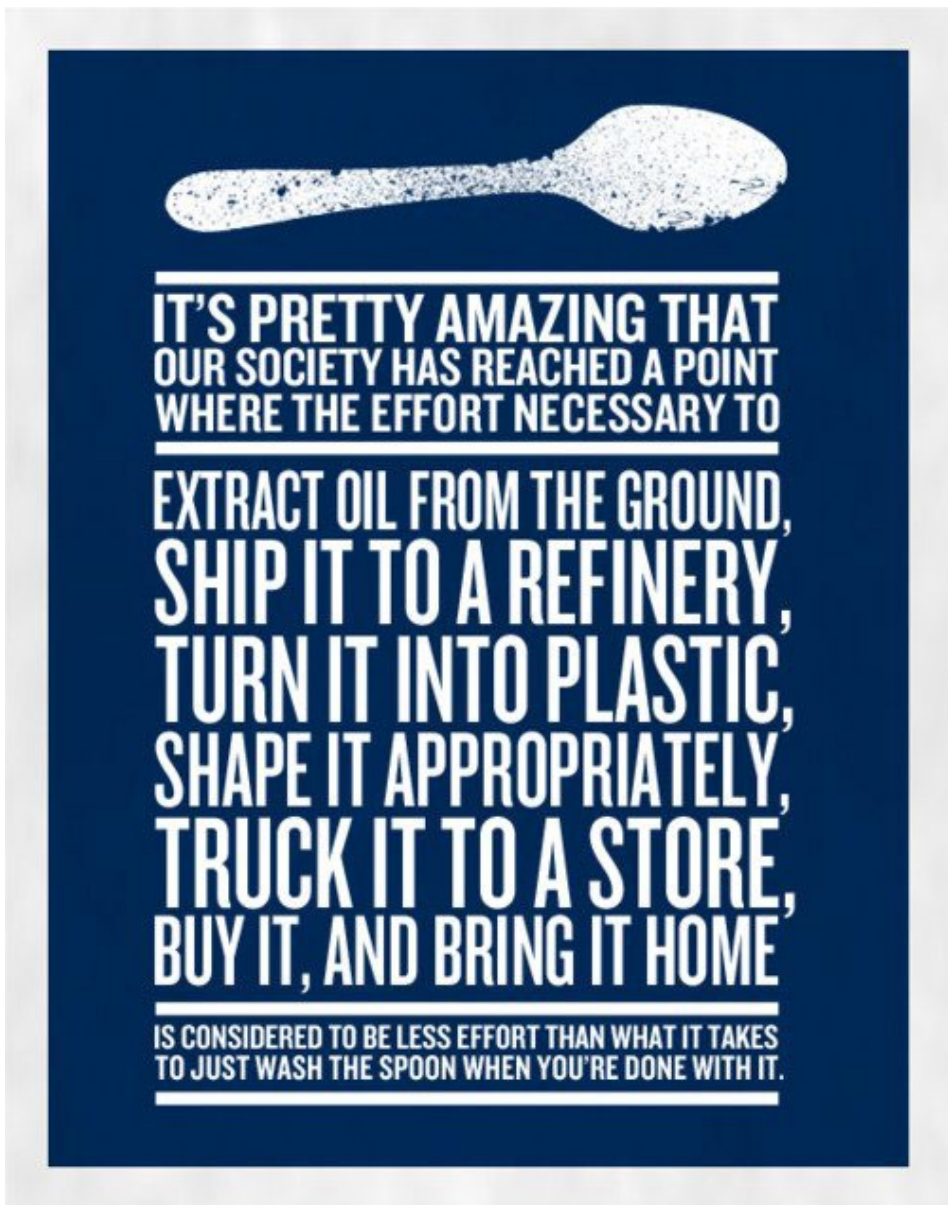
What is the relationship between ethics and materials? How might materials provoke or participate in ethical practices? These are the questions driving this paper. The particular material under examination is plastic: a substance most people have enormous intimacy with, but that also has a very troubling reputation. Plastic is the definitive material of the 20th century and the rise of synthetic modernity. Deeply connected to the growth of carbon economies post WWII, it is now, in the 21st century, considered an anthropocenic marker, part of the living archive of human impact on earth systems. Plastic is in human and animal food chains, it is accumulating at a rapid rate in several massive ocean gyres as well as on land surfaces, and in September 2017 the Guardian newspaper reported that microplastics from clothes had been detected in seventy percent of the public water sources tested, some of them in pristine catchments. Tiny plastic particles, invisible to the human eye, were so mobile and so light they were becoming incorporated into the natural dynamics of condensation to the point where you could say it was raining plastic.

I could go on with statistics and disturbing accounts of the cultural and environmental *everywhereness* of plastic, but that is not my aim. All I want to note is that this material is not something we are separate from. We are thoroughly mixed up with plastic literally and metaphorically, we live with it in complex patterns of economic and toxic interdependency, we have a shared future with it. And it is this reality that poses significant challenges for investigating how to live well with this material. In taking up this challenge, I want to consider one particular aspect of plastic – its disposability: the way in which this incredibly durable material became classified as ‘single use’, as suitable for the production of throwaway objects. More specifically, I want to investigate the relationship between ethics and disposability.

At first glance, these words don’t seem possible to put together. The art of throwing something away after single use, of producing something that is only going to have a fleeting working life: as a straw, as a coffee cup lid, as a beverage bottle, as a bag to carry the shopping home, seems decidedly *unethical*: wasteful of resources, destructive of environ-

ments, unthinking and exploitative on so many registers. If ethics are about ways to live, about how we establish forms of *care* for ourselves and our world, how we understand the responsibilities embedded in our actions and our relations with humans and nonhuman things, then disposability signals a cavalier disregard for these concerns, a very troubling form of ethical *blindness* and arrogance.

This blindness is beautifully captured in this meme (Figure 1) that seeks to reveal the life of single-use objects:



**Figure 1.** The environmental spoon poster by Max Temkin (2011).

This meme explores the complex material, economic and temporal life of the throwaway *plastic* spoon. Its long restless movement through oil refineries and plastics production plants and packaging distribution chains and fast food retailing outlets and customers' hands until it's chucked away. You can see how it offers an implicitly *moral* response to this disposable reality. The pedagogic lesson is that everyone should refuse the plastic spoon, get back to re-usable objects and start doing the washing up!

As much as I like this meme – especially for its astute representation of the materialisation of carbon economies – I'm not sure that it captures the complexities of disposability. How it has emerged historically and the profound ethical challenges that this practice poses to us about how we live; about how destructive practices emerge and how they might be changed. In this meme, the responsibility for stopping disposability is located in the virtuous, morally aware consumer who is advised to 'just wash the spoon.' The effort it takes to do the washing up becomes calculable as an ethical gesture. The problem is would this really be enough to challenge the carbon economies that depend on disposability, that make rapid turnover and single-use objects necessary and infrastructural in so many markets? Absolutely not. And is this really where ethics are located: in the righteous morally aware subject? And what of the plastic spoon in all this? Is this just a passive object of human concern or something that might become ethically potent in particular situations?

Consider another image (Figure 2) that is very familiar and that might invite different answers to these questions.



Figure 2.

What is so compelling conceptually and politically about this ordinary plastic vignette is the way that it provokes questions about the relations between economic processes, resources, materiality and environmental degradation *all at once*. For these disposable plastic objects are market devices facilitating the logistics of fast food consumption, plastic things that appear to us as practical designed objects, *and* waste – pretty much all at the same time. They have simultaneous and multiple identities. Sure, you could say that the moment when you buy the coffee the lid is packaging, an essential element in the logistics of takeaway markets, then you remove it, and it becomes a useless plastic object in a liminal zone en-route to the garbage bin and its final status as rubbish. But this narrative of linear sequencing belies the fact that these multiple qualities and calculations are *folded into* each other. It's not that they emerge in a series of movements and shifting valuations rather, that they implicitly animate each other. The future of the lid *as waste* is anticipated. This quality doesn't appear afterwards but seems to be inscribed in its form and function, in its smooth surface, in its very plastic materiality. We see this plastic lid as rubbish before we actually use it.

As I have argued elsewhere (Hawkins, 2017) this is disposability: anticipating and accepting wasting, not as something that comes after, or as something that happens when all use value is exhausted, but as built into the material object and our relations with it from the beginning. Dispose-*ability* is part of the economy of qualities shaping these objects. These objects are made to be disposed of, and the act of quickly discarding is demanded by the user. If we see this mundane image as a vignette of the economic life of plastic the other thing that seems to be in play is the way in which disposable plastic packaging is shaping how things move not just how they are perceived and used. Here are objects that are ephemeral and transient, that pass through the barista and the consumer's hands fast creating a quite distinct spatiality and temporality. This emergent timespace is not an accelerated product life cycle – from production to consumption to disposal. If the lid or the spoon or the bottle's future as waste are anticipated *before* use then what we're really looking at is a horizontal network of relations or a *topology* that moves in multiple directions rather than a straightforward logic of linearity. And a key part of that topology is that you are aware of the future of the object before you access it in the present. You are at ease with the fact that it is already waste.

When you stop and look closely at the everyday objects in this plastic still life, and what they do in the world they begin to pose questions to us. They provoke awareness of myriad complex relations and temporalities. The meme discourages this provocation, this sense that mundane plastic things might talk back. It is implicitly framed as an externalised moral critique of the plastic spoon and its disposable trajectory. In contrast, the second image is unsettling because it disturbs the utter banality and ubiquity of plastic. As you slow down and look, plastic things begin to force thought, they unsettle and disturb the viewer. And it is in this sense of *disturbance* rather than moral certainty that the complex interactions between plastic, ethics and disposability surface.

## PLASTIC ETHICS

In the rest of this paper, I want to explore how plastic became so central to economic and everyday practices; how it actively shaped and materialised these practices; and how learning to embrace disposability depended on acquiring a form of ethical blindness; that is, an ability

to waste without care. Using the term 'ethical blindness' can imply that the remedy for this moral failure is simply to prompt ethical awareness. To reveal to consumers the effects of their thoughtlessness and lead them from ignorance to understanding and changed practices. This is what the first meme assumes: that the whole chain of effects that underpins disposability will be halted when consumers realise where the plastic spoon comes from and ends up; when they learn to refuse it and start washing up. When they put in a bit of ethical effort.

This understanding of ethics is problematic for several reasons. For a start, it is very human centred. It assumes that the source of all ethical action is human reflexivity: the unique human capacity for introspection and self-discipline. Following this, it is infused with a sense of duty and moral righteousness. Then there is the assumption that the major responsibility for reducing plastics waste lies with consumers, their actions are responsible for the material effects of disposability rather than the network of associations and structures make it both unavoidable and destructive. Finally, while this meme points to the deep connections between plastic and carbon economies, it doesn't really explain how plastic has become such a concern, how it has come to pose questions to us, how it has become a such a provocative material. How it is not simply the passive object of human ethical action, but an *ethical intermediary*: something that can animate relations, foreground entanglements and provoke us.

A different approach to ethics is required. One that is *more than human* and shifts away from the idea of ethics as human duties and obligations. Instead, it is necessary to see ethics as sensibilities and interfaces that foreground modes of entanglement with the world. That recognises interdependence and the power and potentiality of things to cultivate or shape human actions; to generate sensibilities and practices that can be destructive or generative of better ways to live. Thinking about ethics as an interface, as a relational exchange in which *what matters* is established, makes it possible to investigate how plastic might become a powerful force in this interface and relation. In this understanding of ethics plastic is not merely instrumental or functional, the passive object of virtuous human attention, it is a participant in shaping ethical actions. And the question is: what was its role in the rise of disposability? How did plastic become an actant in the emergence of consumers who were ethically thoughtless? How did it become implicated in shaping and ordering various actions: economic and social? And, is it possible to say that we have become governed by plastic?

To elaborate this approach to materials and ethics and wrestle with these questions I want to tell two stories about plastic. The first story is about the materialisation of carbon economies. It looks at how plastic entered everyday life, how it became the skin of commerce with significant powers to change conducts: how it became a governing device. The second story is about attempts to develop a different way of living with plastic, to go 'plastic free'. Its focus is an alternative food market that tried to reduce single-use plastics. In this story, plastic became a matter of concern and a political material. By this, I don't simply mean the object of activism and critique, but a material that acquired the capacity to provoke new ethics; to suggest better ways to live.

## GOVERNED BY PLASTIC

In this first story, I want to briefly recount the history of plastic in the post-WWII period in order to understand how this synthetic material was taken up. Historical and cultural analysis

foregrounds the ways in which plastic became implicated in making or provoking new realities and the effects of this. The key point is that it wasn't that humans gradually became blind to the material. *Rather*, the way the material was applied and used gave it the capacity to reconfigure numerous minor daily practices, and in this process, plastic became a material capable of changing conducts; capable of inviting and demanding ethical blindness and wastefulness.

Because plastic was taken up in so many areas of social and economic life, the focus will be on one case: the rise of plastic food packaging. Much of the plastic produced in the world today is used to make packaging. Packaging in its many guises gives this material its primary identity. It's where we most often encounter it, but how was it introduced into food markets? How did it shift from being novel to mundane and unnoticed? Consider this description of the spread of new plastic objects in the 1950s. A wonderful account of first encounters with a multitude of new plastic things that today we now hardly notice. It gives you a strong sense of the arrival of a new epoch.

*In 1952 Americans had first experienced single serving jelly 'paks' of vacuum-formed sheet vinyl. Later in the decade they bought shirts packaged in clear polyethylene bags and vegetables packed in flimsy polystyrene trays or wrapped in this film; they ate banana splits from 'boats' of thin, rigid, vacuum-formed polystyrene sheet and drank coffee from Styrofoam cups. The following decade witnessed polyethylene bleach and detergent bottles, polystyrene containers for cottage cheese and yogurt, recloseable polyethylene lids for cans of coffee and shortening and cat food ... polyethylene bread bags, Styrofoam meat trays, polyethylene six-pack connectors, vinyl blister packs, green polyethylene garbage bags, and Ex-Cell-o's polyethylene-coated paper milk cartons, which eliminated annoying flakes of wax in the milk but were soon almost superseded by lightweight bottles of blow-moulded polyethylene. (Meikle, 1995: 265-266)*

The 1950s and 60s are often described as 'the plastics age'. This celebratory description refers not only to the massive expansion of the industry but also to changing cultural perceptions of the material as emblematic of modernity and shiny new utopian futures. This positive perception replaced earlier assessments that saw plastic as an inferior or cheap substitute for nature. As plastics production grew in tandem with oil-based economies, the industry rapidly scaled up, and there was a debate about how to find new applications for this wonder material. Furniture, toys, fabrics and interior building materials dominated, but gradually *packaging* was identified as offering phenomenal new possibilities for industry expansion. This shift was enabled by new developments in thermoplastics which meant that plastic could be stretched and moulded into diverse shapes. Thermoplastics realised the significant possibilities of *plasticity* that is, the material ability to both give form to things and also receive form. By the 1960s plastic materials had become so normalised in packaging applications they were literally the skin of commerce. They had become fundamental to the infrastructures and logistics of food production and consumption. They had become market devices in Callon et al.'s (2007) sense, meaning that plastic packaging provoked new 'food dispositifs' and everyday ontologies that modulated food production, market organisation, consumer behaviours, waste management and more. But if the plastic package was implicated in changing industry and ordinary conducts around food, how is it possible to say that it became a technology of governing? How is it possible to see plastic packaging as evidence of the ways in which technical and material objects can come to govern us?

How did plastic's distinct material forms and possibilities – its plasticity – have profound effects on how we shopped, how we discarded and how we effectively became 'governed by plastic'?

These questions assume that modes of governing can be materialised, or work in and through objects. I use 'governing' in the Foucauldian sense as referring to all those minor sites and processes where the conduct of conduct is administered. Governing, then, is not simply about big institutions, state regulations, and policy, but about subtle rules and regimes that shape and inform ways to live. It's about the constitution of the sociotechnical and moral responsibilities of things and how they should be related to. The point is not simply that objects are part and parcel of what it means to be human, as Haraway, Latour and others have shown, but that, increasingly, we make ourselves and our conducts available to being managed or governed *through* our relations with objects. Government does not exist and then seek technologies to achieve its goals. Rather, as Bruce Braun argues: "technologies and objects present themselves as potent sites for introducing new forms of 'administration' into everyday life" (Braun, 2014: 55).

The expansion of plastic food packaging shows this process at work. It prompted two significant and interrelated forms of everyday or mundane governance (Woolgar & Neyland, 2013). First, plastic packaging amplified and enhanced the experience of self-service and the idea of shopping as an expression of free choice and consumer autonomy. And second, it helped consumers become comfortable with the idea of single-use and constant wasting. But in what sense was plastic a participant in these shifts? Plastic wasn't originally made to be wasted, and its physical structure of extreme durability seemed to explicitly resist natural processes of decay. How then did it come to signify disposability and how did it reconfigure consumer conducts?

One answer lies in how plastic's sociomateriality was realised in the food and fast food industries as packaging, how it emerged as a transient market device. As plastic in all its varieties came to dominate food packaging and the rise of the fast food industry, it trained consumers to disregard it, to apprehend it as a transitional medium: something to be looked through and *overlooked*. Plastic was there to facilitate access to the commodity. Its working life was brief and unnoticed. Its physical properties of transparency and lightness enhanced perceptions of the material as an ephemeral means to an end and as morally untroubling. Then there was the proliferation of objects designed for mobile consumption: plastic bags and spoons and throw away lids and straws, the list goes on and on. These material things generated new topologies of time and space. As I have already argued, they appeared stylistically as rubbish from the very beginning. Their synthetic form seemed to come from nowhere, to have no origins in nature, and their future was evident in the present: they were always already waste. These minor plastic things were so anonymous and ubiquitous they simply added to a vague cultural consciousness of an ever greater *flow* of plastic in everyday life.

Plastic packaging could be considered a significant material contributor to the emergence of topological of cultures. That is, cultures where continuous change rather than stability is the norm and where the challenge is to maintain forms of order and continuity in relation to this. Disposability was a practice that addressed this challenge. It configured the time of plastic materials as brief and forgettable *and* consumers as unconcerned about the afterlife of the material, as comfortable with the repetitive wasting that single use and rapid turnover demanded. In engaging in this practice consumers experienced and enacted an ontology of



the present in which nothing mattered beyond the immediate act of using and discarding. Packaging also reconfigured 'convenience' as temporal and spatial immediacy: available here and now as direct presence, but also in the flow of time and constant change. Disposable plastic packaging provoked forms of repetition and reproducibility that seemed impervious to durable record. It encouraged consumers to abandon any sense of obligation to arresting this material flow, to be unconcerned. This is ethical blindness (Hawkins, forthcoming).

This brief account of the rise of plastic packaging and its increasing ubiquity as a disposable material foregrounds how a material can change conducts. How plastic emerged as a potent device for introducing new forms of mundane governance, new demeanours into everyday life. The material *and* its applications and the shopper who reached for it, dropped it and didn't care were enacting disposability. In this way, single-use plastics configured consumers who had a nonchalant disregard for waste and wasting. The emergence of this ethical blindness shaped the interface between the consumer and the material: both were implicated. And as this ethical blindness became normalised it became increasingly essential to the economic growth of the plastics industry and the relentless spread of the material.

## MAKING PLASTIC INTO A POLITICAL MATERIAL

This second story focuses on an attempt to challenge the overwhelming presence of plastic in food systems. It explores how plastic sparked controversy and became a matter of concern, and how this prompted experiments in living differently with it. These experiments involved the creation of new ethical interfaces with the material shaped by the dynamics of making it politically accountable. That is: recognising its role in a range of serious environmental issues and negotiating new relations with it driven by care and concern. The story is located at Northey Street Organic Market (NS) and involves an attempt to go 'plastic free' for a month. NS market was established in 1994 in inner-city Brisbane, Australia, it is part of the Northey Street City Farm, a community organisation that also includes a nursery and permaculture garden and celebrates 'living sustainably in the city'. 'Plastic Free July' was an attempt at reconfiguring the markets to achieve explicit and very distinct political and ethical objectives, both at the local scale of the markets and beyond. It was an experiment in configuring the markets in different ways by putting plastic into new relations.

As a farmers and mainly organic market, NS already has an explicit ethicopolitical identity, with reducing wastes associated with food one of its many social and organisational goals. Other objectives relate to: shortening food supply chains by getting producers closer to consumers; challenging large-scale agribusiness food systems and their exploitation of farmers, environments, and consumers; using organic methods wherever possible; and offering consumers other market forms in which to buy food beyond the supermarket. These objectives generate distinct regimes of value, that is: practical calculative measures that help constitute NS as a site of economic difference and ethical practices. So, what happens when into this mix a mundane material such as plastic packaging is targeted as a matter of concern and the focus of specific actions?

In pursuing this question, the first thing we have to resist is the tendency to see plastic as the stable ground from which disputes and ethical actions proceed. This assumes that its

materiality is fixed and passively awaiting new actions such as reduction or elimination. In this framework plastic is the object of human political action and deliberation rather than something with the capacity to become an integral element in the enactment of new ethics and politics, a participant rather than an inert environmental object. The challenge is to understand exactly *how* materials become implicated in new ethical processes and interfaces. How did plastic become an ethical issue and 'political material' at NS? And in what sense did this process involve new relations and practices that revealed the capacity of things to become differently?

Before assessing the impacts and significance of Plastic Free July, it is necessary to briefly document how plastic mattered in this market before this event. Reviewing its social ontology or the arrangements and realities that plastic helped enact shows that even though NS was an alternative market, it was still dependent on plastic. There was still a complex local choreography of plastic objects and devices at work in the markets. These plastic things worked in many different ways. They can be understood according to a classificatory schema based on the different socio-technical and economic functions of the material. This schema shows that plastics enabled a multitude of actions and relations at NS.

The first category in evidence is *transport or wholesaler plastics*. These include things like large plastic trays, polystyrene boxes, plastic shock trays and the like, and are often used by food producers to protect food in transit and enable circulation. In this category, different plastics are used to manage the different biophysical realities of food. For example, the insulation properties of polystyrene are excellent for keeping broccoli and brussels sprouts cool. Many of these plastic devices are infrastructural and reusable, although there are some single-use items in this category, such as plastic bags used to line cardboard boxes full of veggies like carrots and bananas. Then there are *retail plastics*. These are most often packaging designed to enable self service and range from strawberry and tomato punnets, to plastic bags of measured quantities of beans, to cling wrap put on to extend shelf life as in the case of vacuum sealed cucumbers or precut pumpkin pieces. These plastics are primarily for single use and are focused on the logistics of retail display, shelf life, and self service. They are often oriented to the customer and enact convenience as a necessary value and expectation.

The final category is *immediate consumption plastics*. These enable diverse forms of recreational eating that are part of the NS shopping experience. The coffee stands and juice bars and take away food stalls, scattered in between the produce stalls, all depend on plastic lids, cups, cutlery, straws and more. Again, convenience is a key value that these plastics generate as well as enabling mobile eating whilst people shop.

These three categories are not unique to NS, they are common and prevalent across most food markets large and small. They show how plastic provides a form of infrastructure in relation to food, sometimes a disposable infrastructure sometimes a reusable one. It's also taken for granted, backgrounded and logistical; connecting the spaces between production, exchange, and consumption; making food mobile and making consumption and eating easy and convenient. Plastics are embedded in food systems in different ways with different levels of persistence, they have formed associations with food that are durable, complex, multiple and mutually transformative. But what of the actual realities of plastic at NS? How is plastic implicated in making NS an alternative or ethical market?

On the register of scale or amounts of plastic, there is not nearly as much plastic in evidence as in supermarkets and other food retail settings. Even before Plastic Free July lots of food at NS was *un*packaged, there was much less reliance on putting self-selected items in plastic bags: paper was the preferred material. This is an aware group of store holders and consumers, they bring knowledge and concerns about plastic and an ethical commitment to the markets; they have already learnt to be affected by it. Many have cultivated an ethical agency and identity by displaying a careful and cautious relation to plastic. But plastic is still deeply embedded in NS markets, when you start looking closely it is omnipresent. It may be used according to different patterns of presence and deliberate absence, but it is still a central material actor in the organization and practical functioning of the market.

What then of the specific actions that went into devising Plastic Free July? How was plastic problematised? NS already had a waste policy that targeted many things, including unnecessary plastics. But it was unevenly implemented and the sense from market staff was that more and more plastic was creeping back into the markets and into the waste stream. Plastic was making its presence felt despite attempts to control it. So, Plastic Free July was implemented with publicity put on the website and distributed to consumers and all stall holders inviting them to try and eliminate single-use or disposable plastics during July. It was obvious that eliminating *all* plastics was impossible, their logistical and infrastructural value could not be denied. However, in the process of making plastic into a matter of concern, the existing informal classificatory schema was replaced with a new one: *acceptable* and *unacceptable plastics* and the key determinant of this distinction was whether the plastics were reused (acceptable) or discarded after single use (unacceptable). In other words, the target of Plastic Free July was disposable plastic.

In this way, disposable and single-use plastics – all those straws and plastic cups and lids and punnets and bags – were problematised and framed as controversial. One aspect of the socio-technical and pragmatic character of these plastic items: their disposability, their imminent destination as waste, was rendered unacceptable. These material things were subject to new accountability tests and were found to be environmentally and ethically troubling. Following this reclassification, new modes of relating to disposable plastics were initiated. Problematising and reclassifying these plastics made them ethically actionable. It established justifications for new practices and ensured that the appropriateness of the ethical action – reduction, elimination or refusal – came to be expressed not just through virtuous human actions but through the material thing itself and its potency as always already waste.

Another technique in making plastic into a political material was not just to morally reclassify it and problematise its presence in the local space of NS but to link it to various forms of information about the global plastics waste burden, marine debris, chemical contamination, its origins in non-renewable resources and the oil economy. Plastic was framed in terms of its origins, effects and the futures it was creating. It was made controversial because its multiple vectors of connection with other realities, spaces and species were made visible. In this process plastic at NS acquired new scales and temporalities beyond immediate market presence and use.



**Figure 3.** An infographic describing the Plastic Free July challenge.

This act of linking disposable plastics at NS to a wider set of political concerns is usually explained in terms of ‘raising awareness’. It assumes that a pedagogic approach to informing publics will prompt changes in practices. But there is a very limited notion of politics in play here that is resolutely human centred: becoming informed or educated motivates new actions. Instead, we need to heed Isabelle Stengers’ (2011) account of ‘material politics’ which she says are never just about facts and knowledge alone but also always about struggle: “just like the Marxist concept of class – materialism loses its meaning when it is separated from relations of struggle.”

These struggles were evident in the ‘living plastic free’ workshops that were held for consumers during the month. Consumers were asked to volunteer to take the ‘plastic pledge’ for a week and give up disposable plastics and then report their experiences. Often these reports felt a bit like plastic confessionals or plastic therapy where participants expressed enormous guilt and frustration about the persistence of plastic, about being *unable to get away from it* even when they wanted to. In attempts to develop new ethical relations with plastic consumers had trouble escaping self-blame. Participants in the workshops wrestled with questions like how can you buy yoghurt without a plastic container? How do you negotiate the long walk from the local coffee shop back to work without a plastic lid on your take away when you’ve forgotten to bring a reusable cup? What do you do with the mountain of plastic containers from previous packaged purchases that were designed to be chucked away but were being

kept to reuse? As compelling as these questions were, they revealed an inability to analyse how plastic functioned as a networked and infrastructural material; how it was a critical part of wider food assemblages that was enacting various modes of capture of human and economic actions that were persistent and powerful.

What these dilemmas did prompt was lots of discussion about experiments in living, about how to innovate with and around the recalcitrance of plastic. However, even in these discussions, the tendency was to frame plastic as the passive object of human avoidance not to think more creatively and critically about its wider force in shaping food provision systems. While there was an acceptance of how much plastic disrupted the enactment of an ethical consumer subjectivity this was as far as things got: human frustration with a bad material.

There were similar issues with stall holders who spoke of the difficulties in eliminating some forms of plastics from market arrangements. Selling strawberries in paper bags that rapidly become sodden was impractical for the strawberries, the store holder and the shopper, it was attempted but not very popular. It challenged 'convenience' at a number of levels. Running a juice store was also deemed difficult without disposable cups because there were no kitchens connected to the outdoor stalls. These actions weren't impossible, but they did highlight the functional agency of plastic, how its pragmatic value was embedded in the generation of economic value.

In this way, Plastic Free July could be considered a political event or situation, it involved a series of changes and practices that put disposable plastic into new relations, that prompted struggles with the material as well as new knowledges about the complexities of this mundane stuff. This political situation was not the result of plastic's global environmental impacts having to be regulated or governed, although these impacts were certainly invoked as part of the bigger context. Rather, it emerged through an interrogation of local and immediate plastic practices at NS and attempts to reconfigure them, to disrupt the economic and relational work that plastic was doing and create a different ethical interface with it. To make the material and the human uses of it accountable to each other in different, more considered and careful ways. The material was central to provoking different forms of ethical reasoning and calculations, different interdependencies.

## CONCLUSION

Two stories about plastics and ethics. In the first an account of how we have become governed by plastic, how disposable plastic became a potent material in the administration of food and provoked new conducts and forms of ethical blindness. How this synthetic stuff participated in the emergence of topological cultures where lack of concern with constant change and turnover was fundamental. And the second story about struggling with disposable plastics in a farmers' market and seeking to enact new ethical interfaces with them. Interfaces that pay close attention to the reality of the material after transient use, to its troubling presence as waste even before it's used.

In Plastic Free July we see attempts *not* to be governed by plastic. Rather, to accept interdependency and enact different arrangements between the material and human and economic practices; arrangements in which *living differently with plastic* informs the interactions and

ethical interface and reshapes both the human and the material. We also see how, in making Plastic Free July into an event for the whole market, ethics shifts from being the preserve of the concerned virtuous individual consumer into a collective struggle and an exercise in commoning. For in all the discussions and debates about how to live without disposable plastics, what mattered about this material, and how it was to be valued and cared for at Northey Street, a community also emerged. This community was connected by plastic, by a collective desire to create a different shared future with the material.

Struggles with the material at the level of a small local market and everyday life foreground how ethics emerge in the negotiations between troubling material realities and speculations about different relations and futures, about better ways of living with plastic. But is this enough? No – we also need bigger struggles that move beyond local practices and concerned consumers into the realm of governance, regulation and serious industry responsibility. Big struggles, small ethical renegotiations – they all matter.

**Gay Hawkins** is a research professor of Cultural Studies and Social Theory at the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University. In her internationally recognised publications, she has examined the ethics of waste, material cultures of plastic, the construction of markets, and water practices. Her research interests include the relations between culture and governance, cultural engagements with the environment, and economic sociology, markets and materiality.

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