

MEDIA FIELDS

J O U R N A L

Plasticity and the Anthropocene: An Interview with Heather Davis

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- 1) A lot of your work is invested in engaging with plastic as a crucial mediator of the Anthropocene, identifying plastic as that which mediates our everyday and as a fundamental indicator of the age itself. Could you begin by describing how you became interested in studying plastic? How did you think it could further an ecological understanding of our bodies and their materiality?

I began thinking about plastic for a couple of different reasons. In my PhD work I focused on contemporary art and relational subjectivity, but the more I thought about relationality, the more it became amorphous, bleeding into everything. I wanted to think about something that refused relationality, and that is what plastic does. It becomes a literal figure of the desire for containment and control in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: a fantastic projection turned material that, due to its engineering, retains its molecular structure under almost all conditions. So although it is clear that plastic cannot escape relationality altogether, especially in its effects on the world outside of itself, it has a remarkable capacity to stay true to its own nature, even though it bends and breaks under environmental conditions. In other words, even though it breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces, molecularly it stays the same under virtually all conditions. There are not many other substances that have these characteristics, and even fewer that have been so foundational to life in the past hundred years.

One of the primary insights that plastic opens up is how we think about our bodies in relation to their boundaries. In my research, I argue that plastic is

the literalization of the desire for containment and is premised upon the belief that our bodies are discrete from the world around us. However, what plastic has revealed in its mass proliferation across the planet is precisely the ways in which our bodies are permeable, penetrable, and composed of our environment. Nancy Tuana calls this “viscous porosity,” the ability of the body to remain itself but to be fundamentally vulnerable to the outside.¹

- 2) You cite the example of Citarum River in Indonesia as an instance where the violence of petroculturalism is exacerbated and made starkly visible.² Plastic here is an indicator of toxicity, pollution, and of those left to die. I am struck by another image of plastic in relation to water. As I come from a city that has always battled severe drought, my immediate associations of plastic and water are of long queues of women in urban settlements waiting for the water lorries with their plastic containers. The more plastic containers one can carry, the more water one can get. Plastic in these instances is crucial to life in the city. How does your conception of a plastic hydrology allow for these “life-giving” engagements with plastic?

You are correct to point out that plastic is a factor in environmental racism and toxicity at the same time as it enables life. In their book *Plastic Water*, Gay Hawkins, Emily Potter, and Kane Race look in detail at bottled water in Bangkok and Chennai and how bottled water allows more people access to clean drinking water while it also exacerbates water scarcity through privatized markets.³ Plastic hydrology has lively and deathly attributes that are always in tension. What strikes me in the instance that you cite is how the plastic containers visually reference clay pots. The obvious advantage of plastic here is that it is cheap and light, allowing people to carry more water. However, plastic is clearly not the only such technology. People have used bladders made from waxed cotton or hides or other materials to carry water for hundreds of years, so this capacity doesn't necessarily depend on plastic. But I think what you are getting at are the ways in which plastic is such a multivalent material, how it allows for multiple different possibilities, especially in its use.

Another complex example of this is how plastic is used in medicine. As I'm sure most of your readers are aware, plastics and the associated chemical plasticizers have been linked to a variety of human health problems, from cancer to diabetes to hormonal disruption, in both the production and consumption processes. However, plastics have also become essential in

modern medicine, where plastic is literally life-giving. Jody A. Roberts has a great essay called “Reflections of an Unrepentant Plastiphobe.”⁴ In it, she describes the ways that she tried to be very judicious about not introducing plastic into her life. Then her child was born premature, and it became necessary to interact with a whole host of plastic objects, objects that would be very difficult to replace materially and upon which her child’s life depended. One of the ways that I think through the contradictory aspects of plastic is to point to how plastic operates as a form of governmentality, following from Gay Hawkins’s work.⁵ Plastic is not only shaped by policy and use, but it has shaped us and the world around us in ways that are both literal (we all have plastic inside our bodies) and metaphysical (we could not be who we are without plastic). I am interested in how plastic is both a lively and deathly force in the world, how it shapes us, for whom and what the consequences are. In this, it is too easy to say that plastic is simply bad, but it is necessary to really examine what plastic is doing and how it moves through the world.

- 3) You argue that plastic defies the ecological logic of placemaking and is instead the universal. Plastic is uniform; it is not permeable and not open to outside effects. But what about the malleability of plastic? How do you see local effects, use, and re-use of plastic informing this logic of the universal?

Until recently, I would argue that plastic was not local. This does not mean that it is not malleable, or that it hasn’t been put to use in unexpected ways, but it is intentionally designed to be replicable and transposable in any and every context. Infrastructures such as recycling or product design are, in fact, based on the universality of plastic, of its molecular uniformity, and in many ways this is part of the violence of plastic. Max Liboiron has argued quite convincingly that plastic pollution is a form of colonialism, due to the fact that it covers the land without the consent of those who live and are entwined with it.⁶ I think that the drive for universality, seen in the way that there is now no one and nowhere on Earth that does not contain plastic, is illustrative of this phenomenon.

I would argue that plastic does become local through its integration into the earth: as it is absorbed back into the geologic layer, it begins to bear traces of its passage and the creatures and minerals that it encounters. Through this process, plastic is localized. But this localization and historicization is one

that is also now marked through the chemical signatures of global petrochemical companies.

The universal logic of plastic is also being significantly subverted by 3D printing technology. Although most plastic production throughout the twentieth century was done by small-scale businesses, it still necessitated industrial, rather than domestic, production. It is now possible to produce plastic objects at home. As Mike Michael has discussed, the fact that plastic has become part of DIY culture marks a significant shift in the ways in which plastic can be understood.⁷ But the fundamental drawback of plastic is the fact that once it tears or breaks, there are very few ways to fix it, unlike many other materials. In this sense, it is not a very easy material to work with outside of industrial settings. Perhaps this quality will change in the future.

- 4) How do you see an engagement with the toxicity of plastic as crucial to making visible the attritional disaster of slow violence?

Plastic, as you indicate here, is central to questions of environmental justice. This can be seen in the people who are directly affected by plastic pollution through the manufacturing process. One of the most egregious examples is Mossville, Louisiana, which was a historical freedmen's town. It was located close to PVC and other petrochemical factories, and people were getting sick because of the emissions from these plants. Instead of engaging in safer manufacturing practices or addressing the fundamental problem of toxic pollution and subsequent health effects, the factories compensated the primarily African-American community a small amount to abandon their homes and town. Another example of the slow violence of plastic is the Aamjiwnaang First Nation near Sarnia, Ontario. Also situated near petrochemical and plastic manufacturers, they bear the first documented case of a dramatic reduction in birth rates of boys relative to that of girls. Clearly, there is a correlation here between populations that are deemed expendable and levels of chemical toxicity. This correlation also manifests in the fact that wealthier people can avoid plastics by paying more for consumer goods. But toxicity shouldn't be a consumer choice, and the fact that poorer and racialized people suffer the consequences is depressingly familiar.

Additionally, because plastic is so pervasive, it means it is difficult to trace the exact relation between negative health and environmental impacts and a particular product, chemical, or company. It is impossible to do proper

studies because there is no control group that has not been exposed to plastic and plastic chemicals. This is why Max Liboiron calls plastic pollution a “miasmatic” problem: one that has no definitive borders, but that permeates our environments, often in harmful ways.⁸

Further, I think that plastic indicates how we think of the relationship between humans and our broader environment. Like global warming and nuclear waste, plastic and other petrochemicals represent an unbridled and unprecedented global experiment. Plastic is the result of economic thinking that rests upon the fantasy of externalities, where environmental health (which affects all creatures, including humans) is deliberately not factored into decisions around the manufacturing and distribution of petrochemical products. Externalities often translate into the bodies of poor and racialized people, who are left to die or suffer. This type of thinking relies upon an ill-founded notion that environmental toxicity or pollution can be contained, that our bodies are impermeable, and that there is a clear separation between the natural and cultural worlds (the latter of which is the one that changes and that primarily affects human ability). Increasingly, we are being forced to see how dangerous these ideas have been. The question now is how we are going to respond and what we will do with their material legacies.

- 5) In your work you talk about plastic geologies, plastic hydrology, and even plastic futurities. What purchase do you think plastic ecologies as an analytical and critical concept have in furthering an ethical engagement with the Anthropocene?

One of the reasons that I continue to be interested in plastic is because it is the intimate manifestation of our dependence on oil. We use plastic in almost all aspects of our everyday lives. By this point, our infrastructures, bodies, and movements have been entirely structured by this relatively new material. Plastic points to our imbrication with oil and the ways in which we cannot simply remove ourselves from this material. I’m interested in the generative and world-producing effects of plastic, in how subjectivities, communities, and globalization are formed in relation to plastic. In this, I see an engagement with plastic as part of the lineage of feminist science and technology studies, environmental justice, and feminist new materialist work that disrupts purity politics, instead asking what we can do within a compromised and contaminated world. This is a complicated ethical demand that resists accelerationism and technomascularity.

- 6) I was struck by your theorization of the plastisphere and of organisms that have been brought to life through our engagement with plastic. You discuss how the permeability of our bodies and the ecosphere have blurred the lines between the natural and the synthetic. How do you think these aspects of your work animate debates about subject-object dispositions and contribute to object-oriented ontologies?

Plastic engages the subject/object split in complicated ways. The ideological presupposition behind the material stemmed from the kind of technologically oriented belief that we can manipulate matter to human will and that matter, like the chora, is a vessel waiting to be filled with the intentions of a greater intelligence. In this, plastic upholds Enlightenment understandings of subject and object as fundamentally distinct. And even if we don't believe in these ideas, we are still stuck with their material consequences.

However, as plastic moves through the world, it pushes evolution in particular directions, such as the bacteria in waxworms that can digest polyethylene, or those communities of bacteria, called the plastisphere, that exist on floating bits of plastic in the oceans. In this movement—or similarly, in how plastic folds back into the earth, appearing as new forms of rock such as the plastiglomerate—the philosophical premise upon which plastic was produced is undermined. The ethology or behavior of plastic is such that, even though it may itself be remarkably recalcitrant, refusing its environment, it exerts a great influence over that environment; plastic shows that the distinction between subject and object is often undermined or made more complicated through particular relationships.

- 7) What is “queer futurity” for you? In what ways is it entangled with or divergent from a more general radical futurity?

Queer futurity is resonant with other forms of radical futurity, but it is particularly interested in alternate kinship structures beyond the confines of heteronormative, biological reproduction. In this work, it draws upon black feminist theory and Indigenous feminist theory that articulates how heteronormativity often obstructs good relations among kin and reduces people's ability to respond flexibly to difficulties, including the necessity to adapt to climate change.⁹ Queer futurity seeks to build kinship relations beyond close biological relations or even beyond same-species relations. It draws from the necessity of queer folks to build family in alternate ways that can also serve ecological purposes. This is not necessarily different from a

more general radical futurity, but in the specifics of developing multi-species kin and family formations that resist heteronormativity, there is much to be learned from queer theory, and especially from the work of black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC) queer theorists.

Notes

1. Nancy Tuana, "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina," in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 188–213.
2. Heather Davis, "Life and Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic," in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 347–58.
3. Gay Hawkins, Emily Potter, and Kane Race, *Plastic Water: The Social and Material Life of Bottled Water* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).
4. Jody A. Roberts, "Reflections of an Unrepentant Plastiphobe: An Essay on Plasticity and the STS life," in *Accumulation: The Material Politics of Plastic*, ed. Jennifer Gabrys, Gay Hawkins, and Mike Michael (London: Routledge, 2013), 121–33.
5. Gay Hawkins, "Governed by Plastic," *Lives and Afterlives of Plastic Conference* (2017), perc.ac.nz/wordpress/governed-by-plastic/.
6. Max Liboiron, "Pollution Is Colonialism," *Discard Studies*, 1 September 2017, discardstudies.com/2017/09/01/pollution-is-colonialism/.
7. Mike Michael, "Process and Plasticity: Printing, Prototyping and the Prospects of Plastic," in Gabrys, Hawkins, and Michael, *Accumulation*, 30–46.
8. Max Liboiron, "Plasticizers: A Twenty-first Century Miasma," in Gabrys, Hawkins, and Michael, *Accumulation*, 134–49.
9. See, for example, Kim TallBear, "Making Love and Relations beyond Settler Sexualities," Social Justice Institute, University of British Columbia, 24 February 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfd02ujRUv8.

Heather Davis is currently a visiting scholar at the Institute for Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies at McGill University. She explores and participates in expanded art practices that bring together researchers, activists, and community members to enact social change. She has written about the intersection of art, politics, ecology, and community engagement for numerous art and academic publications, including editing the volumes *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* and *Desire Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada*. Her current book project traces the ethology of plastic and its links to petrocapiatalism.