Plastic’s legacy is an ongoing story in-the-making. With a lifespan beyond calculation on any current human timescales, plastic’s unpredictable futurities make us all vulnerable to the unknown consequences of its longevity (e.g. Davis 2015a, 2015b; Hawkins 2001, 2010; Hird 2012, 2013; Roberts 2010; Zalasiewicz et al. 2016). While much continues to be written about the excess of plastics and the waste crisis, Plastic Legacies: Pollution, Persistence, and Politics brings together a multidisciplinary group of authors that weave together both the complex and contextual effects of plastic’s presence. Each chapter offers unique understandings and responses that not only touch on the inseparability of plastic production, consumption, and waste(ing) of plastics but more importantly the disparities that emerge in situated relations with/between plastics, bodies (human and nonhuman), things, forces, and discourses.

The chapters of the book weave three strands from which to story plastic legacies – pollution, persistence, and politics. In doing so, the story of plastics spills out literally and figuratively beyond the waste(ing) crisis. One of the key facets of the book is the intentional threading of multidisciplinary perspectives and approaches to understanding and responding to plastic’s complex, entangled, and at times contentious relations with humans and nonhumans, nature and culture, seen and unseen. Storying the legacies of excess plastic requires careful and at times, speculative attention to the effects of its ubiquitous presence. In Plastic Legacy the authors attend to plastics in sight and out of sight, in/on/beside bodies, and in gendering and class making practices by weaving plastic’s relations with ongoing colonial injustices, the continued hyper-separation of the individual from the collective, and the ongoing disparity between the global South and global North. As indicated in the introduction of the book, the legacies of plastic must also story “messages about class, gender, and identity formation of the subaltern”
The message in the book is clear, that the plastic waste crisis is far more complex than merely seeking the remediation of excess plastic waste.

Each of the authors contributing chapters offer unique engagements with plastics (waste and otherwise) yet at the same time contribute to the broader theme that threads throughout. Within Part I, “Pollution”, authors complexify the presence of plastics beyond matter out of place by engaging with plastic waste(ing) from the macro to nano level, and from the uncontainable and the un-stable. Part II, “Persistence”, brings scalability in relation to plastic’s presence across land, sea, and geological formations. The third and final section, “Politics”, troubles technological solutions that are rooted in capitalism, as well as the affordances and constraints of large-scale social change. In all three sections, processes of plastic production, consumption, and waste(ing) are entangled with and through socio-environmental issues that not only draw on scientific matters of fact, but also matters of concern (Latour 2004) and matters of care (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011).

Addressing the socio-environmental issues associated with plastic’s enduring presence is no easy task. Ongoing human-induced environmental degradation directly contradicts the call for human intervention and development of innovative solutions. Current approaches are both fragmented and re-active, focusing mainly on individual stewardship and ineffective waste management practices. For example, while worthy causes, such as the ones shared in this book (e.g. the Ocean Cleanup; the British Hedgehog Preservation Society; Plastic Change) offer context specific re-actions to current excess plastic waste(ing), they continue to be hyper-focused on the individual as activist. While plastic production and consumption continues unabated, I cannot help but draw similarities between the inability to stop the flow of plastics into the environment and the hamster racing on the stationary wheel, moving faster and faster yet getting nowhere. This is not to say that, as individuals, we should not engage in small political and ethical acts of care in our everyday waste practices (refusing to use plastic bags or to buy plastic
fibre dishcloths or polyester clothing), but rather to advocate for careful and proactive attention to broader systemic issues that require a collective and collaborative response.

The logics of plastic’s presence, persistence, and vitality emerge within entangled assemblages of bodies, things, and forces (Bennett 2004). In other words, plastics never act alone. The notion of plastic’s ongoing shape shifting in relation with others is touched on throughout the book. For example, Tridibesh Dey and Mike Michael offer the story of complex mingling that calls attention to the “multiplicity of disparate elements, materializing … [through] complex negotiated relationalities – efforts, affinities, interests, concerns, troubles, and cares” (p.149) from which socio-material realities are made. Elyse Stanes shares the notion of on-going-ness to rethink the socio-material realities that are always emerging within interactive processes of being and becoming, while Laura McLauchlan reiterates that “becoming is always a case of becoming with other” (p.174). In other readings, Gay Hawkins (2010: 121) notes that one of the biggest challenges is understanding how “different plastic materialities become manifest and how these reverberate on bodies, habits, and ecological awareness”. Nearing the end of the book, Trisia Farrelly, Ian Shaw and John Holland seem to build on the work of others such as Hawkins and Jane Bennett, when they conclude that understanding plastic pollution, persistence, and politics requires “radical forms of transdisciplinary research that can lead to a paradigm shift in thinking about and acting with plastics” (p.245).

Sasha Adkins argues that “Each nurdle that bobs on the tide represents more than careless ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas 1978). It carries a story of embodied toxicity and embodied injustice” (p.45). Dominant neoliberal discourse and colonial legacies are deeply implicated narratives that continue to impact how society thinks about and acts on/with plastics. Plastic legacies are inherently entangled with colonialism and its ongoing and destructive legacies. As Max Liboiron (2021) so bluntly states both in their book title and its contents, pollution is colonialism. In keeping with the editors’ commitment to take a multidisciplinary approach to storying plastic’s legacy, there is a concerted effort to address “the enduring dominance of a
neoliberal ideology” (p.4). Ongoing colonial violent practices of taking/using the land of others draws attention to disparities across culture and class. Further, it highlights what Myra Hird (2012, 2013) describes as misplaced stewardship that merely manages (plastic) waste “out of sight, out of mind”. In Adkins’ chapter, they conclude that:

Privileged consumers do not see the communities poisoned by the extraction and refining of the oil and gas that become their straws and shopping bags and water bottles. They send their plastic waste overseas so that they do not have to see the mountains of it piling up or breathe the acrid smoke as it burns. The false morality of recycling shields wilful ignorance behind a smokescreen of pro-environmental virtue. (p.50)

Within the neoliberal discourse, the hyper-focused attention on environmental stewardship and recycling practices, and the individual (neoliberal) citizen as consumer and waster, fails to address the complexities that capitalist agendas invite. As clearly expressed in the book, capitalism that “fetishizes competitive individualism and quantitative competition within markets signals why there is still a need for collective nouns and pronouns … If the ‘we’ is erased entirely, then all that is left is a collection of individuals” (p.4). To reiterate, this complexity demands a collective and collaborative response.

By knotting together “globalized consumer capitalism” and the ensuing excess of plastics one can no longer deny the inherent interconnectivity of plastic pollution, persistence, and politics within the story of plastics. Plastic Legacies offers a significant contribution to the radical shift in understanding and responding to human-induced plastic waste crisis. While other scholars such as Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent (2013: 24) remind us that “the manufacture of [excess] plastics destroys the archives of life on the earth, ... [plastic waste] will constitute the archives of the twentieth century and beyond”, the edited collection of chapters in this book provide on-the-ground engagements and encounters that actively trouble the lifecycle of plastics
well beyond simplistic notions of production, consumption, and waste(ing). Although plastics are indeterminant shape shifters whose permanence instills a legacy that will long outlive us, this book helps to story plastic legacies through ongoing complex and contentious relations with bodies, things, forces, and discourses.

References


Kelly-Ann MacAlpine  
Faculty of Education  
Western University  
kmacalp2@uwo.ca

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