

Michael Dunn Life in Plastic: It's not
Fantastic

**Synthetic Entanglements in
Heather Davis's *Plastic Matter*
(2022)**

Rather than declining, plastic production is set to double by 2040 and although it feels like an age since a plastic 'turtle strangler' was spotted in a supermarket, 2022 marks the year microplastics were, for the very first time, found in human blood. In 2020, two years before this startling discovery, it was ascertained that microplastics were found in human organs. Not only is plastic commodification commonplace in almost all reaches of human life, but we, ourselves, are now partially and permanently plastic. Plastic isn't going anywhere anytime soon and not only because plastics, which eventually become micro- and nano-plastics, never truly disappear and break down, but also because of improper distribution and disposal as well as an excessive obsession with corporate profit margins and production. While it may seem that minimalistic and micro-consumerist changes are being made, the intense acceleration of plastic production incentivised by fracking booms, as well as the absurd amount of plastic left behind in our oceans and seas, represented most aptly and uncannily by the 48,000 tons of so-called 'ghost nets,' continue to show us that plastic is a symbol and reminder that all places of this planet have been irreversibly tainted.

Heather Davis's 2022 *Plastic Matter* is, then, in the face of these oddities and absurdities, a timely endeavour offering insights into our state of synthetic sentience in the Anthropocene. In the same way that Donna J. Haraway has offered us ways to reconfigure kinmaking and our relation to the natural 'non-human' world in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Davis suggests that the "queer futures of plastic matter bump and crash against its inheritances and transmissions, churning through the violence of settler colonial extraction, creating unexpected openings and

new relations” (2022, 103). These new relations, however, are explored via what Davis calls complicated inheritances; legacies of loss and loathing that must be unsettled. While having worked extensively on decolonising the Anthropocene (2017) previously with co-author Zoe Todd, as well as extractivism (2019), the shift in the work of Heather Davis to focusing on the intricately interwoven similitude of queer ecologies, plasticity, matter, and, as she states, “the creation of kin through all the novel microorganisms that plastic is birthing, offer[ing] ways of living that are more implicated, enmeshed, and earthly, working against some of the universalizing logics that helped create plastic in the first place,” is a novel approach to making sense of the ‘Anthropocene’ (2022, 6).

To illustrate plastics omnipresence, Davis chooses to first explore visual artworks that deal with plastic entanglements of the everyday while still focusing specifically on the communities dealing with plastic waste pollution. In doing so, Davis suggests that we need to move closer to this tainted chemical product, as well as its discontents, for sake of accountability, creativity, and enmeshment. In this way, plastic for Davis can actually offer up surprisingly “earthly lessons” with which to traverse the ecological crisis (2022, 9). From the first days of our celluloid histories, plastics don’t merely replace they also create newness and thus further a bourgeois classism defined by painfully placid products; ones that nevertheless come into being because of a problematic understanding to nature and those seen as non-human. In this regard, Davis creates analogies rather than metaphors to point to the elephant in the room: how extractivism links both colonialism (and its extensions of systemic racism and structural violence) and climate change. With a heavy nod to Max Liboiron’s *Pollution is Colonialism* (2021), Davis draws us deeper into the rabbit hole of “capitalism [which] itself is able to morph while not fundamentally questioning its founding premises in either antiblackness or plasticity” (2022, 26). While Liboiron focuses on scales of action that address plastics violence, purity activism as a scalar mismatch, and land relationships to explore ways of being in the world with a view to the larger picture of various kinds of pollution (2021, 101–111), Davis zooms in on how with plastics “[f]or the first time, matter could be manipulated at the molecular level” (2022, 29) and how said chemical manipulation creates cautionary but ultimately celebratory expressions of the ‘human’: “the queering of the body should be understood as opening on to new, and ecological, possibilities rather than reasserting a threatened heteronormative configuration of sex/gender” (2022, 87). Davis does, however, see the cognitive dissonance of allowing while disavowing when she asks the difficult question: “how to celebrate, socially and ecologically, the difference of these queer bodily formations

and also hold companies accountable for the harms that they are dispersing, as often these harms fall on the bodies of Black, Indigenous, and poor communities” (2022, 89). Although these questions aren’t always easy, they are incredibly necessary argues Davis.

Through a combination of biographical exploration and incisive analysis, Davis asks a further uncomfortable question of how relevant are ‘we’ to the natural world as well as how are ‘we’ to make sense of the synthetic, plastic world that ‘we’ have created and are now part of; especially when the “proliferation of plastics is now driving evolutionary processes” (2022, 82). Offering us a new and novel perspective of plastic and its associated bacteria as “bastard children” (2022, 82), i.e. substances that will most likely outlive us, Davis explores how these so-called synthetic progeny endanger the already problematic figure of the future child. Rather than expanding on a pressing present we continue to “uphold an economic voraciousness that defies all logic” when “[t]he child stands for resistance to change, through fantasies of enclosure” (2022, 91). By exploring, in a similar vein to Edelman (2004), the idea that children act as a metonymical enticement for a future that is ostensibly a continuation of conservatism rather than focusing on structural violence, Davis alludes to another kind of denial: the climate crisis denial. Here, she does not talk about the regular discourses of delay or climate change denialism but, rather, a kind of commonplace denial “both at the policy level and in everyday habits of consumption and transportation” (2022, 91). EasyJet’s latest brand campaign of ‘nextGen Sustainability,’ a promise to the ‘children’ of the future even while admitting it is not a long-term solution as there is no sustainable way to fly, is testament to quick fix consumerist greenwashing’s continued attempts to circumvent the systemic problem of pollution and the “responsibility of petroculturalism for the extermination of one world while another is being birthed” (2022, 95).

In concurrence with the important and continued critique of the Anthropocene’s universalistic ignorance undertaken by scholars such as Haraway (2016), Liboiron (2021), and Ferdinand (2021) to name just a few, Davis makes it clear that plastic is an often-overlooked aspect of revealing the inherently race oriented prejudices of petrochemical capitalism and consumerism. Plastic as an utterly banal substance can actually help us explore matter manipulation under techno capitalism as well as the entanglement between everyday plastic products and more sinister finite resources such as oil or coal. Davis offers up readers an eye-opening avenue to explore “the ways in which fossil fuels have infiltrated almost every aspect of our daily lives, most intimately through plastic, and what this tells us about Western assumptions regarding matter and material-

ity” (2022, 2). No plastic product is untainted by the darker sides of petrochemical capitalism. Writing as early as 2011, Rob Nixon has already suggested that “[f]or some eighty years, oil has been responsible for more of America’s international entanglements and anxieties than any other industry” (72). It is precisely these ecologically uncanny entanglements that looking at plastic—as the underbelly of the oil industry—further and not only as an American construct but as a worldwide endeavour that we must face. The intensity and continued acceleration of plastic transference reveals even more potent questions of consent when landfills are opened up by historically colonial powers and “plastic is imprinted with the colonial logics of dissociation, dislocation, denial, and universality, reproducing itself without regard for local cultures or ecologies” (2022, 5). Davis argues that plastic functions under the same logics as colonialism; whereby largely racialised and poor communities and peoples who are neither answerable for plastic’s emergence nor profiting from it are the highest percentage of people dealing with long term illnesses and inter-generational effects of plastic pollution.

That being said, it’s unknown just exactly how harmful plastics are at this stage and this is possibly another reason for its continued apathetic acceptance and use across the board from supermarket products and packaging to active outdoor wear, and almost all skincare and hair products. Even if we don’t know precisely how harmful plastics are for us, especially in the long term, Davis demands we think with these products through the commonplace apocalypse of environmental devastation that plastics as a very specific industry entangled in fossil fuels create. “They are reconfiguring the atmosphere, biosphere, and hydrosphere,” she states, “so it seems imperative to think with this material” (2022, 9).

It’s hard to imagine such a laborious material as plastics as ambassadors of an ‘apocalypse’. However, the slow yet violent decay caused by climate change is inherently intertwined with plastics as the everyday, household side of the petrochemical industry. In the way that europop of the 90s replicated a bastardised and cliched, highly sexualised version of Motown’s best-known riffs and licks, plastic assimilates; from the toys of our childhood to the towering trash of a single use, throwaway culture, plastic is part of our very being which makes it all the more uncanny in both its more obvious pollution washing ashore in waves and its silent ingestion into our system (it’s been ascertained that we ingest a credit card worth of microplastics a week). Although we are partially repulsed by plastic products, many of us in neoliberal, Western societies continue to be attracted to their ability, through packaging, to mute our murderous relationship to animals and the taboo of death. “[W]e,” says Davis,

“are also attracted to it, and especially to its promises of a clean, sanitary, sterilized life” (2022, 8). And although life in plastic is anything but fantastic, it has, at least, given us ways to rethink the world beyond ourselves and heteronormativity, as well as the necessity to dismantle commonplace petrochemical capitalism. Ultimately, Davis’s timely attempt to bring plastic, synthetic matter and its manipulation to the fore succeeds in revealing our “entanglements, inheritances, and enmeshments” to these new forms (2022, 101). Despite the repulsion, acceptance, and intrigue of plastics, as well as matter manipulation in more general terms, plastic is unavoidable and irreversible in its reach. The revelatory aspect of apocalypse is reflected in addressing chemically induced ecocide but, rather, with a focus on responsibility for the non-human. However, the revelatory understanding of queer matter is where the similitude stops. “For nihilistic, apocalyptic, or techno-utopian versions of the future,” Davis states, “will only lead us to the continued reproduction of the social order” (2022, 101) which is already so strictly focused on binaries and biology as well as discriminatory exclusions and violent suffering. While Davis is refreshingly open about the influence that Edelman’s antifuturity has made on her own research, she rejects his so-called “apocalyptic nihilism” (2022, 96). Davis, rather, shifts the argument into new directions that bear battling with while unearthing the political questions of our turbulent time: who suffers and who regulates and controls said suffering and, of most importance to the future of plastic and its role as an area of critical research, “how to celebrate the queering of the social order while resisting the destruction and oppression of life forms, including queer ones?” (2022, 95).

Apocalyptica

No 2 / 2022

Dunn: Heather Davis’s

Plastic Matter

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Apocalyptic

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