Introduction

Care amid Oceans of Trouble

am always pissed off when somebody tells me that we cant do anything about BAD plastic bags #BanPlasticKE

—JAMES WAKIBIA, PHOTOJOURNALIST AND ACTIVIST (@JAMESWAKIBIA)

last night a guy in a turtle costume grabbed the straw out of my drink, threw it on the floor, and said 'that's for my homies' #Halloween #StopSucking

—LONELY WHALE, NGO (@LONELYWHALE)

"Festering outrage" #Formosa's #pollution in #Vietnam becomes a tipping point

—INTERNATIONAL POLLUTANTS ELIMINATION NETWORK, NGO (@TOXICSFREE)

Over the past decade, addressing plastic pollution has felt complicated and overwhelming. Anger, shame, hurt, fear, guilt, and despair abound online and offline. Like the planet, the reactions are increasingly heated. Such intensity is a sign something matters.

The most common observation of plastics is their ubiquity. Susan Freinkel opens *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story* by sharing how she tried not to touch plastic for a day and quickly failed; instead, she shifted to writing down everything she touched in a day that was plastic, from toilet seats and glasses to food containers and computers.[1] Bridging private and public practices, plastics have become integral to what Lauren Berlant more recently called the "intimate public sphere."[2] In other words, our uses of plastics may feel deeply personal—from objects we place in our mouths daily to those others may use to assist us in our most precarious moments—and yet are structured by and structure our collective lives.

And plastic production keeps multiplying globally at remarkable rates since the mid-twentieth century. In 1950 the industry created approximately 2 million metric tons of plastics. That number rose to 380 million metric tons in 2015.[3]

That's an almost 19,000 percent increase in less than a century. If we don't change course, the World Economic Forum projects, current amounts will more than triple by 2050, resulting in what some alarmingly estimate as a 1:1 ratio of plastics to fish in the ocean by weight.[4]

Further, plastics aren't inert. Stacy Alaimo contends we now can judge that "a study on plastic pollution published in 1973 seems ancient" when it called the "harm 'chiefly aesthetic.'"[5] As the Just Transition Alliance emphasizes, plastics are toxic to public health and broader ecosystems not just as waste but also as petrochemicals throughout their life cycle, including extraction, production, transportation, consumption, and disposal.[6] Our lives are entangled with microplastics, as scientists have detected them in our blood, lungs, and breast milk.[7] On average, people digest about a credit card's worth of microplastics by weight per week.[8] We all are becoming more plastic, even if we haven't fully grasped what that transformation entails.

Unfortunately, recycling won't make plastic pollution disappear. It is estimated that of all the plastic waste generated to date, only 9 percent has ever been recycled.[9] Further, as Roland Geyer, Jenna R. Jambeck, and Kara Lavender Law have documented: "None of the commonly used plastics are biodegradable. As a result, they accumulate."[10]

Plastics, made mostly from fossil fuels, also exacerbate the unfolding climate emergency.[11] Xia Zhu writes: "Plastic is carbon. More specially, almost all plastic is fossil carbon locked up in polymer form."[12] Considering the magnitude of production, Judith Enck emphasizes: "If plastic were a country, it would be the world's fifth largest greenhouse gas emitter, beating out all but China, the U.S., India, and Russia."[13] Estimated to encompass 20 percent of global oil consumption by 2050, multinational corporate producers are looking to plastics to compensate for a decreased demand for oil, gas, and coal as the world transitions away from fossil fuels and toward renewable energy.[14] Greenpeace coexecutive director Annie Leonard stresses: "For the oil and gas industry, plastic is their lifeline."[15] Meanwhile Earth's climate already has begun to "wobble" or "flicker," as we head toward more "tipping points, or critical transitions."[16]

Despite warning signs, this profound proliferation suggests that most of us have embraced plastics—or at least until recently. So who has begun to share "pissed off" reactions of "outrage" about plastics—and why now?

Beyond Straw Men takes hashtag activism seriously by "staying with the trouble" of and beyond the initial hot takes, to try to dwell in and unravel what is being negotiated in the name of plastics.[17] The title is more than a feminist pun on plastic straws and men who promote them.[18] *Beyond Straw Men* attempts to engage plastics-related hashtag activism in ways that don't fall for or recreate straw man fallacies, which set up an imagined opposition for the purpose of showing how easily it can be torn down. My research complicates discourses that conjure false

choices through straw man arguments, such as individual or systemic change (spoiler alert: we need both); whether one country is to blame or all; whether environmental advocacy is helpful or harmful; and yes, whether we should stand for or against all plastics. Advocates against plastic pollution consistently accept and even celebrate what I describe as *impure politics*, a contingent array of tactics addressing a complexity of challenges in imperfect yet impactful ways both online and offline.

I came to this understanding by deliberately listening not only to voices where I live in the United States, a country that bears profound responsibility for plastics, but also to advocates in the Global South.[19] Contemporary calls for regulating plastics have not merely served as a distraction led by white, elite environmentalists, despite how they often are portrayed in the United States and the United Kingdom.[20] We are all impacted by—and contribute to—contemporary environmental crises, but not all equally.[21] Addressing global injustices, Raka Shome insists, calls for more research "to theorize through experiences that emerge from the Global South and keep them at the center of our intellectual and political imagination."[22] "Environmental communication from the Global South," Jagadish Thaker emphasizes, "highlights that environmentalism is not just a value reserved for the postmaterialist rich but embedded in everyday struggles of poor communities against land and resource grab by the government and corporations."[23] *Beyond Straw Men* therefore engages voices of the Global South as a way of learning theory, ethics, and politics from, as Mohan J. Dutta and Mahuya Pal describe, "space constituted geographically and communicatively amidst inequalities in the distribution of power."[24]

To clarify, *Global South* often refers geographically to countries primarily located in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania, despite crossing the equator. Angela Okune argues for *Souths* to underscore the plurality of worlds often obfuscated in dominant discourse.[25] My approach follows David Naguib Pellow's lead in critical environmental justice studies to "include communities of color and poor communities in industrialized nations within the 'South' designation (. . . 'the South of the North') and privileged communities in poor nations within the 'North' designation (or the 'North of the South')."[26] The South of the North includes communities in the US Gulf Coast (sometimes called "the Gulf South"); in contrast, Australia generally is considered part of the Global North (excluding, however, Aboriginal peoples). I invoke *Global South* and *Global North* not to deny or oversimplify these heterogeneities but to reference profoundly uneven historical and ongoing hegemonic global power relations.[27] As D. Soyini Madison observes in her study of water and human rights in Ghana, global neoliberal policies have "increased poverty and broadened economic equalities across the world."[28] Although Global South/North labels shift and are limited, these distinctions remain a pragmatic shorthand.[29]

Beyond Straw Men engages environmental leadership of the Global South and the Global South of the North, to deliberately reflect anti-colonial, deimperialist critiques of plastic pollution as a methodological praxis of *reorienting*.[30] I write across intersectional identities to resist the flattening of global privileges and oppressions, including but not limited to ability, carcerality, coloniality, class, gender, labor, sexuality, race, and species.[31] To situate my own knowledge, I try to position but not center myself.[32] Throughout, I illustrate how the transboundary crisis of plastics is predicated on multiple forms of oppression about who and what is imagined as disposable.[33]

In addition to humans, marine life has been sounding alarms of a plastics crisis, washing up dead with bellies full of indigestible plastics and strangled or otherwise harmed by plastics. Subsequently, *Beyond Straw Men* identifies the ways hashtag activists invoke and are linked to nonhuman systems. Consideration of marine life from an environmental justice perspective does not escape uneven power relations. Subhankar Banerjee argues: "Multispecies justice is not theory or analysis: it is praxis. It brings concerns and conservation of biotic life and habitats into alignment with environmental justice and Indigenous rights."[34] While not everyone addressed in this book aspires to multispecies justice (or "Democracy"), the movement against plastic pollution generally values nonhuman life, as well as water. A tension that regularly resurfaces is how aquatic relations—and biodiversity more broadly—are entangled with plastics in ways that signal threats to ideals of democracy, abolition, justice, and sustainability.

Through attending to hashtag activism from the Global South and about marine life, I have grown to believe that plastics have "*come to serve as the articulator of the crisis*."[35] That is, while controversies over plastics signify crises about plastics, for reasons noted, they also provide an entry point into a wider range of contemporary contested environmental topics, such as carbon-heavy masculinity, carceral policies, eco-ableism, greenwashing, marine life endangerment, planetary fatalism, pollution colonialism, and waste imperialism. To analyze this complicated conjuncture, we need to consider more than statistics about plastic materials and sciences. "Politics begin with desire," Gerard A. Hauser reminds us, "and desires are tied to our attachments."[36] To better understand the plastics crisis, I believe we should engage attachments—and *detachments*—that arise in public controversies over plastics.[37]

To elaborate: in a founding text of cultural studies, *Policing the Crisis*, Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts set out "to examine why and how the themes of race, crime, and youth—condensed into the image of 'mugging'–*come to serve as the articulator of the crisis*, as its ideological conductor." Discourse about mugging, they argued, was animating a conservative backlash regarding the "British way of life," including perceived threats from

welfare, racism, employment, and American culture. Hall and colleagues take this "moral panic" seriously as an opportunity to explore fundamental cultural values of law and order, to unpack what "mugging" was revealing and obscuring in British public discourse at the time.[38]

Today, many invoke the language of "moral panic" to mock dramatic responses they feel are unwarranted (just search "moral panic and" in a web browser). Yet we all have some "morals," and we all "panic" sometimes—at least I do, as the former guides how judgments are made, and the latter appears to be a reasonable reaction to a range of issues today. Dismissive invocations of "moral panic" miss the more complicated questions posed by Hall and colleagues about what studying a conjuncture entails: How do historical and structural conditions enable a particular matter (mugging or plastics) to become an articulator of crisis? Which forces have gone unnamed or underrecognized in public discourse, eclipsed by polarizing frames and dismissive assumptions? And at a fundamental level, how can we understand which discourses of crisis are legitimate so we can attempt to act meaningfully? To engage these complicated questions, it might be helpful to first define some key terms.

THE PLASTICS-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX AND THE RISE OF RESISTANCE

There are numerous types of *plastics*. "The term *plastic*," as Max Liboiron (Red River Métis) writes, "refers to many types of polymers with many, many associated industrial chemicals. . . . Plastic in the singular misses things that are rather central to plastic activism, plastic science, plastic policy, and other plastic relations."[39] It is important, then, to consider plastics generally, as well as specific plastics in their variety.

Addressing plastics can feel overwhelming, and many environmental advocates dive in by initially focusing on *single-use plastics*. The term *single-use* in the English language has referred to objects "cheap enough to be thrown away" since the late 1800s.[40] Today, single-use plastic generally refers to an item used once—often briefly—before it is discarded and discounted. Think of plastics in the food industry: utensils, bags, beverage bottles, straws, to-go food containers, and individual condiment sachet packets. Single-use plastics often are light, flexible, durable, impermeable, and transparent.

Single-use plastics epitomize *throwaway culture*, which values immediate gratification, convenience, and disposability in contrast to, for example, endurance, reparability, and sentimentality. Throwaway culture is a structure of feeling of dominant culture in the Global North. Borrowing from Raymond Williams, "structure of feeling" references informal social formations that have become so

pervasive, they matter profoundly to our lived experiences in felt ways, even if—and perhaps because—we might not always be conscious of them.[41] Single-use plastics have been integral to the social formations of throwaway culture, which emerged from a desire for profit growth in industry.

Consider packaging, which constitutes the majority of US household trash and nearly half of which is single-use.[42] Plastic studies often recall the editor of *Modern Packaging Magazine*, Lloyd Stauffer, declaring in 1956 that "the future of plastics is in the trash can" and "that it was time for the plastics industry to stop thinking about 'reuse' packages and concentrate on *single use*. For the package that is used once and thrown away, like a tin can or a paper carton, represents not a one-shot market for a few thousand units, but an everyday recurring market measured by the *billions* of units."[43] What this anecdote from Stauffer illustrates is how throwaway culture has been manufactured by design—and exported globally through advertising and lobbying for plastics.[44]

This range of actors is why I refer to the *plastics-industrial complex*, which includes industries that extract or manufacture plastics (petrochemical companies), use plastics (including beverage corporations, grocers, packaging companies, and tobacco), and manage plastics (the waste and recycling industry), as well as the institutional apparatuses that enable them, including those that are private (such as advertising firms and industry trade associations) and public (such as governments). Holding this larger system accountable together enables a more accurate understanding of the conditions of possibility of our current conjuncture, even as each facet is complex.

Consider waste management. The United States produces the largest amount of plastic waste per person in the world; while it is applauded for managing plastic waste well, that plan long involved exporting 70 percent of US plastic waste to China, which in turn led to the global mismanagement of plastic waste into the ocean.[45] China, Julie Sze writes of dominant US ecological imaginaries, often is portrayed as "our psychological displacement and doppleganger, our enemy and our salvation."[46] When China announced the "National Sword" policy to ban the import of foreign plastic waste in 2017, therefore, its decision had global ramifications, particularly for the United States.[47]

One response to the National Sword policy was to maintain business as usual by exporting waste elsewhere. Sharon Lerner's reporting during this time illustrates the consistency of the pattern: "In 2019, American exporters shipped almost 1.5 billion pounds of plastic waste to 95 countries, including Malaysia, which received more than 133 million pounds; Thailand, which got sent almost 60 million pounds; and Mexico, which got 81 million pounds. . . . Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania, South Africa, Ethiopia, Senegal, and Kenya were among the African countries that also received American plastic garbage, most of which was the hardest to recycle and the least-valued plastics. . . . And that's just what's in the official record."[48]

Interestingly, though predictably, when plastic waste was sent to emergent Global South markets, there was no public uproar in the United States, no related hashtag trending.

As Lerner explains, however, China's policy prompted a turning of the tide of plastic waste throughout the Global South. By September 2020 "Cambodia returned 83 shipping containers full of waste to the U.S. and Canada with a message from Prime Minister Hun Sen: 'Cambodia is not a dustbin.' In January, Malaysia sent more than 8 million pounds of plastic trash back to the U.S. and 12 other rich nations. And in Indonesia, a customs official announced last year that hundreds of shipping containers, many of which had been incorrectly labeled to mask the fact that they contained plastic waste, were being sent back to their 'countries of origin,' including the U.S."[49] These examples illustrate how rejecting plastic waste imports increasingly has become a movement in the Global South—one relatively ignored in discourses about plastics circulating in the Global North.[50] This concerted refusal has mobilized support for the Proximity Principle, which advocates that waste management should occur near the site of consumption rather than exporting it to someone else's backyard.[51]

In turn, more progressive communities have started to recognize the need to manage plastic waste within their own jurisdictions. For example, rallying around ocean conservation, the US city of Seattle's plastic straw ban passed in 2018.[52] The focus on single-use plastics, as advocates repeated, was to start with the seemingly nonessential and most wasteful forms of throwaway culture (an idea complicated later).

Unfortunately, the plastics-industrial complex has lobbied against even such modest steps to reduce consumption. For example, based on a model created by the conservative nongovernmental organization (NGO) American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), some US states have preemptively passed legislation banning the banning of single-use plastics, including Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, and Wisconsin.[53] ALEC claims: "Many of the concerns about single-use plastic are overstated."[54]

Regardless of barriers, calls to reduce plastic production have continued to make global headlines over the past decade. In 2018 *Collins Dictionary* declared *single-use* the "Word of the Year" given "a four-fold increase in usage of this word since 2013."[55] The United Nations (UN) chose #BeatPlasticPollution as the theme of the 2018 World Environment Day. The host was India, which announced a single-use plastic ban.[56] By 2021 all EU members committed to banning #Single-UsePlastics.[57] And the UN declared a "blue awakening" in Latin America and the Caribbean, launching a #CleanSeas campaign.[58] Despite setbacks during COVID to reduce plastics, members of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) met in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2022 to negotiate the parameters for a global plastics treaty among almost two hundred countries, to be decided upon by 2024

FIGURE 1. *Giant Plastic Tap #TurnOffThePlasticTap*. Canadian artist Benjamin Von Wong worked alongside locals to collect and arrange plastic waste in the four-story-tall installation, displayed outside the UN headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, where a global commitment for a global plastics treaty was announced in 2022. *Source:* https://blog.vonwong.com/turnofftheplastictap/. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

(see figure 1).[59] As the BBC reported: "There will be pressure to help countries in the global south dealing with plastic problems created in the global north."[60] This momentum suggests we are living through a conjunctural shift, one we would do well to consider through environmental justice studies.

PATTERNS OF ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

Before the internet existed, naming *environmental racism* powerfully articulated how People of Color communities have been and continue to be disproportionately polluted (distributive injustice), as well as left out of environmental decision-making (procedural injustice).[61] Robert D. Bullard has emphasized that "environmental racism is an extension of the institutional racism which touches every aspect of our society, including housing, education, employment and law-enforcement."[62]

Perhaps the most fundamental question in environmental justice studies has been one posed by Bullard: "The goal of an environmental justice framework is to make environmental protection more democratic. More important, it brings to

the surface the *ethical* and *political* questions of 'who gets what, why, and in what amount.' Who pays for, and who benefits from, technological expansion?"[63] Following Bullard, *Beyond Straw Men* explores this question: Who is paying for, and who is benefiting from, plastics?

Although race/ethnicity is the leading indicator of environmental harms, critical environmental justice studies entails intersectional analysis. For now, consider Jayajit Chakraborty's research finding a pattern in which the US state of Texas disproportionately locates hazardous waste sites near where people with disabilities tend to live.[64] Likewise, the UN has documented how disasters disproportionately harm disabled people: they are more often left behind and turned away during planning and responses, as well as having greater risk because of disruption to services, discrimination, and exclusion.[65]

Understanding who benefits from environmental injustice is telling as well. In his research on Pepsi plastic waste being distributed from Global North nations to India in the mid-1990s, Pellow argues: "Ecological modernization in the United States is made possible through environmental injustice in Asia."[66] Lisa Sun-Hee Park and Pellow coined *environmental privilege* as "the exercise of economic, political, and cultural power that some groups enjoy, which enables them exclusive access to coveted environmental amenities," such as public green spaces, urban trees, and clean drinking water.[67] Environmental privilege also includes the freedom from harm. As someone who grew up near a dump (technically called a "refuse" site), I emphasize that environmental privilege includes the liberty to distance oneself spatially and emotionally from waste infrastructure, as well as what or who is imagined as disposable.

Transnational environmental justice analysis tracks these privileges. Pellow emphasizes that the global waste trade is largely shipped "from Europe, the United States, and Japan to nations in Latin America, the Caribbean, South and Southeast Asia, and Africa," creating a pattern of *garbage imperialism*.[68] More commonly called *waste imperialism* by the plastics movement, this pattern involves both diplomacy and force to secure a global hierarchy. Waste imperialism is predicated on what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Anishnaabeg) identifies as *cognitive imperialism* of Indigenous peoples, which has been "aimed at convincing us we were weak and defeated people, and that there was no point in resisting or resurging."[69] The hegemonic norm of convincing oppressed people that resistance is unimaginable or impractical, of course, serves the interests of economic and political elites of the Global North. Before his public execution, poet and anti-Shell activist Ken Saro-Wiwa (Ogoni) named the pattern of fossil fuel violence against his Indigenous community and land "*slow genocide*."[70]

In 2021 the UN recognized plastics as a source of environmental injustice with a disproportionate impact on Global South communities, especially those reliant on oceans.[71] This pattern reflects the dominant white settler imaginary