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revoking / evoking intimacy: where queer plastic and black feminist eco-poetics touch

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Abstract: In their edited iteration of a conversation as part of membra(I)nes, the 12th Annual Conference of the Gender Studies Association and Public Program in June 2023, Ama Josephine Budge Johnstone and Heather Davis tackle issues on plastic matter, the body and pleasure as a deeply complicated and at the same time ethical practice. The text gives personal insights in the authors' understanding and consternation in intersectional matters of race, class, gender and queerness in the context of climate colonialism. The plastic material of cellophane as a bodily substance is thereby regarded as both pleasurable and harmful and becomes an analogy to the effects of white supremacy and the academic discourse – seemingly impenetrable and almost invisible. The conversation offers a queer rethinking and a possible change of the goal climate colonialism away from mere survival.

Keywords: Body, Black Feminism, Climate Colonialism, Pleasure, Queer

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"To research climate colonialism as a Black woman in Europe is to live through the atrocities of imperialism from behind a thin veil of cling-film. Cheap flimsy stuff from the pound shop, the kind you could sever with the strength of an outstretched tongue. To live through the first shock waves of climate colonialism as one called to witness (or archive) its turbulent iterations, and to attempt – in the face of futility – to disrupt or deviate its paths of destruction, is to perform the unholy task of foretelling the deaths of the living amidst the howl of foremothers still clamouring to be told. It is to feel unworthy of the task, and to have to do it anyway."

– Ama Josephine Budge Johnstone, "Pollination as Praxis" (2021)

"Plastic has become one of the sites at which anxieties over technology and environmental features merge. Since its invention and escalating in the 1960s, people have been deeply ambivalent about plastic and its many promises, seeing it as increasingly cheap, fake, and later toxic. We fear being smothered in plastic, in its sickly sweet surfaces. Our bodies invaded by this foreign alien material but we are also attracted to it, and especially to its promises of a clean, sanitary, sterilized life. Despite the fear and revulsion that many now feel for plastic, we cannot easily give it up."

– Heather Davis, "Plastic Matter" (2022)

The following text is an edited iteration of a conversation between Ama Josephine Budge Johnstone and Heather Davis as part of membra(I)nes, the 12th Annual Conference of the Gender Studies Association and Public Program held between HGB Leipzig and Burg Giebichenstein University of Art and Design Halle in June, 2023. These intimations between Davis and Budge Johnstone both continue after and supersede the conference and are captured, here as all ephemeral possibilities and ever-moving thoughts must be, only in part. Albeit a juicy one.

Heather Davis: In the epigraph above I love the way that you use the metaphor of cling film (or saran wrap) to describe the flimsy, translucent barrier between yourself and the atrocities of imperialism. I'm curious about why you start with this image, because it immediately brings us into the uncomfortable place of the collision of violence and sensuality, especially as you describe pushing your tongue through that cling film, to sever or break the illusion that that violence is being kept at bay. I'd like to start here to think about the very different ways we both engage pleasure in our work.

In my theorizations of plastic there has been a real reticence about pleasure due to the ways that whiteness and the Anthropocene can use sensuality, beauty, and comfort to perpetuate violence. I am thinking here about the lures of consumerism, the bodily comforts of fossil fuels, and the ways that, as Nicholas Mirzoeff (2014) theorizes, Western ideals of beauty are used to obfuscate environmental violence. Pleasure can be used to enroll people into incredibly violent projects, so it is something that I approach with a fair amount of caution. This is one of the incredible gifts that you, Ama, pointed out to me, the way my writing about plastic both revels in its sensuality and simultaneously pulls back, how in my book *Plastic Matter*, there is a fear of pleasure.

One of the things that is so generative and beautiful in your writing is your insistence on pleasure, your insistence on erotics, and the ways in which the erotic comes into all of your language, and it trips up the page in these seductive ways. I really appreciate how you are thinking about pleasure as an epistemology that's counter to the violence of white supremacy, where pleasure is an irrepressible eruption that insists on loving as a radical act of resistance within Black feminism. I'd love for you to start with this question of plastic and then expand on your ideas about bodily practice, and an epistemology of the erotic.

Ama Josephine Budge Johnstone: Wow, thank you! That feels like a whole lot, but I think what is also really interesting and generative about the ways that our politics and practices meet is that from our very different positionalities we both think really deeply and with great care – at times excruciatingly – about how we each navigate power and privilege. I am both British and Ghanaian and grew up between the two countries, but I hold a British passport. I am also light skinned, have what we might loosely call a “middle class” accent and proximity to whiteness through my mother's family. So all these complicated and also erotic relationships between Empire, class, acceptability-politics and desirability-politics amongst other socio-political

dimensions – -isms and phobias – are navigated through the existence of my body.

I think this means that a lot of my research has been alternately reticent, anxious, stalling and at the same time an insistent diving in. And pleasure has really lubricated my ability to stay with the work. Pleasure became a way for me to keep thinking about climate colonialism without it completely destroying my mental health, which it was for quite a while. This is something that most people who work on the topic of climate colonialism will relate to. It lives in your body; self-sabotaging somewhere in your gut and it just grows and grows and you have to learn to live with it, or you don't live with it, quite truthfully. So pleasure became a way for me to live with that tumor and navigate how to communicate it to others. Which is also an important part of my ethical practice: how do I talk about climate colonialism in a way that doesn't shut people down or out, particularly when talking about Blackness and climate colonialism. How do I not retraumatize or reviolate Black academic or artistic audiences or my students or my community? How do I not reproduce this really violent language around apocalypse, around epistemicide, around genocide?

The very tangible realities of horror that plague the relationship to our pasts, presents and futures have to climate colonialism are tangled up with the projects of settler-colonialism, enslavement, displacement, occupation etc. So pleasure for me is an ethical practice. It's about having a self-sustaining practice, and it's about trying to enact or evoke or hold myself to account, about creating sustainable discursive environments, particularly with other People of Color and Black folk.

Maybe I'd also add: pleasure as a bodily knowledge system that breaks down the binary between mind and body (or bodymind). Pleasure consistently calls the body to the table. What's going on? What's going on here? What's going on in my belly? Are my feet on the ground? Do I feel unstable? Do I feel unsafe? Why do I feel unsafe? And this of course is where anti-racist work meets and is indebted to disability justice theory and activist practices. If I feel unsafe, if I'm unable to support myself, unable to lean on the ground right now, what needs to change about this situation? What needs to change about this environment? If I'm unsteady, other people are probably also unsteady. Calling pleasure in as something that doesn't come after some kind of revolutionary moment but as adrienne maree brown (2019) insists must be considered now is an epistemological way to move compassionately, centering the pleasure of the most oppressed first.

The final thing I wrote down, because it was a big question, is: pleasure for who, and pleasure as a de-anthropocentrizing marker. Pleasure is something that is not just about me. And I'm not talking about pleasure as something that is easy. I think that's often a mistake that is made. In fact, it's often easier to feel crap and to reproduce patriarchal, white supremacist, neocolonial, ableist, patriarchal capitalism. Pleasure can be the hardest politic to remain accountable to. Although I do see that pleasure is very much a "hot potato" in your work, it is also there in the ways you constantly talk about power. We both at times lean into a language of BDSM to engage with power, privilege, complicity, materiality, toxicity, invasion, dominance, submission – I think we both try to queer those dynamics.

So when I said "To research climate colonialism as a Black woman in Europe is to live through the atrocities of imperialism from behind a thin veil of clingfilm" (Budge Johnstone 2021) – I wrote that line very intuitively. So I really had to sit and think about your question of why plastic. This sensation of severing clingfilm with your tongue – I don't know if anybody else has ever done this – but, this cellophane that you package food with, that for me is a really bodily substance. It is at once, completely impervious. Right? It can be airtight. It is a sealant. It appears to be impenetrable. As you say, just like white supremacy, and academia for that matter – impenetrable, yet at the same time it's barely there. You can barely feel it. From the wrong angle it would disappear completely.

And it is pleasurable, you know, it's a little bit like latex. It's malleable, it moves with you. It surrenders to your tongue. It feels somehow like progress. Like things are getting better. We're getting closer to something. Symbiosis perhaps. And then suddenly you reach this point of resistance where it's not going to move anymore. And if you were to sever it, suddenly you are going to be invaded by it. It's in your mouth, it's in your body. And now it's a potential weapon, the threat of asphyxiation. Which is potentially no less erotic. Yet the power dynamic has shifted.

But, as you know, plastic is always there. It cannot be eroded or degraded, only transformed. Once it is in your body and in your system, it's often there for life. Very much like white supremacy and of course Blackness itself.

HD: What I love about what you just said is how plastic is pleasurable, but also permeates everything, doesn't go away. It creates this feeling of a certain kind of security. I read a Vice article that compared the texture of plastic to shark dick (Evans 2015).

AJB: Is shark dick the penises of sharks? Or is it like...?

HD: Yeah.

AJB: Okay, not like a new queer fad: everyone is doing shark dick. It's actually shark dick.

HD: Hahaha, yes. There is something about that metaphor (even though sharks don't technically have penises) that felt strangely compelling to me. It's a way to describe plastic as a fearful, desirable, erotically charged, ancient material. It captures the feeling of attraction and repulsion: you really want to touch it and you're worried about the consequences. I think what I love about the image of the tongue and the clingfilm is it reveals both the way that plastic is produced as a sealant, a barrier, but also one that is so easily penetrated, and with the mouth, with this erotic consumption.

You capture the tension between the permanence of plastic and its fragility through the use of the erotic. There is also a powerful metaphor here about the way that power might seem totalizing, for example the effects of white supremacy or petrochemicals, and while it's good not to underestimate their reach, it's also important to remember all the mechanisms of resistance, all the pockets of refuge or fugitivity, all the ways in which that power is never complete. There's always been lines of flight, there's always been escape. There's always been holes.

AJB: That's so much of what I wanted that line to say. Thank you. There have always been holes.

But also, these lines that we create between pleasure and pain, or between white supremacy and fugitivity, are not as clear cut as I think we report. You could say there aren't "two sides" of the clingfilm, right. You can turn it over, because if you sever it with your tongue, you're on both sides. You're implicated and enmeshed in the matter, which is really problematic and hard and hot. All at once.

I would love for you to speak a little bit more about this return to matter. We had a kind of brief chat earlier about matter being something that was really important for feminist science scholars in the late 1980s and 1990s and then has dropped a little bit out of academic eye. Yet here you and several other scholars are now, saying: no, we need to pay attention to matter again. So leading on from clingfilm which is also so much like flesh, how you're figuring plastic matter and human matter, together? Because you do a wonderful job of not (re)creating a human/nature or human/techno/culture binary. So how are you of thinking plastic matter and human matter in ways that are complex and queer and entangled?

HD: It's such a big and interesting question. First, what I wanted to study is this thing that we call plastic. What you immediately bump into when studying plastic is that it's not one thing: it's not a specific molecule, it doesn't have one shape or texture or use. So when you really think with plastic, you're really drawn into the question of polymers, which relies upon a working understanding of what molecules are, and an understanding of matter based in chemistry.

One of the things that's also really interesting is the ways in which gender and sex differentiation have also turned increasingly towards the molecule. While in the past sex differentiation was made on the basis of genital appearance or secondary sex characteristics, and then later on chromosomes, now the classification of gender and sex differentiation happens through hormone distribution. So there's an interesting turn towards the processes of molecularization. What does it mean to really be thinking with molecules? The concept of the molecule wasn't even introduced in its contemporary form until the late 19th century, with James Clerk Maxwell. When people were developing plastics there was very little understanding of how molecules function, polymer research really proceeded beside the invention of various plastics, even though people didn't have a full grasp of what was going on chemically.

In terms of really thinking human and other-than-human matter together, I am deeply indebted to the histories of Black feminists' thought. In particular, how the feminine has been associated with matter, how we think through the question of form and substance, of violent legacies of reproductive injustice, and the production of objects that happened through institutions of slavery and how that permeates the world that we live in now. In particular, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's work on the question of plasticity has been really important to me. She reformulates the question of the human through plasticity by tracing the ways in which enslaved people were forced to be sub- and superhuman simultaneously, and the slippages between those categories (Jackson 2020).

In other words, one of the extreme violences of slavery was not accepting the limits of material human form, and instead pushing people to breaking points. While Jackson is clearly coming at these questions from a very different lineage, with extremely different consequences, the way that human matter is approached in slavery resonated with some of the ways that early chemical engineers are approaching matter. One of the arguments of the book that I hope is useful for people, is to really think

about plastic as an emblematic material for thinking Western understandings of matter in general. And I think that for me there's a real continuity between the histories of chemistry and the production of the category of the human.

Additionally, I was also interested in how plastic with its associated chemicals queers various bodies, and how we can think through those complexities. What do we do with this chemical imposition on our bodies that's not chosen? One of the fundamental problems at this moment in time is that we don't get to decide whether or not we are exposed. We are fully enmeshed in chemical regimes of living, as Michelle Murphy (2008) says, even if in highly uneven ways. This does not mean we shouldn't do everything we can to halt toxic petrochemical production, but because many of these chemicals bioaccumulate and have very long lifespans, we also need ways to think about what they are doing to our bodies and how to approach our toxic environments that are not going away. Petrochemicals are reshaping our bodies, whether we like it or not. There is a shifting morphology because of endocrine disruptors and other chemicals that are affecting how sex organs appear.

Eva Hayward and Malin Ah-King (2013) write that these chemical mutations are outstripping social practices and I think that there's something really provocative in that line of thinking that I find useful to think with. What they argue is that sex has always been a process, it is not a final point that we arrive at, and it is not something stagnant that we just are. This is a vitally important insight that disrupts normative assumptions about sex and implicitly intervenes into the panic around trans kids, while also disrupting our assumptions about humans as a stagnant organism not subject to evolutionary or chemical pressures. Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2018) takes up a similar ethic when she insists that we need to embrace evolution as a strategy of change and survival, even if that sometimes means it emerges from toxicity.

In my research on plastic, and the various kinds of plastic eating organisms that are evolving to live in the waste of the petrochemical industry, I've also been interested in the capaciousness of queer organization of life and relations. I think queer theory is particularly good at thinking beyond the human because of the way that queer people organize social relations beyond the nuclear family. It has long been made clear to queers that we can't rely upon the state or upon biological family to constitute networks of solidarity, comfort, sustainability, or care for each other. So it's much less of a leap to then think about the kind of solidarity and care that is

necessary to extend beyond humans, which is the reason I've been really drawn to the questions of queer ecologies.

Queer ecologies recognize how the world is exceedingly queer and how ideas of relation and family can be extended into an ecological realm. This does not mean that those relations are easy or that everyone gets along. Most people fight with their families. It means that you are intimately bound to people, it means that you have responsibilities for others. You can't just distance yourself from something because you don't like it. This is an ethic that has been really important to me in thinking through plastic in my work. I theorize the ways that those plastic eating organisms are becoming a kind of non-human progeny, and if that is the case, what are our responsibilities to them?

In part this is a provocation to think against a purity politics that fantasizes that toxicity can be contained or only housed in certain places or bodies. In part, this is a provocation to take responsibility, for those of us with ties to the petrochemical industry, to clean up our mess. I think queer values and ethics are helpful here in navigating away from purity politics while at the same time articulating a demand for justice. Queer progeny is not about condoning petrochemical saturation, rather, it is about understanding what beings petrochemical companies are birthing and to attend to those realities with curiosity, with an ethic of noninnocence, while fighting to have those companies disabled.

Ama, I wanted to think about this question in relationship to climate colonialism. Your work is deeply concerned with reclaiming erotics and pleasure as an epistemology and as a practice of resistance that comes from a queer BDSM sensibility of pleasure and its associations with pain. I would love to hear you say more about what a queer lens on climate colonialism offers.

AJBj: I think similarly to the way that queerness does not get to lean on the nuclear family as the kind of catch-all crutch, queerness allows us to shift the idea of what the goal is or what the "end point" might be. A big part of reckoning with climate colonialism, certainly as somebody who lives in, benefits from, and is entangled up in the project of 'the West,' is about changing the idea that the goal is for us to survive. When I say "us" I mean 'the West.' What happens if the goal is not for us to survive, if we queer the idea that we have to reproduce and preserve 'how we live now'? The legacy of my child, this version of me living forever, the myth of the elixir of life which billionaires are still trying to produce today, no matter the ecological, molecular or political ramifications of these experiments.

If queerness allows us to shift that one goal, then where might another direction lead us? And things become interesting. Because when you're working on climate colonialism, it's a lot of shut doors. The earth is going to warm by this many degrees, killing this many hundreds of thousands of people (and more-than-human life) starting with those who live on or below the equator. This is the language of climate change. This is the sterile, violent language of the environmental humanities and environmental sciences. We have to change that language. Something queerness does best is changing language that leads to full stops and the inevitability of death, of so-called "sacrificial places and sacrificial people" (Klein 2016). Because these are the options presented to queer people all over the world still today. You're probably going to die. Or die alone, and be a failed human being, never finding happiness because you won't be married or create lots of beautiful white capitalist babies.

So now queer people, and particularly queer and disabled People of Color – people whose bodies are not so easily converted into extractable labour and reproductive forces, people who were 'never meant to survive' – are in the perfect position to start thinking, okay, what if the goal is to reduce the toxicity in the atmosphere, right? To, as Black activist farmer Leah Penniman (2018) has said, call carbon dioxide back into earth. What if the goal is harm reduction? What if the goal is getting out of the way? Which is not in any way about glorifying or even focusing on the end of the human species, that is a Hollywood-endorsed distraction-tactic, but it is the end of an anthropocentric domination of a particular kind of human surviving, and perhaps – as Sylvia Wynter suggests – the domination of a particular kind of human (Wynter 1994; McKittrick 2014).

And I believe, as José Esteban Muñoz (2009) did, that queerness is an inherently speculative practice. In the face of all these shut doors, all these impossibilities for life beyond climate colonialism, we have an incredibly rich unicorn basket full of queer, speculative possibilities for how we can organize, grow, love, die and be in solidarity differently. Maybe that's something else that you and I are trying to explore here and through our work.

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