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"Turns on Changes of State": Plastic Landscapes and the New Commons

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Prefatory note: for the previous two Terra Critica meetings, I have written responses in the form of unsent "letters" to friends: the eminent science fiction writer, Kim Stanley Robinson; Tom Moylan, literary critic, utopianist, and Marxist activist. This response is addressed to Pamela Longobardi, an award-winning American artist whose work "speak[s] with rather than speak[s] for" the environment, particularly the ocean.

I wish I could remember today who it was in 2013 at the first Conference on Ecopoetics in Berkeley, CA, who tried to engage me in a conversation about how the pervasive presence of plastics in the environment could be "interesting" to think about, from an evolutionary perspective. With the zeal of a recent convert to the anti-plastics movement I scoffed at the suggestion, snapping back with something along the lines of, "*well, it won't be interesting at all if we are all riddled with cancer and the planet is dead*" or words to that effect, and walked away with something of a self-righteous swagger. Apologies to whomever that was (female, brown hair – that's all I've got), and the fact that this exchange has bothered me ever since is proof that you were always right.

This is not to say I wasn't right to some extent. So-called forever chemicals throughout the environment, we now know, cause hormonal disruptions and cellular mutation in fetuses, directly impacting the fertility of human beings—particularly, though hardly exclusively, the fertility of males.[1] But the conference participant's proposal was and is interesting precisely

[1] See *Count Down* (2021) by environmental medicine professor Dr. Shanna Swann, which connects a precipitous drop in human fertility to the presence of these chemicals in our bodies.

because of the quality of plastic and plasticity that has to do with change, morphology; with seeing, as Anand Pandian puts it, "how much in plastic turns on changes of state."[2] In its immediate context, Pandian's remark refers to the *chemical* changes behind plastic's versatility in both fluid and solid states, not to evolution; but Pandian's essay *does* light upon the biopolitical aspect of plastic: the found plastic object at the center of Pandian's essay came from a Bayer chemical factory in Leverkusen, Germany, where, it turns out, the first polyurethane plastics had been synthesized in the 1930s. I don't think Pandian was thinking explicitly about the relationship of plastic to changes of "*the* state"—although this was implicit: it can be no accident that Otto Bayer, according to Pandian, would say of the invention of polyurethane that "I was able to convince some officials that our future was to a considerable degree dependent on polyurethane chemistry."[3] Those would be *Nazi* officials: by the Second World War, Bayer's company had been pulled into the Nazi-affiliated IG Farben, which focused intensely on creating improved and brand-new plastics for military use.

I have written elsewhere about the plastics industry's *Lebensraum* aspirations on the other side of the Atlantic. Dow Chemical and Monsanto launched ad campaigns in the mid- to late-1940s touting plastics as essential to the battle to protect all of "the free world." After Germany's defeat, the rhetoric shifted, American chemical/plastics industries touting in unabashedly triumphalist terms U.S. technological exceptionalism. A 1947 Monsanto promised a "Front row seat . . . *to history in the making*"—a rather brilliant turn of phrase capturing the centrality of manufacturing to the nation's own evolution toward being "the first" modern global power.[4]

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[2] Pandian's essay is included in *OCEAN GLEANING*: *Art and Research of Pam Longobardi* (Fall Line Press, 2022), n.p.
[3] Quoted in *OCEAN GLEANING,* n.p.
[4] See my "Plastic's 'Untiring Solicitation'" in Caren Irr (ed.), *Life in Plastic* (2021).

I cannot help hearing the relevance of both the Raymond Williams and Amitav Ghosh readings to contemporary work on "the plastic turn."[5] There is arguably no capitalist ecosystem (so to speak) more emblematic of an "extension to the whole world" than the one comprised by the manufacture and circulation – through economic trade, and through trade winds and ocean currents—than the "ecosystem" created by and for plastic. In a 2021 essay published in Caren Irr's essay collection, *Life in Plastic* (Minnesota 2021), I focus on Karen Tei Yamashita's strange and unsettling novel, *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990), in which is discovered, beneath a swathe of the Amazon rainforest, a seemingly "natural" conversion of the soil's substrate to a previously unknown form of plastic, with "magnetic" (or, it was thought, even "magical") properties. Yamashita's novel is a brilliant allegory of late capitalism's global and even extra-terrestrial aspirations; where my own reading extends previous interpretations is to "read" the plastic landscape through Roland Barthes' conception (in *Mythologies*) of "myth" as an "alibi": the "content" of the mythic narrative and, in Yamashita's novel, the fetishization of plastic stuff and particularly plastic objects as a simultaneous emptying out of, and filling to excess of, signification. In this apparent contradiction lies, according to Barthes, the function of Myth as an "alibi"—a diversion of attention from "that which what goes without saying"—i.e., from the ideological (re)sources of meaning-making.[6]

[5] T*he Plastic Turn* is in fact the title of a new book out by Ranjan Ghosh (Cornell, 2022/3); *Plastic Matters*, by former Penn State colleague Heather Davis, was published by Duke University Press in 2021.

[6] Touching momentarily on my other big "topic": I am reminded of Fredric Jameson's recall of "someone" who opines "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world" (2003, "Future City"). I strongly suspect that Fremeaux and Jordan deliberate echo Jameson in their observation that "we are living in a time where it is easier to imagine the collapse of life as we know it than reinventing the right ways to live together. We are living on the edge of an epoch" (18).

It is certainly possible to read Yamashita's narrative along the grain of Williams' argumentation in "the New Metropolis": the "arc" of the novel's title in such a reading would thus refer to the narrative "arc" of "the penetration, transformation and subjugation of 'the country' by 'the city'" (Williams, 286), such that "a displaced and formerly rural population is moving and drifting towards the centres of a money economy directed by interests very far from their own" (287). This all tracks but for one thing: that we learn finally that this mysterious "mantle" of plastic repeats, with a difference, the history of the extractivist economy we currently inhabit, from living animals and plants to fossils to [millions of years later] oil, plastics, and capitalist monetization of commodities. The Matacão plastic, now forming a new geological "mantle" on this portion of the Earth, is discovered (in a moment of temporal disorientation for the reader) to be formed by the "change of [material] state" of our own civilization's plastic detritus, generations of manufactured trash and dumped toxins subjected to the earth's own "natural" processes of sedimentation, petrification, erosion and upheaval. Moreover, thanks to human endless manipulation of this new "natural" resource, objects made from the Matacão plastic begin, at last, to degrade, sending many human beings to their deaths as buildings and airliners disintegrate around them.[7] The plasticity of this economic ecosystem collapses in on itself.

There are a growing number of such speculative plastic landscapes: I have a growing list of texts and novels in which this is the case, starting with Roland Barthes' prescient image of plastic "gliding over Nature" () and plasticizing it; to J.G. Ballard's vision (in *The Drought*, 1964) of a microscopically thin polymer film over a huge area of the ocean's surface,

[7] This trope is borrowed, I strongly suspect, from the novel *Mutant 59*: *The Plastic Eaters* [by Pedler and Davis, 1971] in which a type of plastic-eating bacteria fells human transport systems—and all manner of manufactured products—by the same method: eating holes into it. One corporate protagonist in Yamashita's novel perishes when, escaping from the company's besieged HQ by parachuting from its roof, he discovers that the sail is, of courses, riddled with holes and tears.

severely disrupting the water cycle and causing widespread desertification of the land; to William Gibson's *Peripheral* series (now the TV series)—where a whole new "continent" of plastic has (d)evolved from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch; to Emmi Itaränta's brilliant *Memory of Water* (2014, about which more shortly) and Ruth Ozeki's equally brilliant *Tale for the Time Being* to Alison Stine's *Trashlands* (2021). To each of these novels we can ask, in Mishuana Goeman's words, "what ideological work does the *land* do?" (Goeman, 71)—i.e., we can unpack "the physical and metaphysical interrelation to the concepts of place, territory, and home, concepts given significant meaning through language in both our Native tongues and those concepts translated into English"—particularly, in our own postcolonial context, the relationship of "*land* to *property*, a move that perpetuates the logics of containment" (72). Goeman discusses land as a "storied site of human interaction" (72), and this makes all the sense in the world to a literary critic who is interested in symbolic forms of "plastic landscapes" and in the real possibility, Roland Barthes predicted in 1957, that "the whole world *can* be plasticized" (Barthes 99). What ideological work, in other words, do *plastic* landscapes do—both the speculative ones (in Gibson, Itaränta, Stine, Ozeki, and many more)—and the *actual* ones? Because there are "real" ones.

Thanks to preparing this response for TC 2023, I am discovering that the academic field of Landscape Studies is having its own "plastic turn"—I refer you to Chris Van Dyke's "Plastic eternities and the mosaic of landscape," which "drawing mainly on the work of Catherine Malabou and Bruno Latour," argues that landscape studies requires new, nonrepresentational metaphors and concepts: namely, "plasticity and a revamped, historical account of relationality." Van Dyke goes on to argue that by adopting a nonrepresentational perspective on landscape studies methodology, the historically and materially grounded *cultural* dimension of landscapes ("visualizing the dynamics of landscape and their history historical

mutability") can produce "more ecumenical" interpretations of them. As he moves forward with the notion that landscapes are what he calls "plastic mosaics that are defined, yet malleable," Van Dyke is not talking about *literal* plastic landscapes. But he could be … and often they *are* mosaic-like (*see figures 1-3*):

Figure 1 (top): Prophetic object #0 [Sea Cave/Goat Grave; Makria Petra, Kefalonia, Greece]

Figure 2 (above): Tangled I, 2008 [Hawaii]

Fig. 3: The Cemetery of Life Vests, Molyvos, Lesvos, Greece. Image by Pamela Longobardi. "Traumatized asylum-seekers and migrants arriving by boat from Türkiye leave the life vests on shore as they stagger inland. Most of the waste is plastic. © Pam Longobardi, CC BY-ND

These are unmanipulated plastic trashscapes photographed by my friend and artist-activist, Pamela Longobardi (https://driftersproject.net/). Figures 1 and 2 are "natural assemblages," which is to say that ocean waves tossed these materials onto shore to form literal mountains (*figs*. 1, 3) and pathways of plastic trash. Figure 3 is an image captured in Lesvos, Greece, the site of hundreds of thousand refugee landings. This place is now called, popularly, "the Cemetery of Life-Vests" (though in a darker mood I might call it the "Life-Jacket Landfill") These are all "storied sites" (Goeman, Ghosh, Fremeaux+Jordan), and Longobardi's work distinguishes itself from others' working in this vein (another earth metaphor!) in her

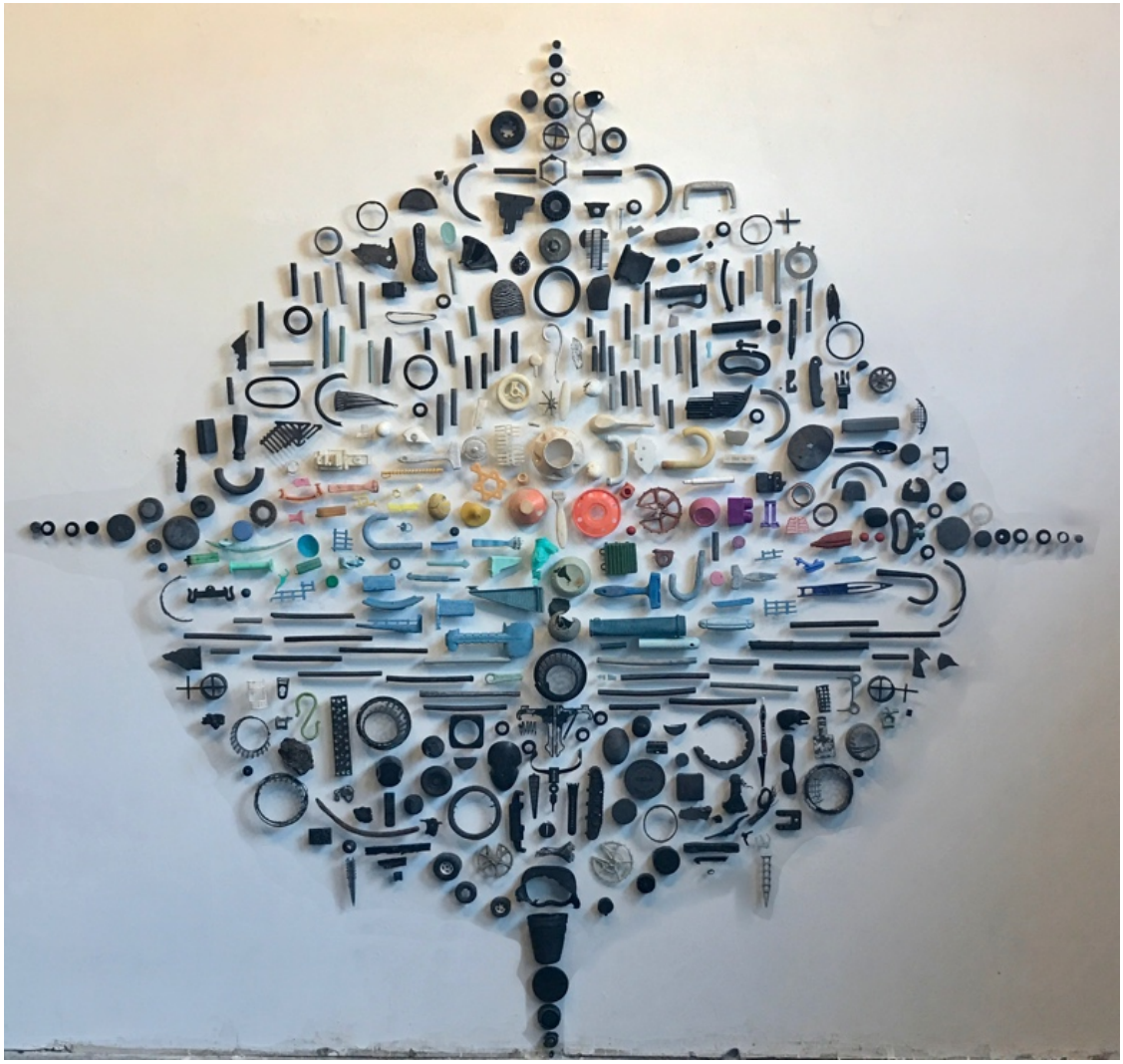
capacity to *find* the story and "surface" it[8]--or to use Goeman's term, to "translate its concepts" into literary and/or visual terms.

Back in the studio, Pam's work with found plastic often forms a more "orderly" kind of mosaic (see figs. 4-8), though by Longobardi's lights, there is as strong an intentionality evident in nature's own terraforming with plastic as there is in her own assemblages. Her relationship with the ocean, as she explains in a number of published texts, is the most intimate. I have written elsewhere about this deep sense of relationality informing the artist's own movements as she enters the water as it, the priority of her investigation resting not with her but with the sea itself as she waits at the "edge" of the shore, or at the entrance of sea-caves where so much plastic accumulates, borderlands that Fremeaux and Jordan call "those magical spaces of neither nor, the trans spaces, the non-binary worlds, the entangled hedges and edges" (11). Longobardi's practice frequently takes her to those seemingly "magical"

Fig. 4: Swerve, 2019. Pamela Longobardi

[8] She goes to great lengths to search the provenance of each found plastic object, from factory to finding: its chemical composition; its likely use, if that is not evident in what remains.

spaces of “coexistence,” which become, for her, the “edges … between art and activism” (Fremeaux and Jordan, 10).



Figs. 5 and 5a (left): Phase Shift, 2017; Pamela Longobardi

Fig. 6 (above): Line of Fire, 2017
Fig. 7 (left): detail, Archaeology of Desire, 2020
Fig. 8 (below): Flag of Lesvos (anamnesia), 2017

Fig. 9: Night Flag of Lesvos (Sotaria). Recovered Life Vests from Lesvos, Greece; Pamela Longobardi

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A 2019 Forbes magazine piece, "Pointing fingers…" describes the scourge of marine plastic pollution as a "tragedy of the commons."[9] But having previously read through Raymond Williams on "the new Metropolis" my reaction to the "tragedy of the commons" argument was, "what commons"? and "what tragedy?" Maybe today's *real* plastic landscapes – particularly those created by the waves, wind, and sun – are communicating something else. Maybe *they* are now "the real place" (Williams, 282). And then, why not "the farce of the commons," since "tragedy" connotes some fatal flaw that draws the protagonist down. Thus

[9] Rob Kaplan, "Pointing Fingers: Ocean Plastic is Tragedy of the Commons" (May 16, 2019). https://www.forbes.com/sites/robkaplan/2019/05/16/pointing-fingers-ocean-plastic-is-tragedy-of-the-commons/?sh=38cbfea4636a.

the question: Do we lay blame on those who are *victims* of hegemonic systems that have long since persuaded the common people that "nothing is to be done"?

Or perhaps we need to talk about a "new commons" -- for where on earth, on, below, or above its surface are we able, now, to say, "I can just take this, use this, if I need it?" *Where but the landfill?* So much of landfills today *are* plastic – and so little is recycled because it's not "worth" it; instead, as we know, the trash gets shipped elsewhere—mostly to China, until China, smothered by its own plastic waste (not to mention the "embodied pollution" created by China's premier status in the manufacture of plastic "feedstocks" for the infinity of molded products). Plastic epitomizes William's outline of "the logic of [the country's] development" (284)—that's our reality. "Science fiction is the new reality," says Stan Robinson—and indeed turning to William Gibson, to Stine, to Don DeLillo and China Miéville, we receive these uncanny glimpses (because they *do* seem so real, so possible) of the future in the present. So I end with a deep bow of respect to Itaränta's brilliant *Memory of Water*—in which landfills – they call them the "plastic graves" are the New Commons, "the ever-changing, eye-betraying terrain of the plastic grave" (135), "a large, craggy, pulpy landscape where sharp corners and coarse surfaces, straight edges and jagged splinters rose steep and unpredictable. Its strange, angular valleys of waves and mountain lines kept shifting their shape" (23), the rain and sun "slowly gnawing everything away" (58), and people "mov[ing] piles of rubbish from one place to the next" (23). It was "hard to discern landmarks" (135), notes the protagonist, Noria; the plastic graves belonged to everyone and no one. Humanity reduced to ragpickers, scavengers. "I wish", says Noria, "I could dig all the way to the bottom. Perhaps then I'd understand the past-world, and the people who threw all this away" (25).

Noria does get to the bottom of it—and, as usual, it's all about the stories.

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