

**Mandy Bloomfield. “Widening Gyre: A Poetics of Ocean Plastics.”**  
*Configurations*, 27. 4 (2019): 501-523.

Warnings about proliferating plastic waste in the world’s oceans are increasingly frequent in both scientific and popular media. Creative communities have likewise devoted greater attention to these circumstances. Visual art such as Andy Hughes’ *Dominant Wave Theory*, which photographically manipulates beach debris (polystyrene cups, abandoned lighters) into “larger-than-life art objects that provoke intensified forms of attention,” generates new directions for activist engagement while challenging other mediums to engage similar interventions (502). This challenge motivates the premise of Mandy Bloomfield’s essay: “examining experimental poetry that engages in different ways with marine waste” in order to “demonstrate the capacity of ecopoetics to make distinctive interventions at the intersection of marine and science studies” (504). Emphasizing poetry’s formal possibilities – “linkage, linguistic porosity, and indeterminacy, as well as its nonnarrative temporalities” – Bloomfield shows how poetry complements the insights of other artistic genres and argues for poetry’s centrality within broader spectrums of ecocritical art (504).

A particular strength throughout is Bloomfield’s interdisciplinary approach to “blue humanities,” a discipline that both foregrounds marine presence and critiques ecocriticism’s dominant “greenness.” Her methodology gleans influence from science studies, new materialism, and theories of “corporeal being, agency, subjectivity, [and] collectivity” (504). She combines this framework with incisive readings of three poets – Stephen Collis, Adam Dickinson, and Evelyn Reilly – who each “engage with ocean waste in ways that . . . encompass histories and agencies of the more-than-human world” and “cultivate amplified forms of attention to more-than-human scales of space, time, agency, and modes of relation” (504).

Bloomfield highlights how Collis’ “The History of Plastic” defines material conditions threatening ocean and planet through repurposing the modernist “widening gyre” of Yeats’ “The Second Coming” to address the Great Pacific Garbage Patch: “add chlorine for PVC/blow in gas linking bubbles/for polystyrene . . . a torrent of products into the/widening gyre” (505). Positioning this “treatment of plastic production, consumption, and waste” in relation to “Jason W. Moore’s theorization of capitalism ‘as a way of organizing nature,’” Bloomfield explicates how this work both figures ocean plastic as capital accumulation and, by “splicing and combining images,” produces an ecopoetics of tangible engagement (505, 506, 509). She then pivots to Dickinson via Stacy Alaimo’s “transcorporeality,” focusing on how understanding humans as “always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” helps position Dickinson’s “Hail” as both “perform[ing] thought experiments, or swerves of cognition and articulation” and generating important “questions of agency and subjectivity” through formal and structural aesthetic choices (509, 510, 514). Beginning with the lines “Hello from inside/the albatross/with a windproof lighter/and Japanese police tape,” “Hail” offers “playful but macabre greetings” in which “offshored waste speaks or writes back to us” (510, 512). Bloomfield frames these as invitation to consider “where . . . plastics go, and what . . . they *do*, once they are out of sight” (510). As readers are simultaneously attracted and disoriented by these greetings and subsequent invocations of “substances intimately associated with the human body” (“breast

milk”; “cord blood”), they begin experiencing the complex assemblage that is the nature of ocean plastic itself (512, 513).

In contrast to Collis and Dickinson, the study’s third figure, Evelyn Reilly, “more self-consciously foregrounds questions of literary history and aesthetic form” in the “collage structure” of her “Hence Mystical Cosmetic Over Sunset Landfill” (514, 515). Bloomfield links her analysis here to Lynn Keller’s *Recomposing Ecopoetics*, which treats Reilly (and Dickinson) from similar perspectives of plasticity and interconnection. Her reading is especially astute when turning to the text’s “retrospective ‘haunting’ of Melville’s” *Moby Dick* (514). Reilly’s Melvillian borrowings, Bloomfield argues, “serve as a reminder of the more materialist dimensions of [Melville’s] work, which viscerally explores the processes and logics of an industrial capitalism that relied heavily on whale oil” (517). Inasmuch as “[s]uch substances have now been replaced with petroleum oil and petroleum products such as plastics,” she continues, Reilly’s “haunting” serves to “complicate the relations between whale oil and plastics” beyond simple replacement or substitution (517). Likewise, Reilly’s “[t]echniques of juxtaposition and unconventional punctuation” that complicate such literary borrowings – and her oscillations between fractured and circular poetic modes – suggest “alternative aesthetic and conceptual models” alike: what a new ecopoetics might become other than a replication of past attempts (520, 523).

Bloomfield’s essay is an important foregrounding of how contemporary poetry can engage the oceanic as a space of imagination and materiality alike. As noted in her concluding remarks, each of these writers eschews nostalgic or pessimistic resignation in favor of forward-facing “modes of philosophical and aesthetic reckoning” (523). Likewise, her reading opens space for “[p]oetry’s formal flexibility” to “make tangible the strange connectivities . . . active in the widening gyre of ocean studies” (523). In that sense, then, it also serves to model what ambitious future work at such intersections might continue striving toward.

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