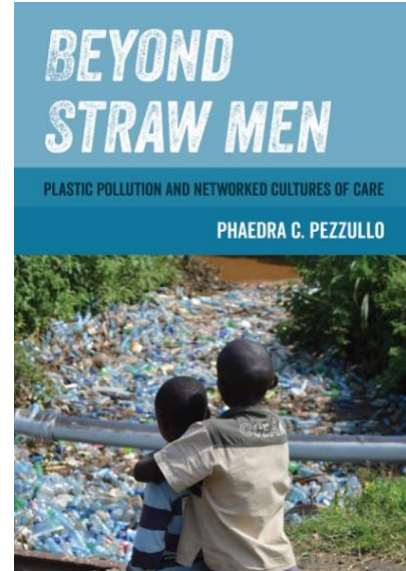


Phaedra C. Pezzullo, **Beyond Straw Men: Plastic Pollution and Networked Cultures of Care**, Oakland: University of California Press, 2023, 288 pp., \$29.95 (paperback).

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As plastic production multiplies worldwide, our lives have become increasingly entangled with plastics. This entanglement is both intimate and paradoxical, as plastics save lives through their role in single-use syringes, while also endangering them through ocean accumulation. The ubiquity of plastic produces a particular affective overload, of “anger, shame, hurt, fear, guilt, and despair” (p. 1), both online and offline. Phaedra C. Pezzullo’s ***Beyond Straw Men: Plastic Pollution and Networked Cultures of Care*** sits with these ongoing crises of plastic and emotion, unraveling “what is being negotiated in the name of plastics” (p. 143). Through a multisited examination of hashtag activism, the book uncovers how these struggles are never only about plastic.



While plastic pollution is a shared global crisis, its harms are not equally distributed. The communities that bear the greatest burden of plastic’s violence anchor the book’s sites of analysis, spanning Bangladesh, Kenya, Vietnam, and the United States. Taking hashtag activism seriously, Pezzullo primarily draws on social media analysis and interviews with the activists behind the hashtags, conducted through her podcast *Communicating Care*. The book unpacks how these hashtags emerge and function as mechanisms for political contention, arenas for counternarratives, and mobilizers of collective action.

Several conceptual frameworks guide this inquiry throughout. One, *impure politics*, rejects false binaries and straw man arguments, insisting that not all plastics are bad, not all advocacy is good, and not all policy is progress. This is perhaps best demonstrated in the book’s analysis of the 2017 U.S. plastic straw drama, where the collision of #StopSucking and #SuckItAbleism lays out how an ostensibly progressive environmental campaign to ban plastic straws can harm disabled communities who depend on them. The path forward, the book argues, lies in listening to the voices of those most affected by these decisions from the outset.

Another framework, *networked cultures of care*, draws on Indigenous, feminist, Black, and queer political traditions to understand care as a collective, political practice. Pezzullo acknowledges that the term “care” has become overused, co-opted at times for disingenuous “carewashing,” yet it remains important. This commitment to care requires “embracing the often racialized, classed, and gendered work required to create and to maintain life while resisting individuals, institutions, and structures that aim to alienate, colonize, estrange, and exploit” (p. 11). Through this lens, the communities of solidarity that form around plastic advocacy, both digitally and physically, become sites of collective imagination, working toward better shared futures. Together, impure politics and networked cultures of care resist binary and reductive thinking,

challenging assumptions about which nations are responsible, whether change should be individual or systemic, and which communities deserve to be heard. The answer is all of the above.

Chapter 1 establishes the global stakes of the plastic crisis, opening in Bangladesh. Pezzullo maps the uneven power relations that structure the plastics-industrial complex, tracing who benefits and who is harmed. Plastics generate enormous profits for a small handful of elites in the Global North, embodying what Stacy Alaimo terms "carbon-heavy masculinity" (p. 23). At the same time, countries in the Global South receive millions of pounds of plastic waste from the Global North. However, disposal is only part of the problem. Tracing the life cycle of plastic from extraction and manufacturing to transportation, consumption, and disposal, Pezzullo demonstrates the ecological harm that is caused at every stage, disproportionately borne by those with less power.

Chapter 2 turns to the greenwashing strategies of the plastics-industrial complex. These strategies, Pezzullo writes, are motivated by a neoliberal logic that shifts the burden of responsibility from corporations to individuals. Beach cleanups, carbon footprint calculators, and the myth of plastic recycling use this logic to redirect attention away from systemic change. As the chapter makes clear through impure politics, there is nothing inherently wrong with recycling or reflecting on one's consumption, but these practices are co-opted by manufacturers to avoid systemic transformations.

Chapter 3 shifts to Kenya, tracing the grassroots hashtag campaigns #BanPlasticsKE and #ISupportBanPlasticsKE. What began as individual outrage from a photojournalist documenting everyday plastic waste evolved into a national campaign by drawing in government officials and building a networked community of care. This collective action led to the country's most significant effort at the time to ban single-use plastics, yet impure politics surfaced in both the policy's choice of plastic to focus on and the inequitable enforcement that followed.

Chapters 4 and 5 investigate the U.S. 2017 plastic straw controversy as an arena of hegemonic struggle over values, identity, and voice. Pezzullo examines the Lonely Whale Foundation's #StopSucking and #StrawlessInSeattle campaigns, which brought together celebrities, actors, and athletes to bring plastic pollution into popular culture through self-deprecating humor. The conservative backlash, channeled through #MakeStrawsGreatAgain, reframed the campaign as an attack on individual freedom and American exceptionalism, revealing how environmental campaigns do not always move everyone in the same direction.

Chapter 5 complicates the picture further. Disabled communities, many for whom plastic straws are not a lifestyle choice, were absent from the campaign's design and the subsequent bans, perpetuating eco-ableism. Disabled activists pushed back through hashtags like #SuckItAbleism and #StrawShaming. As Pezzullo writes, "the entire conversation about plastic straws is about power: who knows best, who decides how change is made, who is centered in all of these activities" (p. 106). The chapter also cautions against planetary fatalism, the logic that if straws cannot solve the crisis, nothing can. Instead, it calls for a more nuanced negotiation about which plastics serve genuine needs, and which do not.

Chapter 6 focuses on the 2016 Vietnam marine life disaster, exploring how plastic corporations and governments work together to downplay the responsibility of illegal industrial pollution and delay accountability. The hashtag movement #ToiChonCa (#IChooseFish) mobilized citizens who refused to accept the neoliberal logic that industrial profit was a fair trade for the destruction of their ocean, livelihoods, and cultural identity. Yet the online platforms that made this organizing possible were also used against citizens, as Big Tech complied with government demands to censor and surveil the very communities speaking out.

The book concludes by identifying four hashtag activism trends worth following: #greenwashing and #brandaudit, which call for corporate accountability and public monitoring of unjust environmental policies; #beyondplastics and its multilingual equivalents, which urge toward reducing and discarding plastics more thoughtfully; and #tortuga, which invites reflection on our kinship and interdependence with other species. Together, these trends point toward a future of plastic activism that is both local and transnational, individual and systemic, human and nonhuman.

While Pezzullo thoroughly unpacks the politics of plastic advocacy across different cultural and political contexts, the book also opens up generative spaces for future scholarship. For instance, Pezzullo asks, "How can we find a way to hold both a desire to care for/as disabled people and earth's climate, as well as marine life and people in the Global South who bear a disproportionate burden of the costs of plastics?" (p. 104). If impure politics asks that we resist treating anything as inherently good or bad, care itself might warrant the same scrutiny. Future work could explore how care is negotiated, prioritized, and contested when the needs of different human communities, nonhuman species, and ecosystems pull in different directions.

Beyond Straw Men will be a valuable read among environmental communication and environmental justice scholars. Those particularly interested in digital activism, eco-ableism, and waste imperialism will find its detailed case studies insightful. Beyond academia, Pezzullo's accessible writing, punctuated by moments of humor and parenthetical asides, makes the book accessible for activists, educators, and general readers alike. Above all, this is a book that will make readers second-guess taking plastics for granted, prompting a deeper reckoning with how our plastic use is "structured by and structure our collective lives" (p. 1).