

Book and Media Reviews

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the author has devoted many years. While not a definitive description of MPP, it serves as a preliminary foray into a profoundly different, potentially revelatory, and more robust sociolinguistic history of the early colonial Pacific.

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Plastic Paradise: The Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Documentary, 57 minutes, DVD, color, 2013. Written and directed by Angela Sun; distributed by Bullfrog Films. Available through Bullfrog Films at <http://bullfrogfilms.com/catalog/plpaso.html>. US\$333.00.

Plastic Paradise: The Great Pacific Garbage Patch has garnered numerous awards and attention from around the globe. With a message that stirs people to want to reverse course, Angela Sun's documentary is an exposé that left this viewer deeply moved by the enormity of the environmental catastrophe in progress as well as by the proximity of the problem to easily overlooked dimensions of our daily lives. The film was particularly meaningful for me after having witnessed firsthand the challenges of trash disposal and environmental degradation on Atafu Atoll in Tokelau, and it will resonate with numerous discussions of contemporary issues in the Pacific.

Sun describes the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (GPGP) in the North Pacific as an immense floating mass of toxic debris about the size of Texas. In the film, she makes her way to remote Midway Atoll, just south of the North Pacific gyre where the GPGP is located,

to see firsthand what she considers "ground zero," an island with minimal human development and an enormous albatross breeding ground awash in plastic debris.

According to the filmmaker, plastic debris collects in this fashion because a combination of gyres (large systems of rotating ocean currents) serve as catchment basins, and debris that would otherwise circulate randomly concentrates within certain zones. At the same time, low-lying islets and high islands alike act as "combs" and catch the plastic waste as it swirls by, concentrating the pollutants and toxins with potentially horrific short- and long-term consequences for nonhuman (and possibly human) ecologies. The gyres that participate in the ocean's plastic sickness can be seen as a metaphor for Sun's documentary storytelling. She too has several topical gyres of information that swirl about throughout the film and ultimately coalesce into a compelling picture of environmental dysfunction.

Gyre 1: plastic debris. Sun cites statistics for plastic production, which began in the early twentieth century but ramped up during World War II and has seen steady growth since. There is ample footage of debris on Midway (five tons of washed-up plastic is inadvertently fed to nesting albatross by their parents every year); abandoned nylon nets tumbling along the shallow coral-sea floor, destroying the delicate ecosystem (there are an estimated 640,000 tons of discarded plastic fishnets in the ocean); and marine life entangled in all manner of plastic trash. A US Fish and Wildlife ranger cuts open a newly deceased albatross to display a bellyful of

plastic. It is thought that nearly all of the 1.5 million albatross that inhabit Midway have plastic in their digestive systems. Besides being fed plastics by their parents, the birds eventually consume them on their own, often by way of eating fish, which have plastics in their guts as well. The ocean is undoubtedly full of plastic debris, but how it got there is unclear. Humans obviously allow it to flow into the oceans, but there is not a ready explanation of the conduits by which the oceans have become such astonishingly massive dumping grounds. Sun gives this topic only cursory attention, though her silence may not reflect failure of inquiry on her part so much as the inadequacy of detailed empirical research regarding pollution chains.

Gyre 2: fish. Fish are an important food source for the entire world, including both humans and birds. Like the albatross, many of the ocean's fish are burdened with guts full of plastic, with some pieces very tiny and others, surprisingly, not so small. The obvious point to consider is the food chain. Fish eat plastic, birds eat fish; therefore, birds eat plastic. Yet the ability of humans to avoid the plastic bits in our fish does not protect us from the next concern.

Gyre 3: persistent organic pollutants. These are chemical compounds used in myriad industrial applications, mainly pesticides and insecticides, as well as for a number of other closer-to-home uses like additives to paint, carbonless copy paper, and plastics, such as with PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) and BPA (Bisphenol A, a chemical commonly added to thermal receipt paper). Sun allows herself to be the guinea pig in a scientific

experiment designed to understand the transfer of BPA to our bodies by normal handling of receipts. This may seem out of place for a movie about plastic trash in the Pacific, but her point is that BPA, which has a massive history of use in the manufacture of plastics, is a persistent organic pollutant that demands our attention. It is an endocrine disrupter and tends to accumulate in the body. It accumulates in all bodies, all the way up the food chain, from fish, to birds, to us. Moreover, it is only one of many pollutants.

Gyre 4: the chemical industry. Sun asserts that the offending party is the chemical industry. She attended a convention of industry representatives in order to question them directly. Her interviewing style is gentle, and she is kind enough not to identify any of the men she questioned, even blurring their faces for the film. Her kindness is notable because her interlocutors all come off sounding like buffoons, unwilling to acknowledge that their industry has been responsible for significant environmental and potential health problems. Sun speaks with numerous experts who come to a unanimous conclusion: we cannot clean up the mess without first turning off the spigot. In this, perhaps disconcertingly, we are all implicated. She discusses recycling efforts, but they alone are not enough to combat the overwhelming volume of virgin plastics introduced into the environment every year—brand new plastics that do not come from recycled materials but rather from petrochemicals that are converted to plastics for the first time.

Sun displays a remarkable ability to weave together a great deal of

disparate information. At times, she seems to go off on unrelated tangents but always manages to show their relevance. The current situation is complex, but this presentation makes it possible for the layperson to grasp the big picture. One charming aspect of the film is the inclusion of archival footage of the type used in classroom documentaries in the mid-twentieth century. Enthusiastic children marvel at this wondrous new material, “Plastic!”, and images of industrial activity creating plastic goods for the benefit of humankind roll past while grandiose music plays and the narrator extols the virtues of plastic.

It is easy to imagine how *Plastic Paradise* might be used for numerous pedagogical purposes in classroom contexts and this may be, ultimately, its greatest value. However, the film is lacking in the kinds of deep exploration of contexts that we often expect. Sun glosses over the history of how we came to be so reliant on plastic, omitting several important factors that have driven so many of the negative behaviors responsible for this ongoing catastrophe. For instance, decades ago all retailers used paper bags to sack customers’ purchased goods. They were vilified for this practice because it allegedly destroyed the forests. There was no foresight that switching to plastic might be great for trees but deadly for the ocean. Similarly, single-use plastic bottles are among the leading environmental offenders, but there is no explanation of how this came to be. Furthermore, a more robust discussion of the region and the peoples most immediately affected by the plasticization of the Pacific Ocean would have been a welcome addition

to the film’s speculations about human impacts for continental metropolitan populations.

Like all enormous and enormously difficult problems, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is wildly complex. The prospect of turning off the faucet of plastic pollutants seems reasonable, but requires two important elements: a widespread willingness to forego the use of problematic materials and a determination to find and use viable alternatives. A future documentary can chronicle the problems those alternatives create.

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Nuclear Savage: The Islands of Secret Project 4.1. Documentary, 87 minutes, DVD, color, 2011. Written and directed by Adam Jonas Horowitz; produced by Adam Jonas Horowitz and Johanna Giebelhaus in collaboration with Pacific Islanders in Communications and the Kindle Project. Available for rent or purchase from Primordial Soup Company/Equatorial Films at <http://www.nuclearsavage.com>. Rental US\$4.99.

The Frankfurt School was among the first to analyze the deeply immoral capacities of modern rationality, bureaucracy, and capitalism. The state, on both sides of the Atlantic, has stood out as the exemplary figure of this Janus-faced contradiction. One thinks of Nazi Germany and the Jews, Zyklon B, and the “Final Solution.” Hawaiians, Native Americans, Vietnamese, and now Muslims would no doubt attest not just to the violence

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is a collection of marine debris in the North Pacific Ocean. Marine debris is litter that ends up in the ocean, seas, and other large bodies of water. Grades. Increasingly, however, it also refers to the garbage patch as a vortex of plastic waste and debris broken down into small particles in the ocean. The North Pacific Subtropical Gyre is formed by four currents rotating clockwise around an area of 20 million square kilometers (7.7 million square miles): the California current, the North Equatorial current, the Kuroshio current, and the North Pacific current. With Lewis Goldsmith, Wallace J. Nichols, Angela Sun. Angela Sun's journey of discovery to one of the most remote places on Earth, Midway Atoll, to uncover the truth behind the mystery of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Along the way she encounters scientists, industry, legislators and activists who shed light on what our society's vast consumption of disposable plastic is doing to our oceans, and what it may be doing to our health. Angela Sun's journey of discovery to one of the most remote places on Earth, Midway Atoll, to uncover the truth behind the mystery of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Along the way she See full summary ».