

Panics over Plastics: A Matter of Belonging in Kenya

George Paul Meiu

ABSTRACT Anthropologists have shown how recent efforts to tell apart foreigners from autochthons have played out, often subtly disguised, in panics over objects that may seem trivial: “alien species” of fish, trees, or plants that endanger “local” nature. Little has been said about plastic’s dominant position among these objects. In Samburu county, northern Kenya, “plastic boys” are unemployed men whom others despise for being unattached, “useless paupers,” who, not unlike plastic itself, have allegedly no capacity to grow roots and thrive. Analyzing this subject position against a wider background of objects and afflictions deemed “foreign”—including plastic bags, plastic rice, plastic hair, plastic smiles, and homosexuality as a “plastic pollutant”—I show how different troublesome objectifications of plastic resonate with one another and their wider context. I argue that panics over plastics and the politics of belonging shape one another, producing new, less-obvious forms of inclusion and exclusion. [*belonging, materiality, plastic, Samburu, Kenya*]

MUHTASARI Waantropologist wameonyesha vile, mara nyingi, watu wakiongea kuhusu samaki, miti, ama mboga, kusema kwamba vile vitu ni vya vigeni, vimetoka ng’ambo, na vinachafu mazingira yao, kwa kweli wale watu wanaongea kuhusu mambo mengine: yaani, wanajaribu kutofautisha watu gani kati wao wametoka penginepo na gani ni wenyeji. Lakini waantropologist hawajafuata maana ya plastiki kati ya vitu hivi. Katika wilaya ya Samburu, Kaskazini mwa Kenya, “plastic boys” ni wanaume ambao wanakosa kazi na wanaotukaliwa na wengine kuwa watu bila familia na “bila maana.” Yaani, watu wanasema hawa wanaume wanafanana plastiki kwa sababu hawawezi kukua na kustawi. Kwa mahala hayo, ninaelekeza maana ya “plastic boys” kwa kuonyesha uhusiano wao na taabu tofauti watu wanazoelewa ziwe “ya kigeni”: mifuko ya plastiki, mchele wa plastiki, nywele za plastiki, tabasamu ya plastiki, na gayism kama “uchafuzi wa plastiki.” Ninaonyesha vile maana za vitu hivi tofauti “vya plastiki” zinafanana. Ninaonyesha pia vile hofu juu ya plastiki na siasa za utambulisho wa jamii zinaundana. [*utambulisho wa jamii, kiini ya vitu, plastiki, Samburu, Kenya*]

RÉSUMÉ Des études anthropologiques récentes montrent que les efforts visant à distinguer les étrangers des autochtones génèrent de la panique autour d’objets anodins comme des “espèces étrangères” de poissons, d’arbres ou de plantes qui polluent la “nature indigène.” Peu a été dit à propos de la prédominance du plastique parmi ces objets. À Samburu, au nord du Kenya, les “garçons plastiques” sont des hommes sans emploi que la population considère comme des “indigents inutiles” qui, à l’instar du plastique lui-même, n’auraient aucune capacité de s’enraciner et de prospérer. J’étudie ces hommes dans un contexte plus large d’objets et de souffrances perçues comme “étrangères”: les sacs et riz en plastique, les “sourires plastiques” ou l’homosexualité vue comme un “polluant plastique.” J’argumente que la panique sur les différentes formes de plastique et la politique d’appartenance résonnent les unes avec les autres et par conséquent produisent des nouveaux genres d’inclusion et d’exclusion. [*appartenance, matérialisme, plastic, Samburu, Kenya*]

RESUMEN Antropólogos han mostrado cómo esfuerzos recientes para distinguir extranjeros de autóctonos se han desarrollado, a menudo sutilmente disfrazados, en pánicos sobre objetos que pueden parecer triviales: “especies foráneas” de peces, árboles o plantas que ponen en peligro la naturaleza “local.” Poco se ha dicho sobre la posición dominante del plástico entre estos objetos. En el Condado de Samburu, norte de Kenia, los “chicos plásticos” son hombres desempleados que otros desprecian por no estar conectados, “paupérrimos inútiles”, quienes a diferencia del plástico en sí mismo, tienen supuestamente una no capacidad de echar raíces y progresar. Analizando esta posición de sujeto contra un fondo más amplio de objetos y aflicciones considerados foráneos—incluyendo bolsas plásticas, arroz plástico, cabello plástico, sonrisas plásticas, y homosexualidad como un contaminante plástico—muestro cómo diferentes objetivaciones problemáticas de plástico resuenan entre sí y con su contexto más amplio. Argumento que los pánicos sobre plásticos y la política de pertenencia, se modelan unos a otros, produciendo nuevas, menos obvias formas de inclusión y exclusión. [*pertenencia, materialidad, plástico Samburu, Kenia*]

Plastic plays a central role in contemporary struggles over belonging and citizenship. Anthropologists have shown, for example, how recent efforts to tell apart foreigners from autochthons have played out, often subtly disguised, in panics over objects that seem otherwise trivial: “alien species” of fish, trees, or plants that endanger “local nature” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Death 2017; Geschiere 2009; Lavau 2011). Little has been said, however, about plastic’s dominant position among these objects. Concerns with plastic pollution are often about more than the substance’s environmental impact. Globally overabundant, plastic is now deeply imbricated in our perceptions of space and time, in how we acquire political subjectivities and imagine futures (Barthes 1988; Davis 2016; Gabrys, Hawkins, and Michael 2013; Hawkins 2001; Meikle 1995). Amid late-capitalist political-economic transformations in Africa, as elsewhere, plastic has also become emblematic of new modes of consumption and new forms of moral disorder (Braun and Traore 2015; Weiss 1996). “Plastic,” Anand Pandian (2016) argues, “embodies, like no other substance, the arc of utopian hope and deep despair around the very possibility of fundamental change in modern times.” It is important, then, to examine what plastic’s historical salience reveals about the politics of belonging today.

Consider a set of recent events in Kenya:

On August 28, 2017, Kenya’s National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) banned the manufacture, importation, and use of plastic bags in the country. International media called this “the world’s toughest ban on plastic bags.”¹ Simply carrying them became punishable with fines of up to US\$40,000 or prison terms of up to four years. “We will go to the extent of raiding defiant premises,” threatened NEMA officials, as police inspected shops, markets, and vehicles.² At borders, too, “foreigners are now to be stripped of plastic bags before entering Kenya.”³ Many Kenyans met the excessive force and incendiary language of

the government’s infamous “war on plastic” with enthusiastic support. Journalist Pauline Kairu describes plastic bags as “an unruly monstrosity that stared at Kenyans almost everywhere”—dangerous things “woven into the fabric of our lives.” “They hang on trees and trenches,” says Kairu, “the winds ever so blithely unhesitating to blow them to undecided destinations.”⁴ So, plastic bags must be eliminated before they destine Kenyans to catastrophic futures. Citizens also called on local governments, as one man wrote on social media, to “completely remove [any] plastic materials [from] our habitat.”

The ban on plastic bags coincided with a set of rumors and scandals in which plastic figured prominently. First, the same year, a panic erupted over so-called plastic rice. After a severe drought had damaged crops across the country, videos circulated on social media showing rice granules melting in boiling water when cooked. “Some people are bringing in cheap and fake rice [from China],” claims a Kenyan blog, “and packaging it as if it was grown in Kenya.”⁵ Speculations on the rice’s Chinese origin are significant when, for over a decade, the Chinese government has invested in Kenya’s infrastructure, taking over responsibilities Kenyans expect their state to fulfill. In this context, plastic rice objectifies what appears as Chinese infiltration in Kenyan lives in a form other than itself. Packaged to appear homegrown, the foreign(er) now appropriates the appearance of the autochthon and, thus disguised, comes dangerously close to real citizens’ bodies to poison them.

Second, over the previous decade, as political leaders prepared to ban plastic bags, panics over another so-called foreign import, homosexuality, have also borrowed the language and imaginary of plastic. “Gayism,” one man wrote on social media, is “a fatal plastic import from the West” that does not fit “the chemistry of Africans.” Others suggest that microplastics consumed in water cause homosexuality. It is not surprising that in 2018, in an event that perfectly

mirrored the Kenyan state's governance through moral securitization, the terrorist organization Al-Shabaab banned, on the same day, homosexual acts *and* plastic bags, making them both punishable by death. Accordingly, homosexuality and plastic—the latest hindrances to moral utopias—became similar, mutually constitutive, if not partly overlapping, foreign afflictions against which an ideal order could be imagined. Thus, anxieties over different foreign contagions have resonated with and intensified people's support of the plastic-bag ban.

Plastic's association with the foreign and its afflictions is not new. Since 2005, as part of my research on ethnicity, sexuality, and belonging in the town of Maralal, Samburu county, northern Kenya, I have worked with so-called “plastic boys.” “Plastic boys” are men in their twenties through early forties who make a meager living selling antiques and plastic artifacts. If locals use the noun “boys”—a mode of reference initially deployed by white colonials in subjecting male Africans (Meiu 2015, 480)—to infantilize these men, the adjacent “plastic,” as will become clear shortly, tells a more complex story. In the aftermath of Kenya's contested presidential election of December 2007, Salim, a twenty-nine-year-old who identified as a “plastic boy,” was evicted from his home near Maralal. Long-standing conflicts over land alienation and wage labor had broken out, across the country, in interethnic violence. “Samburu said that the land had to be shared amongst themselves,” Salim recalled in 2010. “They told me to leave.” Village elders I spoke with said they had evicted Salim because he was a foreigner. To determine belonging, elders now focused more strictly on patrilineal descent, emphasizing that Salim's father was Somali and ignoring that his maternal grandmother had in fact been Samburu. But they also said that Salim was a “plastic boy,” by which they meant a “pauper” (Maa: *Ikirikoi*),⁶ someone without a lineage. Without ties of descent, Samburu say “plastic boys”—like actual plastic objects—are, by definition, non-Samburu. Salim's being a “plastic boy” might not have taken precedence over his paternal ethnicity in shaping the elders' decision. But cultural logics associated with plastic have certainly underscored his foreignness. The same week, local youths destroyed the “plastic boys” shop along with those of migrant settlers in Maralal, claiming they were all foreigners. Salim told me, “I said to myself: ‘I better leave lest maybe something bad happens. They can even slaughter me in the night.’”

In this article, I explore how different troublesome objectifications of plastic—bags, boys, rice, and relations—resonate with one another and with their wider social contexts to shape belonging. What makes plastic such an evocative idiom of nonbelonging in Kenya today? How does plastic congeal at once such “deep despair” and “utopian hope,” to use Pandian's (2016) terms? What is at stake in repudiating plastic, in imagining a world without it? If plastic lends itself in evocative ways to postcolonial subjects' efforts to conceptualize belonging, new relations of belonging materialize precisely as people engage with and disavow the substance's

various nefarious figurations. I argue that the historical objectification of plastic and efforts to define belonging thus shape one another dialectically. Focusing on the “plastic boys” as a gendered subject position, but also on objects and afflictions deemed of “plastic,” I show how historical experiences with plastic's forms, surfaces, and substance inform desires for particular kinds of political order as well as the fantasies, possibilities, and limitations of people's attachments to a region, ethnicity, or the state.

HOW BELONGING MATTERS

Heather Davis (2016, 190) argues that plastic's materiality troubles contemporary identity politics. Its ability to take on numerous, ever-changing forms engenders a “politics of passing”: it offers “the lesson of shape-shifting, of assuming identities that defy coherent forms and change with and in response to particular contexts.” Refusing to be tied to a permanent position, Davis suggests, plastic evades easy scrutiny. So, its mutability puzzles us. Roland Barthes (1988, 92) argues that “the mind does not cease from considering the original matter as an enigma . . . because the quick-change artistry of plastic is absolute: it can become buckets as well as jewels.” Recognizing plastic's distinct mutability makes it expandable to—indeed transmutable into—a wide array of things, including perhaps afflictions (plastic rice) or persons (“plastic boys”). However, *pace* Davis and Barthes, it is important to avoid positing plastic's materiality as universal in its perceptions and meanings. Instead, it is essential to reflect on how plastic's political presence resonates with aspirations and anxieties in particular contexts. Exploring how Kenyans engage with plastic and how, through such engagements, they generate new attachments reveals how plastic and belonging materialize together—how they shape each other's qualities—in particular contexts. While plastic might not always “trouble” identity, as Davis (2016) claims, it certainly becomes a key means for objectifying or struggling with identity's paradoxes.

Throughout the past four decades, in Africa as elsewhere, there has emerged an acute sense that borders are porous and that social life within them has become ever more vulnerable to the unpredictable twists and turns of a market controlled from elsewhere. This has also generated a swing in the opposite direction: an urge to close off borders, secure autochthons, exclude foreigners, and anchor power closer to home, in various national, religious, or ethnic sovereignties (Geschiere 2009; Geschiere and Meyer 1998; Tonkens and Duyvendak 2016). As part of this effort, figuring out who truly belongs and who is an alien is a daunting task, albeit one pursued with much energy, urgency, and sometimes violence (Appadurai 1998; Nyamnjoh 2006). This quest has also intensified what Tonkens and Duyvendak (2016, 3) call the “culturalization of citizenship,” “a process in which what it is to be a citizen is less defined in terms of civic, political or social rights, and more in terms of adherence to norms, values and cultural practices.” The turn to autochthony has thus

prompted calls to rehabilitate morality and exclude those who do not adhere to the values “of the land” (6–8).

Carl Death (2017, 213) argues that with intensified migration and urbanization across Africa, people commonly use environmental tropes to reflect on “foreign invasions” and what appears to be endangered “local nature.” For example, in 2000, in South Africa’s Cape region, a panic emerged over a new “alien” plant—the Australian acacia—that, having spread out rapidly, caused fires that destroyed vast expanses of terrain. Social anxieties over this plant, Jean and John Comaroff (2001) suggest, have paralleled xenophobic affects over labor migrants from other African countries who now competed with South Africans over otherwise scarce employment. In this context, environmental discourse and practice can restore a sense of belonging: planting trees, cleansing landscapes, or rescuing indigenous species are ways to claim autochthony, protect the familiar, and expel the foreign (Death 2017, 213; Lavau 2011).

Plastic occupies a central role in this context. The very presence of plastic, often readily recognizable as a quintessential commodity, can evoke how the circulation of capital renders social worlds porous, pervious (Weiss 1996, 176). As waste, too, plastic dwells in the afterlife of the commodity, threatening to pollute and annihilate life (Hawkins 2001). Its ability both to take on rigid, solid forms and to shape shift may also resonate with new market tendencies to render identity at once immutable—the very stuff of DNA—and ever more malleable to shifting trends of speculation and consumption. But this does not tell us much of how plastic shapes—and is in turn shaped—by particular relations of belonging and citizenship.

Rather than posit a causal relationship between the global circulation of plastics and the politics of belonging, I approach their intersection as premised on “constitutive resonance.” This concept, William Mazzarella (2017, 5) argues, “suggests a relation of mutual becoming rather than causal determination.” Accordingly, plastic and belonging materialize in new ways in relation to one another. I understand materialization here as the processes through which subjects, objects, and relations gain thing-like qualities (Miller 2005).⁷ I explore plastic’s materiality by examining resonances entailed in its objectification: how desires, fears, and attachments come to echo and reverberate in plastic’s material properties; how plastic’s mutability becomes iconic of anxieties over value and durability; and how plastic’s polluting trajectories render immediate utopias of political order and belonging. As Daniel Miller (2005, 9) argues, here “the very act of creating form creates consciousness.”

I begin by showing how the simultaneous emergence of “plastic boys” and plastic objects in northern Kenya gave new material forms to the idea of nonbelonging. With the rise of Samburu nativist politics, plastic came to represent foreignness in many forms. The disavowal of various plastics in the region has allowed Samburu to sustain the idea of an autochthonous order with new means. Similar cultural grammars, I show, have played out in the national public



FIGURE 1. “Plastic boys” in front of their “curio” shop, Maralal, Samburu County, Kenya. (Photograph by the author, 2011) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

as government officials have reassured citizens that the state is protecting them from plastic’s myriad afflictions. I then return to the “plastic boys” to show how people displace prominent threats of social failure on them in ways that make plastic resonate with dominant socioeconomic anxieties in the present. A focus on plastic, I argue, reveals here less-obvious forms of inclusion and exclusion.

“PLASTIC BOYS”: DESIRE, DECEPTION, AND THE FOREIGN

“Plastic boys” are invariably the first people to greet foreigners upon their arrival in Maralal (Figure 1). They sell *curios*: old, traditional household objects and bodily decorations they collect from the region’s pastoralists. They also offer travelers tours of nearby villages or treks into the northern desert. When I began my research, I was fascinated with these men’s vast knowledge about the customs of Samburu, the dominant ethnic group in the region, but also those of neighboring Turkana, Pokot, Rendille, and Borana. Despite their interest in local cultures, however, these men imagine themselves as cosmopolitan, urban youths who, although relatively poor, aspire to become middle class. Their style reflects these aspirations. They dress in blue jeans, running shoes, and shirts or T-shirts; listen to Kenyan reggae music; play soccer; entertain ideas of romantic love; and speak English, Swahili, and two or more regional ethnic languages. Without formal employment and with few foreigners passing through Maralal, “plastic boys” also sell sunglasses, watches, and other plastics to the town’s residents. As locals say, they trade old culture for foreign plastics.

But “plastic boys” is also a phrase for what Samburu living in and around Maralal have come to despise as “useless paupers” who, not unlike plastic itself, have no capacity to grow, reproduce, thrive, or attach themselves in meaningful ways to a place or a people. Locals say they fail to marry, accumulate resources, or set up respectable households. During my

fieldwork, I learned that “plastic boys” invest in numerous intimate attachments but that town-based Samburu elites and Samburu in nearby villages do not recognize these ties as legitimate kinship. Unable to prosper, these Samburu believe, “plastic boys” can contaminate others with their poverty. One woman explained that “these boys are bringing lots of problems to us. They never amount to anything. They are just inauspicious [M: *kotolo ake*].” “Plastic boys,” like plastic itself, are agents of pollution. Villagers sometimes pay “plastic boys” to bury young men who died unmarried and childless, a highly polluting ritual task. Perceptions of failure and pollution also work to delegitimize these men’s ability to access land, employment, and welfare in town.

When I asked “plastic boys” where their name came from, they all told me the same story: In the late 1970s, a group of poor boys walked to a campsite outside Maralal where US marines were training. In the evening, the boys returned to town wearing dozens of glow-stick bracelets the marines had given them in exchange for curios. “At that time, we did not yet have electricity in town,” Adam, a thirty-six-year-old “plastic boy,” told me in 2010. “And those bracelets were glowing so nicely.” The boys told locals that the bracelets would glow for three months, so people bought them. “That was big business,” Adam said. “But, after only a few hours, the bracelets stopped glowing. So, people came asking: ‘Where are those stupid boys who sold us these plastics? Where are those ‘plastic boys?’ That’s where our name comes from.”

This story illustrates how “plastic boys” might share some of plastic’s qualities. If plastic objects entice consumers with their shiny, glowing surfaces while deceiving them with their inherently poor quality, “plastic boys” use trickery and persuasion to make customers desire low-quality goods. They make money by deceiving others, locals say. When used as an adjective, the Swahili and Maa *plastiki* can also mean “fake” or refer to inauthentic goods or cheap things “made in China.” Desire and deception figure here as twin characteristics of both the substance and the men. But, despite the adjective’s pejorative connotations, “plastic boys” are proud of their name. As one man put it, “the name ‘plastic’ was chosen [for ‘plastic boys’] because of [the substance’s] flexibility and [its being] weatherproof,” echoing the men’s qualities of entrepreneurship and hard work.

“Plastic boys” emerged as a social category in the late 1970s, roughly around the same time that plastic became prevalent in northern Kenya. At first, plastic goods were useful and attractive. Jerry cans, basins, baskets, cups, thermoses, strainers, mirror frames, flashlights, slippers, sacks, and soccer balls became popular throughout the region. They came in a wide range of sizes and colors, were easy to wash, and were quite cheap (Figure 2). So much have some of these goods shaped local desires that their names became synonymous with plastic. In Maa, *plastiki* is partially interchangeable with *lkasuku*, a name derived from the national cooking-fat brand Kasuku, whose plastic containers women recycle; *lpiyrai*, “rubber” or “condom”; and *lqunia*,

“gunny sack.” Beads imported from the Czech Republic became the most popular plastic commodity (Nakamura 2005, 12; Straight 2002, 19n26). Samburu women use these beads to make elaborate necklaces and other jewelry that are now emblematic of their traditional dress, and young men wear brightly colored plastic flowers and feathers. Plastic, in these forms, is beautiful and desirable.

But soon, another side of plastic unraveled: waste—bags, bottles, and fragments of old artifacts—became suddenly overabundant. “It is tragic to see how much inroad plastic has made into Kenya,” a traveler to the region observed (Hofmann 2006, 13):

Fifteen hundred feet before each village the first signs of it appear: starting with just pink, blue or clear plastic bags hanging on the shrubs, but then the nearer we get the worse it is. There are plastic bottles impaled on virtually every thorn on every bush. At first glance, it almost looks like they’re in bloom, but a second later the tragic truth is all too painfully evident . . . [Plastics] hang on the bushes in their thousands.

Livestock often die ingesting plastic bags. “If you slaughter a goat or a cow,” a Samburu man told a national newspaper, “you find bags that could fill a sack in its stomach.”⁸ Locals have therefore embraced the government’s ban of plastic bags, and in recent years, Samburu women have worked with NGOs to clean villages of plastic waste.

Over the past four decades, northern Kenyans have imagined plastic things and “plastic boys” in similar ways. If objects can generate desire through their appearance, men do so through their ability to persuade others to buy such objects. But both deceive with their essences. The essence of plastic objects reveals itself quickly because they break easily; their life as useful things is temporary. But they don’t decompose, so their presence as waste is everlasting. Something similar is at stake with “plastic boys.” The category emerged when impoverished families who had lost their cattle to raiders across northern Kenya sought refuge in Maralal. Their young sons took to the streets in search of a living. At first, they worked as cultural entrepreneurs, which was fine, Maralal residents said. But then they started cheating, drinking, and wasting away their lives. For locals, both plastics and “plastic boys” are devoid of life force, a property they can impart to others. In both instances, then, plastic designates entities with foreign origins, deceitful essences, and polluting properties, but for “plastic boys,” it also connotes flexibility and malleability as desirable skills of a late capitalist market.

THE SUBSTANCE OF BELONGING IN NORTHERN KENYA

Images of cattle grazing on piles of plastic waste have become emblematic of northern Kenya’s geopolitical marginality. National media, NGOs, and churches use such images to situate the region’s pastoralists at what Paul Rigby (1992) calls “the periphery of capitalism.” Since the advent of colonialism, Kenya’s northern territories have occupied a marginal position within the state. Lacking natural resources and being



FIGURE 2. Shops selling plastic jerry cans, containers, basins, and shoes, Maralal, Samburu County, Kenya. (Photograph by the author 2011) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

unsuitable for agriculture, British colonials and later Kenyan leaders saw the region as unworthy of government investment. Moreover, for them, the apparent cultural conservatism of northern pastoralists, including Samburu, has been further reason to defer building roads, schools, and health facilities (Waweru 2012). Since Kenya's independence in 1963, administrators who governed northern districts came from other parts of the country and were of Kikuyu, Luo, or Kalenjin ethnicities. This exacerbated northerners' sense of marginalization. Plastic's proliferation in the region only confirmed that powerful leaders cheat them out of a good life and into consuming fake, toxic things.

Since the 1980s, a growing Samburu elite, mostly educated traders, teachers, and development workers residing in towns like Maralal, have pursued an ethnic politics claiming state resources and rights. They joined opposition parties and initiated NGOs to advocate on behalf of Samburu. With international funding, some built schools and boreholes, installed electricity, and replenished rural livestock. Others engaged in ecological projects on wildlife conservation, forest management, or waste control, seeing their environment as a valuable asset for safari tourism (Lekembe 2010). Becoming "green citizens," some elites also demonstrated their strong attachment to the land. Following the 2010 constitutional reform that decentralized state administration, some of them took over, for the first time ever, the governance of their county.

In this context, Samburu have tried to decide who would be entitled to their region's share of national resources and foreign aid. Determining this was no easy task. People of various ethnic backgrounds have long lived in the region, some being adopted into Samburu lineages and clans (Hjort 1981; Spencer 1973, 135–36). Since the 1960s, towns like Maralal have also attracted traders, migrant settlers, and people displaced by cattle raiding elsewhere. But, with the turn to autochthony, their presence became problematic. Rural Samburu worried that their urban kin would "mix"

with foreigners and forget their origins. As one elder told me, "If our children go to town and lose their ways, we will become like Kikuyu. We won't know who is of our clan, who is of our age set." As relations of descent and generation became uncertain (Holtzman 2006), elders sought to reify their importance as criteria of belonging (Meiu 2017, 70–74). This has had uneven gender implications. Women, for example, are easier to adopt into patrilineal clans because they eventually marry into other clans. Men, however, must grow their own clans. Hence, as one elder told me, "raising another man's son can bring death into your homestead." Therefore, Samburu do not adopt "plastic boys," many of whom are orphans. Referring to them as "plastic," then, also lent strength to arguments for their exclusion.

Material substance has long played an important role in belonging. My interlocutors said, for example, that *Ikunono* or blacksmith lineages are unpropitious because melting metal generates polluting forces. These forces can contaminate those who live close to them (Straight 2007, 20). Because few other Samburu generally agree to marry *Ikunono*, the latter have been mostly endogamous (Kasfir 2007, 135ff). Samburu, to be sure, have long depended on *Ikunono* for knives, spears, machetes, and other metal objects (Larick 1987). But because these objects "belong" to—and can act on behalf of—*Ikunono* (e.g., to kill others), their relation to such objects has been ambivalent. This example shows how the material qualities of particular attachments, their substances, can affect, for better or worse, people's "life force" (M: *nkishon*), itself a condition for sustained belonging. Like the *Ikunono*, locals say "plastic boys" undermine others' life force. Yet plastic's entanglements in local belonging are more complex.

DESIRING AUTOCHTHONY, DISAVOWING PLASTIC IN RURAL SAMBURU

As plastic became prevalent, rural Samburu objectified it in light of their own moral dilemmas. Since the 1990s, for

example, they speak of “plastic hair” (M: *lpapit le plastik*) and “warriors of plastic” (M: *lmurran le plastik*). *Morans*—young men who have been circumcised but must wait several years before marrying and becoming elders—have migrated to Kenya’s coastal tourist resorts to make money (Meiu 2017). They devised an easier way to maintain their long, braided hair, dyed with ochre, which is emblematic of their age-grade status at home and an important part of how they appeal to tourists on the coast (Kasfir 2007, 228–35). Rather than keep their hair long, they wear extensions. Their choice is significant because, for Samburu, hair represents an important aspect of kinship. Those belonging to the same lineage and *morans* of the same age set “share hair” (M: *keng’ar lpapit*)—that is, the substance of their hair makes them copresent in one another (Spencer 1965, 74; Straight 2007, 125–26). If, say, a lineage member dies, the hair of all members of that group becomes polluting and must be shaven, lest they too would die. Town-based Samburu sometimes postpone shaving in such situations, prompting conflicts with rural relatives. Male migrants, however, take the insult further: they produce fake extensions and caricature kinship with plastic hair.

Young rural women also began referring derogatorily to men with urban clothing as “plastic *morans*.” Jackson, a thirty-two-year-old, told me in 2015 that women in his village used this phrase to tease male migrants. “The girls are trying to provoke *morans*,” he said. “They call them ‘plastic warriors’ to say that they are not real men, because they do not wear the real [traditional] clothes. They are wearing plastic hair, the kind that town ladies buy in salons.” “But why plastic?” I asked him. “It’s because these men lack discipline,” he said, “that respect for culture.” Plastic figures here in opposition to culture, and its attribution probes, as women do, migrants’ devotion to their place of origin. If mobility appears here as men’s purview, women use plastic to emasculate migrants whose styles threaten local culture.

As plastic hair shows, plastic is problematic because kinship is entangled in substance and things. In rural areas, *plastiki* refers to objects that cannot embed themselves in families and homesteads, things that don’t belong. Plastic basins, jugs, jerry cans, and buckets do not take on the *latukuny* or bodily substance—dirt, sweat, or smell—of their owners; unlike calabashes, wooden containers, headrests, and stools, which do (see Figure 3).⁹ In 2011, one man told me:

You know, a calabash, even when it breaks, you can never burn it or throw it outside [the compound]. If you burn it, it will affect you. You can even die. But plastic, even if it was used for milking, you can go ahead and burn it. Plastic is just something which came late and doesn’t have any value for people, because it is not theirs. They don’t own it. But if you let a calabash without milk in it for too long, and it begins to crack, that calabash will curse you and your whole family.

Note how, on the one hand, the inability of plastic objects to attach themselves to persons may be advantageous in that it does not expose its “owners” to sorcery, as



FIGURE 3. Wooden calabashes and a set of plastic shelves next to the hearth of a village house, Samburu County, Kenya. (Photograph by the author, 2015) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

do calabashes and wooden objects when stolen. Ownership requires persons and things to be part of one another, something plastic never achieves. On the other hand, for persons to prosper, they must cultivate relations to propitious objects, like calabashes, which, if used correctly, bless them. As Bilinda Straight (2007, 65) argues, “calabashes are thoroughly entangled in Samburu personhood.” Plastic objects, by contrast, remain unattached, sterile, unable to generate growth.

At least three of plastic’s properties appear troublesome in this context. First is its impermeability, its inability to absorb other substances organically. Locals I interviewed illustrated this property by saying that calabashes, for example, are constantly being touched and thus take on their owner’s sweat, while plastic, if washed with water, is always restored to its initial sterile state. Similarly, Brad Weiss (1996, 174) shows how, among Haya of Tanzania, gourds contain the owner’s generative heat, while “the coldness of plastic . . . [restricts] these warm, ongoing processes.”

Second, plastic is invariably associated with objects that arrive in the region ready-made (see also Weiss 1996, 176). “It is those things that people make themselves that have *latukuny*,” one Samburu man said, “but not those that are made in a factory.” Objects made in the household are entangled in its growth, while objects made elsewhere can threaten it. Recall that the sharp metal objects made by *Ikunono* (or clay pots made by Dorobo groups) are seen as likely to curse or kill if not handled with care or, on occasion, blessed ritually. These objects’ lineages are nevertheless known, while plastic’s origins remain obscure. Made in factories elsewhere, its intentions are vague, uncertain.

Third, if plastic does not organically attach itself to bodies, it can nevertheless damage them. Some women, for instance, worry that sex with either condoms or plastic bags (used when condoms are not available) can “block

the womb.” An elderly woman told me that “plastic in the womb” (M: *plastik te kosheke*) is similar to AIDS in that it makes bodies waste away. In Maa, *mbiita* (AIDS) is a noun derived from the verb *a-biita*, “to waste away” or become slim (Wanyoike 2011, 156). Similarly, in Malawi, becoming HIV positive is known as “swallowing plastic,” that is, eating “something inedible, undigestible . . . like a goat that becomes thin after swallowing plastic” (Uys et al. 2005, 16). In Tanzania, “plastic teeth,” teeth that appear in toddlers and that can quickly lead to their death, manifest themselves like AIDS, through drastic slimming (Weiss 1996, 170). If sex and plastic goods entice with the promise of pleasure but risk bringing depletion and death, then AIDS and plastic afflictions—their symptoms quite similar—express trouble with sexuality and reproduction.

It is no surprise then that Nkai (God), too, would ban plastics. Over the last two decades, in rural areas, several young girls who claim to have visited Nkai returned home with messages for their communities (Straight 2007, 37ff). They urged women to abandon, among other things, plastic beads and containers. One elder told me, “These girls say women should stop wearing all these plastic beads. Nkai says that it is this plastic that is making women unable to give birth.” Another man heard a girl say that “women should stop milking cows in plastic jerry cans or else cows will stop giving milk. To milk your cows in plastic is to curse them. It is to show them disrespect. So, Nkai will punish you for it.” Writing about these messages, Straight (2007, 65) observes that “to approach a Samburu cow with a plastic container is to mix what cannot properly mix—outside and propitious inside.” Albeit highly contested, girls’ prophecies circulate widely in the region, solidifying a certain taxonomy of objects along the axes of culture versus foreign imports, life-giving versus polluting things. They also make plastic’s arrival in the region a historical juncture when life-giving culture has begun being polluted. In some rituals then, people must “return” (M: *a-chukunye*) to using calabashes or wooden objects and refrain temporarily from using their plastic counterparts.

Two forces animate these diverse understandings and practices involving plastic. First, *desire*: a nostalgic longing to reconstitute a time before plastic—dangerous commodities and disease—arrived in the region, a time when life had not yet been threatened by the nefarious effects of foreign things. As part of this desire, plastic’s coldness, ready-made forms, and impermeability resonate quite strongly with the idea of nonbelonging. Samburu desires for particular kinds of attachment deem plastic a material impediment to propitious belonging. Invoking plastic, locals thus resist attaching themselves to particular things, styles, and persons.

A second force is *disavowal*: an ongoing repudiation of plastic. The very idea of a world without it is, no doubt, aspirational. Nobody I spoke with believes it is possible to get rid of all plastics. “Isn’t it Nkai who brought plastic to us in the first place?” one elder asked. But neither is the disavowal of plastic a pointless act. Rather, it is through the plastic’s

repetitive repudiation that the utopia of an unpolluted autochthonous community is called forth, rendered palpable, and made to inform the political projects of the present. Mary Douglas (1966, 139) argues that polluting substances “can distract from the social and moral aspects of a situation by focusing on a simple material matter.” Such focus helps reinforce not the social order itself but rather the *idea* of an order. It consolidates the image of a political totality and thus produces in social life the effects of such an image, if only as an aspirational projection, a thing yet to come. The resonance between plastic and nonattachment is thus constitutive of belonging; desiring what plastic forecloses and disavowing it as a condition for happiness, Samburu generate intimate ties while imagining themselves in a prosperous future.

THE NATION’S FOREIGN CONTAGIONS

The resonances between various instantiations of plastic and their wider social context has also represented an important symbolic resource for the Kenyan state and national public. In a satire published in the *Daily Nation* in 2013, Mark Muthai suggests that the radical way Rwanda has implemented, since 2008, its ban on plastic bags—using police raids, drastic fines, and jail terms—reflects how it has been treating Kenyan migrants in recent years.¹⁰ “The Rwandese government,” Muthai writes, “has launched a crackdown on Kenyans living in Rwanda who have a record of wearing plastic smiles”—smiles that are fake, duplicitous. “This is in line,” he suggests, “with the Rwandese government policy of eradicating all plastics in the country as an environmental conservation measure.” Muthai quotes a Rwandese minister say, “We cannot tolerate plastics in this country and we will do everything in our power to root out any foreigner who goes about with a plastic smile.” Though fictitious, Muthai’s piece reveals a key premise shared by his Kenyan readership: that banning plastic bags is about the threat of multiple foreign contagions and the role the state must play to protect its citizens. Foreigners here take on the properties of plastic itself. “On a hot day,” a police officer tells Muthai, “people with plastic smiles smell like, well, burning plastic.”

When the Kenyan government passed its own—and, recall, by some accounts, “the world’s toughest”—ban on plastic bags in 2017, more was at stake than environmental pollution. In June, the Kenyan Bureau of Standards pursued an investigation into allegations that plastic rice circulates in the country. “Watch Out! Plastic Rice Now on Sale in Kenya,” warns an online article, claiming that “a leaked video reveals that producers of long grain rice in China are now making plastic rice . . . then mix it with natural rice for commercial exportation to African countries.”¹¹ The ensuing panic was part of a recurring set of nationwide scandals over counterfeit foodstuffs. On social media, a Maralal resident describes the situation thus:

Poisonous sugar, fake honey, plastic rice, fake eggs, our meat is being injected with formalin . . . counterfeit cooking oil . . .

Almost everything we eat is processed . . . and everything else is made in China. In short EVERYTHING IS FAKE. There's nowhere to run.¹²

Pursuing an investigation into plastic rice, government authorities responded to such deep anxieties. In Nigeria, for example, similar panics over plastic rice led the government to ban temporarily rice imports and try to revitalize the local rice production. Kenyan authorities disclaimed the existence of plastic rice. But, as in the Nigerian case, their highly publicized investigation asserted a particular image of the state. If some Kenyans have long been skeptical about their country's new economic dependence on China, investigating the import of plastic rice, authorities reassured Kenyans the state protects them from any foreign contagion.

At stake in such panics is, among other things, the future of citizens' very nature, now undermined by the afflictions of globalization. "The most offensive part of being gay," writes Kwamchetsi Makokha in a homophobic rant in the *Daily Nation*, "is its unnaturalness on a continent of nature like Africa, which shuns aeroplanes, plastic, spectacles, and other unnatural things like genetically modified organisms."¹³ Makokha depicts Africa as unpolluted nature when global circulations of plastics, gay rights, or technology have corrupted humanity elsewhere. Political and religious leaders across the continent have depicted homosexuality as a Western contagion (see Epprecht 2004). But in Makokha's statement, homosexuality also borrows plastic's substance as a contagious affliction, something conveyed strongly by the popular term "gayism." Like plastic, but unlike "homosexuality," gayism connotes a trend that proliferates. In 2017, for example, a national scandal emerged over two male lions photographed copulating in Kenya's Maasai Mara National Reserve. Ezekeil Mutua, head of the Kenya Film Classification Board, made headlines claiming that the lions "caught" gayism from Western gay tourists kissing in the park.¹⁴ Like Makokha, Mutua depicts African nature—and heteromascularity—as being at risk of foreign contaminations. Accordingly, if plastic threatens nature, then gayism is plastic in that it undermines the heteronormative "nature" of bodies and gender.

Fighting such contagions plays an important role in the making of what Paul Amar (2013) calls the human-security state, a form of rule based on moral securitization. This may involve the rescue of nature and heritage, the rehabilitation of traditional family and normative gender relations, or the capture and reform of dangerous masculinities, whether criminals or homosexuals. Here, as Adeline Masquelier (2005, 12) argues, "polluting and threatening things are thought to originate from the outside—whether outside the body, the household, the clan, the village, the suburb, or the nation." In this context, panics over plastics reorient citizen subjectivity by producing desire both for an authentic autochthonous nature and gendered order and—importantly—for the state as an ultimate guarantee of moral security in times of flux.

We might be tempted to understand regional politics of ethnicity as opposed to the politics of national belonging. Yet plastic sustains similar cultural grammars in publics of different scales. In northern Kenya, elites have been deeply invested in environmental conservation. They organize rallies, workshops, and seminars to teach rural residents about the dangers of trading timber, making charcoal, and littering plastic. They also debate ecological policies on Maa-language radio and social media. But because their environmental concerns focus almost exclusively on the ecology of Samburu county, their efforts anchor ethnicity in territory. The conservation of local nature is thus care for ethnic territory, a claim to ethno-regional belonging.

The ban on plastic bags drew so much support precisely because it resonated strongly with both regional *and* national concerns. In this sense, plastic represents an instance of what Michael Herzfeld ([1997] 2016, 7–8) calls "cultural intimacy," a set of usually secret and embarrassing idioms that allow people to recognize themselves as sharing belonging beyond face-to-face contact. Political leaders and the media have strengthened extant cultural grammars of plastic and banked on their powerful resonances to legitimize the state's authority as a source of moral security.

DISPLACING SOCIAL FAILURE, DISAMBIGUATING THE FOREIGN

If plastic creates strong semiotic and sentimental resonance between different foreign contagions, it is also because people can engage it as an object cause of moral problems. "Plastic boys" as subject position—as a category of selfhood—reflect this well. "We call them 'plastic boys' because they hang around like that, with no families, with no purpose," Simon, a Samburu NGO worker in Maralal, told me in 2011. "They just run after the whites to sell things to them and then they drink that money. They are just like that plastic, that garbage, those thrown-away plastic bags that you see everywhere and that don't belong anywhere." Simon suggests that "plastic boys," like plastic waste, permeate the local landscape without a "purpose" or ability to attach themselves. They share plastic's tendency to persist as waste. When northern Kenyans like Simon speak of "plastic boys" disparagingly, I suggest, they express collective anxieties over work, kinship, and respectability and depict foreign afflictions as causes of social failure.

One day in June 2011, Mama Loleku, a Samburu woman who owns a business in Maralal, warned me not to hang out with "plastic boys." Two had stopped by her store the previous day to ask where I lived. She told me she had given them the wrong directions. "I wanted to protect you," she said. "They are dangerous, these boys." Then, she explained, "they bring white people to my shop and quote them prices three times higher than the ones I want. They tell the whites, in English, that my shop is the cheapest in town. But then they tell me in Swahili that they will come later to collect their commission. They cheat people." Mama Loleku described "plastic boys" as "youths who make a living for themselves

with their mouths” (S: *vijana wenye wanajitafutia na midomo yao*). “They are fake,” she concluded. Traders, teachers, and development workers in town also see “plastic boys” as lazy, unwilling to study and work, and looking instead for quick, easy money. By depicting schooling and work as conditions for success, elites’ narratives occlude how recent political-economic transformations have made education an uncertain asset, employment scarce, and speculative practices widespread modalities of value creation.

In this context, middle-class lifestyles are also fragile, uncertain, and unsustainable. Local elites depend on foreign donors, NGO funds, trade networks, or employment to sustain a good lifestyle. Such ties can dissolve easily, quickly. Some “plastic boys,” for example, come from previously well-to-do families. James joined the “plastic boys” in 1990 when he was seventeen. His parents, both high school graduates, had worked for tourist lodges. They rented a large house in Maralal and sent their children to the town’s best schools. But in 1988, James’s father lost his job suddenly and, a few months later, as James put it, “died of sorrow.” His mother died shortly thereafter. Without an income, he and his siblings dropped out of school. “Before my parents died,” he told me, “we had a lot of money for school and everything. Then, life changed. Nobody was helping us. I learned English in school and knew about tourists, so I joined the ‘plastic boys.’”

Stories of sudden wealth loss, such as James’s, echo in the daily worries of elite men and women. When I visited Mama Loleku in June 2018, she had lost most of her savings. She had just campaigned for a councilor seat with the local government, a five-year position with a large salary. But she lost the election and now struggled to pay her children’s school fees. In this sense, when Mama Loleku and others criticize “plastic boys,” they disregard contexts and speculative modalities of livelihood that they share with these men. They also displace deep anxieties over uncertain livelihoods onto these men: if educated people who work hard to accumulate wealth can lose it so easily, they would argue, it is because of socioeconomic trends that the “plastic boys” manifest most saliently. These trends include speculative pursuits of money, the depreciation of education and stable employment, and an inability to hold on to wealth. Though aware that elites disregard “plastic boys,” James saw his ability to speculate on and persuade potential customers as skillful entrepreneurship. “This is our work,” James said. “It is not stealing.” Yet, for others, “plastic boys” embody precisely the dangers of perpetual plasticity—a speculative malleability—that threatens durability, continuity, and identity.

Like Maralal’s elites, Samburu living in nearby villages consider “plastic boys” troublesome. A few elders told me it was bad to make money by trading calabashes or old wooden objects. These, let us recall, are bodily extensions of those who make them. Elders say that “plastic boys” do not prosper because they “eat” life-giving objects, consuming—almost cannibalistically—other people’s bodies and life force (cf. Straight 2002, 13). Not only do they benefit from such

“inalienable possessions” (Weiner 1992), but they also import polluting plastics. Here, plastic eats away at culture, alienates its capacity to grow. It is important to note that many rural Samburu see their own contemporary means of livelihood, including charcoal making and alcohol brewing, as inauspicious (Meiu 2017, chapter 4). Therefore, when they speak of “plastic boys,” they also reflect on wider conditions of precarity. But, like Maralal’s elites, they also displace prevalent social anxieties on “plastic boys.”

In December 2010, I asked Mama Seiyina, a widow from a village near Maralal, what she thought of “plastic boys.” “Those thieves?” she replied,

We call them street children of the whites. A child might decide to go and do that work. And nobody told him to go. His disobedience alone has taken him. He will just go and do that work. But he will not come home again. He will age and he will not marry. He will just be a pauper and you won’t have any relationship to him. He can be just anybody. He will not be able to say: “This is my father and my brother.” Nothing is there. They lost that respect that Samburu have.

Referring to “plastic boys” as “street children of the whites” (M: *Ichokorani lomusunku*), Mama Seiyina suggests that the legacies of colonialism shaped belonging and mobility. “Plastic boys,” for her, become dependent on white people in ways that uproot them from kinship and leave them uncontrollably mobile. The Swahili noun for “whites,” *wazungu* (in M., *Imusunku*) derives from the verb *kuzunguka*, “to go around,” “to move in circles,” echoing here an older experience of white administrators and later African labor migrants in the colonial context as displaced, uprooted, unattached. Rural Samburu, for example, teasingly call their urban kin “black whitemen” (M: *Imusunku orok*) to warn them, as it were, that pursuing modern, “white” values can render them non-Samburu, alien to local attachments. As “street children of the whites,” “plastic boys” embody most visibly this long-standing tendency of young men to being seduced by and subordinated to “white” values. “When people say: ‘Ah, plastic boys,’” James explained, “it means they have degraded you. That is to say, you are just of lower dignity. You are someone running, running [after whites] without purpose.”

Belonging, Mama Seiyina implies, is less about an immutable identity and more about demonstrating one’s commitment to local kinship and custom. It is about sustaining ties to a rural home and growing one’s lineage. As these customary relationships are decisive in assessing local belonging, the decline of cattle economies, land alienation, and rampant unemployment have left many impoverished rural families unable to pay bridewealth, fund weddings and funerals, and hold important ceremonies (Meiu 2017, 184–90). But if both town-based and rural Samburu invest in local custom, it is also obvious to them that “plastic boys” do not.

Indeed, “plastic boys” explicitly dissociate themselves from rural worlds. James, for example, told me that had he wanted to, he could have returned to his father’s village. Over the years, his father, a Samburu, had supported his rural

kin. But James preferred to live in town. “You know, those people are very primitive,” he said. “They are uneducated but they want you to do things their way.” James’s decision severed his relationship to them. “If you don’t show up to participate in those ceremonies,” he said, “people will ignore you . . . because you know nothing about their ways.” Associated with an inauspicious livelihood and embedded in attachments that others devalue, “plastic boys” then figure by definition as non-Samburu. Most Samburu, in fact, see “plastic boys” as Turkana, despite these men’s otherwise diverse ethnic backgrounds.

The processes of displacement and disambiguation that constitute the subject position of the “plastic boys” are shaped here through resonances with local and national discourses about plastics. First, if plastic refers to the fake and the deceptive, then for many locals, “plastic boys” are fake subjects. Uprooted from legitimate kinship and reproductive arrangements, they exacerbate forms of uncontrolled mobility and deceitful appearances associated with colonialism and globalization. Second, like plastic, they represent the antithesis of culture—they erode culture for their own benefit. Third, if plastic’s usefulness appears temporary while it persists as waste, “plastic boys” appear to locals as men without reproductive and cultural ambitions who, after all, do not go away. Through the dialectics of displacement and disambiguation, these similarities between plastics and “plastic boys” anchor larger fears over social failure in polluting matter.

Most “plastic boys” prefer to identify as Kenyan. But the Kenya to which they belong is for them one of the future—an anticipatory projection, a form of “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) in relation to which they are still “boys” waiting to become men. Tribalism and corruption, “plastic boys” say, hold Kenya back. “I am Samburu,” James said. “But, for me, someone who helps me is more important than people of my own tribe . . . I don’t like tribalism [S: *ukabila*]. I am happy to be like the other ‘plastic boys,’ without a tribe.” Adam, another “plastic boy,” said, “Now, if I get into an argument here, Samburu say [he switches from Swahili to Maa]: *Miyolo dei nkop ang itii?*—‘Don’t you know you this is our land?’ They will beat you in the street, because they say ‘this is our land.’” “Plastic boys” rejection of ethnicity can be read as a claim to a more legitimate kind of belonging—a form of belonging that transcends the corruption and tribalism of elites, rural Samburu, and party politics. “As a Kenyan,” Adam said, “this is my country. I can live any place I want.” Indeed, “plastic boys” see their mode of livelihood as hard work that should grant them the recognition and respect of the state administration. For this reason, since 1996, some “plastic boys” registered with the government as the Plastic Boys’ Self-Help Group, a cooperative meant to attract funding from the governmental youth programs and NGOs. Although they have not received much funding, by registering as a labor cooperative they made a claim for national belonging. Although “plastic boys” share dominant perspectives on plastic as a pollutant, they insist, as James once told

me, that “people dismiss us because they don’t know who the ‘plastic boys’ really are.”

CONCLUSION

Over the past decades, ethnicity, indigeneity, autochthony, and culture have played important roles in how postcolonial subjects have imagined, contested, and actualized attachments to territories and the state (e.g., Broch-Due 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Geschiere 2009; Hodgson 2011). Less-readily recognizable as constitutive of belonging are the politics of matter: how substances and surfaces resonate with and shape the politics of inclusion and exclusion; how things and textures echo, magnify, or deplete possibilities to belong; how polluting matter complicates, subverts, or reinforces identity and its attachments; and how matter itself is a product of such struggles.

What is fascinating about plastic is that its substance and its multiple, mutable forms lend themselves evocatively to postcolonial subjects’ efforts to identify and diagnose—to “theorize with poor means” (Thiong’o 2012, 2ff)—dilemmas of belonging in the present. In Kenya, plastic is inextricably tied to belonging: its mutability appears to undermine identity; its impermeability to resist relationality, to annihilate life; its presence as ready-made commodities to render tangible globalization’s neocolonial forces. Plastic can pass for culture (as with Samburu beads) or appear autochthonous (as with plastic rice), suggesting the very ambiguity of determining who belongs and who does not. In Kenya since the 1980s, people have been extensively preoccupied with the dissonance between the appearance and essence of various things, whether money, goods, or bodies (Blunt 2004; Smith 2008). Concerns with plastic extend this preoccupation: plastics mimic the form of particular objects without also reproducing their essence, value, or durability. If plastic speaks so saliently in Kenya today, it is because it efficiently congeals such wider anxieties over bodies, relations, and politics on both regional and national scales.

I do not suggest that the different instantiations of plastic described in this article—boys, bags, rice, smiles, hair, and homosexuality, among others—form an integrated system of meaning. Instead, I approached them as *coincidental* and *resonant* in ways that are generative. The intersection of plastic’s different manifestations with a particular politics of belonging is coincidental in that it is not part of a unified, linear, progressive time but an outcome of a “queer timing,” “a temporality that produces truth through coincidence, through intersectionality” (Boellstorff 2007, 30). “Plastic boys” emerged in the late 1970s, ecological concerns with plastic pollution in the 1990s, and the rhetoric of a “war on plastic” in the 2000s. But their coincidental arrival in national and local publics generates new meanings and actualizes belonging in new ways. Key to their coincidental arrival in these publics is their ability to resonate with one another. Mazzarella (2017, 5) argues that resonance establishes a mimetic relation that is mutually transformative. Sustaining relations of mutual becoming, “plastic boys,”

plastic objects, plastic trends, and their wider social and economic contexts come to share grammars that produce the foreign. Two processes, I have shown, drive their mutual becoming. First, there is the dialectics of desire and disavowal through which the repetitive repudiation of plastic sustains aspirations for the utopia of an unpolluted autochthonous order. In the national arena, this dialectic also produces desire for the state as the ultimate guarantor of moral protectionism. Second, there is the dialectics of displacement and disambiguation through which plastic comes to congeal common forms of social failure and attributes these to foreign contagions. These dialectics demonstrate how plastic's historical objectification and efforts to define belonging are co-constitutive.

Barthes (1988, 92) argues that plastic prompts “a perpetual amazement, the reverie of man [*sic*] at the sight of the proliferating forms of matter.” For Barthes, “this amazement is a pleasurable one since the scope of the transformations gives man [*sic*] the measure of his power.” Approached from the postcolony, however, plastic's mutability hardly appears as a pleasurable realization of the measure of one's power. Produced elsewhere, proliferating against the collective will, and difficult to control, for postcolonial subjects, plastic is dubious at best—a reminder that globalization, like colonialism, works through multiple, nested forms of alienation and marginalization. It is then not as much *through* plastic, but *against* it—through its repudiation—that postcolonial subjects imagine order, autonomy, and autochthony. Plastic is then, *pace* Barthes, an inherently cosmopolitan substance, one generating and being transformed by different imaginaries of belonging.

George Paul Meiu *Department of Anthropology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA*

NOTES

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¹ Jonathan Watts. 2018. “Eight Months On, Is the World's Most Drastic Plastic Bag Ban Working?” *The Guardian*, April 25. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/25/nairobi-clean-up-highs-lows-kenyas-plastic-bag-ban>.

- ² George Omondi. 2017. “Retailers Risk NEMA Raid for Plastic Bag Stock After August 28.” *Business Daily*, June 7. <https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/news/Retailers-risk-Nema-raid-for-plastic-bag-stock-after-August-28/539546-3960204-130q6d/index.html>.
- ³ Philip Etemesi. 2017. “Foreigners Are Now Being Stripped of Plastic Bags Before Entering Kenya.” *OMG Voice*, September 26. <https://omgvoice.com/news/foreigners-stripped-plastic-bags?country=KE>.
- ⁴ Pauline Kairu. 2017. “Will We Triumph in the War on Plastics?” *Daily Nation*. September 17. <https://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/dn2/Plastic-bag-ban-Have-the-cows-finally-come-home/957860-4099846-pip5dpz/index.html>.
- ⁵ BuzzKenya. 2017. “Watch Out! Plastic Rice Now on Sale in Kenya.” buzzkenya.com (Link no longer active)
- ⁶ Throughout this article, I use the abbreviation “M” to mark words in the Samburu dialect of the Maa language and “S” for words and phrases in Swahili.
- ⁷ Scholars have recently questioned materiality's simplistic equation with artifacts or material culture (Miller 2005; Hodder 2012) and problematized clear-cut divides between matter and immateriality, substance and its signifying regimes (Coole and Frost 2010; Ingold 2007). Although I am inspired by work demonstrating how objects exert “agency” to shape concepts and ideas (e.g., Holbraad and Pedersen 2017), the present article foregrounds the dialectical dynamics of materialization and objectification to demonstrate the co-constitutive process through which plastic and belonging materialize.
- ⁸ Martin Fundi. “Our Livestock Now Safer, Samburu Pastoralists Say on Plastic Bags Ban.” August 26. https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2017/08/26/our-livestock-now-safer-samburu-pastoralists-say-on-plastic-bags-ban_c1623865.
- ⁹ For a detailed discussion of *latukuny*, see Straight (2007, chapter 4).
- ¹⁰ Mark Muthai. 2013. “Rwanda to Deport all Kenyans with Plastic Smiles.” *The Standard*, September 20. www.standardmedia.co.ke.
- ¹¹ BuzzKenya. 2017. “Watch Out! Plastic Rice Now on Sale in Kenya.” buzzkenya.com (Link no longer active)
- ¹² Alois Leadekei. 2008. “Contraband Sugar Nabbed by Security Agents at Maralal.” Facebook, June 26.
- ¹³ Kwamchetsi Makokha. 2010. “How to Invite Public Odium and Make Your Life Difficult.” *Daily Nation*, May 10. <https://www.nation.co.ke/oped/opinion/How-to-invite-public-odium-and-make-your-life-difficult-/440808-923226-32j3rtz/index.html>.
- ¹⁴ Sarah Malm. 2017. “Gay Lions Seen in Kenya Anger County's Moral Policemen.” *Daily Mail*, November 3. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5046653/Gay-lions-seen-Kenya-angers-country-s-moral-policeman.html>.

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