

## Object Lessons: Glitter

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Glitter is everywhere, gilding consumer products from greeting cards and nail polish to sunscreen and coffins. It plays a role in Western cultural phenomena ranging from LGBTQ+ activism to children's entertainment. But this substance has recently received widespread backlash, having been identified as a source of environmentally-harmful microplastics. As the backlash went viral, it triggered a surprisingly passionate, and deeply polarized, public response; as blogger Penny Whitehouse observes: "Glitter. You either love it or hate it, right?" Seemingly frivolous yet controversial, problematic and pervasive, glitter demands our critical attention.

My fellowship project will be a short, public-facing book on glitter (currently under contract with Bloomsbury's "Object Lessons" series). The book will be informed by my scholarly specializations in affect studies, which focuses on emotions and visceral reactions such as the aforementioned love and hate, and queer ecologies, which focuses on the intersection of LGBTQ+ and environmental issues. Throughout the book, I will emphasize the themes of consumerism, affect, environment/pollution, and gender and sexuality. I will also consider ontology: tracing glitter's shifting composition over time—from mica in ancient periods to plastic during the Great Acceleration to sugars and cellulose more recently—I will show that the term "glitter" does not refer to a predictable or stable object.

The book will offer five relatively in-depth chapters in addition to five interspersed "microchapters": short and fun interludes that crystallize the ideas of the book through genres like the product test and the interview. I will explore topics ranging from the wonders and perils of glitter beer to the absurd theatrics of "glitterbombing" to the recent marketing of biodegradable glitter to LGBTQ+ consumers.

Regarding "glitterbombing," I look at glitter's material and symbolic role in contemporary activism through two comparative case studies. The first is the series of glitterbombings of homophobic politicians that took place in the United States in the 2010s, while the second is the more recent "glitter revolution" (*revolución diamantina*) in Mexico, during which feminist anti-violence activists have dusted politicians as well as monuments in pink sparkles. I show how this activist practice exploits the unique qualities of glitter (dispersal, persistence, irritation, shininess) while participating in a longer history of what Amory Starr calls "tactical frivolity" in politics. Further, I show how glitterbombing as an activist tactic trades on *both* the historic affection that LGBTQ+ and female communities have for this substance *and* their recognition of its negative qualities.

Regarding the marketing of biodegradable glitter, I consider how such reconfigurations in composition might affect queer and drag cultures specifically—and, more generally, indicate shifts in political consciousness. For example, the LGBTQ+ adoption of biodegradable glitter, along with movements like Out for Sustainability's #PlasticFreePride campaign, suggest that environmental ethics is emerging as a central component of contemporary queer politics. I also consider biodegradable glitter as an example of what environmental philosopher Kate Soper calls "alternative hedonism": ecologically-responsible behaviors that involve pleasure rather than self-denial. As hedonism and pleasure have been central to

LGBTQ+ liberation, but notably absent from mainstream environmental movements, biodegradable glitter gestures toward a new queer environmentalism.

This book will thereby frame the history of glitter as an environmental history. That is, it will position glitter as a phenomenon always subject to the contingencies of existing natural resources, technologies, labor, and cultural-environmental change. I will end with a reflection on our current era, which some have dubbed “the Plasticene,” following the popular term “the Anthropocene.” In this era, plastic has become humans’ most enduring legacy. Glitter predates this era but has also played a role in it. I will propose that the recent move (back) to biodegradable glitter marks not just the flexibility of “glitter” as a category but also a promising turn toward adaptation. Perhaps we humans can remake what we mean by so many object designations. Or, at least, we can find pleasure in trying.