



Media Release

October 31, 2016

Science and Technology Studies Lecture – Wednesday, Nov. 2 at 7 PM “The Plastic Island That Isn’t There: How Absences Matter for Science and the Ocean”

Dr. Kim De Wolff wants to take you on a voyage to the North Pacific to a mythical island – an island made of trash. De Wolff will be speaking at St. Thomas University as she delivers the annual Science and Technology Studies Lecture on Wednesday, Nov. 2 at 7 pm in Brian Mulroney Hall in Room 101.

The mainstream media consensus seems irrefutable: there is an island of plastic waste floating in the middle of the North Pacific Ocean. But despite agreement on its location and a proliferation of claims about its size, no one can find it; not on Google Earth, not after weeks at sea.

Marine scientists dismiss the trash island as misleading and inaccurate, but they cannot explain why it endures in the public imagination. This talk draws on science and technology studies to move beyond questions of accuracy to explore how the trash island became and remains so powerful.

“In this talk, we will travel on a boat through the garbage patch, meet scientists, activists and even an architect, as the missing island variously appears as myth, plastic ‘soup’ and an island-to-be,” De Wolff said.

“I will argue that the physical form plastic pollution takes at sea is inextricably connected to whether and how people care about it. Even missing things are powerful actors that shape both knowledge of global environmental crises, and the kinds of action that become possible in return.”

Kim De Wolff received her PhD in Communication and Science Studies from the University of California, San Diego, and is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow with the Center for the Humanities at the University of California, Merced.

Her research investigates the intersections of global environmental problems and cultures of consumption and waste, especially those involving plastic and water. An interdisciplinary scholar of science and technology studies and critical cultural communication, she combines participatory, interview, and textual-based methods to examine how material forms and practices shape both understandings of environmental problems and the possibilities for responsible action. Her current book project traces how the Great Pacific Garbage Patch circulating in the North Pacific Ocean becomes a matter of public concern.

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