



Photo: Anne McClintock

Response to Anne McClintock's "Slow Violence and the BP Oil Crisis in the Gulf of Mexico"

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"Slow Violence and the BP Oil Crisis in the Gulf of Mexico" is a powerful work of political analysis and critical intervention in a moment constructed as a crisis. It includes material from two essays published in *Counterpunch*, "We Are All BP Now: Militarizing the Gulf Oil Crisis," 24 June 2010 and "The Gulf Crisis is Not Over: Slow Violence and the BP Coverups," 23.24 August 2010.

McClintock's essay opens with John Berger's words from *About Looking*, which I want to repeat here for they resonate throughout the essay: "The task of an alternative photography is to incorporate photography into social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any such memory." References to social and political memory are in circulation in contemporary work but, as far as I can see, their use does not indicate a common or shared agenda. I value "Slow Violence and the BP Oil Crisis in the Gulf of Mexico," because it forces us to think about social and political memory as productive of a counter-archive, one that demands the constant and consistent interrogation of the terms and conditions which produce social and political memory and their ways of seeing.

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I want to begin with the issue of the photograph and what we imagine it can do.

Edward Burtynsky follows the path of oil through modern society, from wellhead to pipeline to car engine—and then beyond to the projected peak-oil endgame.

[Edward Burtynsky](#), having worked in mines, was acutely aware of worlds unseen that need not merely to be seen but to be recognized and given meaning; he uses color and large format photography to this end in his landscapes. He also uses the term “contemplate,” suggesting that he is aiming for an idealist frame of engagement, we see and we think. *Oil*, Burtynsky argues, underpins the scale and speed of taking resources from the earth; he wants us to recognize this through large form and color. (I will return to issues of scale and temporality later.) His, at times, stark and startling landscapes are organized by linear progression: production, extraction, consumption and the entropic end of oil.

McClintock’s “Slow Violence and the BP Oil Crisis in the Gulf of Mexico,” not only interrupts the linearity of Burtynsky’s narrative, it also reminds us of what is buried, obscured, forgotten, and silenced within and by its frame: The Exxon Valdez calamitous oil spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska on 24 March 1989.



Exxon Valdez Clean up effort. [Source](#)

Burtynsky photographs the results of the BP Macondo Prospect blow out in the Gulf of Mexico in May and June of 2010 and then assembles them into a show for the Nicholas Metivier Gallery in Toronto, 16 September - 9 October. What is astonishing to me is that Burtynsky places these photographs in an exhibition accompanied by 55 Polaroid pictures of ship breaking yards in Bangladesh, a series entitled *Pentimento*, instead of, and rather than, revising the narrative structure of his series *Oil*.

The social and political memories that atrophy in Burtynsky are vigorously alive in McClintock’s critique for, as she argues convincingly, environmental disaster is inextricably tied to the history of extraction. Burtynsky is clearly committed to making us see in new ways, to see what remains unseen, and he acknowledges that the end of oil is disorderly. Yet he accepts and, indeed, reinforces a commonsensical understanding of the exceptional nature of the Deepwater Horizon horror in the Gulf. In his work. environmental catastrophe is set apart from, not in continuity with

or integral to, the processes and conditions of extraction, transportation, consumption and the entropic end of oil.

We are offered no such comforting amnesia in McClintock's work. "Slow Violence and the BP Oil Crisis in the Gulf of Mexico" confronts, challenges, analyzes, and dissects with forensic skill the power of language to determine how and what we see and do not see. Finding the oil to "kill" it, for example, implies that we can not only manage the spill, but that oil is a body that we can re-bury—that its remains can be confined. In 2010, environmental catastrophe was scrupulously stage-managed and performed as "war." We were encouraged to imagine the possibility of a decisive event that could "win" the battle, even though a series of these decisive events failed like the endless Afghanistan "war." But each failure was immediately reconfigured as the prelude to the next decisive stage of the "war."

Such social and political imagining that not only disguises but also occludes the temporality and scale of environmental disaster the like of which in Nigeria, for example, is a continuous disaster without end.



Well fire in Nigeria.

Source: [Radio Nederland Wereldomroep](#)

Providing the context of militarization for the analysis is a key element in the argument about politics and social memory. In the post 9/11 "neoliberal moment, the expanding scope of emergency powers is on full display" as we saw in the "management and control" of peoples in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and in McClintock's account of the management and control of the media in the militarized zone of the Gulf. The "war" against the oil spill is an integral part of the "deliberate cultivation of a general culture of insecurity and crisis" which directs our attention not only toward particular "enemies" but also away from other forces, forces which impinge upon and shape the minutiae of our daily lives under neoliberalism. As Eli Jelly-Schapiro argues in "Forever War: Culture, Coloniality, and the Long History of the War on Terror":

The neoliberal state of emergency demands the constant and militarized securing of capital, and the constant and militarized policing of the insecure spaces inhabited by the multitudes that fall through the chasms of the "ownership society."¹

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Permits are now being reissued for deepwater drilling; capital has been secured through the militarization that Anne McClintock so astutely identifies and connects to the problem of scale in relation to what we can and cannot “see.” Perhaps I should say how we can make various scales and what is at stake in thinking about scale and visibility.

The militarization of the gulf, the management and containment of media access prevented the circulation of images of the oil-soaked, dead and dying wild life that became the iconic images of the Exxon Valdez spill. We heard of but never saw the floating graveyards of death. We did not see the toxic substances that would remain and that will poison the future. For if the future is compromised then the “war” is revealed as never ending: the weapon, dispersants, remains out of sight.



Photo: Anne McClintock

Anne McClintock, hanging out of a Cessna flying in a zone of the Gulf declared “off limits”, managed to capture on film the toxic dispersants beneath the surface of water but they remained out of sight in the media coverage, which turned its eyes, all too quickly, to issues of recovery, monetary compensation, and encouraging tourists to return as if it was our moral duty to aid fellow citizens by eating Gulf shrimp and walking dead shores. There are other remains, out of site submerged plumes of hydrocarbons, plumes of oil that formed deep within the Gulf ; there are no images even though scientific papers confirm their existence. Information on these remains that will affect the future for generations is buried deeply within the website of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). One drills and drills deeper and deeper in to NOAA, as if diving into the Gulf itself, only to find reports incomprehensible to anyone unschooled in the terminology of analytic chemistry.



Photo: Anne McClintock

Even the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute (WHOI) has fallen silent about its research which not only confirmed the existence of “a plume of hydrocarbons ... at least 22 miles long and more than 3,000 feet below the surface of the Gulf of Mexico, a residue of the BP

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Deepwater Horizon oil spill.” But also confirmed that “deep-sea microbes,” essential warriors in our forever war, “were degrading the plume relatively slowly, and that it was possible that the 1.2-mile-wide, 650-foot-high plume will persist for some time.” The report can be accessed [here](#). Some time?? WHOI's most recent report from September 5, 2011, focuses entirely upon the amount of oil and gas that was leaked: “57,000 barrels a day, totaling approximately 5 million barrels of oil released from the well between April 20 and July 15, 2010, when the leak was capped. In addition, the well released some 100 million standard cubic feet per day of natural gas.” What remains?

The issue of remains haunts this response to “Slow Violence and the BP Oil Crisis in the Gulf of Mexico.” Rendering slow dying into social memory seems to me to be a task of the utmost urgency, a task that Rob Nixon undertakes in his new book *Slow Violence*. Wondering how the entropic end of slow violence, rot itself, can expose what we willfully refuse to see and to acknowledge I turned to the [Chris Jordan](#)'s Midway Project:

In the film, we can see Jordan directly confronting the issue of scale when he realizes that the rules by which the visual narrative of his first project was bound, a code of practice he had set himself had to be broken in order bring into view the depth of the plastic in the stomachs of the baby albatrosses. The Midway Project shares with “Slow Violence and the BP Oil Crisis in the Gulf of Mexico” the determination to produce counter archives, to face the “horrors of our time,” in Jordan’s words. This interventionist work seeks action not contemplation. For the past two years, the Bottlenose dolphins have been experiencing a slow dying from anemia, low blood sugar, and liver and lung disease from the pollution in the Gulf. Their bodies are now beginning to come to the surface—the evidence of things not seen.

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Notes

¹ Eli Jelly Schapiro, “Homeland Security: A Genealogy,” from “Forever War Culture, Coloniality, and the Long History of the War on Terror.” Unpublished dissertation in progress.

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