



Photo: Anne McClintock

## **Slow Violence and the BP Oil Crisis in the Gulf of Mexico: Militarizing Environmental Catastrophe<sup>1</sup>**

Anne McClintock | University of Wisconsin, Madison

*The ultimate mask of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.*

- Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*

*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.*

- John Berger, *About Looking*

This piece is accompanied by five different albums corresponding to the five sections of the text; to view these individually, click on the button at the bottom left of the slideshow screen above.

### **I. 2010: Militarizing the Gulf of Mexico Oil-Spill**

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In the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon explosion on April 20, 2010, the forever spill became the forever war. A calamity of untold magnitude unfolded, and alongside it a strange militarization emerged, as the language for managing the crisis became the language of war.

From the first days of the disaster, war-talk fired from the mouths of television pundits, the U.S. Coast Guard, journalists, and local officials alike. Campaigning frantically to protect Louisiana, Governor Bobby Jindal urged the nightly television cameras: “We need to see that this is a war; a war to save Louisiana; a war to protect our way of life.” Billy Nungesser, the indefatigable President of the Plaquemines Parish, implored anyone who would listen: “We will fight this war. We will persevere to win this war.” Democratic strategist James (Ragin Cajin) Carville made furious appeals on CNN: “This is literally a war. This is an invasion. We need to hear someone say ‘We’ll fight them on the beaches.’” Retired General Russell Honore, who oversaw the Katrina debacle, likewise urged the media: “We need to act like this is World War III. Treat this like it’s an invasion [...] equal to what we decided about terrorists. We’ve got to find the oil and kill it.” Even the Obama Administration tried to fire up the nation by invoking 9/11, couching the Deepwater Horizon explosion as akin to an invasion by terrorists.

But this was truly strange talk, this talk of war and of “killing” oil. Visit the BP site (one of the more surreal Alice-Through-the-Looking-Glass experiences) and you could see the word “kill”—BP’s favorite, faux-techno buzzword—appearing with ritualistic incantation. Kill the well. Kill the leak. Kill the oil. Which morphed into “kill mud” (the mud that would kill the leak) and “kill lines” (the lines that would follow the pipes to kill the leak). All this kill-talk had a jaunty, we-know-what-we-are-doing tone, but accumulatively it bordered on the bizarre, culminating in the “kill shot”: the weird slurry of car tires and golf-balls that BP initially fired at the leak to kill it. As if by throwing the sacrificial detritus of our oil-soaked leisure activities into the maw of the oil-god, BP could stop it spewing death.

There was a lot of verbal killing going on, and indeed the Gulf did seem to be bleeding: a vast, streaky, red-black smear stretching to every horizon. Sixty days and counting, the oil eruption gushed unstoppably past 200,000 barrels (BP’s original, secret estimate), past 400,000 barrels, past 800,000 barrels, and rising. No one had a clue exactly how much in that summer of magical counting.

On CNN, Wolf Blitzer gazed at the grey Louisiana horizon and intoned: “It looks like a military campaign; heavy-lift helicopters taking sand to the frontlines of the battle against the oil.” I did look, but it didn’t look like a military campaign to me. Certainly, a few Blackhawk and Chinook helicopters were dropping sandbags into a filthy, yellow-brown sea over-flown by some hapless gulls, but a war front it really was not. The disaster in the Gulf was, in fact, as unlike a war front as you could imagine. The Louisiana marshes lapped quietly with brown ooze. Solitary birds heaved and flailed in the middle of nowhere under the oil’s slow embrace. Dolphins gaped open-mouthed on beaches. A dead whale washed ashore. No, this was not a war. Only a tremendous failure of the imagination could see this as a war.

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But the militarizing of the Gulf disaster became the invisible norm, so much so that it became hard to see how misplaced and dangerous the analogy to war actually was. So, why did so many people call the largest environmental disaster in U.S. history a “war”? And why does it still matter that they did?

Calling the oil the “enemy” helped the public not ask who was culpable in the first place. Calling the response “a battle front” helped us not ask who, other than the military, should be in charge of environmental disasters. Calling the blowout an “invasion” helped us not see how our global culture of petro-militarization got us in the mess in the first place. And calling the oil “the enemy” helped us not admit how much we, the consumers, having awakened the oil from its ancient slumber to fuel our gas-greedy lives are as complicit as anyone.

An unsettling verbal alchemy was at work in all the military talk. “Jindal has declared war!” cried the *Florida Pundit*. But on whom exactly had Governor Jindal declared war? Was it the murderously irresponsible BP? Or was it the culpable but increasingly invisible Halliburton? (Wherever there is Halliburton, there is pain). The Obama Administration for failing, really, to do anything? The *Sunday Herald*, for one, pleaded with Congress *not* to blame BP: “The oil is the enemy,” it urged, “not each other.” Admiral Allen described the oil as “an insidious enemy that keeps attacking in different places.” Viewed through the prism of war, oil and nature were the enemy, for they had erupted beyond our control. Adopting a warlike stance toward nature is not new. A long-established discourse on conquering the wilderness is ready at hand to justify our rapacious assault on the life forms around us. Drill, baby, drill. Then, when it all goes horrendously wrong: kill, baby, kill.

If all the war-talk seemed merely metaphoric, there was always Rush Limbaugh to rely on, for whom the doomed rig explosion was not just a metaphor but an actual act of war. Limbaugh insisted that the Deepwater Horizon rig was probably attacked by “a foreign government,” with culprits ranging from “Muslim terrorists to the Red Chinese, Venezuela and beyond.” Michael Savage began simultaneously peddling the same story, but with North Korea behind the “attack.” Cherry-pick your terrorist of choice; no matter, it was war.

Limbaugh, Savage & co.’s terror-talk would have been laughable had it not converged with the broader militarization of the spill. Senator Bill Nelson (D-Florida) called for the *actual* military to take charge. But what part of the military’s mission and expertise, I wondered, could lead Nelson to believe that the army could stop the oil billowing from the ocean bed, let alone take charge of the massive response? Do we actually have the military hardware to stave off such disasters in the first place? Sure we do. We could send in a Predator Drone, point the Oil Vaporizing Missile at the leak, and hit the “If-we-dream-hard-enough” button.

A painful irony was obvious: we couldn’t send in the military because it was already overstretched in fighting two ruinous wars abroad, wars fought precisely to secure the dwindling oil we need to lubricate our profligate lifestyles and keep our global military mobile. But the

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military can barely manage these wars abroad, let alone cope with environmental catastrophes back home, pulled so thin that veterans from these wars have post-traumatic stress so severe that they commit suicide at the harrowing rate of one death every 80 minutes.

Couching the catastrophe in the language of war served only to conceal the political void at the heart of the clean up. The government's systematic failure to regulate BP-Halliburton-Transocean *before* the explosion was matched only by its stunning impotence *after* the explosion. In June, two months into the spill, Nungesser was still begging to know who was in charge. Even Admiral Thad Allen told reporters: "To push BP out of the way would raise the question: replace them with what?"

The robust, accountable government agencies that should have been responsible for the clean up have been gutted by decades of neo-liberal deregulation. Indeed, this is what the far right wants. In the last decade, Republican calls for *limiting* government have given way to calls for *dismantling* government in favor of a system managed and policed by the same fiscal and energy brigands who caused the crises in the first place. As Peter Lehner, Executive Director of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), put it: "Our country arrived at this point because our demand for oil has driven companies like BP into deeper and riskier Gulf waters at precisely the time the political consensus had broken down for the public safeguards we need to protect our safety, health, and environment. Our watchdog agencies, in short, were defanged."<sup>2</sup>

In a world of promiscuous deregulation, oil giants like BP take obscene risks and rake in undreamed-of bonanzas. BP, the second largest oil company in the world after Exxon Mobil, has an average annual profit of \$14 billion. BP made \$17 billion in 2009, and \$9 billion in the first quarter of 2010. BP's top CEO before Tony Hayward, Lord John Browne, was at \$11 million a year the highest paid CEO in the UK and was so addicted to profit that he cut safety costs at all costs. BP has long been known as the top-ranking safety violator globally. According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), BP racked up over 700 violations the year before the explosion; that is nearly two violations per day. But, according to Lehner, the atmosphere of rampant cronyism was such that oil company engineers sometimes penciled in their own responses to inspection forms and federal inspectors simply traced over them. BP's Regional Oil Spill Response Plan for the Gulf was so makeshift that it included references to walruses and sea otters, neither of which inhabit the Gulf.

The bonanzas for oil companies are so vast that when the companies are actually fined for their spills, the fines usually amount to a few days' worth of annual profits. Exxon Mobil, the largest oil company in the world, with annual profits of a scarcely imaginable \$41 billion, had its fines reduced after the Exxon Valdes disaster by Justice Roberts' Supreme Court from \$5 billion to a mere \$500 million. Not one company official saw the inside of a jail. So why bother following safety regulations? And when safety regulations are systematically violated, well, stuff happens—like a dead ocean.

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And when stuff happens, what do we do? Who is in charge? Gov. Jindal cried out: “This is a war. We’ve got to be adaptable.” The trouble is, there was precious little to be adaptable *with*: skimmers, sandbags, and shovels; antiquated barges with makeshift vacuums trying to suck up an ocean that was turning black. On television, I watched men in white overalls hold a puny vacuum-cleaner nozzle to the gargantuan oil slick. Cajun engineering, some wryly called it. Absurd, if it weren’t so awful.

The wildly unregulated oil industry is profit-driven to such a degree that no research and development money (R&D) has gone into developing any clean-up technology for the last forty years. Not since the Santa Barbara oil spill disaster of 1969. Not since John Lennon recorded “Give Peace a Chance.” Not since everyone was still using typewriters. The oil industry has the frontier technology to drill to fabulous, sci-fi, Jules Verne depths, but it is still using hopelessly outmoded methods like containment booms, wet-mats, sandbags, and spades to clean up after the disasters. In the Gulf, skimmers lumbered ineffectually back to shore carrying only 10% oil to 90% water. Kevin Costner’s save-the-day spill-machines did not go into action. Booms were laid out with little or no knowledge of the shoreline and got tangled up in every squall. Worse, the oil was trapped inside the booms, close to the shore, close to the birds, close to marine life. I watched as men swirled mops in the ooze.

Where is the R&D for clean-up technology? As I write this, I wonder: I can touch my iPad and in a few seconds beckon from the ethers an invisible book that speeds unseen through the starry skies to materialize magically into print between my fingers. We can pull off this breathtakingly wondrous stunt, but we are stumped by the task of scooping up the oil we ceaselessly spill? Why?

It is not as if there aren’t enough bad spills to warrant spending some serious R&D cash on remedial technology. The Obama Administration’s claim in April 2010 that “oil rigs generally don’t cause spills” was dismaying in its blatant inaccuracy. In fact, as much oil is spilled in the world every seven months as was spilled from the Exxon Valdes alone. In Nigeria’s oil-devastated delta, where oil companies like Royal Dutch Shell operate wildly outside the law, where writer-activist Ken Saro-Wiwa was hanged for opposing the rampant despoliation of the Niger Delta, more oil is spilled every year than in the first few weeks of the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

But who cares? Those other spills occur every day, slowly and far away, out of sight of the U.S. media’s sensation-driven gaze, out of mind of the immediate, disaster-packaging of prime time news. So much so that Doug Suttels, BP’s top CEO, could lie to NBC’s Tom Costello, saying that BP hadn’t developed any remedial oil-spill technology because “there have been so few big spills.” Adam Weise, a young rig worker who died in the rig explosion had emailed his girlfriend, Cindy Shelton, with increasing urgency shortly before the disaster. “Every time he called me,” Shelton recalled, “he’d say, ‘this is a well from hell.’”<sup>3</sup> When a BP official was warned by Deepwater

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Horizon engineer, Brian Morel, that the rig was a “nightmare well,” the official responded in an email: “Who cares? It’s done... We will probably be fine.”<sup>4</sup>

We weren’t fine, but by calling the catastrophe a war we staved off feelings of helplessness by giving familiar symbolic shape to an unforeseen chaos. Fear was militarized and given a reassuringly violent form. Certainly, we Americans are particularly prone to deploying the language of war to deal with social crises. We pretend to wage war on a lot of things that we can’t wage war on: the war on drugs, the war on crime, the war on poverty, the war on AIDS, the war on terror, the war on women, and now the war on oil. The militarization of our culture has become so pervasive that every crisis of neo-liberal capitalism rolling in is figured through the language of war. An ironic bumper sticker says as much: “At least the war on the environment is going well.”

All the war-talk about the Gulf disaster would have been understandable, defensible even, were it not for one fateful feedback loop. Militarizing the environmental catastrophe in the Gulf as a war became a way of not seeing the environmental catastrophe of war. A dangerous circularity took shape as the crisis was managed in the same terms that produced the crisis: that of war.

BP would not (still) be in the Gulf drilling deeper than it knows how to drill were it not for its uniquely profitable relation with the U.S. military. The U.S. Department of Defense consumes more oil than any other entity on the planet. The protection of overseas oil is now so unquestioned that even former Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned against the “creeping militarization” of U.S. foreign policy. To fuel the United States’ “full spectrum dominance” of the world, the Pentagon uses 75% of the oil bought by the Department of Defense (DOD) for its jets, bombers, tanks, Humvees, and drones. In order to keep buying this oil, the military has to keep protecting U.S. regional oil interests, two thirds of which are now in conflict-prone zones. U.S. military bases in Iraq and Afghanistan use a staggering ninety million gallons a month, at an equally staggering cost of \$400 per gallon. To garrison this vast, global gas station, the DOD keeps expanding, even under the Obama Administration, which means buying more oil.

Buying from whom? The DOD has a longstanding, multimillion-dollar business relationship with BP, which it says it has no intention of relinquishing, even now, in the aftermath of the Gulf disaster, despite open knowledge that BP has racked up 97% of all flagrant [safety violations](#). In 2005, the DOD paid BP \$1.5 billion. In 2009, BP was the Pentagon’s largest contractor at \$2.2 billion, and 16% of BP’s profits came from sales to the Pentagon alone. BP is the single largest producer of oil in the Gulf, where it sucks up 25% of total U.S. oil production from fields with names like Mad Dog, Atlantis and Thunder Horse.

Keeping this in mind, we would do well to remember that militarization is the number one cause of environmental destruction in the world. We would do well to remember that military production facilities are exempt from environmental restrictions, and are as a result the most

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ecologically devastated places on earth. We would do well to remember that the U.S. military is the largest, single polluter on the planet. We drill, we spill; the environment pays the bill.

But blaming BP alone means that we consumers we don't have to admit our complicity in the slow motion, chemical slaughter we have unleashed on the planet. Blaming BP alone means we don't have to look too hard in the rear-view mirrors of the cars we drive, or too deep into the plastic water bottles we drink. In 2010 Americans drank enough plastic water bottles to stretch around the world one hundred and ninety times. Blaming BP alone means we don't have to admit how our oil-addiction keeps U.S. foreign policy in thrall to petro-despots and oligarchs.

BP would not be drilling in the Gulf in the first place were it not reaping monstrous profits from our luxurious oil-bingeing. A gas-pedal-to-the-metal nation, U.S. consumers are especially complicit, our profligate lifestyles devouring 30% of all raw materials used globally every year. We Americans siphon 25% of all the earth's black oil, nearly 800 million gallons per day, to fuel our cars, trucks, airplanes, helicopters, mega-malls, and military bases. Every one of us who drives one, two, three cars is complicit. Every one of us who shops with plastic bags is complicit. Every one of us who strolls through mega-malls heated to a permanent tropical summer in winter, is complicit. If we do nothing, we are all complicit in this calamity. We are all BP now.

## II. July 2010: The Media Blackout in the Gulf of Mexico

In the immediate aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon explosion, the militarizing of the Gulf was extended to a massive blackout of media coverage of the disaster. To a degree unprecedented in U.S. history, extraordinary restrictions were imposed on journalists, photographers, filmmakers, and local residents. To justify the blockade, the Gulf was described as a "war zone." The Macondo Prospect—the site of the oilrig explosion—was dubbed "Ground Zero" (a blatantly militarized twist to an industrial disaster). The Coast Guard referred to journalists and photographers as "media embeds": but "embeds" in what war, precisely? One journalist told me that when a Coast Guard official barred him access to a Grand Isle beach, the journalist asked on what authority the Coast Guard official replied: "It's like the Patriot Act."

Local Gulf residents and bayou-keepers, as well as reporters and photographers for outlets such as *Mother Jones*, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, *Truthout*, and the Associated Press, among others, began to protest the restrictions. Most journalists blamed BP for the media blackout, but this was misleading, for what had in fact emerged was a motley alliance of BP, Coast Guard officials, Homeland Security officials, the Federal Aviation Agency, the National Guard, sundry private contractors, local law enforcement, and parish officials, all of whom conjoined to prevent the media and the general public from gaining access to oil-damaged areas, and thereby preventing the public from gaining access to the catastrophic news.

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On June 30 2010, matters took a more serious turn. The Coast Guard at the Joint Information Center at Houma, Louisiana, where it shared a cozy office with BP, passed an unprecedented ruling. No one—no media, no reporters, no photographers, no local residents, not even fishermen—could enter within a 20-meter exclusion zone that was flung invisibly around booms, islands, estuaries, rookeries, beaches, and response vessels, indeed, everything impacted by the oil or clean-up operations, effective throughout the five Gulf states. No one, in other words, could legally go near any clean-up boats. No one could go near oil-damaged birds, or other dead or dying marine life. No one could go near the pelican rookeries or barrier islands. No one could walk on oil-polluted beaches or go within 60 feet of the boom. No one could go unattended to medical clinics or bird-rescue operations. And anyone who violated the ruling was liable for an astonishing \$40,000 fine as well as equally astonishing possible Class D felony charges, which carry a potential one-to-five year prison sentence.

So on July 15 I decided to go to the Gulf with my camera and laptop along my friend, filmmaker Karin Hayes, to try to get behind the media blockade, in particular the blockade of Grand Isle, Louisiana. Grand Isle is the only inhabited island in the Gulf Barrier Islands, and I knew that Grand Isle had been under especially tight media blackout for months. I had heard ominous, unconfirmed stories that BP clean-up workers were "burying the oil under the sand," and I wanted to see if I could get behind the scenes myself. I wanted to know what was being hidden from the public, and why.

Shortly before I arrived in Louisiana, in early July, Admiral Allen responded to the uproar of protests over the media blockade by going on national television and officially assuring the media that they would have "uninhibited access" to all clean-up areas. In actuality, as I and other members of the media soon discovered, the blockade in the Gulf only tightened. Flyover permits were revoked, and aerial access was tightly restricted. Even accredited media flights were denied permits to fly below 900 feet over clean-up areas. All photography or filming on public beaches was prevented. National Guardsman blocked Anderson Cooper's CNN team from filming oil-damaged birds at Fort Jackson, Louisiana. Even the *New York Times* and filmmakers from PBS were refused permission to fly over "Ground Zero." The blockade was so tight that workers for BP's so-called "Vessels of Opportunity" program were contractually threatened with immediate job loss if they so much as spoke with anyone in the media.

I found that the main bird-cleaning facilities at Fort Jackson were closed to the media except for a couple of days a week. Sick workers were contractually forbidden to speak to journalists. A film crew was prevented from filming a medical mobile unit at Venice. Local animal welfare activists began reporting that dead birds and other marine life washing up on beaches were being secretly removed at night by anonymous officials, evidently to hide visible evidence of the impact on wildlife.

In the early days of the catastrophe, deeply disturbing stories were told by fishermen who



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reported finding vast, floating graveyards of dead birds, dolphins, and whales near the Macondo site; these were secretly burned at night. Some argued that this was the reason for the media aerial blackout over the “Ground Zero” site in June. Huge smoke plumes suggested that these vast, graveyard-gyres of dead marine life were being burned in secret out at sea. Later, images of half-burned whales and turtles began appearing on the Internet, exposed by Greenpeace and other organizations.

Why all the cover-up?

BP had agreed to pay compensation only for “verifiable damage”—if no one could see the damage, then no one could verify it and if no one could verify the damage, BP would not have to pay. I was secretly told by workers involved in the “Vessels of Opportunity” clean-up operations that they were forced by BP to hand over their cell phones before they went to work, so that they could not document the damage. A local fisherman who accompanied Karin and myself on a carefully choreographed BP media boat tour told us that all workers had to show even their private computers for regular checking. In a particularly egregious gesture, BP prevented clean-up workers (many of them brought involuntarily from prisons) from wearing respirators, as the masks made visible the fact that clean-up conditions were hazardous to workers' health.

By the time we got to the Deep Delta, BP and the Coast Guard had arranged carefully choreographed boat and aerial tours for certain accredited media. How carefully choreographed these tours were, became instantly clear when we were taken by boat, accompanied by a local scientist, to an island to look for oil-damaged pelicans. I instantly knew the island was not a pelican rookery, for there were no mangroves, and the feral pig scat I saw on the beach told me that no pelicans would be nesting there. Not surprisingly, the beach was pristine. While we strolled about the beach with the scientist “looking for birds,” the workers leaned on the boat with their arms folded, watching us sardonically.

On our arrival back at the clean up hub at Venice, Louisiana, while we stood and waited out a squall, a volunteer from the Audubon Society anxiously pulled me aside and told me that for three weeks he had been watching boatload after boatload of oil-damaged birds arriving about five times a day at the Venice boat-landing, with, by his count, about fifty oil-fouled birds a day: figures far in excess of those being disclosed by BP and the Coast Guard. As we waited for the rain to ease, the BP workers silently melted away, watched us warily from a distance, or sat in their vans until we had left. When I managed to speak to one worker through the window of his van, he said: “When BP leaves, come back, and we will all talk.”

Down in the Gulf, the uproar of outrage at the blockade deepened, but the local protests seemed inaudible to the rest of the nation. The Louisiana ACLU wrote an open letter assuring the media that the Coast Guard ruling was unconstitutional. Local newspapers carried reports, as did bayou bloggers and alternative Internet media outlets. Then the Coast Guard did another

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abrupt about-turn, assuring members of the media they could get unfettered access to oil-damaged areas, but only if they contacted the Houma Joint Information Command with certified press credentials. This, too, however, proved extremely difficult. Karin and I managed to get on a Coast Guard media-flight to the Macondo site with six international journalists only by calling the Houma JIC in the middle of the night, eventually managing to talk the bored JIC official into giving us press passes.

So on July 18, we flew in the Coast Guard plane out to the Macondo site. Only after the flight, however, when I traced our route on a map later that evening, did I realize how closely choreographed the flight had been. As we flew fifty miles out to sea, the Coast Guard carefully took us over the areas of marsh and ocean that were not excessively oil-soaked. At one point, as we flew over the five great passes where the Mississippi empties into the sea, the Coast Guards gestured to us all to look out one window, while they stood casually blocking the other window. I squeezed as politely as I could behind them, and took as many photos as I could behind their backs. One of the discomfited Coast Guard asked me if I would send him copies of my photos, and when I asked him why, he answered tersely: "For my wife." Later, close-cropping and enlarging the photos, I could see massive rust-red streaks and circles of oil and Corexit everywhere between the islands east of the passes as well as miles and miles of blackened beaches and the long, white ribbons of the toxic dispersant Corexit marking the foam-line of the currents.

Meanwhile, across the length and breadth of the Gulf, the blockade stayed in effect. During my first evening in southern Louisiana, I spoke with an outraged team from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, still fuming at having been evicted by Coast Guard officials from East Grand Terre Island, where they had been filming oil-damaged birds. Another journalist told me that he was denied access to Grand Isle beaches in case he got "struck by lightning." Another told me that he had been denied access to Grand Isle itself because, "the roads need repairing."

In a particularly nefarious act of keeping workers quiet and covering up the hazards, BP brought prison inmates from elsewhere (mostly African-Americans) to do the clean up. Using unprotected prisoners without respirators to clean up the toxic waste is an extension of post-Civil War prison "contract leasing": forced labor *déjà vu*, slavery by another name. Not to mention the fact that there was a handy, extra perk for BP in using prison workers. Prisoners are cheap, docile, and controllable; they are also profitable. Private companies like BP who use people on prison work-release programs happen to get tax rebates of \$2,400 for every prison worker they employ.

BP could well stand, not for Beyond Petroleum, but for Beyond Principle. Less visibly, but as insidiously, scientists at local universities who were conducting research into the disaster's impact began to be targeted by BP, who offered these scientists lucrative contracts with exceptionally compromising restrictions. Several faculty members confirmed to the American Association of University Professors ([AAUP](#)) that they had

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been offered contracts by BP that carried restrictive confidentiality clauses, including a gag on publishing, sharing, and talking about research results for three years. Most egregiously, faculty contracted by BP were barred from ever testifying *against* the company in court, though they would be allowed to testify *on behalf* of the company. The scientists, moreover, could communicate only through lawyers, raising the dismaying prospect that future scientific research findings would be fettered by lawyer-client privilege. A nationwide academic protest was launched to challenge this frank corporate attempt to manipulate scientific research and fetter academic freedom, but to little effect.

The upshot was that by the end of July, after a couple of weeks in Louisiana, I knew that no one could see what was happening on the Grand Isle beaches except under the careful chaperonage of a Coast Guard escort. So in a last-ditch effort to get behind the media blockade, I decided to try the forbidden skies. I heard that the FAA had cancelled all flyovers, but I hoped that determination and a sleepy lunchtime hour might help. A local photographer had told me about a small private plane charter company near Houma that might at least fly me over Barataria Bay, where the marshlands, bays, and oyster beds had been especially hard-hit by the oil slicks.

So Karin and I drove to Houma to a small private airstrip, where I chartered a tiny Cessna. We first flew out over the hauntingly lovely, lacey-green filigree of the vanishing Barataria Bay marshes, then swung out over the open waters of Barataria Bay itself. I hung out the tiny window, with my seatbelt cinched round my ankles, and took hundreds of photographs of the fragile marshes, the BP barges, the massive, floating hostel where BP housed its workers far out of reach of the media (the locals called it the “Flotel”). I took photographs of the massive, miles-long, pink-gold streaks of oil, the foamy white lines of toxic Corexit, and the shimmering, rainbow slicks fouling the waters of the Bay. These huge, rusty streaks were ominous evidence, I knew, of the toxic mix of oil and dispersants, and were particularly revealing since the Coastguard had repeatedly assured the media and local residents that the Corexit was not being sprayed over Barataria Bay at all. The presence of these rust-red streaks and oily rainbow smears told a different story.

As we flew further out over Barataria Bay, we were followed at a distance by a Coast Guard plane, but it eventually lost interest and veered away. Then I finally managed to talk the reluctant, although increasingly obliging and curious, pilot into flying us over Grand Isle itself.

Whatever else these photographs of Grand Isle reveal, one fact was immediately clear: Grand Isle was from the outset of the crisis the favored beneficiary of clean-up efforts. But by August 2010, the beaches, bays, marshes, and waters of Grand Isle were still deeply fouled with oil, despite BP’s claims to the contrary. As we swung low over the island’s beaches and marshes, over the extensive machinery, workers’ tents, and BP vehicles, the oil was everywhere visible, darkly fouling the water of the bays, smeared over the beaches, pushed deep into the oily-grey marshland.

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When I showed my photos later to a few contractors and other locals, they all thought it possible, by the appearance of the machinery being used, that some of the oil was being buried under the sand. I have no way of confirming this, but later I found videos on the internet recording bulldozers working secretly at night on Gulf beaches, burying the oil-contaminated sand under two to three feet of clean sand.

Grand Isle is only one island in a vast expanse of oil-soaked Gulf, which include invaluable nature preserves, scores of fragile barrier islands, pelican rookeries, oyster beds, vulnerable marshes, and immense expanses of fishing waters. More than an estimated 200 million gallons of crude gushed into the Gulf in the first three months, oiling more than six hundred miles of coastline and thousands of square miles of deep ocean, beaches, tidal estuaries, and wetlands, producing a surface slick the size of South Carolina. Wildlife and habitat were threatened from Texas to the Florida Keys. Thirty-seven percent of Gulf waters were closed to fishing, thousands of fisherfolk and other workers were thrown out of work, some permanently, and the future of millions of families, indeed, the future of the Gulf itself has been thrown into uncertainty. For hundreds of miles around the “Ground Zero” site there is now a vast region entirely void of life, officially called the “kill zone.”

Despite the use of massive (and still secret) amounts of the toxic dispersant Corexit to “disappear” the visible oil on the surface, and despite the combined efforts of federal and BP officials to “disappear” the story from the news, the catastrophe in the Gulf remains gargantuan, and any real restoration will be many, many years off, if ever.

In the meantime, the forever war has come ashore.

### **III. August 2010: BP Cover-ups. Corexit and Disappearing the Oil**

Three vanishing acts were played out in the Gulf: the disappearing of the oil from the ocean surface by the toxic dispersant Corexit, the disappearing of the story by the media blockade, and the disappearing from view of the shadowy private contractors who were all over the Gulf making a mint helping BP and the Coast Guard keep a cover on the clean-up. In August, BP partially capped the well and the media began to cap the story. The National Oceanic and Aeronautic Association (NOAA) issued a report on August 5 that included some implausibly neat arithmetic, declaring that 75% of the oil was gone—either captured, burned, evaporated, or broken down. The White House enthusiastically endorsed the report. Energy advisor Carol Browne proclaimed: “The vast majority of the oil is gone.”

Declaring that 75% of the oil was “gone” may have sounded cheering (though a lot less cheering when one remembers that the estimated 25% of the oil remaining was still four times as much as the total Exxon Valdez spill). But down in the Gulf, no one was buying even the “75% gone” story. An immediate clamor of outrage rose up, as residents refused to dance the crisis-is-over, happy-feet dance. Hundreds of Gulf residents testified that they were still seeing

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masses of oil on the ocean, in the estuaries and bays, on the beaches and in the marshes, as well as dead fish, dolphins, sharks, birds, and other marine life washing ashore. A New Orleans radio poll showed that 80% of respondents did not believe the NOAA report. Charlotte Randolph, Lafourche Parish president, disputed the report. “They want everyone to think it’s over. This week in Lafourche parish we had hundreds of barrels a day washing in.”

On August 18, scientists from the Universities of Georgia and South Florida weighed in, producing an open challenge to the White House report in which they insisted that 70% to 79% of the oil in the Gulf still remained in the water. Charles Hopkinson, a professor of marine science at the University of Georgia declared: “The idea that 75% of the oil is gone and of no concern to the environment is just absolutely incorrect.” Spike Lee, filming in the Gulf, scoffed at what he called the BP/White House “abracabra kawabanga” trick and called on journalists to stay with the story.

Three days after I arrived in the Gulf, this triple disappearing act came together personally for me when Steve, a private contractor, emerged from the shadows of a southern Louisiana bar urgently wanting to tell me something. I call the contractor “Steve”, though that is not his real name. I cannot tell you his real name because he assured me that he would kill me if I do.

“It’s as if a nuclear apocalypse has gone off in the Gulf,” Steve said. “The media is not telling the truth. No one is telling the truth. Let me tell you something. Yesterday on the beach where we work my crew cleaned up seven hundred bags of oil. Today we went back and the beach was completely covered in oil, as if we had never been there. Today we carried away another seven hundred and fifty bags. Every day we clean up, then the tide brings it in again. The oil is everywhere, deep under the sand. Today I wanted to measure the oil, so I stuck my shovel into the sand and oil was down there eight inches deep.”

Steve leaned in close. “Do you want to know how long my contract is to work down here?” he asked. “Three years.” His jaw muscles tightened as if he wanted to suck his words back into his skull, but could not.

“They are telling everyone it is not so bad, but they are lying,” he said. “Cleanup will take many, many years. I am going to be here a long time.”

Steve wiped a hand heavily over his eyes as if they were burning.

“Today we saw three sharks washed up dead on the beach,” he said. “The insides of their noses were black with oil. The membranes of their mouths were black with oil. Their eyes were black with oil.”

Steve is a veteran of three wars who has seen a great deal of horror, but he seemed to find this memory inordinately upsetting.

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“I am telling you this for the sake of our grandchildren,” he said. “We have an apocalypse going on, and no one is paying attention.”

A few days later, I stood with Steve in the chemical-laced dusk of a Louisiana car park. The night was a strange brew of oily vapors and ginger blossom. Steve was slumped against his car, exhausted by his day working fifteen hours at clean-up operations at an undisclosed location near Venice. The red tip of his cigarette burned on/off, on/off in the dark like a warning signal. As we talked, the nightly, muffled thrup-thrup of helicopters began. I had heard these distant helicopters go out at night, and a number of locals had told me they had also heard these strange night flights as helicopters and planes headed out on mysterious missions. I asked Steve if he knew where the helicopters were going and what they were doing.

“They are looking for oil,” he said. “First, the helicopters go out at dusk. When they spot oil, they radio the GPS locations back to the Coast Guard. Then between one and three in the morning, military planes go out and spray the oil with dispersants.”

“Why do they go out at night?” I asked.

“They don’t want people to know how much oil there is out there,” Steve said. “So they are hiding the oil with dispersants. And they don’t want people to know how much dispersants they are spraying. That’s the big secret down here.”

As it turns out, Steve knows a good deal about the disappearing act taking place in the Gulf with dispersants. Before coming to work on the oil spill, he had worked as a contractor for Halliburton. He now works in the Gulf for a company dealing with environmental toxicity and health hazards. It took me several hours talking late into the night, and half a bottle of Southern Comfort, before Steve suddenly revealed the name of his company.

“I work for CTEH,” he said.

Then he dragged his hand hard over his eyes.

“I can’t believe I just told you that,” he said, but it was clear he wanted me to know.

So I went online and did some research. Founded in 1997 in Arkansas, CTEH (Center for Toxicology and Environmental Health) specializes in toxicology and risk assessment. According to its website, CTEH “specializes in the specific expertise of toxicology, risk assessment, industrial hygiene, occupational health, and response to emergencies or other events involving release or threat of release of chemicals.” As it happens, CTEH is the company tasked with monitoring the levels of chemical toxicity of the oil-spill and its possible impact on the health of offshore workers involved in the clean up.

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[CTEH](#) is part of the Joint Unified Command based in Houma, Louisiana, where BP shares its office with the Coast Guard. The CTEH website is frank: CTEH is “proud” of its role in the Unified Command response. The website is less frank, however, about one stunningly important omission: [CTEH is being paid directly by BP](#).

CTEH, in other words, is monitoring the possible toxic effects on workers of the chemicals BP has unleashed, and it is doing this at BP’s expense. In short, CTEH is being paid by BP to check up on BP. This is a conflict of interest so flagrant it is like a murder suspect hiring the forensic experts who will examine the murder scene. CTEH has, to boot, an impressively consistent record of unsavory conflict of interest cases, where they have ruled favorably every time on behalf of their corporate clients. CTEH was hired by a coal-mining company, which had unleashed a massive coal-ash spill in the Tennessee Valley. CTEH declared everything hunky-dory. CTEH was hired by a paper mill, which was sued by an employee for asbestos exposure. CTEH blamed the employee’s health problems on his lifestyle. Murphy Oil Refinery hired CTEH after spilling one million gallons into a community in St Bernard’s Parish, LA. CTEH found nothing for anyone to worry about.

After the rig explosion in April, BP contracted CTEH to monitor the toxicity levels of the air and water down in the Gulf. At it happens, CTEH is also the toxicity advisor for the [President of the United States](#). As Nicholas Cheremisinoff, a former Exxon chemical engineer and expert on pollution prevention, pointed out, this means there is “a huge incentive for them to under-report.”<sup>5</sup> It also means that if anyone sues BP for health problems caused by toxic exposure to oil or chemicals, CTEH would be the expert witness called in on BP’s behalf. Indeed, as early as August 2010, two Gulf Coast residents, Glynis Wright and Janille Turner, filed a class action suit against BP in Alabama, for alleged health problems caused by clean-up chemicals. Cheremisinoff said he is “100 per cent certain” CTEH would be called in as expert witness for BP.

Not surprisingly, down in the Gulf CTEH is flying very low under the radar. According to a report filed by the Louisiana Bucket Brigade (LBB), CTEH was present at a community meeting in New Orleans (but without any insignia or identifying credentials) repeatedly reassuring residents that the area was safe and that heat was the main hazard facing workers. When the LBB reporter asked the EPA representative why they were working for CTEH, the rep responded: “CTEH? Don’t know them.” When the reporter pulled out a copy of the CTEH website, the EPA rep backtracked: “Oh, yeah,” he said, “We look at their data.” Asked if that didn’t amount to a conflict of interest, the rep admitted: “Yeah, that is a danger.” Shortly afterwards, he backtracked again: “No, we don’t really do anything with them. Who are they again?”<sup>6</sup>

This conflict-of-interest carousel—where BP pays CTEH, and the EPA relies on CTEH data to monitor BP—is so flagrant that Rep. Lois Capps (D-CA) has formally requested that President Obama relieve BP of responsibility for protecting the health of workers and local residents, to no

avail.

CTEH and the EPA have consistently denied or underplayed the hazards and the mainstream media has “disappeared” the story, but down in the Gulf people are getting very sick. In Louisiana, I personally heard story after story of people getting sick, stories later confirmed by a gathering mass of local reportage, largely kept from the mainstream media. Numerous men working on the oil spill became ill and were hospitalized, though we can never know the full extent, because [sick workers](#) are contractually prevented from talking to the media by BP. Reporters were hospitalized as a result of toxic contamination.

I talked to the wife of a Vietnamese fisherman, for example, who told me: “My husband has had chest problems ever since he went to work for BP. A lot of people are getting sick. And when the south wind blows, my asthma gets bad,” she said.

In an Internet café, I overheard a young man talking loudly into his cell about a blistering rash on his chest. “The doctor thinks it’s over-exposure to the chemicals,” he said. Riki Ott, a marine toxicologist and tireless community activist, has been collecting evidence of people all over the Gulf who are showing symptoms of toxic poisoning: “headaches, dizziness, sore throats, burning eyes, rashes and blisters that go so deep, they are leaving scars.”

#### **IV. The Corexit Catastrophe: “Carpet-Bombing the Gulf”**

You have to hand it to them: BP’s image-makers are doing a heck of a job looking on the bright side of life. Consider the multi-million dollar ads they regularly place in the *New York Times*, any one of which would go a long way towards putting an out-of-work fishing family on their feet. In these ads, not a dollop of oil can be seen from sea to shining sea. Even the skimmers seem to be skimming up stardust. The beaches seem pristine. As Marci, a private contractor with an energy company, sardonically said to me at dinner one evening: “Clean. Clean as a baby’s butt clean. You know why? Dispersants.”

Marci asked me: “Why do you think the oil stopped fifteen miles from the Florida coast? All along the Gulf, there is a fifteen-mile wide line where the oil stopped. How did it stop at that magical line?” She told me the same story others had told. “At night they go out with planes and spray it with dispersants. So the beaches *look* clean. But the oil is still there. Wait until the fall,” she said. “Wait until the weather cools, and the Mississippi drops. Then the oil will rise to the surface. Then the oil will come back.”

Marci bristled with suppressed anger: “You have to understand the tides,” she said. “Why do you think the oil is inside the booms, not outside them? It’s because of the dispersants. The dispersants sink the oil under the water. It looks like the oil is gone. But then the tides go in, taking the oil with them, and the oil goes in under the booms. Then the water cools, the oil rises, the tide goes out, and the oil is caught on the inside of the boom. Close to the marshes, close to



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the birds.”

Travelling around Barataria Bay by boat and air, I had seen and photographed this: islands surrounded by boom, with the oil trapped on the inside.

From the beginning, the use of Corexit has been clouded by controversy and cover-ups. The cutely named Corexit is made by an American company, Nalco, and is banned in 18 countries, including the UK, on the grounds of its exceptionally lethal toxicity. In April, shortly after the Deepwater Horizon blowout, Lisa Jackson of the EPA ruled that Corexit should only be used in “extremely rare” cases. But for decades in Louisiana a tightly knit culture of mutual cronyism between local politicians and oilmen has flourished. On August 1st, the U.S. House of Representatives Committee confirmed that for over three months, in explicit violation of EPA’s official guidelines, the U.S. Coast Guard had fast-tracked 74 permits to BP, giving BP the green light to “carpet-bomb” the Gulf, as Commander Allen bluntly admitted. From the first days after the blowout, BP pumped thousands of gallons of toxic Corexit directly into the erupting wellhead, dispersing the oil as it gushed from the broken well, producing what would later become ominous underwater plumes of oil.

As early as May 15 2010, just weeks after the blowout, researchers from the National Institute for Undersea Science and Technology’s boat *RV Pelican* identified the first of the huge, undersea oil plumes, one three miles wide, 10 miles long, and 300 feet deep. By May 27 2010, marine scientists at the University of Florida discovered a second, far bigger plume stretching for 22 miles. NOAA denied that these plumes were related to the Macondo well, but by June 28 scientists published evidence of a deep plume 22 miles long that was proven to be directly linked to the well.

On August 20 2010, scientists produced more evidence of vast plumes of oil drifting for miles. A team of scientists in the journal *Science* confirmed the discovery of a massive 22-mile subsea oil plume the size of Manhattan, and reported that contrary to BP’s repeated assurances, there was very little evidence that the oil was being broken down by microbes. In October 2010, a plume over 20 miles was found at a depth of 3,600 feet with no signs of degradation. BP denied the reports.<sup>7</sup>

In November 2010, federally funded scientists found damage to deep sea coral several miles from the Macondo well site. “We have never seen anything like this,” said Charles Fisher, a biologist with Penn State University. Mak Saito, an Associate Scientist at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts, said the oil could be altering the very chemistry of the sea.

All told, an estimated two million gallons of the chemical Corexit brew was sprayed over the ocean, estuaries, islands, marshes, shrimp-fishing waters, oyster-beds, and residential areas of the Gulf. In truth, given what I and others found out about the extent of the secret, unregulated

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night-flights spraying dispersants, we will simply never know how much Corexit was in fact unleashed over the Gulf.

One afternoon, driving around the desolate back-roads near Venice, Karin and I stopped by the roadside to take photographs of an abandoned boat tilting out of the grass. After a few minutes standing on the grassy verge, I felt a fierce burn down the side of my foot, which only washing from my water bottle eased. I found out later that this fiery itch was a symptom typical of direct skin-contact with Corexit. Was the Gulf so soaked in Corexit that even the grassy verges of the roadsides were toxic? A few months later, residents began finding Corexit in their swimming pools, and a Louisiana resident told me that all the ticks on the dogs were dead.

The main ingredient in Corexit is 2-Butoxyethanol, which is toxic to blood, kidneys, liver, and the central nervous system, also causing cancer and birth defects. Corexit is mutagenic for bacteria, huge amounts of which live in the Gulf of Mexico. The EPA, reluctant at first to release the data, eventually conceded that Corexit is lethal for 50% of any group of test animals that comes in contact with it. Even the Department of Transportation classifies Corexit as “Class 6.1: Poisonous Material” for transportation purposes. The risks of Corexit to humans, the fragile marsh ecosystems, and marine life are staggering. Corexit has never been used in such quantities before, or at such depths in the ocean, or on open marshland. Corexit is so peculiarly lethal because it accumulates up the food chain. Fiddler crabs absorb the toxins in their muscles and are then eaten by birds. Coyotes and feral pigs then eat the bird corpses. Pelicans absorb the toxins from fish, and even lightly oiled pelicans ingest the oil through their constant preening. Larger marine life, like tuna, dolphins and whales, carry the greatest toxic loads of all.

Chris Pinetich, a marine biologist and campaigner with the Sea Turtle Restoration Project, confirmed what Steve and others has told me: that Coast Guard planes have been flying out at night spraying Corexit on the water and land.

“People need to realize that their water, their air, the sand they are walking on are coated with this stuff,” he said. “We are producing an experiment in the Gulf the likes of which no one has ever seen. Top scientists admit that. We are all part of the experiment.”

[One study](#) shows that oil mixed with Corexit is 11 times as lethal as the oil alone. So why use a banned, notoriously toxic brew that simply disperses the oil, without destroying it, and making it harder to see? Oil on the surface of the ocean is easier to see, easier to retrieve, easier to burn.

Why use such lethal toxins in the first place?

Dispersants are called dispersants because that is precisely what they do. Dispersants disperse the oil, so that it cannot be seen. Dispersants do not *destroy* the oil. Dispersants only *disappear* the oil. Corexit merely sinks the oil below the surface, making it harder to see and harder to retrieve. And since BP had agreed to pay only for

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“verifiable damage,” the less oil that is seen, the less BP can be sued for liability.

Death by Corexit is slow and invisible. Death by Corexit wreaks its havoc out of sight and very slowly, often over generations. Corexit inflicts what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence.”<sup>8</sup> We are accustomed to think of violence as immediate and spectacular, bounded by space and time. Nixon recalls us to slow violence of a different kind: the “attritional devastation” that takes place gradually over time and space. Slow violence may be less visible and less media-sensational, but it enacts a toll no less lethal and lasting for being slow and out of sight.

Corexit is a particularly insidious form of slow violence: a conjurer’s trick, an alchemy of deceit, a sorcerer’s bargain with life and death.

Down in Barataria Bay, people cough [the BP cough](#). Workers have rashes and burning eyes. Their ears are infected; their skin gets blisters. When the south wind blows, lungs tighten and close. Some fishermen vomit; some struggle to breathe. Some get dizzy; some get diarrhea. Some have asthma; some have fast-beating hearts. Their chests burn fire; their throats are sore. And children cough the BP cough.

## V. Slow Violence in the Gulf of Mexico

Corexit is not the only form of slow violence wreaking havoc in the Gulf. The Deepwater Horizon disaster was by any standard spectacular violence: a volcanic crimson and grey apocalypse, an ocean in flames, a doomed, industrial colossus slowly pitching and sinking, taking with it eleven men dead. But everyone I spoke to in the Gulf echoed the same refrain: the Deepwater Horizon blowout was only the most recent, fast-forward, telegenic calamity on top of the permanent slow-motion catastrophe unfolding in the Gulf.

The BP catastrophe came after decades of the slow-motion, industrial slaughter of the Gulf’s marshes, estuaries, bays, and ocean waters by three major forces: industrial dumping; chemical contamination and agricultural run-off from the heartland; and the forced engineering of the marshes by dredging, which weakens the ability of the marshes to withstand the brunt of the annual storms and hurricanes. Long before the Deepwater Horizon explosion there was already a vast “dead zone” in the Gulf, an immense area the size of Lake Ontario. Since the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the dead zone has hugely expanded, stretching into a vast expanse of water utterly inhospitable to life.

The Gulf is a modern paradox. The geological conditions that produced the Gulf’s invaluable diversity are the same conditions that make it America’s carbon graveyard. Natural home to some of the richest ocean and coastal habitat anywhere, an immense interwoven network of wetlands, estuaries, beaches, barrier islands, bayous, and deep ocean, the Gulf is, as Lehner puts it, “an ecological treasure chest opening itself up to thousands of species of birds, wildlife, marine and aquatic life and an endless array of plants.” The Gulf comprises one of the richest,

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most diverse eco-systems in the northern hemisphere; it is home to some of the most diverse and productive fisheries in the world. Forty percent of all U.S. fishing grounds lie in the Gulf. Thousands of marine species breed in these vast, warm waters, including blue fin tuna, carp, snapper, and yellow fin grouper. Seventy percent of the oysters, shrimp, blue crab, and hundreds of millions of pounds of other seafood produced every year in the U.S., come from the Gulf.

But the Gulf is also the U.S. largest gas station: one third of all oil produced in the U.S comes from the Gulf, where oil companies, driven by rapacious profiteering, drill in frontier-like conditions miles under the ocean water, then further miles into the seabed, in conditions more challenging than deep space, putting these invaluable natural resources irreplaceably at risk.

Since the 1950s, decades of greed and deregulation have turned the Gulf into the U.S.' largest industrial wasteland. The Gulf is an immense, watery mausoleum to the hedonistic high times of the military-corporate petro-era. If a gigantic hand emptied the Gulf like a basin of water, we would see a drowned version of New Jersey: seeping oil-rigs, dumped military ordinance, unexploded bombs, thousands of miles of pipelines—a vast, oceanic wrecking-yard, cluttered with the debris of a century of industrial waste. Miles from anywhere, the spires of an oilrig rise up from the marshes like a church to a demonic god.

Ninety per cent of all drilling for oil and gas in the United States takes place in the Gulf. This statistic hit home for me when I first opened a Hook-N-Line fishing map. On the map, the Gulf's waters are marked with thousands of small, red blocks so thickly clustered the map looked like a map with the measles, a map of malady. Each red square marks one of the 4,000 platforms littering the Gulf, many of them abandoned and many of them leaking.

The Gulf also bears the brunt of agricultural pollution from the heartland: runoff and waste from Midwest cornfields, sewage plants, golf courses and factories. Nitrogen from fertilizer drains down the Mississippi into the Gulf every year. And through these damaged and vanishing marshes, massive watery superhighways have been cut, canals and passageways for the barges and huge ships forging their way through to the Gulf.

As a local Gulf resident put it to me: "Every straight line in the marshes is man-made and every straight line is a road to destruction." Every straight line has been forcibly dredged for flood control and shipping, the river and marshes violently reengineered by levees and canals to stop flooding, thereby fatally closing off the silt and fresh water that the marshes needs to sustain themselves, rendering them ever more vulnerable to the annual pounding of the hurricanes.

For many people I spoke to, the violence of Katrina was as great as the violence of the oil spill. Southern Louisiana is a half-drowned, shape-shifting, upside-down world, where boats float out of the treetops, and houses tilt out of the water. Everywhere I travelled, people still lived alongside the debris of Katrina. Boats flung by Katrina were left to rot on the grassy verge of

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roads. Half-wrecked houses slanted out of the land. Trees stripped bare by the hurricane leaned arthritic against the evening sky. Every day, Karin and I drove past huge coal and oil refineries, the Port Sulphur toxic dump, rotting boats, sunken cars, abandoned roads lined with methane barrels. Down near Venice, we found a toxic lake so rank with chemicals we could barely breathe. Not for nothing is the Deep Delta called “cancer alley,” with highest rates of cancer in the US.

One evening, Karin and I pulled into an unprepossessing marina near a town aptly named Empire, driving carefully past a sleeping BP security guard. A few oyster-boats were festooned with yellow boom, but the rest of the marina wore a forlorn and dilapidated air. From every boat, the useless fishing nets hung like shrouds, dark relics of better times. One man moved slowly about his small houseboat. I got talking to him, and Lloyd Boudreau invited me into his houseboat, where in his tiny kitchen he unrolled on his kitchen table his collection of huge photographs of the disaster Katrina had wrought. Pictures of his life quite literally turned upside down. With stabbing fingers blackened by a life on the oilrigs, he pointed to photographs of his houseboat, upturned like a toy, sodden and black-green with mould. Katrina is the ghost he lives with. Lloyd Boudreau has no room in his heart to begin to think about the oil spill. Battered by the accumulated slow violence of decades of corporate greed and mismanagement, wrecked by dredging, levees, and hurricanes, the Louisiana delta is vanishing before our eyes, slipping into the sea at the rate of one football field every half hour. Since the 1930s, a mass of land equal the size of Delaware has vanished under water.

## **VI. Two Years and Counting: The Gulf Crisis is Not Over**

The night before I left the Gulf, I had dinner with the owner of the vacuum barges doing clean up. Shaking with rage, he showed me a message from the Joint Information Command at Houma that he had just received on his cell phone: “All your vessels must be removed from the water by Monday.”

“My barges are the only things that are giving any effect down here,” he railed. “And no one has paid me for the three million dollars I have invested.”

I emailed home: “They are going to kill the story,” I said. And they did.

Later, when I travelled around the U.S. giving talks on the Gulf disaster, I did not meet a single person who had heard about the \$40,000 fine or who knew about the 20-meter restriction zone. I did not meet a single person who knew that the catastrophe was still ongoing, nor that the shrimp and seafood they were eating might still be compromised. Nor did they know just how much BP, the Coast Guard, the federal government, and the mainstream media had conjoined to cap the story. In short, not only was there a media blackout of the catastrophe, there was a blackout of the blackout.

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A few weeks after I returned home, on September 19, 2010, the Macondo relief-well procedure was declared a success. The Obama Administration proclaimed the Macondo oil well “effectively dead.” The largest marine oil-disaster in the history of the world was declared over. The mainstream media buried the story.

I called P.J. Hahn, Director of Coastal Zone Management in Plaquemines Parish. “I know there is still plenty of oil out there,” Hahn insisted. “They say they have captured 75%, but they don’t even know how much there was to begin with. Figures lie, and liars figure,” he said.

“From the very beginning,” Hahn told me, “the Coast Guard went to bed with BP. There was no oversight. They tried to cover for themselves. Now they’re trying to declare a quick ending. If they can get the President to convince everyone that it is over, then that reduces BP’s liability. There are two things working right now: there’s an election coming up and we have a President dying in the polls. They want to tell everyone it’s all ok. Now,” Hahn said, “the media has left. They want to kill the story.”

“Last weekend,” he continued, “we got stuck on a sandbar. When we gunned the engines, there was nothing but oil behind the boat. Then we dove with the Cousteau group again and there was plenty of oil on the bottom of the ground. The sand just covers it up. On Sunday night, we stopped at a barrier island, and as we were walking back to the boat, black oil spurted out of the hermit-crab holes. We pushed a stick down into the ground, and when we pulled the stick out, the oil began bubbling up. Fresh oil, not weathered oil. Wait till the shrimp boats start going out again. When those trawlers hit bottom, that’s when we will see a lot of things.”

I called Steve. He told me that on his way to work that day he had seen a huge oil slick about five miles long and one mile wide in one bay alone. “The media has gone,” he said, “but the oil hasn’t.”

Others offered similar testimony. “The oil has not gone,” said Tony, an out-of-work shrimp fisherman. “It’s just below the surface.” Bob Marshall, writing for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* reported seeing a great deal of oil at South Pass. Fishermen reported oil both inside Barataria Bay and out near the great Mississippi Passes and barrier islands. Riki Ott flew out over Barataria Bay and afterwards reported: “Bay Jimmy on the northeast side of Barataria Bay was full of oil. So were Bay Baptiste, Lake Grande Ecaille, and Billet Bay... We followed thick streamers of black oil and ribbons of rainbow sheen... The ocean’s smooth surface glistened like molten lead in the late afternoon sun. Oil. As far as we could see: oil.”

“They’re just covering their butts,” said a woman at a gas-station

On September 20 2010, just as Marci had predicted, a massive, new oil slick poured into 16 miles of Louisiana’s fragile coastline, blackening marshes and fouling islands west of the Mississippi in the hard-hit Plaquemines Parish. The *Times Picayune*

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reported the sightings, and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries confirmed them. A month later, on October 23 2010, more massive slicks of brown, weathered oil, miles long, were sighted in West Bay, Texas, between Venice and Southwest Pass, the main shipping channel of the Mississippi.

Again, The *Times-Picayune* confirmed the sightings. In late November, coastal zone director, Hahn reported that 32,000 gallons of oil had been sucked out of the marshes in the previous ten days alone. Where I had travelled by boat through the Barataria marshes, the oil still stretched miles deep into the dying grasses.

In short, by the fall of 2010, along the five Gulf states affected, hundreds of miles of damaged wetland and beaches were still soaked with oil; the marsh grasses were dead or dying. In Louisiana alone, 320 miles of shoreline were still fouled by the oil. In November, 4,200 square miles of the Gulf that had been opened and declared safe for shrimping were re-closed to shrimping after tar balls were found in shrimpers' nets. Fishing boats were still trailing oil-sheen in their wakes and churning up weathered oil closer to shore. Baby crabs and adult shrimp were found covered in crude oil and Corexit was found in the larvae of blue crabs. Marine biologists from the University of Southern Mississippi found "orange blobs" under crab larvae shells in almost all the larvae they examined along 300 miles of coast from Louisiana to Florida.

One of the most under-reported effects of the explosion has been the continuing release of the deadly gas, methane, which suffocates marine life and creates dead zones through oxygen depletion. While I was still in the Gulf, a private contractor working at a secret clean-up site told me that methane bubbles were "popping up everywhere." His wife, who was sitting at the bar with us, suddenly texted him on his cell phone, with a cautioning look on her face, and he abruptly stopped talking. But later, when she had gone, he pulled me to one side, pointed to a large map of the Mississippi Delta, running his fingers silently over a huge swathe of coastal waters east of the Mississippi passes. "There," he said, and refused to say more.

As for the ocean floor, in September 2010, Samantha Joye, a professor in the Department of Marine Sciences at the University of Georgia, found that huge amounts of oil sediment had merely settled on the ocean bed without dissolving. In October 2010, two research boats from University of Southern Mississippi found thick raw crude and light oil coating the seabed in a 140-mile radius around the Macondo Prospect itself. David Hollander, researcher at the University of Southern Florida, reported: "Oil's presence on the ocean floor didn't diminish with time; it grew." The EPA and NOAA have consistently underplayed or covered-up the full extent of the catastrophe. Scientists at the University of Southern Florida and the University of Southern Mississippi claimed that the government was trying to block their findings.

In the year of media silence, from the fall of 2010 to the fall of 2011, voices from the Gulf kept crying out like Cassandras, trying to make themselves heard. The news remained dreadful, but no one outside the Gulf seemed to be listening.

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## Aftermath

One year later, in August 2011, several miles of new, fresh oil slicks were sighted covering the ocean surface near the Macondo site. Scientists analyzing the oil confirmed that the oil was a chemical match for the original Macondo well. This was calamitous news, because it meant, quite blatantly, that the oil well was not only not “dead,” it was still live and it was leaking.

Nonetheless, the Coast Guard pronounced the oil too dispersed to recover, and the mainstream media remained mute on the matter.

Then news of dead and dying marine animals began pouring in. From mid-January to late March 2011, scientists officially counted 200 dead dolphins. Videos were taken of dolphins in stricken pods, floating dead, or thrashing in oil, trying to breathe, pointing their faces at the sky. In October 2011, a NOAA report admitted that dolphins and whales were dying at twice the normal rate. In 2012, dead dolphins continue to wash ashore, many of them with newborn or premature calves. Far sooner than anyone predicted, in early 2012, mutations started [appearing](#), shrimp without eyes, and deformed turtles. But after investigating, NOAA put an official gag order on the results, on the grounds that the research was part of a criminal investigation of the spill. Numerous scientists said they have been “personally rebuked by federal officials for speaking out of turn to the media about efforts to determine the cause” of the deaths. Finally, even White House energy advisor Carole Browner was obliged to admit the Deepwater Horizon blowout was the “worst environmental disaster the US has faced.” But watching the mainstream media in the year following the explosion, you wouldn’t know it.

The Gulf catastrophe was not only the largest environmental catastrophe in U.S. history; it remains the largest coordinated *cover-up* of an environmental catastrophe. All told, eight U.S national parks are affected and remain in dire threat. More than 400 land species that inhabit the Gulf islands and marshes are at risk, including endangered turtles, pigs, coyotes, and an estimated 34,000 birds, including pelicans, egrets, terns, roseate spoonbills, and blue herons. Hundreds of thousands of migrating ducks and geese over-winter in the Mississippi Delta. Thousands of pelicans continue to preen feathers covered in oil and Corexit. Offshore, 15,700 species live in the Gulf, over 8,000 of which are directly located in the oil-spill area, among them birds, fish, sea turtles, mollusks, shrimps, and 29 species of mammals, including dolphins and whales. Ninety percent of North Carolina’s commercial sea life spawns off the coast.

All these numbers speed across the retina like a nightmare ticker tape, too fast to be turned into visible scenes, too fast to be imaginatively comprehended. From the beginning of the Gulf disaster, a flickering double vision marked our experience of the Gulf crisis. We watched the unfolding catastrophe through two eyes: the Cyclops mono-eye of the mainstream media, over which a filmy cataract soon grew. For months, the mainstream, corporate media image available



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to us was BP's jauntily dubbed "spill-cam" footage, the nightly, murky-brown cloud of oil billowing close-up from the broken well-head, a gushing nothingness erupting meaninglessly from the ocean bed. Who knew that there was far more to see, that we were just deliberately not being shown it? This spectral, nightly close-up became a form of blindness.

We also watched the calamity unfold through the blinking eye of the internet, which revealed the disaster in intermittent flashes, semi-hallucinatory glimpses and intimations: in the video-clips, photographs, and desperate dispatches from alternative news outlets, uploaded by journalists and photographers who had taken the trouble to go down and try to see for themselves. These images told an alternative, broken story, one that did not yet have the authority of the mainstream media. The context of the photographs and videos were sometimes uncertain. Where were these images taken, and by whom? Something terrible had happened; that much we knew, but what?

Certainly, a few astounding photographs taken early into the disaster such as those by Charlie Riedel and by Rick Loomis and Carolyn Cole for the *LA Times* made it clear that something horrendously untoward had taken place in the Gulf. These images seemed to come from and belong to a world not our own. Some were marked by striking and troubling quality: they were eerily and terrifyingly gorgeous, as if the vast spread of oil had conjured a magical alchemy of the eye, making the unseen tides and currents of ocean-life for one instant suddenly and finally gorgeously visible. Vast, pyrotechnic smears of orange, black, and purple stretched to the horizon. Golden waves flecked with black were captured and held in a molten flare of sun. The oil became a liquid monument to the life force of the ocean at the very moment of its destruction.

As with 9/11, the official story failed to offer a meaningful narrative. So we developed double vision, and along with it anxiety, sadness, and paranoia. People kept saying: "I can't bear to look at those birds." As if looking away was itself the very sign of compassion. But looking away only became another form of blindness.

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On my last evening in the Louisiana Delta, my fishing guide, Dave, took me by boat to the forbidden pelican rookeries at Queen Bess and Cat Islands near Grand Isle. As we sped through the fragile, filigree marshlands of Barataria Bay, flocks of snowy egrets and roseate spoonbills lifted gracefully into the air ahead of us, an explosion of white confetti, an exuberant celebration of life. Arriving at the boom-encircled islands, Dave and I sat within the illegal zone close to the boom and watched for a couple of hours as pelicans drifted in through the shimmering light to roost in the mangroves, preening their breast-feathers.

"We don't know how long it will take for them to be poisoned by their pruning, ingesting the oil through their feathers," Dave said. "Who knows how many will die unseen in the marshes."

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Returning later that evening through the oil-damaged marshes in the glimmering twilight, I could see miles of tangled boom filthy with oil. Inside the boom, the marshes were blackened for miles as if a fire from hell had roared through. Everywhere there was a great stillness. Not a bird to be seen. I thought of John Keats's great line: "The sedge is wither'd from the lake and no birds sing" ("La Belle Dame sans Mecri"). I thought of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, which launched the modern environmental movement. Would this silence do the same?

On what abacus can we count the slowly dying, the invisibly hurt, the already poisoned but not yet dead? For two years we have been counting: numbers of gallons spilled, numbers of toxins released, numbers of birds dying, numbers of fishermen out of work. We are like children counting on our fingers in the dark, trying to ward off the shapeless face of something dreadful that has been unleashed and that we cannot fully understand. Down in Barataria Bay, the crabs climb out of the burning water and hold their claws to the sky. The creels stand empty; the boats lie still. Nets hang like shrouds. And children cough the BP cough.

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**Anne McClintock** is the Simone de Beauvoir Professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She is the author of *Imperial Leather. Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), short biographies of Olive Schreiner and Simone de Beauvoir, and of *Double Crossings* (2001), a monograph on madness, sexuality, and colonialism. McClintock is the co-editor of *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Race, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (1997) with Ella Shohat and Aamir Mufti. Anne McClintock has several forthcoming books, including a new book project, *Paranoid Empire. The Forever War and the Twilight of US Power* (Duke University Press); a creative non-fiction book, *Skin Hunger. A Chronicle of Sex, Money and Desire* (Jonathan Cape); an anthology, *The Sex Work Reader* (Vintage); and a collection of essays, *Planet of Intimate Trespass* (Routledge).

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> See: Lehner, Eric and Bob Deans. 2010. *In Deep Water: The Anatomy of a Disaster, the Fate of the Gulf, and How to End our Oil Addiction*. New York: Experiment. p.16

<sup>3</sup> See: *In Deep Water*, p.24. This interview originally appeared in the

[www.chron.com/business/energy/article/Relatives-remember-the-11-rig-workers-lost-in-Gulf-1715973.php](http://www.chron.com/business/energy/article/Relatives-remember-the-11-rig-workers-lost-in-Gulf-1715973.php).

<sup>4</sup> See: *In Deep Water*, p. 39

<sup>5</sup> See: Schoar, Elana. 2010. "Record of BP's Gulf Worker-Testing Firm Raises Conflict-of-Interest Questions." *The New York Times*, June 18, 2010: [nytimes.com/gwire/2010/06/18/18greenwire-record-of-bps-gulf-worker-testing-firm-raises-84788.html](http://nytimes.com/gwire/2010/06/18/18greenwire-record-of-bps-gulf-worker-testing-firm-raises-84788.html).

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<sup>7</sup> For further information on this see: Klein, Naomi. 2011. "The Search for BP's Oil." *The Nation* . January 31. <http://www.thenation.com/article/157723/search-bps-oil>.

<sup>8</sup> See: Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.