Slow Violence

Literary and postcolonial studies have ignored the environmentalism that often only the poor can see

By Rob Nixon
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Environmentalists face a fundamental challenge: How can we devise arresting stories, images, and symbols that capture the pervasive but elusive effects of what I call "slow violence"? Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, oil spills, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental crises confront us with formidable representational obstacles that hinder efforts to mobilize for change.

We are accustomed to conceiving violence as immediate and explosive, erupting into instant, concentrated visibility. But we need to revisit our assumptions and consider the relative invisibility of slow violence. I mean a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous but instead incremental, whose calamitous repercussions are postponed for years or decades or centuries. I want, then, to complicate conventional perceptions of violence as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is focused around an event, bounded by time, and aimed at a specific body or bodies. Emphasizing the temporal dispersion of slow violence can change the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social crises, like domestic abuse or post-traumatic stress, but it is particularly pertinent to the strategic challenges of environmental calamities.

Politically and emotionally, different kinds of disaster possess unequal heft. Falling bodies, burning towers, exploding heads, avalanches, tornadoes, volcanoes—they all have a visceral, page-turning potency that tales of slow violence cannot match. Stories of toxic buildup, massing greenhouse gases, and accelerated species loss because of ravaged habitats may all be cataclysmic, but they are scientifically convoluted cataclysms in which casualties are postponed, often for generations. How, in an age when the news media venerate the spectacular, when public policy and electoral campaigns are shaped around perceived immediate need, can we convert into image and narrative those disasters that are slow-moving and long in the making, anonymous, starring nobody, attritional and of indifferent interest to our image-driven world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories striking enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most serious threats of our time?

The long dyings—the staggered and staggering discounted casualties, both human and ecological—are often not just incremental but exponential, operating as major threat multipliers. They can spurn long-term, proliferating conflicts that arise from desperation as the conditions for sustaining life are degraded in ways that the corporate media seldom discuss. One hundred million unexploded land mines lie inches beneath our planet's skin, from wars officially concluded decades ago. Whether in Cambodia, Laos, Somalia, or Angola, those still-active mines have made vast tracts of precious agricultural land and pastures no-go zones, further stressing oversubscribed resources and compounding malnutrition.

To confront slow violence is to take up, in all its temporal complexity, the politics of the visible and the invisible. That requires that we think through the ways that environmental-justice movements strategize to shift the balance of visibility, pushing back against the forces of temporal inattention that exacerbate injustices of class, gender, race, and region. For if slow violence is typically underrepresented in the media, such underrepresentation is exacerbated whenever (as typically happens) it is the poor who become its frontline victims, above all the poor in the Southern Hemisphere. Impoverished societies located mainly in the global South often have lax or unenforced environmental regulations, allowing transnational corporations (often in partnership with autocratic regimes) the liberty to exploit resources without redress. Thus, for example, Texaco's oil drilling in Ecuador was not subject to the kinds of regulatory constraints the company would have confronted in America, a point highlighted by the Ecuadorian environmental-justice movement, Acción Ecológica.

Our temporal bias toward spectacular violence exacerbates the vulnerability of ecosystems treated as disposable by capitalism, while simultaneously intensifying the vulnerability of those whom the human-rights activist Kevin Bales has called "disposable people." Earlier this month, Brazil gave the green light to the gargantuan Belo Monte Dam, despite opposition from 20 leading Brazilian scientific societies and the nation's Movement of Dam-Affected People. Dams have driven more than over a million poor Brazilians off their land; Belo Monte will further displace an estimated 40,000 mostly indigenous
people, while flooding 200 square miles of the forests and clearings on which they have depended. It is against such conjoined ecological and human dispossession that we have witnessed, again and again, a resurgent environmentalism of the poor.

Alongside that activism, a diverse group of writer-activists is espousing the causes of the environmentally dispossessed. These writers are geographically wide ranging and work in a variety of forms—novels, poetry, essays, memoirs, theater, blogs. Figures like Wangari Maathai, Indra Sinha, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Abdul Rahman Munif, Njabulo S. Ndebele, Nadine Gordimer, Jamaica Kincaid, Arundhati Roy, and June Jordan have recorded the long-term inhabited impact of corrosive transnational forces, including petro-imperialism, the megadam industry, the practice of shipping rich nations' toxins (like e-waste) to poor nations' dumping grounds, tourism that threatens indigenous peoples, conservation practices that drive people off their historic lands, environmental deregulation for commercial or military demands, and much more.

The strategies these writers adopt are as varied as their concerns. In Animal's People (Simon & Schuster, 2008), Sinha remolds the picaresque novel to portray life in a fictional version of Bhopal 20 years after the disaster there. His scurrilous, scheming narrator, Animal, pours out lively, gritty, street-level stories about the urban underclass that inhabits the interminable aftermath, in a city where the poisons released by the chemical explosion still course through the aquifers, the food chain, and the people's genes. By contrast, Maathai’s memoir, Unbowed (Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), offers an animated account of the successful struggle mounted by Kenyan women against illicit deforestation, a struggle that involved 100,000 activists who planted 30 million trees. They also planted the seeds of peace, creating a vibrant civil-rights movement that linked environmental rights to women's rights, freedom of expression, and educational access.

Some writers have helped instigate movements for environmental justice. Saro-Wiwa, for example, was one of the founders of Nigeria’s Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People; Maathai won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work starting the Green Belt Movement. Others, like Roy and Sinha, have aligned themselves with pre-existing groups like India’s Save the Narmada Movement and the Bhopal survivors’ movement—thereby giving imaginative definition to the issues at stake while enhancing the international visibility of their causes. None of these writers, however, are committed to some narrow ideology, but are simply sorrowed or enraged by injustices they believe in some modest way they can help expose, silences they can help dismantle through testimonial protest, rhetorical creativity, and by advancing counterhistories in the face of formidable odds. Most are restless, versatile writers ready to pit their energies against what Edward Said called "the normalized quiet of unseen power."

Engaging with writers who give imaginative definition to the slow violence inflicted in the global South can help us reshape the conceptual priorities that animate the environmental humanities. Literary studies has been a major force in the greening of the humanities, but since the growth of environmental literary studies as a field in the mid-1990s, it has suffered from an Americanist bias—in the kinds of authors studied and, most important, in the perception of what counts as environmental writing. [...] The more ecocriticism I read, the more my impression was confirmed. I encountered some intellectually transforming books, but they tended to canonize the same self-selecting genealogy of American authors: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, Terry Tempest Williams, Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder. All were authors of influence and accomplishment, yet all were drawn from within the boundaries of a single nation. Environmental literary anthologies, Web sites for college courses, conferences, and special issues on ecocriticism revealed similar patterns. [...]

To reconfigure the environmental humanities involves acknowledging, among other things, how writer-activists in the Southern Hemisphere are giving imaginative definition to catastrophes that often remain imperceptible to the senses, catastrophes that unfold across a time span that exceeds the instance of observation or even the life of the human observer. In a world permeated by insidious, unspectacular violence, imaginative writing can make the unapparent appear, rendering it tangible by humanizing drawn-out calamities inaccessible to the immediate senses.

Writer-activists can thus help challenge media-reinforced assumptions about violence. They can work within a broad coalition to advance environmental justice. And they can draw on the strategic energies and empower more-traditional activist constituencies: indigenous, labor, and student groups, progressive scientists, and campaigners for human rights, women’s rights, and civil liberties, as well as organized opponents of unchecked globalization. In so doing, they will serve as a resource of hope in the larger battle to stave off, or at least retard, the slow violence inflicted by globalizing forces.

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