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“Far from the Gulf Coast, but near It, Too”

Art, Attachment, and *Deepwater Horizon*

THOMAS S. DAVIS

When I began researching and teaching the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster some years ago, it seemed to capture uniquely the multifaceted harms of extreme extraction. It was not only the largest oil disaster in American history but one of the most intensely visual ones. Initial footage showed a rig aflame, encircled by boats spraying arcs of water onto the towering inferno; smoke would continue to drift skyward for days. Aerial photographs captured the discolored surface of the Gulf with curved, rusty lines appearing as brushwork over cerulean waters, recalling abstract painting more than environmental devastation. Cameras on the seabed relayed to global audiences the eruption of crude oil from the seabed into the Gulf for eighty-seven days. As the years ticked by, *Deepwater Horizon* seemed less unique as it took its place alongside other infrastructural disasters, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline, the Gold King Mine wastewater spill, and the Flint water crisis, all of which laid bare the ruinous entanglement of infrastructure, capitalism, and nature. Revisiting *Deepwater Horizon* now in the midst of COVID-19 and the uprisings against policing and anti-Blackness, it is only more apparent that our infrastructural systems—water systems, energy systems, public health, public safety—are at the heart of intersecting emergencies. And these emergencies offer a moment of piercing clarity into the ordinary workings of capitalist violence.

I start by connecting *Deepwater Horizon* to other infrastructural emergencies to make it less exceptional. My gamble here is that by treating the largest offshore ecological disaster in history as exemplary of extractive capitalism, we can learn more about our attachments to

the forms of life that our era of “tough oil” enables.¹ I draw from a growing artistic and cultural archive around *Deepwater Horizon* that uses the disaster as an occasion to think through the web of attachments we have to the worlds conjured and destroyed by extractive capitalism. In what follows, I turn to the poetry from Juliana Spahr and Kaia Sand and to visual art by Brandon Ballengée that models, enacts, or simply strives to comprehend the depth and complexity of those attachments. As I detail below, these artworks tease out three specific features of attachment: attentiveness, proximity, and finitude.

My analysis proceeds from two points. First, these artworks think carefully about how and when disasters become perceptible. The works I focus on here seem to worry specifically about the knowledge we gain when we prioritize the moment of emergency. What do we grasp or miss about the ordinary violence of infrastructural systems when they work as planned? Although *Deepwater Horizon* is etched in public memory as a singular catastrophe, we learned in the weeks, months, and years after the spill that it was but one instance in BP’s long-standing culture of risk. *Propublica’s* investigation into BP uncovered a pattern of negligence that continually resulted in human and ecological harm. In 2005 an explosion at an oil refinery in Texas City killed fifteen people, but that was perhaps a preview of what was to come. According to *Propublica’s* report, “The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration fined BP \$87 million last year [2009]—the largest fine in OSHA history—for failing to repair many of the safety problems that led to the blast. Four more workers have died in various accidents since then, and two chemical releases in 2007 sent more than 130 people to the hospital.”² A year later BP’s lax approach to safety and regulations led to a 267,000-gallon leak of crude oil in Alaska’s Prudhoe Bay. In 2009 a BP pipeline in Lisburne oil field ruptured and leaked forty-six thousand gallons near Prudhoe Bay. The *Deepwater Horizon* disaster in 2010 hardly seems out of step with BP’s ordinary operations and, more broadly, signals the intrinsic violence of extractive capitalism. In her masterful reporting on the spill, Antonia Juhasz notes that “Professor Robert Bea’s *Deepwater Horizon* Study Group concluded that ‘at the time of the Macondo blowout, BP’s corporate culture remained one that was embedded in risk-taking and cost-cutting—it was like in 2005 (Texas City), in 2006 (Alaska North Slope Spill), and in 2010 (the *Deepwater Horizon*).’”³ Despite the fact that the spill played out in the

public eye for nearly three months, it did little more to shift energy policy or public feeling than the previous incidents.⁴ In the end, the disaster in the Gulf appears to have differed only in scale and visibility.

My second point is that aesthetic objects can help us think more precisely and more imaginatively about connections between infrastructure and what we narrate, conceptualize, and value in everyday life.⁵ As Patricia Yaeger notes, infrastructure's very etymology suggests it is beneath, that it evades vision and perception.⁶ In the words of the editors of a special journal issue on "infrastructuralism," it is "the invisible, forgettable ambiance in which the daily drama of modern life takes place."⁷ Infrastructure is the ground against which we cut figures. Some have suggested that the work of aesthetics is to invert that relationship; art objects should make the invisible visible, defamiliarized, or otherwise draw attention. This sort of inquiry has often turned on the mechanisms by which infrastructure becomes visible or invisible. Brian Larkin and Graeme Macdonald have both argued that visibility and defamiliarization in and of themselves may not be sufficient. For Larkin, "visibility and invisibility are not ontological properties of infrastructures; instead, visibility or invisibility are made to happen as part of technical, political, and representational processes. That is why the distinction between spectacular infrastructures and mundane ones should not be figured as an opposition but as representing different styles of visibility."⁸ Macdonald, too, has argued that we need not only to make infrastructure visible but to enact ways of seeing it better.⁹

My argument builds on this research but reframes the relationship of infrastructure and aesthetics in terms of attachment, opening up a different set of questions. What attachments are made or unmade in and through our relationship with those infrastructures? In what ways might aesthetic objects and practices express the intensity, durability, historicity, and even absence of those attachments? As I hope to show through Spahr, Sand, and Ballengée, turning to attachment can help us think more carefully about our multidimensional relationships to energy as well as the problems and rewards of directing aesthetic attention to its infrastructures. Before turning directly to their works, I want to outline how the relations I am calling attachment are related to but distinct from entanglement, which is a concept with wider currency in energy and environmental humanities.

To classify a relationship as entanglement is not merely to highlight

a connection. Consider Karen Barad's influential definition of entanglement: "To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating."¹⁰ For Anna Tsing, entanglements describe and help narrate multispecies worlds as well as the interrelationships of the supply chains of global capital, the less formal networks of labor that operate in its shadows, the migrants who live and work in those shadows, and the histories of violence and empire that underwrite it all. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, we glimpse entangled relations as ones that emerge *as* relations; the components of those relations do not exist autonomously or separately prior to the relation. When we say that humans are entangled with fossil fuels, we should be clear that the mode of being human, the forms of life we inhabit, do not preexist our interactions with fossil fuels and all that they enable. This is not a small claim. It needs some clarification, and we need a sense of why it is advantageous to describe the relationship this way.

Hannah Appel, Arthur Mason, and Michael Watts argue that "oil is the lifeblood of just about everything including, it turns out, the sorts of civic freedoms and political liberties that most Americans have come to take for granted: unlimited personal mobility, cheap food, the prospect of property ownership in the suburbs."¹¹ Brett Bloom's graphic for "petro-subjectivity" maps out in almost overwhelming detail the routes by which oil flows through our daily lives.

The directional arrows link nearly every facet of daily life back to the barrel of oil. Oil is quite literally in what we wear and eat; it powers our movements and alters our sense of time and space; it determines how we dream the possible and, perhaps, limits our abilities to imagine worlds without it. Of course, our entanglements with oil can be simultaneously near total and uneven. Being part of the class that travels with relative ease across the globe makes oil part of your being quite differently, for example, than for those who reside in the toxic landscapes of petrochemical refineries in Cancer Alley in Louisiana.¹² Our entanglement with oil means that our relationship with it is not entirely about our use of oil or how we choose to engage with it. Kathryn Yusoff sees humanity not just as empowered by fossil fuels but, as she

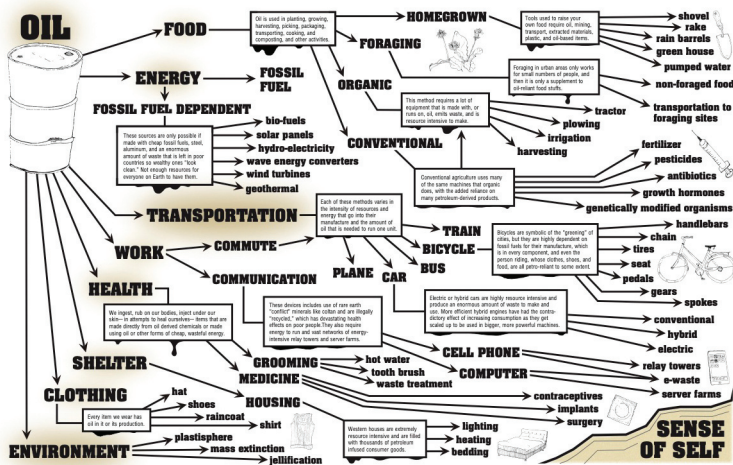


Fig. 1. Graphic of the routes through which oil moves into nearly every facet of daily life. From Brett Bloom's "Petro-Subjectivity." Used by permission of the author.

says, as “an expression of them.”¹³ Oil can “direct what bodies become through the force of fossil matter-energy.”¹⁴ Our ideas of what it means to be human—socially, culturally, biologically—are themselves bound up with oil. And it is the infrastructures of our carbon-based energy system that enable what Appel, Mason, and Watts call the lifeblood to flow, keeping alive certain forms of life while pushing others closer to death and illness.

To be entangled with systems or with other beings does not mean you are attached to them. Mark Fisher reminded us that one could participate in, and be coercively entangled in, capitalism without having a particular belief in it or attachment to it.¹⁵ It might be tempting to say that understanding our entanglement with fossil fuels might compel us to take inventory of our attachments to petrocultural norms; a lot of humanistic discourse and, indeed, utopian and revolutionary politics turn on the idea that disclosing something can, or should, initiate action. And yet *Deepwater Horizon* appears to have made little difference in what Kari Marie Norgaard dubs “socially organized denial,” or the social and collective forgetting that underwrites our relationship with fossil fuels.¹⁶

Attachment names a way of being connected to other beings, ideas, places, structures, or things. While it might seem to suggest primarily an emotional or affective relation, I want to suggest that attachment also unfolds from acts of attentiveness, judgment, and valuation. We become attached to *this* particular place over *that* one. We allocate more value to *this* set of relationships than *that* one. Our attachments may be transitory or durable, continuous or episodic, intense or weak. Yet even if attachments might be said to be more conscious and more selective than entanglements, they are not always beneficial, nor do they indicate relationships of care. Stephanie LeMenager's exploration of our "love for oil" details how our relationship with petroleum is much more than entanglement; it is best characterized as a "destructive attachment."¹⁷ Scholars in the energy humanities in particular have noted that this "love" does not endure solely due to ignorance of the deprecations of the fossil fuel industry. Rather, we are attached to the forms of life it makes possible, even when an event like *Deepwater Horizon* draws into sharp relief the links between those forms of life and extractive violence. Attachments can extend injurious or undesirable relationships. For Lauren Berlant, attachments are always optimistic and, in her words, can be cruelly optimistic, binding us to things we desire that also diminish us.¹⁸ Sara Ahmed, on the other hand, sees them as potentially transformational; attachments, in her words, "open up different possibilities for living." They are foundational for constructing and sustaining collectives; they form a "we," however tentative or provisional, that imagines and antagonizes for more just worlds.¹⁹

Whether they are ultimately perceived as cruel, transformational, or something less extreme, attachments form and dissolve under different conditions. The artworks I take up here open up three of those conditions: attentiveness, proximity, and finitude. In Juliana Spahr's poem "Dynamic Positioning," attentiveness turns the reader away from the tragic and elegiac dimensions of the oil spill and probes detachment from and mediation of the event. Kaia Sand's "Deepwater Horizon Ledger" imagines forms of proximity not determined by geographical or physical nearness. And finally, in the visual art of Brandon Ballengée, finitude refers to endings that hover without ever fully arriving. Attentiveness turns us away from what we expect to see, proximity exceeds nearness, and finitude extends time. These works suggest that our at-

tachments to oil may be more powerful than we imagine and more complex than we know.

Juliana Spahr's Poetics of Attentiveness

Attentiveness to something precedes, shapes, and sustains attachment. Attention is an act of selection, of choosing one thing over another. Jenny Odell considers how practices of attention forge relationships between the objects we attend to and “our own intricacies and contradictions.”²⁰ Attention initiates dialectical relationships between the outward world of objects and the more inward world of the observer. In this way, attention can be revelatory and formative. Artworks, if we are lucky, might instigate these processes for us, reconfiguring how we see, think, and act. Odell sees artworks as “training apparatuses for attention. By inviting us to perceive at different scales and tempos than we are used to, they teach us not only how to sustain attention but how to move it back and forth between different registers. As always, this is enjoyable in and of itself. But if we allow that what we see forms the basis of how we can act, then the importance of directing our attention becomes all too clear.”²¹ Attention, then, becomes a condition for how we see and comprehend the attachments we have, how they were made, and how they might be sustained or unmade.

Much of the cultural production around *Deepwater Horizon* can be understood on one level as redirecting attention to its ensemble of causes and effects: documentaries such as *The Great Invisible* explore the recklessness of extractive capitalism and its insatiable hunger for profit; Jason Kimes's sculpture *Eleven* memorializes the eleven workers whose deaths were entirely preventable; Nailah Jefferson's *Vanishing Pearls* documents the slow killing of cultures and traditions of African American fishermen in Pointe a la Hache; and the poems in Rebecca Dunham's *Cold Pastoral* register the ongoing damage to marine ecosystems as well as the human toll. Poetry of the BP oil spill participates in these attentive exercises—but in ways where, to quote Odell, it is “our attention itself that becomes palpable.”²² But what is unique about poetic attention? Lucy Alford's *The Forms of Poetic Attention* describes in rich detail how poetry initiates ways of attending to the world and acts itself as a form of attention. “Poetic attention,” she writes, “is the attention produced, required, or activated by a poem.”²³ Attentiveness also moves

between the poem as object, the poem's treatment of its object, and the reader's engagement with the poem: "Reading poems for how they shape, orient, and inflect a plurality of attentional pathways requires examining the formal dimensions of poetic works where they intersect with readerly attention, on the one hand, and with writerly attention, on the other, considering how both readerly and writerly attention, as well as the formal dynamics of the poem, are situated historically."²⁴ The poem, then, is "a site of attentional relations."²⁵ In this section, I treat Juliana Spahr's remarkable infrastructural poem "Dynamic Positioning" as an exercise in poetic attention. Drawing from Alford's model, I see the poem as both directing attention to its object and enacting modes of attention through its formal and linguistic composition. In its elegantly crafted antilyricism, the poem asks us to think through the disaster as an instance that reveals our entanglement with oil and our detachment from its forms of production.

"Dynamic Positioning" employs the technojargon of offshore drilling to describe the routine process of extraction and to explain the various failures that culminated in the explosion of *Deepwater Horizon* and the death of eleven men. It is also, I think, best understood as part of Spahr's collection *That Winter the Wolf Came*, which, in one way at least, is an oil book. The poems in *That Winter the Wolf Came* pull together the global oil industry, the moment of Occupy, encounters with wildlife, and the everyday joys and banalities of life in a season of political upheaval and crisis. In "Transitory, Momentary," the first poem in the collection, Spahr offers "a small observation that sometimes art can hold the oil wars and all that they mean and might yet mean within."²⁶ I read "holding" as a kind of poetic attention, one that comes by way of pairing and juxtaposing different phenomena; the migrations of Brent geese and the use of their names for Brent crude and the Brent oil field in the North Sea; fluctuations in oil markets; street protests and battles with police; the petrochemicals that circulate between a mother and the young child she nurses; and the technical jargon of offshore drilling. Holding directs our attention to the ensemble of possible relations.

In "Brent Crude," Spahr holds together the fluctuations in the price of Brent crude on the oil market with reflections on her body, her movements during Occupy, and the genesis of writing the poem that will become "Dynamic Positioning." An email from a friend asks about the role of the poet and how the poet might "call attention to the ma-

terial life of the artists, as person, who, in addition to being creator/conspirator to a body of work, possesses a physical body, and real financial, medical, and social needs.”²⁷ This leads her to “start writing a poem about oil extraction in iambic pentameter.”²⁸ The turn to traditional meter arises also as a way to free herself from recently completed work with a collaborator who told her “several times that we don’t need another BP poem.”²⁹ As “Brent Crude” moves to a close, Spahr composes a paragraph about dynamic positioning and offshore extraction, portions of which reappear in “Dynamic Positioning.” In the prose poem version, Spahr toys with the language of offshore drilling that will characterize much of “Dynamic Positioning.” “Brent Crude” comes to a close and echoes the phrase from Spahr’s collaborator: “Around the time I start writing in iambic pentameter, some said the last thing we need is another BP poem; someone said just another nature poem; someone said stupid white girls writing about Africa; someone said I refuse to publish stuff like that. Not to me necessarily. At other moments to me but that doesn’t matter. It was in the air. The Brent Crude Oil Spot price was 117.18.”³⁰

“Dynamic Positioning” is and is not another BP poem. It attends to the disaster without becoming a poetry of witness. Even as the poem names the eleven dead workers, it carefully avoids elegy; it experiments with form without aestheticizing extraction like, say, the aerial photographs of Edward Burtynsky. As an infrastructural poem, it is unique in the growing archive of art about *Deepwater Horizon* and is notably distinct from the other poems in *That Winter the Wolf Came*. It lacks the sense of attachment that pervades the other poems—attachment to friends and comrades, to other bodies, to a child, and to what Spahr calls the “non-revolution.” By focusing on the rig and the “story of This Well,” Spahr’s poem thinks through our entanglement with and detachment from oil.³¹ This poem, then, models an attentiveness to, or we might say holds, a relation between extractive capitalism, its infrastructural technologies, its ordinary and spectacular violences, and the problem of entanglement and detachment.

As Spahr indicates in “Brent Crude,” her treatment of contemporary offshore extractive technology comes in the most traditional of poetic forms: seventy-six couplets rendered in iambic pentameter. In a brilliant reading of Spahr’s poetry and Anthropocene anxiety, Nicole M. Merola sharply observes that she “nests other, contradictory sets of

forms” within this form.³² “The poem,” she writes, “is both linear and tentacular, continuous and fragmented.”³³ And yet, as we will see, this traditional form breaks and spills through lexical enjambments that mark out visible disruptions, creating a tension between formal regularity and the graphic presentation of lines that break with increasing speed as the rig approaches the moment of its explosion. As Merola notes, the lines also alter the aural experience of the poem; the halting sounds of the couplets approach a zone of near illegibility even as we know quite clearly that the accelerating instances of linguistic splits and spills relay the pace of the unfolding disaster.

“Dynamic Positioning” opens with twelve couplets that describe the process of offshore drilling in the passive language of extractive industry. The first six couplets give a sense of how Spahr’s language and meter develop a form of attentiveness to extraction.

It is dynamic positioning that
Allows a semi-submersible the

Ability to hover there over
The well. It is a thirty-six inch tube,

A casing, that extends down to allow
The drill and bit to be rotated there;

The drill then spudding in: the seafloor, dark,
And giving way. It is a thick column

Of drilling mud that keeps natural gas
And oil beneath the seafloor while the well

Is capped and it is a cement that
Fills in the casing so the drill pipe stays³⁴

Notably, there are no human operators in this process. Agency is ascribed to the various components of the rig: dynamic positioning, a thirty-six-inch tube, the drill, a column of drilling mud, and cement. Our attention is drawn to the carefully coordinated act of drilling and all its movements, highlighting for us each place where something could go awry. Yet even with the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster casting a shadow over how we read these opening couplets, Spahr’s anaphora directs our attention to the infrastructure itself and holds it there; “it is”

and “then” capture the interplay of repetition and sequence that characterizes ordinary offshore operations, what Spahr later refers to as “the elaborate simplicity” of extraction.

These first twelve lines direct our attention to *Deepwater Horizon*, but the rest of the poem will tell the story of the disaster at the Macondo well. Yet that story, Spahr notes, “begins with other wells.”³⁵ Although only referenced in this line, those other beginnings emphasize *Deepwater Horizon*’s history of risk. Although *Deepwater Horizon* would win a SAFE (Safety Awards for Excellence) award from the federal government on the very day of the disaster, the rig arrived to the Macondo well with a range of known problems. The rig itself had not been inland for nine years and had been working consistently between the September 2009 audit and April 20. *Deepwater Horizon* had been working on other wells and was contracted by BP to take on the Macondo well. When the rig arrived, BP’s audit had already “identified 390 repairs that needed immediate attention and would require more than 3,500 hours of labor to fix it.”³⁶ The backstory of the Macondo well disaster is the story of ordinary extractive capitalism that prioritizes profit and production above all else; offshore drilling itself is a disaster that precedes the explosion and aftermath of *Deepwater Horizon*.

Spahr’s story begins on the day of the disaster.

It begins with a round of tests, some done
And some avoided. An environmental

Impact and blowout plan declared to be
Not necessary. Drilling easy. Then³⁷

The backstory of the rig—its avoidance of repairs and regulations and its cavalier approach to safety—replays here. The pace of disaster unfolds through the language of kill lines, blowout preventers, and the increasing and decreasing of drill pipe pressure; the poem holds those descriptions and their culmination in disaster in the same form and meter. Spahr charts each test, each failure, and each reaction with “then,” maintaining the same inhuman language of infrastructure and sequence. If the couplets and infrastructural vocabulary hold the disaster, it spills over graphically and aurally. Lexical enjambments appear in the thirty-seventh couplet and increase markedly when gas begins rising through the well bore.

To the baffle plates, the poorboy degass-
Er, then the lower annual prev-

Enter is activated. The drill press-
Ure, the volume of gases, fluids, drill-

Ing mud, seawater, then is steadily in-
Creasing. And it begins again. Or be-

Gins some more. First as mud. A mud that roar-
Ing, rained. Then the gas as it discharge-³⁸

These breaks shift the visual and aural dimensions of the poem. When read aloud, the couplets sound stilted and, at times, are barely comprehensible; Merola notes that “these visual stutter-steps within words across lines and stanzas correlate with uneven, ragged breathing and reading.”³⁹ The lexical enjambments end after the explosions and the Mayday call.

The story pivots for the first time to humans. The eleven dead workers are named, as are the president and CEO of Transocean, the CEO of Halliburton, the CEO of BP, and the director of minerals management for the Obama administration. As Spahr lists the names of the dead workers, she employs the same flat sequential language used earlier to describe the tests and failures: “The well exploded. / They then died. Some swam away.”⁴⁰ The naming does not tilt the poem into elegy. Spahr specifically disavows the details that might humanize and elicit sympathy: “I will not tell / You their lives, their loves, their young children, their / Relationship to oil.”⁴¹ Their names sit alongside, are held together with, those of the energy corporations and state officials. Our attention is drawn to the collection of names and the seeming refusal of the poem to distribute any emotional charge—sympathy, anger, disgust—to any of them. The readers, like the poet, watch the disaster unfold in mediated fashion, including us alongside the protagonists of extractive capital and the state.

This exercise in attention acquires its power by sapping the disaster of melodrama, depriving it of the anticipated, and already experienced, responses, most of which were routed through tragedy and elegy. Spahr’s poetics of attention opens the space for us to think about how we know the BP oil spill, the contours and depths of our entanglement with extreme extraction, and finally, how we can be simultaneously en-

tangled with and detached from “Our oil.” The closing of Spahr’s poem shifts our attention from the detailed sequences of failure and reaction in the final hours of *Deepwater Horizon* to the mediation of that event. The poet, like us and like the corporate and state officials whose decisions precipitated the spill, experiences *Deepwater Horizon*, now the name of an event as well as a rig, from afar and through screens. And yet that oil, Spahr writes, is “Our oil.” By shifting the poem’s attention from the rig to distant observers, Spahr asks how we can begin to understand our entanglement with extractive violence when it is so distant, so highly mediated.

Kaia Sand’s Volumetric Proximity

These contours of our entanglement with oil—distance and proximity, immediacy and mediation—explain the detachment in Spahr’s poem. Do we need physical proximity to cultivate and sustain attachments to something? It’s not uncommon for us to accord more importance to, and become more attached to, the places, people, and struggles that form part of our daily lives; environmental injustices in our city or neighborhood might cut deeper and spur us to more radical action than those struggles we see and stand in solidarity with from afar. Proximity appears to be a condition for the formation and endurance of attachments. Kaia Sand’s BP poem, “Deepwater Horizon Ledger,” focuses on proximity and the kinds of attachments we have that ensnare us within extractive capital. The problem, as Sand writes, is to understand how one might be “Far from the Gulf Coast, and near it, too.”⁴² I want to suggest here that Sand’s poem imagines a version of proximity that does not depend on geographical or physical nearness. Sand’s poem figures our relationship to oil as one of volumetric proximity.

What does it mean to think of proximity in terms of volume as opposed to area? Geographers and cultural anthropologists have been at the fore of rethinking spatial relations in terms of volume. Stuart Elden’s oft-cited “Secure the Volume: Vertical Geopolitics and the Depth of Power” explores how areal thinking limits the ways we understand the intersections of space, politics, and everyday life.⁴³ Drawing on Paul Virilio, Elden argues that there are “complexities of volume . . . such as reach, instability, force, resistance, incline and depth” that coexist

with horizontal and vertical conceptions of space but cannot be entirely explained by those conceptions.⁴⁴ In their work on the “wet ontologies” of the sea, Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters have suggested that volume shifts us “from a world of stable surfaces to one of three-dimensional mobilities.”⁴⁵ Jerry Zee has made similar arguments in relation to wind and particulate matter.⁴⁶ Areal thinking highlights the devastation within the Gulf and coastal communities caused by the oil itself. Volumetric thinking, on the other hand, attends to airborne chemicals and particulate matter that moved with the wind; the shifting plumes of oil beneath the sea’s surface; the migratory patterns of birds that traverse the Gulf; the movement of seafood harvested in the Gulf and sold and consumed globally; and importantly, the dumping of carbon into the atmosphere that is part of ordinary extractive capitalism. Volume, then, does not so much abandon as reimagine what constitutes nearness and distance.

As its title indicates, Sand’s poem assumes the form of a ledger, a way of counting and measuring the costs of the disaster. The poem consists of four entries in the ledger and a postscript. Written and updated in real time, the entries in “Deepwater Horizon Ledger” juxtapose the volume of oil accumulating in the Gulf with the daily doings of the speaker’s, or accountant’s, life on the Pacific coast. The four entries are largely repetitive, varying only in the amount of oil and slight alterations in daily activities. Consider Sand’s accounting in the second entry, the first of two entitled “At Least Twenty Gallons Per Second”:

In the time it takes me to say this, at least 160 gallons of oil will
have gushed out of the Deepwater Horizon site
And now 200
And now 240
And now 280
And now 320 gallons of oil
In the time since this poem began, gushing out of the BP Deepwater
Horizon oil
drilling site, I count 600 gallons of oil mixing into the Gulf of Mexico
saltwater.⁴⁷

The gallons swell from 160 to 600 within the time and space of eight lines. But the poem also creates a future perfect alignment between the time the poet speaks or writes and the growing plume. The

“ledger,” then, is more than just an act of poetic calculation; it stages a relationship between the poet on the Pacific coast and the disaster in the Gulf. This temporal connection opens onto other connective forms, including proximity. This first entry draws to a close by juxtaposing an ordinary breakfast ritual with the poet “burning the oil BP drills for me each day.”⁴⁸ That juxtaposition stages the relation between extraction in the Gulf, or in any of BP’s global offshore sites, and daily life far removed. The final line of the first entry concludes by reimagining the spatiotemporal parameters of the spill: “This, as each second, 5 more gallons of oil defy barriers and become the difficult ecology of now.”⁴⁹ As time ticks by, as the oil accumulates in volume beneath the surface of the Gulf, those “barriers” come to signify more than the breached barriers of the blowout preventer or even the seafloor. That new “difficult ecology” means altered relationships in the web of life, which extend in, through, and beyond the Gulf.

The other three entries repeat the future perfect alignment of speaking the poem and the growing quantity of spilled oil, the continued counting of oil and its juxtaposition to daily life in a geographically distant place on the Pacific coast. The numbers and details vary across the entries, but a new phrase enters in the second entry: “far from the Gulf Coast, and near it, too.”⁵⁰ That double formulation, to be far and near, begins the poem’s reimagining of proximity, which gets a more sustained articulation in the “Postscript.”

The postscript departs visually from the ledger entries. It consists of two columns and moves from the spill in the Gulf to BP’s endless extraction across the globe. The geographic sprawl of BP’s extractive enterprise suggests that no one and no place is distant from it. After listing oil field sites stretching from Alaska to India, Sand’s anaphora captures the offshore enterprise:

and still, from deepwaters, from
deepwaters off Angola, from deepwaters,
off Trinidad & Tobago, from the
deepwaters off Itaipú off Brazil

and still, from the deepwaters of the Gulf
of Mexico where millions of gallons of oil
sloshed and sloshes⁵¹

These ordinary extractive enterprises, which are signified by locations and not the symbolically charged *Deepwater Horizon*, generate their own forms of volumetric proximity. Extraction is figured as three-dimensional with its products being experienced through multiple media in however delayed or dispersed a form. Sand's postscript traces the wresting of oil from deep within the earth to its chemical transformations in refineries to its burning in one specific place to its release of carbon into the atmosphere. From fossils locked beneath the surface to what Jerry Zee and Timothy Choy call "the wrong air of the Anthropocene," the site-specific extraction and uses of fossil fuels become airborne, placing us into volumetric proximity with carbon-based activities undertaken in other places and at different times.⁵² In Sand's final stanza, she imagines these various forms of volumetric proximity:

This as I press my heels into the pebbled
beach of Brighton, looking south at the
English channel, far from the Gulf of Mexico
but near it, too. This as BP purchases public
fondness, bending its logo into Olympic rings
in London. This as rain clouds rumple the sky,
while elsewhere, in the U.S., crops wither in
drought. This as we burn old & earthen algae
into a long-suffering climate.⁵³

The geographical distance of Brighton and the Gulf coast gets rearticulated as nearness: the churning and movement of the Gulf Stream that links these two sites and their climates; the jet fuel required to bring Sand from the Pacific coast to southern England; the horrors of *Deepwater Horizon* and the greenwashed nationalism of BP's Olympic sponsorship; the unfolding Anthropocene climates that amplify storms and floods here and droughts over there. What the spill of *Deepwater Horizon* as an event makes apparent is that extraction is the signature chronotope of the Anthropocene. Burning that "old & earthen algae" into climate-altering carbon brings all of us, in some way, near to sites of extraction that are geographically distant but volumetrically near. As Robert Macfarlane has memorably put it, "We burn Carboniferous-era fossil fuels to melt Pleistocene-era ice to determine Anthropocene future climates."⁵⁴ Sand's ledger, then, also provides an account of the

ways water and air become media for the transmission, circulation, suspension, and an unavoidable being-with of oil. And yet as Sand presses her heels against the beach, she reminds us of the attachments we have that are enabled by fossil fuels: mobility, the pleasure and lure of other places, and our contact with the natural world. Our attachments to these things and the ordinary pleasures she includes in the earlier entries often make fossil fuels seem inevitable—if we want to access the basic pleasures of daily life, we have to make compromises with a carbon energy system that will only continue to make the earth less habitable. Through the delayed, dispersed, and distributed effects of fossil fuels, extractive infrastructures create forms of proximity that exceed our physical nearness to them.

Brandon Ballengée and the Art of Finitude

The spill ended on July 15, 2010, when the well was capped. From other perspectives, the spill never ended. Scientists are still calculating the effects of the BP spill on marine ecosystems in the Gulf. The National Marine Mammal Foundation's recent research concluded that "dolphins in the area of the spill have a low reproductive success rate of about 20% compared to 65% in dolphin populations that were not impacted by the spill."⁵⁵ A study published in *Scientific Reports* in April 2020 found that species richness in the Gulf of Mexico declined by 38%.⁵⁶ If measured by the criterion of ecosystem alteration, the capped well was not the end of the spill.

The time of the oil spill is an ending without end, an ending that instigates other endings. Stephanie LeMenager rightly notes that a "spill categorically defies endings, persisting in space and time through its effects on ecosystems and bodies."⁵⁷ How do we measure these endings and aftermaths? What attachments are injured or clarified by these endings? Does the end of something generate new attachments? This section is about finitude and attachment. Brandon Ballengée has devoted nearly a decade of artistic production, scientific research, and community activism to investigating the aftermaths of the spill. I traveled to Louisiana in the summer of 2017 to see Brandon's work and to visit his studio and, at the time, his freshly launched *Atelier de la Nature*, which now serves as an art space, a rewilded landscape, and community education center. We first met outside of A Studio in the Woods, a protect-

ed forest in New Orleans that, like *Atelier de la Nature*, serves multiple purposes for southern Louisiana: they facilitate residences for artists and writers; operate youth camps; and like the day I was there, host art and cultural events. Brandon was part of a live arts magazine curated by local independent arts organization Antenna. For that evening, the organizing theme was wetlands. Brandon brought his portable museum, *Crude Life*, which redirects some of the visual aesthetics of old natural history museums toward the Gulf and the lingering consequences of the oil spill.⁵⁸ Amid the ambient buzz and burr of insects under a thick canopy of trees, people wandered up to *Crude Life* to gaze at the beautiful stained specimens, to learn about the afterlife of the oil spill, and to share their own stories and memories of it. Part of the ever-evolving exhibit that evening was a set of “Wanted” posters that list fourteen species endemic to the Gulf that have been missing since the 2010 oil spill. These posters circulate, and if he’s lucky, people will call with information about sightings of these species.

The next morning, I set out with Brandon on a boat. Those “Wanted” posters yielded some information.⁵⁹ Fishermen may have pulled up some of the missing species in their bycatch. On this unsurprisingly hot, thickly humid day, we push out into Barataria Bay. We cast some nets off the side of the boat, drag them, and hope to find one of the missing species. We try with our untrained hands to angle them around the crab traps bobbing in the water. We pull them aboard and empty them: some shrimp, a couple of crabs, some brachiopods, and a few small fish. Nothing from the poster and nothing uncommon. We throw back everything we won’t eat. Shake the net. Toss it again. Drag. Pull. Same results. To find nothing only confirms the missing. Undertaking that search unfolds a certain temporal dimension of the spill: the possibility of an irreversible end to certain facets of the Gulf ecosystem and the uncertainty of that end. An ending that hovers, that colors and shades how we think and speculate, that inflects how we become attached.

Ballengée’s growing corpus of works on *Deepwater Horizon* explores the end of things wrought by the spill. As I mentioned earlier, finitude, like attentiveness and proximity, is a condition of attachment. What ideas of finitude emerge in the wake of a disaster, and how do those ideas of finitude make or unmake attachments? Martin Hägglund has recently made the argument that finitude is a condition of possibility for mutual care. We form attachments, he argues, precisely because we

recognize that the existence of those whom we care for and those things on which we are interdependent are never guaranteed. Our moment of climate breakdown only clarifies our interdependence:

If the Earth itself is an object of care in our time of ecological crisis, it is because we have come to believe that it is a resource that can be exhausted, an ecosystem that can be damaged or destroyed. Whether we care about the Earth for its own sake or for the sake of species that depend on it, the awareness of its precarious existence is an intrinsic part of why we care about it. This is not to say that we care about the Earth *only* because it can be lost. If we care about the Earth it is rather because of the positive qualities we ascribe to it. However, an intrinsic part of why we care about the positive qualities of the Earth is that we believe they *can* be lost, either for us or in themselves.⁶⁰

Those “positive qualities,” particularly with regards to the loss of biodiversity that animates so much of Ballengée’s work, indicate that we are moved to care for something not solely because it can be or has been lost. The images of oil-soaked pelicans, contaminated marshes, and eyeless shrimp serve as striking visual evidence of the oil spill’s immediate and ongoing harm, but their affective power resides elsewhere. Ursula Heise claims that stories of species loss acquire power when they “become part of the stories that human communities tell about themselves: stories about their origins, their development, their identity, and their future horizons.”⁶¹ She continues, “Extinction narratives allow their readers or viewers to reflect on turning points in cultural history as the loss of a particular species comes to stand in for the broader perception that human relationships to the natural world have changed for the worse.”⁶² Narratives of species loss express in mediated form attachments to other things that may be ending or, at the very least, may be seen now as finite.

Ballengée’s corpus of works on the spill’s aftermath continues to grow and stretch across media forms: an activist video called *Committed* exposing BP’s claims about recovery; hauntingly beautiful stained fish called *Ghosts of the Gulf* and *Tears of Ochun*; the portable natural history museum called *Crude Life* mentioned above; and the large installation *Collapse*. In direct tension with its name, *Collapse* is a visual marvel of order and stability. At first blush, it is a beautifully ordered

twelve-by-fourteen-by-fifteen-foot trophic pyramid composed of 455 glass jars holding 26,162 specimens from around 370 species of fish. Its formal arrangement replicates scientific epistemologies grounded in classification, order, and hierarchy. Yet at the levels of form and content, Ballengée's sculpture presents what we do not know, what we cannot control, and what we stand to lose. Ballengée has said that the pyramid should visualize the interconnectedness of the web of life and evoke histories of death and loss: "Hundreds of specimen jars metaphorically recalled glass coffins stacked to create a massive pyramid. This pyramid attempted to represent both, the biological reality of trophic Gulf interconnection and visually recall the structures of ancient Egyptian and other tombs."⁶³ *Collapse* presents simultaneously two contradictory things and freezes any movement between them: past and present, life and death, interdependence and disappearance.

The glass containers also capture a similarly contradictory movement. On the one hand, their transparency and orderly arrangement demonstrate our knowledge of multispecies interdependency; the glass itself signals the fragility and interdependency of the Gulf ecosystem. Yet the sculpture also reminds us that our knowledge of interdependency has not altered extractive orientations to the nonhuman world. The jars with fewer specimens indicate declining populations, and the empty jars stand for extinct species. At the base of the pyramid, also where we find the primary producers, we find samples of oil and Corexit, the toxic dispersant that augmented the toxicity of the oil and made its cleanup even more difficult. With oil and Corexit at the base of the pyramid, *Collapse* indicates that these materials will cycle upward through biomagnification. Along with what Spahr calls "Our oil," our dispersants may now become part of our food supply and eventually be ingested into our bodies. The glass sculpture gives visual form to the impending collapse of fisheries, of biodiversity in the Gulf, of healthy and unique ecosystems, and of interconnected planetary systems that make life livable. An enduring and complex entanglement with a carbon energy system accelerates other endings and amplifies the warning signals of these not-so-distant finitudes.

Ballengée's series *Ghosts of the Gulf* consists of stained specimens that were found dead in the aftermath of the spill. In their natural habitat, many of these specimens would not exactly be the poster children for species extinction. Gulf silversides, Texas clearnose skates, and African

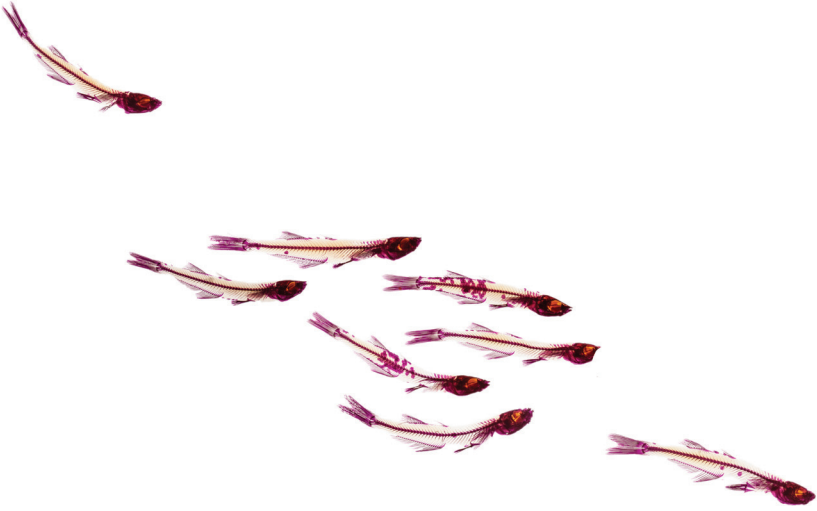


Fig. 2. Gulf silversides. Brandon Ballengée, *Ghosts of the Gulf*. Used with permission of the artist.

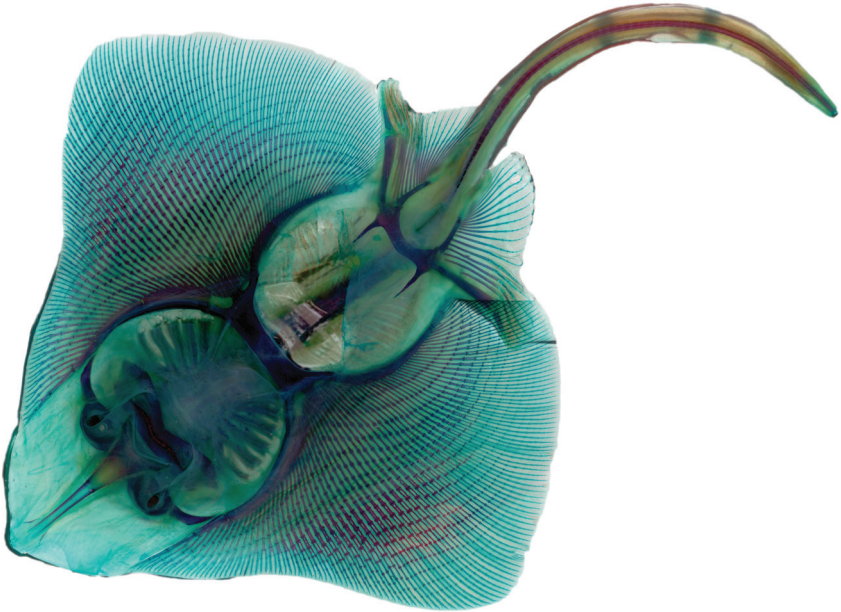


Fig. 3. Texas clearnose skates. Brandon Ballengée, *Ghosts of the Gulf*. Used with permission of the artist.



Fig. 4. African pompanos. Brandon Ballengée, *Ghosts of the Gulf*. Used with permission of the artist.

pompanos do not possess what Heise sees as “the aesthetic beauty of tropical birds and certain kinds of butterflies [that] also allows their disappearances to be perceived as tragic.”⁶⁴ Ballengée’s series alters our aesthetic perceptions of these otherwise ordinary, unremarkable sea creatures. Through his clearing and staining process, the specimens become visually alluring; the images allow us to see the complex inner architecture of these fish, rendering these noncharismatic species aesthetically beautiful. They become worthy of our attention and our admiration; they become things we do not want to lose. Yet as ghosts, they are already lost to us. These images recast finitude as endings that linger to remind us of their end and of the other ends to come.

To be haunted by the loss of species we did not value when they existed invokes this scenario of our attachments: how did we become attached to systems that thrive and grow by diminishing the world, that invert their own conditions of possibility into conditions of impossibility? In one way, Ballengée’s ghosts haunt because they visualize a general sense that our relationship with the natural world is unraveling; perhaps more

than that, they are figures of what we might call durational finitude, a condition where losses accumulate but are never final. *Ghosts of the Gulf* gives expression to Anthropocene vanishings that are ever ongoing, as endings that will outlive us. And yet these ghostly images ask if we are ready to value our brittle interdependencies with the nonhuman world over the extractive systems that imperil us all. Perhaps we already do. Perhaps that is why the images are so arresting. They rattle out of silence the attachments we have had, the ones we want to have, and those we will want to have had in a future where we nurture more and lose less.

Attachments and Freedom

I want to close here by thinking briefly about what we might call intersecting infrastructures: the infrastructure of extraction and the infrastructure of cultural production. In Louisiana, oil and gas bankrolls the art world. Ann Hackett sums it up:

We should thank them for the tricentennial celebration, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, the Contemporary Arts Center, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Louisiana State Museum, the Audubon Zoo and Aquarium of the Americas, the National WWII Museum, the New Orleans Botanical Garden, the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, The Historic New Orleans Collection, Prospect New Orleans, City Park, and many more of the city's cultural institutions. They all receive significant funding from companies making money from the Gulf's oil and gas industry or from foundations funded by this wealth.⁶⁵

Of course, this is all done in broad daylight. Funding the arts is public relations; in the words of Mel Evans, it is "artwashing."⁶⁶ As funding dries up for artists and cultural workers at the state and federal levels, fossil fuel and petrochemical corporations become the only game in town. The offshore rigs, the onshore refineries, the cancerous petrochemical factories, and pipelines merge into the cultural infrastructure of the state, at once breathing life into an impoverished cultural world while also strangling it. Hackett, for instance, notes that Entergy "withdrew \$20,000 from WBOK," a local radio station, after it reported on protests over a prospective power plant.⁶⁷ This is a clear example of undesirable entanglements trying to coerce attachments. If you value

the arts and culture, if you want to survive as an artist or cultural producer, your access to money, exhibits, and museums comes by way of fossil fuels. For over a century, fossil fuel companies have marshaled the arts and integrated themselves into multiple facets of culture to make nonextractive practices and values appear bound in a life-or-death relationship with extraction. As fossil fuel infrastructure intersects and interweaves with cultural infrastructure, a postcarbon world seems less and less possible. Fossil fuels, it seems, are inevitable.

The artworks I have offered here stand as counterexamples. Not only is extractive capitalism not inevitable, but its rapaciousness quite literally makes the world less livable. But how might aesthetic practices yield material transformations? How can alternative modes of seeing and thinking initiate other forms of action? How can the future worlds to which we are attached become present? From Louisiana—where oil and gas maintain a hold on economic, political, and cultural life that is almost total—comes one example. In 2018, Antenna launched Fossil Free Fest to bring together artists, activists, tribal leaders, and cultural producers.⁶⁸ The event was scheduled in advance of the famous Jazz and Heritage Festival, which is sponsored by Shell. Over the course of a week, Fossil Free Fest investigated the use of fossil fuel funding for art, culture, and education; it also demonstrated a way to operate and to create communities without that funding. Cultural infrastructures can be disentangled from fossil fuel infrastructures; attachments to culture, art, people, and freedom itself can grow, deepen, and intensify outside their entanglements with extractive capitalism.

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NOTES

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