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Nixon, Rob, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011), 353 pp.

Demarcations among rudeness, neglect, abuse, and “actual” violence have been held to be somewhat fraught distinctions with something of a difference. The question comes down to: “When is mistreatment elevated to actual violence?” If you have had doubts, this exhaustive and intriguing study equating the nasty treatment of the global poor to deadly warfare should resolve the question. It did for me.

An effective effort to unequivocally establish the violent character of the long-term environmental and human effects of the neoliberal project of globalization and “bring environmentalism into a full, productive dialogue with postcolonialism” (233), this unified series of eight critical essays and an epilogue collapses the space between the immediacy of violent spectacle and the enduring, debilitating ramifications of the project of global development for the poor, dislocated populations of the global south. Nixon defines slow violence as that which “occurs gradually and out of sight, [...] delayed [attritional] destruction [...] dispersed across time and space that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). In close readings of “combative” texts from a wide variety of vehement, even militant “writer-activists,” Nixon undertakes to explicate the violence described in the work of a number of third-world literary lights – in both fiction and nonfiction – demonstrating the divergences between postcolonial studies and ecocriticism and ultimately calling for the integration of a grounding human justice perspective into both discourses.

In his Preface, Nixon points to Edward Said, Rachel Carson, and Ramachandra Guha as his influences, writers whom he feels bridge the gap between environmental and postcolonial literatures. Asking, “How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention” (3), the author announces his recurring concern with “the complex, often vexed figure of the environmental writer-activist” (5). While Nixon argues at several points that issues of literary form must be bound to writers’ affiliations with environmental justice movements, this is not primarily a work of literary criticism. He embraces such critique, but focuses more emphatically on the broad rhetorical and visual dimensions in space and time that combine to render slow violence a phenomenon that generally passes under the radar of media and politicians alike. Ultimately, the “new media” may prove a tool to change that.

Activist-writers whose variety of literary forms Nixon examines in detail here – in order to demonstrate the depth of the violent aftereffects of disruptive global development – include Wangari Maathai, Arundhati Roy, Indra Sinha, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Abdulrahman Munif, Sjabulo Ndebele, Nadine Gordimer, and Jamaica Kincaid, among

others. He draws from their works the specifics, impacts, and interpretations of a wide-ranging, implacable array of slow-moving disasters to show how such long-lasting effects as, for example, the radioactivity of expended military ammunition made from depleted-uranium, will remain a health threat virtually forever. More banal, but no less affecting, are the structurally violent, if covert, effects of the current neoliberal regime of “austerity measures, [...] rampant deregulation, corporate megamergers, and a widening gulf between rich and poor” (10).

In addition to interweaving the effects of slow and structural forms of violence and their effects on poor populations, Nixon focuses on writers’ “political, imaginative, and strategic functions”:

Writer-activists can help us apprehend threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to the senses, either because they are geographically remote, too vast or too minute in scale, or are played out across a time span that exceeds the instance of observation or even the physiological life of the human observer. (15)

The author begins his set of focused critiques – each of which has in his past scholarship stood alone – with an analysis of literary treatments of the Bhopal and Chernobyl disasters, as rendered in Indra Sinha’s fictional *Animal’s People* (Simon, 2007) and Adriana Petryna’s nonfiction *Life Exposed* (Princeton, 2002), to illustrate two exemplary instances of catastrophic slow violence, each a “foreign burden” imposed upon an unwitting populace (52). Sinha’s work on Bhopal

exposes the uneven timelines and multiple speeds of environmental terror: the initial toxic event that kills thousands instantly, the fatal fire that erupts years later [...]; the contaminants that continue to leach into the communal bloodstream; and the monsoon season that each year washes abandoned chemicals into the aquifers. (61)

Moving on to the issues of oil exploitation and the “resource curse,” Nixon notes the brevity of the current fossil-fuel interregnum in human history, a high-energy interlude that will throw a long shadow into the future, along with concomitant lethal effects on the populations of countries where oil has been most plentiful: a “paradox of plenty” (69). He examines Abdelrahman Munif’s five-novel oeuvre, *Cities of Salt* (Vintage, 1984), to engage the *long duree* of the effects of oil extraction in the Persian Gulf. While subjecting Munif to an exacting literary critique, Nixon focuses more closely on the representation of the ruined ecologies in the novels as “an unofficial, contrarian imaginative history of the oasis as resource frontier” (81). In the radically impoverished lives of the nomads displaced from a “semiagrarian subsistence” society to coastal refinery towns (83), we have another instance of the slow, violent creation of another set of homeless “virtual uninhabitants” (of which more later). In a postscript to this analysis, Nixon contrasts the American wilderness ethic with the Arabian resource frontier, noting efforts to cast the oil “frontier” as analogous to the USA’s western expansion.

In an ensuing series of chapters, Nixon grapples with the human tragedy of oil exploitation in Nigeria and Ken Saro-Wiwa’s search for environmental justice and human rights for a “micro-minority,” the Ogoni population of the Niger Delta. By the

time he was framed and executed, the African activist had laid the groundwork for estimating the “global cost [...] of the ongoing romance between unanswerable corporations and unspeakable regimes” (105). Nixon distills Saro-Wiwa’s argument that the treatment of locals at the hands of big oil amounts to an unconventional war waged by ecological means (111) with little international response.

Making connections to gender and poverty, Nixon goes on to discuss the green belt movement and the process of soil erosion as other instances of slow violence, and “soil security” as a call for environmental justice. Colonial refusal to recognize women, who are most often the “primary cultivators” in African cultures, has masculinized property as a tool to dispossess legitimacy (139). Attacks on women activists embody the effort to keep slow violence from public view (148).

In his “Unimagined Communities” chapter (five), Nixon develops his intellectually innovative concepts of victim communities and their “virtual uninhabitants” in the context of “megadam” construction and the introduction of “modernity” to the third world. Surplus populations, displaced by development, are rendered invisible when cast by global development interests as too trivial to be worried about. “Virtual uninhabitants,” or small but substantial populations of indigenous people who live in areas characterized by developers as “virtually uninhabited” are thus rhetorically rendered nonexistent for the purposes of economic “development” by first-world institutions (154). The writer-activists Nixon examines instantiate a counter-narrative to the “distancing rhetoric of neoliberal ‘free market’ resource development [...] that displaces onto future generations – above all through slow violence – the human and ecological costs” (26).

In his examination of race, tourism and environmental time (Chapter Six), the author looks at the function of nature reserves in Africa and the place of native Blacks in relation to White tourism, seeing the game reserve as both a refuge and a cage (176). “Canned lions and an eternity of bush” comprise the tourist’s reality, whereas the violence that slowly enfolds local populations is again rendered invisible. Nixon traces several literary journeys – both fictional and non-fictional – to explicate how the racialized terms of wildlife scarcity have been used to “rescript” it as a black problem (190). Ultimately, the tension animating these issues is expressed in the question: “How much change, how fast, and at what cost to whom, and when?” (198).

The final chapters engage the slow violence of precision warfare – the virtually perpetual localized radioactivity of spent ammunition made of depleted uranium – and articulate the author’s major project of showing the need to focus on slow violence both in consciously activist ecocriticism and in socially activist Postcolonial and American Studies. Environmentalism and Postcolonialism seem to be ships passing each other in the night, each silent on issues of major concern to the other. Nixon’s peroratorical conclusions on these fields of critical studies, and on the potential of new media in his epilogue, are worth quoting at length:

Crucially, from an environmental perspective the emergent dialogue between Native studies and postcolonialism can help foreground the socioenvironmental relations between internal colonialisms and offshore imperialisms [to] further unsettle the

dominant paradigms [...] while widening the potential avenues for comparative work around environmental justice on a global front. (262)

In volume and velocity, the new media have made available testimony on a previously unimaginable scale [...] to fortify the environmentalism of the poor and push back against the perpetrators of slow violence (278). The new media constitute a potential resource of hope within a broad coalition. [T]he writer-activist will continue to play a critical role by drawing to the surface [...] submerged stories of injustice and resource rebellions. (280-81)

The cumulative power of Nixon's project, apparently the culmination of his life's work so far in literary criticism, ecocriticism, and postcolonial studies, make this a persuasive and engaging treatise that can serve as a thorough introduction for an advanced course in either environmental studies or postcolonial literature.