



# **Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor**

*Rob Nixon*

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The violence wrought by climate change, toxic drift, deforestation, oil spills, and the environmental aftermath of war takes place gradually and often invisibly. Using the innovative concept of slow violence to describe these threats, Rob Nixon focuses on the inattention we have paid to the attritional lethality of many environmental crises, in contrast with the sensational, spectacle-driven messaging that impels public activism today. Slow violence, because it is so readily ignored by a hard-charging capitalism, exacerbates the vulnerability of ecosystems and of people who are poor, disempowered, and often involuntarily displaced, while fueling social conflicts that arise from desperation as life-sustaining conditions erode.

In a book of extraordinary scope, Nixon examines a cluster of writer-activists affiliated with the environmentalism of the poor in the global South. By approaching environmental justice literature from this transnational perspective, he exposes the limitations of the national and local frames that dominate environmental writing. And by skillfully illuminating the strategies these writer-activists deploy to give dramatic visibility to environmental emergencies, Nixon invites his readers to engage with some of the most pressing challenges of our time.

## **Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor Details**

Date : Published July 14th 2011 by Harvard University Press (first published July 1st 2011)

ISBN : 9780674049307

Author : Rob Nixon

Format : Hardcover 353 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Environment, Biology, Ecology, Social Movements, Social Justice, Philosophy, Theory



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# From Reader Review Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor for online ebook

## Margi Prideaux says

Well researched, well written. Strong stuff. A brilliant book.

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## Kendra says

Envy was what I felt. Wish I'd made those connections. The book features smart juxtapositions of evidence, sharp analysis of contemporary events and literary figures. And while theoretical, not it's not too dense for the interested layman to slog through.

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## Sara says

### The lag, or the essence of tragedy

*[Through my ratings, reviews and edits I'm providing intellectual property and labor to Amazon.com Inc., listed on Nasdaq, which fully owns Goodreads.com and in 2014 posted revenues for \$90 billion and a \$271 million loss. Intellectual property and labor require compensation. Amazon.com Inc. is also requested to provide assurance that its employees and contractors' work conditions meet the highest health and safety standards at all the company's sites].*

How can literature make visible the relentless workings of violence after its spectacular bursts (wars, the explosion of the nuclear plant, the leak of poisonous fumes, etc) have been long forgotten (by the perpetrators)?

The "weak thought" approach - painstakingly pile up details and examples and hopefully some kind of idea will emerge - is underwhelming. But this is always the case with post-colonial studies, based as they are on an unabashed ignorance of literature as such.

The Greek tragedy springs to mind - at least the mind of the post-colonial layperson - as the perfect tool and form to host and shape those stories of violence whose ghastly effects seem to be enjoyed by a snarky, cynical Fate only. A prologue - what to our fast-paced emotion gobbling would be the beginning and end of the story - and an aftermath broken down into three acts (if not a trilogy), plus a chorus explaining to the audience what has happened out of sight. Aeschylus, more than Euripides. Oedipus defeating the Sphinx, killing his father and marrying his mother is just the beginning of the story, whose highest point is when Oedipus realizes what he has done and blinds himself. But it is not over even then.

Tragedy - also modern one - is based on the past not being past, on the past hunting the protagonist who thinks they have moved on, and is now busy enjoying their newfound happiness.

Who is going to blind themselves for the decade-long effects of Agent Orange, depleted uranium, the not-yet-exploded cluster bombs scattered all over Iraq, oil spillages, etc?

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### **Jay says**

useful and instructive for developing a terminology for ongoing ecological disasters and why post-colonialism and environmental studies ought to be more compatible than they heretofore have been. alas, while focusing on the "slow violence" occurring in tandem with a sped up world of briefer attention spans, one notices how much ecological damage has emerged in subsequent years that Nixon could not have foreseen (fracking, Flint, etc)

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### **Mary says**

One of the most important books I've read in a long time.

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### **Kidada says**

In its capacity to make legible the experienced slow moving environmental horrors of public policy re: public works programs, infrastructure, and of war, Slow Violence is a devastating but must-read text.

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### **Carmen Thong says**

Surprisingly readable, with a lot of gems in terms of theoretical formulations and comparative analyses. Also backed up by a substantial amount of examples, which are rendered interesting and immediately relevant by Nixon's adept writing style. He does get carried away by the humanitarian rhetoric at times though - more so in one specific instance, but he's good otherwise. Very important reevaluation of violence and spectacle, ecocriticism, poverty and postcolonialism. It seems to be one of those landmark books when it comes to ecocriticism nowadays, and I can see why. Though I skimmed most of the example bits (wouldn't have done if I didn't have so many other uni readings!), I am glad I finished this book from cover to cover. Not sure I'd back him up 100%, but the book was both insightful and enjoyable.

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### **Daniel Reynolds says**

I reviewed this for the Alternative Law Journal - for anyone interested you can read my full review here: <http://www.altlj.org/news-and-views/l...>

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### **Craig Werner says**

The most important book of literary criticism I've read in five or six years, maybe longer. And a bit disappointing.

I'll start with the positives. Nixon raises an absolutely central question for contemporary writers: how can we develop forms of expression which confront the problem of "slow violence"--primarily the environmental impact of our economic and political and personal actions--in a compelling manner. He's brilliant in framing the problem. Most of our narrative and polemical forms focus on spectacular, and usually individual, conflicts. Take three seconds to think about whatever movie's at the top of the box office list or whatever book's at the top of the NYTimes best seller list, and you'll get the point. I'm absolutely convinced that Nixon has asked the right question. It will be a part of how I think about literature from here on out.

Nixon also does a good job with the second part of his title, "the environmentalism of the poor." The take-home message here is that environmentalism isn't just for affluent western liberals; environmental degradation has an even more immediate impact on the lives of the poor, especially in the global South, which has been and is being used as a dumping ground and provider of resources for developed economies with very little attention to either short or long-term effect on the people who live there. Focusing on writers and activists from the global South--Ken Saro-Wiwa, Wangari Maathai, Arundhati Roy, Nadine Gordimer--Nixon argues convincingly that any approach to environmentalism that fails to enter into active dialog and alliance with their movements is both intellectually and politically doomed.

Finally (on the positive side), Nixon raises the question of what the "writer activist" can do to address the title issues. Again, it's the right question, but--and here I'm making the transition to the problems--I wish he'd done more to answer it. While Nixon's previous work as a critic--a terrific study of the Capetown Renaissance, South Africa's rough equivalent of the Harlem Renaissance and a study of V.S. Naipaul--makes it clear that he's got a deep grounding in the thorny questions concerning political literature, not much of that awareness is present here. Specifically, I wanted him to bring the writer-activist issues into conversation with what I'll shorthand as the Brecht-Lukasc debate. The central issue there was whether conventional literary forms (for Lukasc, the Dickensian novel and realistic drama) are capable of communicating politically challenging material in a way that leads to real action. Brecht said no, that what we need are forms which jar viewers out of their comfort zones and force them, often uncomfortably and against their wills. The specifics re. Slow Violence differ, but the question's related: can familiar polemical forms which highlight heroic individual political figures (as is the case with Wangari and Maathai) or op-ed pieces such as Roy's, do more than join in the deafening chorus of opinion which floods our media worlds today? Nixon (whose best book, the marvelous *Dreambirds*, uses ostriches as a point of entry into a huge range of issues) is fascinated with non-fiction prose forms. I tend to think that fictional narratives--novels, movies, TV mini-series--have a more central role to play in overcoming resistance and denial.

That leads to my final two criticisms or qualifications, both of which have to do with Nixon's text world. First, I would have liked to have seen more attention to Native American and global indigenous literature. The first books I'd use to spark a discussion of how to portray slow violence effectively would be Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and *The Almanac of the Dead*. Similarly, Nixon pays almost no attention to science fiction, although Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* shares some aesthetic strategies with, for example, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Doris Lessing's *Canopus* series (both of which related directly to Nixon's concerns). I don't think it's accidental that Nixon's discussion of the "environmental picaresque" in the chapter on Sinha and the Bhopal catastrophes was the one I'll be coming back to most frequently.

One last quibble. Although Nixon is probably right when he says that literary criticism about environmental issues--ecocriticism to use the argot--has been unremittingly Americanist in its focus, he oversimplifies several of the canonical writers who have been placed at the center of that canon. It may be true that the critics have been parochial and overly invested in the "sublime," but that's not an accurate description of Gary Snyder (who spent a great deal of time in Asia and is in active dialog with Asian environmentalists), Edward Abbey (who's anything but distanced in his take on how we relate to the land), or Terry Tempest

Williams who, as a Mormon woman, has emphasized the issues of marginalization of the victims in ways that parallel the writers Nixon justly celebrates.

Finally, although Nixon does a terrific job communicating his ideas to a non-academic audience in public talks and journalistic essays, Slow Violence is a highly academic book. He spends a lot of time orienting his ideas towards contemporary arguments among literary critics. To be frank, I just don't give a damn about the relative prestige of post-colonialists or the theoretical discussion of cosmopolitanism vs. world literature. Some of the issues raised in those debates are interesting and, as SV demonstrates, a few are crucial. But I wish Nixon had written a book I could recommend for my non-academic friends, who on average are far far more aware of the issues he raises than those located within academia.

The fact that I've written what's probably the longest GR review I'm likely to says something about the importance of Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor. It frames questions and opens doors. It made me re-think my perspective on issues I've thought about a lot. A platform for further work, on the page and in the world.

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### **Shazia Rahman says**

I loved reading this book. Its smart and well-written and brings together all kinds of ideas that were already in my head in a coherent much less chaotic way.

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### **Shanna Early says**

This is probably the most important book I've read in a long time, and I highly recommend it to anyone concerned about environmental justice or social justice. This is an academic text, but Nixon's writing is clear and interesting. Because the most academic bits of the book are focused on postcolonialism and literary criticism, it's right up my alley. But I think readers who are less interested in debates in literary scholarship can easily skim over the parts that focus more on scholarly concerns if they want to. I think the book overall is worth it.

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### **Michael says**

This book is WOW. This book is yuck.

I already knew fossil fuel companies were slimy and money-hungry, avoiding environmental regulations whenever possible. I knew that the U.S. makes a habit of exporting our dirtiest businesses, and our trash (literally), to poor countries without the political sway to complain about it. I knew that the inhabitants of many small, low-lying islands, who have been faced with the dire consequences of global warming already, have been among the most vocal to speak out about the need for policy change.

Here's what I did not realize.

I did not realize that, even now, oil companies like Shell literally fund and militarize tyrannical governments that won't hold them accountable for harm to the environment or the people of their country. I did not realize

it was so common for them to do this, and then say they had no political sway when the government started literally killing those who start speaking out against the behavior of oil companies.

I did not realize oil companies have been excited about the new possibilities opened up by global warming, as the arctic continues to melt and make it more practical to start drilling up there. I did not realize the U.S. government was excited to help them expedite this process, by clearing away all the pesky red tape that would keep them from doing so.

I did not realize that it is a cold, hard fact that companies like Chevron spend more money advertising how much they care about alternative fuel sources than they actually spend on developing alternative fuels. Although this isn't too hard to imagine.

I did not realize that, at the same time Barack Obama was gently slapping the hand of B.P. after the Deepwater Horizon disaster, he was making sure there was a maximum cap for the cost oil companies would have to pay in the event of a oil disasters in Indian waters, no matter how tremendous the disaster is. The maximum cap? 0.5% of what we expected B.P. to pay when a disaster happened in the U.S.

I did not realize that we only hear about the oil spills that we are expected to be interested in. For instance, we haven't heard much at all about the Exxon disaster's-worth of oil that has been spilled in Nigeria EVERY YEAR, for more than the last thirty years. I would have thought this was newsworthy.

I did not know that, when the Deepwater Horizon disaster happened, B.P. was relying on clean-up methods that were more than forty years old and had been developed for fresh water, because they had never invested in developing clean-up methods since then, or for different ecosystems. I didn't realize that, while B.P. was so clueless about actually cleaning it up, they sent planes out at night to douse the most heavily polluted parts of the water in a chemical that would cause the oil to clump and sink, doing possibly more environmental damage, but making it much harder to determine how large the disaster was.

I really, really wish I didn't have to take this book back to the library tomorrow, so I could write a full review with sources, ala Bird Brian. Instead, You just get to see me in this state of shock as I try to make sense of all this. If you can find a copy of this, I definitely recommend it.

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### **Adrik says**

This text was a revelation for me. The author, Rob Nixon, offers insight into how we are slowly damaging our earth, through what he calls slow violence, a process that is continuous but since it is not of the attention grabbing kind, one that goes unnoticed. The book reads well but is a tough read as he reveals a mix of greed and complacency as the cause for the state of our climate today. However, I feel this book is important to read as it gives us the terminology to discuss these issues as well as little rays of hope in the shape of movements begun by ordinary people wanting and achieving change.

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### **Rob says**

(7/10) I'm of two minds about *Slow Violence*. I wasn't particularly sold on ecocriticism as a critical method going into this book, and Nixon didn't quite persuade me as to its importance. The concept is definitely

intriguing, but I've let to see an ecocritical reading that really made me consider a text in a new light in the same way that feminist or materialist readings often have. Then again, I haven't really looked very hard, and perhaps I simply need more grounding to appreciate Nixon's book. While I enjoyed his reading of Animal's People, a lot of times Nixon seems to use literature simply as a framing device for discussing environmental issues. For instance, his reading of the Nadine Gordimer story is really a reading in name only, as he spends the entire section talking about Kruger Park and its significance (quite well, I might add) while only occasionally quoting from Gordimer. It's probably telling that the chapter I liked best, "Ecologies of the Aftermath", mentions books or other texts only in passing. There are also times when his arguments are too morally simplistic -- the frequently-mentioned contrast between "resource omnivores" and "systems people" too easily breaks down the world into greedy Westerners and the virtuous poor.

With that said, Nixon also develops a number of important concepts. I love the term "slow violence", which incorporates everything from systemic poverty to the erosion of the glaciers, and I support wholeheartedly Nixon's call to focus on it instead of the readily-available spectacle of "fast violence". I also appreciate how he undertakes textual analysis of nonfiction, in particular nonfiction with an obvious political end (as opposed to memoir or other forms which fit easier into standard English practice). Approaching political tracts with the same rigor and detail we approach novels isn't only a way to generate new scholarship, but helps to expand our frame of reference and reveal things to us (such as the environmental philosophies Nixon describes) that might have been obscured by a more limited frame of reference.

So while there were a lot of things I found frustrating about Slow Violence, ultimately it leaves me feeling as though a lot of new avenues have been opened up. Some of those avenues are simply criticizing the text, or perhaps doing it one better. But maybe that desire to jump in the conversation is the real goal of any academic book.

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### **Whitney says**

A fascinating and smart look at how neoliberalism destracts as much as it creates globally.

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### **Kristen Angierski says**

This should be required reading for all humans.

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### **Tania Fabo says**

A lot of interesting concepts in this novel about the impact of less visible, delayed forms of environmental violence and how they disproportionately affect the POC poor. However, the whole thing read a lot like an ode to the writer-activists, and much like a high school book report at times, which, for me, detracted from the impact of the actual histories. It would have been much more impactful as a detailed chronology of slow violence, perhaps making occasional reference to writers as they relate to a particular history. It is currently rather convoluted and confusing, both in the chronology and the sentence structure.

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## **Dan's Obsessions says**

-Extract from a friend--

Here's what I did not realize.

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## **Joe says**

Nixon argues that transnational corporations in collusion with states have made a disheartening array of expropriations from local communities (ecology people) in the name of resource extraction (ex: oil) and/or development (ex: mega-dams). These struggles and their violences are difficult to represent because they occur on large scales of time and manifest in diffuse ways (slow violence). This is in contrast to a symbolic

regime of spectacular, dramatic violence and warfare (the bullet ridden corpse, tumbling towers) to which states and citizens are far more responsive. Nixon argues that slow violence should have just as much priority in our thinking, representation, and action and should be considered within the definitions and effects of warfare; however, the nature of slow violence (diffuse, long gaps between cause and effect, creating displaced peoples without necessarily moving them) creates cover from which state and corporate actors can avoid, defer, or minimize responsibility for the violence of resource extraction, toxic production processes, and massive infrastructure projects. Nixon has a nose for memorable phrasings with which to evoke his central ideas--"vernacular landscape," "Corporate Colonialism," "Developmental Refugee." Nixon turns to literature to examine the methods prose writers take up in the challenge of representing slow violence, its impacts, and strategies of resistance, including the picaresque (to stay close to the ground, the story of the hungry), societal novel (which can move through multiple strata and points of contact), autobiography, polemical essay (Arundhati Roy), and he himself performs a corrective form of journalism in regard to the struggles of radiation victim, Gulf War nurse. Valuable as an example of the opportunities and pitfalls of bringing together eco-crit and post-colonial approaches. Will be sorting out these opportunities and pitfalls over the next few months as I dive into a reading list centering on waste and abjection.

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