

# Spectacles of Futurity: The Oil Industry on YouTube

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THE mythology of neoliberalism is sustained by a continuous and willful appeal to the free market as a kind of equal and immaculate utopian space where humans are allowed to compete in accordance with their nature, where human energy, liberated from the constraints of law and convention, can exercise itself freely. Yet the free market is neither equal nor immaculate, for modern capitalism was co-constituted with colonialism, industrialization and white supremacy, rooted in resource extraction, environmental pollution, and forced labor. Neoliberalism, as an ideology that makes material realities as well as cultural artifacts, creates possibilities for cultural products that actively appropriate anti-neoliberal critiques and transform them into tools for accumulation and privatization. The development of the oil industry is linked deeply to the evolution of capitalism, beginning in the oil fields of Russia in the 19th century and evolving rapidly after World War II into a present-day global industry in which a few corporations control most of the world's wealth, over \$2 trillion (Appel 5). Along with the world's transition from industrial capitalism into neoliberalism comes a transformation in our understanding of the energy needed for the continuous movement and accumulation of capital. The material energy needed to carry out industrial operations becomes the locus for protest and resistance.

In this essay I will explore and interrogate the dynamics of the oil industry and its self-representation in modern media, exploring how oil capitalism is linked to global dynamics of deregulation, white supremacy, and neo-colonization. I will analyze how oil corporations have invested in cultural production via YouTube, mythologizing their practices while invoking a utopian rhetoric that completely obscures the violent realities their activities beget in the world. In *Oil Culture*, Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden argue for an analysis of "oil capitalism" that registers the deeply rooted influence of oil in modern capitalism and interrogates the oil industry's continued influence in popular cultural production (Barrett & Worden xviv). Not only is the oil industry's global growth coincident with the increasing trend toward free market capitalism, it is an industry that participated in active lobbying and political manipulation to increase privatization and greater free market liberties. The Global Climate Coalition is one such lobbying group that took on the front of climate concern while actively publishing climate change denying propaganda (Revkin). It is a contradiction in terms that the oil industry could ever be the agent of an environmentalism that recognizes the ways climate change not only disproportionately affects, but actually targets, poor communities and communities of color.

## "Slow violence," oil, and race

In the last decade, oil corporations have been widely and publicly condemned for disastrous oil spills and petrochemical catastrophes, but these spectacular events are not mere accidents, nor anecdotal: catastrophe is the modus operandi of the oil industry. That is, oil corporations take on reckless extraction projects without regulation or safety protocols, opting to deal with lawsuits and disaster cleanup should there be a public or legal call, a kind of after-the-disaster contingency plan. Further, extraction and processing projects also mean almost certain disaster for local economies, and the collusion of the oil industry in formerly-colonized governments has created petro-states that actively suppress civilian resistance. Since the early days of extraction, oil corporations have embraced a strategy of complete risk that disregards humanitarian consequences. In his essay, "A Short History of Oil Cultures," Frederick Buell calls attention to the modern embrace of risk as

one that is linked with the sweeping deregulation of extractive industries around the world. He calls this embrace of catastrophe “a runaway dynamism” that “rejects the very notion of stability and equilibrium and that celebrates risk and even imminent catastrophe” (Buell 82). Disaster is symbiotically linked with exuberance, such that, the greater the potential for violence (whether political, ecological, or economic), the more intoxicating the oil project.

But the dynamic of catastrophe-exuberance is not just one that plays out in disaster spectacles of the news media; it also takes place over long time scales where slow disasters unfold, destroying the health and livelihood of people where the oil project is taking place. The Mississippi River has been the site of transport and refining of oil products for hundreds of years, and recent petrochemical operations—the process of refining oil into lighter-weight consumer products—has continuously polluted the water and air of the communities that live there, which are predominantly of color. The River delta, commonly referred to as “Cancer Alley,” stretching from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, is known for the high rates of early death due to cancer related to toxic chemical exposure, a site where oil capitalism and white supremacy are deeply linked (Zanolli). Meanwhile, in Nigeria, Shell Oil’s operations since the 1950s, and its collusion with the Nigerian government, have led to the continuous destruction and targeted assassinations of the indigenous Ogoni people and anti-oil activists (“Timeline”). Nigeria’s “independence” is deeply linked with its status as a neo-colony of Shell, a British-Dutch company that is known for its negligence regarding regulations, which it applies only thinly to European and American projects. For example, environmental reports have shown that, since the 1950s, Nigeria has yearly experienced oil spills and leakages of the same magnitude as the catastrophic Exxon-Valdez oil spill in Alaska (Nigeria 16). Oil destruction is regarded as spectacular, worthy of coverage, when it affects the wealthy, white, and Western.

Rob Nixon theorizes an “environmentalism of the poor” that focuses on the long-term environmental destruction as “slow violence,” which is insidious precisely because it is unspectacular. He defines slow violence as “calamities that patiently dispense their devastation while remaining outside our flickering attention spans—outside the purview of a spectacle-driven corporate media. The insidious workings of slow violence derive largely from the unequal attention given to spectacular and unspectacular time” (Nixon 6). Where oil spills and disasters are registered in the media as “spectacular,” the slow accretion of toxicity and pollution in poor of color communities is “unspectacular” for its relative invisibility. As in Cancer Alley or the Niger River Delta, many communities notice the effects of the pollution in premature deaths and diseases, but do not have access to media power or legal defense. The violence done to these communities does not leave evidence in the same way an oil spill does; it is slow, spanning life spans and generations.

The extensive coverage of oil-related catastrophe in the media, which is increasingly wrapped up in the high-paced instantaneity of the internet, renders the everyday, slow violence even more invisible. The environmental movement in the United States, led largely by white upper-middle class people, has inadvertently exacerbated the dynamic of slow violence, operating on a general bias that disasters happen to white people and to pretty animals, not to poor people or people of color.<sup>1</sup> Nixon writes that oil corporations have responded to green activist protests by offloading their operations into other “out-of-sight” parts of the world, that is, communities not visible to the frenetic gaze of modern internet media (2). He continues:

If, under neoliberalism, the gulf between enclaved rich and outcast poor has become even more pronounced, ours is also an era of enclaved time wherein for many speed has become a self-justifying, propulsive ethic that renders ‘uneventful’ violence (to those who live remote from its attritional lethality) a weak claimant on our time [...] The oxymoronic

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<sup>1</sup>This notion is evidenced, for example, by Vogue Italia’s “Water & Oil” photographic series, which sensationalized and fetishized oil pollution as tragic and grotesque on the white female body, completely disassociating the BP oil spill from its devastating impact on people of color in the Gulf (Meisel).

notion of slow violence poses a number of challenges: scientific, legal, political, and representational. (Nixon 8)

In other words, when information is unregulated and flows seemingly infinitely, the accretional violence of petrochemical pollution and oil leakages is rendered not only invisible, but non-existent by virtue of its unassimilability to our high-speed attention spans.

In what follows, I explore how oil companies have capitalized on the profusion of spectacle on the internet through an audio-visual form, appropriating environmentalist rhetoric and strategically occluding their own presence, obscuring the violent, racist, and deadly consequences of their activities.

## Strategies of oil corporations via YouTube

YouTube is an audiovisual platform that has infected modern media consumption. It is a quintessential embodiment of neoliberalized media, an audiovisual “free market,” where everyone from amateur vloggers to Presidential campaigns can compete to accrue popularity on the ever-growing platform, in which 300 hours of video are uploaded every minute (Holehouse). Perhaps predictably, YouTube has become a highly viable media platform for oil corporations to promote their image through long-term, tactical PR campaigns that do not just buffer their public image against environmentalist critique but actively distort and conceal their image. Mona Damluji writes in her essay, “The Image World of Middle Eastern Oil,” about the strategy used by oil companies since the 1950s to conceal their connections with oil and natural gas and instead advertise the brand alone (157). Certainly, on the YouTube channels of Exxonmobil, Shell, BP, and Chevron, “energy” is used as a euphemism for “oil,” such that, based on the corporations’ self-descriptions alone, it would be very difficult to trace their connection to oil. This has evolved in the modern day into “a constant barrage of visual messaging through print, television, and Internet media intended to promote the oil brands as global icons of corporate social and environmental responsibility” (164). In what follows I create an informal taxonomy of corporate tactics used by the world’s most powerful oil giants in their YouTube media and critique their rhetorical, aesthetic, and ethical strategies. While oil corporations have been capitalizing on contradictory logics of environmentalism and humanitarian concern since their nascence—from funding nature documentaries, to promoting new technology, to creating scholarship funds—their YouTube channels reflect a shift in rhetorical strategies toward globalized humanism, an appropriation of identity politics, and a bizarre technofuturism reflecting a neoliberalized world where the free market is the status quo that will still set us free.

### *Toxic Innocence and Universality: Shell’s Bedtime Stories Series*

Given that Shell was the first to capitalize on film production for its PR image, it is no surprise that Shell’s YouTube website is by far the most prolific and popular of the major oil corporations like ExxonMobil, Chevron, and BP. Shell’s YouTube website has 1,511 videos, divided into a profusion of “playlists,” which range from advertisements for oil-based auto-lubricants to scholarship promotional videos to “documentary” coverage of Shell’s decommissioning of oil rigs at sea.<sup>2</sup> However, most disturbing is Shell’s November 2017 series of bedtime stories, which were promoted in tandem with Shell’s “Gravity Light” and “#makethefuture” series.<sup>3</sup> The Gravity Light is lauded

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<sup>2</sup>These decommissioning videos are themselves important objects for analysis, for they seem to promote a rhetoric of “decommissioning” as an environmental step, when in reality decommissioning is forced after oil rigs fail to be profitable for want of oil in the ground (“How”).

<sup>3</sup>“The Hare and the Tortoise” for example (“Pixie”).

by Shell as a revolutionary lighting device that was paraded around Kenya in a campaign for fifty nights (“How”). The videos themselves—thirty eight in all—feature “classic stories from around the world,” read by various celebrities and children, animated by an unnamed (perhaps not human) artist, and featured in three languages: English, Spanish and Portuguese.<sup>4</sup> The innocence and vulnerability of a child actor help to buttress a company’s PR image as also innocent and pro-humanitarian. The series features animation that has crisp, bright color tones and a kind of geometric cleanness, with animals and humans acting out versions of Aesop’s fables and other “classic” world stories that feature narrators from Britain, the U.S., Nigeria, and Austria, but are predominantly narrated by children with cheery, high-pitched voices. The stories are vaguely linked to literacy, presumably made possible by the light provided to Kenyan children by the “Gravity Light,” invoking a light-hearted global community brought into being by Shell’s technology.

These bedtime stories cohere to a neoliberal aesthetics, where the virtual world is cheerfully clean, unburdened by pollution or suffering, and whimsically globalized. The *mise-en-scène* is colorful and ethereal, rendered in vibrant colors like fuchsia or bright green, but also sparse; the forest is made up of solitary angular shrubs and trees, and the animated animals and people do not move their mouths. The “classic” stories are only vague shells of their originals, and no references are made to the religious or cultural history from which they came. What pervades, arguably, is a deep eeriness—the effect the videos are designed to evoke rings hollow, especially as the cheery product is so completely detached from the violent reality of the corporation behind it. In his book *Aesthetic Resistance and Dis-Interest*, John Steppling describes the “political uncanny” as a particular phenomenon of neoliberal mass media production. He writes, “artificial emotions are directly linked to mass media and electronic culture. A revisionist history that creates narratives of military heroism, and blots out stories of sadism and torture [for example], is simply fitting into the default strategy to erase compassion and empathy” (86-7). The strategic reproduction of narrative by those in power leads to a culture of imitated feeling that debilitates our ability to see power as it is. In this case, Shell is creating revisionist bedtime narratives, taking very generalized world stories and effectively leeching off the sentiment attached. What it is “blotting out” is the frenetic expansion of its violence in the last fifty years.

Shell’s bedtime story series is “uncanny,” but not outright disturbing, because it gestures toward an imaginary world of universal empathy while remaining completely untethered to any worldly reality. Daniel Worden, in his piece “Fossil-Fuel Futurity,” writes that such gestures are ideological devices that “disconnect fossil-fuel consumption from the environment and instead place it in the realm of the ‘merely’ cultural” (Worden 110). Shell obscures its real-life investments in violence and environmental destruction by creating these dissociated worlds of animated whimsy, at once occluding its own investments and appropriating the universal stories themselves. Shell lays claim to global humanism by invoking “tradition,” and “life lessons” as if it were a cultural organization rather than a corporation. The very notion of a YouTube bedtime story also presupposes a complete disengagement with the tactile and human world, assuming that a YouTube representation of a bedtime story is capable of replacing the oral and embodied telling of one.

### ***“Light” Carbon and Simulation of Corporate Responsibility***

Oil corporations are always faced with the challenge of absorbing and fending off environmentalist critiques, and it seems that in its abundance of promotional “science” videos, the oil industry claims that increased efficiency is unilaterally equated with sustainability. Innovation, meanwhile, is abstracted to refer to an imaginary future where humans have transcended environmental constraints. Here I will analyze specifically the “energy-efficient” “science” promotional videos of BP,

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<sup>4</sup>It is no coincidence that Shell has extensive oil operations in South America.

Chevron, and ExxonMobil, interrogating the semantic strategies they all use to conceal their relationship to environmental destruction and catastrophe.

BP features a series of videos on its “low Carbon programme,” wherein a British man narrates what he claims are multiple environmental initiatives. The video shows abstract green and blue leaf-like objects swirling around, then clustering together to reveal different initiatives. This video is not really about sustainability, but really just a series of advertisements for BP products, from “Castrol Edge Lubricants” to “BP BioFuel,” which are supposedly made of “lighter Carbon” products, a euphemism for natural gas (“BP”).<sup>5</sup> In an ExxonMobil video, called “Efficiency Lab,” “lighter Carbon” is also invoked, as a soft female voice narrates a poem imposed over background images of pistons pumping, golden oil swirling, and sleek cars leaving garages (“Efficiency”). Here, the mechanics of a car are a metonym for efficiency and futurity. Like the BP video, “light Carbon” is euphemistically used. Where the depletion of oil and gas reserves and anti-oil initiatives threaten the industry, companies respond by insisting that natural gas is essential to moving toward sustainability. Indeed, on Shell’s website, a “scenario” report claims that Shell is motivated to meet the demands of the Paris Climate agreement, but insists that a spike in oil extraction and consumption is necessary to meet the demand (“Collaborating”). “Light carbon” is ultimately oil’s insistence on its own hypothetical viability in a sustainable future, but simultaneous erasure of its disastrous impact on global climate.

“Protecting the El Segundo Blue Butterfly,” a video by Chevron lasting a total of thirty seconds and narrated by a fast-paced male voice, describes how “Doers” helped “save” the El Segundo blue butterfly in southern California by planting buckwheat (“Protecting”). The logical acrobatics of this video come to light with a bit more digging into Chevron’s fraught relationship with the butterfly. In the 1910s directly, Chevron’s industry operations contributed to the butterfly’s near extinction by destroying sand dune habitats (Mattoni 281). The reference to “doers” is part of a broader campaign by Chevron to link its company with American “hard-work” and “doing,” with vague references to the way the United States depends on energy (“America”). Not only does the “doing” fit properly within the “bootstraps” myth so endemic to neoliberal nostalgia,<sup>6</sup> but the use of the butterfly as a symbol for the environment writ large is a perfect example of capitalist firms appropriating threatening critiques and refining them into commodities themselves.

Lastly, all four oil companies analyzed in this essay—Shell, Chevron, Exxonmobil, and BP—appropriate a language of identity politics in an attempt to sell the idea that their companies actually care about the existence of people who are harmed by the violence done to them. In many instances images of the demographics most likely to be harmed by the oil industry are featured as the ones benefiting from its supposed magnanimity. The YouTube channels of each company feature many women of color brightly talking about how the corporation helps them, and, by extension, the world. BP, for a particularly disturbing example, has a series called “EnergyWithin,” which recently featured the paraplegic Egyptian swimmer Aya Abbas, who competed in the Special Olympics (“Igniting”). Shell Oil, meanwhile has a series of interviews that show Letitia Wright, a Black British woman who acted in the recent blockbuster film *Black Panther*, interviewing a series of female engineers on how their careers have been benefited by Shell (“Engineering”). This oil industry trend toward advertising the bodies of women, especially women of color in audiovisual production, is a liberal appropriation of notions of gender and racial equity that situates the corporation at the center of progress. Further, the implicit message of the videos is that the wider and deeper the corporation’s power, the more everyone in the world will be able to fulfill their human potential.

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<sup>5</sup>The video implies that the use of “lighter Carbon” is akin to lowering Carbon emissions, which is only nominally true.

<sup>6</sup>The “bootstraps” myth refers to the notion that through hard work alone, anyone can achieve wealth and success, by “pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps.” This myth fails to acknowledge the deep inequities—namely racial—in the economic system that overtly and tacitly prevent people from achieving social mobility.

Slavoj Žižek famously speaks about the new trend in modern capitalism toward a synthesis of consumption and social justice within the same gesture: when a consumer buys a product, they not only buy the material good but also some supposed act of charity attached, such that consumption becomes a hallucinatory act of activism itself (Žižek). The oil industry has moved toward a PR strategy of converting people's guilt and fear regarding impending environmental disaster into a product that can ease their minds. The "lighter Carbon" products sold by ExxonMobil and BP are designed to maintain the same consumer behaviors while convincing consumers that they are also being environmentally friendly in their consumption. Further, the use of women of color in advertising is a means of convincing consumers that they are, indirectly, supporting women of color when they (inevitably) buy oil products. The deluge of audiovisual media available on the channels of oil corporations also means it is impossible to hold them accountable for all their claims to social justice, such that they can cast their supposed initiatives toward "sustainability" and "energy efficiency" as environmentalist, or feminist. In reality, the sustainability they speak of is more concerned with the durability of their power over the future financial market, and their energy efficiency is really the efficiency of making more money off of less.

### ***Obscurantist Aesthetics and Futurity***

A third disturbing strategy used by oil corporations on YouTube is rhetoric and imagery of a utopian future, what I call petro-futurism, which uses circular logic and confusing language. As oil scrambles for viability in the future market, a variety of tactics are used, wherein the inherent unknowability of the future is itself transformed into a lucrative terrain of risk and global transformation.

Shell, for example, has a series of YouTube videos that describe an initiative called "Shell Scenarios," which claim to predict how "the world" needs to respond to "an uncertain future." In one video, a white man says to the camera, "all of us still have to make big decisions that can have important consequences, whether personal or organizational. But [...] we tend to be trapped within the limits of our own experience, which leads to all kinds of problems" ("Navigating"). The impossibility of absolute objectivity, the epistemological uncertainties inherent to human existence, are transformed into a terrain of commodifiable possibility and risk. The man describes how Shell is working on developing "alternative memories of the future," which, as the rest of the video implies, refers to some kind of utopian strategy wherein temporal boundaries are transcended through a belief in risk. Returning to Buell's theory of the "exuberance and catastrophe" ideology, the future-oriented language of Shell embodies a kind of ecstatic embrace of disaster. The implication is that environmental and humanitarian regulations are futile because the future is inherently unknowable. The rest of the video frames climate change as just one "trend" among other "trends" like "demographic change" and "technological change" that will happen in the world. Shell uses a pseudo-futuristic rhetoric to lay claim to the inherent risk of the future as itself a marketable, commodifiable risk.

In his essay, "Securing Oil," Michael J. Watts describes the neoliberal era as one of commodified contingency: "Risk has become an ontology, a form of being, a worldview, and a way of life. [...] oil as a commodity has been subject to [...] the evisceration of anything like regulatory oversight" (Watts 235). As Watts describes, the promise of risk contained in oil, the future of catastrophe, can itself be leveraged in the stock market. Frontier capitalism has been warped into techno-future capitalism, where Shell's "alternative memories of the future" really refer to the immense lucrative potential of devastating catastrophe. When Shell talks about the uncertainty of the future, it is situating the oil market as the ideal embodiment of a world of risk, where disaster will liberate the market from the shackles of human and governmental constraints. Further, Shell's over-generalized, hyperbolic use of nebulous words like "uncertainty" and mangling of temporalities is part of an obscurantist aesthetics wherein all reference to oil is completely absent, while references to "energy" and "the future" are linked with the corporate brand. That is, oil corporations are

turning the energy needed to sustain life into a metaphysical advertising strategy, and the future into a terrain for more risk.

Over the last several years, the veritable deluge of YouTube videos produced by oil corporations is but a new manifestation of an old strategy—formerly in print media—of protecting the public perception of oil from scrutiny. The invocation of innocence, global humanism, social justice, and futurity are all strategies used by Big Oil to obscure the harm they beget in the world, and to maintain their increasing capitalization on risk as a commodifiable reality made only more lucrative by climate change and continued environmental devastation. As Byung-Chul Han writes in *Psychopolitics*, “Power that is smart and friendly does not operate frontally [...] It *leads astray* instead of erecting obstacles. *Friendly* power proves *more powerful*, as it were, than purely repressive power. It manages not to be seen at all” (Han 14-15). Indeed, what is so disturbingly tactful about the audiovisual production of oil corporations is how they create a bright and futuristic spectacle that operates, to return to Nixon, “propulsively,” at a rapid pace of time that renders the slow violence of oil corporations invisible. Further, the references to the future by Shell’s “alternative memories of the future” video are, in some sense, Shell’s actual business model: capitalizing on risk and incentivizing destruction as a begetter of more risk.

### **.1 Conclusion: Possibilities for Subversion**

For decades, Big Oil has been widely ridiculed by environmental activists and the common populace for “greenwashing,” a term which refers to the PR strategies used by corporations to occlude environmentally destructive behaviors using “eco-friendly” media campaigns (Watson). With the rise of the internet, the tactics for greenwashing have grown even more shrewd and difficult to identify. In the wake of the oil industry’s recent petro-futurist video productions, several independent audiovisual artists have used their medium to expose the reality of oil extraction and production.

One such work is that of the British satirical artist Darren Cullen, who makes artwork and videos that disrupt the spectacular logic and aesthetics of oil corporation media through satire. In 2017 Cullen stewarded a “Shell Climate Solutions Roadshow” that pointedly visualized the irony behind Shell’s “Make the Future” campaign. In one video featured in the “Roadshow,” a miniature car sits in a glass box that fills with fake carbon monoxide in a simulation of a suicide, reframing Shell’s slogan #makethefuture as “#burnthefuture” and implying that part of Shell’s plan for emissions reduction is in fact mass death by emissions. A series of drawings by Cullen demonstrate a collection of fake eco-friendly strategies by Shell, including “Converting Submerged Wind Farms to Tidal Turbines” and “Converting Whale Ships to Run on Biofuel.” In a pointed visual twist, the “S” on a gleaming replica of a “Shell” gas station sign has lost its “S” and become simply “hell.” These “strategies” demonstrated by Cullen call out Shell’s attempts to twist the harmful consequences of climate change into fodder for new technology (Cullen). With a few simple visual and rhetorical shifts, Cullen seizes the pro-environmentalist machinations of oil advertisements and turns them on their head to reveal the suicidal anti-humanitarian realities behind Big Oil.

Zina Saro-Wiwa, a filmmaker based in Brooklyn from Nigeria, makes video art that stages an intervention in the spectacular imagery typical of oil spills, challenging the viewer to witness the slow violence, in Rob Nixon’s terms, of Shell’s continued destruction of the Niger River Delta. Zina’s father, Ken Saro-Wiwa, was an anti-oil activist and writer who was executed by the Nigerian government in 1995, after a decades-long fight against Shell’s destruction of the essential land of the Ogoni people. In one video by Saro-Wiwa, “Karikpo Pipeline,” several dancers in traditional Ogoni clothing dance among the oil infrastructure surrounding the Delta, performing a “Karikpo” masquerade dance that emphasizes playfulness and vivacity. A split screen captures images of fields and dirt roads as human forms emerge from the distance and stand upright near the camera, creating a disjointed effect where multiple timelines appear to be happening at once. The standing forms of the dancers contrast with the horizontal lines of pipelines, and in many shots the dancers are simply still, containing a stalwart refusal to be moved even when there is uncertainty in the

land around them. Ultimately, the main source of movement in the video comes from the shifting camera perspective, which occasionally pans over a landscape marred by pipelines and extraction sites. There is a stillness in the video that captures the slow accretion of violence on the landscape rather than the sudden spectacles so endemic to public oil spill coverage. However, the stillness of the Karikpo dancers seems to match that of the landscape, as though the humans living in the Delta will not be so swayed by the volatility of the oil industry and its media representation (“Karikpo”). In another video, “Niger Delta: A Documentary,” Saro-Wiwa captures a single, four-minute-long shot of a shoreline somewhere along the Delta, and an empty red chair sits in the foreground as a boatman paddles by in the distance. While the “Documentary” title of the video implies a more descriptive, dynamic, and even politicized rendering of the Delta, Saro-Wiwa by contrast captures a feeling of banality and absence; the empty red chair sits utterly still, and the immense harm done by Shell’s industry is unseen as the Delta itself carries on (Saro-Wiwa). This video refuses to be captivating or spectacular, and instead captures the everyday reality of a moment on the Niger River, a repudiation of the sometimes fickle urgency with which the white-dominated environmentalist movement operates. In this video, the continuation of the everyday—a man transporting himself slowly down a river—is itself a repudiation of the loss inflicted by Shell.

The most notable intervention against petro-futurist greenwashing is the documentary capacity that now exists for activists and community organizers fighting (often at a grassroots, small scale) the operations of the oil industry, particularly in the U.S. The subversive database “Royal Dutch Shell” is an online, publicly available repository of information regarding Shell that leverages community power to monitor and critique the obscurantist strategies of the corporation (“Royal”). Smartphone cameras allow for documentation of oil operations as well as the police response to anti-oil protests. Along the banks of Louisiana’s “Cancer Alley,” St. James and St. John the Baptist Parish are two communities that continue to experience high levels of disease-causing pollutants released into the air and drinking water of the Mississippi. Under the organization RISE St. James, several community members protested against construction of the petrochemical plastic plant Formosa in October 2019, and filmed their altercations with police, not only amplifying the necessity of their political cause but capturing the police backlash against protests by a predominantly Black environmental justice group (Dermansky). During the now widely known Standing Rock protests against the building of the Keystone XL Pipeline through North and South Dakota, civilian footage was crucial in building public consciousness, documenting the progress of pipeline construction, and drawing in more support for the temporary encampment of protestors (“Video”).

Ultimately, for every new Shell bedtime story released on YouTube or celebrity-sponsored BP oil promotional video, there are dozens of amateur videos published online by people affected by oil, or participating in the resistance against its continued operations. The very same tools for cultural production that were once reserved for the wealthy and powerful are now widely available to the resisting public. Just as Big Oil has appropriated the “democratic” platform of YouTube to sell its imagery and language of “eco-friendliness,” there is continued possibility for artists and organizers to leverage video as a means of sharing the reality of living on a planet of abundant resources.



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