

Representing Slow Violence and Resistance: On Hiding and Seeing

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Abstract

Focusing on representations of violence and its resistance, this special issue engages and troubles Nixon's (2011) theorization of slow violence, contributing feminist and antiracist perspectives. The concept of slow violence has recently seen growing interest among geographers and researchers across disciplines who are grappling with the multi-faceted nature of violence across politics, culture and history. In this issue, the authors draw upon the concept of slow violence to explore social and environmental injustices in the toxic sites of waste, racialized surveillance of food landscapes, caregiving, policing in gentrifying neighborhoods, and the dismantling of social housing provision. Documenting what Said (2001) called "the normalized quiet of unseen power" of making visible the invisible, the papers gathered here raise critical questions of witnessing, surveillance, silencing, and refusal. Reframing how we understand violence, the authors take up a core theme in Nixon's original work, opening up "narrative imaginings that witness sights unseen" (Nixon 2011, 15), while explicitly centering the concerns, knowledge and bodies of those who suffer violence that have been forgotten, hidden, or otherwise erased. What the papers have in common is an insistence that it is not only violence that is unseen, but the people themselves whose humanity is unrecognized and whose material struggles are disappeared, as made evident in "Black Lives Matter." Collectively, we foreground the perspectives of those most affected by violence with the understanding that not only do they hold deep knowledge about their lives and experience, but that their particular vantage point is critical in understanding structural inequalities (Smith 2013; Torre, Stoudt, Manoff, & Fine 2017; Tuck & Yang 2014).

Introduction



Figure 1: New York's Municipal Slave Market, New York City, Wall Street & Pearl Street. Photo credit: Caitlin Cahill 2019

‘A violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’ (Nixon, 2011, 2).

Unless you were actively seeking it, you would probably miss the plaque commemorating New York's Municipal Slave Market, tucked away between slender trees in a parklet of wood chips and rocks on the corner of Wall and Pearl Streets. It is a paltry thing compared to the statuesque memorials of Christopher Columbus, Teddy Roosevelt, Robert E Lee, and J. Marion Sims (the “father of gynecology” who tortured, aka “experimented on,” enslaved Black women without anesthesia) found throughout the city (and country), statues that serve as “the material nodes in the network of white supremacy” and “the visible form of the established order of racial hierarchy” (Mirzoeff 2017). And yet the marker of the Slave Market is something and this something matters. Conceived by activists involved with Occupy Wall Street, the marker was dedicated just four years ago, providing a history that many New Yorkers still don't know about, even though the African Burial Ground National Monument is just a few blocks away (dedicated in 2007). The largest and earliest cemetery for free and enslaved Africans in North America, the African Burial Ground's preservation and memorial was established thanks to the persistent activism of the African-American community. Over 15,000 skeletal remains are interred at this site, twenty percent of New Yorkers were enslaved, and almost half of all New York households included an enslaved person, second only in the colonies to Charlestown, Virginia. Not only is this history “unseen” – or, perhaps more accurately, hidden -- also underrecognized are the revolts organized by free and enslaved African Americans rising up against inhumane and brutal conditions (cf. [Black Gotham Experience](#)). While the official histories of slavery are almost erased from the public spaces of the city, antiblack violence and the struggles for freedom, life, and visibility continue to unfold in the historical present (cf. McKittrick's important work on "Plantation Futures," 2013; Inwood & Bonds 2016).

2019 marks the 400th anniversary of enslaved Africans coming to the US, the basis for racial capitalism and white supremacy that is central to the US and UK empires and their aftermaths. Writing

from these locations, we open with this observance as a stark example of the temporalities and spatialities of violence. How might we come to terms with the denial and erasures of our violent legacies, with what Hartman (2008, 6) identifies as the “afterlife of slavery,” referring to the “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment”? At the same time, how might we engage in the ongoing collective work of not only recognizing this history and present moment, but to struggle towards the arc of freedom (Hannah-Jones 2019; Johnson & Lubin 2017; Kendi 2017; Sharpe 2016; #BlackLivesMatter)?

Another anniversary we call attention to is the 50th anniversary of Stonewall, the spontaneous uprising in response to police brutality that catalyzed the LGBTQ liberation movement worldwide. What is sometimes forgotten in LGBTQ Pride celebrations is that Stonewall was not peaceful, but a disruptive violent struggle organized by a multiracial coalition in response to routine state-sanctioned police violence, co-led by Black and Brown trans women. Insisting on an intersectional understanding of violence, hooks (1990, 205) reminds us that “our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting.” In observing these anniversaries we join scholars, activists, and artists who narrate violence as not only a project of recognition but of redistribution, calling attention to the ongoing material struggles (#BlackLivesMatter; Cacho 2012; Fraser 1995; Hanhardt 2013; Kelley 1997; Moraga & Anzaldúa 1981; McKittrick 2013; Johnson & Lubin 2017; Browne 2015).

Focusing on representations of violence and its resistance, this special issue engages and troubles Nixon’s conceptualization of slow violence, contributing feminist and antiracist perspectives. Nixon’s (2011) theorization of slow violence has recently seen growing interest among geographers and researchers across disciplines who are grappling with the multi-faceted nature of violence across politics, culture and history. In this issue, authors draw on the concept of slow violence to explore social and environmental injustices in the toxic sites of waste, racialized surveillance of food landscapes, caregiving, policing in gentrifying neighborhoods, and the dismantling of social housing provision. The papers gathered here document what Said (2001) called “the normalized quiet of unseen power” of making visible the invisible, while also raising critical questions of witnessing, surveillance, silencing, and refusal.

Reframing how we understand violence, the authors collectively take up a core theme in Nixon’s original work, opening up “narrative imaginings that witness sights unseen” (Nixon 2011, 15). If slow violence is not an immutable nor inevitable force, how might its contestations be made legible? Nixon also states (2011, 16): “contests over what counts as violence are intimately entangled with conflicts over who bears the social authority of witness which entails much more than simply seeing or not seeing.” In response, this collection explicitly centers the concerns, knowledge and bodies of those who suffer violences “unseen,” that have been forgotten, hidden, or otherwise erased. The state of being “unseen” reveals how violence is invisibilized or “naturalized” and our collective complicity (Yancy and Butler 2015). What the papers have in common is an insistence that it is not only violence that is unseen, but the people themselves whose humanity is unrecognized and whose material struggles are disappeared (as made evident in “Black Lives Matter”). Collectively, we foreground the perspectives of those most affected by violence with the understanding that not only do they hold deep knowledge about their lives and experience, but that their particular vantage point is critical in understanding structural inequalities (Smith 2013; Torre, Stoudt, Manoff, & Fine 2017; Tuck & Yang 2014).

In this introductory overview we explore these themes further. We start by highlighting the key contributions of Nixon’s idea of slow violence for geographical research on violence (see also Pain and Cahill, in preparation). We then raise a number of questions framed by critical intersectional perspectives informed by feminist and antiracist scholarship. This discussion brings us to the interwoven issues of resistance and representation, and our attempts to affect an epistemological shift to polyvocal and intersectional analyses that places emphasis on embodied and emotional registers of violence. The

collection therefore aims to contribute to interdisciplinary interest in slow violence by opening up questions of what Mirzoeff (2011) calls “countervisuality” and other forms of resistance.

Expanding slow violence

Nixon’s 2011 book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* has been taken up enthusiastically by researchers in a wide range of disciplines, including human geography (e.g. Cahill 2015; Kern 2016; Davies 2019; de Leeuw 2016; O’Lear 2015; Pain 2019). Its core conceptual value for geographers lies in its focus on the temporalities of structural violence (see Pain and Cahill in preparation). Nixon’s argument is that many harmful and iniquitous forms of violence acquire their power over the long term: they are gradual, accumulative, and most of all, hidden forces that may take place over years, decades or longer. Harm is spatially as well as temporally dispersed from the initial event or events and their full impact. At first glance, this framing of violence fits well with feminist and antiracist theorizations of violence as multi-scalar and as simultaneously mundane/everyday and spectacular/political (Christian et al. 2016; Hyndman 2003; Pain & Staeheli 2004; Pain 2015). It also aligns with such authors’ correctives to geographical research on violence which tends to fetishize spectacular events on the global or international stage. Nixon argues that slow violence is enabled by an emphasis upon a particular epistemic construction of crises and disasters (cf. O’Lear 2015). He asks, what if instead we attended to the “hushed havoc” and “injurious invisibility” of slow violence?

While Nixon’s own empirical examples focus on the environmental consequences of pollution, warfare and climate change, the concept of slow violence has wider resonance. For us, it is relevant to understanding how the ongoing processes of colonialism and racial capitalism take shape in concurrent structural and everyday forms of violence, not as a one-off spectacular event, but as continual, incremental discriminatory dispossessions at the intersection of gender, class, race and place. As Laurie and Shaw (2018, 10) point out, violence “burns in the background of daily life ... it is an existential climate by which localized subjects and worlds condense into being.” Nixon’s articulation of the invisibility of slow violence aligns with our commitments to un hiding the ways that power distorts and shapeshifts, erasing widespread pernicious forms of harm.

Reporting from diverse sites, from a mining town in North Eastern England to the wastelands of the Northern California, the papers gathered in this special issue take up the challenge of “rendering visible occluded, sprawling webs of interconnectedness” (Nixon 2009, 443) of violence in dramatically different socio-political landscapes. Witnessing testimonies of Black food geographies, Jones documents the affective experiences of navigating racial surveillance in retail spaces, raising questions as to how the visceral and poetics intersect. The embodied experience of negotiating racial profiling is also central to the struggles of young, working-class people of color growing up policed in gentrified/still disinvested New York City, discussed by Cahill et al. in their paper. Excavating geographies of environmental injustice and racial violence in San Francisco, Tagle describes an alternative optics uncovered through creative acts of salvage produced by Asian/American artists. In the UK, Pain et al. witness the harm caused by recent government housing policies in Britain’s post-industrial places, tracking the lineage of these harmful actions back to the violences of capitalism in the past. Calling attention to the unacknowledged role of youth caregivers in the US, Olson explores the process of representing the ‘vigorously unimagined.’ Dowler and Christian also address unacknowledged violences in their theoretical intervention, locating slow violence in a historic context of feminist scholarship that is overlooked by Nixon. Perhaps Nixon’s most important contribution is to highlight the problem of representing forms of violence, and how the silence cloaking violence is precisely how it acquires its capacity to damage and retrench iniquitous forms of social, economic and political oppression. It is this idea, and the challenge of representation, that our authors take up and that our collection focuses on most closely, as we expand below.

Not so slow (or fast): Questioning slow violence



Figure 2: Image by Giovana Medeiros @giovanamedeiros. “No Es Fuego Es Capitalismo” is a meme created on Twitter and Instagram retrieved from DecolonizeThisPlace, August 22, 2019.

As we write, the Amazon is on fire, July 2019 was the hottest month in historical record, and the devastations of climate crisis are apparent everywhere. So, is violence really slow and “unseen”? What does “slow” mean – slow to whom? Whose gaze is privileged? Who is seeing, who is hiding, and who is being obscured? Taking climate emergency as a stark example raises pointed questions about denial and complicity in the “climate apartheid” (Dawson 2017) of the capitalocene (Altvater et al. 2016) (see Figure 2). These questions offer critical insights into the issues the authors foreground in this special issue: antiblackness, class struggle, patriarchy, neoliberal capitalism, and their intersections. Challenging what critical theorist Rizvi (2015) identifies as “epistemic laziness,” or the stance of “needing not to know” in order to sustain privilege and power, we draw upon feminist and antiracist scholars who insist upon situated and embodied knowledge (Haraway 1988). Centering the knowledge and epistemic expertise of those most affected by violence, slow and otherwise, we recognize that from this location there are critical insights into the history and structural arrangements of injustice. In the case of climate emergency, for example (and to state the obvious), how might we learn from Indigenous communities and communities of color like Flint, Michigan, USA who are engaged in the struggle for sovereignty over land and water? Or, in a different context that is nonetheless resonant, what can we learn from transgender and gender non-conforming people who continue to struggle over sovereignty to their bodies, identities, and pronouns? We ask these questions to point explicitly to how marginalized people are often

marked timeless, too slow for modernity, or “out of time” (Zaborskis 2016) --and to how they challenge these positions and continue to fight.

The papers share an intersectional analysis informed by feminist and antiracist perspectives—an analysis that we suggest is overdue. In the first paper, Dowler and Christian offer an important conceptual context for the collection. They demonstrate that Nixon’s identification of the dispersal of historical violence across time to shape the present has strong precedents in feminist and critical race analyses of violence. Further, Dowler and Christian argue that in his exposition of slow violence, Nixon runs the risk of reifying binaries of slow/fast, visible/invisible, spectacular/mundane, and so on, implying that they are materially (as well as symbolically) different. In expanding consideration of ‘violence’ beyond the usual dichotomy of everyday/state, Dowler and Christian engage the insights of feminist geopolitics and Black feminist scholarship to demonstrate the mutually constitutive relationship between the intimate and global, and the personal and political (Cahill 2007; Dowler & Sharp 2001; Gilmore 2007; Hyndman 2001; Lorde 1984; Mahtani 2014; Mountz & Hyndman 2006; Pain, 2015; Pain & Staeheli 2014; Pratt & Rosner 2012; Wright 2006, Smith 2016). A number of scholars have explicitly described violence that cycles between ‘fast’ or ‘hot’ and ‘slow’ or ‘banal’ (see also Christian et al 2016). For example, in an account of women’s peacebuilding activities in the face of gendered and military violence in the Pacific Islands, George (2014) considers the relation between immediate “hot conflicts” and slow violence in the form of sea-level rise, masculinized politics and militarism that are ignored but that underpin women’s insecurity. De Leeuw (2016) extends slow violence to understand the colonial violence still taking place in British Columbia, now perpetrated through the intimate sphere of home, family, and Indigenous women’s and children’s bodies. And in Rezwana and Pain’s (2019) research in Bangladesh, *both* cyclone disasters and gender-based violence manifest as both immediate and dramatic spectacles as well as long-term chronic processes that have the greatest impacts on women and children.

Further muddying the idea of slow/fast violence, feminist and antiracist scholars question whether violence can ever be understood as slow at all. For example, in the Growing Up Policed research project (Cahill et al., in this issue), slowness does not describe the experience of neighborhood dispossession through oppressive policing practices because of the understanding that violence has a history with consequences that play out over time. An alternative concept to describe the temporalities of such violence might be latency, involving periods of apparent dormancy punctuated with times of more visible violence. This acknowledges the repetition involved in oppressive violence, as well drawing on theorizations the trauma that always follows violence and is an integral part of its impacts (hooks 2003; Pain 2019; Tamas 2011). Jones (in this issue), for example, discusses racial trauma to underscore the pervasive ongoing effects of racism and white supremacy on Black wellbeing that may be internalized and felt over time. Perhaps just as trauma lies dormant in bodies, violence is latent in some landscapes of structural inequality, periodically erupting (see Mountz 2017).

The concurrent temporalities and spatialities of violence produce what we might call a collective cognitive dissonance; it is seen and not seen by wider publics and societies. Our collection grapples with not only how this dissonance operates, but the implications it has for organizing and resistance. In characterizing slow violence as invisible, Nixon is clear that seeing and not seeing are intentional strategies of the powerful to conceal violence. He argues that the erasure of violence is a tactic that encourages a ‘stage-managed amnesia,’ so that violence is forgotten (see also Kern 2016). In many cases, it is not that the effects of slow violence cannot or can no longer be seen: as Davies (forthcoming) describes in the toxic landscapes of Louisiana’s ‘Cancer Alley’, many residents clearly see and feel the material effects of slow violence in everyday life.

Instead of invisibility, our authors consider whether perhaps slow violence might be ‘hidden in plain sight’ (Dawson 2016). Decentering what Haraway (1988, 581) identified long ago as “the god trick,” the “conquering gaze from nowhere,” feminist, antiracist and Indigenous scholars argue that

knowledge is informed by one's location, while calling attention to how dominant perspectives assume a stable and omniscient vantage point. Nixon (2011, 16) articulates this as the issue of 'who counts as a witness' connected with 'conflicts over who bears the social authority of seeing.' Opening up new sightlines, the papers here interrogate claims of visibility and raise significant questions of surveillance and power. Reversing the "gaze on power" as an analytic practice to "make transparent the metanarrative of knowledge production – its spectatorship for pain and its preoccupation for documenting and ruling over racial difference" (Tuck & Yang 2014, 817), our papers engage what critical race theory scholars identify as "dark sousveillance" (Browne 2015). The Growing Up Policed research team, for example, uncovers the relationships between the structural disinvestment of their community for profit, and the criminalization and policing of young working class people of color, an ontological violence that "blames the victim" (Cahill et al., in this issue). This is also evident for Pain et al., in the historical and continuing dispossession through stigmatization of the UK's coalmining communities. Elsewhere, in a study of embodied experiences of online bullying, Brydolf-Horwitz (2018) identifies "the persistent cognitive disconnect between the virtual and the corporeal, and the language that enacts or justifies such distinctions," highlighting not the invisibility of slow violence, but how it is talked about and responded to—or not discussed or recognized at all.

Nixon argues that if the modern nation state is sustained by an idea of an imagined community, it also actively produces "vigorously unimagined communities" (2011, 150). Dowler and Christian extend this argument, demonstrating how the invisibility of slow violence is deeply imbricated in the invisibility of feminized and racialized experiences and space more broadly. This analysis is also central to Black geographies, that McKittrick (2011, 951) articulates are classified as "spaces 'without'/spaces of exclusion, even as those who have always struggled against racial violence and containment populate them." In her exploration of Black food geographies, Jones demonstrates how "they are rendered "out of sight" and out of place. Their marginalization underscores their existence." Olson traces the lack of recognition for youth caregivers to dominant childhood narratives in the US, founded in eugenics and whiteness that not only erase, but stigmatize this important form of social reproduction. In their participatory research in Brooklyn, New York, Cahill et al. demonstrate how broken windows policing works to disappear young people of color and their communities while criminalizing them, a violence that is repackaged as revanchist "progress" in gentrifying communities. Salvaging the disparate histories and geographies of waste through an analysis of art work, Tagle tracks the violence of racializing working class communities as disposable in wastelanded places in the Bay Area.

Above all, feminist and antiracist scholars argue for the need to understand violence as a relational construct that attends to life-giving praxes of care as well as harm and brutality. For example, McKittrick (2011, 948) calls for *analyses* of violence to move beyond "bifurcated racial categories (black = dispossessed, white = freedom)" and the "paradoxical preoccupation with the suffering/violated black body" that displaces human life and a "black sense of place." She shares the generative work of Gilmore (2007) as an example, describing the labor of African-American mothers who mobilize around the premature death of their children in the context of the expansion of the California prison industrial complex, revealing the intimacy of racial capitalism while highlighting grassroots opposition. In another small yet important location in the world, in North East England, Pain et al. highlight how, many years ago, coalmining communities set up their own welfare structures, and that this tradition of collective action still informs how they take care of and depend upon each other in the context of contemporary structural housing dispossession. Jones describes the survival strategies she and the Black testifiers she interviews consciously engage as they negotiate predominantly white food spaces. Tagle describes the assemblages of Asian/American artists that witness violence and environmental injustice, engaging in "creative practice that labors to transvalue disposable lives and landscapes into sites of worth, no longer waste."

The evidence of things unseen: Responding to violence

The collection also engages with the question of how researchers bring hidden violences to light and engage with these struggles – what Baldwin calls the “evidence of things unseen” (Baldwin 1985). If we understand violence as ongoing and always present, and informed by the past, how do we respond? Rather than only manifest in the spectacle of organized collective public protest, what are the everyday, localized and ongoing ways we might engage and resist? Askins (2015) reminds us that “quiet politics” can be every bit as agentic as more public and visible forms of resistance. Feminist and antiracist scholars long ago identified and theorized different forms of “transformative resistance” and political engagement that may take shape behind the scenes and in private spaces (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001; Staeheli, 1994). Attending to the effects of violence and repression in everyday life, several of the papers here highlight socio-spatial strategies for resistance and survival practiced in particular contexts (Jones, Cahill et al., Olson). Significantly, our collection takes into account the ways that violence “shapes, but does not wholly define,” everyday life (McKittrick, 2011, 947).

A key focus for all the papers here is how we, as researchers, represent violence without reproducing it. Antiracist, Indigenous, and feminist scholars ask us to “suspend damage” (Tuck 2009) and refuse to “only speak of your pain” (hooks 1990), calling for scholars to “re-think analyses of injustice that re-isolate the dispossessed” (McKittrick 2011, 960). With this epistemological drive, each of the papers here engages a “countervisuality” (Mirzoeff, 2011) that shifts the gaze away from the suffering body and onto the structures, systems and policies that underpin slow violence. Moving beyond the “the binary of reproduction versus resistance,” Indigenous scholar Tuck (2009, 409) proposes a desire-based framework, an epistemological shift that places emphasis on a complex personhood struggling within and against the violences of settler colonialism, racial capitalism and neoliberalism. How might we hold onto desire as part of the tension between violence and the struggle for freedom within everyday life? In their rich empirically-based accounts, our authors detail the remaking of slow violence that is always present, examining how it is engaged, refuted, negotiated, and resisted – seen and unseen - experienced, forgotten and *felt* (see Jones, this issue). Complicating the issue of visibility that Nixon foregrounds, our authors raise critical questions how about we might ‘re-member’ bodies, history, knowledge and culture in a way that doesn’t flatten, romanticize or make a spectacle of the struggles they document (Fine & Torre 2004). Nixon himself turns to postcolonial writer activists to offer new imaginaries that offer alternatives modes of expression.

Our authors engage forms of cultural production that move beyond language. They engage creative praxis as a way to conceptualize and represent the complexity of the lived experience of violence, and they attend to the emotional and embodied experiences of violence that are too often erased in academic work. Engaging poetic methodologies, Jones interweaves autoethnography, “testimonies, breaths, analysis, and GIFs” to seek expression of the racialised violences of foodscapes. Tagle focuses on Asian/American artists who work with materials salvaged from the waste industry, their artworks positioned as interlocutors that uncover hidden histories and toxic geographies and witness environmental racism. In Olson’s work with youth caregivers, a range of outputs were produced to highlight the issues they face, including postcards, infographics and short documentary films. Through her autoethnographic approach, Olson critically assesses these representational practices, as she and collaborators try to balance “impulses to pathologize and objectify the youth caregiver with the desire to accurately represent the urgent need for recognition visibility and inclusion.” The Growing Up Policed research team (Cahill et al., in this issue) engage in critical participatory action research to document the experiences of young, working-class people of color, as an explicit strategy for challenging the prevailing ‘authority of seeing’ (Nixon 2011). Pain et al. collaborated with residents to design research questions, and used participatory methods, photography and songwriting to document and raise awareness of the scandal of housing disposal. As a musician, Brenda Heslop’s use of song communicates difficult

situations on different levels, producing something of beauty and value that is returned to the community while articulating issues to a wider audience.

Donna Haraway (2002, 680) argues that “vision is always a question of the power to see— and perhaps of the violence in our visualizing practices.” We conclude with this double-edged insight, which raises a set of ethical questions to consider regarding the purposes and publics of research (cf. Cahill & Torre 2007). Whether creating material markers or expressing the affective experience of historic and contemporary violence, who is made vulnerable by research? Who has the authority to speak for or represent a particular community affected by violence? Is there a “we” being represented? What are the implications of how we present our “message”? Who are we speaking to and why? How might research on violence provoke action, and transform how we “see” and “act” in our world? We offer this collection as an intervention that suggests alternative ways of thinking through how we might engage with the ongoing violences we collectively face, and our mutual implication in them. Spanning from the climate emergency, to racial capitalism, to the mass migrations of people who desire a secure home, to the many ways these issues take shape in our communities at the local level, our collection documents how care can be invoked by scholars, activists, and artists who work towards recognition of violent conditions and imagining a more just future.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the presenters and audience at the Geographies of Slow Violence day-long sessions convened at the 2017 AAG in Boston, where most of these papers were first presented. We would also like to acknowledge the thoughtful and generous editorial support and guidance of Jack Giesecking in the preparation of this issue.

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