

Diary: Oil, Americas, New Orleans, Death

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New Orleans's Saint Charles Avenue is lined with oak trees whose broad branches drip Spanish moss and Mardi Gras beads from the pre-Lenten parades, and behind the oaks are beautiful old houses with turrets, porches, balconies, bay windows, gables, dormers and lush gardens. There are no refineries for miles, hardly even gas stations on the stretch I was on in mid-June, and the Deepwater Horizon rig that exploded on 20 April and the oil welling up a mile below it were dozens of miles away as the bird flies. So there was no explanation for the sudden powerful smell of gasoline that filled my car for several blocks or for the strange metallic taste in my mouth when I parked at the Sierra Club offices uptown, except that since the BP spill such incidents have been common. As of mid-July, the spill is supposed to be plugged at last, except that the plug is temporary at best, and the millions of gallons of oil are out there in the ocean, on the coast - and in the air.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the Environmental Protection Agency has an unhelpful handout for the BP era that says:

"These effects should go away when levels go down or when a person leaves the area. The low levels that have been found are not expected to cause long-term harm ... If you smell a 'gas station' like odour ... it may be volatile organic compounds, or VOCs. The key toxic VOCs in most oils are benzene toluene, ethylbenzene and xylene."

When I went out on the sea from Grand Isle, which is hardly more than a great sandbar at the end of the watery land south of the city, 109 miles from it by car, the taste was much stronger, and one of my companions on the boat had run into far worse. Drew Wheelan, a birdwatcher from the American Birding Association, told us that he had walked into a patch of fumes so intense his body seemed to react automatically and fling him away. 'I hit a cloud so concentrated,' he wrote on his blog, 'that 20 hours later my mouth and tongue still feel as though they've been burned by a hot liquid.'

A pregnant friend wondered if she should have left New Orleans altogether, and another friend warned his pregnant girlfriend to stay indoors on the more pungent days. The smells were just part of the ominous, uncertain atmosphere of the Gulf in the wake of the BP spill. The whole region had become something like the Western Front, a place where you might run into pockets of poison gas, except that this wasn't a battlefield: it's home, for pregnant women, for children, for old people who've spent their entire lives here, for people who love the place passionately, for people who don't know any place else on earth and don't want to go anywhere, and for people who can't, at least economically. And for countless birds, fish, crustaceans, cetaceans and other ocean life. The spill has hit them all hard.

If 'spill' is the right word for this oil that didn't pour down but welled up like magma from the bowels of the earth. It's also called the Macondo blowout, and maybe 'blowout' is a better word.

The blowout is about global capital, and about policy, and about the Bush-era corruption that turned

the Minerals Management Service into a crony-ridden camp that didn't do its job, and about Big Oil, and about a host of other things. But it is also about the destruction we've all seen in the images, which are horrible in a deep and primordial way. I went out on boats twice and saw an oiled pelican through binoculars and some faint oily traces on wetlands grass and couldn't quite make out the oiled terns in the distance. And I saw what everyone else could see too, the photographs and footage from those who went to Ground Zero of this catastrophe.

Mary Douglas said that dirt is matter out of place, and petroleum is out of place everywhere above ground. We design our lives around not seeing it even when we pump it into our cars and burn it, and when we do encounter it, it's repulsive stuff with a noxious smell, a capacity to cause conflagrations, and a deadly impact. Nature kindly put a huge amount of the earth's carbon underground, and we have for the past 200 years been putting it back into the atmosphere faster and faster, even though we now know that this is a project for which words like 'destructive' are utterly inadequate.

There's a YouTube video shot by an oil-rig diver in which huge brown globs of oil float underwater like colossal clots of phlegm. From the surface the chunky brown stuff looks like vomit. 'Just globs of death out there,' one diver, Al Walker, says in a Southern accent. 'Oil so thick it blocks out almost all the light below,' says another diver. An AP photograph by Dave Martin shows one of the gentle little waves of the Gulf Coast in close-up, a wave on Orange Beach that's brownish gold with spots of orange and black oil on it, water acting just like water and looking just like paint thinner or gasoline.

And then there's the aerial footage taken by John Wathen, or Hurricane Creekkeeper, that's gone viral on YouTube, Facebook, other facets of the internet, and the media, including CNN. It shows great plumes of smoke rising from the sea, as the oil is burned off the surface. The flames are invisible but the columns of smoke rise up and float away: burning water, like the famous incident in 1969 when the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland caught fire from having so much industrial contaminant. That was one river in an industrial region: the flat calm blue ocean burning is apocalyptic, a world turned upsidedown, rules broken, taboos violated, something as unnatural as nuclear fission and fallout, something nightmarishly wrong, and it extends for hundreds of miles, on water and under it, on shore and in the air.

In the Sierra Club offices, Darryl Malek-Wiley, the club's local environmental justice organiser, showed us a map of the Gulf, chequerboarded with gas leases, and peppered, as though the map had been hit with buckshot, with oil platforms, 4000 of them. A news story a week later mentioned the 27,000 old oil wells also out there in the territory the maps show, some probably leaking, but no one is monitoring them. Darryl, a big white-haired guy with a Southern accent and a slight Santa affect, showed me another map, an aerial photograph of a portion of the Louisiana coast, on which you could see all the channels the oil and gas industry has cut through the wetlands, creating straight routes through which water can move fast and hard, cutting the channels wider and eroding this coast still further. 'Nature meanders but time is money,' a bayou-dweller told me. About a football field of coastline erodes away every 45 minutes, and a third map of Darryl's showed how much land has been lost in the past several decades, since the petroleum industry came to the Gulf, an area about the size of Delaware, or 2500 square miles.

Oil and gas channels are responsible for nearly half of this erosion of land that is for the most part sediment laid down by the Mississippi over the aeons before it was tamed. When you look at the remnant land on a map, it looks like tattered lace, a frail smear of soil pitted and pocketed and

veined by fresh and salt water. From the flat ground you can't see much of this texture, but water is everywhere and anything can flood. Most structures rebuilt since 2005 are on stilts a dozen feet or more high, ready for the next surge, flood or sea-level rise, if not for the continuing erosion that will leave a lot of these structures literally out at sea. Sometimes travelling through this country you see drowned old structures whose underpinnings the sea has already reclaimed.

Another source of coastal erosion is the channelisation of the Mississippi, which no longer delivers sediment in the quantities it did when it was building up the delta. The place had a lot of problems before BP, really. Shrimping was being undermined by cheap, ecologically horrendous shrimp farms in Asia and Central America, and the Mississippi was delivering its own form of death to the ocean: nitrogen from synthetic fertilisers in the corn belt of the Midwest washes into the river and out to the delta, where it feeds algae blooms that die, decay, and take much of the oxygen out of the seawater. The dead zone is about 8500 square miles. About a third of the corn is supposed to be for ethanol, the not very green alternative to petroleum, so you can see the Gulf being throttled by a pair of energy-economy hands. Inland are the refineries and chemical plants that have given a swathe of the region the nickname Cancer Alley.

Louisiana is in many ways a semi-tropical Third World country with a resource-extraction economy that subsidised splendid social programmes in the era of Huey Long, a lot of subsistence lifestyles in remote and roadless places, and corruption and incompetence galore. The current conservative senator, David Vitter, has been mixed up with prostitutes while preaching family values; the Democratic congressman from New Orleans had to resign after he was found to have an unexplained \$90,000 in his freezer (in an interesting twist, the disarray he created in the large African-American population allowed the much smaller Vietnamese-American population to send its first representative to the House, Anh 'Joseph' Cao, the congressman who in June suggested that BP's president should be given a knife to commit hara-kiri).

People like to say that New Orleans is not a particularly poor, corrupt American city, but the rich northern capital of the Caribbean, with its vibrant ex-slave cultures, carnival, sweet gregariousness, and warm weather conducive to living in public. It is rich in cultural creation and continuity in a way no other place in the US is. Before Katrina it had the most stable population of any American city: people stayed in one neighbourhood, sometimes one house, for generations; they knew their music, their food, their history and their neighbours, and they celebrated their rituals, which are complex and frequent in this Catholic bacchanal of a port town that has a second-line jazz parade with dancing in the streets every Sunday and a plethora of social organisations, mostly segregated.

It's also part of the deeply racist South, and of the hurricane coast. Hurricanes make and unmake the landscape. In Hurricane Rita, Chevron's deepwater platform, cleverly named Typhoon, drifted dozens of miles from its position. Another platform was carried 66 miles by Katrina and washed up on Dauphin Island. A rig owned by Shell broke free from the Mars platform and dragged a 12-ton anchor that crushed oil pipelines. The hurricane destroyed seven platforms, damaged 24, and created underwater mudslides that dislodged more than a hundred pipelines. When you travel around the coast, signs everywhere warn you not to dredge or even cast anchor, because of the underwater pipelines. This place was already a toxic mess before the Macondo blowout, thanks to oil.

Eight million gallons of petroleum were spilled in Hurricane Katrina alone, and other spills in the Gulf include the colossal Mexican oil-well blowout of 1979 that sent oil all the way up the Texas coast. That one is over and maybe it's evidence that a region can recover, if the most directly affected town, Ciudad del Carmen, did recover - what was once a shrimping economy there is now

based on petrojobs.

Before the blowout Katrina seemed like the worst thing that could have happened. Now people mention the hurricane to explain how much worse the blowout is. Not in terms of immediate loss of human life or social conflict, but in terms of clarity and solutions. Hurricanes come in; they wreck and flood; they're over; you clean up. This thing - when will it be over and how can you clean up? Technological disasters - meltdowns, contaminations, toxic spills - tend to be more traumatic than natural disasters, because their consequences are hard to measure and hard to recover from. If you've just been irradiated or poisoned, you don't know if you're going to die of it in 20 years' time or have kids with birth defects; you don't know if it can be cleaned up or how or what clean or safe means; your home might be permanently contaminated and you don't know. You're also likely to have the liable corporation lying to you, whether the incident is Three Mile Island or Bhopal or the Exxon Valdez.

Uncertainty has been central to the horror of the spill: unlike a hurricane or an earthquake, the spill has no clear termination, no precedent, there's little that ordinary people can do to respond, and no imaginable end to its consequences. 'People have a feeling their way of life is disappearing,' Darryl at the Sierra Club told me. 'What if a really big storm comes right at the rig? Is BP gonna give me one cheque? Two cheques? The next 20 years while we can't fish? Sometimes I don't wanna think about it. I drink a beer, maybe more than one.'

'It was already poor and now it's gonna be fuckin' destitute,' Henry Rhodes, the tattoo artist who called the first big demonstration against BP in New Orleans and then co-founded the organisation Murdered Gulf, told me. 'I don't even eat seafood anymore, because that shit's fucked up.' A native New Orleanian, the blond, goateed and heavily inked man spoke passionately, mournfully, about what he saw as the destruction of his homeland. And he said the moratorium on deepwater rigs on top of the destruction of the seafood industry means '100 billion annually that's just gone'.

Margaret Dubuisson, the communications director for the local branch of Catholic Charities, spoke with me at the crisis centre in the Vietnamese community in New Orleans East. A huge portion of the immigrant Vietnamese population either fish or process seafood for a living, she said. They are not well educated, and often their English is negligible: 'They have PhDs in fishing, but some of them did not go to high school - did not go to grade school. The skills don't transfer. Oyster fishermen especially. If that closes you can't go a hundred miles up the bayou. It's not transferable.' Oystermen here work like farmers, with designated beds they tend and harvest; if your bed is contaminated, you're out of luck. Mississippi river water redirected to keep oil away from the oyster seedbeds has devastated them and the \$330 million industry is in big trouble.

It's said that Corexit, the dispersant now being used on the oil, causes birth defects and testicular and reproductive damage, particularly the old batch of more toxic Corexit 9527 that's been used along with the new formula, Corexit 9500. The 407 dead sea turtles may have drowned because of neurological damage from the oil or the dispersant - or in shrimp nets operated by fishermen desperate to get their last catches. About two million gallons of dispersant are said to have been poured into the sea.

Why BP has been using dispersant at all is a question whose answer seems to be about a policy of disguising, repressing and hiding the damage. One clean-up worker quit because she said they were told to remove only the surface sand: the BP supervisors just wanted the beach to look clean. One BP

contractor, ex-soldier Adam Dillon, was fired for questioning the clean-up after working for months to keep the media at bay. He describes thick oil and disgruntled workers whom he kept journalists away from. BP has created a no-fly zone; the co-operative Coast Guard keeps boats at bay, their captains afraid of huge penalties if they cross into restricted waters; workers were obliged to sign non-disclosure contracts, others had all recording technologies confiscated, data on worker exposure were suppressed; scientists were not allowed data; birders were allowed to band but not to put transmitters on rescued birds, according to Drew Wheelan; and data on the spill were constantly spun so the volume of gas upwelling was smaller, the impact was less, the facts were unavailable. A vast area of the ocean is now the scene of a cover-up. Even Anderson Cooper, the star anchor on CNN, has spoken out vehemently against this oceanic lockdown that treats scientists and journalists as the enemy.

BP rules the waves and a lot of Louisiana. I met one boat's captain who'd been trying to get information from the Coast Guard but was repeatedly passed on to BP, which also seemed to be calling the shots on land about who could go where, controlling media access and even air traffic to the area of the spill. Police, sheriffs, National Guardsmen and politicians seemed to be taking their orders from the corporation whose power, rather than shrinking, has in a strange way grown from its folly and destruction. BP has also taken over virtual space, buying up ads on the internet and spending a great deal of money to ensure that its own propaganda sites come up first in searches for topics related to the spill. BP's hegemony is part of the helplessness people here feel. BP negligently created a blowout but has intentionally staged a coup. Of course Big Oil has been running American politics for more than a century, an achievement that peaked with the Bush administration. Much of the criticism of Obama is for not sufficiently reining in what his predecessor wrought.

The blowout was not only the biggest oil spill in American history by far: it's a story that touches on everything else - taints everything, like the black glop on sandy beaches, on pelicans, terns, boats, sea turtles, marshlands and dolphins. It's about climate change, peak oil, the energy future, the American presidency, about corporate power and the corrosive effect of Big Oil on global politics. It's also about technology, geology, biology, oceanography, ornithology, the rich, deeply entrenched cultures of the Gulf, about human health and risk management, about domestic violence, despair, drinking, unemployment, bankruptcy, about British pension funds, the wake-up call to shareholders and the class action suit brought by the New Orleans chef Susan Spicer of the restaurant Bayona because contamination, scarcity or outright loss of the primary ingredients in the region's cuisine - shrimp, crab, fish and crayfish - is one current and probably continuing outcome of the blowout.

Drill baby drill, Sarah Palin's petro chant, is not going to be heard again soon. If the BP blowout had to happen, it happened at an opportune time. Weeks earlier, Obama had said that offshore oil wells were safe and that he was going to open up for exploration and drilling portions of the Atlantic and northern coast of Alaska, much of it for the first time. Shell was preparing to drill in the fragile Beaufort and Chukchi sea regions of the Alaskan Arctic. All that got put on hold. Timing is everything. If the global economy had waited a month longer to collapse in 2008 there's a good chance John McCain would have become president and Sarah Palin would have been even harder to get rid of.

The blowout also happened at an interesting moment in global history. On the one hand, the conversations about climate change, after the post-Copenhagen hangover, got a little jolt of urgency from this reminder of how brutal, humanly and ecologically, petroleum extraction is. In an essay for TomDispatch.com posted in May, Michael Klare reminded us that the Deepwater Horizon blowout is

an augury of the age of extreme extraction to come: 'While poor oversight and faulty equipment may have played a critical role in BP's catastrophe in the Gulf, the ultimate source of the disaster is Big Oil's compulsive drive to compensate for the decline in its conventional oil reserves by seeking supplies in inherently hazardous areas - risks be damned.' The disaster furthers the arguments for moving away from a carbon economy sooner by putting on display how grotesque these systems - gigantic offshore rigs, drills that go miles below the deep ocean floor - are even when they work.

Horrendous as the spreading oil is, the overall effect on the environment - more climate change - would have been even more irreversibly destructive had the stuff been collected and burned as planned: the biggest disaster, a number of scientists say, is the invisible one we all add to every day with our airplanes and cars, steaks and air conditioners, overseas goods and coal-fired power plants. When everything goes exactly as planned, a deepwater drilling platform is profoundly destructive, polluting, toxic and dirty: waste goes directly into the surrounding water, drilling releases heavy metals from the sea floor into the sea, other toxins enter the water. Deepwater drilling releases colossal quantities of methane hydrates, thus releasing methane, a greenhouse gas at least 20 times as potent a climate-changer as carbon dioxide. I don't know if this has been a wake-up call to the horrors of the carbon economy, but I haven't heard much from the climate-change deniers lately.

In the wake of the economic collapse of 2008, a new anti-corporate rage has seized the United States, and the BP disaster has focused hatred on the oil companies. If there was a left with the capacity to focus this rage into reform, we might be arguing about the abolition of their huge tax dodges or even the end of corporate personhood - the granting of human and even constitutional individual rights to these behemoths - or the nationalisation à la Venezuela of the oil industry. But we're not. Things are dying from BP, but not much is being born that I can see.

Still, the \$20 billion claims fund and the \$100 million for worker compensation constitute a fairly unprecedented assault on the citadel of corporate profit, a pre-emptive payment. Exxon was able to fight out compensation for the 1989 Exxon Valdez's Prince William Sound spill in court, dragging the process out for decades, outlasting its opponents, and finally settling in 2008 for a pittance compared to the destruction and suffering the corporation's spill had created. As Antonia Juhasz wrote in 2009, in *The Tyranny of Oil*,

"Big Oil gets sued a lot, and its greatest defence is its financial might - its ability to outspend any and all challengers (whether it's a single gasoline consumer in Illinois or the federal government) and ride cases out for five, ten or even 20 years ... Chevron alone has 300 inhouse lawyers and an annual budget of \$100 million for farming out litigation to private firms. It employs some 450 law firms globally."

'This is the biggest thing to happen to Big Oil in a hundred years,' Juhasz told me on 26 June, just after the local iteration of the national Hands across the Sand solidarity demonstrations at Ocean Beach in San Francisco. 'That is, since the Standard Oil monopoly was broken up. And maybe bigger,' she added. The damage of the spill remains to be seen both in the Gulf and in the way it may reshape or dismantle Britain's single largest corporation, encourage the regulation of the oil industry, perhaps corporate accountability, and affect the significant but subtler business of public opinion. The recently radicalised Sierra Club used the blowout as an occasion to call for an end to the US's dependency on oil within 20 years.

Obama compared the blowout to 9/11, which brings up all kinds of possibilities, notably the one that

BP is the new al-Qaida, and once you speculate about that, all sorts of interesting ways of mapping the situation arise. Bin Laden's inherited wealth was also oil money, or rather construction money from building the infrastructure for the Saudi oil empire, and 15 of his 19 hijackers on September 11 were Saudis too. The blowout is really just part of what you could call the contemporary oilscape, which includes the war in Iraq, the presence of the US in Kuwait and formerly in Saudi Arabia (this was one of bin Laden's grievances), and the role of Big Oil in American politics - which was not long ago dominated by a president, vice-president, secretary of state and others direct from the industry.

The clean-up's lack of safety measures also recalls 9/11. After that disaster, Rudy Giuliani and the Bush administration, anxious to get business back in business and to assert their capacity to handle the situation, suppressed information about the toxicity of the burning heap of rubble that had been the World Trade Center. Asbestos, plastics, heavy metals, PCBs and other toxins were all going up in smoke and into the lungs of anyone nearby, but the Environmental Protection Agency was pressured into turning scary scientific analysis into reassuring press releases and thousands of workers worked for months without respirators. 'World Trade Center cough' is a widespread disorder among New York City firemen today, and more than 10,000 people have sought treatment after inhaling the fumes.

Similarly in the Gulf, many of the clean-up workers have been sent into toxic situations without protective clothing or respirators. 'When I visited a La. Parish Work Release jail this past Friday, it was early evening, and the inmates were returning from their 12-hour workday shovelling oil-soaked sand into trash bags,' my friend Abe Louise Young, whom I met through her Katrina oral history project nearly five years ago, wrote to me in early July.

"Wearing BP uniforms and rubber boots (nothing identifying them as inmates), they were driven in an unmarked white van, and looked dog-tired. The majority of beach workers are African-American. It's a striking sight in the Louisiana coastal towns where eight out of ten people are white - and the only tell-tale sign of their incarceration. In the first few days after the blowout, clean-up workers could be seen wearing scarlet pants and white T-shirts with 'Inmate Labor' printed in large red block letters. Outrage flared among local officials and newly unemployed residents desperate for work. Those explicit outfits disappeared in a matter of days. The clothing change is no accident - it's an effort at concealing the nature of BP's labour force. Work-release prisoners have no choice in their job assignments. After arriving in BP uniforms, the inmates suit up in Tyvek head-to-toe coveralls."

Forced labour in toxic conditions. Cheap prison labour undercutting clean-up income for unincarcerated, unemployed Gulf residents. Dead sea turtles by the hundred. Turtles being burned. Plumes of smoke rising up from the burning ocean. Dead whales. Pelicans soaked in oil. Fourteen thousand Vietnamese fishermen out of work in New Orleans Parish alone after having survived Katrina, Rita and Gustav, after surviving the Vietnam War and exile. A way of life dead, at least temporarily, for the Vietnamese, Cajun, white, black and indigenous communities of the waterlands. Rebuilt homes in a landscape suddenly without jobs. Derrick Evans of Turkey Creek Community Initiatives, a big African American ex-professor, told me, as we travelled through the oil-smeared islands of marsh grass in Grand Bayou, that a bayou redneck named Mike had told him: 'Osama fuckin' bin Laden could not have imagined, planned or executed more devastation than BP has.'

I met Evans at Grand Bayou, out on the road to Port Sulphur and Venice. Think of southern Louisiana as a hand whose fingers are the remnants of the eroded land, pointing south into the sea. New Orleans is somewhere in the palm of that hand, and the easternmost finger has one road running down its length. More than halfway, past the giant mountain of coal and a few of the countless refineries in the region, there's a tiny sign for Grand Bayou and you turn off onto a dirt

road running west. When I did, a beat-up truck passing in the other direction paused, and the dark-skinned driver rolled down his window to say that the party we were looking for was standing by the road just up ahead. Apparently not a lot of people come down that road.

The road soon petered out into a set of boat docks, an abandoned house, and cane marshes into which flocks of little blue crabs with big right claws scurried when I approached. We found the sailors we were looking for: Rosina Philippe and her brothers Danny and Maurice, members of the Atakapa-Ishak tribe. She told me that their name was Choctaw for 'cannibal people', a long-ago slur they hung onto in case it made the small group seem like more impressive opponents. There had been 23 families living in Grand Bayou before Katrina; the Amish and the Mennonites helped them rebuild their houses on stilts, but only nine families remained. Some of the evacuees come when they can: 'Vacation time, summer time they come back. We make up pallets on the floor. They wanna come back. I didn't get home until August 2009.'

As Danny, her younger brother, the one with the God Is My Hero. And He Rocks black T-shirt, steered the flat-bottomed boat, Rosina Philippe, a strong woman with a thick dark braid down to her waist, told me that 'this situation with the oil will be with us for at least another decade. How to move forward? Our primary food source is from the water. Not only is our source of revenue cut off from us, but our food supply. Maybe three people here work in the [petroleum] industry, but it's not a conflict because they're not the decision-makers.'

As the boat went down the wide channels between the flat islands of grass she added: 'This area was forested. My father passed last year, at 86. When he was a boy you could cross from one side to another of the channels.' The word bayou means moving water in a flat, low-lying area, a place that is neither swamp nor stream, and once most of the bayous were wetland forests. Like Grand Bayou, many places still called bayous have eroded into something else.

Ibis flew overhead, young birds who retained their brown markings, and the wind blew through the grasses, and the sky overhead was stormy, but it seemed impossibly peaceful if you could forget it had all just been contaminated, parts of it were dying or dead, and more might be doomed. Rosina Philippe said: 'This is nursery for shrimp and fish and crabs - when the oil is all along the banks and into the grasses, everything dies. What's happening in the Gulf right now is death.'

Andrea Schmidt, who had just wrapped up an al-Jazeera documentary on the spill when I spoke to her, told me that everyone kept comparing the relationship between fishing and oil extraction to a marriage. Oil was the bellicose husband; fishing was the battered wife; but divorce was not in the works. They are the two economies of coastal Louisiana. This is why the moratorium that's laid off thousands of oil workers and more workers in support industries is not popular locally. In the minds of a lot of people a disaster that's trashed half the economy is not a good reason to shut down the other half.

It was on a trip to Grand Isle (we never got to Queen Bess or any other bird island, thanks to prohibitions against getting within 65 feet of a boom) that we met Drew Wheelan, the birder, who saw far more than we did. He wrote on his blog:

"What we found on Queen Bess was oil-soaked sorbent boom tossed into the colony by the waves, and that about 85 per cent of all young royal terns on the windward side of the island were oiled on most of their plumage. Many of these birds were severely oiled, and could barely stand. There were

at least 45 young royal terns that if I had my say would need immediate rescue and care, though at this point I would have to think that many would succumb to the effects of this oil and weather regardless of care received. The Coast Guard has imposed new rules on these colonies to keep people out, which include criminal trespass, a felony, which could be punishable by 15 years in jail and up to a \$450,000 fine. No one I know is prepared to save a bird with that kind of a risk attached."

A major disaster brings in outsiders, some like Drew, some not so altruistic or not so competently engaged with the facts on the ground. Or at sea. At its best, it's like Katrina, which brought an unprecedented wave of volunteers - probably more than a million - to the Gulf and particularly to New Orleans to rebuild, to clean, to cook and to tend. At its worst, it's a fundraising and travel opportunity for the self-serving. We went to lunch down the road from Grand Bayou, at Ann's Restaurant and Catering, a collection of trailers by the side of the road in Port Sulphur, with the Reverend Tyronne Edwards of the Zion Travelers Co-operative Center, a dark-skinned man in a light-coloured linen jacket and trousers, and Byron Encalade, the African-American president of the Louisiana Oystermen Association, an organisation announced on his orange T-shirt. We ordered versions of deep-fried seafood that came in a series of styrofoam containers, and we washed it down with the oversweetened ice tea that is the totemic drink of the South. (Was the seafood contaminated? Everyone ate it.) The oysterman and the preacher talked about all the outsiders who were going to be using the Gulf blowout to raise funds, then use the funds to augment their existing programmes or meet payroll, a syndrome they'd grown acquainted with after Katrina. They had many complaints about outsiders, politicians and BP. They wanted everything managed locally.

The reverend talked about all the local African-Americans who were disaffected with Obama, including his aged mother. 'We wanna support him but man ... he's really lost a lot of respect. I feel sorry for the president. He's got people around him making him fail. I'm still a supporter of the president, but it's gotten so hard.'

Encalade said: 'It's the unknown things. Even after Katrina, you assessed where you stood. Here you don't know what your damages are and how long it's gonna last.' And he spoke of the Vietnamese refugees and the veterans of the war that made them refugees who had come here: 'That's all any of them ever wanted to do is come home, get a trawler. That was peace by them. I've been talking to the VA.' He'd told the Veterans' Administration he was worried about old trauma resurfacing. He talked about the crews on his three boats, now fighting the spill. Later, when we had followed him on the ferry that takes cars across the river to the eastern side of the peninsula, where he kept his boats, he stood on a dock and talked about getting his first boat when he was 13, about working in the petroleum industry himself, but 'you're always coming back to fishing. We got salt water in our veins and we can't get it out. We ain't trying to. We don't know what's going to happen and that's the thing. Seems like we're down to the last try.'

As I write, the Macondo well seems to be capped, though the cap is only temporary. A lot of people will be ready to say the story is over, but that's like saying that you put the bottle of poison down after drinking only a pint of it. The oil is out there, and the consequences will be felt for the foreseeable future. A little more than a week after my trip, I went to the national disaster studies conference in Colorado, where I hung out with a guy who's been studying the Exxon Valdez spill for 21 years. He told me that the herring industry there never recovered, and fishermen were hard hit. The Gulf, in his view, can look forward to the death of the shrimping industry, massive unemployment, an outmigration of those who can go, leaving behind the elderly, indigent and infirm,

a loss of trust and social capital, a lot of despair and a lot of medical consequences of the chronic stress of living in a ruined world. And to living in a poisoned environment. That this is the Gulf - a place of deeply rooted families and cultures, as well as wildlife - means that there's a lot to lose. Nothing now suggests it won't be lost.

Rebecca Solnit

P.S.

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<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n15/rebecca-solnit/diary>

* Rebecca Solnit's most recent book is *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*. Researching her piece for this issue, she paid her eighth visit to New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina.