◆ 9

Nunca Máis: Ecological Collectivism and the *Prestige* Disaster

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The 2002 *Prestige* disaster looms as the largest environmental disaster in Spanish history as well as the largest maritime oil spill in Western European history. After the Spanish government denied the damaged ship safe harbor, the *Prestige* tanker sank 275 kilometers off the coast of Galicia. As 125 tons of heavy petroleum washed ashore every day, multiple levels of the Spanish government refused to acknowledge the extent of the unfolding disaster. In contrast to this rhetorical denial, photographer Xurxo Lobato captured the final moments of the sinking ship on November 19. Taken aerially from a diagonal angle slightly off kilter to the ship's bow, the photograph marks the dramatic burial of one of many risk objects in the ebb and flow of global capital. Galician author Manuel Rivas compares Lobato's work to *Kyudo*, the practice of Zen archery, because the photograph pierces into the sinister core of modernity: the political, social, and ecological risks taken in the name of economic development (257–58). Lobato's image captures the *Prestige*'s final grimace that calls out to humanity as it disappears from our sight. The ship was buried alive, screaming as it disappears into *A Costa da Morte*'s rough seas that delivered its *coup de grâce*. What happens after this horrific image? How can we respond? My response here is a brief examination of the failures and future of environmental justice in Spain and some connections to environmental justice on a global level.

Environmental disasters like the *Prestige* require an important distinction between what Anthony Giddens has described as "external" and "manufactured" risks. The external risk of disaster is "experienced as coming from the outside" of a given community (26). A hurricane, for instance, is perceived as "natural" or "external" because it is a possible outcome of living near a coastline. A plague is likewise viewed as a consequence of coming into contact with contaminated animals or goods (or, for others, caused by divine intervention). No matter the exact source, external risk dictates that we cite the blame as stemming from outside of

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human communities. Conversely, manufactured risk originates from human activity. Giddens explains that, recently, "we started worrying less about what nature can do to us, and more about what we have done to nature" (27). For example, on March 11, 2011, the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami triggered major equipment failures at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plants. As if the "external" disaster were not enough, the installation of nuclear facilities in such a location created a "manufactured" risk far beyond what the force of a massive wave could do on its own. Indeed, the incurred damage to Fukushima Daiichi *entangled* different communities across the world as radioactive contaminants spread. This sort of entanglement is increasingly global in scale. Manufactured risks are not merely dangerous for one particular location, but rather constitute dangers for entire ecological networks. As Giddens himself points out, events such as hurricanes, plagues, and tsunamis underscore the fact that these risk outcomes do not strictly affect nature or human communities, but rather the shared space of humans and nonhumans. To sketch a preliminary response to the *Prestige*, let us consider the material and discursive composition of the ship itself that led to its demise in the *Costa da Morte* region.

The *Prestige* incident qualifies as a discernible manufactured-risk situation. According to the United States-based Ship Structure Committee, the *Prestige* was a single hulled oil tanker damaged in rough seas (Ship Structure Committee). After controversially being refused safe harbor in Spain, France, and Portugal, the ship was towed toward open sea on November 13, 2002, in the hopes of avoiding a spill near the Spanish coast (García-Olivares 537). On November 19, the craft split in two and sank about 275 kilometers west of Vigo in international waters. Subsequently, an estimated 61,600 tons of oil spilled into the sea (80 percent of the ship's 77,000 tons). The cause of the initial damage is not known, nor is it likely to be known as the *Prestige* is submerged in two miles of water. Yet the Ship Structure Committee report suggests that the initial flooding may have been due to "fatigue of welded plates" or "sustained side shell damage." The ship, however, was perfectly within industry norms and should not be conceived as a rogue object or a limit case. Instead, the *Prestige* should be considered risky insofar as it is a typical, everyday object. While such objects typically remain invisible and silent, occasionally they speak through their unstable aspects. What this spill reveals is the dark side of these everyday risk objects and our intimacy with them. Bruno Latour describes these risk objects as entangled because they surround us to such an extent that they are "entangled" in our economies (22–23).

The *Prestige* is also emblematic of the common practice known as "flags of convenience." The twenty-six year old ship was built by Hitachi Shipbuilding and Engineering in Japan and sailed under a Bahamian flag. It was registered in the port of Nassau and owned by the Liberian cooperation

Mare Shipping, managed by the Greek company Universe Maritime, and insured by the London Steamship Owners Mutual Insurance (Ship Structure Committee). This litany of facts expresses the almost absurd sense in which the *Prestige* is an object *inscribed* with global phenomena. While its port of call is multifarious, the ship's true home seems to be nowhere, circulating along the network of global oil trade. The *Prestige*, then, becomes paradigmatic of risk within late capital: its danger is from nowhere potentially affecting anywhere.

Another important aspect of the *Prestige's* composition is the ecological impact of the petroleum it carried. In the end, over a hundred miles of Spanish, French, and Portuguese coastlines were contaminated with highly toxic oil and an estimated cleanup cost of €2.5 billion (the financial equivalent of the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska) (Garcia 19). Moreover, analysts have suggested that the spill cost the costal economy about €71 million (García-Olivares 533). In November 2013, a Spanish court in A Coruña absolved the Spanish government of any wrongdoing and only found the ship's elderly captain Apostolos Mangouras guilty of disobeying the Spanish government's requests. Judge Juan Luis Pía stated that: "Nobody knows exactly what might have been the cause of what happened, nor what would have been the appropriate response to the emergency situation created by the Prestige's breakdown" (Hamilos). It is important to dwell on the ruling's language. The judge not only claims that there is *no way* of determining the cause of the accident, but also that there is *no way* of deciding what an appropriate response might have been. These risks, then, *remain* a part of life in regions like Galicia's *A Costa da Morte*—among countless other regions across the globe. This wording is particularly damning for the prospects of environmental justice in Spain because it not only suggests that there *was* neither a single cause nor a known appropriate response, but also, given the same conditions today, we *still* have no known "appropriate response" to such a disaster. Greenpeace concordantly noted that the court's ruling gives "a carte blanche to the oil industry to threaten the environment and citizens" (Hamilos). In Galicia, the spill not only threatened the maritime ecosystem and those dependent on it, but also the health and wellbeing of all residents in the region. Risk, then, remains an essential component of our petrol-based global capitalism. In fact, on April 14, 2015, the Russian fishing vessel *Oleg Naydenov* sank fifteen miles south of the Canary Islands after the ship caught fire in a Canary Islands port and was towed out to sea to find its watery grave.

During the *Prestige* disaster, Spain's current prime minister, Mariano Rajoy (at the time the deputy prime minister) famously denied that an oil spill had occurred and has never retracted the statement. Instead of referring to the spilled oil as spilled oil, Rajoy metaphorically described it as "hilillos de plastilina" (little trails of clay); in effect, this verbally transforms a

disaster with weighty ramifications into a minor incident (Moreno). Other public figures, such as the former Minister of Public Works and Transport Francisco Álvarez-Cascos, were simply absent (Álvarez-Cascos had gone hunting because he deemed his participation as "frivolous."). The subtext of this official narrative maintains a sense of normalcy; that is to say, it denies that Galicia's ecosystems and economy have been damaged by a human-induced disaster. As one might glean from Rajoy's metaphor, this narrative has a decisively literary component. In one essay dedicated to the *Prestige* crisis, Rivas refers to North American journalist Greg Palast's story from the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* spill about the "miracle barrel" (268). Palast discovered that a "barrel" of clean water had been substituted for the contaminated water sampled from the spill site, rendering the test results clean when they should have shown oil contaminants. The purified water-text took the place of the contaminated one. "The facts" of the spill actively obstructed any revelation about the ecological state of marine life and local communities. Insofar as politicians did not feel obliged to resort to proof and instead simply denied the incident, there was not an exact parallel event to Palast's miracle barrel in Galicia. Yet Rivas contends that Galicians were *inside* the miracle barrel. Public officials and media outlets discursively replaced the real contaminated beaches with imaginary clean ones. The obvious effect of this narrative is the shrouding or silencing of facts; that is to say, the iconic pastoral image of a rural Galicia obscures the truth that its ecosystems and communities were in a vulnerable position vis-à-vis international shipping routes of the petrol industry. Furthermore, the persistence of the miracle barrel narrative did not dissipate even as petroleum washed up on the beaches of *A Costa da Morte*.

Challenging this official denial, *Nunca Máis* sought to draw out Galicia's entanglement with risk objects like the *Prestige* and, in so doing, garnered support across Iberia, Europe, and the world. Two days after the *Prestige* sank, the political coalition BNG (*Bloque Nacionalista Galego*) and many intellectuals set up what would be come the first meetings of *Nunca Máis*. Rivas himself sums up the spirit of the movement: "La sociedad civil reclama su derecho a ser ciudadanos, no meros votantes. El problema es que el PP teme a los ciudadanos. *Nunca Máis* es un rechazo a esa concepción" (Lobo) (Civil society reclaims its right to be citizens, not merely voters. The problem is that the PP fears citizens. *Nunca Máis* is a rejection of this concept). Beginning as a grassroots reaction to the oil spill and the awkwardly slow response by the PP government and international agencies, the protests of *Nunca Máis* united people towards a greater awareness of the fragility of environments and surrounding communities. *Nunca Máis* demanded that we slow down our observations and to gaze into the features, structures, and disasters of what Rob Nixon has called slow violence: invisible and silent destruction of landscapes often occurring on the

peripheries of nation-states or other global actors. It is less about the supposedly cathartic or graphic kinds of violence often represented in the media and more about ecological absorption and decay, inside, outside, and around human communities.

Ecological slow violence produces what Stephanie LeMenager has called "petro-melancholia," a critical attitude toward modernity after the realization that "progress" is, in fact, a series of disasters. The prescience of petro-melancholia requires an examination of the invisible and often silent structures and mechanisms at work in today's global economy. Several parallels between the *Prestige* case and the BP oil spill in 2010 become instructive on this point. Much like Galicia's case, the United States Gulf Coast and, more generally, the southern United States, has remained underdeveloped when compared to its northern counterpart. Modernity, for a state like Louisiana, has largely consisted of a patronage system with big oil companies and an acceptance of the health risks associated with large-scale oil refining operations. Writing on Hurricane Katrina and the BP blowout of 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico, LeMenager argues that environmental consciousness and activism display a melancholia concerning the "industrial-era infrastructures" that are ultimately destructive to human and nonhuman ecosystems.

Writing on *Nunca Máis*, Txetxu Aguado notes that any consideration of the protest movement must take into account the common good: not merely condemning the inaction of the government and the crimes perpetrated against the local ecosystems, but also making connections to similar environmental disasters on a global level. The *Prestige* crisis functions, then, as a catalyst to consider our entanglement with local ecosystems and to unite against violations of environmental justice.

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