



## Oil Bunkering #4

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I am standing off to the side of the photograph in a bright white space.

There are more people than I expected, but then I'm not in the National Gallery of Canada very often.

As people drift over, they settle into contemplative stances. The photograph is large, and I can follow their gaze. They are drawn to the churning white water, often following the boat's wake, re-tracing its path through the image. Some viewers are still, but many adjust their bodily orientation to the image, moving closer, leaning in, seeking details. It

usually lasts a minute or so. If they consult the title plate, they read, "Oil Bunkering #4, Niger Delta, Nigeria, 2016".

Couples and small groups sometimes pause to talk, and I catch snippets of their conversations: "what is it?"... "where is that!"... "is this the picture from the ad in the bus shelter?"... "is it oil?"... "I bet it is oil"... "it looks like oil"... "fucking oil, man"... *these last four are all from the same guy*... "an explosion, a bomb, maybe"... "no, it is a spill, see, look over here"... *they are both right*... "are they fleeing?"... "fleeing what?"... A parent reads the gallery text that describes bunkering as piracy and a child exclaims, "pirates!"... "So, I guess they hack the pipelines to steal the oil," the parent concludes... "A crime scene," says another.

I take a break and beeline to the coffee shop by cutting through the gallery store. The crime scene is for sale, emblazoned with the word "Anthropocene," the name of the exhibition. I dimly recall the word "omnicide," used decades ago by the Ogoni poet and activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa. I pick up the print and find 10 or 12 more behind it, each one sealed in plastic wrap, piled before rows of black t-shirts carrying white words: "A shift in consciousness is the beginning of change."



As I return to Oil Bunkering #4, a docent is gathering people around the photograph. The docents are smart and polished with their descriptions, often posed as questions. "How do you feel about seeing beauty in what appears terrible?" They don't say "sublime," but cultivate the precious ambivalence that is Edward Burtynsky's brand. Someone has moved closer and is tracing the strange grids in the image with their index finger. "What are these?" When no one answers, the docent says they are

“authentic” because Burtynsky “adds nothing” to his photographs. The idea of these lines as authentic sounds strange. “If it is here,” the docent says in gesturing to the image, “it is there.” “It’s like another planet,” someone else says. My heart rate picks up. I’m going to say that these weird lines are in Northern Alberta, too, that geologists detonate the earth to listen for oil in Canada, too, but someone speaks first. “Fifth season.”

## 2016

“Oil Bunkering #4” was initially published in a 2016 *New Yorker* profile of Burtynsky. The artist wanted to raise consciousness of the Anthropocene, the moment “man” acquires planetary agency. The magazine reports frequently on the idea, so they sent a journalist to accompany Burtynsky in Nigeria.

In Burtynsky’s art, extraction is presented as an evolutionary fact, as old as bipedalism, an inescapable effect of a predatory species. In his photographs, extractive infrastructure dominates its surroundings in ways that displace traces of the ecologies producing such systems. These images generate visual puzzles that prefigure the ongoing fossilization of industrial environments. The puzzles invite instability in the distinctions we draw between technology, humans, and nature, but the extractive throughline is consistent across Burtynsky’s work.

The profile opens with the journalist, Raffi Khatchadourian, in a helicopter with Burtynsky flying above the Niger Delta. They are about to pursue the boat in *Oil Bunkering #4*. Khatchadourian describes the scene as having “the atmosphere of a war zone,” and I believe him. Khatchadourian documented the U.S. military machinations necessary to build and secure the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline in the early years of the war on terror. I doubt he carries illusions about the relationship of military power and pipelines. It is cringeworthy when Burtynsky describes bunkering as “push back from the have-nots” and as the sort of thing one finds in “developing” countries, but the journalist lets it pass.

Khatchadourian does wonder openly about the appropriateness of Burtynsky’s approach to Nigerian environments. Why depict life surviving the legacies of colonial incursion in the same way one shoots an abandoned mine or the detritus of extraction in Europe? Burtynsky steers these questions into the art world, preferring to discuss Rem Koolhaas’ time in Lagos, digital photography, drone imaging, and so on. I suspect he shares Koolhaas’ view that suspicion of white photographers in Nigeria is an expression of political correctness. Burtynsky and Khatchadourian frame this discussion with respect to Tim Hecker’s (2010) exploration of the sublime aesthetics of Koolhaas’s

aerial depictions of Lagos, emphasizing the abstract interplay of order and chaos (and leaving the dour bits of Hecker's argument that are informed by Paul Virilio to one side).

The work of Sylvia Wynter might answer Khatchadourian's question and deserves our consideration. In Wynter's (2015) formulation, our present conception of humanity (Man2) is constituted through an ongoing devaluation of black life, and inscribes a way of being human that enables the displacements of extraction more widely. Any discussion of "humanity" in western traditions of thought implicates us in a history of extraction that acquired planetary scale through the appropriation of the lands, labours, and bodies of racialized others. There is no description of the Anthropocene without Western Africa.

Let's hold this understanding of humanity in mind when considering Burtynsky's relationship to the extractive processes he makes visible. As related by Khatchadourian, this includes:

- + The hiring of police and state agents in Nigeria to secure his movements throughout the country.
- +The apparent bribery of Nigerian citizens challenging his right to access impoverished environments for the purposes of photography.
- + Armed state security taunting if not threatening Nigerian citizens that were protesting Burtynsky's presence at sites of oil extraction.
- + The use of Google Earth to locate and map illegal distilleries for refining bunkered oil (which the Nigerian military often targets and destroys at the behest of the oil industry).
- + The rental of a helicopter from a military airstrip to photograph the distilleries despite the pilot's warnings that they may be shot if they observe too closely.
- + The pursuit of people fleeing the helicopter's presence, which includes the pilot taking evasive measures to ensure their 'target' cannot fire upon them. The chase scene abruptly ends when the helicopter experiences engine failure and the pilot returns them to the airstrip.

In these actions, we see the displacement of black life that structures and circumscribes our expressions of environmental concern, and the significance of the historical arcs of humanism that are narrated by Sylvia Wynter (2015), Michelle Murphy (2017), Kathryn Yusoff (2018), and Armond Towns (2019), among others. As Cajetan Iheka (2020) notes, crude oil extraction in the Niger Delta is preceded by the palm oil extraction of the nineteenth century and by the bodily extractions of slavery in the fifteenth century; the

Anthropocene is this wider and more complex history of the human and extraction, shaped as it is by relationships of slavery, colonialism, and ecological ruin.

Burtynsky's approach illustrates what Yusoff (2019) calls Black Anthropocenes, a constitutive displacement of black life that circumscribes the appearance of extraction's harms to familiar forms of environmental concern and attribution. Black life, in this formulation, appears in the idiom of environmental concern as harm, damage, or loss.

Consider the devaluation of Nigerian life that is evident in Burtynsky's decision to bring police and military into contested environments to secure their visibility as damaged ecologies. In doing so, he reproduces the security mechanisms that allow the petrochemical industry to operate in the region. In this respect, Burtynsky's photographs extend an "extractive gaze" (Hodgins and Thompson, 2011) in the aesthetic sense but also by reproducing the patterns of displacement required for extractive infrastructure to operate. By describing bunkering as a piracy that engenders ecological catastrophe, and by situating these crimes as typical expressions of regional and state poverty ("push back from the have-nots"), the political instabilities endemic to colonial infrastructure are made to appear within a stark opposition of black criminality and ecological concern. This is how big oil mobilizes ecological concern to leverage military assistance in the Niger Delta. It is interesting that the National Gallery of Canada and Ontario Gallery of Art felt that Canadians needed to see oil extraction in this way not long after the Canadian government bought Trans Mountain Pipeline.

This story invites inversion, and we have abundant evidence that devastation in the Niger Delta is directly attributable to legal forms of petrochemical extraction. We could describe yet again the catastrophic consequences for farming and fishing, or of gas flaring, but consider that legally-extracted oil is blended, graded, and then shipped to different markets. The blending produces cleaner fuel grades to meet the requirements of European and North American cities with stricter air pollution regulations. The degraded blends are called "African quality," sold back to Lagos and other African cities, and are a significant driver of the excessive levels of hazardous matter found in Nigerian air and bodies (Hecht, 2018). This practice is why the harm inscribed in African lungs is presented as an Anthropocenic signal by Gabrielle Hecht (2018).

We see in this example how the degraded air and damaged bodies of Nigeria are shaped by forms of environmental concern that protect valued geographies. The intensification of polluted air in Lagos is to improve air quality elsewhere. And this displacement of damage is not contingent or happenstance; it is structurally determined by the broader devaluation of black life present in our ideas of what it means to be an environmentally-conscious human being. This means that simply expanding European air quality concerns to African geographies is insufficient. In the knowledge drawn upon

in Hecht's intervention, a knowledge that underpins many approaches to environmental justice, the devaluation of black life remains in the epistemologies and methodologies that organize our environmental concern. As Michelle Murphy (2017) suggests, the body burden approach to articulating petrochemical harm tends to reproduce paradigms of "damage based research" that pathologize bodies and lands, a point also made in Katherine McKittrick's (2019) recent observation that there is "an ideal analytical script that proves rather than questions the brutality of environmental racism."

I hear in the work of Murphy, McKittrick, Wynter, Towns, Iheka, Eve Tuck and others a call to rethink the knowledge that structures our environmental and planetary concerns. Humanity, as we know it, is borne of an environmental violence that is unevenly distributed in time and space, but nonetheless shared. The ambient nature of our present environmental concern misstates the nature of this commonality. It pretends to protect humanity from a planetary future that has *already* arrived, *already* become known, and *already* been lived; it works by ensuring that those *already* living this future do not yet count enough to alter the way that planetary harms are displaced primarily to black bodies and geographies; the system of knowledge governing such displacement is necessary to continue imagining there is a non-disastrous present that human beings currently inhabit and might eventually extend into the future. But there is no such present. The disaster is planetary. The question of the future is whether the human might become so too.

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