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Surfacing Ecological Disaster: *Poets for Living Waters* and the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

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Abstract: Considering the 2010 Deepwater Horizon Spill, the largest environmental disaster in American history, this article examines the elemental intermixing of oil and water via the chemical agent Corexit, the substantial effects submerging oil into the water column had on ocean life, and the aesthetic translation of this environmental destruction by the poetry platform *Poets for Living Waters*. Functioning as a communal expression of grief, of remembrance, and a demand for change, *Poets for Living Waters* brings together the work of hundreds of authors, figuratively raising oil's toxic specter to the surface by challenging America's failure to protect ocean ecosystems through an elementally-attentive poetics that highlights the characteristic traits of both water and oil and the deadly effects that occur when these two elements intermix.

Keywords: elemental agency, elementally-attentive poetics, environmental poetry, oil spill, online poetry, poets for living waters

1 Introduction

On April 20, 2010, BP's Deepwater Horizon drilling platform exploded, killing 11 workers, injuring 17 others, and instigating the largest environmental disaster in American history. Two hundred and ten million gallons of crude oil leaked into the Gulf of Mexico, the second-largest oil spill ever and the largest in American history (Juhasz 2011, p. 85). This created a public relations disaster that BP sought to mitigate with prodigious use of Corexit. Oil is hydrophobic, which means it is repelled by the polarity of water molecules and thus gathers on the water's surface. Corexit is a chemical dispersant that breaks oil into smaller droplets, causing the oil to sink into the water column. Corexit is itself also quite toxic, and when combined with oil the resulting mixture is up to 52 times more toxic than oil alone

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(Rico-Martínez, Snell, and Shearer 2013). Banned in almost two dozen countries, including the United Kingdom, Corexit has been designated a “chronic and acute health hazard” by the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) and has been identified as the cause of health problems, and even several deaths, among cleanup workers involved with the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill (Juhasz 2011, p. 100). Notably, only about 1000 gallons of Corexit were used for the Valdez oil spill, while 1.8 *million* gallons were used for the Deepwater Horizon spill, either dispersed underwater near the mouth of the broken pipe or sprayed by airplanes, often under the cover of night. On May 19, 2010, about a month after the oil spill began, and well before the Deepwater Horizon pipe was capped on July 15, poets Amy King and Heidi Lynn Staples put out a call for submissions for a new online platform for poetry written either in response to the ongoing disaster or in support of healthy ocean ecosystems (Staples 2010).

The online poetry platform *Poets for Living Waters*, with its goal of “creating venues for poetry in support of healthy ocean communities,” was active for four years and includes the work of hundreds of poets (Poets for Living Waters 2010). In contradistinction to the ways BP sought to control the optics of the oil spill by submerging the oil in the water column, *Poets for Living Waters* utilizes the visibility and accessibility of the internet to figuratively raise this submerged oil, challenging BP’s obfuscation, as well as oil’s negative effects on animals and humans. In this article I consider how both the submersion of oil into the Gulf of Mexico and the poetry platform *Poets for Living Waters* articulate characteristic traits of the elements of oil and water, including water’s circulation and importance to life and oil’s toxicity and ability to envelop. By subverting the elemental boundaries between oil and water so that the hydrophobic oil would sink into the ocean depths, BP turned life-sustaining water into a vast zone of destruction. The poetry platform and the poems it contains exemplify an elementally-attentive poetics that aligns with this collection’s interest in emerging aesthetics motivated by elemental analysis. Even the title *Poets for Living Waters* asserts the importance of elemental distinctions. We often don’t imagine water as a medium of death, but through Corexit the two elements of water and oil intermix, creating an underwater ecological disaster.

In recent years the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and BP’s usage of Corexit have been revisited in the environmental humanities. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon (2011) describes the usage of Corexit in the Gulf of Mexico as a “biocide” (p. 272). The submerged Corexit-oil mixture exemplifies Nixon’s concept of slow violence, or the sort of “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” (p. 2). In “Dispersing Disaster: The Deepwater Horizon, Ocean Conservation, and the

Immateriality of Aliens,” Alaimo (2012) draws on new materialism, as well as her own work on transcorporeality, to argue that the Corexit-fueled dispersal of the oil into the depths proves that we should attend to “the material interchanges across human bodies, animal bodies, and the wider material world” (p. 180). More recently, in “Fluid Cuts: The Anti-Visual Logic of Surfactants after *Deepwater Horizon*,” Jue (2019) applies the filmic concept of the “cut” to BP’s attempts to obfuscate the disaster, exploring how “Corexit came to constitute a key form of anti-visual media, dispersing oil to be out of sight and out of mind” (p. 526). As Jue notes,

Perhaps surfactants contribute to a notion of the Anthropocene that is based in chemistry rather than geology [...]. Yet to be materially specific to the situation at hand, it is important to note that surfactants do not dissolve oil: oil emulsifies in seawater, where droplets of oil remain within fluid suspension in lingering swirls and striations across the oiled ocean (p. 543).

These works, and as well as much recent work in the environmental humanities more broadly, draw on a developing but robust tradition of considering materiality not as inert or unchanging, but rather as “storied matter” that displays the interplay of material agencies and meaning over time (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, p. 7). While in line with such work, this article takes a slightly different approach. By attending to how Corexit intermixes oil and water, this article argues that we learn about the elemental characteristics of oil and water and the differences between these elements.

As elements, oil and water are importantly different. Oil is toxic and antithetical to the functioning of life, whereas water is life-supporting. Due to oil’s hydrophobia these two elements have historically been understood as distinct, but Corexit intermixes the two, pairing oil’s toxicity with the three-dimensional circulation of water. In the collection *Saturation: An Elemental Politics*, Jue and Ruiz (2021) argue for the contemporary and ongoing importance of engaging with the elements. Jue and Ruiz write that “the elements are not a neutral background, but lively forces that shape culture, politics, and communication” and that “less reified and bounded than objects, elements allow for a broad ecological sensibility that, nonetheless, activates specific cultural imaginaries” (p. 1, 6). We find in these statements an attention to how elements both underlie and shape our existence. For instance, BP’s submersion of oil into the water column, as well as American governmental support via the Environmental Protection Agency’s acceptance of this approach, reveal important truths about America’s dependence on oil and willingness to treat the ocean as a waste zone.

2 Elemental Qualities of Water and Oil

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill and the subsequent submersion of oil demands attending to the elemental qualities of water, and particularly a body of water as large as the Gulf of Mexico. Interconnecting with the Atlantic and the world's oceans more broadly, oceans cover 71% of the globe and contain 99% of the planet's habitable space (Rozwadowski 2018, p. 23). Oceans are also spaces where circulation-currents flow, global tidal shifts circle the planet, whale carcasses fall to the ocean floor and upwellings of nutrients rise from the ocean depths. One foundational work that connected the elemental qualities of water with human values and experiences is Gaston Bachelard's *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (2006), which applies water's elemental meanings to psychic experiences. More recently, Neimanis (2016) uses water to argue for understanding our lives as substantially entangled with other lives, and with the world more broadly, through the movement of water through our bodies. Attending to this never-ceasing circulation of water means that "we find ourselves tangled in intricate choreographies of bodies and flows of all kinds—not only human bodies, but also other animal, vegetable, geophysical, meteorological, and technological ones" (p. 96). As we can see, the essential characteristics of water, its permanence, its circulation, and its life-sustaining qualities, unify a wide range of beings. We might even look back to early Greek philosophers for antecedent visions of water's elemental interconnectivity. As Macauley (2010) points out in *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, Water as Environmental Ideas*, "the Presocratic physiocrat Thales—widely regarded as the first Greek philosopher—claimed that water is, in some sense, the source of all things. In other words, he judged it to be an abiding, albeit often hidden, constituent of the plethora of sensible phenomena" (p. 43). Throughout these diverse approaches we can see how water is life-sustaining, as well as how water unifies a diverse range of entities, including living beings, the oceans, the atmosphere, and even technologies like the internet, as I discuss below.

Oil as an element, of course, fuels much of contemporary western life. Despite being formed from formerly living creatures, oil is antithetical to life's productive operations. In a section of her book *Black Tide: The Devastating Impact of the Gulf Oil Spill* titled, appropriately enough, "Oil Can Kill You," Antonia Juhasz writes that "Crude oil is toxic to humans, plants, and wildlife, capable of causing serious debilitation and even death to any who come in contact with it. Crude oil contains high levels of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) such as benzene,

toluene, and xylene.”¹ These substances affect the central nervous system, and can cause acute toxicity, cancer, birth defects, and liver and kidney damage. Similarly,

Oil is deadly to animals in many ways. When oil coats an animal, it can limit the creature’s ability to swim, fly, navigate, maintain body temperature, feed properly, and even reproduce. Oil can harm the eyes, mouth, and nasal tissue as well as the immune system, red blood cells, and organs like the liver, lungs, and stomach (Juhasz 2011, p. 90).

Oil’s negative effects on life occur at a wide range of scales, including visible effects such as impeding a creature’s movement, as well as smaller-scale effects like disrupting the functioning of organs. Able to both envelop and permeate, oil’s ability to affect bodies confirms Alaimo’s theory of transcorporeality which traces how the movements of chemicals through bodies express a “viscous porosity” (2010, p. 15). Despite so much of contemporary Western life depending on oil consumption, oil’s ability to disrupt life has varied and outsized effects.

3 Corexit and its Effects

By dispersing oil within water, Corexit disrupts the usual boundaries between these two elements. Oil and water have classically been understood as distinct. As Macauley (2010) notes regarding the Presocratic philosopher Empedocles, an important early environmental thinker, for Empedocles, “the elements are kneaded together in dough, and those ‘ingredients’ that do not mesh or coagulate well reject one another as would water and oil” (p. 124). This historical view of oil and water as rejecting one another aligns with an understanding of the hydrophobic characteristics of oil. Corexit’s ability to cause these distinct elements to intermix is a new development. With its name sounding similar to both “correct-it” and “corexit,” as if one can excise the geologically-sounding “core,” Corexit emulsifies oil into smaller droplets that sink and become suspended, mitigating oil’s negative effects on the ocean’s surface and along the shore, but directing this oil toward a vast array of marine life (Schmidt 2010).

BP used two forms of Corexit, both of which are proprietary formulas of the Nalco Company, which has released only a partial list of ingredients. BP first used Corexit 9527A, before switching to Corexit 9500 in response to public outcry which in turn led to pressure from the EPA. Corexit 9527A, which is designated as a “chronic and acute health hazard” by the EPA, contains a solvent that can injure

¹ Juhasz (2011), p. 90. For more on oil, its physical traits and its contemporary dispersals, both intentional and not, see Appel, Mason, and Watts (2015) and Transportation Research Board and National Research Council (2003).

blood cells, kidneys, and the liver. Corexit 9500 also contains known carcinogens, and the toxins from both can transfer up the food chain (Juhasz 2011, p. 100). BP purchased over one third of the world's supply of these chemicals (Lustgarten 2010), and of the over 1.8 million gallons used, almost 40% were applied underwater at the source of the oil leak (Juhasz 2011, p. 98). The remaining Corexit was sprayed from airplanes (p. 97). The outcome of all this, of course, was to both submerge the oil into the ocean and to make a significantly more toxic oil-Corexit mixture. Being dispersed in small droplets meant that creatures and plants that would not have been affected by the oil now were.

We can see the extent of Corexit's emulsification of the oil into smaller droplets in the subsequent aerosolization of this emulsified oil.² Breaking the oil into smaller parts meant that the toxic parts of the oil became small enough to become aerosolized and to pass through skin. As Marsa (2016) points out in her discussion of the oil spill's toxic aftereffects, "when the ocean water evaporates, the chemicals become aerosolized and are carried aloft by the high winds on the Gulf, sickening people who inhale the tainted air" (n.pag.). Implicating the porousness of the elements of water and air, as well as how ocean and atmosphere intermingle through an exchange of gases across waves, this aerosolization of Corexit-affected oil shows how extensively Corexit altered the oil. Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality and the porousness of bodies returns as a salient reference. Corexit's emulsification of oil allowed for an even more toxic version to travel into the atmosphere via water's processes of circulation and dispersal.

At the core of this elemental intermixing lies a decision to treat the ocean and ocean life as disposable. Too often the ocean is seen as a place for dumping sewage, chemicals, and radioactive waste (cf. DeLoughrey 2010). BP, and by extension the EPA, treated the ocean depths as an erasure zone. Indeed, as Juhasz (2011) points out in *Black Tide*, an underwater application of Corexit "had never occurred before and had never been tested" before BP began applying Corexit at the mouth of the broken pipe (p. 99). Similarly unknown was exactly how to do such a task effectively. Juhasz refers to one researcher who believes that up to 90–95% of the Corexit was dispersed directly into the water rather than the oil itself (p. 107). Foisting such toxicity onto ocean life helped BP, America, and other oil-dependent societies to avoid having a sustained, media-intensive, encounter with the incredible dangers that an oil-dependent economy entails. Obfuscating the oil invites cultural forgetting by shuttling this annihilation of life from the shore to the depths, out of sight, and thus presumably out of mind.

² Oil's toxicity affecting air quality was an issue from the very start of the disaster. As Jue (2019) notes, the ships of early rescue workers were so surrounded by oil that the air became toxic, leading to large amounts of Corexit being applied at the site of the pipe (p. 535).

Oil's Corexit-forced submersion into the ocean has had enormous effects on marine life. For instance, due to Corexit breaking oil into droplets the same size as algae, filter feeders like oysters that would not have been affected by the oil without the use of Corexit now were. It is estimated that 8.3 billion oysters were lost in the aftermath of the oil spill (Bibza and McCormick 2020, p. 8). Fish gills became clogged and the Corexit-oil mixture has proven highly toxic to coral (Goodbody-Gringley et al. 2013; Romm 2010). Thirty-two percent of the laughing gulls population in the northern Gulf died (Bibza and McCormick 2020, p. 5). Corexit has been found in the eggs of pelicans, and has been found to overwhelm the livers of red snappers (Gunderson 2012; Pittman 2013). Dolphins and other mammals in the Gulf were particularly affected. As the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) (2016) has found, the Barataria Bay and Mississippi Sound bottlenose dolphin groups experienced a population reduction of 51 and 62%, respectively, with expectations that it would take 40–50 years for affected populations to rebound (p. 4–585, 4–584). What's more, "in the five years after the oil spill, more than 75% of pregnant dolphins observed within the oil spill footprint failed to give birth to a viable calf" (NOAA 2016, p. 4–584). Other observed effects among the surviving dolphins included anemia, tooth loss, and liver damage (NOAA 2016, p. 4–615). Thus, while BP's usage of Corexit helped to minimize oil's anti-life effects on the surface and shore, it also created a highly toxic undersea environment with demonstrable long-term effects on sea life.

4 Elemental Thinking

In the face of such massive destruction, how can one respond? As Cohen and Duckert (2015) point out in their introduction to the edited collection *Elemental Ecocriticism*, thinking about the elements entails discovering ethical obligations. Cohen and Duckert note that, "the elements companion and assist; they also materially and ethically bind" (p. 19). BP's usage of Corexit materially bound water and oil, in turn creating an ethically binding problem. As *Poets for Livings Waters* and the hundreds of poets who submitted work prove, such simultaneously material and ethical binding can in turn prompt poetic responses. Similarly, Cohen and Duckert (2015) address capitalism's motivations to forget the essences of elements when they write that "through active and recurring forgetting, the apprehension of material vibrancy evident in elemental theory has been obscured by mechanistic models that serve commodity capitalism well but license environmental devastation" (p. 5–6). This sort of forgetting is what underlies BP's (and the EPA's) decision to submerge the oil, utilizing an out-of-sight-out-of-mind logic

that helps to reassert, almost as if without complication, oil's central place in contemporary western life.

Responding to the sorts of logics that enable environmental devastation, Cohen and Duckert call for a re-activism that is “a renewal of non/human ethical enmeshment, a transhistorical call to attention, in which lessons from the past are reactivated for better futures” (p. 6; original emphasis). This re-activism and its attention to non/human ethical enmeshment is the sort of project that *Poets For Living Waters* pursues, challenging the capitalist-fueled impetus toward forgetting the environmental devastation of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The platform and the poems that make it up serve as an open-ended call for non/human ethical enmeshment, an elementally-attentive poetics. Rather than submerging the deadly specter of oil within the ocean, *Poets for Living Waters* reasserts water as vital and vibrant, declaring the importance of water's elemental characteristic of sustaining life.

In thinking about the poetry platform *Poets for Living Waters*, it is worth noting that the internet depends on oil. In other words, oil saturates our culture so fully that even this critique of oil depends on oil. As Starosielski (2019) notes in “The Elements of Media Studies,” “over the last decade, media studies has become elemental,” and she goes on to explore how “elemental analysis can extend environmental studies to a wide array of media [...] In such a vision, all media becomes environmental media, and all media studies becomes environmental media studies.” We can see how considering elements such as oil, water, and air, as well the ways that such elements cycle through the physical structures that power media, can in turn draw attention to media's environmental effects (cf. Jue 2020, p. 23; Sullivan 2017). Thus, even while *Poets for Living Waters* calls attention to the different elemental qualities of oil and water, the website, and every device that connects to the website, are implicated in a broader material web that requires the consumption of oil and the circulation of water. As LeMenager (2014) points out in *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*, “almost every media available to us today is materially and even philosophically indebted to oil” (p. 68). Similarly, Zylinska (2021) addresses water's role in the media via the concept of “hydromedia,” which considers how “media subjects and media objects” are bound together through water's circulation, since, after all,

water is involved in the production, transportation, and usage of media devices: the excavation of minerals that serve as media components, the cooling down of computer servers—not to mention the actual makeup of human media users, 60% of whose bodies and 77% of whose brains are constituted of water (p. 46).

Water functions as a web of interconnection, expressing its elemental trait of circulation, while also gesturing toward transcorporeality and the ability of water

to travel between different forms. As can be seen, even as a form of media *Poets for Living Waters* binds together oil and water.

5 Elementally-attentive Poetics

As a robust engagement with the world that surrounds us, the field of poetry is expanded by thinking about water and oil as elements. Recent environmental poetry has productively attended to human's relationships with, and effects on, the environment (Hume and Osborne 2018; Keller 2017; Ronda 2018). An elementally-attentive poetics adds to this conversation by attending to the characteristic traits of the elements and how these elements in turn affect our experiences and cultural meanings. In other words, the engagement with, and exploration of, the world that we find in elementally-attentive poetry entails new forms of analysis that seek to understand these elements. The Deepwater Horizon oil spill instigates this sort of elementally-attentive poetics. In the face of such a disaster, as well as BP's submersion of the oil, poets responded in the mode of (to revisit Cohen and Duckert's term) "*re-activism*," an elementally-inspired attentiveness to "non/human ethical enmeshment" (Cohen and Duckert 2015, p. 6; original emphasis).³ What is constructed is a poetics that engages with and articulates the elemental qualities of both oil and water, as well as how such elements undergird our lives, and the outsized negative environmental effects our cultural dependence on oil entails.

We can gain more insight into the elementally-attentive poetics of *Poets for Living Waters* by looking at how Heidi Lynn Staples, a cofounder of *Poets for Living Waters*, describes the platform and what poetry can do in the face of environmental destruction. In 2011, the literary journal *Interim* published a special "eco" issue (Arigo, Copperman, and Skinner 2011). The issue includes a section, which Jonathan Skinner edited and Kristen Baumliér wrote the introduction for, on the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and its aftermath. In "Offshore: Poetics, Catastrophe, Peak Oil," Baumliér (2011) notes of the included works that "you will find a lot of grief here," yet these works seek to "remember" and to explore "in the darkness where the ongoing ecological and social consequences are playing out" (p. 229). In

³ *Poets for Living Waters* further demonstrates how poetry can be inspired by an element as challenging as oil. In *Living Oil*, LeMenager (2014) disagrees with environmental educator David Orr's claims that "water has inspired great poetry and literature," but that "oil, on the contrary, has had no such effect on our language" (p. 47). Elsewhere in the text, LeMenager explores poetry from the Louisiana Coast, the Niger Delta, and other locations marked by mixtures of oil and water. We might add *Poets for Living Waters* to this community of poets responding to oil, though here the locations of the authors are quite dispersed.

a contribution titled “How Poetry Makes a Difference in the Era of Ecocide,” Heidi Lynn Staples writes: “I do think poetry has a place in response to public catastrophe, which is why I worked with Amy King to launch Poets for Living Waters” (Staples 2011, p. 272–3). As Staples points out, “Poets for Living Waters has not shut down BP,” nor has the site kept sea animals from harm or protected local Gulf residents from the toxic chemicals showing up in their blood (p. 273). However, *Poets for Living Waters* “has provided a virtual gathering place, and in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the site often received close to a thousand visits a day. Visitors have expressed appreciation for a forum in which to share their grief, trauma, outrage and desire for change” (p. 273). The emotions of “grief, trauma, outrage and desire for change” are palpable across the breadth of the platform. The platform acts as a curated space of grief, a digital archive of outrage, and a space of refusal and reimagination. Such forms of elementally-attentive poetics may become even more important in the developing Anthropocene.

I find one statement Staples makes toward the end of her piece particularly persuasive, both as a poetic call to action and as a description of the platform’s goals. As Staples (2011) notes, “Art is not so much a tool or a noun, but participation in a process, a verb” (p. 274). This idea of art as participation percolates throughout environmentally-attentive poetry more broadly, but in the specific example of *Poets for Living Waters*, this approach led to other environmentally-attentive works, including a series of readings across the country, as well as a later collection titled *Big Energy Poets: Ecopoetry Thinks Climate Change*, published in 2017. Heidi Lynn Staples and Amy King return as co-editors for this new volume, and in the introduction they reflect on *Poets for Living Waters*’ role as an “online international poetry response to the 2010 BP oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico—the biggest manmade environmental disaster in U.S. history, that monumentally farcical botch with implications unto geological time” (Staples 2017, p. 13). Much as *Poets for Living Waters* still exists online, and much as oil still exists in the sands and water column of the Gulf of Mexico, we can see the continued need for the verb-ness of poetry, the need to bring into language challenges to environmental disaster, including the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, but also the manifold instances of environmental degradation and destruction that surround us.

6 Poets for Living Waters

The site is designed in such a way as to challenge knowing what type of poem one will land on. As Figure 1 shows, the various poems are not arranged alphabetically, either by title or poet, but rather in the order in which they were posted. Notably, the title of the poem and the author’s name are located above the photo

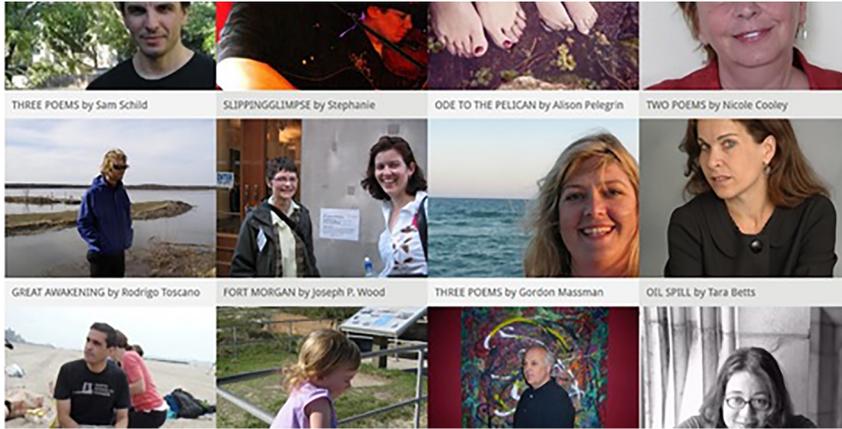


Figure 1: A screenshot of *Poets for Living Waters* shows its communal web design. This mode of organizing information challenges knowing what sort of poem one will encounter, other than the poem will be in support of healthy water ecosystems.

depicting the author. This repeated blocky approach emphasizes the platform's shared, communal approach. As a forum for addressing the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and the ecological damage being done to the Gulf of Mexico, this mode of engaging with the website emphasizes the wide-ranging voices involved. I think there is something both interesting and important about this communal approach. Much as Corexit sought to make the oil spill disappear through submersion, here hundreds of poets are showing their care, their attentiveness to the entanglements of oil extractivism, of environmental disaster, and of humanity's effects on the oceans and ocean life. By attending to the diverse range of oil's anti-life effects and water's life-supporting characteristics, these poets are enacting an elementally-attentive poetics. Through poems marked by "grief, trauma, outrage and desire for change" (Staples 2011, p. 273), the diverse authors become congealed, a media-mediated reversal of Corexit's emulsification of the oil. By this, I mean that as a form of media the website seeks to congeal and make visible, exemplifying art's role to function as, to quote Staples, "participation in a process, a verb" (p. 274). On the other hand, congealing is the opposite of Corexit's effects on oil. Media and medium here are functioning in opposing ways, but both depend on an underlying understanding of how oil and water function *as* elements.

I believe that an important part of engaging with the website is to navigate its communal-style web design oneself and to encounter among the hundreds of poems the wide range of responses. Clicking on a square leads one to a page dedicated to the work of one poet. Each page repeats the same format: One or two

poems are included, a “Statement” is often included that provides additional insight into the poems, an author’s bio is included, and the page ends with the same photo of the author found on the main page. Undoubtedly, repeating this structure makes it easier to include hundreds of poets, but it also invites surprising encounters for readers, since this repeating format unifies many different authors and many different styles of poetry.

7 Conclusion

As *Poets for Living Waters* shows, elementally-attentive poetry has the ability to raise submerged issues to the level of language by attending to the elemental characteristics that underlie our own experiences. Rather than accepting America’s dependence on oil and the environmental destruction such a dependence leads to, the platform demands change. Describing the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and the impetus for creating the poetry platform, Staples declares: “I just got hit with it, consumed by it, and I wanted to turn that into something positive, because the grief was just completely overwhelming” (qtd. in Fischer 2010). This grief and response through poetry is a reassertion of the “non/human ethical enmeshment” that lies at the heart of Cohen and Duckert’s calls for re-activism. By attending to the life-sustaining elemental characteristics of water, its circulation, the upwellings and downwellings that bring different ocean lives into proximity, the oysters, the fish, and the dolphins that cohabitate within this watery medium, as well as the anti-life characteristics of oil, its toxicity and ability to encapsulate, and its transcorporeal ability move through bodies, *Poets for Living Waters* enacts a media response that challenges Corexit’s intermixing of these two historically separate elements. As future environmental disasters occur, and elements that have historically been considered as separate become intertwined, the sort of elementally-attentive poetics that *Poets for Living Waters* evinces will become all the more relevant for bringing what is submerged into the light.

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