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## Digital Deepwater Imaginarities in Brenda Longfellow's *Offshore*

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Delia Byrnes

Across the critical, popular, and industrial imaginations, the term “offshore” has come to denote a range of neoliberal sites and practices in the twenty-first century. From a geopolitical perspective, the offshore refers to the stretch of ocean beyond a nation’s coastline that falls within the scope of the Exclusive Economic Zone, the 200 miles beyond shore that extend a country’s federal jurisdiction. Yet as Imre Szeman suggests, the term names both a risky, increasingly productive site of oil work and an “epistemic sensibility”: off in the distance, out of sight, beyond prying eyes. It is through both the literal and figurative meanings of the offshore that the extractive industry anchors itself in the deepwater. This industrial “enclaving” (378), argues James Ferguson, marks an emerging geography of neoliberal extraction. While twentieth-century US energy culture was fueled by fantasies of limitless expansion (occasionally interrupted by catastrophes such as the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill and the 1973 oil embargo), the twenty-first century is increasingly shadowed by environmental limits. Toxic bitumen extraction in the Athabasca tar sands and the Dakota Access Pipeline’s threat to Indigenous sovereignty are just two recent examples of globally visible energy injustices.<sup>1</sup> While these sites make visible the messy entanglements

of bodies and oil, the offshore industry positions itself beyond the spectacle of messiness, exploitation, and colonialism: it is supposedly absent of humans and (conveniently) at a distance from the prying eyes of regulatory bodies and concerned publics.

Offshore energy production typifies the so-called tough oil regime of the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> Along with other forms of extreme extraction, such as hydrofracking and tar sands mining, deepwater drilling carries drastic environmental risks along with decreasing rates of energy return on investment (EROI). Today, the extractive offshore extends from the continental shelf of the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic, the North Atlantic, the Gulf of Guinea, and beyond.<sup>3</sup> With approximately 30 percent of global oil now coming from deepwater wells, the offshore-drilling market is a vital yet underexamined space.<sup>4</sup> Turning to the site of the offshore, I examine how contemporary energy discourse and cultural production imagine it into being. In doing so, this essay seeks to understand the worlds that are made and unmade by offshore oil, particularly as we come to recognize oceans as the “liquid index of the anthropocene” and a bellwether of climate change (Alaimo 143). Focusing on the deepwater Gulf of Mexico, I sound the depths of this burgeoning extractive region in the US imagination.

This essay brings together environmental and anthropological studies of offshore extraction to demonstrate how this prolific industry deploys modularity to render itself abstract, geographically untethered, and beyond the temporalities of onshore political and material life. In other words, I analyze how the offshore industry disentangles itself from the territorial imaginary and reproduces itself as modular, mobile, and flexible. The central claim I make is that contemporary interactive narrative forms, such as digital fiction, are uniquely positioned to unsettle the spatial and temporal tropes of the deepwater regime and offer new strategies for thinking about tough oil by implicating the user in the practices and consequences of deepwater extraction. As cultural agents produce creative works about the offshore, they hail this intentionally abstracted site as a literary-critical object that can be textualized, analyzed, and remediated toward more just environmental futures.

In her study of twentieth-century oil culture, Stephanie LeMenager argues that petroleum infrastructure “has become embodied memory and habitus for modern humans, insofar as everyday events such as driving or feeling the summer heat of asphalt on the soles of one’s feet are incorporating practices” (104). Given the increasing centrality of deepwater extraction to our global energy

landscape, this essay is animated by questions about the nature of offshore energy's embodied habitus and the kinds of subjectivities this extractive regime produces. To address these questions, I begin with a discussion of the material (re)production of the offshore as a coherent geocapital site, a physical space made legible for capitalist development. First, I suggest that the offshore engenders modular relationships to time, space, and embodiment, which I term offshore subjectivities. Turning to filmmaker Brenda Longfellow's digital film *Offshore*, I argue that its interactive form immerses users within the embodied habitus of the deepwater extractive regime. Billed as a "feature-length interactive documentary," *Offshore* is an online docufiction hybrid that braids together realist and speculative modes of storytelling. Housing a cache of real archival materials within the fictionalized world of an abandoned deepwater platform in the Gulf of Mexico, *Offshore* invites the viewer to directly interact with the text as the player character of a federal investigator. Assuming this role, the user is tasked with journeying to the rig to uncover clues about a catastrophic disaster that wreaked havoc on adjacent marine and coastal habitats. As Longfellow's text draws the user into the spaces of deepwater extraction, it disrupts the logic of the offshore by reinstalling affects of ambivalence, anxiety, and uncertainty. I ultimately show that, as *Offshore* first embodies and then estranges the occulted logics of the modular deepwater industry, it takes a critical step toward unsettling the habitus of contemporary energy culture.

If one of the most urgent challenges facing environmental humanists is the seeming incompatibility of statistical data and lived knowledge, *Offshore* radically collapses these scales. It brings home the abstracted infrastructure of energy extraction by showing how it touches the feeling body. This essay thus advances digital fiction of the offshore as a vital form of ground-truthing that recalibrates our understanding of tough oil in the twenty-first century. In doing so, it further illustrates the contributions of new media genres to reimagine our relationship with energy.

### **Making the Offshore**

On 20 April 2010, high-pressure gas from a well in the British Petroleum (BP)-operated Macondo Prospect surged upward, igniting and engulfing the *Deepwater Horizon* platform in flames. The majority of the 126 people onboard were rescued from the blowout, while 11 employees died, including nine rig workers and two engineers. The rig sank to the ocean floor two days later, at roughly the same time

an oil leak was discovered. Over the next 87 days, nearly five million barrels of crude oil gushed into the Gulf of Mexico, covering a surface area of approximately 68,000 square miles. It remains the largest oil spill in industry history.<sup>5</sup> Wreaking ecological havoc, the spill poisoned multitudes of pelicans, shrimp, dolphins, turtles, phytoplankton, and other marine species. Amid widespread criticism for its negligence, BP swiftly deployed a dispersant called Corexit. This chemical invisibilized the oil slick while triggering a host of health problems for both human and more-than-human populations.<sup>6</sup> Many Gulf Coast residents reported seizures, breathing problems, and other chronic illnesses; *Offshore* archives some of their testimonies. While BP's public relations campaign narrated the spill as an economic crisis to be redressed through market stimulation, the pervasive health effects of the spill and the corporation's disastrous clean-up efforts transcend an economic calculus: residents continue to report health problems, and marine biodiversity has yet to recover.<sup>7</sup>

Nearly 57 years earlier, on 7 August 1953, the Gulf of Mexico extractive zone was quietly folded into the US territorial imaginary. With the passage of the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Lands Act, Congress mapped and codified the ambiguous space between state-owned and international waters, designating four distinct oceanic regions along the watery margins of the continental US. Spurred in large part by a dispute between the federal government and Texas regarding oil-drilling rights in the tidewaters of Texas, this newly-minted US Code established under federal jurisdiction the Alaska OCS, the Pacific OCS, the Atlantic OCS, and the Gulf of Mexico OCS. The Act encompasses all submerged land, subsoil, and seabeds within its demarcated boundaries and permits the Secretary of the Interior authority to oversee mineral development and grant leases to exploratory companies through a bidding process. In this way, the OCS Lands Act redefined a formerly amorphous margin as a mappable region, expanding the territory of the US imaginary by rendering the watery reaches beyond the nation's coastline a coherent geocapital site.

Cultural theorists have long understood spatial production as a social process that inscribes specific values and modes of being. This essay considers how spatialization extends to the sea. If, as Hester Blum suggests, methodologies of contemporary nation and postnation have thus far been terrestrial, an "oceanic turn" (671) in the study of neoliberal geographies promises "new forms of relatedness" that recognize the unboundedness of maritime spaces. Discussing deep-water extraction, Hannah Appel describes the spatial configuration

of the offshore as a kind of modularity-making. Indeed, the industry proliferates precisely because it reproduces a modular logic: the idea that offshore infrastructure is infinitely “self-contained,” flexible, and decomposable (that is, capable of disassembly and reassembly) (Appel 693). The offshore is thus discursively rendered a singular, endlessly reproducible space, even as it stretches into wildly different economic, environmental, and political landscapes. Implicit in this logic of reproducibility is the assumption that the industry is removed from the geopolitics, economies, and social structures of adjacent nation-states, both materially and symbolically. This, Appel suggests, is the “haunted fantasy of the offshore” (698). Importantly, modularity diverges from familiar critical narratives of globalization as a vehicle for standardization.<sup>8</sup> Far from engendering homogeneity, modularity requires constant work to maintain its fantasies of standardization and replicability. It is at this worksite that offshore media intervenes.

The spatial production of the offshore is in many ways consistent with contemporary understandings of globalized extractive regimes. James Ferguson, for example, argues that neoliberal extraction has replaced the idea of a state-legible grid with privately administered “enclaves” that are largely illegible to state interests (379). “Enclaving” (378) disarticulates extraction from adjacent local economies and instead integrates extractive sites with diffuse multinational corporations. Much like the Sudanese economies of which he writes, the capital produced by offshore industries “skip[s]” (379) over—rather than “flow[s]” across—contiguous borders, ultimately constituting an “off the grid” geography (380). The interstices of this neoliberal off-grid came into stark relief in the wake of the BP disaster, as currents of crude oil breached both ecosystems and extractive enclaves. David Bond tracks the “laboratization” (705) of the ocean following the 2010 spill as a kind of terra nullius that made the Gulf of Mexico available for scientific and industrial experimentation. Since much of the oil from the broken wellhead remained in the benthic and pelagic zones, the spill’s biotic consequences “were occurring on the outskirts of the forms of life the state had historically sought to protect under environmental law” (696). In the words of an unidentified marine scientist, “We know terribly little about what the deepwater was like before the spill” (qtd. in Bond 706). The ocean was reassembled as an “experimental domain” (695) and subject to measurements and technologies that transformed the Gulf of Mexico into a “scientific laboratory” (705).

These industrial and techno-scientific discourses illuminate the epistemological stakes of offshore geography: what it means

to sense, measure, and know the deepwater. Yet the ocean's murky depths vex conventional instruments of information-gathering and point to critical ruptures in the authority of scientific-industrial knowledge of the ultradeep.<sup>9</sup> Flat-mapping technologies and aerial photography, for example, fail to capture the dynamic depths of the ocean even as they exemplify positivism's disinterested view from above. This scientific vantage point is intimately bound up with the colonial imagination and its fantasies of objectivity and power. Denis Cosgrove, for example, examines how "aerial detachment" (236) has advanced imperialist projects and proffered the idea of an "abstract, universal space." Jeanne Haffner similarly argues that, since its inception, aerial photography has promised a safe remove from the "chaos of the ground" (82) and authorized the idea that comprehensive spatial knowledge is only accessible from above. Donna Haraway has persuasively deconstructed the relationship between technologies of vision (such as aerial photography) and power, analyzing how military, scientific, and colonial surveillance naturalize vision as an instrument of authority. Yet far from conferring "objectivity" (581) to one's view of the world, she argues, aerial technologies elide the many contingencies and partialities that define what it is to see. In this light, the illegibility of deepwater spaces from above mounts a challenge to authoritative epistemologies: oceanic knowledge remains partial, subjective, and uncertain as it stymies the totalizing gaze of positivist science.

The industrial sensing technologies necessary for interpreting the ultradeep, such as Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR), are unconventional forms of mediation that veer from the supposed transparency of the view from above. Even as they attempt to manage the epistemic uncertainties posed by the ocean's depths, they demand inference rather than the naturalized certainty of vision. These technologies have become well integrated into industrial extraction. Nevertheless, I want to linger on their inherent uncertainties as a way to access the alternative epistemologies that might emerge through embracing the illegibility of the deepwater. In her analysis of oceanic spaces, Stacy Alaimo muses, "To begin to glimpse the seas, one must descend, rather than transcend" (161). This epistemic humility chimes with feminist science studies, where Haraway has influentially advanced a "feminist objectivity" (583) that celebrates "limited location" and partial, "situated knowledge" in place of rationalist science's "conquering gaze from nowhere" (581).

Recent creative projects remediate privatized sensing technologies such as those described above and evince alternative practices

for dwelling in, rather than attempting to compress and evade, the murky epistemologies of the ultradeep. Longfellow's *Offshore* offers a highly mediated, defamiliarizing, and distinctly situated perspective on the Gulf of Mexico. It redeploys industrial sensing technologies (from mobile cameras and digital mapping systems to aerial vision) to replace the "transcenden[t]" (Haraway 582) gaze of industrial science with knowledge situated in embodied and affective experience. One of the real-life media that *Offshore* resignifies, for example, is BP's proprietary video feed, swiftly dubbed "Spillcam" by news media,<sup>10</sup> which captured the 2010 spill from the ocean floor using ROV cameras. By strategically remediating this industrial surveillance technology, *Offshore* delves into the epistemic possibilities of uncertainty, tapping into partial knowledge as a vital site of critique.

### **Situating Longfellow's *Offshore***

In discussing the shifting relationship between narrative arts and emergent modes of capitalism, Bertolt Brecht observed that "petroleum resists the five-act form" (30). The crisis of petroleum (and modern capitalism, by extension), he suggests, is increasingly cyclical and diffuse, rendering traditional narrative modes insufficient. Longfellow's interactive digital text is as far removed from the five-act form as one can imagine: it is nonlinear, excursive, user-guided, iterative, and formally resistant to narrative closure. Indeed, *Offshore* is a tactical media project, which Rita Raley defines as a temporary creation that engages in a "micropolitics of disruption, intervention, and education" (1) by subverting and remixing a "dominant semiotic regime" (6). For precisely this reason, *Offshore* offers valuable strategies for engaging with the diffuse workings of global petrocapi-talism. It further illustrates the critical importance of new media genres for grappling with contemporary extractive regimes.

Rob Nixon writes extensively on the difficulty of reconciling the scales of climate crisis, from the planetary to the cellular, with our aesthetic strategies for representing "slow violence" (19). Similarly, Nicole Shukin reflects on the vexed political act of making energy visible. She ultimately advocates for a critical art that replaces a representational register with an "ontological" one that enacts modes of being and inhabiting, such as interactive media. This emphasis on more-than-representational modes coheres with the emerging field of the ecological digital humanities (ecoDH), which theorizes "big data and the personal, art and science" (Cohen and LeMenager 341) through both "research and activism." Moving among different



scales (the planetary, the personal, the digital), ecoDH is especially interested in the potential for “activating more of the human sensorium than text alone typically does” (341) and focusing on the interactions between “embodied place” and “networked ecologies.” As LeMenager persuasively argues, we “experience ourselves, as moderns and most especially as modern Americans, every day in oil, living within oil, breathing it and registering it with our senses” (6). Understanding oil culture means understanding its varied sensory and embodied circulations across extractive geographies, including the prolific offshore.

Appel importantly uncovers modularity as the guiding praxis of offshore extraction. By definition, modularity is atomistic rather than holistic and emphasizes the endless potentiality of discrete parts rather than the sticky connections linking up the whole. Modularity as an industrial logic succeeds to the extent that it effaces and suppresses linkages. Significantly, it is not inherent to the industry but meticulously reproduced through various protocols, practices, and rituals both onboard the rig and embedded within industry discourse. For this reason, it is especially important to dwell in the interstices of the offshore oil industry, for it is here that the work of making invisible, and making modular, occurs. I approach the offshore through a textual mode that is itself highly modular: the interactive digital text, constituted by a series of modules that unfold in response to the user's actions. It is from this vantage that I situate my analysis of Longfellow's *Offshore*, drawing on the broader discourses of energy humanities, tactical media, and digital fiction to understand the text's reflexive unsettling of the modular offshore.

Set in the *Spartan 208*, a fictional rig in the near-future Gulf of Mexico, *Offshore* employs an exploratory first-person gaming format to navigate its extensive digital infrastructure, which includes an elaborate archive of videos, statistics, historical narratives, and interactive cartography. Beginning on the *Spartan 208*'s landing platform, users work their way into the depths of the rig. The user engages with the text on at least two narrative levels: first, as the navigator of the digital platform who must click through its various spaces, videos, and textual archives, and, second, as a fictional character: a disinterested, post-apocalyptic federal investigator who must plumb the depths of the continental shelf and the bureaucratic labyrinths of corporate unaccountability. This investigator is formally tasked with conducting a postmortem on a catastrophic rig explosion and its ecological and public-health consequences. *Offshore* immediately conjures an uncanny physical space that is familiar yet disorienting. Character-

ized by dark colors, labyrinthine passageways, shadowy corridors, and the haunted rituals of bureaucracy, each physical area in the *Spartan 208* correlates with a chapter title, which the user clicks through to uncover clues about the disaster. The text also features the ambient sounds of broken radio waves, ghostly figures that disappear around corners, and flickering hotspots that provide additional information, including interviews with real Gulf Coast residents affected by the BP disaster. *Offshore* ultimately locates the explosion and subsequent spill in a *longue durée* of Gulf Coast oil modernity through a video series that journeys back to the regional discovery of crude oil at the dawn of the twentieth century.

The cumulative video- and text-based media in *Offshore* constitute its documentary mode, while the *Spartan 208* is a fictional scaffolding. If, as Kate Marshall suggests, architectural forms act as communicative media, what exactly do the physical spaces of the *Spartan 208* mediate?<sup>11</sup> What happens if users investigate not the disaster of the rig blowout, but, rather, the physical infrastructures of the offshore platform conjured by Longfellow's text? By lingering in these interstitial spaces, users unfurl and inhabit the suppressed linkages of the offshore oil industry. Engaging with both the formal and thematic infrastructure of Longfellow's text, then, this analysis approaches *Offshore* not as a documentary but as a work of digital fiction that renders legible the offshore subjectivities of the deep-water-extractive regime. I show that, as the text animates its virtual drill rig, it interpellates the user into the ontologies of the offshore, recruiting them to embody, perform, and ultimately unsettle the logics of modular extraction. Through its interactive form and post-apocalyptic aesthetic, *Offshore* disrupts the placelessness and timelessness of the offshore by foregrounding its sticky material and affective scales.<sup>12</sup> In Longfellow's text, energy infrastructures discipline bodies and transmit feelings of dread, ambivalence, insecurity, and instability. *Offshore* thus reveals how the abstracted regimes of deepwater extraction touch the feeling, sensing body. These "energy affects" (14), Jennifer Wenzel argues, are critical to moving beyond the "naïve asceticism or abstemiousness" that often characterizes cultural responses to fossil fuel. By emphasizing the pressures that the offshore exerts on affect, embodiment, and spatial knowledge, this essay further contributes to an understanding of maritime space as a "proprioceptive point of inquiry" in need of its own interpretive frames and models (Blum 671).

From its opening frame, *Offshore* draws the user into a regime of modularity. It assumes a familiarity with digital media that implicates

the user in the remote world of deepwater extraction. In the lower-left corner of the screen, a monochromatic image of grey sea and sky emerges. White text appears on a black bar: “Building OFFSHORE opening scene: [xx] % complete.” Immediately following, “Building SPARTAN 208: [xx] % complete” appears. With these words, *Offshore* initiates the user into a world of both narrative and material construction. Just as Longfellow’s text is being digitally built and transmitted to the user (for seconds or nanoseconds, depending on the user’s Internet speed), the physical site of the *Spartan 208* is simultaneously assembled. Each is an example of modular design: as an interactive digital text, *Offshore* can be navigated in a multitude of ways, as users can choose to jump around the text (and its corresponding physical spaces) using the “Map” feature or to move linearly. The fictional world of *Offshore* begins in the *Spartan 208* rig, a modular industrial design premised on flexibility, reassembly, and standardization. *Offshore* invites users to reflect on this modularity with its opening words. Where the word “loading” conventionally designates the retrieval of a webpage, Longfellow’s verb “building” is tactile, a quality often absent from the abstract realm of digital media. Building, unlike loading, is an inherently modular process: rather than assuming that an object is assembled and ready for conveyance, building signals the process of thoughtful and strategic assembly. In this way, *Offshore* formally reiterates the logic of assembly and decomposability. It draws users into the abstracted temporalities and spatialities of the modular offshore by materializing them as virtual space.

Interactive digital fiction is typically characterized by the second-person address (“you” click through the text), yet this inherently flexible and hypothetical mode is ironically most familiar in neoliberal genres: “advertising, self-help books, and game manuals” (Ensslin and Bell 62). As Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell argue in their study of digital second-person narration, interactive fiction has the potential to ironize the neoliberal discourse of endless possibility inherent in this fluid “you” by invoking “postmodernist tenets about unfixable identities” (62). They suggest that the use of second-person address (also known as the “textual *you*” [49]) in digital fiction “bring[s] about a species of ontological violation that is not possible in printed texts” due to the simulated immediacy of digital media (56). Marie-Laure Ryan has similarly observed that digital fiction is one of the few narrative forms in which the second-person addressee “enters into a truly dialogical rather than merely rhetorical relation with an Other” (519). The formal imperative to enter and produce a narrative, rather than simply read it, implicates users in the environmental

consequences of *Offshore's* unfolding story. From this perspective, *Offshore's* interactive and immersive ontologies are especially germane for environmental discourse.

Ensslin and Bell home in on the slippage inherent in the “textual *you*.” They emphasize the “oscillating tension between fictionalized and apostrophic address” (64)—that is, the tension between the avatar-you and the “you” hailed by the text. These slippages can trigger ontological confusion, and, in turn, create pauses that compel users to reflect on their involvement in the text. The “ontological violation” staged by *Offshore* refuses its audience the privilege of conclusively identifying with the passive addressee of the conventional documentary mode. Rather, the user is compelled to navigate the “you” hailed by the text. *Offshore* thus insists users to inhabit its spaces and logics rather than interpret them from a safe distance.

As it builds the *Spartan 208*, *Offshore* implicitly informs users that the doomed oil rig is being reanimated for their viewing, quietly compelling them to enter the text. This action further implicates them in the risky world of offshore drilling. Users thus bear the burden of making meaning from the vessel materializing onscreen. This ontological slippage is especially provocative in the context of *Offshore's* environmental project, as the user becomes an agent of, rather than mere witness to, fossil-fuel extraction. Even before *Offshore* addresses the user as the investigator it invites reflection on how the user participates in the carbon-heavy lifestyles underwritten by oil. In Longfellow's text, users are ultimately responsible for both the narrative's and the rig's animation. They must inhabit both their actual position as media users and the postmortem perspective of the investigator through which the narrative addresses them directly.

Before traveling through the narrative corridors of *Offshore's Spartan 208*, I will provide a brief introduction to the film's prologue, which transports the user to the virtual rig and demonstrates the text's interwoven modes of documentary realism and speculative fiction. In tandem with its ontological unsettling of the user through the second-person address, the prologue prompts an affective destabilization by evoking nostalgia and dread. Spanning about one-and-a-half minutes, this module is the threshold to the *Spartan 208* and introduces a disorienting space. As the user clicks the flickering “play” icon that launches *Offshore*, the grey scene of sea and sky rapidly spins, blurs, and disappears in a vortex at the center of the screen. The prologue subsequently appears as dissonant music plays in the background. An ominous, apocalyptic quotation materializes on a black screen—“The era of easy oil is over”—which is attributed to David O'Reilly,

CEO of Chevron, in 2005. The phrase “easy oil” contrasts tough oil, which names the unconventional and costly fossil fuels extracted by deepwater-drilling, hydrofracking, and tar-sand mining. By opening the text with this ominous pronouncement, *Offshore* summons the specter of unsustainability and mobilizes the twin affects of nostalgia and dread, which respectively inflect the past and future with the anxieties of the present. As scholars have long demonstrated, the twentieth century was the golden age of “easy oil,” an era in which abundant cheap energy yielded new modernities, from automobility to the culture of disposability. LeMenager, for example, describes our ongoing dependence on carbon-fueled lifestyles as a kind of “bad love” (11). From this vantage, *Offshore*’s opening salvo—“The era of easy oil is over”—is an affective charge that summons users into a space of melancholy. The phrase brings a grimmer and more uncertain future nearer: that of tough oil and its attendant risks. This tension between the backward glance of nostalgia and the speculative orientation of dread provokes a critical ambivalence in the user.

Expanding *Offshore*’s affective ambivalence, the prologue leads to a note of deferment that holds the user in a state of simultaneous anticipation and belatedness. More text appears in a staggered sequence:

Thousands of feet below the ocean floor  
 In dangerous conditions where the hazards are immense  
 but the profits are bigger  
 where the consequences of something going wrong  
 are catastrophic.

The text is intercut with a montage of the BP oil spill: grainy footage of the fiery rig, close-ups of hoses attempting to quell the flames, and finally an image from Spillcam showing calm, blue-green waters clouded with plumes of black crude. The text that appears over this image—“where the consequences of something going wrong”—is a prepositional phrase, promising conclusion. However, the montage simply ends with the words “are catastrophic” suspended over a cloud of oil. Mobilizing both thematic and grammatical instability, *Offshore*’s opening statement anticipates the text’s critical strategies.

The destabilized perspective then shifts to the sky, where the prologue positions users in a virtual helicopter even as it undermines the authority of aerial vision. The epigraph eventually dissolves into a fullscreen image of an opaque blue-gray ocean, with light bouncing weakly off its surface. Radio waves and unintelligible human voices fill the audio track as the camera moves rapidly over the water, too fast

for users to gain their bearings. The shadow of a helicopter flickers below, the only clue to the user's position. This sequence ironically redeploys the God's-eye-view—Haraway's "conquering gaze from nowhere" (581). Denis Cosgrove and William Fox remind us of the "sense of mastery" (8) that attends the aerial perspective and its "eye to scientific objectivity" (9). Users may now occupy a position of perspectival authority, *Offshore* suggests, but they are unable to geolocate themselves as their gaze searches the blurry ocean surface. By subverting the militaristic technology of the helicopter and its aerial vision, *Offshore* introduces the Gulf Coast energy frontier through the key of disorientation. Indeed, the juxtaposition of the ominous epigraph and the heliopic perspective suggests that the hunt for tough oil is ceaseless and endlessly roving. As the prologue continues, the perspective shifts to that of the pilot's seat, which allows users to peer down at a seascape methodically charted by geometric lines and data points—the ocean reinstalled as an object of surveillance. By positioning users in the pilot's seat, *Offshore* not only initiates them into the seemingly transcendent economies of global petrocapi-talism that skip from place to place; it further recruits them as surveyors. Ironically, however, users are disempowered by their inability to control the movement or path of the vessel.

Through its subversive use of heliopic vision, Longfellow's text further reveals how the global offshore is defined by economic metrics that dislocate it from specific sites—that is, make it modular. As users hover over a waterway leading to the open ocean, they transition from a relatively realistic panorama to one that is highly mediated through the prism of extractive calculations. A sequence of images shows inverted red triangles marking points of interest in the offshore industry, from coastal drilling prospects to onshore loading zones in Ghana replete with barrels of oil. White lines span the scene and connect various points, which provide terse explanatory notes, such as "Estimated Reserves, Offshore Arctic: 90 billion barrels." This sequence gives way to a different scene: the screen flickers on a still of docked rigs and smaller vessels. It brightens as if by camera flash, and users see ever so briefly a rhizomatic network of white dotted lines appearing and then vanishing from the surface of the water, presumably denoting a subterranean network of pipelines. The prologue's visual emphasis on geometry suggests the programmability of the ocean as it is mapped and administered by industrial cartographies. At the same time, the clandestine presence of these grids—their flickering appearance and disappearance—speaks to the "enclaving" (Ferguson 378) that increasingly defines contemporary

extraction. Far from being a legible “universalizing grid” (728), this industrial cartography emerges in *Offshore* as erratic, ephemeral, and only fleetingly visible, a brief glimpse into the occulted networks of deepwater extraction. As the prologue canvasses dramatically different geographies, Longfellow positions the offshore as a globe-spanning region connected by the economic logics that compass it: a network of enclaves only legible to the private-industrial gaze. The offshore, she suggests, is everywhere, and therefore disarticulates itself from specific times and places. In this way, *Offshore* demonstrates modularity in the making.

### Unsettling Offshore Subjectivities

*Offshore* positions the *Spartan 208* in the interstices of this enclave grid and forges a reflexive space through which users enter it. As the user arrives on the vessel’s landing platform, an official incident report describes the nautical location of the *Spartan 208* at the time of the explosion and the evacuation of all 152 employees onboard. Strangely, the report warns that the “current location and condition of the rig has yet to be determined.” This peculiar and paradoxical statement gives one pause: If the current location of the rig is unknown, how did the incident report arrive here—and, more importantly, how did the investigator arrive here? The *Spartan 208*’s ability to quite literally drift under the radar suggests that, for a fugitive moment, the rig is unmoored, slipping through the gridlines of neoliberal metrics. It is in this paradoxical space—situated yet unmoored—that *Offshore* subverts the endless mobility and flexibility of the modular offshore.

The peculiar treatment of time within *Offshore*’s digital architecture further formalizes the text’s temporal ruptures. A bar at the top of the screen tracks the user’s movement through the video archive: it reads, “You have seen [x] minutes of 71 minutes.” Yet the progress and total number of minutes go backward and forward as one moves through the text; at times, the number of minutes elapsed exceeds the total number of minutes in the documentary (“You have seen 288 of 71 minutes”).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, trace sounds and visual flickers persist even after one clicks the pause button, compounding the feeling of discomfort and inescapability. The unruly timestamps and persistent visual and auditory traces in *Offshore* create the impression of time as erratic and recursive rather than linear. Indeed, many real-life offshore workers testify to the split temporalities they experience onboard oil rigs. Speaking with a Texan rig worker, for example, Appel recalls the man’s observation that he felt he led two parallel

lives: one in Houston and one in his offshore post. Each life, he suggested, was frozen in time while he was in the other, “like pressing stop and start on a DVD” (qtd. in Appel 696). While this experience is characteristic of many remote occupations, it is important to note how the long workdays and unusually isolated space of the rig amplify experiences of distance and separation. The rig emerges as an ongoing site of deferral and disruption in one’s relationship to time. Hester Blum notes that scholarship on the fluid spaces of global capital tends to overlook the actual work carried out at sea, where laborers are “consigned to invisibility” even as they stand at the center of global capitalism’s circulations (671). Attending to the laboring bodies that work in these sites of transnational crossing, then, rematerializes oceanic spaces in vital ways and makes them legible to broader publics. By formalizing the recursiveness of time in the offshore world, *Offshore* embodies the abstract temporalities of the deepwater regime for its users.

Longfellow’s text subsequently installs ambivalent embodiment: the user is aware of the investigator’s body in space and at the same time experiences partial vision and hindered mobility. As the helicopter drops toward the helipad, granting entrance to the *Spartan 208*, its shadow is an uncanny reminder of the investigator’s position in the world of *Offshore*. Appearing as a proxy for one’s physical body, the helicopter shadow displaces the user twice. First, the shadow is the closest thing to physical embodiment to appear thus far; it contains the body of the investigator yet disarticulates the user from the familiarity of a sensate, bounded human body. Second, as a shadow, it is a proximate reflection absent of any textural nuance or detail. *Offshore* thus positions the user in an inherently destabilized position, estranged from everyday proprioception. It is here that the text dislocates and recalibrates the user’s embodiment: as it refuses the agency, familiarity, and self-containment invested in the body of the rational subject, it creates a critical space for examining the embodied habitus of oil culture through which one comes to understand oneself as a neoliberal subject.

When the user finally enters the *Spartan 208*, *Offshore* fully transitions to a virtual aesthetic: the vessel’s staticky aural landscape combines with drab, lifeless colors as a reminder that the investigator is utterly alone on the abandoned vessel. Written instructions provide an explicit purpose: “PLEASE PROCEED TO INVESTIGATE POSSIBLE CAUSE OF PRESUMED CATASTROPHIC FAILURE AND ASSESS THE IMPACT ON ADJACENT COMMUNITIES AND ECOSYSTEMS.” This instruction to investigate the catastrophe’s



impact points the user toward *Offshore*'s documentary video- and text-based modules, which feature interviews with Gulf Coast residents affected by the BP blowout, including local Louisiana fisherpeople, as well as community health practitioners, industrialists, and industry commentators. In addition to introducing the human populations affected by the spill, *Offshore* assembles a cache of data on more-than-human species in the Gulf of Mexico. The user is directed to engage with these materials with a specific goal in mind: to deduce a coherent narrative about the fictionalized *Spartan 208* disaster. The first instruction, however, to uncover the "possible causes" of the "presumed catastrophic failure" (two phrases, incidentally, imbued with conjecture and contingency) directs the user not only to the extensive documentary footage that implicates governmental deregulation and industrial negligence but also more implicitly toward the rig's architecture. Thus, the user is instructed not only to narrativize *Offshore*'s archives but also to read the physical spaces of the *Spartan 208*.

Longfellow mobilizes the user's embodied and emplaced knowledges to critically read the drilling platform as a metonym for the modular offshore industry. A pair of red headphones hangs on one wall of the helicopter, inviting the user to hover over them. A woman's voice provides a greeting in a Standard English accent: "Welcome to the *Spartan 208*. Before disembarking, please ensure batteries from all electrical items are removed, and cell phones are turned off. Alcohol, matches, lighters, knives, weapons, or any other flammable product are strictly forbidden. Remember, an oil rig may be an extremely dangerous place. Proceed with extreme caution, and disembark now." Denied any electric technologies, the user is implicitly directed to proceed into the world of the rig—and the historical memory of the BP blowout—armed with other sensors: visual and auditory senses, historical consciousness, and imaginative agency. *Offshore* thus interpellates the user as a kind of sensor. It is the investigator's capacity to see, hear, feel, intuit, and imagine that *Offshore* privileges as an epistemic tool in the investigation of the *Spartan 208*.

The lower platform of the drill rig further recruits the user's proprioception. A sound similar to labored breathing through a gas mask punctuates the soundscape. This aural effect is reflexive: the distorted sound of breathing provides a reminder of the investigator's bodily sensors. This sensibility persists as the user ventures forward. After viewing video clips that canvass the modern energy histories of the Gulf of Mexico, the user encounters multiple options for moving forward: descending to the boat deck, or down a tunnel marked

“Terminus.” Clicking on the latter grants the user a bird’s-eye view of a well-like structure made of corrugated metal. The words “8000 ft DEEPEST WELL EVER DRILLED” appear in the center. After the user shuttles down the shaft, additional text emerges in translucent white as a kind of disembodied voice: “Go Back?” If the amplified breathing in the previous module confers reflexivity (it is through hearing the exaggerated sound of breathing that the user becomes aware of their virtual embodiment), the text that appears here reflexively articulates the user’s anxieties. Is “Go Back?” merely a question about one’s location in the bowels of the *Spartan 208* or a query about our cultural ambivalence toward tough oil? “Go Back?” assumes a double valence, referring to both the vertiginous descent down a well-shaft and the collective hunt for crude oil in the ultradeep. Both excursions are impossible to turn back from at this point. The words thus appear simultaneously foreboding and belated, rehearsing the text’s affective and temporal ambivalence.

The ghosts of Gulf Coast extraction fill the *Spartan 208* as the user delves further into the rig. “Go Back?” flickers again in the ship’s lower decks as a ghostly figure in a hard-hat climbs the stairs ahead. Moments later, the user stumbles on a video titled “In the Bloodstream: Stories of Chemical Exposure” and hears from real-life shrimpboat captain Darla Rooks, who enumerates a litany of biological symptoms from spasms to bleeding, following BP’s deployment of the Corexit dispersant. As she describes the labyrinthine networks of oil pipelines that crisscross the Gulf, a map appears on screen with red lines designating the underwater pipelines. Reminiscent of blood, the lines chart their venous path through the heart of US oil country. Entangling the visual registers of the biological and the industrial, *Offshore* emphasizes the unsettling transactions between oil and bodies. In concert with the refrain of “Go Back?” that haunts the rig, *Offshore* forcefully reminds users of the vulnerability and porosity of the body: to enter these spaces is to acknowledge the permeability—and vulnerability—of the human.

The corridors of the rig become increasingly elaborate in the lower decks, pulling the user toward divergent archives. Clicking on “Theatre,” for example, precipitates another haunting. The blurry silhouettes of rig workers flicker intermittently, as if vying for the user’s attention. Ghosts linger until the scene shifts to a viewing room. Through the affective mode of haunting, *Offshore* reminds users of the people, labor, practices, and safety rituals that once occupied the deserted rig. This deeply human and embodied history forms a counter-strategy for reading the *Spartan 208*. In place of the

modular infrastructure of the offshore platform that absents humans, the *Spartan 208* emerges as a space animated by—haunted by—the entanglements of living bodies and industry. By folding the visual traces of laborers into the architecture of the rig, *Offshore* ultimately positions the *Spartan 208* as a critical energy archive that ground-truths the industrial, disembodied science of deepwater extraction. Through the echoing corridors of the virtual vessel, *Offshore* beckons the user as an affective sensor. That is to say, *Offshore* mobilizes the user's virtual experiences of uncertainty, hesitation, and anxiety to recover the material life consigned to the margins of the offshore and subjected to the erasures of an industry that quite literally off-shores its risks. Longfellow's text thus makes visible and ultimately subverts the timelessness and placelessness of the deepwater regime by dwelling in the residual affects it produces.

Toward the end of *Offshore*, users find themselves in the belly of the *Spartan 208*. The vessel's hangar, with a furnace-like orange glow, is eerily reminiscent of a hellscape as users face the stormy Gulf of Mexico. Shadowed by dissonant music, an embedded video titled "Rig Requiem" begins to play, changing the perspective to a sunny aerial view of the gulf's neatly organized industrial grid. Moments later, the perspective shifts abruptly to a display of grainy handheld footage of a specific rig, apparently shot by a person circumnavigating the platform. Transitioning from the aerial perspective of a helicopter to the embodied perspective of a human, *Offshore* provides close-ups of the vessel and its labyrinthine infrastructure. Both the quality and haphazard assembly of the clips recall the informality of a home video. Mournful cello music becomes increasingly frenzied and disharmonic as radio static punctuates the score, and a beeping device reminiscent of a hospital heart monitor intrudes further. The video culminates with a list, under the heading "Requiem for," of the eleven people killed in the *Deepwater Horizon* explosion. Minimally rendered in white text, the names appear as an afterthought in stark contrast to the content of the clip, which (as the video title suggests) elegizes the rig itself using the personalized registers of home video and funeral score. Through the counter-intuitive mourning of the rig itself, Longfellow installs a peculiar subjectivity as she draws on deeply personal representative strategies to literalize users' affective investments in contemporary tough energy.

This suggestive scene exemplifies many of *Offshore's* concerns with the abstracted relationship between energy infrastructures and affective economies. I draw here on Sara Ahmed's articulation of "affective economies" (118) as a way of understanding how emotions

align individuals with the social spaces that surround them—how they “work” (119).<sup>14</sup> With regard to oil, our attachments to the lifestyles, values, and objects it engenders are not simply private matters; rather, our feelings about energy participate in a social economy that, as Ahmed writes, “binds subjects together.” It is toward this matrix of affect, energy, and economy that “Rig Requiem” draws our attention.

The difficult yet necessary work of mourning oil surfaces again in *Offshore*, this time through a more speculative mode. In the final module, the user descends into a submarine from the *Spartan 208*'s hangar. Standing in the rear of the vessel and facing its window, the user sees four iPad-shaped video screens on the console with “play” icons on each of them. Clicking on a video simulates the submersion of the vessel as footage materializes beyond the window, and the user is transported to the ocean floor. In the second video, the green tint of night-vision illuminates a murky cylindrical steel structure, which the camera slowly pans up on as the user peers through the submarine's window. An elaborate system of pipes issues from the structure, which appears to be the BP blowout preventer. Black stenciled text wraps around the cylinder and centers itself in view: “IN MEMORY OF THE DEEPWATER.” As the structure curves, it is reasonable to assume the text concludes with the word “HORIZON” wrapping around the side, out of frame; the underwater monument, anchored over 5,000 feet below sea level, is presumably a tribute to the eleven workers who died on April 20, 2010. Yet, we never see the word “horizon.” Instead, we hover over an evocative phrase—“IN MEMORY OF THE DEEPWATER”—that offers up an entirely new meaning. I want to linger on this phrase as a kind of deformative reading, by which I mean a misreading as a way to open up new interpretations.<sup>15</sup> Through this lens, Longfellow's remediation of BP's archival footage acts as a kind of provocation, inviting reflection on the myriad losses and injuries—both human and more-than-human—sustained in the wake of the BP disaster. The steel structure drilled into the ocean floor thus hovers onscreen as a memorial to the vast and diffuse ecologies of the Gulf of Mexico, from the benthic and pelagic creatures devastated by the spill to the human communities suffering the toxic consequences of BP's dispersal efforts. *Offshore* here invites us to reflect on the very idea of losing, and subsequently commemorating, an entire oceanic region and the various life forms and ecosystems it sustains.

As a tactical media project, *Offshore* requires its user to complete its signifying fields and is thus necessarily temporary. This fleetingness might suggest the text's inability to effect change or reconfigure

environmental citizenship. Yet Rita Raley reminds us that “the right question to ask is not whether tactical media *works* or not, whether it succeeds or fails in spectacular fashion to effect structural transformation; rather, we should be asking to what extent it strengthens social relations and to what extent its activities are virtuosic,” engendering fulfillment through its performance rather than an end product (28–29). From this perspective, *Offshore*'s tactical interpellation of the user into the world of deepwater extraction enacts its own “micropolitics of disruption” (1). If modularity is the “haunted fantasy of the offshore” (Appel 698), Longfellow's text opens up a fugitive space in which users can dwell in the embodied habitus of this prolific energy regime. *Offshore* is thus an immersive encounter that affords new access to the worlds that are made and unmade by deepwater extraction. In mobilizing how it feels to live tough oil in the twenty-first century, *Offshore* invites users to think with, through, and beyond the carbon-constrained world.<sup>16</sup>

## Notes

1. For examples of media that explore these cases, see Josh Fox, Myron Dewey, and James Spione's film *Awake: A Dream for Standing Rock*, which follows the peaceful resistance of Standing Rock water protectors against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Additionally, see Peter Mettler's documentary *Petropolis: Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands*, a short film that surveys the ongoing environmental and climatic effects of bitumen extraction in western Canada.
2. This industry term shadows the more conventional, cheaply produced, and easy-to-reach fossil fuel resources that underwrote twentieth-century modernity.
3. For example, the *Hibernia* platform in the North Atlantic Ocean, operated by ExxonMobil, remains one of the world's largest offshore rigs. In early 2019, the French multinational oil company Total S. A. began production of the expansive Egina field off the coast of Nigeria; in the US, Caelus Energy recently claimed the Smith Bay estuary in the Beaufort Sea as a “world-class discovery” for offshore oil markets (“Smith Bay Fact Sheet”).
4. According to a report by the US Energy Information Administration, this number is projected to increase in the coming decades (“Today in Energy”).

5. This record does not include the 1991 Gulf War oil disaster, which resulted in the spillage of over nine-million barrels of crude oil as an act of warfare.
6. Biologists use the term “synergistic toxicity” to describe the heightened toxicity (up to 52 times average levels) produced by the combination of Macondo crude oil and Corexit. For more on the public-health and environmental effects of the chemical dispersant in the wake of the spill, see Rico-Martínez, Snell, and Shearer, 8–10.
7. For a helpful digest of the spill’s lasting environmental impact, see National Ocean Service.
8. For example, see Scott, who examines the modern state’s spatial production and administration of a universalizing grid.
9. Though the exact coordinates of the ultradeep shift as technologies advance, this term generally refers to deepwater spaces more than 5,000 feet below sea level; see “Ultra Deep Water.”
10. According to the Global Language Monitor’s annual survey, spillcam was the top word of 2010 (“Tracing 2010’s Most-Used Words, Names and Phrases”).
11. In her monograph *Corridor: Media Architectures in American Fiction*, Marshall looks specifically at the role of material passageways and argues against interpreting these spaces as “mere metaphor” (7). Instead, she studies corridors and other physical sites in the literary imagination as “reinscri[ptions]” of “the abstractions of power, institutionality, and bureaucracy in the hard walls of the built world” (7). It is these “hard walls” that re-emerge as objects of critical interest in their own right.
12. Here I recall Amitav Ghosh’s geography of oil extraction. Ghosh theorizes the incompatibility between the novel as a “monolingual” (30) genre that “luxuriat[es]” in a “sense of place,” and the lived geography of globalized oil as “a space that is no place at all, a world that is intrinsically displaced, heterogeneous, and international.” From this perspective, the instability of the interactive text, such as *Offshore*, signals its reflexive capacity for narrating global extractive cultures.
13. I am still unsure whether this feature is by design or accident (or a consequence of different operating systems); however, I have observed it consistently across several web browsers.
14. Ahmed is concerned with the “global economies of fear” (128) that constitute terrorist discourse; however, I find her linking of emotion with broader subject collectives to be especially valuable for thinking with oil as a central object of contemporary life.

15. I refer here to Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann's articulation of critical or "interpretive deformance" (44) as an intentional act of misinterpretation that promotes new meanings by embracing the speculative and performative work of the critic; see "Deformance and Interpretation," 46.
16. My use of "live tough oil" reimagines LeMenager's titular concept of "living oil" to incorporate extreme extraction in the twenty-first century.

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