In a 2017 interview,¹ the science fiction writer Jeff VanderMeer described the challenge of communicating climate change in his novels. He explained that ‘global warming is like a haunting because it appears everywhere and nowhere at the same time’; it is hard to ‘give concrete essence’ to phenomena that move slowly and cause feelings of helplessness. In this last point, VanderMeer echoes a concept that philosopher Timothy Morton has called the ‘hyperobject’ (Morton 2013): a thing that is, spatially and temporally, so huge that we are not equipped to comprehend it in its entirety. VanderMeer suggests that literature can make hyperobjects more comprehensible because ‘one thing fiction can do in its laboratory is make visible what is often invisible to us’.

Robert Macfarlane has similarly suggested that literature and its languages are up to the task of coping with hyperobjects (Macfarlane and Morris 2017) – as is evidenced in the online artwork ‘The Bureau of Linguistical Reality’, which curates crowdsourced neologisms to ‘provide new words to express what people are feeling and experiencing as our world changes’.² My point here is to do with communicating and managing the impacts of a destruction so immense as to constitute a hyperobject. There are events and objects so damaging that the intellectual and practical tools to describe or cope with them may be found in registers better suited to popular or literary culture than heritage studies.

Megadams, oil pipelines and other forms of large infrastructure lend themselves to this discussion. They are, of course, more concrete than...
global warming, and in many ways more visibly bounded: we can see the limits of dam walls and pipelines, as well as the movement of water and oil, and perhaps feel a bit more secure with this containment. But those of us accustomed to managing the effects that these projects have on heritage are aware – and have been aware for some time now – that these impacts reverberate in diverse, often unanticipated ways. To borrow a phrase from Bruno Latour, the earth-moving and extractive impacts of infrastructure development ‘strike sideways’ (Latour 2001, 16: emphasis removed). They produce knock-on effects that include changes to livelihoods, land use and population resettlement; they change access to local resources and fuel the politics of representation. Infrastructure development schemes also affect people in ways that may be difficult to encapsulate within our existing heritage management vocabularies. These often privilege languages of loss and value, conditioning us to measuring impact as something that happens all at once. Nor is this helped by the standard framework for developer-led mitigation, which defines the remit of heritage salvage as the conditions preceding new construction rather than development’s long-term effects.

We know of these difficulties in describing experiences of development because writer-activists in Africa and the wider world have been telling us about them for decades. In this chapter I want to explore some themes in this writing that I believe merit further attention from heritage scholars. In this I take my cue from Rob Nixon’s Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (Nixon 2011). In this work he examines a genre of environmental activist literature, describing global manifestations of what he calls ‘slow violence’ visited upon those countries deemed in need of development. For Nixon, ‘slow violence’ describes calamities brought about both through environmental disasters (erosion, flooding) and human intervention or mismanagement (dam building and oil spills), emphasising where the consequences of these forces are ‘dispersed across space and time’ (Nixon 2011: 2, 6–9). Slow violence is thus related to structural violence – the hidden agencies at work in institutions that perpetuate social injustice and inequality – but focuses specifically on where environmental catastrophes are diffuse, long-lasting and not spectacular.

Consequently the effects of projects such as megadams and pipelines are tremendous but often difficult to track, especially in our era of ‘turbo-capitalism’ and ‘super-modernity’ that dedicates so much media space to events that are massive, loud and immediate. In this chapter I follow Nixon’s suggestions to pay attention to slow violence as it is manifested in the works of several African writer-activists, whose work
includes both fiction and political non-fiction or biography (I mainly discuss the latter here, cf. Meskell and Weiss 2006). I consider what insights from this work can offer heritage studies and heritage managers in how we conceive of the environmental impacts of infrastructure development, how landscape can be both a cultural asset and a potential danger, and how we define risk and security in the face of development threats. As my main involvement with infrastructure projects has been related to heritage mitigation and salvage (King and Arthur 2014; King and Nic Eoin 2014; King et al. 2014), much of my discussion is concerned with these applications of the themes described here.

When land is a weapon

Land is perhaps the obvious place to begin, especially in light of how deeply ‘the land question’ has been entangled in questions of post-colonial restitution, empowerment and development in many African countries. Written in 1961 amid widespread movements for African independence and decolonisation, Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth related the structural and economic conditions of colonisation to the dehumanisation and psychological trauma experienced by colonised peoples. This extended to experiences of alienation from land, including both its resources and its entanglement in feelings of belonging and historical self-awareness. Fanon argued that for colonised peoples the ability to own and access lands previously arrogated by colonial powers would bring dignity as well as rights. Land restitution and rehabilitation were correctives to decades (in some cases centuries) of colonialist endeavours to impose prescriptive understandings of civil and moral progress on African populations via institutions linking cultivation and ‘effective occupation’ to civilisation (for example, Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Vernal 2012; King 2018).

However, for much of the late twentieth century the loudest voices clamouring for intervention against environmental destruction (especially by dams) did not draw strength from arguments such as Fanon’s, which linked land with cultural and economic empowerment. Instead conservationists such as Wallace Stegner and David Brower, both based in the United States, called for the preservation of pristine wildernesses – not cultural or socially meaningful places. Nixon argues that Arundhati Roy’s 1999 essay ‘The Greater Common Good’, about the hegemony of dam-building that lay behind India’s Narmada Valley dams, was a landmark work that shifted the environmentalist rhetoric around development
from one based on a nature/culture divide to one premised in socio-cultural justice, of the sort envisioned by Fanon (Nixon 2011, 154–5). The wave of dam-building accompanying the Narmada project was an opportunity to highlight not only how in the late 1990s the dam-building industry was becoming more globalised, but also how the ‘exploitative centre of gravity’ of such projects was shifting to densely populated rural places, where land was a source of history, identity and security. Dam-building, and by extension certain forms of infrastructure-building, thus became cast as ways for states to ‘perform’ development, and also as acts of state- and developer-led violence.

Ken Saro-Wiwa’s writing against Shell’s oil extraction in Nigeria (1993–8) sits beside Fanon’s linking of land with dignity, North American environmentalism’s connection of land rights with custodianship and Roy’s insistence of focusing on the perspectives of people on the politico-economic periphery. In two major non-fiction works – *Genocide in Nigeria* (1992) and *A Month and a Day* (1995) – Saro-Wiwa describes the complicity of the regime of Nigeria’s Sani Abacha and Shell Oil in coupling ethnic and environmental violence. The decision to instal oil pipelines in the Niger River Delta area, home to political minority communities such as Saro-Wiwa’s Ogoni, was the centrepiece of these texts, although Ogoni representation had been a lifelong ‘article of faith’ for the author (Saro-Wiwa 1995, 39).

In an earlier work of 1990 (*On a Darkling Plain*), Saro-Wiwa linked oil extraction with dehumanisation in the wake of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70). He observed that ‘oil was very much at the centre of this war’, and that post-war development policies ‘have turned the delta and its environs into an ecological disaster and dehumanised its inhabitants’ (see Saro-Wiwa 1995, 44). His subsequent visits to the United States showed the power of environmental consciousness (of the ‘pristine wilderness’ sort) in making demands of governments and companies. He describes this as a ‘sharpening’ of his awareness to organise a particular kind of Ogoni activist platform against oil extraction, one combining a North American strain of ecological preservation with a particularly local set of concerns about wellbeing and representation (Saro-Wiwa 1995, 54).

Saro-Wiwa’s concept of ‘ecological genocide’ captures this sort of environmentalism. He argues that land is a major casualty of destruction caused by development and its attendant (often flawed) mitigation efforts: oil seepage destroys rural livelihoods and pipeline construction and management practices tend to disenfranchise local area residents. But ‘genocide’ here contains another sense of damage, one in which land can be politically and physically weaponised through degradation and
pollution. Delta lands may be a cornerstone of Ogoni identity and politics, but they can also damage Ogoni health and wellbeing. In this view Saro-Wiwa differs from contemporaries such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who characterised land as a weapon in the hands of colonisers but a source of nourishment in the hands of Africans (Caminero-Santangelo 2007, 702).

From a heritage perspective, Saro-Wiwa’s description of ecological genocide illustrates that landscapes – for all the multifaceted and multi-component traits that heritage scholars accord them – have changeable social value. Land in Saro-Wiwa’s telling is not just a ‘weapon of the weak’ (in James Scott’s now-famous phrase), nor is it primarily the province of local knowledge and imagination (Scott 1985). Far from being anodyne or ineffably complex, land can have the power to harm in two senses: it became increasingly polluted under Shell’s stewardship, thus becoming a source of physical danger for residents of the pipeline’s catchment, and it was also a mechanism through which the state could suppress Ogoni activism. With respect to this latter point, Saro-Wiwa’s re-telling of the Ogoni activist movement against Shell and Abacha (the focus of A Month and a Day; Saro-Wiwa was executed in 1995 for alleged crimes related to his activism) emphasised where Nigeria’s ambitions to post-colonial development and economic viability came at the expense of Ogoni human rights. Environmental violence here tracked and reinforced ethnic factionalism.

Claims to human rights contingent on land rights are certainly familiar to heritage scholars, as are the ways in which political factionalism can manifest itself in contests over rights to culturally significant places. Here, however, we see Saro-Wiwa claiming that land is not equal to the payout of political recognition, but rather an active conduit of political aggression. This is a significant point to bear in mind in how we understand stakeholder access to, and investment in, the territories that are contested when infrastructure development demands that we identify people who stand to benefit or lose out from landscape destruction. Imperatives to record or salvage landscapes in the way of building projects rarely confront this question, but what if salvaging landscape includes salvaging vehicles for violence (cf. Ronayne 2007)?

The haze of modernity

Saro-Wiwa’s writing further showcases how, during the course of the Abacha regime’s involvement with Shell, inequities between ethnic groups in Nigeria were widened and allowed to solidify. Meanwhile transnational
companies such as Shell were increasingly freed from regulatory con-
straints during the structural adjustment protocols that took hold in the
1980s and 1990s, which devolved governing powers to a mosaic of extra-
state entities. In highlighting this process, Saro-Wiwa leads us into a brief
discussion of where tracing experiences of development, or ‘betterment’,
in Africa blurs the distinction between colonial and post-colonial, and
renders hazy the dawn of ‘hyper-modernity’.

Transnational connections of the sort just described are familiar
terrain in heritage studies. This is especially true as twentieth-century
neoliberal development schemes reached into ever-farther corners of
the so-called Global South, entrenching heritage in the role of economic
driver, political persuader and vehicle for global representation. Taking
development as a subject of historical study, however – especially through
the lens of popular culture and literature – illustrates where ‘betterment’
schemes are part of a longer history of efforts to enclave or localise pov-
erty (arguably beginning in Africa with missionary activities), or at least
to tell us how poverty relates to the emergence of the modern world (cf.
Lafrenz Samuels 2009).

Litheko Modisane has described his unease over how African
modernity has been characterised with a hazy boundary or link to the
colonial era that whiffs of ambivalence (Modisane 2015: if we can agree
(in the spirit of archaeologies of the modern world) that modernity
did not begin with African independence movements but much earlier,
and perhaps with the spread of global mercantilism, then how are we
to cope with the roots of modern African heritage that lie in conditions
of colonial exploitation? Modisane’s anxiety over this hazy boundary is
instructive. To my mind it encourages us to take another look at the link-
age between transnationalism, development and poverty within a longer
view of African modernity. If we are prepared to accept that the mod-
ern world was born of global connections, then we should look to where
transnational involvement of entities bent on ‘bettering’ African commu-
nities instantiated and then perpetuated ideas about poverty and the way
to uplift it. In part, this amounts to a plea for more nuanced, deeper histo-
ries of development and its legacies in the form of land management, soil
erosion control, dam-building and mining. It is also a plea for heritage
studies to locate its practices within an awareness of this history.

But we would do well to return to Saro-Wiwa, and also to more
recent commentaries on how these legacies of betterment have been
negotiated in African print cultures over time. In Khwezi Mkhize’s recent
writing about the birth of South Africa’s first black publication in the early
twentieth century (Mkhize 2018), there is a resonance with Saro-Wiwa’s
desire to destabilise the centre-periphery model that positions so many African communities as downstream from politics, policy and literary trends. Mkhize writes that these early publications, produced by the first generation of mission-educated Africans, were a way for this constituency to add their voices to the public sphere and critique the failure of liberal promises of upliftment and betterment. Escaping the centre-periphery model, then, is not just about recovering subaltern voices or provincialising the metropole. It also requires a reconfiguration of political geography to assert that historically marginalised voices can carve out a space in the public sphere, and that this space can challenge ideas about betterment.

Critiquing transnational development schemes in a way that disrupts the centre-periphery model, then, is arguably an essential component for understanding the length, breadth and duration of development interventions in Africa, along with their slow violence.

The meaning of risk

In 1977 Wangari Maathai launched the Green Belt Movement (GBM), a Kenyan activist association whose tree-planting efforts not only raised global awareness of the conjoined problems of deforestation and soil erosion, but ultimately won Maathai a Nobel Peace Prize. Maathai’s activism treated large-scale deforestation as both a contributing factor to the economic insecurity of rural women (traditional cultivators) and a symptom of the authoritarian policies of Kenya’s long-term president Daniel arap Moi, who was in power from 1978 to 2002. In Maathai’s 2008 memoir Unbowed, she describes the GBM’s aim to reintroduce ‘a sense of security among ordinary people so they do not feel so marginalised and so terrorised by the state’. In so doing, Maathai relates the question ‘What does it mean to be at risk?’ to environmental, gender and democratic security.

Nixon argues that Maathai’s activism was successful because of its intersectionality. The imperative to plant trees and arrest soil erosion was about more than preserving forest lands as ‘pristine wilderness’, in line with the ‘antihuman’ conservation measures that Kenya inherited from colonial economics (Nixon 2011, 139). To understand the net impacts of deforestation and soil degradation as slow violence, it is also necessary to understand the historical events that positioned rural women as the inheritors not only of a historical system of land dispossession and labour devaluation, but also of a contemporary programme of resource mismanagement by Moi’s government. For the GBM, risk could be minimised and security achieved by looking both backward to the past and sideways to
other, related spheres of impact. Together these optics could provide the necessary tools to prevent future conflict among rural communities.

These messages were especially timely within Kenya (affected by ethnic factionalism as Moi’s tenure closed its second decade) and the wider world. Maathai’s Nobel Prize came in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks and the start of George W. Bush’s Iraq campaign, and she in turn faced criticism inflected by misogyny, racism and sentiments that tree-planting was too anodyne a focus for a time of terror. However, as Nixon explains, Maathai’s writing and activism shows how ‘structures of violence sustain tinderbox conditions that cynical political elites can readily ignite at great cost to a society’s systematically disenfranchised’ (Nixon 2011, 149). If soil erosion causes a chain reaction that leads to insecurity and instability, surely something as simply and effectively pre-emptive of violence as tree-planting is worth supporting.

The GBM and Maathai’s writing about it raise two significant, heritage-resonant points. The first relates to how slow violence often occurs in the passive voice, ‘without clearly articulated agency’ (Nixon 2011, 136). Part of what makes slow violence so pernicious and so difficult to keep within one’s analytical field of vision is that it often refuses to declare itself as such. Slow violence (once we are aware of it and its traces) too easily lends itself to description as a series of regretful events, produced by the confluence of administrative happenstance or unintended consequences. These easily appear as downstream from so many convoluted processes that decision-making authority for violence itself becomes abstracted. Maathai and the GBM refused to accept this. They held Moi and his government directly responsible for rural insecurity, regardless of how far removed from the deforestation process they claimed to be.

When considering heritage damaged or put in harm’s way by infrastructure development programmes, the alphabet soup of funding bodies and the contracting processes of which heritage managers see only a small part help to obscure the historical and networked factors behind this destruction. This is especially the case as neoliberal development schemes have ensured that financing and governance associated with large infrastructure construction are dispersed across an assemblage (to borrow a phrase from Tania Murray Li, 2007) of institutions; this creates a horizontal landscape of power across which to track developer agendas (Ferguson 2007). Maathai, along with scholars of neoliberal heritage regimes (Coombe 2013), encourages us not to shy away from chasing these networks, but instead to probe more deeply into how they imagine and instrumentalise heritage. I would argue, along with some anthropologists and historians (for example, Mbembe 2001; Ferguson 2007;
Chalfin 2010), that the authority to enact development programmes and (potentially) bring about slow violence should never be taken for granted, nor be allowed to position itself as too far ‘up there’ in the hierarchy of governance to be critiqued directly. The corollary of this position is more historical and ethnographic work into states and extra-state entities, along with exploration of how they work together to articulate ideas about development and its cultural value.

Second, Maathai illustrates where risk must be evaluated by taking into account historical conditions as well as imagined catastrophes. In recent years heritage mitigation in development contexts has expanded to include not just archaeological salvage, but also intangible heritage and oral history recording (for example, Nic Eoin and King 2013; Kleinitz and Merlo 2014; Apoh and Gavua 2016). This expanded remit necessarily entails a broader awareness of time and context in a development-affected area, and creates opportunities for non-expert voices to define the impacts of development on heritage. We see this in projects such as the recent inscription of Lesotho’s Sehlabathebe National Park on UNESCO’s World Heritage List, which entailed an oral historical survey to ascertain local communities’ feelings toward rock art within the park’s boundaries. Rather than rock art-specific comments, the survey elicited long simmering concerns by area residents about the lack of economic opportunities and their ongoing unhappiness with the forced removals of communities from the park’s boundaries in the 1970s. If the direction of heritage management associated with population displacement and landscape alteration is to include this sort of anthropological or oral historical work, then this insistence upon putting present-day impacts in historical contexts of alienation and disenfranchisement will become increasingly commonplace.

Risk – of loss of place and damage to heritage – is related to catastrophe that is imagined, but the extent of imagination is rooted in historical awareness. The business of managing heritage and its associated risks will become increasingly complicated in this era of intangible heritage mitigation. We would do well to heed Maathai’s warning that confining our understanding of heritage impacts to silos (tangible/intangible, historical/contemporary) is to miss the bigger picture.

**Conclusion**

The discussion in this chapter is a preliminary one, aimed at beginning a conversation among heritage studies and print cultures and directing attention to vocabularies or concepts that can (I believe) enrich
approaches to destruction in heritage studies. We live in a time of rapid change for heritage, its subjects and its methods; a time of proliferating hyperobjects that require us to shift our frames of reference to take in ever-larger timescales, assemblages of actors and flows of knowledge. However, the writers described here (representing a very small fraction of the relevant literature) alert us to the ways in which many themes surrounding heritage and destruction are not wholly new, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Landscape destruction, whether through erosion, megadams or oil pipelines, both embodies and conducts different forms of violence; these can reverberate across time and space in ways that may be subtle but devastating. These are not unprecedented conditions, but ones that have been in place for decades in countries such as Nigeria, as Saro-Wiwa reminded us.

The embeddedness of violence within these sorts of infrastructure development projects is impossible to ignore. Yet it is also easily abstracted, distanced from the complex assemblage of state and extra-state entities involved. Paying attention to this array of actors, then, becomes not just an exercise in tracing new forms of governmentality and global heritage, but also in examining how the business of governance (increasingly outsourced to non-state actors) implicates decisions about heritage management and development that are inherently violent. In considering this, we would do well to heed Rosemary Coombe’s insistence to take states, developers, non-governmental organisations and the like as subjects of detailed ethnographic and historical enquiry (Coombe 2013), thereby resisting the abstracting power of slow violence.

Time and risk also emerge as themes worth further consideration. Maathai’s GBM illustrates how understanding, anticipating and mitigating the effects of destruction is an exercise in imagination – but an imagination that is not infinite; it is influenced or limited by peoples’ historical self-awareness, memories and desires. Moreover, destruction is never produced through a single policy or set of actions. It is rather located at the intersections of historical and contemporary socio-economic circumstances that can (in Nixon’s words) ‘sustain tinderbox conditions’ through the accretion of slow violence over time. Thinking of slow violence in this way offers something of a rejoinder to the suggestion that in our era of supermodernity, time and destruction both behave exceptionally fast, accelerating and changing course with remarkable velocity (González-Ruibal 2016, 148–9). I suggest that authors such as Saro-Wiwa and Maathai demonstrate how, in the context of destruction, time behaves unpredictably and multi-directionally. Soil erosion may be experienced as a slow process, but challenge the reasons for it and the same apparatus
behind erosion will react with swift, militaristic efficiency. Oil spills are catastrophic, fast events, but their negative impacts seep into the future (affecting the long-term health and slowly declining livelihoods of multiple generations of area residents), as well as into the past (in how ideas about land and one’s place in it are transformed).

Indeed, this chapter could be glossed as a suggestion to view super-modernity and destruction as slow phenomena instead of, or in addition to, fast ones. Fundamentally, though, the discussion here highlights areas in which popular and print cultures can give us food for thought and are worth paying attention to. Following authors such as VanderMeer and Macfarlane, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, and so crossing genres as well as disciplines, is a necessary step towards beginning to comprehend hyperobjects, megastructures and their associated violence.

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Notes


References


