

**‘A kind of sensory, strange thing to experience’: Speaking environmental disaster
in the *Sea Empress Project* archive.**

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**‘A kind of sensory, strange thing to experience’: Speaking environmental disaster
in the *Sea Empress Project* archive.**

ABSTRACT

This article explores embodied encounters with the *Sea Empress* oil spill of 1996 and their representation in oral narratives. Through a close reading of the personal testimonies collected in the *Sea Empress Project* archive, I examine the relationship between intense sensory experiences of environmental change and everyday interpretations of the disaster and its legacy. The article first outlines the ways in which this collection of voices reveals sensory memories, embodied affects, and narrative choices, to be deeply entwined in oral representations of the spill, disclosing a ‘sensory event’ that created a powerful awareness of both environmental surroundings and their relationship to everyday social processes. Then, reading these narratives against-the-grain, I argue that narrators’ accounts tell a paradoxical story of a disaster that most now wish to forget, and reveal an ambivalent legacy of environmental change this is similarly consigned to the past. Finally, I relate this social forgetting of the *Sea Empress* to the wider history of environmental consciousness in modern Britain.

KEYWORDS

Sea Empress disaster, Oil spills, Oral history, Embodiment, Senses, Everyday life

INTRODUCTION

Just after eight o'clock in the evening on Thursday 15 February 1996, the supertanker MV *Sea Empress*, carrying 130,000 tonnes of North Sea crude oil, ran aground off St Anne's Head just outside Milford Haven in Pembrokeshire, Wales. Over the ensuing week, what began as a routine maritime mishap evolved into a complex multi-agency salvage operation.¹ As oil gushed from ruptured tanks, loss of draught confounded initial plans to tow the stricken vessel into harbour for repair. Instead, *Sea Empress* became trapped within a submerged basin of rocks and sandbanks. On 17 February, in rising winds and seas, salvors lost control of the ship which over the following days was repeatedly forced against the walls of this submarine prison. With its storage tanks badly damaged and salvage teams struggling to regain control, concern grew that both ship and cargo would be a total loss.²

By this stage, the unfolding environmental disaster was being extensively covered in both the British and international media, with accusations circulating that the Conservative government had shown complacency in not applying the lessons of the

¹ E. Ferguson and D. Harrlson, 'Sea saga sinks into black farce: A tale of incompetence and complacency lies behind the Dyfed disaster', *The Observer*, 25 February 1996.

² P. B. Marriott, *Report of the Chief Inspector of Marine Accidents into the Grounding and Subsequent Salvage of the Tanker Sea Empress at Milford Haven between 15 and 21 February 1996* (London: Stationery Office, 1997); A. Rees, P. Crosbie, and I. Cobain, 'The tide of blunders', *Daily Express*, 22 February 1996; A. Rees and T. Moore, 'Catalogue of scandal that made oil spill a disaster', *Daily Express*, 11 January 1997.

MV *Braer* spill three years earlier.³ Fortunately, the poor weather passed and on 21 February it became possible to re-board the ship and restart its engines. Nonetheless, as the *Sea Empress* finally, and to everyone's relief, limped toward Herbranston Jetty, it left behind it 72,000 tonnes of crude oil (approximately twice the amount lost from *Exxon Valdez*) embarrassingly spilt into the waters neighbouring the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. The subsequent pollution affected nearly 125 miles of shoreline, including the beaches at the coastal resort town of Tenby, leading to an enormous clean-up operation as well as months of restrictions on local fishing.⁴

Two decades after *Sea Empress* went aground, the artist Abigail Sidebotham returned to Pembrokeshire to conduct a public art project commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the catastrophe. Her research included working with local volunteers to collect oral histories from some of those who had experienced the disaster. These testimonies have since been published online in the *People's Collection Wales* online archive.⁵ This

³ R. Smithers, O. Bowcott, and D. Fairhall, 'Ministers "Disregarded oil warnings"', *The Guardian*, 21 February 1996; S. Lyall, 'Oil tanker refloated off Wales', *New York Times*, 22 February 1996, 8.

⁴ H. Mair, 'Further leaks occur in *Sea Empress* saga', *Marine Pollution Bulletin* 4, no. 34 (1997): 222; P. Brown, '*Sea Empress*: How disaster struck', *The Guardian*, 12 February 1998.

⁵ 'Sea Empress Project', Peoples Collection Wales, accessed 4 August 2019, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/users/10537>. The interviews were recorded as part of a project run by the artist Abigail Sidebotham and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The archived recordings are publicly available and are used here for the purposes

remarkable assembly consists of thirty-two semi-structured interviews of mostly complete recordings. Collected primarily for creative purposes, Sidebotham's interviews centre specifically on the events and the legacy of the disaster, rather than exploring them in the context of larger life narratives. Many of the interviews are quite short in length. Nonetheless, this archive still offers an invaluable insight into the experience of petrochemical catastrophe in modern Britain and raises interesting insights into about how this intense sensory experience has subsequently affected narrators' memories of the disaster and their 'consciousness' of their environment.⁶

In recent years there has been an increasing excitement about the prospects for exploring environmental history through oral narratives.⁷ This work has been diverse,

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⁶ A. Thomson, 'Memory and remembering in oral history', *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

⁷ S. Hussey and P. Thompson, *The Roots of Environmental Consciousness: Popular Tradition and Personal Experience* (London: Routledge, 2002); S. Mukherjee, *Surviving Bhopal: Dancing Bodies, Written Texts, and Oral Testimonials of Women in the Wake of an Industrial Disaster* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); E.D. Blum, *Love Canal Revisited: Race, Class, and Gender in Environmental Activism* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2011); K. Holmes and H. Goodall, *Telling Environmental Histories: Intersections of Memory, Narrative and Environment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); D. Lee and K. Newfont, eds., *The Land Speaks: New Voices at the Intersection of Oral and Environmental History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

but one of its key themes has been the exploration of oral accounts of catastrophic environmental change. This perhaps reflects the power of oral history in accessing the everyday, as Deb Andersen writes, ‘Disasters can cut deep against the grain of ordinary human experience - and oral history can present a cautionary tale drawn from the lasting human struggle to come to terms with it.’⁸ Moreover, as Brian Williams and Mark Riley have persuasively argued oral narratives offer powerful insights precisely because they offer ‘embodied, nuanced and [inter]subjective understandings of environment and environmental change.’⁹

In what follows, I offer a secondary analysis of the *Sea Empress Project* collection, exploring what its range of interviews reveal about the intersection of embodiment, environmental change, and everyday life in late-modern Britain. I have two main objectives each addressed in the two main parts of this essay. In the first section, I employ a close reading of the interviews to examine the specific content and narrative form used by narrators in conveying their bodily, sensory experiences of the *Sea Empress* spill as a ‘sensory event’. In the second part of this article, I begin ‘reading’ these narratives against-the-grain, examining the relationship between intense emotional memories of the disaster and the struggle to put into words the legacy of catastrophe. I

⁸ Deb Anderson, ‘Where the Wild Things Were’, in *Disasters in Australia and New Zealand: Historical Approaches to Understanding Catastrophe*, ed. S. McKinnon and Margaret Cook (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 180.

⁹ B. Williams and M. Riley, ‘The challenge of oral history to environmental history’, *Environment and History* 26, no. 2 (May 2020): 208.

argue that this reveals a paradoxical relationship between intensely embodied memories and somewhat more ambivalent articulations of the spill's legacy.

NARRATING SENSORY DISASTER

The sensory event

The sensory is an almost universal starting point for stories in the *Sea Empress Project* collection. Narrators frequently begin with references to the disturbing aroma of crude oil, its strange movements on water, and the unfamiliar sounds it made. A local artist, Sarah Reason-Jones, offers one particularly complex and layered account of the sensory experience of the spill that it is worth interrogating in detail. After a brief autobiographical introduction, Sarah proceeds immediately to tell a story of her sensory experience of the disaster:

There was just silence, there were no seagulls in the air. There was a smell.

There was the odd aeroplane flying around, and I remember thinking this is what it must have been like in the war. And, what else can I say? And then, just looking at the harbour, which was sludge coming in and going out on the tide, I remember thinking, I've just taken all of where I live for granted. The beautiful sea, the cliffs, and at the time you didn't know if it was ever going to go back to

normal. I just sort of felt, well, like a bereavement. This has happened, will it ever go back to the way it was?¹⁰

There is a remarkable narrative density to this account, in which Sarah emphasizes the ‘out-of-this-world’ strangeness of her experience through a series of sensory juxtapositions between the *normal* and its inversion. The appearance of oily sludge moving with the tide is contrasted with the usually ‘beautiful sea’. An uncanny silence is made perversely audible by the *absence* of expected animal cries, intermittently disturbed by the drone of an aircraft. Then there is the smell, which Sarah audibly stresses. Sarah’s narrative conveys the moment that an ordinarily invisible sensory backdrop that she had ‘taken for granted’ suddenly, and frighteningly, transitioned into her conscious awareness. Her story evokes a moment of ‘sensory destabilization’ analogous to that referred to by Mark M Smith in his sensory history of hurricane ‘Camille’.¹¹

While Sarah’s narrative is clearly driven by a sensory memory, she also highlights the temporal dimension to this bodily experience. Sarah speaks of the ‘day or days’ over which this ‘dislocation’ took place, conveying a tension between immediacy and duration, while her analogy with *wartime* prompts a listener to think of, and place the event within, historical time. These statements put the time of her story out-of-joint, simultaneously emphasizing the status of the sensory event as a rupture in the normal

¹⁰ S. Reason-Jones, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview by A. Sidebotham, 10 January 2016, Sea Empress Project, People’s Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/557350>.

¹¹ M.M. Smith, *Camille, 1969* (University of Georgia Press, 2011), 7.

rhythm of everyday life, and as a moment that has now passed.¹² Moreover, these sensory dislocations and temporal distortions formed a deeply emotional experience that Sarah describes as ‘like a bereavement’. This rift in her everyday environment was so disturbing that Sarah even remembers seeking refuge from it by visiting the northern coastline of Pembrokeshire, where the pollution was less severe, and recalls that it was nice ‘just to have the normal sea’.

I want to dwell briefly over the complexity of Sarah’s narrative because it poses many of the observations and questions that follow. Sensory historians have become increasingly sensitive to the interpenetration of sense, time and affect, an imbrication that is clearly at work in Sarah’s telling.¹³ What does the overlapping of these different manifestations of embodied experience mean in this context? If Sarah is making the narrative choice to integrate these different registers of embodied experience, in the process presenting her ‘environment’ as something previously so proximate to her as to be out-of-focus, what does this tell us? One answer might be to read Sarah’s story, in Joy Parr’s terms, as the revealing the moment that an environment experienced primarily through habit and practice shifted from a state of ‘corporeal embodiment’,

¹² Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life* (London: Continuum, 2004), 17.

¹³ S. Koole, ‘How we came to mind the gap: Time, tactility, and the tube’, *Twentieth Century British History* 27, no. 4 (1 December 2016): 524–54; R. Boddice and M.M. Smith, ‘Emotion, Sense, Experience’, *Elements in Histories of Emotions and the Senses*, September 2020.

which Parr says is ‘usually held beyond telling’, into conscious awareness as something ‘urgently speakable’.¹⁴

Yet, while something like this is clearly happening here, I do not think that this is the whole story. The *Sea Empress* disaster may have brought the corporeal environment ultimately into consciousness for Sarah, but it also raised the question of return. It prompted Sarah, and still prompts her, to ask herself, and now a listener, whether things could ever be the same again. Discussing the ways in which modern Canadians adapted to extreme transformations of place in modernity, Parr argues that the ‘path towards knowing anew is difficult to share, for these embodiments of the altered world beyond our skin are usually achieved without conscious awareness and are held beyond speech’.¹⁵ However, Sarah’s account offers a different perspective, in which the embodied awareness of environmental change is accompanied by a spoken desire not to adapt but to go back to normal. This is not so much embodied adaptation to a changed materiality as the linguistic assertion of an ideological desire. Of course, this memory is a retrospective articulation. It might also be read as a question, ‘after twenty-years, *have* things gone back to normal?’ Nonetheless, Sarah’s story prompts consideration of whether it is possible to forget, or in this context *unspeak*, an embodied sensory event? As we shall see, this question runs through numerous narrators’ accounts of the catastrophe, and reveals the challenges, and the politics, of remembering the *Sea Empress* after twenty years.

¹⁴ J. Parr, *Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environment and the Everyday*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), 2.

¹⁵ Parr, 190.

Sensory dislocations

The centrality of sensory memory is common ground among the *Sea Empress Project* narrators, reflecting the acknowledged importance of the senses in oral narratives.¹⁶ Examples of odour providing a unifying factor in the social memory of *Sea Empress* could be multiplied endlessly from the archive. To some extent, this primacy of scent may reflect the contingencies of local topography. *Sea Empress* went aground off St Anne's Head, to the west of the major inhabited areas in Pembrokeshire. While a large part of the tanker's oil was ultimately driven south, around the headland of Angle Bay, for many people living along this coastline their first material encounter with the spill would have been the reek of petrochemical pollution. Local businessman, Kim Beynon, declares that his 'biggest memory' of the spill was of 'getting up at seven o'clock in the morning and preparing to go to work, and the smell in the air in Tenby ... It was just an unbelievable smell. I'd never smelt anything like it before. It was just that oily acrid smell. I ran up to the top of the North Beach, and to my horror, the whole of the North Beach was just covered in oil'.¹⁷ For Beynon this moment of sensory overload was intimately connected with his daily rituals; the normal cadence of his waking and getting ready for the day is shattered by the smell and running to the beach to identify

¹⁶ P. Hamilton, 'Oral History and the Senses', in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 3rd ed. (Abingdon, Oxon, 2006), 104–16.

¹⁷ K. Beynon, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview by S. Rhys-Phillips, 16 November 2016, Sea Empress Project, People's Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/557359>.

the source. This memory is so powerful it still has the power to interrupt Beynon's sense of time: 'it was twenty-years ago' he says, 'and time has flown very quickly', but 'the smell is as if it were yesterday'.¹⁸

Narrators often ask their listener to accept the centrality of the sensory to their story by beginning an account with the scent of oil. Arthur Squibbs, interviewed alongside his partner Norah, recalls early in his telling how the 'lasting impression for both of us was the smell, and I can remember that always.'¹⁹ This statement comes within a minute of the interview commencing and is preceded only by some brief personal background. In other cases, there is explicit acknowledgement of olfactory memory to the story being told. Peter Cooper, a local physiotherapist, tells his interviewer that he can't remember where he first heard of the incident, but does recall going to the beach at Manobier and that 'the smell was the first thing, I'm sure people have mentioned that. There were very powerful fumes in the air.'²⁰ Peter is clearly aware that accounts of the *Sea Empress* are, first and foremost, understood to be stories of smell. Sensory recollections are not necessarily confined to outdoor environments either. Marion Hutton returned to Tenby the day after the grounding, and recalls that, 'I knew the news and smelt the smell and it was quite awful.' She also remembers that 'a friend had been staying in my house and

¹⁸ Beynon.

¹⁹ A. Squibbs and N. Squibbs, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview by S. Rhys-Phillips, 27 October 2016, Sea Empress Project, People's Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/556311>.

²⁰ P. Cooper, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview by S. Rhys-Phillips, 10 January 2016, Sea Empress Project, People's Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/557352>.

had woken and smelt what she thought was an electrical fire. She knew how they did smell because she'd lived next door to one, and she thought she must have left something on in the house, and she recalled running round this house trying to find the source of this awful smell.²¹ Offered in the form of humorous anecdote, Marion's story nonetheless reveals how oily aromas ensured sensory dislocations diffused into domestic spaces too.

This capacity for sensual disturbance was partly a result of a peculiarly grubby materiality, what Stephanie LeMenager refers to as oil's 'fecal qualities'.²² These mucky characteristic are, however, more than aromatic, and while the whiff of crude oil is the single most widely shared memory in the collection, it remained only one part of a dense multi-sensory encounter.²³ Reflecting this sensory complexity, narrators frequently move from olfactory experiences to explore other connected sensory moments. As workers removed oil from the beaches, its tenacious materiality underlined other features such as its adhesive tactility. For Norah Squibbs, the oil was a sticky and persistent substance that refused to behave, 'that's how the streets got so fouled because every vehicle was tracking it through the town. If you crossed the road,

²¹ M. Hutton, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview by S. Rhys-Phillips, 19 September 2016, Sea Empress Project, People's Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/557356>.

²² S. LeMenager, 'The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after Oil!', *American Literary History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 73.

²³ M.M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 126.

you'd get it on your shoes.'²⁴ The authorities gave out absorbent mats to address this problem, but Norah remembers that she still had to start wearing separate outdoor shoes and then 'carry them through the house to the garden' to protect the carpets.²⁵ Maureen Ward, who ran a local animal rescue centre, expresses the persistent annoyance of this stickiness: 'it was like someone had emptied five hundred tons of treacle. It was horrendous', and 'the whole town [of Tenby] absolutely stank of oil because it was traipsing all through town, people were walking into it, walking into the shops'.²⁶

These accounts of sensory dislocation, which again, could be multiplied, reveal the *Sea Empress* spill as a multi-sensory experience in which the material dislocations of oil pollution upset the rhythms of everyday life. Frank Trentmann and Vanessa Taylor have argued that we should see socio-technical disruptions as part of the 'normality' of everyday life in technological modernity.²⁷ In the case of the *Sea Empress*, however, narrators' sensory memories affirm something else, presenting a moment in which

²⁴ Squibbs and Squibbs, Interview.

²⁵ Squibbs and Squibbs.

²⁶ M. Ward, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview by A. Sidebotham, 9 June 2016, People's Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/557355>.

²⁷ F. Trentmann, 'Disruption is normal: Blackouts, breakdowns and the elasticity of everyday life', in *Time, Consumption, and Everyday Life*, ed. E. Shove, Frank Trentmann, and R. Wilk (Oxford, UK: Berg, Oxford, 2009), 67–84; V. Taylor and F. Trentmann, 'Liquid politics: Water and the politics of everyday life in the modern city', *Past & Present* 211, no. 1 (1 May 2011): 199–241.

technological failure made ‘normal’ life, and its sensory substrate, uncomfortably visible. For many this was to prove a distinctly distressing experience.

Horror stories

How does one convey of embodied knowledge when the sensory experience that underpins it cannot be shared? This is a problem that faces all the narrators in the *Sea Empress Project* archive. The resolution of this challenge emerges in the generic form of narrative chosen to present the incident. Overwhelmingly, narrators use the idiom of horror to express the moment that their surroundings transitioned from taken-for-granted habitat to place of uncertainty and menace. Words like ‘horrible’, ‘horrific’, and ‘horrendous’ are used repeatedly, a vocabulary hinting at the genre subtly shaping these stories. As Martin Tropp has argued, ‘horror fiction gives the reader the tools to ‘read’ experiences that would otherwise, like nightmares, be incommunicable’, and his point seems to apply well to this case.²⁸ Moreover, this attentiveness to genre reveals the sophistication with which narrators seek to translate past bodily encounters into a present-day language appropriate to convey the affective impact of the spill. While the vocabulary of horror is, like references to smell, pervasive, a small number of accounts unambiguously raise horror to the generic form structuring a narrative’s plot. These stories often move from the olfactory to rely on graphic imagery that emphasizes the movements and colour effects of oil pollution.

²⁸ M. Tropp, *Images of Fear: How Horror Stories Helped Shape Modern Culture, 1818-1918* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 1999), 5.

Local photographer, Simon Rhys-Philips, perhaps unsurprisingly, gives his interviewer an almost cinematic account that deploys the imagery of horror and sci-fi film to relate his experience. ‘It was’, Rhys-Philips says, ‘like something out of a really spooky film or something, it was oil, but it felt like this kind of weird invasion’.²⁹ In a classic horror trope, Simon presents this encounter as simultaneously terrifying and mundane: ‘My recollection of it was not of a huge blanket of oil coming in. It was kind of this thin strip not more than twelve feet wide ... It was like this kind of ribbon, and you could see it coming in to shore.’³⁰ The unsettling mood of Simon’s narrative is further intensified by juxtaposing the ordinary and extra-ordinary effects of light and colour on surfaces: ‘I can remember the black oil and the blue sea and the sky. I wish I was into photography then because you’d have got some horrible but great photos.’³¹ Horror fiction combines embodied anxieties and temporal distortions in order to unsettle apparent certainties of everyday existence, and Simon’s telling appears to work in a very similar fashion. He heightens the intensity of his account by contrasting normal surroundings with the alien substance that perverts and distorts them. The oil slick is presented as a *thing*, an uncanny, non-living, agent that defies human will, appearing to move with an intent of

²⁹ P. Rabinowitz, ‘Wreckage upon wreckage: History, documentary and the ruins of memory’, *History and Theory* 32, no. 2 (1993): 119–37.

³⁰ S. Rhys-Phillips, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview by E. McAloney, 10 January 2016, Sea Empress Project, People’s Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/557349>.

³¹ Rhys-Phillips.

its own.³² In turn this movement underlines the disturbance of normal time. ‘I remember being at White Line Corner, or, The Croft, and looking out over Carmarthen Bay’, Simon continues, ‘you could see it, you could see the oil coming. It was just a really eerie experience.’³³ Finally, Simon stops the time of his telling altogether. ‘You could see it coming,’ he remembers, ‘it was like a scene out of the movies, everything stopped. Nobody was doing anything. I don’t think anybody was doing anything that day in Tenby.’³⁴

The remarkable power of Simon’s story is supplied by his consistently speaking in the visual language of horror cinema. This is a formal technique particularly appropriate to the representation of sensory dislocation, affective disgust, and temporal distortion. Undoubtedly, this very self-conscious use the techniques of cinematic representation are the peculiar insights of a photographer’s sensitivity to visual storytelling, but Simon is not the only narrator to draw upon these kinds of techniques even if he is the most explicit in doing so. For instance, Tina Williams tells a story that, while less specific in its use of cinematic aesthetics, nonetheless draws on some similar techniques. She eschews slowly building narrative tension, however, for the use of sudden narrative juxtaposition recreating her encounter with the spill as a jump-shock. ‘You can go to Fresh [Freshwater West Beach] one day, and it’s beautiful’, she says, ‘then the next it’s

³² D. Trigg, *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror* (Alresford: John Hunt Publishing, 2013).

³³ Rhys-Phillips, interview.

³⁴ Rhys-Phillips.

just all this oil'.³⁵ Although the technique here is different, the effect, conveying the sudden horrific severing of continuity in everyday experience, is the same. Tina then returns unambiguously to the language of horror: 'I was just horrified, I was really saddened by it, because you couldn't see what was going to happen, [it was] such a catastrophe to me.'³⁶

Both these narrators build sensory horror stories around alarming material presences. In other cases, narrators focus on absences to convey their disturbing bodily experiences. The aural is often the realm in which such absences are remarked, as in the case of the odd silence remembered by Sarah Reason-Jones. This is a reminder that, as Marianna Dudley has noted, the non-human can also have a 'voice' or at least an important aural presence.³⁷ Soundscapes certainly offer important everyday ways of registering environmental change.³⁸ Simon Rhys-Philips' recalls the way in which during the days

³⁵ T. Williams and M. Williams, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview by S. Rhys-Phillips, 24 September 2016, Sea Empress Project, People's Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/557348>.

³⁶ Williams and Williams.

³⁷ M. Dudley, 'River of many voices: Oral and environmental histories of the Severn', *Telling Environmental Histories: Intersections of Memory, Narrative and Environment*, 12 December 2017, 81–106.

³⁸ P.A. Coates, 'The strange stillness of the past: Toward an environmental history of sound and noise', *Environmental History* 10, no. 4, (1 October 2005): 636–65; J. Heinsen, "'Nothing but noise" The political complexities of English maritime and colonial soundscapes', *Radical History Review* 121 (2015): 106–22; E. Jones, 'Space,

of the *Sea Empress* spill silences particularly unsettled him, ‘It was’ he says ‘just the most eerie experience. It was silent.’³⁹ This troubled quiet is also a feature of other stories. Kiri Howell recalls a night-time trip to the beach when the aural environment was intensified by the darkness. At first, she declares, ‘We couldn’t see much because it was pitch-black, but it was a really, really windy night, and the first thing that grabbed our attention when we got to the beach was the smell.’⁴⁰ But she then combines this recollection with auditory memory. ‘It was very windy, but you couldn’t really hear the sea, which was strange’, a deficiency that she describes with delightful precision as ‘the non-sound of the sea’. ‘It was’, she emphasizes, ‘a kind of sensory, strange, strange thing to experience. No sound of the sea, only the wind and this terrible, terrible smell.’⁴¹

Several narrators recall this sinister perversion of the oceanic acoustic. In the context of recorded testimonies these representations are interesting in that they offer narrators the unique chance to use onomatopoeic vocabulary to imitate their sensory experience for the listener. Kim Beynon tells of a sea losing its everyday aurality because of the oil taking ‘all the momentum out of the waves’, and of the sound the oil on water made as

sound and sedition on the royal naval ship, 1756-1815’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 70 (1 October 2020): 65–73.

³⁹ Rhys-Phillips, Interview.

⁴⁰ K. Howell and D. Stanley, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, 9 March 2016, *Sea Empress Project, People’s Collection Wales*, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/557358>.

⁴¹ Howell and Stanley.

it came ashore, ‘it was just *glupping*, you know just plopping, onto the beach’.⁴² Alun Richardson, an outdoor instructor who moved to Manorbier in 1996, also remembers these unfamiliar noises, which he also imitates, while explicitly pointing out that his focus on sound is unusual: ‘We were on Manorbier Beach and my first memory is the sound. Not the smell actually. The smell came on pretty quick afterwards. It was just the sound. It was a gloop, gloop, gloop sound of the water instead of a splashing sound.’⁴³ Ruth Griffiths also uses a similarly imitative language, remembering that the oil ‘slurped to and fro’ contributing to the feeling that it was ‘horrible’.⁴⁴ Annie Haycock, a naturalist, remembers visiting a local beach when, ‘I suddenly realised, the tide was coming in and you normally hear those little wavelets on the beach, but you weren’t hearing anything, and the water was black and sort of treaclely, and instead of coming along in little ripples, it was coming along in these little thick waves and washing into the seaweed.’⁴⁵ Like Simon Rhys-Philips, Haycock contrasts the ordinariness of her

⁴² Beynon, Interview.

⁴³ A. Richardson, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, 15 September 2016, Sea Empress Project, People’s Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/556310>.

⁴⁴ R. Griffiths, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview by P. Le Britton, 19 September 2016, Sea Empress Project, People’s Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/557351>.

⁴⁵ B. Haycock and A. Haycock, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview by A. Rhys-Jones, 10 January 2016, Sea Empress Project, People’s Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/556313>.

surrounding environment with this invasion: ‘It was quite surreal because you had this blue sky, black sea, it was calm, and just didn’t feel right. It felt alien.’⁴⁶

Using the language and imagery of horror, then, the *Sea Empress Project* narrators indicate how we should interpret the sensory experience of the spill. A terrifying moment in which embodied relationships to the natural world became the object of deeply uncomfortable conscious awareness. This was often also a distressing experience. In 1996, a local mayor described the mood in Tenby as like ‘a mass bereavement’, the same language that was later used by Sarah Reason-Jones.⁴⁷ The oral testimonies of the *Sea Empress Project* thus offer a rich insight into the intersection of embodied sensory knowledge and affective experience.⁴⁸ However, as we look more deeply into the affective impact of this sensory catastrophe, we start to come up against the limits of language and narrative in expressing narrators’ encounter with environmental disaster. Instead, are forced to confront and dwell upon silences, reticence and even, paradoxically, narrative acts erasing the sensory event.

SENSORY SILENCES

Unspeakable affects?

⁴⁶ Haycock and Haycock.

⁴⁷ ‘Hopes dashed on cleaned-up coast’, *The Observer*, 6 April 1996.

⁴⁸ M. Cave and S.M. Sloan, eds., *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis* (New York: OUP USA, 2014); F. Walsh, ‘Traumatic loss and major disasters: strengthening family and community resilience’, *Family Process* 46, no. 2 (2007): 207–27.

In his interview, Tim Deere-Jones, a local marine pollution consultant, comments perspicaciously to his interviewer that, ‘the actual emotional distress’ of the spill was perhaps its most important effect, one that, ‘you don’t find being recorded by official sources’.⁴⁹ Given the emphasis so far on the power and eloquence of oral narratives in representing sensory catastrophe, it is important to underline that narrators often recall that, in the moment, they struggled to communicate their encounter with environmental disaster. One common memory of the spill is, in fact, that of speechlessness. Several narrators specifically remember an inability to articulate what they were suddenly confronting.

Jean Rhys-Philips magnificently captures this tension recounting the moment when oil came ashore in Tenby:

It was a Tuesday, and as usual I went to Pembroke to do my stint in the charity shop. On my way home I always collected the newspaper from the newsagents on South Parade. I went there, chatted away to Dave for a few minutes ... and, all of a sudden, I had a funny feeling that there was something wrong, a sort of hush about the place, and in the background I could hear whirring noises. I said to Dave, ‘What’s wrong, what’s happened,’ and he said, ‘You haven’t heard, have you?’ I said ‘no,’ and he said, ‘well you better go and look at the North Beach.’ So, I went round to the North Beach. I stood overlooking the North Beach with a whole line of people who were just standing there in silence,

⁴⁹ T. Deere-Jones, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview by S. Rhys-Phillips, 16 November 2016, Sea Empress Project, People’s Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/557345>.

gazing at this, what looked to me like a band of chocolate mousse in the sea.

Everybody was just standing there, not saying a word, just horrified.⁵⁰

Jean's account is a remarkable intertwining of a now vivid multi-sensory narrative with the recollection of a horrified inability to articulate the pollution's emotional impact in the moment. Her story is deeply situated in the recall of everyday habit, and a repetitive normality that is broken not by any identifiable sense impression but by a 'funny feeling'. In the recording, Jean particularly emphasizes the 'hush', and the 'reality' of the affect is only affirmed by the process of seeing, which she is explicitly encouraged to do.

Jean's account asks us to consider the significance of what, at the time, could not be said about the sensory event. Indeed, throughout these testimonies a listener encounters representations of unspoken affects. Physical acts recur as markers of collective social witnessing, bodily acts like people standing in silence or weeping are a reminder that language is not the only means of social communication. Ruth Griffiths remembers that 'grown people were in tears.'⁵¹ Tim Deere-Jones tells his interviewer that he 'would find people ranging from fairly small children to adults and very mature people standing there and looking absolutely and completely stunned, and traumatised, and in many cases I found adult people standing on the seafront actually weeping.'⁵² Nick Ainger,

⁵⁰ J. Rhys-Philips, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview by S. Rhys-Philips, 16 October 2016, Sea Empress Project, People's Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/557362>.

⁵¹ Griffiths, Interview.

⁵² Deere-Jones, Interview.

who was the area's Member of Parliament, recalls 'people standing on the esplanade in Tenby looking at the South Beach, and they were just crying, they couldn't believe what they were seeing.'⁵³ Clearly environmental disruption played a key part in the sudden emergence of a 'feeling community' conscious of the threat to, and its relationship with, its natural surroundings.⁵⁴

Yet these moments of shared grief should not be reduced to a product of human and non-human affective relations. This decontextualises the fundamentally social nature of the affective economy revealed by the disaster.⁵⁵ These grief-stricken silences for the natural world were combined with material anxieties that, after twenty years, find more reticent expression in narrators' tales. Perhaps the most important of these was the deep economic unease that accompanied the spill. While narrators make a great deal of sensory memories, typically they refer briefly, and in passing, to the economic context into which the sensory event intervened. Contemporary sources were, on the other hand, were more direct in relating the spill to the political economy of everyday life. As one contemporary report put it, Tenby and the surrounding area felt like a community 'fighting for its livelihood,' and it was feared that 'the region's economy [was] going

⁵³ N. Ainger, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview with A. Sidebotham, 24 September 2016, Sea Empress Project, People's Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/557354>.

⁵⁴ A. Gaynor, S. Broomhall, and A. Flack, 'Frogs and feeling communities: A study in history of emotions and environmental history', *Environment and History*, Online Early, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.3197/096734019X15740974883861>.

⁵⁵ Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (79) (1 June 2004): 117–39.

into free-fall.’⁵⁶ These concerns closely echo the social and economic contexts of other oil spills in rural areas, like the *Torrey Canyon* disaster in 1967.⁵⁷ It is an important reminder that local environments are not just cultural constructs or sensory surroundings, but often the very material resources on which is built the social and economic reproduction of community life.

Today narrators express these economic anxieties more warily. Nonetheless, the memory of intense uncertainty remains. Occasionally, the economic is the explicit context in which horror narratives are placed by narrators. For instance, Maureen Ward remembers that Tenby was ‘in shock’ and ‘you thought. Oh my God. That’s the end of our summer season.’⁵⁸ Ruth Griffiths is similarly explicit about the community’s economic dependence on its natural environment, stating that it’s ‘The one thing we’ve got down here is everything is clean and unpolluted, and to see it like that was past our worst nightmare’.⁵⁹ In some cases, narrators had made deep personal economic and emotional investments in this environment as a resource. Alan Richardson had just moved to Pembrokeshire in 1996 to pursue a career as an outdoor guide and climbing instructor, an opportunity which that February he believed had been ruined. Years later he still profoundly recalls the shock, and ‘it still makes me feel a little bit emotional now.’⁶⁰ Although now relatively underplayed in many accounts, these are important

⁵⁶ ‘Hopes dashed on cleaned-up coast’.

⁵⁷ A. Green and T. Cooper, ‘Community and exclusion: The *Torrey Canyon* disaster of 1967’, *Journal of Social History*, 5 May 2015, 892-909.

⁵⁸ Ward, Interview.

⁵⁹ Griffiths, Interview.

⁶⁰ Richardson, Interview.

reminders that the economic context of everyday existence in rural Pembrokeshire remains vital to understanding the paradoxical legacy of the *Sea Empress* in the present.

Sensory erasures

If anything was, in Joy Parr's evocative words, 'urgently spoken' in the immediate aftermath of the *Sea Empress* spill it was the question of duration.⁶¹ How long would the anxiety and uncertainty of the spill last? Nick Ainger considers this to have been 'the real worry' among the community, 'what is going to be the long-term damage to the environment? Are we going to see constant, small, oil pollution incidents? What is going to be the lasting damage to the seabird population?'⁶² Ruth Griffiths says that the people of Pembrokeshire 'just wanted to get back to normal.'⁶³

In the 1990s, the United Kingdom had a relatively well-established administrative apparatus for dealing with large-scale oil pollution. The Prevention of Oil Pollution Act 1971, drawn up in the aftermath of the *Torrey Canyon* spill, had established the Marine Pollution Control Unit to co-ordinate responses to large oil spills.⁶⁴ Increasingly

⁶¹ Parr, *Sensing Changes*, 2.

⁶² Ainger, Interview.

⁶³ Griffiths, Interview.

⁶⁴ M.J. Forster, 'The Prevention of Oil Pollution Act 1971', *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1972): 771–74; K. Colcomb, 'The Work of the Marine Pollution Control Unit', in *IEE Colloquium on Pollution of Land, Sea and Air: An Overview for Engineers*, 1995, <https://doi.org/10.1049/ic:19951015>; J. Sheail,

cognizant of the media impact of spills environment, the oil industry had also developed its own remediation and compensation infrastructures.⁶⁵ Consequently, as salvors struggled to get control of the *Sea Empress*, these institutions, combined with a huge amount of informal labour supplied by the local unemployed, went into action to clear oil from the coastline.⁶⁶ Alongside this material work of deletion, the local tourist industry began a process of representational erasure. As residents struggled to articulate their reactions to the devastation, a national ‘reassurance campaign’ was started, later described by one industry executive as ‘an excellent example of an integrated effort by the [oil] industry itself, local authorities and tourism bodies.’⁶⁷

This campaign represented the official narrative of the disaster. It claimed to speak on behalf of everyone in the local community and the story it told was one of unambiguously successful, rapid, technological restoration of normality. Carried on throughout the summer of 1996, the campaign not only sought to tell but to *show* potential visitors that the sensory impact of spill had been reversed. It reassured customers by offering *virtual* sensory encounters with the area. Compliant national newspapers eagerly contributed to this ‘negation of disaster’, breathlessly reporting that ‘bathers are back after the oil spill’ and that ‘such is the success of the clean-up that

‘Torrey Canyon: The political dimension’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, no. 3 (1 July 2007): 485–504.

⁶⁵ K. Morse, ‘There Will Be Birds: Images of Oil Disasters in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries’, *Journal of American History* 99, no. 1 (1 June 2012): 124–34.

⁶⁶ ‘Scrubbing-brush army defeats invasion of oil’, *The Times*, 7 May 1996; ‘Pembroke’s clean sweep’, *Daily Express*, 20 March 1996.

⁶⁷ T. Dawe, ‘Wales set for another boom’, *The Times*, 1 August 1996.

there is not a speck of oil visible on Tenby's beaches and the only smell is that of salt and seaweed'.⁶⁸ Holidaymakers were quoted as objective observers who could speak authoritatively on the sensory experience. One testified to 'seeing this place on TV and it was a mess. Now you'd never know there'd been a drop of oil here.'⁶⁹ More hyperbolic voices asserted that 'the clean-up operation has left the beaches in better shape than they've ever been.'⁷⁰ Perhaps the most telling example of a virtual sensory experience was a 'feature advertisement' competition in a national newspaper challenging the reader to test their own sensory acumen in a 'spot-the-difference' competition between two 'before-and-after' photographs of Tenby's beaches.⁷¹ First prize was a four-night break at a local holiday park.

Controlling the narrative of disaster meant that certain stories were unwelcome. Some of which can still be encountered in the *Sea Empress Project* archive. Margaret Brooks, who worked for Dyfed Wildlife Trust, tells of the difficulty she faced getting media attention for the impact of the spill on local wildlife reserves and sites of special scientific interest, 'You had the tourism industry saying, please don't talk about this, don't say bad things about our area. The phones have stopped ringing. We have no clients whatsoever, and why they would come? All they see on the television is oil

⁶⁸ 'The coast is clear in Tenby', *Daily Express*, 10 August 1996; G. Button, 'The negation of disaster: The media response to oil spills in Great Britain', in *The Angry Earth: Disasters in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. A. Oliver-Smith and S.M. Hoffman (Routledge, 2012), 113–32.

⁶⁹ J. Ingham, 'Slick work that saved oil beach', *Daily Express*, 5 June 1996.

⁷⁰ 'The coast is clear in Tenby'.

⁷¹ 'Pembroke's clean sweep'.

everywhere.’⁷² Martin Williams specifically recalls the tension between the environmental reality of the spill and the need to carefully manage the impact on Pembrokeshire’s ‘green’ image as rural idyll: ‘people were worried because we were on the national news, and people were really worried what it was going to do to the tourist industry.’⁷³

Such ‘counter-narratives’ occur relatively rarely in the collection. Despite almost universal attestation to intense sensory and affective memories of the disaster, the vast majority of the archive’s narrators concur with the official story of rapid environmental recovery. Like the role of smell in the social memory of *Sea Empress*, this story of recuperation is repeated over and over. Nick Ainger remembers being very worried about the long-term impact of the spill, but tells his interviewer that these concerns were unnecessary because of ‘a very successful clean-up’.⁷⁴ Maria Evans was pessimistic ‘that the beaches would clean up quickly’, but was ‘delighted that I was proved wrong’.⁷⁵ Maureen Ward recollects that ‘at that time I would never have realised how quickly it could be cleared and we would have visitors on the beach just after April. It

⁷² M. Brooks and A. Brooks, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview by P. Le Britton, 9 March 2016, Sea Empress Project, People’s Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/556309>.

⁷³ Williams and Williams, Interview.

⁷⁴ Ainger, Interview.

⁷⁵ M. Evans, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview by D. Stanley, 9 March 2016, Sea Empress Project, People’s Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/557357>.

was amazing how they cleared it all'.⁷⁶ Kim Beynon speaks of being 'impressed' by 'the co-ordination, in a disaster situation, I think it was very, very good. Considering there was no preparation, no warning, no nothing'. He believes that 'this spillage was handled superbly well', and looking back, 'really after twenty years there's nothing evident that it ever took place'.⁷⁷ Tina Williams says that the beach at Freshwater West is 'looking amazing anyway, so it hasn't had any long-term effects there that I know of'.⁷⁸ Ruth Griffiths was afraid that, 'this is the end of Pembrokeshire as we know it', but emphasizes using repetition that, 'It wasn't. It wasn't'.⁷⁹ Former Tenby lifeboatman, Arthur Squibbs, having recalled the intensity of the smell of the oil as 'pretty awful' immediately describes the clean-up as '... superb. They seemed to have hand-scrubbed the entire coast'.⁸⁰

All these accounts are notable in how closely they mirror the subsequent findings of the government investigation into of the long-term environmental impacts of the spill.⁸¹ It is apparent that, whatever awareness of an embodied environment may have surfaced in the wake of the disaster, most narrators now consider to the spill in terms that firmly assign it to the historic past. For Griffiths, the disaster is 'not something you think about

⁷⁶ Ward, Interview.

⁷⁷ Beynon, Interview.

⁷⁸ Williams and Williams, Interview.

⁷⁹ Griffiths, Interview.

⁸⁰ Squibbs and Squibbs, Interview.

⁸¹ D. Little, *Sea Empress Environmental Evaluation Committee (SEEEC) Report Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations*, 1998, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.2423.5128>.

very often really'.⁸² Maureen Ward suggests that the *Sea Empress* disaster has all but disappeared from social memory, and that it is only the interview itself that now sparks her own recall and that of others:

I think most people have forgotten about it now, twenty-years is a long time isn't it, things happen. I happened to say the other day, when we were having coffee, that you were coming to do this thing [the interview] and they said, 'I can't really remember what happened. When was it?' ... You looked at the beaches a year after, and unless somebody had seen it on the tele', you'd never have dreamt that it was such chaos.⁸³

Tina Williams regards the *Sea Empress* disaster as 'just part of Pembrokeshire's history', a brief sensory blip in environmental normality and the otherwise untroubled reproduction of everyday life: 'It didn't stop people coming down. It's part of the history and they can see how lovely things are, and how it hasn't affected wildlife as such, in the long-term.'⁸⁴

It is easy to see why the popular desire for the environment to quickly return to normal would readily coincide with industrial and bureaucratic narratives of successful environmental recovery. Yet, while oral testimonies suggest that Pembrokeshire's sensory surroundings are indeed 'back to normal', they also, somewhat paradoxically, attest to the impossibility of restoring the *unspoken* embodiment of that environment. David Bond has helpfully described oil spills as 'fuzzy events', which permanently, but

⁸² Griffiths, Interview.

⁸³ Ward, Interview.

⁸⁴ Williams and Williams, Interview.

invisibly, change the materiality of an environment in ways that can never be fully known or accounted for.⁸⁵ Some of that ‘fuzziness’ remains present in this archive. Even the most sanguine of narrators acknowledge, for example, that their sense of their environment remains unsettled by the shadow of *Sea Empress*. Ruth Griffiths, for example, asserts that people do not think of the disaster very often, but then adds, ‘except when you are at the beach and you look at the rocks, because it’s beautiful down there now’.⁸⁶ Some claim that the oil itself still persists, occasionally returning from the ocean. For local environmental campaigner, Val Bradley, ‘the stuff is still down there. The storms we had in 2012, 2013, it comes up again every time’.⁸⁷ Even Tina Williams, who believes that the spill had no long-term effects, suggests that the clean-up only dealt with ‘the excess’, and that ‘if you dig down now, you’ll still find oil.’⁸⁸ Despite the best efforts to erase the *Sea Empress* disaster both materially and narratively, it seems that something remains.

An absent presence

Clearly, speaking of environmental change in the wake of *Sea Empress* is no simple matter. Twenty years after the disaster, narrators still reveal a strong social yearning to

⁸⁵ D. Bond, ‘The science of catastrophe’, *Anthropology Now* 3, no. 1 (1 April 2011): 36.

⁸⁶ Griffiths, Interview.

⁸⁷ V. Bradley, Interview about the *Sea Empress* oil spill, interview by Abigail Sidebotham, 9 March 2016, Sea Empress Project, People’s Collection Wales, <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/557347>.

⁸⁸ Williams and Williams, Interview.

maintain the consensus that the Pembrokeshire's environment has returned to normal. This does not mean, however, that they do not have concerns about environmental risks and uncertainties.⁸⁹ Maria Evans tells a story about aeroplanes flying overhead that were 'filled with this fairly evil stuff...and it was supposed to be being sprayed not closer than a mile offshore. My husband and I got wet one day when the Dakota went offshore...you could feel the droplets coming down. There were a lot of problems with sick sheep and sick cattle.'⁹⁰ Subsequent epidemiological research has, indeed, pointed to the acute mental and physical health impacts of exposure to both the crude oil and the chemical dispersants used in the clean-up operation.⁹¹

Narrators still recall these various chemical exposures. Tina Williams, who is nurse, remembers that 'we had a lot of people ringing the surgery concerned about their health, particularly people with respiratory problems'.⁹² Val Bradley believes that 'there were significant questions that arose as a result of the clean-up, because when you have an oil spill, particularly the kind of material that was spilt on the beaches, the only way to deal with it is to wade in with chemicals, which, if anything, are more dangerous'.⁹³ Arthur Squibbs had his own close bodily experience with exposure to dispersants through

⁸⁹ Joy Parr, 'Smells Like?: Sources of Uncertainty in the History of the Great Lakes Environment', *Environmental History* 11, no. 2 (1 April 2006): 269–99.

⁹⁰ Evans, Interview.

⁹¹ R. A. Lyons, 'Acute health effects of the *Sea Empress* oil spill', *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 53, no. 5 (1 May 1999): 306–10.

⁹² Williams and Williams, Interview.

⁹³ Bradley, Interview.

scratches on the skin that he noticed ‘healed very slowly’.⁹⁴ Such toxic exposures might be expected to perhaps prompt some critical engagement with the nature or necessity of the clean-up operation. Certainly, as John F.M. Clark has shown, in other contexts in Britain toxic exposures have prompted politicisations of local environments.⁹⁵ Again, though, like the indications of economic unease noted above, these potentially potent embodied experiences, which contradict reassuring official narratives, offer only periodic disturbances to the story of restored environmental normality.

A sense of the formidable consensus underpinning the insistence on environmental restoration is revealed by Val Bradley. Bradley is an environmental activist and was, briefly, part of the campaign for a public inquiry into the disaster, as she conspicuously puts it, ‘more to protect the future than to deal with the events of the past.’⁹⁶ There were good reasons to demand a public inquiry. At the end of 1996, the local health authority reported thousands of local people suffering headaches, skin problems and other symptoms following the disaster.⁹⁷ A year after *Sea Empress* ran aground, Friends of the Earth, dissatisfied with the results of official inquiries, were threatening legal action.⁹⁸ Yet, despite evident public concern about the health impacts of the spill, Bradley had to abandon her own role in the campaign because, she says, it was viewed

⁹⁴ Squibbs and Squibbs, Interview.

⁹⁵ J. F. M. Clark, ‘Pesticides, pollution and the UK’s *Silent Spring*, 1963–64: Poison in the garden of England’, *Notes and Records*, no. 71, 3, (15 February 2017), 297-327.

⁹⁶ Bradley, Interview.

⁹⁷ ‘Thousands sick after oil spill’, *The Times*, 4 December 1996.

⁹⁸ P. Brown, ‘Friends of the Earth to sue over *Sea Empress*’, *The Guardian*, 15 February 1997.

as too disruptive. ‘Essentially the tourist industry was on my side’, she declares in conciliatory manner, ‘but they didn’t want to get more involved because it was negative publicity’ and ‘already by that time there were other pressures being exerted on me to tone it down’. She returns, again, to the economic anxieties provoked by the *Sea Empress*, noting that the spill was a ‘huge threat almost instantaneously to our main source of income in Pembrokeshire, which is tourism’ and ‘the bigger the fuss I made about it, and the more support I got, the longer I kept it in the public view’.⁹⁹ Obviously, to speak of the *Sea Empress* disaster at all is to push against the central material facts of life in a place dependent on commodifying a particular image of itself. The result has been the establishment of a strong collective impulse to deny the spill was any more than a momentary disruption and that Pembrokeshire’s environment is now, in Sarah Reason-Jones’s terms, back to normal.

There is one explicit exception to this general tendency in the archive, which is offered by Peter Cooper, a physiotherapist who moved to Pembrokeshire in the 1980s. For Cooper, the sensory dislocations of 1996 remain present to this day. The area was, he says in the past tense, ‘quite an idyllic place to move to for us’, and ‘the beach was a massive feature of the area’.¹⁰⁰ Peter spent a great deal of time there with his young children: ‘I used to take them down to the beach. I used to take a little camping stove; find a little corner out of the wind and brew up tea, that sort of thing.’ It was ‘one of the important activities to us as a family’. However, these everyday rituals did not return after the spill: ‘that was sort of wiped out, and that was sort of upsetting. It upset the children too.’ After the disaster, he states, ‘we never went to the beach and brewed up

⁹⁹ Bradley, Interview.

¹⁰⁰ Peter Cooper, Interview.

tea like that again. That was the most upsetting thing really, a disruption of that treasured family activity.’¹⁰¹

Peter’s story stands out in this collection precisely because he denies the restoration of a ‘normal’ environment. Instead, Peter insists, against what he sees as a media imposed narrative, that it was ‘all changed’ and that ‘it’s not recovered to what it was’.¹⁰²

I personally don’t think it’s back to normal... There was a thing on the TV about it not so long ago, some guy saying, well, it’s remarkable how it’s recovered, and all this sort of stuff. Actually, it’s nothing like it was to me. You know the little rocks and hollows where we used to sit have not recovered. There used to be little rock ponds full of beach life, little minnow fish, they’re not there now. It’s just a monoculture of seaweed.¹⁰³

Significantly, Peter’s account of environmental change is embedded not just in bodily or sensory experience, but in his telling of the spill as a rupture in his own family history and a particular set of habits whose absence has left a profound affective trace. ‘The thing we loved about it [Pembrokeshire] was destroyed, the actual environment.’ Peter states, ‘It took a long time for it to get anywhere near normal. By which time ... I suppose the children were growing up and things changed.’ For Peter, then, despite the absence of oil, the spill is not a past event at all, its presence lingers on:

It hasn’t really gone away. Though we haven’t got the immediate oil in front of our eyes,’ because ‘it changed my life, because it changed my pattern of

¹⁰¹ Cooper.

¹⁰² Cooper.

¹⁰³ Cooper.

functioning. When we used to go with the children and engage with the coast, be part of it, it all stopped. The children grew up. By the time you could think about going again, everything seemed changed.¹⁰⁴

Of all the narrators in this collection, it is Peter Cooper who gives the strongest sense of someone for whom the restoration of corporeal environmental normality is most unthinkable.

CONCLUSION

The Ghosts of Sea Empress

In May 1997, *Sea Empress*, now repaired and renamed the *Sea Spirit* to ‘ward off bad luck’, set sail from the Harland and Wolff dockyard in Belfast.¹⁰⁵ Thereafter, the ship returned to the burgeoning assembly of machines serving the global market for marine oil transport, where it remained in service for another fifteen years.¹⁰⁶ The decision to change the ship’s name was not, of course, just a token against future ill-fortune. It was another bid to erase the evidence of petrochemical catastrophe symbolized in the substance of the vessel itself. It is easy to see why such an expurgation was desirable to some. As Stephanie LeMenager writes, perhaps a little hyperbolically, ‘One of the most truly revolutionary, in the sense of world-upturning, events of late-twentieth century environmentalism was its focus on the oil spill, which jump started the US movement in

¹⁰⁴ Cooper.

¹⁰⁵ B. Christine, ‘Rebirth of the *Sea Empress*’, *The Times*, 18 April 1997.

¹⁰⁶ T. Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011) 109.

California in 1969 and which offered a reinterpretation of oil extraction as death-making, rather than a realisation of modern life.¹⁰⁷ Yet, as we have seen, the erasure of the *Sea Empress* spill has, to some extent, been a great success. Today, while the global processes of exchange and distribution embodied in such vessels remain intact, the death-making calamity that the vessel experienced in Welsh waters is remembered only intermittently, if at all, even by those it most directly touched.

After collecting the interviews discussed here, Abigail Sidebotham produced a film that she aptly entitled *I Came like All the Ghosts at Once*.¹⁰⁸ Ambiguous objects, simultaneously sources of horror and memory, ghosts are the troubling sensual impressions of a past bodily presences. They speak to the ambiguities, paradoxes, and disavowals of embodied awareness.¹⁰⁹ Paradox and ambiguity also characterize the oral narratives of the *Sea Empress* disaster. On the one hand, narrators' accounts reveal a powerful sensory rupture that brought the embodied experience of everyday surroundings sharply into conscious focus. This was a profoundly emotional moment, as individuals directly encountered the 'death-making' power of oil over nature and society. Yet, and despite profound shock, these same narrators now tell of this experience as part of a troublesome past cautiously acknowledged. These reactions to the *Sea Empress* disaster can be contrasted with oral accounts of other environmental

¹⁰⁷ LeMenager, 'The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after Oil!', 62.

¹⁰⁸ A. Sidebotham, *I Came like All the Ghosts at Once - Trailer*, accessed 21 May 2021, <https://vimeo.com/262577112>.

¹⁰⁹ D. López, 'Ghosts in the barn: Dead labor and capital accumulation in Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*', *Twentieth-Century Literature* 65, no. 4 (2019): 307–42.

disasters where the impact of, for example, extreme weather events has resulted in much more engaged responses to ecological change.¹¹⁰ Nonetheless, in this context, environmental disaster has apparently been the subject of a fraught process of social forgetting.¹¹¹ This has distinct political effects. These interviews demonstrate, for example, almost no attribution of responsibility to the petroleum industry, despite Pembrokeshire being the site of several refineries at the time of the accident or the fact that the Pembrokeshire coast continues to experience occasional small spills.¹¹²

If anything, it is more typical for narrators to present the catastrophe as a moral lesson about the importance of appreciating a previously invisible environment. The *Sea Empress* thus becomes the object of a comforting redemption story. In April 1996, Nick Ainger presented petitions (together containing over 100,000 names) to the House of Commons and the then Prime Minister, John Major, demanding a public enquiry into the disaster.¹¹³ Despite these efforts, no public inquiry was ever held. Twenty-years on this is how Ainger remembers the legacy of the spill:

One of the things looking back that really struck me is that you don't miss your water till the well runs dry. And I think that people not just in Pembrokeshire but

¹¹⁰ Deb Anderson, 'Where the Wild Things Were', 194–97.

¹¹¹ G. Beiner, *Forgetful Remembrance: Social Forgetting and Vernacular Historiography of a Rebellion in Ulster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 146.

¹¹² 'Oil Leak in Milford Haven', *Senedd Research*, Welsh Parliament, accessed 6 July 2021, <https://research.senedd.wales/research-articles/oil-leak-in-milford-haven/>.

¹¹³ 'Sea Empress Disaster', *Hansard*, 24 April 1996, accessed 6 July 2021, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1996/apr/24/sea-empress-disaster>.

people who knew Pembrokeshire suddenly realised how important Pembrokeshire was to them. That this very special place with this incredible scenery, incredible environment, that they'd enjoyed on regular holidays or lived in, suddenly it was being seriously damaged, and I think, in the long-run, I know it sounds counter-intuitive, I think it actually benefitted Pembrokeshire because it did make people realise how special it was.¹¹⁴

In this account, momentary political mobilisation morphs into a curious acceptance of catastrophe as a moral lesson. This is a perspective that contemporary commemorative narratives continue to promote, presenting the catastrophe after twenty-five years as, on the one-hand, 'a day, and a sight many will remember for years to come', while reminding audiences that, 'to look at Pembrokeshire's beaches [now], it's almost as if it never happened'.¹¹⁵

Ultimately, then, despite formidable sensory experiences, the subsequent social meanings of the *Sea Empress* spill are determined by these fundamentally contradictory stories. The effects of the stories revealed by the *Sea Empress Project* archive, rather than the mere embodied fact of disaster itself, have ultimately placed this event on the uncertain edge of community awareness. It remains to ask why these accounts have taken the shape they have. There are many possible perspectives that might help us to understand this problem. To some extent, narrators are, perhaps, in Valerie

¹¹⁴ Ainger, Interview.

¹¹⁵ J. Main, 'The *Sea Empress* Disaster', ITV News, 15 February 2021, <https://www.itv.com/news/wales/2021-02-15/the-sea-empress-25-years-on-since-one-of-the-biggest-environmental-disasters-in-the-uk>.

Walkerdine's words, simply trying to reassert a 'sense of historical continuity of the community' in the wake of an unsettling event.¹¹⁶ It is also possible, as Stephanie LeMenager has argued, that these stories reflect the troubled 'ecological unconscious' of a wider culture sustained by oil.¹¹⁷ As such, the disavowals and paradoxes of our narrators' narratives probably also reflect a universal imbrication of everyday life within the circuits of fossil capital.¹¹⁸

However, I think it is too one-dimensional and static to regard these stories of powerful sensory experiences of environmental change as mere articulations of a social consciousness ideologically overdetermined by the circuits of capital accumulation. Storytelling, and especially oral storytelling, is contingent, and open to change. Sidebotham's collection points to the continued presence of doubts, resistances, and counter-narratives to the account of environmental restoration that has come to dominate the story of *Sea Empress*. We should also recognise the very material antagonisms, revealed by these narrators, between the individual sensory experience of environmental disaster and the often equally embodied, and emotionally compelling, social necessities deeply entrenched in the rhythms and needs of everyday life. It is in interrogating the dialectic between these different kinds of embodiment, and the

¹¹⁶ V. Walkerdine, 'Communal beingness and affect: An exploration of trauma in an ex-industrial community', *Body & Society* 16, no. 1 (1 March 2010): 91–116.

¹¹⁷ S. LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 80.

¹¹⁸ A. Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016), 364-5.

challenge of representing them, that we might come to understand the extent, and limits, of popular environmental concern in modern Britain.

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