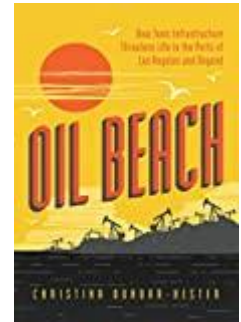


Christina Dunbar-Hester. *Oil Beach: How Toxic Infrastructure Threatens Life in the Ports of Los Angeles and Beyond.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023. 272 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-226-81971-6.



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In mid-October 2021, an image on NASA’s popular Earth Observatory blog captured my attention. The post was titled “[Waiting to Unload](#),” and the image has become indelibly imprinted on my memory, testifying to one of the many effects the COVID-19 pandemic had on the world. Like scattered matchsticks on the darkest of fields, here was San Pedro Bay off Long Beach, California, choked with ships, the result of “[COVID-related supply chain snarls](#).” On the day the Landsat 8 satellite captured the image, there were sixty container ships waiting to dock at the combined ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

I have visited Long Beach once, briefly, in early 2018. I saw the bay during breakfast with a handsome gardener-potter at the Long Beach Museum of Art. If only Christina Dunbar-Hester and her book *Oil Beach: How Toxic Infrastructure Threatens Life in the Ports of Los Angeles and Beyond* had been at hand as a guide either on that day or when I looked at the Landsat image three-and-a-half years later. I would have looked at the bay, its natural and unnatural face, rather differently. I

don’t recall looking too closely at the “islands” in the bay, but now I understand their deception: they are oil-drilling platforms masquerading as real islands. One of the ships seen by the satellite, Dunbar-Hester writes early in the book, likely dragged its anchor across an oil pipeline connecting the offshore drilling site to the port of Long Beach, rupturing it and fouling the water and coastline of Orange and San Diego counties.

Rich in detail, critique, and conceptual exploration, *Oil Beach* is an “unnatural history” (p. 4) of the relations of wildlife, other “life-forms,” global shipping, a port, and petroleum infrastructure. An interdisciplinary study working within the generous harbor of science and technology studies, the book’s study area is San Pedro Bay, into which the combined ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach are thrust. They are separate but coterminous ports, which receive 40 percent of inbound containers to the United States, and previously home to a naval station. The bay is, in Dunbar-Hester’s description, “a site of multitudinous life” alongside “hyperindustrial, toxic shipping, oil, and military

operations” (p. 2). The book is organized in four chapters which each look at a “charismatic life-form” that transits through the bay—birds, bananas, otters, and cetaceans—how they go in and out of commodity chains and their place in ecological lines of relation, flux, and violence.

The one life-form interrogated throughout the book is infrastructure. Dunbar-Hester argues for the idea of “infrastructural vitalism,” a concept that points toward the creators and maintainers of infrastructure and their “animistic belief” in it (p. 5). Logistics managers and others are committed to infrastructure’s vitality and see it as the spine, lifeblood, or heart of communities and nations. To preserve the global system of infrastructure and its “life-force” requires violence and lethality against biological life-forms.

Central to the chapters on birds, otters, and cetaceans is the critique that the care and conservation ostensibly afforded these life-forms—generally through legal obligation—is in fact highly circumscribed. The support given these life-forms is actively accompanied by constraints that allow oil and military interests to flourish at their expense. Whatever successes there might be in healing a Nazca booby at the Los Angeles Oiled Bird Care and Education Center, token habitat restoration at Long Beach for least terns, moving black-crowned night heron colonies, rearing sea otter pups at Long Beach’s Aquarium of the Pacific, or saving whales from ship strikes, in no case is the “life” of the port or other oil and military infrastructures ever questioned. In no case is the “accumulation of life” for the biological life-forms the central driver (p. 51), only the valorization of small successes—a few birds cleaned, a few otter pups reared and released. To keep the port, the global economy, and the US military running, damage of nature is simply assumed and weak “thresholds” against harm are put in place, rather than comprehensive precautions. There is no respect, for example, for the “whale sensorium” and their “creaturely sovereignty” (p. 141). Although

Dunbar-Hester respects the achievements of life-forms in eking out their survival among the violent infrastructures of oil, trade, and militarism, she also argues against inflating these achievements into stories of “hope,” as is often demanded of such stories in some contemporary strands of climate and environmental protest and writing.

In the banana case study Dunbar-Hester reveals what is hidden in commodity chains and the complex relations between bananas and oil. It is a study as much of the oil infrastructure in San Pedro Bay as the bananas that flow through it—or at least, used to. Bananas were once among the most important imports into the port (where they had to be manually handled), but by the new millennium the demands of scale, efficiencies, and profit moved banana flows to other US ports. Dunbar-Hester uses the banana to explicate the logistical cold chain within the modern US food system, the fossil-fuel power needed to support it, and the pollution coming from the enormous, containerized trade flowing through the ports. Within this context, any pretensions by the port to become “green” are laughable. The port cannot be “clean” or “green” while the volume of trade and circulation remains anywhere near its current levels.

While some of the context to Dunbar-Hester’s stories is, in general terms, well known and some of the critiques of economic ideas or environmental management practices well-trodden, they are clarified and reinforced within the particularities of San Pedro Bay and the ports. With its exploration of “infrastructural vitalism,” *Oil Beach* compellingly contributes to a scholarly conversation about infrastructures and environments, joining important works such as Ashley Carse’s excellent book *Beyond the Big Ditch: Politics, Ecology, and Infrastructure at the Panama Canal* (2014). A strong, critical scholarly approach to and account of ports, global shipping, and trade, is clearly coalescing—think of Laleh Khalili’s *Sinews of War and Trade* (2020) or Isabel Hofmyer’s *Dockside*

Reading (2022)—and Dunbar-Hester brings a crucial environmental focus to it.

At the conclusion of the book, Dunbar-Hester begins to map a future in which “transspecies supply-chain justice” is the guiding frame of action (p. 154). This approach would change how we look at port infrastructures—no longer as sites of frictionless trade but as points of “audit” that monitor labor practices and ecological impacts. This approach to justice would make many local and global labor, anticolonial and ecological struggles visible, struggles which ports and global supply chains continue to make invisible. Attentive to power, this is a hopeful vision of a more thoroughgoing kind. And it is an approach to justice that might drive activism and action in ports, large and small, around the world.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

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