Petrofiction and Political Economy in the Age of Late Fossil Capital

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From the title to the last scenes of Helon Habila’s novel *Oil on Water* (2010), oil presents itself as mood, environment, and atmosphere. As the narrator Rufus makes his way into the Niger Delta, the atmosphere is heavy with “the suspended stench of dead matter... dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil,” and grass “suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker’s hands.”1 Oil coats the atmosphere in *Oil on Water* to the point that different things — smells, birds, grass — become expressions of the same thing. Thus by the middle of the novel, even prisoners are covered in oil as a punishment, in what the novel calls a “brutal anointing.”2 In the last scene of the novel, “gallons of oil floating on the water” are imagined “tight like a hangman’s noose around the neck of whatever life-form lay underneath.”3 By contrast, in *Cities of Salt* (1984) by Abdelrahman Munif — the novel that, in a review, inspired Amitav Ghosh to coin the term petrofiction — petroleum works behind the scenes in very significant ways, but is never physically present.4 Why the abundance of physical descriptions of oil in the more contemporary novel?

That the novels represent oil in such different ways is of course largely due to their differing geographical and historical situations — in particular the uneven environmental crisis created by capital’s increasing need for oil. The years between 1980 and 2008 mark a period of increasing globalization where the explosion of Chinese exports and “globally mobile capital” carrying production technology to new locations, requires “massive consumption of fossil energy.”5 *Oil on Water* was written during the end of this period of late fossil capital, also a period of emissions explosion. Yet Ghosh’s famous claim that there is as yet no great oil novel is not due to what we might term a lack of environmental consciousness but rather because in Ghosh’s account, the idea of oil is “inconceivable.”6 The supra-objective qualities of oil as both fuel and plastic, earth and air, subject and system, distinguish it from earlier commodities in literature, like coffee, spices, or sugar.7 Which is to say that the
physical presence and absence of oil in these novels is also connected to the different forms of wealth oil stands in for and makes possible: wealth in the value form itself, as an abstraction, may not be directly representable in literature — it is after all not a measurable thing but a historically specific set of social relations — but the ways in which we see the value form as it bears on social relations in literature dealing with oil gives us a way to mediate the fictions themselves. *Cities of Salt*, written in a third-person collective narrative, makes explicit these relations around oil in its commodity form, while something very different happens in *Oil on Water*, where oil itself appears as a hostile object, a distorted form of natural wealth, or an expression of nature as such.

*Cities of Salt* was first published in Arabic in 1984 and then appeared in English translation in 1987. Munif, an ex-oil engineer and economist, thought of oil not in terms of environmental degradation but as a lost opportunity for the independence and development of the Arab world. In the novel, when U.S. oil companies discover that the land occupied by Bedouins of a small oasis community in a fictional kingdom of the Arabian Gulf is sitting atop a large deposit of oil, the Bedouins are forcibly removed from their land and must work for the oil company in the coastal refinery center of Harran in order to survive. The pace of the narrative is slow at the beginning of the novel, allowing characters like Miteb al-Hathal the time to ponder the “bonds” of nature, family, and community. These are the sources of wealth before the implementation of the imported social formation, sources which oil appears to replace. The people eventually understand oil as a potential source of wealth, but wealth that is only ever realized via the accumulation of its money and commodity form by the Americans, the emir, and several designing individuals. For the workers receiving a wage, oil wealth remains obscure.

*Oil on Water*, published in 2010, follows the scattered memories of journalist, Rufus, as he attempts to make sense of his experiences locating the wife of a British oil executive who has been kidnapped by militants claiming to fight for the restoration of the Niger Delta. The story does not revolve around those working in the formal economy as in *Cities of Salt*, but around those forced into warlike and criminal activity in the informal economy, as either militants surviving off of the kidnapping of foreign oil workers or those involved in what is known in Nigeria as “bunkering” or illicit oil theft from the oil company’s pipelines. The setting is one of an environmental apocalypse — a place where the capacities from natural wealth have been exhausted. There is a clear historical shift between the novels: in *Oil on Water*, we see a world of informal and criminalized economies, horrors of environmental destruction and capital’s increasingly acute demand for raw materials. The work of those who do participate in the formal economy of *Oil on Water*’s Niger Delta is precarious and dependent on the whims of a racialized global order where domestic workers feign stupidity and journalists must chase the stories of white foreigners to get headlines. The economic and physical landscapes are mutually expressive, littered with disastrous
social suffering and material waste. The shoddy infrastructure left by multinational companies is scattered about the landscape, depicting a much deeper crisis than we saw in *Cities of Salt*. Oil is extracted erratically and without the slightest concern for social or environmental costs. Workers are forced to survive entirely through participation in the informal economy, making inevitable the heedless extraction and ceaseless violence and leading to catastrophic spills.

While *Cities of Salt* depicts the transition from a traditional social formation to a colonial-capitalist way of life, *Oil on Water* shows us the end result of this social form. The former emphasizes wasted possibility, while the latter describes the exhaustion shared across physical and social landscapes embedded in the emergent petroeconomy. Additionally, oil impacts social relations in these two novels in very different ways. In *Cities of Salt*, the source of conflict is not oil but the foreign social formation that organizes oil wealth in a particular way. In *Oil on Water* on the other hand, material nature seems to be exhausted because of the presence of oil itself. The novel asks the reader to think ecologically: oil is nature, humans are nature, and human creation is nature. We are reminded at one point in the novel that oil is as natural as light: narrator Rufus, using the oil imagery of “refining” through “sieves,” notices that, “whenever a single ray [of light] found its way through the million leaves and branches and fell on our skin or on the dead leaves below, it looked so pure and startling, as if it had been refined through a thousand sieves.”

But this small figurative moment, likening oil to a resource as natural as light, is never contrasted in the novel by a clear representation of how oil as wealth, in commodity form, shapes social relations.

This absent representation of oil as a commodity, in *Oil on Water*, makes the source of degradation indiscernible, as the particular ecological voice of the novel obscures the distinction between oil as wealth in the value form and oil as material or natural wealth. The narrative plays with the representation of oil paraphernalia, often depicting it as part of a natural landscape, as though “sprouting,” or, in the case of the image of crisscrossing pipelines, as “tree roots surfacing far away from the parent tree.” Such re-naturalization of oil makes it at times appear to be an unstoppable sinister force of nature. Just how this same oil is related to the socio-ecological horror depicted in the novel is never clear because instead of appearing as wealth in the commodity form, it appears as an exaggerated, caricatured form of natural or material wealth. One version of this implication, for instance, turns the destruction of the Niger Delta into a natural cycle. That the commodity form is conflated with nature in its depiction in literature is part of its invisibility. Though oil coats nearly everything in *Oil on Water*, it is strangely invisible in its merging with everything else.

**Literary Form and the Economy of Energy**

How may this naturalization of oil manifest the “energy unconscious” that is part of the cultural logic of late fossil capital? Patricia Yeager insists that critics understand
the ways that “energy invisibilities may constitute different kinds of erasures.”

It may seem strange to argue that certain forms of petrofiction have an intensified version of “energy unconscious,” yet in *Oil on Water* and petrofiction written in neonaturalistic forms, there is a kind of erasure of social relations that makes oil illegible. Andreas Malm defines a “fossil economy” as one of “self-sustaining growth predicated on the growing consumption of fossil fuels.” Fossil capital in particular is defined as both a relation and a process — “a triangular relation between capital, labor and a certain segment of extra-human nature, in which the exploitation of labor by capital is impelled by the consumption of this particular accessory,” and “an endless flow of successive valorizations of value, at every stage claiming a larger body of fossil energy to burn.”

Commodity production, waged or forced labor, and carbon emissions are necessary elements of fossil capital. This economy appears to be driven by invisible inner forces in its self-sustainability, yet depends on what Jeff Diamanti calls the “subsumption of literally unimaginable quantities of non-human energy” entering into production, distribution, and consumption processes.

These “invisible inner forces” cannot be understood outside of the social relations and processes that maintain them. Seeing oil as nature could mean seeing its possibility — its use in fueling something other than capital. Conflating it with a naturalized version of the commodity form renders oil and the relations and processes of fossil capital imperceptible. Thus the problem of oil’s political economy is part and parcel of the problem it poses to the literary history that takes it on. This, I am arguing, is tied to the challenges oil poses to the project of environmental representation, on one hand, and its impact on economic value on the other.

Writing from within the tradition of German value critique, Claus Peter Ortlieb isolates the irreconcilability of material wealth and wealth in the value form or what in his title he names “A Contradiction between Matter and Form.” Writing in response to Michael Heinrich’s insistence that capitalism knows no bounds — Heinrich’s insistence, more specifically, that the economic crisis of the 1970s was not the beginning of a terminal crisis — Ortlieb ties the finitude of human and natural resources to the limits of capitalist accumulation. In Ortlieb’s account, capital must increase the sheer mass of commodities produced in order just to maintain, much less increase, the total mass of surplus value. But this increase in the mass of commodities produced obeys merely the blind drive for the accumulation of surplus value on the level of the individual capitalist enterprise. In turn this generates the contradictory result in which the global production of the mass of surplus value must tend to decrease since the same mass will have to spread out over more and more commodities — with no hope that their value (hence surplus value) will ever be realized through their sale. A second feature of the same contradiction is that material wealth appears superfluous to capital at the same time that it is essential: for capital must also continuously produce material wealth (or “use values” in this sense) as the only possible bearer of value. Yet capital cannot take the existence of any material
limits or finitude, since the drive for the “self-valorization of value” cannot ever by its very logic reach an end point. Ortlieb’s formulation puts the sources of surplus value at inverse relation to the accumulation of surplus value: “if the destruction of material wealth serves the valorization of value, then material wealth will be destroyed.”

This recalls Marx’s central claim about of “progress” under capitalism, namely that it is premised on “undermining the original sources of all wealth — the soil and the worker.” The pressure of capital to ceaselessly increase relative surplus value through technological improvements in production and the resulting fall in the value of labor power requires an ever-accelerating consumption of limited natural resources.

What I have been suggesting so far, however, is that the discrepancy between material wealth and the value form of wealth is as much a literary problem as it is a historical one. My argument so far has been that the historical modulation of these two forms of wealth takes place in sociocultural relations embedded in industrial production, which is to say in the cultural fields that negotiate environmental and economic wealth. “Petrofiction” is generally understood as a category of literature that indicates a thematic of oil in the content of the work. In light of Ortlieb’s argument concerning the crucial distinction between material wealth and wealth in the value form, and the tendency with which the two are often conflated in environmental discourse, it is fundamental to analyze the ways in which acclaimed petrofiction may or may not be making this distinction and the resulting possibilities for the representation of conscious human action. As the depiction of the effects of petrol on the environment is often an essential characteristic of contemporary petrofiction, how are these depictions linked to the representation of oil as commodity and oil as material or natural wealth?

**Petrofiction: A Category Mistake?**

Implicit in my treatment of “petrofiction” in the age of late fossil capital is a reconceptualization of what the modifier “petro” does to the literary history of resource aesthetics. Let us begin, however, with the critical treatment of the term “petrofiction” itself. We have heard of “petrodollars” and “petrocapitalism,” with “petro” generally specifying and defining the second term. But “petrofiction” is a combination of a material thing (petrol) and a social object (fiction), and the “petro” part of the word does not define or specify “fiction.” Instead the term “petrofiction” seems to indicate that a thematic of petrol, drawn from the content of the work, is awkwardly projected as the form of the literature, which has lead to certain problems of interpretation. Peter Theroux, translator of Abdelrahman Munif’s novel *Cities of Salt* — the novel that inspired Amitav Ghosh to coin the term petrofiction — says he felt that “Cities of Salt was no more about oil than the Godfather was about olive oil.” He says he felt “let down” by readings that emphasize oil as opposed to the story itself. Theroux’s statement indicates the need for critics to distinguish between petrofiction
as literary theme and literary genre, in order to better understand how oil is used in
the narrative. Interpretations of petrofiction as theme, that is, in analyzing how oil is
depicted in the content of the story, could discern character and setting relations in
the work proximate to oil. Interpretations of petrofiction as formal genre or mode are
more complicit with drawing oil from the content of the story into the organizing form
of the novel, which problematically makes the narrative appear resource determined,
and thereby obscures the depiction of socionatural relations.

This naturalistic form is not uncommon in works often labeled as “petrofiction,”
as I have shown here in the case of Oil on Water. Though Upton Sinclair’s work came
well before the idea of “petrofiction,” one might label it an early example of “resource
determination” due to its awkward personification of oil capital at the end of the 1927
novel Oil! The novel ends with the “black and cruel” demon that must be “chained.” Oil
in the novel serves as the object of the author’s moral and political agenda of
denouncing bourgeois rapacity and greed, which ultimately reverts to bourgeois
apologetics. The bourgeoisie’s unchecked immoral behavior is where the narrative
locates much of the evil of capital, and the material excesses that oil brings exacerbate
this behavior. I locate a more contemporary example of “resource determination” in
the practice exhibited in Patrick Chamoiseau’s Texaco (1992) of dividing the novel’s
timeline, as if it were a sequence of various forms of purely material substances,
with the title of the novel itself leaving us squarely, if ironically, under the aegis of
oil capital. Chamoiseau’s redefinition of the slum as “urban mangrove,” where the
soil appears “strangely free, definitively free,” is already problematic because the
novel presents it from the very beginning as separate from and awkwardly immune
to social processes. This distancing makes it difficult for the narrative to analyze
the relations that lead to socio-ecological destruction, as class consciousness appears
to be replaced by ecological consciousness in the novel. Utopian moments depicting
slums as nature, assume that the symbolic resistance or infrapolitics of planting
roots in polluted soil, noxious with oil fumes, can flower without significant, and not
merely symbolic, socio-eco-logical interventions. Thus in one petrofiction we see oil’s
toxicity exerted as a contradiction in the commodity form it materializes — it has
turned the very soil from which it came into a hazard — which already runs counter
to the “natural” state of the commodity, which is paradoxically to appear without the
friction of ecological or social toxicity.

The commodity form in its economic and social manifestation presents itself
as natural, in a semblance of objectivity in the commodity. In History and Class
Consciousness Georg Lukács writes that under capitalism “[e]conomic reality has
the appearance of a world governed by the eternal laws of nature, laws to which
[one] has to adjust [one’s] activities.” Petrofiction in particular may be prone to
interpretations of socioeconomic reality as nature (that is, ahistorically determined
and not in relation to social processes) because when petrol as commodity is confused
with petrol as material, the narrative weighs down in description of the material
and natural world. When looking at petrofiction then, it is necessary to note the ways in which social relations may be stifled by the object in reified narrative form, effectively confusing certain social forms as natural (that is, determined by nature itself). In petrofiction that aims to depict the ecological effects of oil specifically, capitalism can project itself as an ecological force. Jason W. Moore convincingly argues in his work on what, borrowing from Andreas Malm, he calls “the Capitalocene” that capitalism is indeed a force of nature, as social and ecological processes are not separate but moving dialectically, in as he terms it, the “double internality.” But this dialectical movement can only be depicted in literature if character and environmental relations are established between subjects and objects. When the commodity form is represented as Nature, the social relations that the commodity form acts on disappear. The literary result is much like naturalism, as defined by Lukács, where characters have no connection with the objects described, making the subjects no different than mere objects. I will return to this topic with more detail at the conclusion of this paper. But first, a closer look at Oil on Water and Cities of Salt as examples of two very different “ecocentric” forms of the novel and the resulting depictions of oil as differing forms of wealth.

**Oil on Water and Voices without Quotation Marks**

What stands out about the novel Oil on Water is its attempt at producing an ecological voice, the goal of which seems to be the decentering of human narration in order to give more weight to the ecological object. In her review of the novel, Jennifer Wenzel observes that “the land and water seem to speak directly in their own voice without quotation marks.” Tree branches, roots, seaweed, and the flight formations of birds resemble language, letters, or communication. Descriptions intertwine human and nonhuman nature showing their inclusiveness — the boatman is “as unobtrusive, as natural, as the grass and the trees outside.” In one scene, the journalists come upon a scene of post-violence carnage and then describe it by juxtaposing both trees “cut in half, dripping vital sap” and a body with a torn stomach and a “trail of blood that... disappeared into the grass.” Material objects are also given lifelike or animistic qualities, particularly in the imagery used to describe abandoned drilling installations: oil paraphernalia is naturalized as “sprouting,” and “growing gas flares and pipelines.” In another passage pipelines resemble roots, veins, and writing: “the oil scorched earth, and the ever-present pipelines crisscrossing the landscape, sometimes like tree roots surfacing far away from the parent tree, sometimes like diseased veins on the back of an old shriveled hand, and sometimes in squiggles like ominous writing on the wall.” The similes here compare the pipelines to entities that transport and feed living beings (veins and roots) and meaning (writing). But the image is “ominous” as is the foggy setting of the entire novel giving it a tone of doom. This sense of doom is particularly haunting in the image where Rufus sees a human arm “severed at the elbow bobbing” in the water. Even the dead limb here
seems to have “an ecological voice,” with “its fingers opening and closing, beckoning... sometimes with its middle finger extended.”

The nonhuman world appears much more alive and active than the human world in *Oil on Water*. Rufus’s narration contrasts significantly with the depictions of “ecological voice” in the novel. He appears trapped in his human understanding of the nonhuman world and is never quite able to understand the communication of either human or nonhuman voices. Though it is never stated in the novel, one can gather that his mentor, the once great journalist Zaq, represents the defeated hopefulness of the previous generation that saw a partial decolonial movement of Nigeria in 1960 and the expectations that oil wealth would eventually trickle down from oil fields discovered in 1973. Rufus eventually absorbs Zaq’s cynical disillusionment, which is only occasionally interrupted by moments of often drunken idealism. After their first meeting, Rufus has to carry Zaq’s intoxicated, passed-out, and ill body with him for long distances until he wakes up, symbolically staggering and carrying the crushing weight of the disillusionment of the previous generation. Zaq remains ill throughout the novel, and Rufus is never quite able to shake the influence of the disillusionment of his mentor. This failure of human understanding of the ecological is inherent in the narrator’s failures, in the foggy memory he describes in the first paragraph, as well as in the unapologetic inability of the novel to capture its ecological object — it can only guess, observe, and describe. Furthermore, that the novel gets narrated from the point of view of a journalist whose aim is to “observe” and “witness” makes the form of the novel descriptive, as if an objective description of the material object gives more weight to the ecological object, making the narrative slightly less fallible in its attempted distance from human consciousness. The result is an awkward depoliticization/naturalization of oil and the description of environmental apocalypse. Yet, this seems to be a conscious move on the part of the novel, as Rufus is at one point scolded by a prisoner he is interviewing for not being able to “see the larger picture.” The story should not just be about the recovery of the white woman, and yet Rufus is never quite able to see this in his attempt to find a good story.

Ultimately, like Rufus, most characters are unable to understand the ecological voice. These characters appear to perceive reality through static binaries, much like oil on water — two entities refusing to merge. The kind of thinking that separates alive and dead, male and female, west and east, white and black also separates humanity and nature. Nature here includes oil. The assumption that oil as nature is passive and separate allows its indiscriminate use. Oil, the dead, the east, the female, the black, and nature are generally assumed to be passive and separate by Rufus and other dominant characters in a clearly unecological view. Yet, when the male, the white, and the human make these kinds of false assumptions, it comes back at them negatively, as everything is connected ecologically. This is most apparent through the ways in which men treat women. The Niger Delta at times appears to be telling its own story of suffering through its female characters often serving as an allegory for the way
in which the land is treated: Boma, Rufus’s sister, is burned and disfigured by an oil fire as is the Niger Delta, the military sergeant’s daughter is raped as Chief Ibiram’s land is taken without consent, and the British woman’s husband abandons her for a foreigner as chiefs abandon the land for foreign oil money. That the novel more directly relates female characters to the land is not an essentializing feminization of nature but a critique of the ways in which both nature and women are statically perceived as passive, trivialized and valued for beauty only. At one point in the novel Rufus overhears a scene of domestic violence: “there was the loud sound of a slap, the crying stopped, the shouting stopped. Peace reigned.” The irony implicit in the notion that peace follows violence, is most likely also a reference to the particular path of violent resistance the militants use while claiming to want the restoration of the Niger Delta. Their activities such as kidnapping and blowing up pipelines for ransom only end in more sabotage and suffering. There are many faulty claims to truth in the novel, one being from the professor: “This land belongs to us. That is the truth.” The ecological voice and details in the novel prove otherwise. The assumption that the passive needs violent protection contributes to the cycle of violence that shows no end in the novel.

The ecological voice of the novel aims to make these connections, but the human characters themselves fail to do so. The exception is the island people of an animistic cult who survive and are able to heal in part because of the ecological consciousness that they embody through their rituals and daily practices — the cult refuses oil money, worships natural processes and aims to heal what has been scarred. But there is no sense that this healing is meant to lead to the restoration of the ecosystem. The priest of the animistic cult says, “we believe the sun rising brings renewal... whatever goes wrong in the night has a chance for redemption after a cycle.” This cyclical view of ecological processes is what distinguishes the novel from typical environmental apocalyptic novels, in that it refuses the didactic ploy, aiming to change the consciousness of the reader with the shock of the doom to come. But this means that instead, the novel is depicting a situation in which the end of the cycle has already come, as it has come to the Niger Delta, and that there is nothing left to do but heal and survive.

Depictions of the specific relations between the colonial subject and oil are missing in the novel. The novel’s attempt to emphasize an environmental presence in the narrative has the effect of absorbing social processes into the ecological object, thereby stifling the depiction of relations between the subject and object. In giving Nature what appears to be complete agency, The Force of Nature appears to act on passive objects. The attempt to represent the ecological object in the novel instead renders everything passive. In opposition to dualism, and in what appears to be a purging of social processes, the novel presents a version of monism whereby the relations and connections of organisms to physical surroundings — notably the aim of ecological study — are lost.
One reading of the novel takes the contradictions of the racialized, patriarchal, neocolonial order as evidence of its flawed understanding of nature. At the end of *Oil on Water* Rufus wonders if it is fate that wanted Isabelle, the kidnapped British woman, to see firsthand the human and nonhuman carcasses that were the result of her husband’s work as oil engineer. But, in wondering how her life has changed after barely surviving the kidnapping, he concludes that she was most likely not able to recognize the Niger Delta’s attempt to communicate with her — that her experience would be “nothing but a memory, an anecdote for the dinner table.”

Isabelle’s indifference to the socio-ecological apocalypse may be a challenge to the Western reader, who despite having more weight in the global order and being the biggest consumers of petroleum, care little for the waste that is disposed of far away. Despite Isabelle’s direct experience as a witness to the socio-ecological destruction, she remains indifferent. Yet in spite of the recognition of this problem in the novel, the ways in which oil as a commodity supports this racialized, neocolonial order is missing.

In “Narrate or Describe?” Lukács interrogates literary naturalism and what he calls the “novel of disillusion,” in which “the final victory of capitalist inhumanity is always anticipated.” The disillusioned tone of the narration radiates from every turn in *Oil on Water*. Though Rufus feels hopeful at the end of the novel, he has been naïve and wrong many times throughout the narrative, and indeed the last word of the novel is “descent,” perhaps indicating the way in which the cycle is moving.

Possible ways out of the impasse appear defeated before they are even hinted at. If the title *Oil on Water* presents a metaphorical image of static dualism, its reference to nature further naturalizes such a dualism. But, as with most hints and symbols in the novel, the reader can too easily fall into the pathetic fallacy, reading into nature what is not intended to be interpreted by the human who inevitably falls into the trap, never fully able to decenter his or her consciousness. Lukács says of the “novel of disillusion” that the “inflated metaphor, arbitrary detail, chance similarity [and] accidental meeting,” are “supposed to provide direct expression of important social relationships.” But because the characters have no clear relation to the objects described, social significance is actually obscured, making it near impossible to extract any kind of meaningful interpretation of the novel. In *Oil on Water* this is essentially related to the naturalized representation of oil. If social forces do not surface dialectically in unity with the ecological forces, how can the reader discern with certainty that the degradation and violence in the novel are not also natural? The narrative’s placement of humanity and oil in nature without establishing ecological relations leads to the idea that subjects are doomed more by nature than any kind of social form. If everything is seen as part of nature, then the absolute destruction of the Niger Delta in the novel becomes a problematic if not arbitrary idea because it becomes difficult to locate the relations that entail such devastation.

It could be argued that the novel is simply an expression of eco-social devastation
in its depiction of a moment and location where there does not actually appear to be any agency whatsoever. In the Niger Delta over 550 oil spills have occurred in the last ten years, compared to the ten that have occurred across the whole of Europe in the last forty-five years. But, instead of focusing on agency here, I ask if the emphasis that the novel places on the ecological is a feature of an expiring cultural logic of late fossil capital.

It is true that oil is nature before it becomes a commodity. But under capital we actually never experience oil as nature — it can only be experienced as commodity, and it is its naturalized commodity state that prevents us from seeing it as nature. Oil as a naturalized demonic substance in the narrative puts the colonial subject and the object (oil) in opposition, as the subject becomes isolated from the object when it loses its relation with the object. If social processes are isolated in literature, then ecological processes are also isolated and no movement is possible.

**Cities of Salt: The Collective Third-Person Narrative Voice**

How could oil as a commodity then appear in literature? The answer is that it does not, nor does it need to appear as such. An ironic problem that I am proposing is central to the cultural logic of late fossil capital is that the more oil is described in a work, the more it disappears. This naturalization of oil indicates a particular kind of “energy unconscious” — that which erases or contributes to the depiction of literally fossilized social relations. I hope to show in the following analysis of *Cities of Salt* the contrast between its ecological form and the ecological voice of *Oil on Water* and how this is related to differing depictions of oil.

Going back to the invisibility of oil as a material substance in *Cities of Salt*, oil does not appear physically but instead manifests itself in the minds of the characters in different ways, mostly as some kind of wealth or gold to come. This is because its particular material form as a commodity is not of importance to the Bedouin. What is important are the social powers it is given and the depiction of its effect on eco-social relations. Indeed oil exists alongside a web of other commodities in the novel. The irrationality of the commodity system is shown through a web of things that have social power without actually being useful to people. The sketchy “doctor” that sees a business opportunity in Harran, Dr. Subhi, claims his needle can fix all sorts of problems — virility in particular — and its purported powers draw even the most loyal customers away from the traditional treatments of Mufaddi, Harran’s traditional healer. The Americans easily keep the emir distracted from his people by presenting him with objects to make him feel powerful, but he is unable to understand any of these object’s potential uses due to his insatiable desire to accumulate more. On the contrary the objects weaken and confuse him with desires: “The emir grasped the telescope as a mother grasps a suckling infant,” but he completely loses sight of his people under these new colonializing circumstances. His obsession with the telescope further distorts and fragments his vision, proving his inability to see or
understand the whole picture.

We see the power of oil as a commodity in the novel not though its ability to fuel production and development, but in its ability to generate wealth and luxuries — and then only for the American side of Harran. Oil’s social powers as a commodity appear infinite — it displaces people, invents work for a wage, creates racial inequalities, complicates family and gender relations, and even rearranges people’s relationships with nature. But never does oil itself appear in the novel as an object of natural powers — its influence is conditioned by its social uses. Oil depicted through a constellation of social relations shows the conditioning powers of those relations. In Ortlieb’s summation of the crucial significance of pointing to the dissimilitude of material wealth and value, he makes the assertion that “conscious human action” must bring a postcapitalist form of the social into being, before the blind compulsion of the value form finally leads to the merger of terminal capitalist crisis and what may well be a terminal ecological crisis that threatens to destroy all sources of material wealth.45 That Cities of Salt represents oil as a commodity and not as nature allows for the subject-object relations that permit movement in the narrative. This movement recalls Malm’s definition of fossil capital mentioned earlier, as both a relation and a process. Without this movement there could be no “conscious human action” depicted in the novel, as the conflation of material wealth (here oil as nature) and wealth in the value form (oil as commodity) naturalize oil’s powers without recognizing the social forces behind this influence.

Socionatural relations in Cities of Salt fluctuate and change under different social formations — from traditional precapital relations where people own the means of production and survive off the land, to their displacement in Harran, where they become mostly alienated from nature as workers surviving off wages. Under both social forms ecological and social forces are presented dialectically. The third person collective narrative begins with the consciousness of Miteb al Hathal, and remains with him longer than any other character. But the narrative eventually leaves Miteb, entering the stories of numerous characters, to the point that John Updike accuses Munif in his review of Cities of Salt of having not even written a narrative recognizable as a novel.46 And yet this third-person collective narrative, more than other forms, works with the interconnection that ecological thinking necessarily entails — ecology being the science that studies the relations of organisms to one another and to their surroundings. The narrative weaves in and out of interdependent characters, plants, and animals, highlighting both social and ecological relations and common destinations.

In Cities of Salt subjects do not appear as objects of their environment. The novel makes the subject-object relationship to the characters’ environment particularly apparent at moments when characters come to consciousness of the nature of their exploitation and the rupture of socionatural relations. The commodity-based social formation organizes eco-social relations, but eco-social relations, though not with
the same intensity, also impact the new social formation. The first victims of the oasis community, once the Americans have found oil and forced the people off their land are the “wailing” trees. After the community is displaced, they become workers in the coastal city of Harran. They are distraught by their inability to counter the sense of racial inferiority created by their segregated working and living conditions. It is once they leave the city for the desert, that they begin to find ways to meaningfully counter their confused feelings of inferiority. The turn towards empowering social processes is here caused and strengthened by the workers’ connection to their natural environment. The rains that bring plants and animals also have the effect of creating the nostalgia that reminds them of their previous relations. The workers start to engage in guerrilla tactics of resistance — playing practical jokes on the Americans by letting loose rats and lizards in their tents and the strategic placement of a big dead black snake in the American camp, which results in several Americans leaving. The culmination of this moment of empowerment is the offering of a boxful of lizards meant to publicly frighten and humiliate the Americans at the ceremony marking the completion of the pipeline. The Arab workers clap longer than the others in mockery of the show.

This parallel between the flowering of the desert and of social consciousness continues to drive workers to a greater unification as they bring their partially repaired socio-ecological relations back to the city, culminating in their outrage at the dismissal of workers and the emir’s refusal to investigate the murder of traditional healer Mufaddi, who had refused any complicity with the imported social formation. The formal insistence of collective third person turns the slow growth of class consciousness into a kind of vantage from which to assess the impact of oil as a social relation. Oil gets mediated differently across its stages of development — it’s discovery results in general suspicion, curiosity, and desire in the community — it’s extraction leads to fear, alienation and displacement — the refinement process in Harran objectifies them into workers, but during the building of the pipeline — oil’s transportation, the workers recover their subjectivity.

Miteb and Mufaddi are important characters as they frame the novel — the novel starts in the consciousness of Miteb, his ghost appearing and disappearing throughout, and ends with the ghost of Mufaddi. Both are marked by their refusal to adapt to the new economy brought by the Americans, as well as for their particularly strong connection to their environment. Both have female counterparts (not wives or family-based) in Umm Khosh and Khazna, in that when one is affected, the other follows either in strength or weakness. In strength — as Umm Khosh becomes sane near Miteb, and Khazna’s cures become more effective with the presence of Mufaddhi — or in weakness — as Umm Khosh reverts to her madness and dies with the disappearance of Miteb, and Khazna becomes blind with the death of Mufaddi. Both Mufaddi and Akoub the truck driver also have human and extra-human counterparts in Amna’s fawn and Akoub’s truck. Akoub the truck driver’s truck breaks down along with him
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as his health deteriorates, as does his dog whose leg becomes infected at the same moment as his does. Additionally, tied-up camels suffer with the first prisoners in the first jail, here among many other moments in the narrative in which changes in the social and material environment are depicted as effecting both human and nonhuman nature.

The most striking example of this interconnectedness is the extent to which Mufaddi’s death effects his entire environment: his name in Arabic means “the final arbiter” and the emir’s refusal to investigate the cause of his murder is the ultimate motivation for the unification of the workers at the end of the novel. The pain caused by his murder brings voice to the suffering workers and finally relief, as Mufaddi’s child patient also finds his voice after being unable to talk, when he witnesses the pain of the irons on another — his pretended treatment — and he begins to “bellow” and is cured. Mufaddi’s ghost appears at the height of the marches, and is seen by every single participant; his death proving the extent of his connection to his environment as it reacts in chaos: adults tremble and become thirsty, babies cry, dogs howl, a gazelle jumps into the ocean, and large birds fall prey to hungry dogs. Additionally, Amna’s fawn, Mufaddi’s animal counterpart, also suffering under house arrest, presumably dies at the moment of his death.

Despite the many individual differences of characters, the narrative viewpoint is collective, from “the people,” and often in connection, through simile, with nature or natural processes, turning the subjects and objects of the setting into an embedded whole. When Um Khosh begins to lose her sanity due to the disappearance of her son, her sadness is said to “[leave] a deep impression in the people’s hearts and minds, much as rushing water does in hillsides.” When Miteb fully refuses the Americans and their claims, the narrative voice at first reflects society’s frustration with his refusal: “He seemed obstinate and imbecilic. He had forgotten his age and dignity.” When the collective narrative of Cities of Salt directly expresses an opinion, it is often an opinion held in general by the community. There is no illusion of transparency as there would be in the case of a more conventional third person omniscient narrative. Instead, in the third-person collective, ideologies are laid bare and rendered fluid. Transformation happens collectively, often influenced by those characters lying just outside the collective norms. The people eventually realize that they were wrong about Miteb, and his ghost haunts them for the rest of the novel. The narrator’s comments are not intended to capture “reality” but rather the dynamic of collective opinion, while at the same time remaining attentive to those just outside this realm. The dynamic narrative shows the people as initially incapable of imagining future problems or of any critical awareness, much less preventing the oncoming crisis. Unable at first even to recognize their own situation, they nevertheless eventually transition into awareness and the capacity of organizing and fighting back.

Munif, himself formerly an oil engineer with a PhD in oil economics, moves between fiction and nonfiction in the novel, detailing the racist, segregated labor practices and
Jim crow-type laws that clearly evoke the historical situation associated with Aramco (or the Arabia American Oil Company) in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia in the ’40s and ’50s. In the novel, the workers come to understand the nature of their exploitation and revolt, as in fact the workers did in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, particularly in 1956. Echoing one of the first slogans actually used to exhort workers to unite in Dhahran in 1945 against Aramco, Munif’s workers also shout “we are all one,” and the novel concludes with “the masses of people mov[ing] as one man.” By 1956 in Dhahran, however, the protests had been stopped by a royal decree outlawing strikes. Those who didn’t comply with the decree ended up in jails or disappeared. Additionally, poor migrants were kept on hand as a reserve work force, making local worker’s demands largely futile. Oil historian Robert Vitalis says that after the royal decree, Aramco’s policy planning staff came out with a statement claiming that the workers were more content now and that they even had new TVs courtesy of the company.

Though Amitav Ghosh admires Munif’s interaction with oil in Cities of Salt, he calls the novel’s ending, in which the workers enact some success in “becoming politically active,” “an escapist fantasy” and “pure wish fulfillment.” Whether true or not, such a putative exaggeration of the success of the striking workers when considered as a utopian moment within a realist fictional narrative provides a strong contrast to utopian moments from other works categorized and acclaimed as petrofiction. The ending, though not as optimistic as Ghosh implies, leaves breathing room for the possibilities that socio-ecological relations entail. Munif moves into the realm of the magical at the end of the novel as Fawaz and Mugbel (Miteb’s sons) are seen “flying through the air like birds” along with the ever-present specters of Mufaddi and Miteb. The aim of the narrative here is clearly not to describe objective social facts or coincide with empirical reality but to realistically portray social forces and connections as they are seen by the third-person collective. That Miteb’s sons are flying highlights the transcendence of material description in order to capture driving social forces that are at play in this moment. That ghosts are present connects the historical process to a momentum in order to capture driving social forces that are at play in this moment. The point is not that the momentum is hopeful, but that momentum exists in the form of the novel. What appears solid (like salt) may not be so. This momentum would not be possible without subject-object relations.

Though the discovery of oil completely changes the lives of the Bedouins, oil itself (as material wealth) is not presented as the catalyst for displacement or the source of suffering or an organizing historical force. It is instead the distinct commodity-based social formation that organizes eco-social relations, allowing for a representation of the relations organized around oil under the value form. When Ibn Naffeh says, “The Americans... are the root of the problem,” there is some dramatic irony here,
as the reader can easily discern that it is not the Americans themselves that are the problem, as the entire novel carefully depicts not a history determined by a nation or an inert natural material but the process of the disintegration of relations, from the divorce of the means of production, to working for a wage, to segregation, to iron posts replacing trees, to the reification of women’s bodies, to the introduction of luxury goods, to land grabs, and so on.59 The title could be pointing to a future collapse (salt easily disintegrates), yet it is not clear by the end of the novel how this collapse may come about. What is clear is that the collapse is not coming from some determined social or ecological process. Both social and ecological driving forces arise organically in the novel and point to an uncertain ending that allows dynamic socio-ecological forces to gain or lose momentum. This also allows for the representation of oil as material wealth (oil as possibility) and oil as commodity (oil as tragedy) to operate simultaneously in dialectical and historical tension.

Neonaturalism and Neorealism

What happens when we rethink Georg Lukács’s realism/naturalism distinction in the context of neonaturalist and neorealist narratives about oil in the age of late fossil capital? Naturalism, heavily influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution at the time of its first appearance as a distinct narrative style, tends towards fatalistic notions of environmental determination of social behavior. Lukács charges naturalism with reducing “driving social forces” to mechanical, natural laws of society, as would a scientist observing unmediated facts or as social data available to the novelist as experimentalist trying to discover the “natural laws” of society. In “Narrate or Describe?” Lukács explains that the distinction between realism and naturalism is based on the narrative standpoint: the reified observer of naturalism observes and describes a scene whereas the narrative of a realist work participates as it narrates the “vicissitudes of human beings,” in part by transcending mere observation and description.60 In realism, this transcendence involves the depiction of setting as something inseparable from its relation to the characters — and vice versa. We have already seen examples of this in Cities of Salt. However, in naturalism, as it is understood by Lukács, the characters have no connection with the objects described.61 The subject and object are represented as isolated from each other. Such mutual isolation becomes, at its logical extreme, a total separation, not just of character and setting, but the severing of reality as such into two independent spheres, as is the traditional depiction of nature and man, nature as entirely foreign to the social. And as we have seen in more contemporary literature, this can take the seemingly paradoxical form (as it relates to literary naturalism) in which the ecological object completely absorbs the social object. In both cases there are only abstract relations, established between subject and object, which in a sense amounts to the complete absence of relations. In Lukács’s account of realism, however, “description of the environment is never ‘pure’ description but is almost always transformed into action.”62 In realism
the depiction of environment accords it a dramatic role in the story as a whole, as characters and setting or environment never cease to interpenetrate each other. The two never cease to constitute an underlying absolute unity in relation to which their separation is always relative. Characters and setting are in continual and singular process — one which manifests itself in both their apparent separation as well as in those moments in which their absolute unity shines through the surface of what only appears to be their mutual isolation.

In naturalist observation, the narration “ignores the motive forces of social development and their unremitting influence on even the superficial phenomena of life.” There is a great leveling between characters and setting, as everything is described as existing on the same plane, as objects moving in accordance with a putative “natural law” that disguises what is in fact a more total reification of social relations. In naturalism, “[o]bservation is a process with its own logic and its own mode of accentuation. The important and unimportant are described with equal attention... deprived of all human significance.” The reified narrative style in naturalism is likened to the “static pictures of still lives connected only through the relation of objects arrayed one beside the other according to their own inner logic, never following one from the other, certainly never one out of the other.” Instead of documenting the dynamic process of the deterioration of relations or hinting at possible relations, there is static defeat. This defeat is the result of the depiction of so-called “subjects” (human characters) as if already absorbed by — and thereby appearing to lack any real relation at all to so-called “objects” (oil, the natural environment, landscape, setting, and so on). Having been severed, in a necessarily false surface relation, from what has now become their true but concealed dialectical unity, subjects themselves appear to be mere objects.

Clearly, there are no “pure specimens” of either narration or description. The point here is not to label works of literature as either one or the other but to notice different strengths and combinations in order to gauge the relationship with reality that is being depicted. We cannot say that Rufus is simply describing “social facts,” as did Zola’s third person naturalistic description. But the problems that Lukács found in Zola’s naturalism are very similar to problems we find in Oil on Water and other works of “petrofiction.” This is notably related to the novel’s particular kind of ecologically informed imagination, resulting in effects that may appear to differ from the standard naturalist formula critiqued by Lukács: in the moments where ecological processes are depicted, the narration participates by moving the typical idea of a pristine, rural, and asocial nature out of this static category and placing it in process with the social. In “petrofiction” this means that oil as commodity is not naturalized but also appears specifically as commodity bearing on the social relations that in essence are the domain of novelistic representation. Still, at bottom the novel nevertheless exemplifies reified observation, since in precisely those moments when social processes are depicted as rooted in indifferent ecological material, these social
relations themselves simply disappear. When social processes are not portrayed as developing in relation to ecological processes but rather as entirely subsumed within ecological processes, then historical time appears to merge with naturalized, nonhuman time — a time of natural decay and a purely material, asocial death — and the historical time of the social appears to come to a standstill.

Notes
2. Habila, Oil on Water 60.
3. Oil on Water 238.
7. “Crucially, Ghosh does not consider the possibilities of a logic of oil that puts it in the shade, in his eyes, when compared with the creative commodity par excellence, spice (although even here, in the realm of commodities of colonization, he might have made space for the vast histories on sugar and coffee).” Peter Hitchcock, “Oil in an American Imaginary,” New Formations 69 (2010) 81.
10. Oil on Water 140.
11. Oil on Water 9, 193.
18. “A Contradiction between Matter and Form” 112.
20. “A Contradiction between Matter and Form” 112.
27. Oil on Water 178.
28. Oil on Water 76, 77.
29. Oil on Water 9, 43.
30. Oil on Water 193.
31. Oil on Water 38.
32. Oil on Water 38.
33. Oil on Water 60.
34. Oil on Water 163.
36. Oil on Water 111.
37. Oil on Water 232.
38. Oil on Water 90.
39. Oil on Water 239.
41. Oil on Water 239; Rufus says, “I turned and began my descent.”
42. Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?” 116.
44. Cities of Salt 421.
45. “A Contradiction between Matter and Form” 117.
47. Cities of Salt 106.
48. Cities of Salt 570.
49. Cities of Salt 579.
50. Cities of Salt 575.
51. Cities of Salt 53.
52. Cities of Salt 71.
53. Cities of Salt 613.
187.
55. Ghosh 148.
56. Cities of Salt 615.
57. Cities of Salt 615.
58. Cities of Salt 627.
59. Cities of Salt 626.
60. “Narrate or Describe?” 111.
61. “Narrate or Describe?” 130–133.
62. “Narrate or Describe?” 118.
63. “Narrate or Describe?” 122.
64. “Narrate or Describe?” 131.
65. “Narrate or Describe?” 144.
66. “Narrate or Describe?” 116.
67. “Narrate or Describe?” 116.