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cluded with a sequence of photos on which Burtynsky made his fame: the shipbreaking yards of Chittagong, Bangladesh, where nineteenth-century labor meets twentieth-century garbage through the mechanism of twenty-first century offshoring of multinational capitalism's expenses and responsibilities.

Oil is a photo narrative—an attempt to tell a story through images. Rather than an exhibition of his latest pieces, the book (and the show it represents) is akin to a curatorial exercise in which one aspect of an artist's thematic preoccupations are drawn out of a larger body of work. What makes *Oil* unique is that in this case, the curator is the artist himself, who has revisited his large body of images in an effort to produce a tale that might generate in its viewers the same oil epiphany that prompted their production. Burtynsky is far from the only photographer to generate photo essays with political intent. One thinks immediately, for instance, of Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* (1996), though text (the powerful essays included alongside his photos in most of his published work) is important for Sekula in a way that it isn't for Burtynsky: with the exception of a short opening fragment that describes the ambition of this photo series and the epiphany that kicked it off, no text accompanies the photos—not even titles or identifications of the sites at which they were taken (this information is, however, available in the book's index). There's no doubt that Burtynsky provides us with powerful, alluring, and dramatic images. One

of the questions that the book raises is the not just whether it succeeds in its political and pedagogic aim—too blunt of a question to be posed to such a varied and vibrant set of images in any case—but what we are to make of the visual mechanisms that Burtynsky employs in his photos and their capacity to name the central place of oil in our social imaginaries and ontologies.

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The impulse of documentary photography with political aims is to engage in exposé: to introduce to vision otherwise hidden practices or spaces that we should know about, but don't—either because we don't want to or because we aren't meant to. Though Burtynsky's images retain some of this impulse (it is why they can accompany magazine or newspaper articles less as art pieces than as instances of journalistic photography), there is more going on. His attention to the spectacle of scale and the elevated vantage point from which his images are taken—either full aerial shots, as in the case of the freeway interchanges, or from above the horizon line—simultaneously exemplify and critique the enduring fantasy of enlightenment knowledge. The god's-eye perspective produces the enormity every-

where on display—a form of knowledge that makes it possible to leave human marks on a vast, almost planetary scale. Burtynsky's deserts are filled to the brim with cars and planes, and his images of garbage dumps—on a similar other worldly scale—track the detritus left behind when each is junked. There is something of the sublime in these photographs: not the Kantian sublime, that encounter with the unknowable that only reconfirms the Enlightenment subject's ability to, in the end, know and control everything, but the terror and lack of control that is characteristic of Edmund Burke's sublime. An oil epiphany can mean that one suddenly understands what one didn't; in another register, it can mean that one finally comes to understand that one *doesn't* understand, or can't possibly understand, what humanity hath wrought to the planet as a result of oil. The feeling one gets in moving through Burtynsky's photo narrative of oil from birth to death is more the latter than the former. And this is to his credit: the painful and beautiful images on display in *Oil* never stoop to render oil manageable, not even fully graspable, except as a dimension of contemporary social life whose blunt reality we can no longer hide away from.

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Oil and World Literature

Graeme Macdonald

In a 1992 *New Republic* review of the first two novels in Abdelrahman Munif's renowned petro-quintet *Cities of Salt* (1984), Amitav Ghosh pondered the absence of the Great American Oil Novel (GAON). Why, he asked, in the nation where oil is virtually sacrosanct and where the industry remains a prodigious force, had literary responses to its significance for American life been so scant? For Ghosh, the silence of American cultural production reflected the production of oil itself. His answers invoked a combination of concealment, disrepute, and inconspicuousness that remains salient. The enduring volatility surrounding oil's entire infrastructure ensures a level of corporate and political hush, supplemented by peripheral extraction sites distant from most metropolitan population centers or deep in the world's seaways. This quietening extends, for Ghosh, to oil's cultural registration. He also holds average American geographical (and geopolitical) illiteracy to account. These, aligned with a general introspection and national inwardness in American letters, were all factors preventing the writing of

the GAON.

Several of Ghosh's points remain salient, despite areas where the premise of such an argument is narrow and contentious. From a vantage point twenty years hence, as the study of petroculture and petrofiction develops, the question remains pressing: why is it that this mineral, utterly pervasive in the everyday lives of people in developed economies, remains mostly "offshore" in social and cultural consciousness, surfacing now and again in the wake of foreign wars, gas price hikes, or Gulf-of-Mexico-type disasters? As many of the reviews in this journal demonstrate, however, there *is* a prolific and accelerating amount of oil writing, published prior to and after Ghosh's intervention. The issue may not be of the absence of this type of material rather than with how to adequately house it. Many of these oil texts are "American," though this, like other national literary formations, is a category placed under some pressure by the extra-national perspective required by the purview of most petroliterature. Any suggestion that oil has not featured significantly in the history of U.S. writing throughout the twentieth century and into the present can be refuted from such a perspective. That some oil writing may not automatically register as "Great" testifies not only to the discreet nature of the oil industry's tentative registration in American literary culture but to the thin and canonically subservient framing of the question as Ghosh perceives it. For as oil is a world resource produced and impacting within and beyond the nation, so too is literature, as recent attempts to refurbish the outlooks of world literature insist. Like oil itself, oil literature has significant global transportation routes, value changes, and multiple and uniform forms.

From an American perspective, we must assume that Ghosh was either unfamiliar with Upton Sinclair's volatile 1927 novel *Oil!* (republished in 2007) or deemed it unworthy of the adjective "Great." The latter seems more likely, if unsatisfac-

tory, for much of the content of *Oil!* is prescient to our age where domestic unrest and international conflict over the resource and its political ramifications continue to shape oil politics. Should we also give Ghosh the benefit of the doubt in not including what is without doubt a GAON—none other than Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), arguably among the first Oil novels? Vested in that notable nineteenth-century resource industry—whaling—Melville's novel narrates a megalomaniacal hunt and harvesting of a natural resource all over the world. It stands as prototype representation of a process endemic to the global history of oil extraction and petrochemical commerce.

***Is not every modern novel to
some extent an oil novel?***

Questions of oil's visibility and configuration in national literary histories, however, needs to be reconceptualized on at least two fronts: geographic and generic. What constitutes an *American* (or indeed a British, Nigerian, Iranian, Trinidadian, Russian, etc.) oil text in an age where the circuitry of literature grows increasingly international, and where many arguments have been made in academic circles to pressurize any national literary outlook as limited or, worse, solipsistic? Following this: what specifically constitutes oil literature? Must a work explicitly concern itself with features immediate to the oil industry? Given that oil and its constituents are so ubiquitous in the material and organization of modern life, is not *every* modern novel to some extent an oil novel? Such questions are historically qualified by the manifold nature of the resource and its automatic international provenance. As soon as oil is struck, its site is internationalized by virtue of the multinational capital and expertise required (often

————— *Macdonald continued on page 31*



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plains, after the passion is gone and the wide-open stink of intimacy prevails, and there is nothing left of the union that once existed. “There is still a body here but it is changed and maybe now for me I am seeing you and that is something that us and we can’t handle.”

Then comes the hard part—what to do with the mucked up masterpiece? No one wants to be responsible for the sorrow, pain and incredible loss that usually accompanies the difficult decision to separate, so the couple is left in limbo, nebulously waiting for things to get better or worse, wondering who will make the first move.

Hand grenades in our hands and holding them inside her ovaries, pressing down the levers, the pins pulled, grinning our stupid grin at each other, the faces of our faces over the fence or the wall we have built, watching each other and counting out loud and at the same time one, two, three, ready to let go and hear right again.

“Love conquers all” is a most unwitting turn of phrase. Love *does* conquer all in the most brutal of ways. At its most clichéd, it can destroy two people as individuals, and its failure can emotionally cripple the

lovers for years. As Tyler’s narrator laments at the end of the novel: “we wanted to be separated, but no one said that you would get the mind and I would be left with the heart...no one told me I would disappear.”

***Tyler lets his metaphoric
imagery capture the feelings
brought on by heartbreak.***

Tyler’s symphonic writing does not literally spell out the hurt, but instead, he lets his metaphoric imagery better capture the broad and often conflicting feelings brought on by heartbreak, something that in literature, has often been left to be expressed by female characters and women writers. “If things are so bad, why don’t they just move on?” has become an easy retort in our age of dispensable commodities, so it is a relief to find this kind of trauma pondered to distraction by the male of the species, despite the fact that thanks to our own survival instinct, we usually do “move on.”

Fittingly, Woods’s final image of a naked man climbing back into (or perhaps out of) the womb, leaves the impression that separation returns one



Detail from Cover

to one’s point of origin. Given our persistence in the belief in Romantic love and finding the perfect partner, perhaps with each disappointment, we must regroup, take solace in the familiar, then become strong enough to once again notice the glimmer of hope and excitement in the new?

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American) to set up the extraction infrastructure and the labor force, and to enable its immediate plunge into the world market. As with oil, cultural production in the age of petromodernity has moved ever irresistibly along this global path.

Like literature, oil is and has always been fluid and fungible. The oil novel in particular retains identifiable connecting and comparative peculiarities, indicative of how certain themes and forms “travel” abroad or are “imported” by writers in other oil-affected spaces. A trajectory of world oil literature throws up interesting extra-national affinities. Most oil fiction, for example, contains certain thematic preoccupations: volatile labor relations and ethnic tensions, war and violence, ecological despoliation, and political corruption. Storage and “peak” anxiety over levels of reserves and remainders shapes events and chronological structure. Petrofiction’s preoccupation with environmental justice is also well established, ensuring close relations with green debates around the world. Portentous plotlines are common, with the striking of oil and the coming of the oil company men often represented in narratives driven by proleptic inevitability or by a sudden acceleration in events. In such traceable forms, the oil text anticipates the utterly changed world that petromodernity provides.

Petrofiction is also usually a narrative of uneasy and uneven encounter. The shady relations between comprador local elites and the “foreign” stranger—often a representative of “big oil”—are a recurring trope. This is where America and “American” literature finds itself abroad, sucked into the larger pool of world petroliterature. A transnational literary line spanning one hundred years to the present can be followed from the close of Sinclair’s *Oil!*, where various players in the emergent U.S. oil dynasties of the early twentieth century consider the need to expand their business internationally. “Surely America was entitled to its share of the world’s oil,” asks the son of the man who runs Ross Consolidated, noting ominously that “there was no way to take it from these greedy foreign rivals, except to mass the power of the government against them.” By the close, with the corporate oil industry established, oil imperialism begins to spread, with new developments in Eastern Europe, Mesopotamia, and the Caribbean, “won by

American bribes and held by American battleships.”

The subsequent machinations of American-led multinational oil capital are registered throughout the subsequent history of world petrofiction. They trigger the famous 1934 strikes in the refineries of Trinidad, for example, the subject of Ralph de Boissière’s 1952 novel *Crown Jewel*. A similar conflict is at the heart of Munif’s *Cities of Salt*, which traces the development of oil in the Saudi desert from the 1930s to the 1980s. In the first of those novels, America brings corporate organization, expertise, and enormous material and cultural challenges to the local population. “The Americans came and the demons came with them,” claims one character, an attitude indicative of the dark figuration of oil-driven modernity typical of the oil novel. It characterizes the “Black Star” installation project that drills a hole through the very centre of the island of Hellya, in the Orkneys Archipelago in the far north of Scotland, in another petrotitile recently reprinted in 2007: George Mackay Brown’s 1972 novel *Greenvoe*. The novel’s registration of the deleterious effects of the 1960s North Sea oil strike on a peripheral community is again imbued with a shady corporate presence, contextualised by both the Cold War and U.S. oil capital’s heavy involvement in North Sea energy policy and infrastructure. A sinister foreign corporate influence appears again in Carlos Fuentes’s 1978 novel of the 1970s Mexican oil rush, *The Hydra Head*, and in Patrick Chamoiseau’s 1992 novel *Texaco*, a story of local islanders’ resistance against both state and corporate oil “békés” in Martinique. The sinister representative of corporate oil reappears in crisis events registered in the Egyptian novelist Nawal El-Saadawi’s *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* (2001), another work of oil modernism set in an unnamed Gulf territory where a war over oil rages. In all these novels, the figure of the stranger appears—usually American—often as a sinister corporate interloper, working behind the scenes with local elites to change the destiny of local lives by dragging them and their territory into petromodernity.

Given the scope of these examples, can we say that the Great American Oil Novel does exist—as a Saudi novel? As a Scottish or Mexican one? Or do we forego worrying about these categories and

realize energy forms and periods as presenting the means for a truly world literary form? Oil literature is simultaneously global and domestic. As a world resource, however unevenly distributed, oil, like world literature, has an unequal movement and an uneven development because of the hierarchy of nation-states in the world system that consume and produce it in varying levels. This conflict inserts itself into petroliterature, whose world provenance presents a geocultural challenge for anyone interested in tracking and connecting the wide range of the oil imaginary. Its multinational structures, routes, and determinations ensure petrofiction’s contemporary identification as a subgenre of literature more productive under the rubric of “world literature” than it is under that of any national literary corpus.

Finally, there remains the interesting critical challenge posed by most modern literary texts, where oil is *not* in the foreground—or indeed anywhere mentioned. It is nonetheless everywhere apparent, in the shape of materials that surround characters, facilitating the very lifestyles they lead, the commodities they consume, the spaces they travel to, even the governments they choose. By this reckoning, is not all fiction from, say, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) to *The Corrections* (2001) “oil” fiction? Is not any work by John Steinbeck or William Faulkner or Richard Wright, Philip Roth, or David Foster Wallace petrofiction? All modern writing is premised on both the promise and the hidden costs and benefits of hydrocarbon culture. If this proposition seems unwieldy—preposterous even—it is still worth thinking how oil’s sheer predominance within modernity means that it is everywhere in literature yet nowhere refined enough—yet—to be brought to the surface of every text. But it sits there nevertheless—untapped, bubbling under the surface, ready to be extracted by a new generation of oil-aware petrocritics.

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