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Michael K. Walonen

Interdisciplinary Literary Studies, Volume 14, Number 1, 2012, pp.  
56-78 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press  
DOI: 10.1353/ids.2012.0004



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# **“The Black and Cruel Demon” and Its Transformations of Space: Toward a Comparative Study of the World Literature of Oil and Place**

MICHAEL K. WALONEN

No other commodity or natural resource has interlinked the disparate peoples of the world and altered the spatial conditions within which they carry out their lives to anywhere near the extent that oil has.

The vast social changes wrought by oil’s capacity to safely and efficiently power the internal combustion engine are immense taken by themselves. Reflecting toward the end of 1999 on the previous one hundred years of turmoil and sea change in world civilization, Tom Wolfe observed that the much-lauded digital revolution paled in comparison to the changes in warfare, sense of distance and space, religiosity, and sexual behavior brought on by the oil-fueled internal combustion engine:

Without [the] engine, there would there would have been no world wars, no atomic bombings, no threat of worldwide nuclear destruction, no space exploration, nor, for that matter, any Vietnam War. . . . [Moreover,] it has . . . led to people discarding religion so casually and blithely you can’t even give them any such somber, knit-brow name as “atheists” . . . [and] which did more to get the sexual carnival rolling, the pill or the drive-straight-to-the-room motel? (“The Party 2000”)

Daniel Yergin voices much the same sentiment in his exhaustive history of the geopolitics of oil, *The Prize*:

In the twentieth century, oil . . . became the basis of the great postwar suburbanization movement that transformed both the contemporary landscape and our modern way of life. Today, we are so dependent on oil, and oil is so embedded in our daily doings, that we hardly stop to comprehend its pervasive significance. It is oil that makes possible where we live, how we live, how we commute to work, how we travel—even where we conduct our courtships. It is the lifeblood of suburban communities. Oil (and natural gas) are the essential components in the fertilizer on which world agriculture depends; oil makes it possible to transport food to the totally non-self-sufficient megacities of the world. Oil also provides the plastics and chemicals that are the bricks and mortar of contemporary civilization, a civilization that would collapse if the world's oil wells suddenly went dry. (14)

The dependence on oil of this modern industrial society, whose basic structure it made possible in the first place, has led over the years to recurrent anxieties (largely unfounded, as Leonardo Maugeri argues in his *The Age of Oil*) regarding the availability of a sufficient quantity of oil to meet consumption needs. These in turn have lead to neoimperialistic efforts by the major first world powers to secure access to oil reserves through direct military action, such as Britain's violent 1920 suppression of revolt in what is today Iraq, and by covertly fomenting the overthrow of governments by autocratic leaders, as in the case of the joint U.S. and Britain-backed 1953 coup d'état in Iran (Maugeri 27, 69–70). Thus oil has brought about the alteration of entire national political systems. Beyond this, at our current historical juncture it hardly needs to be pointed out that world dependence on oil has had profound environmental consequences, from global warming to water pollution to oil spills—seventy spills of varying sizes on the U.S. Outer Continental Shelf between 1980 and 1999 (Juhasz 314), not to mention the more massive and notorious Exxon Valdez and current British Petroleum Gulf of Mexico oil spills. In all these ways and more oil has drastically affected the basic social and spatial conditions of people throughout the world, as well as their modes of relating to one another.

This article traces the basic contours of the sizeable body of world literature concerned with the pursuit of oil and the riches derived therefrom, particularly the manner in which this pursuit drastically alters place—that

is, the physical contours of a given area, but also the socially produced totality of the uses to which it is put, composed of the institutions, customs, functional divisions, aesthetic codes, and so forth that define it. In an era in which the discipline of literary studies finds itself seeking to go beyond nationally bounded canons and fields of concern, it is hoped that this approach might provide a productive way of discursively situating texts from disparate cultural and linguistic traditions in terms of their responses to a common global and globalizing situation, one whose ramifications, as the preceding has hopefully shown, are immense. Undertaking this task comprehensively would be a massive project, beyond the scope of this article; instead, I have selected an assortment of texts that offer particular insight into the nature of the oil business, as well as the transformations and threats posed by the quest after oil, and that represent a wide variety of eras and major oil-producing regions of the world. One might also have focused on such works as Antonina Koptiaeva's social realist *Gift of Earth* (1963), Romulo Gallegos's *Sobre la misma tierra* (1943), Ralph de Boissière's *Crown Jewel* (1952), Gregorio Lopez y Fuentes's *Huasteca* (1939), Ghassan Kanafani's "Men in the Sun" (1962), J. M. G. Le Clézio's *Onitsha* (1991), Laura Restrepo's *The Dark Bride* (1999), Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939, set against the backdrop of the moral corruption of the Southern California oil industry), and Gerald Haslam's writings about the oil-producing places of the Bakersfield area.

In his essay "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel" (1992) Amitav Ghosh, whose novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) will appear later in this study, argues that "scarcely a single [literary] work of note" has been published on the subject of the encounter with oil—its extraction and trade and the social consequences thereof (138). According to Ghosh, no work outside of Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984) has come anywhere near capturing the transnational scope of the oil industry, the heterogeneous mixing of peoples in its workforce, and the forms of social organization it has fostered, because for Americans oil and oil dependence have a shameful aspect to them, because the literary epicenters of the Arab world are not found in oil-producing countries, and because of the tendency of contemporary fiction to occupy itself with the familiar and the geographically bounded rather than fluidly cross linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries (139–40). While there may not be a single crowning literary achievement that heteroglossically captures the flow of people, capital, and geopolitical control represented by the oil industry, this article will show that there is a well-established world literary tradition whose constituent

texts may not be *War and Peaces* of what Ghosh calls “the Oil Encounter,” but nonetheless offer an incisive running commentary on oil’s social and spatial impact—its destruction of traditional spatial orders; its creation of vast levels of material inequality, with the attendant risk of undermining democratic political systems; and its exercise of power, both diffuse and concentrated in the hands of legendary oilmen. Most of the texts examined here are canonical, though they occupy fairly marginal places within the literary canon; others, like Essad Bey’s *Blood and Oil in the Orient* (1930) have been largely forgotten. But to properly begin this study with a consideration of the prehistory of the oil industry, the conditions that preceded and led to its ascendancy, we must turn first to one of the most canonical works of all, Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851).

## LOOMINGS

It might at first blush seem like something of a stretch to trace the lineage of the literature of oil and place back to *Moby-Dick*, but Melville’s novel remains not only the earliest but also one of the most powerful cautionary explorations of the greed and monomania that fuel the quest for oil wealth. The whaling business, carried out chiefly to obtain sperm whale oil for use as a source of illumination, was the direct predecessor, and one could even say antecedent, of the American oil industry. In her *Forbes* magazine article “Blubber Capitalism,” Laura Saunders notes that the New England whaling industry in many ways anticipated modern-day corporations, sharing such traits with them as risk distribution, international business scope, sophisticated forms of organization, capital accumulation, and technological innovation. By the 1850s the whaling industry was experiencing problems, particularly escalating costs due to the increasing scarcity of its product brought on by overfishing, and into this breach stepped petroleum, kerosene extraction having been patented in 1854 and what is generally credited as the first successful example of subsurface drilling for oil having taken place in western Pennsylvania in 1859 (Maugeri 3–4). For the first half century of its existence, kerosene, which provided a more affordable alternative to sperm whale oil, drove the petroleum industry—it was not until 1910 that gasoline, which had previously been considered “an almost useless by-product,” dumped into rivers at night on occasion, bypassed kerosene in sales thanks to demand occasioned by the spread of motor vehicles (Yergen 14, Maugeri 22).

*Moby-Dick* is a tale about, among other things, heedless efforts to draw commodities—objects with use and exchange value, as well as a fetishized social aspect—from nature. As Robert D. Wagner remarks in his *Moby-Dick and the Mythology of Oil*, the Pequod is just the sort of protocorporation that Laura Saunders observed in the New England whaling industry: “a business enterprise, owned and managed for profit, with limited liability to its owners and potentially disastrous risks, physical and economic, to its workers,” with Ahab serving as the CEO and Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask as vice presidents (120). The ship is outfitted through the sale of shares to “a crowd of old annuitants; widows, fatherless children, and chancery wards; each owning about the value of a timber head, or a foot of plank, or a nail or two in the ship. People in Nantucket invest their money in whaling vessels, the same way that you do yours in approved state stocks bringing in good interest” (Melville 71). The crew, by turn, is paid by “certain shares of the profits called *lays* . . . proportioned to the degree of importance pertaining to the respective duties of the ship’s company” (73), their economic gain thus being tied entirely to the ship’s performance, in a manner redolent of logic of performance incentives and stock options. With the shareholders and the employees of the Pequod thus married to the bottom line, they place their faith and an unchecked level of control in the hands of Captain Ahab, a man with a reputation for skill and ferocity in his pursuit of whales, but also a man whose megalomania and hijacking of corporately owned resources in the service of his own personal vendetta lead to the destruction of the considerable amount of capital invested in the Pequod and the loss of the lives of all but one of its crew. Read in this manner, *Moby-Dick* is a text that voices strong anxieties regarding the evolving forms of capitalist business practices and wealth pursuit, a form of enterprise “apt to ‘invert’ and ‘deaden’ whoever takes too great a part in it” (Leroux 437). In addition to this, it is a text that voices early concerns about the overexploitation of limited natural resources in an era in which whalers were finding themselves forced to search out their once-abundant prey among the far corners of the earth:

But still another inquiry remains; one often agitated by the more recondite Nantucketers. Whether owing to the almost omniscient lookouts at the mastheads of the whaleships, now penetrating even through Behring’s straits, and into the remotest secret drawers and lockers of the world; and the thousand harpoons and lances darted along all the continental coasts; the moot point is, whether Leviathan

can long endure so wide a chase, so remorseless a havoc; whether he must not at last be exterminated from the waters, and the last whale, like the last man, smoke his last pipe, and then evaporate in the final puff. (Melville 352)

As has often been remarked, every generation has its own *Moby-Dick* commensurate with the chief concerns and anxieties of its age; here in the early going of the twenty-first century, with our unabating dependence on a finite and dwindling supply of fossil fuels wreaking substantial havoc upon both global and local environments and the political, economic, and social ramifications of multinational corporations comporting themselves with Ahab-like impunity consistently mounting, Melville’s insights into the dangers of proto-big oil ring sublimely prophetic.

#### **BLACK GOLD, BIG BUSINESS, LABOR, CORRUPTION, AND UPHEAVAL**

Starting in the 1920s, as oil came to exert an undeniable social influence upon the industrialized nations that were well on their way to becoming dependent on consuming it and on those locations throughout the world where it was being extracted, a literature exploring the operational dynamics of the companies that came to dominate the oil industry in the wake of the breakup of Standard Oil emerged. Among these works, Upton Sinclair’s novel *Oil!* (1927) is probably the most widely known, thanks in part to the recent loose film adaptation, *There Will Be Blood* (2007).

*Oil!* is set during the first two decades of the twentieth century amid the Southern California oil boom that—as it is easy to forget so many decades after that region’s oil supply was exhausted—supplied 22 percent of the world’s oil at the time, more than the production of any country outside the United States (Juhasz 64). It narrates the story of Bunny, the son of a successful independent oil magnate, and his father, J. Arnold Ross, or “Dad,” as he is more commonly referred to in the text. The two purchase a series of ranches in the fictional town of Paradise, where they make a big oil strike and come to know two brothers, Paul and Eli Watkins, who represent divergent approaches to social reform and existential vocation. Paul, introduced to radical thought by a freethinking lawyer who took him on as an apprentice in Paul’s adolescence and increasingly galvanized his tendencies through the experience of his being forced to fight against the

Soviet proletariat forces in Siberia at the end of World War I as part of the American expeditionary force, dedicates his life to communism and the labor struggle against big business. Eli, on the other hand, is an evangelical revivalist based upon Aimee Semple McPherson, one who becomes wealthy thanks to his “hellfire and damnation” ministry broadcast over the radio and from the pulpit of his multimillion-dollar tabernacle in the heart of Los Angeles. In the meantime, after a brief stint in the armed forces, Bunny takes up college life as a student at Southern Pacific University, an institution based on the University of Southern California during its days of affiliation with the Methodist Church, and begins a relationship with Hollywood starlet Vee Tracy. While he does this, Dad joins forces with fellow oilman Vernon Roscoe, who is based on real-life industry figure Edward Doheny (Juhasz 65), and together they help to buy Senator Warren Harding’s way into the White House in the 1920 presidential election in exchange for the rights to drill on government oil reserves.<sup>1</sup> Sinclair based this incident very closely on the Teapot Dome scandal, which had helped to inspire his writing of the novel in the first place (Bloodworth). When the machinations of Roscoe and Dad are discovered, a furor ensues; Dad flees to Europe, where, broken and growing sentimental with age, he becomes fascinated with spiritualism and dies shortly thereafter. The family fortune disappears with Dad, due likely to the manipulations of Roscoe, who does not want the money to fall into the hands of Bunny. This is because under Paul’s influence Bunny has come to adopt an increasingly radical socialist position, one that he affirms when he marries Rachel, a woman from his university socialist group. The novel ends with the death of Paul, from a beating at the hands of an anticommunist mob breaking up a labor meeting, and of his devoted sister, Rachel, who throws herself down an oil well in grief.

*Oil!* is a warning cry against the erosion of democracy that occurs when big business buys its way into government, a reflection on the corrupting face of greed, and a testament to the persecution of far leftist social reformers. Its position on oil itself is ambivalent, or rather, multifaceted. Dad, the novel’s central oilman, is a sympathetic character, a rugged individualist who has made his own way, rising in affluence and social status not out of any inherent desire for power or luxury, but rather as a stoical concession to the necessities of modern life. He treats his workers well and employs strikebreakers only when he is forced to by the association of oil owners to which he belongs. In addition, the novel revels in times at the freedom of mobility and speed afforded by the oil-powered automobile, notably in its opening sequence and sections describing Bunny’s high school days. However, this freedom of circulation, Bunny comes to conclude, is part of

an ultimately fruitless, quixotic search for something better: “you looked at the world, and saw enormous crowds of people driving to places where they were no better off than at home” (284). Paul, who is favorably characterized as a selfless and enlightened figure, comes to see in the mad scramble of individuals and companies for control of resources endemic to the oil industry a metaphor for international relations within a capitalist system:

As I go about Europe I say to myself that is world diplomacy. A wrangle over an oil lease! Every nation hating every other one, making combinations and promising to stick together—but they’ve sold each other out before night.... Each one racing to get the oil, and spending more than he makes—isn’t that a picture of capitalism? And then the war! You remember how we heard the racket [of a group of neighbors fighting over the terms of an oil lease in their neighborhood of Prospect Hill].... Son, that was a little oil war! And a year or two later the big one [World War I] broke out . . . and remember, they were fighting for a chance to exploit oil workers, to divide the wealth the oil workers were going to produce; in their crazy greed they killed or injured seventy-three per cent of all the men they put to work on Prospect Hill—that’s government statistics also! And don’t you see how that’s the world war exactly? The workers doing the fighting, and the bankers getting the bonds! (468–69)

So, for Sinclair, it is ultimately human acquisitiveness coupled with the scarcity of resources that lies behind the conflicts and exploitation of the oil business. The didactic final line of the novel emphasizes this—that properly harnessed under a different social system, oil will not cause the destruction and loss that occur in *Oil!*: “There will be other girls with bare brown legs running over those hills, and they may grow up to be happier women, *if men can find some way to chain the black and cruel demon* which killed Ruth Watkins and her brother—yes, and Dad also: an evil Power which roams the earth, crippling the bodies of men and women, and luring nations to destruction by visions of unearned wealth, and the opportunity to enslave and exploit labor” (527–27; italics mine).

In the world of the novel this “black and cruel demon” transforms place by stirring the drive to dominate reserves and thus maximize profits, which in turn leads men to bring about great alterations to physical environments. The city of Paradise is transformed by the Ross’s oil drilling, from a small pastoral—though more desiccated and rundown than its name implies—community to the site of a sprawling industrialized camp,

with derricks, massive reservoirs, workers' barracks, and a state-of-the-art refinery. Dad distributes the necessary graft to local officials to have paved access roads built at taxpayers' expense. In general, the novel marvels at, while simultaneously cautioning against, this power of enterprise and capital to effect monumental change to the landscape, as in the case of a road constructed through the mountains:

Men of money had said the word, and surveyors and engineers had come, and diggers by the thousand, swarming Mexicans and Indians, bronze of skin, armed with picks and shovels; and great steam shovels with long hanging lobster-claws of steel; derricks with wide swinging arms, scrapers and grading machines, steel drills and blasting men with dynamite, rock-crushers, and concrete mixers that ate sacks of cement by the thousand, and drank water from a flour-stained hose, and had round steel bellies that turned all day with a grinding noise. All these had come, and for a year or two they had toiled, and yard by yard they had unrolled the magic ribbon. (5)

But while the enthusiasm in this passage over industrial might is palpable, the novel recognizes the necessity of spatial regulations in the form of zoning ordinances and restrictions on land exchange and exploitation. Southern California's first steps from relative obscurity in the late nineteenth century toward the sprawling urban and suburban population center that it is today resulted from the efforts of real estate boosters attracting people to the land of eternal sunshine. Before oil, before the entertainment and defense industries, this was the first big Southern California boom. *Oil!* represents these real estate men, one of whom aids Dad in acquiring the Paradise properties he later drills upon at rock-bottom rates, as rapacious roadside hucksters with no aesthetic sense. The real estate men's avaricious driving logic of usage is fundamentally the same as that of the oilmen, and *Oil!* posits that when there is no legal stewardship governing the usage of land or it is laxly applied, the kinds of capitalist economic exploitation carried out by the real estate men and Dad—and Roscoe to an even greater extent than Dad—take place unimpeded.

A similar unease about the oil industry as the ultimate embodiment of capitalism, empowered to radically alter and even despoil whole landscapes and communities, is voiced in B. Traven's novel *The White Rose* (1929). Relating the story of the fictional Californian Condor Oil Company's repeated efforts to gain ownership of the oil-rich White Rose hacienda in the Veracruz region of Mexico, which succeed only after its Indian owner

is murdered and his signature forged, *The White Rose* vacillates in narrative focus between the inhabitants of the hacienda, the governor of the region, and Mr. Collins, the president of the oil company.<sup>2</sup> This allows the text to illustrate the multisided human dimension of the struggle for oil, riches, and land at the same time that it reveals the virtually limitless power that corporations of the era could wield as a result of their reserves of capital and influence. It notes that “large companies, especially steel and petroleum companies” such as Condor Oil, have the power to effect

the rejection of foreign ambassadors; the changing of its own envoys; sickness and resignation of secretaries of state; armed intervention in the affairs of Bolshevik Russia; the abolition of freedom of speech for communists; the plotting of a new Mexican revolution; support for the Turks against England; twenty-two year minimum sentence for Wobblies; free trade for whiskey smugglers; . . . the encouragement of mobile prostitution to revive an auto industry struggling for its life; support for the installment plan and similar ideas for the enslavement of the people least able to pay; the denial of credit to cooperatives and unions that build houses to rent at cost; and a few other things. (56–57)

Even this partial list illustrates that these corporate manipulations are generally carried out to alter foreign policy for the sake of profit or to attack organized labor. In the case of the White Rose hacienda and surrounding territory, the oil companies use their strength to acquire as much land as possible, even if this land is only likely to hold oil, because this “makes speculation possible and permits millions of dollars to be made without so much as a single barrel of oil having to be produced” (4). So a rather parasitic quality is imputed to these companies—they irrevocably alter landscapes and lives not solely to produce products that have a clear use value, but also to facilitate these sorts of speculative numbers games that do not create any social good, only shareholder profits. This point is made glaringly on at least two other occasion in the novel: when Mr. Collins, working at a previous job, instigates a conflict with the coal miner’s union to drive competition out of business and reap a financial windfall, and later when he manipulates the price of stocks to make enough money to pay off the substantial bills he has accrued satisfying the lavish tastes of his high-priced mistress.

Beyond this, like *Moby-Dick*, *The White Rose* is a work that illustrates the environmental dangers of the single-minded corporate profit-drive. As Richard E. Mezo argues, the text purveys a view “that people should live

in an intimate and balanced relationship with the natural world” (95). This clearly does not occur when the White Rose is taken over by the oil company and transformed into a “monotonously” noisy place that is “smeared over, oiled up, smoke-filled, filthy,” where “drillers were killed by swinging pipes, tooldressers were crushed by collapsing jacks, part-time workers were struck down by heavy steel cables and wound up piecemeal in the winches” (206). In addition to this loss of life and environmental devastation, the social impact of this transformation is registered: these inroads of the industrial onto the agrarian are represented as destroying an ancient communitarian existential wholeness that cannot be recuperated. The inhabitants of the hacienda find their *gemeinschaft* society ruptured as they are forced to relocate by the oil company, losing in the process “much of what had once made them rich in their feelings, in their quiet natural happiness” (195). However, *The White Rose* is not an uncomplicated text of romantic longing for a lost folk existence of simplicity and strong interpersonal bonds. It sees the life changes experienced by the people of the hacienda as essentially bittersweet—for all they have lost being brusquely and precipitously forced into the industrial, anomie-ridden twentieth century, they have gained in not inconsequential material comfort and in a sense of being part of a larger, more globally encompassing world. Those who come to work in the oil fields

saw that other men were not so very different from themselves. And this strengthened the fraternal bond to other men and other peoples. They listened to the radios brought into the camps by the American engineers and oil people. They heard music and words from other lands, heard the speeches of the President of the Republic, heard the lectures of doctors, teachers, instructors, artists, health inspectors—all of those people who were bearers of culture, knowledge, and advice, into the most remote regions of the nation. They met other workers. . . . And a day was coming when everyone could rightly say: We have become richer than we were; we have become greater than our fathers were. Today we are citizens of the world. What is more, we are conscious citizens of the world, because we understand the earth and the other people in it, and we understand more and more. And because we understand more, our love has become greater. (194–96)

So, at the same time that *The White Rose* sees American oil companies operating abroad as antagonistic to workers, economically exploitative,

and destructive of the environment and traditional societies, it also shows them unwittingly creating a way out of the parochialism of the traditional and local by producing new social spaces that allow for new possibilities of human solidarity, awareness, and interconnection.

Although published, in Germany, in the same year as Traven's *The White Rose*, Essad Bey's *Blood and Oil in the Orient* stands worlds apart from Traven's work in its ideology and its valuation of oil.<sup>3</sup> Part romance of Orientalist violence and grandeur, part anti-Soviet diatribe, *Blood and Oil in the Orient* is set amid the massive early twentieth-century oil boom in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. The Baku region's oil saturatedness has been known since ancient times—flammable oil and natural gas seeping to the surface drew the Zoroastrians to Baku, which became the geographic center of their religion—and Marco Polo commented on the oil of Baku centuries later in his travel writings (Reiss 10). Starting in the late nineteenth century, the demand for oil to produce kerosene drew a bevy of individuals from the Caucus region and abroad to seek their fortunes in Baku, which by 1901 was producing half the world's oil (11).

*Blood and Oil in the Orient* is the ostensibly autobiographical story of its narrator's early life as the son of a powerful Baku “oil lord,” his journey through Turkistan to Samarkand with his father in flight from the Communist/Armenian takeover of Azerbaijan, their return to Baku following the Turkish/German occupation of the country, and finally their escape into Georgia when the Soviets reestablish their control in 1920. Throughout, oil takes on a fairly idiosyncratic character. The text begins by equating oil with barbarism, the unimpeded drive to control and thrive (3–4), yet a natural aspect is attributed to it as well. Oil is a basic, constituent part of the Baku landscape as described in *Blood and Oil in the Orient*, saturating the earth and even the waters of the Caspian Sea, into which the city juts (18). The narrator describes oil vapors as refreshing and notes that locals believe they help to fight lung disease (20).<sup>4</sup> At times oil is valued even further, held at a quasi-religious level of veneration: it is used to “baptize” children into the socially privileged ranks of Baku's oil aristocracy (4), and returning to the city after his flight to Samarkand, the narrator reflects that oil “again streamed from the depths as in the older times when it was still sacred, when, like the eternal flame, it was consecrated to the peaceful Ahura-Mazda, the good god” (267).

On a more secular level, oil is credited with having transformed Baku from “a desert city” that “consisted only of clay huts and a few barbaric palaces, which were built on the desert sand and surrounded by a single

wall” (11), into a place of affluence, with European-style streets, “theatres, coffee-houses, bath-houses, promenades, and sporting clubs” (12), home to representatives of the Nobel and Rothschild families, both of which made considerable profits off of Baku oil. The overnight oil wealth of Baku is also credited with sparking a building boom of gaudily ostentatious tycoon residences in a mishmash of architectural varieties: “all styles and periods were represented. Moorish palaces stood next to Gothic buildings, and a Byzantine cupola arose next to a rococo pavilion. Palaces were the owners’ hobbies, and each sought in his own way to realize some strange dream of his soul” (43–44).<sup>5</sup> As for the oil-extracting structures themselves, the narrator, in a manner reminiscent of the Futurists’ championing of industrial technology, gushes that “derricks constitute the most beautiful industrialized landscape in the World. . . . Hundreds of slender towers standing close together remind one of a fantastic fairy-tale forest” (20).

In each of the armed conflicts that Bey describes in *Blood and Oil in the Orient*, both sides agree to spare these derricks and other oil production facilities, showing that the economic lifeblood of the region is held in greater value than a change of social order. It is, after all, the oil fields of Baku that drew most of its residents there, directly or indirectly, in the first place, and it is these fields that later attract the imperialistic designs of both the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. At the end of World War I British soldiers occupy Baku, legitimizing their “sojourning in the richest oil-land in Asia” with the pretense of spreading the ennobling benefits of British civilization (269–70). Following their departure, oil attracts the expansionist efforts of the Soviet Union to Baku, while the Soviets largely ignore the rest of the country, “probably because they had little interest in Azerbaijan beyond the oil fields” (313).

So, in stark contrast to *Oil!* and *The White Rose*, *Blood and Oil in the Orient* holds up oil and its transformative potential in a positive light, even as it documents the “barbaric” drive it inspires in men and nations to control its supply. Later in the twentieth century this rosy outlook would become well-nigh untenable.

#### **OIL BOOMS AND THE DESTRUCTION OF TRADITIONAL SPATIAL ARRANGEMENTS**

As the 1970s and 1980s moved along, with the Arab oil crisis having come and gone, the United States’ domestic sources of petroleum having largely

dried up, and the geopolitical struggle for control of access to oil reserves taking on an increasingly pronounced role in world affairs, a number of literary voices appeared, decrying the ravages inflicted by oil companies upon the spaces of traditional societies during the postwar era. Perhaps the most richly penetrating of these is that of Abdelrahman Munif in his novel *Cities of Salt*. Munif’s text chronicles the arrival and installation of American oil workers in the oasis village of Wadi al-Uyoun, their disruption of its environmental conditions and basic rhythm of life, and their transformation of the coastal town of Harran into their base of operations and transport depot.<sup>6</sup> The novel culminates with the Arab workers of the oil company rising up in demonstration against the Americans and the corrupt local leaders with whom the Americans are allied, an act that Ellen McLarney connects with “the 1953 workers’ strike against Aramco in Dhahran” (195) but that Amitav Ghosh sees as an escapist fantasy that masks the reality of how oil companies in the Middle East have prevented such labor uprisings through their use of workers from elsewhere in the developing world (147–49).<sup>7</sup>

The radical changes wrought in Wadi al-Uyoun by the presence and efforts of the foreign oil company, figured symbolically in the tainting of the oasis’s water supply and the cutting down of its palm trees, alter its basic functional social organization, replacing the tribal model with that of the employees’ relationship to the company and consequently altering the identity of the Wadi’s inhabitants (133–34). This shift from a *gemeinschaft* to a *gesellschaft* society is so striking that the atomized oil workers who move to Wadi al-Uyoun are initially almost incomprehensible to its more long-standing, communally oriented inhabitants: “How did these men sleep, and where? How did they eat? . . . It seemed . . . each of these men lived by himself, without any connection to the others around him” (137). McLarney observes that this conceptual juxtaposition—the idyllic, prelapsarian Wadi al-Uyoun versus the fallen, mechanized existence that stems from contact with the industrialized world and the culture of the Americans—hinges on projecting the notion of an ideal community of authenticity and cultural origins back in time (178–79). It is only by formulating this idealized sense of a stable and ecologically harmonious community existing prior to the contaminating touch of global oil that Munif can arrive at the thematic formulation proclaimed in his title—“Cities of salt means cities that offer no sustainable existence. When the waters come in, the first waves will dissolve the salt and reduce these great glass cities to dust” (qtd. in McLarney 193).

This sustainability is both of the environmental kind, familiar in the contemporary usage of the term, and of the social spatial variety. The first of these is illustrated most forcefully in the scene of American overseers and Arab laborers working together to lay a pipeline through the desert between the oil fields and the coast—the Americans set themselves against the grain of nature, “fussing” with generators that break down, because of the dust, in efforts to cool themselves that end up making them hotter, while the Arabs manifest a more organic mode of relating to the land by using the open air and breezes to cool their tents during the day (510). As for social sustainability, the society of the Harran oil compound is untenable because it is divided into the separate and materially unequal Arab Harran and American Harran, each of which is oriented around a value system that is at odds with the other. The Arabs, for example, are extremely shocked and disconcerted when a ship arrives in the harbor bearing foreigners who revel in what is received as extreme wantonness and dress in scandalously revealing swimsuits. Moreover, the unrelenting drive to produce and the relative indifference of the American company toward the well-being of their native workers contribute to the sense that their foreign presence poses a risk of social corruption. The conflict between the two groups reaches its climax when the local military, acting as agents of the oil company, attempts to suppress the collectivity that has coalesced in the form of a strike inspired by the figures of Miteb al-Hathal and Muffadi al-Jeddan, men who have in their own ways resisted the Western encroachments onto their land, disappeared, and been inflated to mythic proportions in the imagination of the Arab residents of Harran. This attempted repression leads to a stronger sense of communal purpose, and the Americans’ puppet emir is driven from Harran as the oil company is compelled to accede to the demands of the strikers. However, the novel ends on a note of unease, as characters look ahead to the bloodshed to come and the lasting social “illness” brought on by the American oil company’s continuing presence in the land.

The same kind of anxiety regarding the dangers posed to the continuity of a people by the impact of foreign oil companies is expressed in Ken Saro-Wiwa’s autobiographical work, *A Month and a Day* (1995). *A Month and a Day* recounts Saro-Wiwa’s efforts as an activist on behalf of his ethnic group, the Ogoni tribe, and the period of imprisonment he undergoes at the hands of the ruling Nigerian military dictatorship in an attempt to silence his protests. The Ogoni, Saro-Wiwa observes, face a form of genocide as the victims of an “unholy alliance between oil interests and the Nigerian military” (192), which has sown rampant pollution in the once-fertile

Ogoni lands and funneled all the profits from the oil extracted from this territory to the central government, dominated by Nigeria's majority ethnic groups (148). Chief among these guilty companies is Shell Oil, a corporation that Saro-Wiwa excoriates in a short poem:

The flares of Shell are flames of hell  
We bake beneath their light  
Nought for us save the blight  
Of cursed neglect and cursèd Shell. (79)

Both Shell and the Nigerian government have profited enormously from the industry causing this blight: Saro-Wiwa complains that in the thirty years prior to the writing of *A Month and a Day* the government's share of revenue from Ogoni oil has amounted to \$30 billion, yet none of this money has made it to the Ogoni, leaving their land economically underdeveloped and rife with unemployment (68). He uses the terms “indigenous colonization” and “internal colonization” to refer to this situation (18, 147), meaning that the Ogoni have been subjected to the same sort of exploitation at the hands of successive Nigerian regimes within which they held no power as they suffered as subjects of the British Empire. The end result of this has been the threat of the extinction of the Ogoni, their loss of a viable homeland, and diminishment in population to the point that their language, traditions, and other cultural practices disappear (97).

In *A Month and a Day* Saro-Wiwa consistently connects the local to the transnational in conceptualizing this plight of the Ogoni. Their problems stem from the devastation of their most immediate environment, yet this is the result of national policies that are themselves the product of multinational corporations' business practices and the truly international demand for fossil fuels. As Byron Caminero-Santangelo observes, for Saro-Wiwa, “the Ogoni's colonized condition results from international economic imperialism and the process of (economic) globalization. By working with the national government, oil companies are able to appropriate land from the Ogoni without compensation, bypass environmental regulation, and, as a result, cut down operating expenses. Basically, international oil maximizes profits at the expense of Nigeria as a whole, and especially its ethnic minorities, by enriching a small ruling elite who serve as middlemen and enforce the interests of foreign capital” (296). In the face of this collusion between the strong-armed leaders of the nation and the basically extranational oil companies, Saro-Wiwa presents the Ogoni's struggle for greater political

autonomy and control over their land as a potential model that can bring greater democracy and interrupt the succession of dictatorships that have over time marked the political landscapes of so many African nations (134). In this way, too, the local struggle of the Ogoni has, for Saro-Wiwa, more global resonances commensurate with the increasingly globalized nature of the world.

Saro-Wiwa's agitation eventually resulted in his 1995 execution by hanging, but the attention he raised and the scandal surrounding his death did much to bring worldwide attention to the devastation that Shell had visited upon the Ogoni. In 2009 Shell reached a \$15 million settlement with the Saro-Wiwa's family to avoid having to take a suit over its human rights violations to court and thus generate even more negative publicity (Mouawad). Saro-Wiwa's case shows that an individual can take a stand against multinational oil companies and the violence their business practices can do to places, hurting big oil in its most vulnerable area—its bottom line.

### A VISION OF GLOBAL, NEocolonial OIL

Less confrontational in its approach, though just as telling in its critique of the late twentieth-century oil industry, Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* offers a perspective on the more subtle, transnational face of oil in the Middle East and beyond. This picaresque novel follows the weaver Alu from his home in eastern India across the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa in flight from unfounded suspicions that he has belonged to a terrorist organization. Images of oil transportation bookend the sections of the narrative set in the Arab-Islamic world—Alu passes by a series of oil tankers just prior to his clandestine arrival in al-Ghazira, a small Arab state based discernibly on Abu Dhabi or Dubai, and the novel closes with Alu watching boats sail north across the Straits of Gibraltar towards “the shiny oil-tanks of Algeciras” (185, 423). Oil dictates the basic tenor of life in this region as represented by Ghosh, exerting a profound influence upon the economic, political, and daily lives of its inhabitants. Al-Ghazira has been progressively transformed, like the land of Munif's *Cities of Salt*, from a largely preindustrial society, “an intimate little place, half market-town perched on the edge of the great hungry desert beyond, half pearl-port fattening on the lustrous jeevan pearls in the bay” (221), to a nation wholly centered on oil production and run by an elite selected and propped up by Western oil companies. When oil is first discovered in the surrounding

region by the British, they attempt to get the leader of al-Ghazira, the *malik*, to sign a treaty allowing them to drill in his land; initially he resists, but eventually the British send in “a whole regiment of Indian soldiers” and he is forced to relent (248–52).<sup>8</sup> The spaces of al-Ghazira begin to change as an “Oiltown” springs up next to the older city, growing to the point that it seeks to expand onto a sacred strip of land next to the sea, resting place of “old Sheikh Musa” (252–53). This provokes a rift with the *malik*, who refuses, causing a changing of the guard among the “Oilmen” (253–54). The new Oilmen incite a coup d'état, which places the Western-educated brother of the *malik*, the *amir*, in command of the country, leaves the *malik* effectively shut away as a prisoner in his own fortress and leads to the seizure of properties belonging to the *malik*'s allies and the unimpeded growth of the oil industry and the various construction projects in al-Ghazira that spring from it. Paramount among these is the New City, an agglomeration of architecturally ostentatious skyscrapers and upscale shopping outlets covering the sacred burial site of Sheikh Musa—“the New City appeared overnight, like a mushroom. The Oilmen forgot all about a new Oiltown, for the whole country was their Oiltown now” (263). The novel thus charts a move from sacred to commercial spaces, from traditional forms of governance to forms of neocolonial control.

The upshot of this is a drift away from the status of a “real place” (261) to a place where technological gadgets and conspicuous consumption serve as means of inculcating subjugation and docility, as Claire Chambers notes in her “Representations of the Oil Encounter in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*” (34). The contrast with the largely bygone “real” al-Ghazira is visually presented at the beginning of the section of the novel set there via a juxtaposition of the old town's *souq*, a “honeycomb of passageways” cast in shadow and filled with dust, and the Star, an ultramodern high-rise replete with luxury boutiques.<sup>9</sup> The Star and the other shopping centers of al-Ghazira serve as venues for its newly oil-rich residents to perform their affluence as they fill their days with consumer goods that the text references time and again: computerized watches, video games, “transistors, washing machines,” “various makes of calculator,” “portable television sets,” “American jeans and Korean shirts” (202, 341). Just as their oil circulates around the world, the food they purchase at the supermarket is not traditional, local fare, but such items shipped in from the four corners of the globe as “freshly frozen Australian lamb and Danish mutton, French cauliflowers and Egyptian cabbages, Thai rice and Canadian wheat, English cod and Japanese sardines, prawns and shrimps and lobster from the world over” (208).

These alluring goods motivate not only al-Ghazira's native inhabitants, but also the foreign workers from such locales as Egypt and the Indian sub-continent who flock to al-Ghazira to labor as menial workers, earning considerably better pay than they could at home. In this regard, the text presents al-Ghazira as the latest in a series of "lights [that] have shone in one part of the globe or another, wherever money and its attendant arms have chosen to descend on people unprepared for its onslaughts," attracting immigrants desperate for a better set of material circumstances (189). The Middle East is thus presented, Chambers argues, as subject of a "utopian myth of a New World of wealth and opportunity," while within the actual country these immigrant characters struggle to survive, spatially segregated in their shantytown amid "the hostile environment of the oil economy" (37, 38).

In sum, then, *The Circle of Reason* presents the oil-rich states of the Persian Gulf as places where local customs and practices have been so eroded that consumer capitalism flourishes in almost untrammeled fashion, where vast levels of opulence attract a heterogeneous population of workers, who, however, experience hazardous working conditions, economic exploitation, and sordid living conditions worlds away from those of wealthy natives. The influence of foreign companies over these nations is not achieved, the novel says, as in the days of the colonial era, by means of direct military force, but rather through the support of pro-Western regimes and fostering an addiction to imported consumer goods that ensures that countries like al-Ghazira will keep their oil pipelines open. Thus Ghosh diagnoses the way that Western corporations have exerted neocolonial forms of control in order to maintain a supply of the most profitable substance on earth, as well as the impact that these efforts have had upon the fundamental nature of these places where oil is extracted.

The novel is not, however, entirely pessimistic in its manner of envisioning the social impact of oil wealth upon a country. Toward the end of the narrative a character presents Algeria, which nationalized its oil industry starting in the late 1960s and spent the profits on urbanization and modernization efforts (Maugeri 107), as a study in the productive use of this wealth: one character notes that "almost alone among the oil-producing nations, Algeria had foresworn ostentation and concentrated on bettering the lot of the common people; . . . in such marked contrast to some neighbouring countries . . . in Algeria one sensed everywhere an energetic purposiveness, a belief in the future" (375). Likewise, but in an altogether different manner, the final work to be considered in this study, Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco* (1992), offers the prospect of hope for places in the aftermath of the Oil Encounter.

## A VISION OF RECLAMATION

Given the breadth and intensity of the critique aimed at the oil industry within the body of world literature, it would be easy to end this study on a pessimistic note, reaffirming the social and ecological toll that the quest after oil has taken. Instead, without giving easy answers where there are none, I will close with Chamoiseau's vision in *Texaco* of the reclamation of land previously consecrated to the uses of the oil industry.

*Texaco* narrates more than 150 years of history on the French Caribbean island of Martinique, from the days of slavery to the late 1980s, through the lives of father and daughter Esternome and Marie-Sophie Laborieux and the larger settlements whose spaces they occupy and help to produce during their lives. But beyond the level of plot, *Texaco* marks a fusion of urban studies and novelistic discourse as it recounts the history of spatial adaptations negotiated by black Martiniquans in the face of vast social and technological changes. In the process, the text challenges basic city-planning *doxa* by highlighting the positive values of eclecticism, verve, and multifariousness embodied in the bricolage squatter settlements of Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique. In the words of the urban planner who encounters Marie-Sophie and helps her to preserve her settlement, named “*Texaco*” after the corporation on whose land it is built: “In the center, an occidental logic, all lined up, ordered, strong like the French language. On the other side, Creole's open profusion according to Texaco's logic. Mingling these two tongues, dreaming of all tongues, the Creole city speaks a new language in secret and no longer fears Babel. Here the well-learned, domineering, geometrical grid of an urban grammar; over there the crown of a mosaic culture to be unveiled, caught in the hieroglyphics of cement, crate wood, asbestos. The Creole city returns to the urban planner, who would like to ignore it, the roots of a new identity: multilingual, multiracial, multihistorical, open, sensible to the world's diversity” (220).

*Texaco* is built over the old reservoir tanks used by its namesake company, a “fenced space where a smell of stale oil permeated the soul” (24). The squatters' choice of this site and their taking on *Texaco*'s name is, as Ashley Dawson argues, an act of repossession through the “assertion of local communities of solidarity” that flaunts at the local level the power of multinational oil (28). At first the owner of the reservoir facility, in conjunction with those of the facilities used by Esso and Shell, has local law enforcement tear down the shacks built by *Texaco*'s residents, but the inhabitants continually fight against this destruction of their homes and build them

back up when they have been destroyed. Eventually, after Aimé Césaire, the poet of negritude and mayor of Fort-de-France, intervenes on the residents' behalf, this demolition becomes more selective, though it does not cease. Finally, because of the waning of the oil trade in the region, the damage caused by successive hurricanes, and particularly the indomitable will of the people of Texaco, the owner of the reservoir tanks gives up and moves away, leaving the space to Marie-Sophie and her fellow residents: "Texaco . . . had picked up its barrels, carted off its reservoirs, taken apart its tankers' sucking pipe, and left" (24).

*Texaco* offers a vision of reclamation, of common people taking back territory that has been monopolized and often sullied by the large oil companies, whose social and environmental depredations have time and again reconstituted places for the worse, as the works analyzed in this study have so eloquently illustrated. Granted, in cases where extreme levels of toxicity have been left behind, this may not be a practicable solution. But ordinarily, given the nature of the oil extraction process—using a site until its mineral resources have been exhausted, and then moving on—the reestablishment of viable social spaces (or other forms of productive usage) that *Texaco* proposes seems a valid approach to the settlement crisis faced by increasing numbers of the urban poor of the developing world. As the text's urban planner observes, "In a few years, *more than half of humanity will face, under similar circumstances*," the same lack of affordable lodging in the cities to which they have been drawn as have the people who inhabit Texaco (368).

Finally, *Texaco* is a work of particular worth because it, like Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day*, offers the possibility of poor, marginalized people of the sort so often victimized by multinational corporations striking back at the local level. Ultimately, the inhabitants of Texaco outlast the oil company, and no matter how vast and powerful the corporate machinery of big oil might seem, in the end it is no more formidable than the will of the people, whether they live on the production or the consumption end of the global oil equation.

## NOTES

This study was begun some time ago, in part as an effort to come to a greater understanding of an early childhood spent in different locations in the developing world as the child of an oil company official. About halfway through, the massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico took place, inaugurating such an astounding level of environmental devastation to a swath of coastal sites cherished in later childhood

that this analysis of these narratives of the spatial impact of wanton and heedless oil exploitation has taken on an even more relevant and imperative cast.

1. Edward Doheny was the ruthless head of the Pan American Oil Company; he played a pioneering role in the establishment of the Southern Californian and Mexican oil industries (Yergin 213, 229).
2. Heidi Zogbaum argues that like Sinclair's Vernon Roscoe, Collins is based in part on Edward Doheny, one of the chief American oilmen active in Mexico (32).
3. Essad Bey is the pseudonym of Lev Nussimbaum, an Azerbaijani-born Jewish writer who converted to Islam after moving to Berlin in the wake of the Soviet takeover of the Caucus region. For full details of his fascinating biography, see Tom Reiss's *The Orientalist*.
4. It should be stressed that Bey's work is imaginative more than it is ethnographic. From its earliest publication it has been charged with being factually inaccurate (Reiss 212–23).
5. This equation of nouveau-richeness with loud, polyglot taste in architecture is reminiscent of the literature of early twentieth-century Southern California, with its attribution of uncouthness and lack of rootedness to the local parvenu population by way of descriptions of its clashing assortment of architectural styles.
6. According to Ellen McLarney, Wadi al-Uyoun is based on “Abqaiq, an oasis that became one of Saudi Arabia's largest oil fields and the starting point of the Trans-Arabian pipeline” (182).
7. Aramco was a joint venture formed in 1948 to extract oil from the Arabian Peninsula when Exxon and Mobil (then known as Standard Oil of New Jersey and New York) joined forces with Chevron (Standard Oil Company of California) and Texaco, which had been drilling in Saudi Arabia since the early 1930s (Maugeri 53, 56).
8. *Malik* is Arabic for “king.”
9. A *souq* is a market.

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