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Fast-forward Fossil

Petro-despotism and the Resource Curse

As I fill my tank at the self-service station a bubble of gas swells up in a black lake buried beneath the Persian Gulf, an emir silently raises hands hidden in wide white sleeves, and folds them on his chest, in a skyscraper an Exxon computer is crunching numbers, far out to sea a cargo fleet gets the order to change course.

—Italo Calvino, “The Petrol Pump”

We are the sons of the Indians who sold Manhattan. We want to change the deal.

—Abdallah Tariki, former Director of Petroleum and Mineral Affairs of Saudi Arabia

If the twentieth century has been declared, by turns, the American Century and the Century of Oil, it is by now manifest that the twenty-first century will be known as neither.¹ We are heading toward a multipolar global order that will depend for its survival on belated—and therefore evermore desperate—responses to uncertain petroleum reserves and mounting climate change. American hegemony has already peaked and (whatever the squabbles over the most likely date) peak oil will follow,

ending the dreams of unfettered oil-powered growth that have become inseparable from petroleum's incendiary geopolitics.

In this interregnum between energy regimes, we are living on borrowed time—borrowed from the past and from the future. “Fossil fuels” captures in a phrase this double relationship to planetary time: it suggests, on the one hand, the stratified death compacted over millennia that technology has enabled us to resurrect as the force that drives our fleeting, internal combustion civilization. On the other hand, “fossil fuels” also conveys an aura of antiquatedness, of built-in obsolescence inadequate to future needs. For if the fossil record, as a sedimentary script, has been parsed with a host of competing religious, political, and economic motives toward times past and times to come, what remains certain is its finitude as a source of usable energy. What's equally certain is that the faster we extract and consume our planet's compressed hydrocarbon inheritance the greater the likelihood that our actions will propel us—and other living multitudes—toward an abbreviated collective future as fossils in the making.

If “fossil fuels” resonates with a sense of time borrowed against an exhaustible past and an exhaustible future, the phrase “resource curse” conveys a different, but complementary, doubleness. “Resource curse” holds in taut suspense notions of fortune and misfortune; the phrase also fuses utilitarian and numinous perspectives on Earth, suggesting the vulnerability of the world of solid, useful goods to spiritual force fields—the curses and blessings that can have profoundly material effects. Moreover, “resource curse” compresses huge, fraught questions about ownership: what does it mean to be possessed or dispossessed, politically, economically, and spiritually? What are the repercussions of having mineral belongings that literally undermine a community or society's capacity to belong? And what forces turn belongings—those goods, in a material and an ethical sense—into evil powers that alienate people from the very elements that have sustained them, environmentally and culturally, as all that seemed solid melts into liquid tailings, oil spills, and plumes of toxic air?

The notion of the resource curse hinges on the paradox of plenty, whereby nation-states blessed with abundant mineral wealth are too often concomitantly blighted.² As a rule of thumb, the greater a state's reliance on a single mineral resource, the greater the chances that state is undemocratic, militaristic, corruption riddled, and governed without transparency

or accountability. Abundant resources are frequently coupled to rampant injustice, fragile economic growth, and low rankings in the United Nations Human Development Index. In strengthening a country's currency, mineral discoveries may render other economic sectors, like agriculture and manufacturing, less competitive, while the boom-bust cycles of mineral markets exacerbate social volatility. There are of course exceptions to these tendencies, but in resource-cursed societies, a mineral strike, though less immediately spectacular than a missile strike, is often more devastating in the long term, bringing in its wake environmental wreckage, territorial dispossession, political repression, and massacres by state forces doing double duty as security forces for unanswerable petroleum transnationals or mineral cartels. In such societies, a highly concentrated revenue stream is readily diverted away from social and infrastructural investment and into offshore bank accounts. The ties between rulers and ruled are typically weak: the despots or oligarchs prefer to depend—for their private wealth, consumer sprees, extravagant military spending, and power displays—on controlling the central resource than on strengthening civic expectations by introducing taxes, elections, and a diversified (and therefore less controllable) economy. Under such circumstances, national cohesion and stability may be jeopardized by exaggerated inequalities. These frequently entail both vertical inequality (a widening class chasm between super rich and ultra poor) and horizontal inequality (a geographical gulf between resource-rich enclaves and the remainder of the country).

That said, the resource curse, when invoked as a free-floating cultural explanation bereft of history, can mislead. Australia and Canada are resource rich but not resource cursed. Is that merely because they are stable, long-established electoral democracies that have avoided the extreme concentrations of power that have blighted monoeconomies like Nigeria, Libya, and Angola? The historical answer is more complicated than that.

The "curse" is in part a spin-off of an international legal system that compromised decolonizing nations' sovereignty over their natural resources. In the 1970s, when efforts to create a New Economic Order collapsed, the European powers and the United States denied newly independent states resource sovereignty by declaring, as Antony Anghie has noted, that such resources were not national in character but belonged to all humanity, by upholding old colonial treaties for resource transfer, and by granting multinational

corporations equal international legal standing to third-world states.³ From Saudi Arabia to Zaire, from Indonesia to Iran, the Western powers typically supported oligarchs, dictators, and military regimes that cooperated with the skewed terms of resource extraction. The Western powers often machinated to topple rulers who objected to these skewed terms. Moreover, Western multinationals typically exerted a disproportionate influence over the terms of extraction with their third world state partners, inhibiting democratic dispensations from developing while exploiting an environmental, health, and labor climate far more lax than the legislative controls corporations were subject to back home. Hence, international law enabled a single multinational to cultivate divergent standards of operation in the global North and South, a double standard that grew out of—and exacerbated—the historical, structural inequities for which the resource curse has become shorthand.

In the global South, oil culture in particular typically brings few new jobs to the locals to replace old forms of communal subsistence jeopardized by fouled water, earth, and air. Multinational oil corporations, seeking a pliable workforce, prefer to import laborers from rival communities or distant lands rather than create jobs for communities most immediately affected by extraction operations. This practice, in turn, impedes labor unions and civic organizations from developing—organizations that could mesh the workplace with the priorities of neighboring communities, whose ostensible resource wealth has reduced them (from the perspective of fossil fuel authoritarians and their partners, the oil majors) to disposable people.

From a literary perspective, the idea of the resource enclave achieves a special resonance, for it depends on a profound act of imaginative disconnection. French foreign policy makers, for example, would sometimes divide Africa into *Afrique utile* and *Afrique unitile*, the gulf between the useful and the useless bits corresponding largely to those enclaves with exploitable resources that could be profitably incorporated into metropolitan capitalist structures and the unincorporated, disposable remainder.⁴ The tightly garrisoned useful enclaves would be embedded in—yet materially, militarily, and imaginatively removed from—the destitution that surrounded them.

Such an enclave mindset is inseparable from another form of imaginative dissociation, namely, rent-seeking behavior, attempts to maximize the often immense chasm between the market value of a resource and the costs of its extraction. Economic rent effects a rending gap in the social fabric, as

mining transnationals and collaborative local elites treat a nation's "natural" bounty as if it were neither of nor for the nation, but exists as a kind of extraterritorial gravy train. In the global South, these multiple practices of economic and imaginative disconnection foster apprehensive nation-states and apprehensive states of mind, in which rulers readily incline toward the paranoid and the great majority who are excluded from the spoils scramble for survival.

As these forms of dissociation suggest, to address the resource curse requires that we confront the uses and abuses of enchantment. The eminent Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski captures something of this sentiment in his Iranian book, *The Shah of Shahs*, when he observes how "oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free, it expresses the eternal human dream of wealth achieved through a lucky accident . . . in this sense it is a fairy tale and like all fairy tales a bit of a lie."⁶ Jose Ignacio Cabrujas, writing from the other end of the world, exclaims over how Venezuela's petroleum state turned into a "magnanimous sorcerer Oil is fantastic and induces fantasies. The announcement that Venezuela was an oil country created the illusion of a miracle; it created, in practice, a culture of miracles" propelling the nation "toward a hallucination."⁶ Thus the oil encounter lends itself to populist fairy tales of sudden bounty that easily sour into volatile disillusionment, as people possessed by outsize dreams find themselves captive instead to outsize military regimes and the disenchantments of a ruined environment.

Abdelrahman Munif and the Oil Encounter

For some eighty years, oil has been responsible for more of America's international entanglements and anxieties than any other industry. In 2009, the United States spent \$188.5 billion on imported oil (\$95 billion of that from OPEC members alone).⁷ According to Princeton economic geographer Roger Stern, in the three decades from 1976 to 1997, the United States spent a further \$7.3 trillion on securing its oil supply from the Middle East.⁸ Oil remains a primary source both of America's strategic vulnerability and of its reputation as a bully, in the Islamic world and beyond. Our appetite for fossil fuels has created a long history of unsavory marriages of convenience with petro-despots, generalissimos, presidents for life, and fomenters of

terrorism. Given this history—given the outsize characters, bloated dreams, unscrupulous alliances, double crossings, insurrections, and repressions, given the soaring and plummeting fortunes, one would have expected that the titanic drama of the resource curse would by now have generated a substantial, ambitious literature.

This leaves us facing a conundrum. Why is it, as Amitav Ghosh has asked, that the oil encounter has failed to generate a literary response comparable in range and depth to that produced in earlier times by the spice trade?⁹ Moreover, one should note that Big Oil certainly hasn't produced a literature equal in range or magnitude to that generated by its fossil fuel precursor, King Coal, which inspired Emile Zola, George Orwell, Sinclair, Clancey Segal, and D. H. Lawrence, to name but a few. Given the preeminence of oil in America's destiny, it is startling that not since Sinclair's California saga *Oil!* appeared in 1927 has any author hazarded writing the great American oil novel.¹⁰

There is, however, one twentieth-century writer who sought, on an unparalleled scale, to give transnational life to the forbidding subject of oil, a writer alive to oil's lubrication of human greed, alive to oil's bewitchments and its disenchanting states, both national and psychological.¹¹ Between 1984 and 1989 Abdelrahman Munif penned *Cities of Salt*, a sprawling quintet of novels that engages the broad geography and volatile history of the petroleum encounter. The encounter he dramatizes entails the special relationship, or rather, the special deal between our planet's biggest petroleum players: Saudi Arabia, the leading producer; and the United States, the principal consumer. *Cities of Salt* takes shape around the rise of the hydrocarbon despots encouraged, armed, and sustained by American corporate and foreign policy interests. The companion subject of *Cities* is the growing repression and disillusionment of ordinary Bedouins and their intense, if episodic, insurrectionary response. Munif tracks the psychological and cultural disorientation of Bedouins whose lands and lives the two-headed behemoth of empire and petro-despotism has trampled. The novels—especially the fine first volume—deserve to be better known and more widely taught in the United States, not least for their power to illuminate America's fateful entanglements with Islam and for the chance they offer us to rethink the parameters of environmental literature, transnationally and across the frontiers of genre.

The opening volume of *Cities of Salt* spans the period from 1933 to 1953, the very era when Aldo Leopold was enunciating his land ethic, advocating a far-sighted vision of what it means to live responsibly and viably in environmental time.¹² Leopold's ethic was circumscribed, in some ways, by the particularities of America's Jeffersonian traditions; he did foresee, however, that to live as an American in the American century was to be a consumer of historically calamitous proportions. He foresaw, too, how the impact of such unchecked resource consumption would be felt disproportionately abroad. In 1932, one year before an American petroleum corporation signed the first concession agreement in the Persian Gulf, Leopold wrote: "When I submit these thoughts to a printing press, I am helping to drain a marsh for cows to graze, and to exterminate the birds of Brazil. When I go birding in my Ford, I am devastating an oil field, and re-electing an imperialist to get me rubber."¹³

Yet Leopold could do no more than limn these issues in ethical outline from afar. Munif, writing from within the oil encounter's extractive vortex, could give imaginative dimension to the hydrocarbon force fields—the petroleum-driven promises, seductions, coercions, betrayals, and catastrophes—that shaped his region and rippled across the world. Thus his writings—at once historical and premonitory—offer us a unique entry point into one of the twentieth century's defining stories: the rise of a transnational petro-modernity that contained, from the outset, the seeds of its own undoing. What Munif brings to life, in unparalleled detail, is the profound investment of the foreign and domestic petroleum overlords in quashing democratic aspiration and resource sovereignty. Munif conjures, moreover, a huge chorus of disenfranchised voices, some bewildered, some complicitous, others intrepid in their dissidence, yet all outmaneuvered by American and British imperial forces in league with the oil majors and (if sometimes frictionally so) with the petro-despots too.

Munif felt he had been summoned to his theme by the stars: he was born on the very day in 1933 when the Persian Gulf's first concession agreement was signed between the monarch of the newly created Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Abdul Aziz ibn Saud and an American oil corporation, the California Arabian Standard Oil Company. As it transpired, Munif's final book (on Iraqi resistance to imperialism from 1917 to the twenty-first century) would appear just months after the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, giving his life a certain symmetry around empire and oil.

Although he wrote *Cities of Salt* before the term “resource curse” had been coined, Munif has bequeathed us the most expansive novelistic account of the Persian Gulf’s early oil conflicts that would bring the resource curse in train. *Cities of Salt* tracks how a nascent transnational oil culture created the foundations for the resource curse, deepening the divide between a narrow class that would become astronomically rich and the uprooted, immiserated masses (from inside and increasingly from beyond the Persian Gulf). Munif’s novels remind us of the perception by French economist, Jacques Attali, that ours is a world increasingly divided into rich and poor nomads, into a wandering elite that travels expansively and a disenfranchised poor whose movements are propelled by misery in a quest for basic goods and rights beyond their grasp.¹⁴ This rift between the mobile rich and wretched, disenfranchised nomads is at its most dramatic in the Gulf States, where such discrepancies foster political volatility among people bound by desperation, oil, Islam, and American and European need.

Munif portrayed his novelistic method as the imaginative pursuit of “the deep, internal movement of history,” a history indissociably environmental, political, and cultural.¹⁵ Arguably, his greatest gift was for linking oil’s hybrid lives as a commodity to the oil-induced movements of human populations across oceans and across deserts. Munif himself was perfectly placed as a witness to displacement, for he was (to adapt Bertolt Brecht’s self-portrait) a man given to “changing his country as often as his shoes.”¹⁶ A child of the Arab diaspora, Munif was born in Jordan to an Iraqi mother and a Saudi trader who traveled expansively across the region as the race for oil was transforming it. Munif himself led an improbably peripatetic existence, residing in Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Yugoslavia, and France.¹⁷ En route he earned a Ph.D. in oil economics from Belgrade University, edited the Baghdad journal *Oil and Development*, and worked in the Syrian oil ministry.

As such, he was ideally situated to enter into the fantasies purveyed by petroleum’s manipulative emissaries while also addressing the impact of petroleum—through force and fabulation—on Bedouin oral culture. In Munif’s writings about the resource curse, spiritual powers are never immaterial: he is alive to the active energies of the spectral, whether expressed through the opaque enchantments of oil as fetishized commodity or through political resistance inspired by rumors of a shimmering, elusive

desert fighter who launches sallies against the foreign dispossessors. Munif is alert, in other words, to the blurring of corporeal and incorporeal powers within the coercive-seductive force fields of oil imperialism, commodity desire, and the insurrectionary forces ranged against them both.

Munif's involuntary and voluntary movements, his exile and his roving, were accompanied by a rare range of professional experiences whose one binding thread was petroleum. He was an oil industry insider who also knew, from the inside, what it meant to be dispossessed. Saudi Arabia stripped him of his citizenship; his novels were banned in several Gulf States and Egypt for their excoriating satires of the peninsula's oil elite; and in his displacements, he felt vulnerable to the suffocating political gamesmanship that pervaded the region. Yet his empathy for the uprooted preceded his own deracinations: his memoir about his Amman childhood sharply enunciates the impact Palestinian refugees had on his political psyche, as they were driven from their lands by the *nakbah* and streamed into his hometown in the late 1940s, utterly transforming it.

In chronicling his region's oil-induced environmental and cultural upheavals, Munif implicitly distinguishes between the nomadic and the rootless. Nomadic Bedouin culture had been inscribed on the land through movement; theirs was a belonging-in-motion shaped to an arid world. But the deracinations of the oil age plummeted them into a rootlessness that was nomadism's opposite. Driven from their lands, increasingly urbanized, repressed and exploited by a corrupt sepoy class in cahoots with American oil interests, many lower-class Bedouin found themselves culturally humiliated and politically estranged.

Writing and Political Agency

To write against the corrupting intimacies between petro-despots and the oil majors can be a life-threatening enterprise. Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed for doing as much; George Aditjondro, the vocal Indonesian intellectual who wrote fearlessly about his nation's oil-driven authoritarianism, was forced into exile, as was Munif after the Saudis revoked his citizenship and issued threats. Moving from country to country, Munif became, in his words, an "uninvited guest" whose exiled presence could be wielded by the Saudis (and others hostile to his views) against any state that hosted him.¹⁸

Yet through all those upheavals he refused to temper his outspokenness on the region's root corruptions.

"Our crisis," he once declared, "is a trilogy: oil, political Islam, and dictatorship."¹⁹ *Cities of Salt* was pitched against that trilogy of fused calamities. In *Cities*—and across the broad swathe of his writings—Munif exposed the perfidies of the petro-despots, the spread of the carceral state, and the costs borne by those who (from oases to city streets) clamored for resource sovereignty, political answerability, socialism, civil liberties, or participatory democracy. By shuttling between fiction and nonfiction, Munif exposed the imperial underpinnings of that trilogy of calamities, bearing witness to the ways American and British petroleum powers—whether in competition or collaboration, whether backed by the CIA or MI6 or both—cynically fomented and funded political Islam, propped up petro-despots, helped subvert or assassinate democratically elected leaders, and thwarted street-level efforts to advance a more equitable spread of regional oil wealth.

Munif maintained an insistent belief that writing could be a tool for change.²⁰ To that end, he adopted a multigenre assault on both the Persian Gulf elites and their foreign collaborators. However, unlike most writers under consideration in this book, Munif's faith in literature's instrumental value was neither integral to his organizational activism (as with Saro-Wiwa, Maathai, and Ndebele) nor supplementary to an already established literary career (as with Roy, Sinha, Carson, and Gordimer). For if Munif turned to literature belatedly (he was forty before his first novel, *Trees and the Assassination of Marzuq*, appeared in 1973), that turn marked a withdrawal from organizational politics and a reentry into politics through a different door. Disillusioned with organized resistance, he determined to become a full-time writer, which he saw as a compensation—albeit in his view an inadequate one—for the social transformations that he'd once hoped the region's radical movements would provide, before they were crushed, corrupted or collapsed through self-immolation.²¹

From his student days onward, Munif had plunged into a dizzying array of political organizations, variously and in combination, socialist, democratic, nationalist, pan-Arabist, and Baathist. But by the late 1960s his faith in movement politics had been exhausted: repression by despotic forces from within and subversion by imperial forces from without had resulted in surging imprisonments, executions, disappearances, torture, and banishments.

Above all, it was the Six Day War that propelled Munif to channel his political energies in a literary direction. Reflecting on the impact of that war, Munif recalled how “the defeat of 1967 pushed [him] toward the novel not as a means of escape but of confrontation. It had an unforgettable effect: to see such a vast area as the Arab world—with all its enormous clamour and slogans—crumble and fall, not just in six days but a mere few hours.”²² In turning to literature during that aftermath, he sought to redeem the oppositional capacities of language from such clamorous sloganeering, a task he undertook through the complementary possibilities offered him by fictional and nonfictional forms.

Munif belonged to a post-World War II generation emboldened by decolonization, inspired by nationalism and socialism, and burdened “with an immense load of dreams and desires for change. . . . But our dreams were greater than our resources.”²³ Faced with waning possibilities for organized resistance, Munif envisioned literature as an alternative resource. Perhaps literature might offer some modest counter to the surreal, unmoored worlds of despotism afloat on oil; might offer some anchorage in history, some space for dreaming and for insurrectionary acts of memory, aspiration, and satirical exposé. Munif became a writer-activist, then, through a disengagement from rather than an immersion in movement politics.²⁴ In this diverted realm Munif secured for himself, amidst the precariousness of exile, some element of imaginative sovereignty and purposeful hope. An unsettled man, literature became his place of displaced possibility.

He found himself writing into the headwinds of ongoing, region-wide crises. He responded with essays, polemics, and manifestos on (among other things) how to reorganize the oil industry.²⁵ He responded, too, with novels, mostly either allegorical fables steeped in oral tradition or historical epics that blended in semiallegorical elements. This allegorical propensity—and his refusal to name a society that provided the setting for any novel, even when it was recognizably, say, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, or Iran—served a double purpose. On the one hand, it allowed him political deniability. But perhaps more significantly, it marked him as a resolutely regional writer in a transnational (rather than a Thomas Hardy) sense. Munif insisted that his region’s commonalities were more striking—and more politically consequential—than its internal differences. He viewed the region as, among other things, one vast carceral state: “the political prison exists from the Atlantic to the

Gulf,” he declared, a sentiment that found dramatic expression in his most famous novel, *East of the Mediterranean*, set in a typically unnamed despotic state.²⁶ In a similarly regionalist gesture, he observed how “the Bedouin oil blessing, which at one time was confined to the desert, has moved to all Arab cities and become the force defining not only politics but culture, ways of life, and the human concerns in this region.”²⁷ These remarks give voice to Munif’s paired imaginative obsession with imprisonment on the one hand and movement (upheaval, banishment, exile) on the other: his writings return again and again to the visitations of involuntary immobility and involuntary mobility that have bedeviled his region.

By not specifying the locations of his novels Munif sought to limit the risk that a nation-specific critique could be read as exculpating other equally heinous regimes in the region. His fiction works, as it were, through inverse specificity. By amassing sensory, cultural, geographical, and historical detail he writes against the forces of amnesia, censorship, and repression, creating the impression of whole societies that are, nonetheless, never reducible to themselves. His broad regionalism is underscored by his recurrent commitment to a transnational justice at once cultural and environmental, powerfully established through figurative counterpoints between, on the one hand, oil culture’s invisible maneuverings and material excesses; and on the other, the transparent, modest, and regenerative life of the grove.

If the oil realm is geologically subterranean, politically opaque, rife with secret concessions and imperial back room deals, the realm of the grove—whether olive, date, lemon, orange, or almond—is the realm of provender and provenance. Munif was especially alert to the impact of the uprooted grove on human ecology: to trees as bioregional and historical stakeholders, as palpable markers of contested memory, as standard bearers of sustainable life and equally of cultural dignity. His own improbably uprooted life, his profoundly inhabited sense of deracination’s rending, intensified his predilection for humanizing his region’s trees and for arborealizing its people. That tendency comes to a head in the first volume of *Cities of Salt*, during the intense scenes of first contact between American petroleum prospectors and the people of the oasis, as Munif gives fictional form to the events that would lead to the first American oil company concession in the Persian Gulf, to the completion in 1950 of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline and, in the novel’s explosive later pages, to the worker strikes that shook Dhahran in 1953.

The Oasis as Resource Frontier

The oasis scenes in *Cities of Salt* mark the first skirmishes in an imperial resource war that would bring, not far behind it, the first premonitions of the resource curse. Like many scenes of first contact, this is a war that isn't a war, or at least one that doesn't announce itself as such; initially, it simply appears to involve the arrival of bewildering strangers whose advent gives no inkling of the extensive violence to follow. But we can read the encounter between the oasis community and these newcomers—three American oil prospectors and their two marsh Arab guides—as an epochal, if as yet inchoate, contest between a desert culture historically shaped around water wealth and interlopers following a different wealth script, in which “resource rich” means oil. Hitherto, water (and its dependent trees) had been the foundational bounty—connecting past to future, time to space, place to movement, agriculture to nomadism. In this context, water sustained tradition as what Amiri Baraka once called “the changing same”; it was water that underlay a culture of continuity-within-flux responsive to ecological vicissitudes, a culture infused with cosmological belonging and steeped in a history of nomadic cosmopolitanism.²⁸

Over the course of *Cities of Salt* we witness the Americans (in collusion with a far-off emir) uproot this water-based culture and supplant it, without explanation or consultation, with a petroleum-fixated culture.²⁹ This tectonic shift in resource priorities is accompanied by a profound temporal rupturing: oasis deep time (inseparably cultural and ecological) becomes subordinated to petroleum culture's swaggering sense of an even deeper time, one premised on an apparently infinite geological generosity fueling an apparently infinite future wealth. The newcomers' hubris disdains the idea of limits: the decisive time frame changes from a cyclical, seasonally renewable culture that prizes water time to a culture dominated by oil time's linear narrative, in which concerns regarding sustainability get crushed by an onrushing developmental ideology, purportedly universal in its generosity. (“Wait, just be patient, and all of you will be rich!” the Americans declare upon arrival.)³⁰ In the background, we have the slow time of hydrocarbon's geological accretions and in the foreground, the accelerated time of petro-modernity's primitive accumulation.

If primitive accumulation generally combines a history “of force, of dis-possession, and enclosure,” in the case of petroleum, we confront primitive

accumulation of a special type.³¹ Fernando Coronil, writing in a Venezuelan context, is pertinent here, particularly his incisive thinking about the distinctive character of “nature-exporting societies.”³² Coronil remarks on how “the tension between the natural origin of the nation’s finite collective wealth and the private destiny of its social appropriation shaped the contest between democracy and dictatorship.”³³ However, in Saudi Arabia, far more acutely than in Venezuela, the oppositional forces were never able to mount a significant democratic challenge because they faced a more daunting set of collusions—between empire, petro-capitalism, and the House of Saud. Saudi Arabia, after all, was a society where in 1947 a U.S. ambassador could boast that America possessed its own “oil colony.”³⁴

If the etymological ties between nature and nation were deployed in the United States to mythologize the society as “nature’s nation,” in Saudi Arabia that logic resurfaced in heightened form. Soon after American prospectors had made their first oil strike in the Persian Gulf, the United States oversaw the creation and “independence” of Saudi Arabia; and so, through a gesture of simultaneous decolonization and colonization, an outpost of “nature’s nation” was engineered into birth. The new nation’s “natural” bounty was promoted from the outset as imminent wealth for all its newly minted “independent” citizens, while simultaneously being privatized by imperial need and familial monopoly. The result was a paradigmatic instance of what Wm. Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson have aptly called “the imperialism of decolonization.”³⁵

Cities of Salt chronicles the emergence of a nature-exporting, client nation-state premised on ruined ecologies. The novel’s thinly disguised Saudi Arabia possesses a natural bounty so vast and monolithic that it inhibits economic, infrastructural, and civic diversity, encouraging instead highly stratified social relations, highly concentrated power, and an international feedback loop of corruption and repression. These inequities are set in motion by the first oil concessions at the desert oases that, like the “purchase” of Manhattan from the Native peoples, bore no earthly relation to the long-term market value of the resource. Thus, in the official narratives, the oasis was typically represented as a remote, “primitive,” worthless place redeemed by the arrival of American technology that allowed nature’s beneficence to flower.

It might be productive, then, to approach *Cities of Salt* as an unofficial, contrarian imaginative history of the oasis as resource frontier. From this perspective, Munif can be seen to use the technology of the novel—the

novel as paperwork—to script petro-capitalism’s contradictions, contradictions papered over by American and Saudi public relations that crafted a seamless developmental narrative from which oil imperialism and petro-despotism were both carefully excised. As such, Munif’s novels take shape (in form and impulse) as works of disenchantment: they dispel the bureaucratic necromancy whereby Saudi Arabia appeared as an autochthonous nation-state blessed with impeccable natural credentials.

What emerges in Munif’s denaturing of the petroleum nation-state is a tension between different geometries of environmental time: at the pre-petroleum oasis, or wadi, a cyclical set of expectations prevails, one that acknowledges both scarcity and replenishment, whereas the official, linear, developmental narrative of the naturally rich nation-state suppresses notions of finitude and stewardship. Thus the twilight of the wadi and the dawning of the petroleum state mark the fall and rise of incompatible cultures of benediction:

Wadi al-Uyoun was an ordinary place to its inhabitants, and excited no strong emotions, for they were used to seeing the palm trees filling the wadi and the gushing brooks surging forth in the winter and early spring, and felt protected by some blessed power that made their lives easy.³⁶

This known, inhabited ecology of good fortune stands in contrast to the unknown fortune that has yet to materialize from the rhetoric of oil riches. When the wadi’s representatives travel to their emir to oppose the American presence, he reassures them that “there are oceans of blessings under this soil” and that the foreigners have traveled from “the ends of the earth to help us.”³⁷ We can read this scene as a showdown between different temporal visions as well as divergent ecologies of scale: a showdown between the wadi, a visible place of finite bounty; and the invisible realms—those “oceans of blessings” below and “the ends of the earth” beyond—that are reputedly conspiring, through geological and technological generosity, to put an end to scarcity.

The people of the wadi first experience oil’s blessings as violation; the Americans, having probed the soil at Wadi-al-Uyoun, vanish then reappear in “yellow iron hulks.”³⁸ The “unearthly” machines are neither of nor for this earth:

They descended like ravenous wolves, tearing up the trees and throwing them to the earth one after another, and leveled all the orchards between the brook and the fields. After destroying the first grove of trees, the tractors turned to the next with the same bestial voracity and uprooted them. The trees shook violently and groaned before falling, cried for help, wailed, panicked, called out in helpless pain and then fell entreatingly to the ground, as if trying to snuggle into the earth to grow and spring forth alive again.³⁹

The trees had anchored community and enabled a blend of nomadic and semiagrarian subsistence. As the machines rip up the roots—and routes—of the culture, they rip through the temporal fabric of oasis ecology, whereby life returns to the earth for cyclical retreat and regeneration. Furthermore, the assaults on the oasis set up a conflict between the micropolitical culture of the once sovereign grove and the transnational macropolitics of concession—in the fullest political, psychological, geological, and environmental sense of concession.

In the second phase of oil's benediction, the wadi's now homeless people get displaced to a coastal refinery town, Harran, where they find themselves housed in furnace-like metal shacks and remade as laborers in a wage economy under foreign mastery. The worker compound is segregated from the transplanted American suburban enclave—in a Persian Gulf rendition of Jim Crow.⁴⁰ At day's end, the workers part

like streams coursing down a slope, one broad and one small, the Americans to their camp and the Arabs to theirs, the Americans to their swimming pool, where their racket could be heard in the nearby barracks behind the barbed wire. When silence fell the workers guessed the Americans had gone into their air-conditioned rooms whose thick curtains shut everything out: sunlight, dust, flies, and Arabs.⁴¹

Thus the undifferentiated oil blessing becomes institutionalized as class distinction and racial segregation: nature's unbounded bounty becomes incrementally bounded, privatized, partitioned. On the poor side of the wire,

that bounty is reduced to the noises of luxury rising from the far side of the barricade and to the inner noise of yearning.

Inarguably, a romantic strain suffuses Munif's elegiac depictions of the pre-petroleum oasis—as harmonious, almost paradisaical, compared to the divided, divisive world that would ensue.⁴² Munif falls back on tropes familiar from other postcolonial or neocolonial literatures to project an atmosphere of conjoined ecological integrity and cultural authenticity. Certainly, if in an American context, Shepard Krech has argued that it is historically inaccurate and politically dubious to propagate the myth of the Ecological Indian, one could make a similar case for the dangers of a reductively mythologized Ecological Bedouin.⁴³ In fairness, Munif does temper his Edenic oasis authenticity by underscoring the droughts, famines, and calamities that have historically beset the place. It is not as if the wadi is a stranger to violence; rather that petro-capitalism's arrival introduces a violence of unprecedented magnitude and irreversible consequences.⁴⁴

If Ken Saro-Wiwa sometimes sought to defend Ogoni rights by mobilizing a dubious discourse of impermeable cultural authenticity, so too Munif's romance with authenticity has some problematic fallout. We witness this, for example, when the textured sympathy he extends to the wadi's cosmopolitan nomads is not extended to the cosmopolitan foreign workers who arrive from Asia and from across the Middle East:

Once Harran had been a city of fishermen and travelers coming home, but now it belonged to no one; its people were featureless, of all varieties and yet strangely unvaried. They were all of humanity and yet no one at all, an assemblage of languages, accents, colors and religions.⁴⁵

At moments like this, foreignness per se—whether embodied by American petroleum overlords or by the Yemeni, Sri Lankan, Egyptian, Bangladeshi, and Indian immigrant underclass—gets collapsed into the figuration of loss.

If the elegiac oasis scenes depend on familiar, troubling postcolonial tropes, in Munif's case those scenes assume an autobiographically inflected melancholy. As a child, he traveled widely with his family of small-time traders; their wanderings traversed national divides before the

region's nation-states existed. Munif recalls in interview how "we brought flour from Amman to Saudi Arabia and, at the same time, brought salt and dates from Saudi Arabia back to Jordan. This was the specific kind of trade that I did in my youth."⁴⁶ During this period, encountering an oasis would have been emotionally momentous for the boy. So Munif had profound familial reasons for nostalgia and rage when he witnessed this tradition of traversal traduced (or at least unrecognizably transformed) by petrocapitalism's dictates.

An abrupt transition from an economy dispersed around nodal oases to a centralized, client nation-state presided over by an oil corporation transforms cultures of exchange—of stories as well as goods. Exchange defines the oasis almost as much as water: an oasis is not an enclave, it is a place where (to adapt James Clifford's terms) rootedness is routed through the constancy of movement.⁴⁷ An oasis is a place of passage that blends the agrarian and the nomadic, an ecosystem as way station and thoroughfare. Indeed, without the Bedouin caravans and the flux of nonhuman migrant living forms as well, the wadi would soon wither. So the arrival of visitors at Wadi al-Uyoun is scarcely an isolated event; nor is the wadi a stranger, even, to the visitations of imperialism. Locals recall how during Ottoman times, Jazi al-Hathal and his forces would ambush Turkish invaders who had seized the wadi for themselves, eventually forcing them to withdraw.⁴⁸

What is perplexing about the Americans is the way they exempt themselves from the cultures of exchange that animate the oasis. They arrive with equipment, but no goods to trade and no stories. Possessed of a bewildering incuriosity, they reserve their most intense investigations for the earth below, not the surface people; bewitched by the unseen geology, the Americans remain indifferent to the eco-cultural history. Their presence along the margins of the oasis is acquisitive not inquisitive; the newcomers stand inscrutably outside the wadi's dense culture of narrative and commercial exchange. If Munif's writing about the oasis takes on tones of anticipatory elegy (for an authenticity simplified and heightened in remembrance), he nonetheless conveys the cosmopolitan complexity of oasis culture before it was ecologically, culturally, economically, and psychologically unsettled by an instrumental rationality that saw only fossil fuels and relic people, impedimentary Bedouin who, in the name of civilization, modernity, and profit had to be moved and forcibly remade.

Provincializing America: Wilderness and the Frontiers of Genre

In 1988, when Peter Theroux's English translation of the first volume of *Cities of Salt* appeared, the most prominent American response came from John Updike, who reviewed it for the *New Yorker*.⁴⁹ Updike disliked the novel intensely, for political and formal reasons. The grounds for his distaste are worth examining because they open up large questions about the frontiers of genre in relation to transnational frontier literatures. What would it mean to disturb the conventions of U.S. frontier and wilderness literature through what Anne McClintock has called America's "offshore histories"?⁵⁰ To what extent, in engaging a history as vast, as multifarious, as that of the resource curse, is the novel itself an adaptable resource? How, moreover, do the geological, geopolitical, and technological translations of an oral culture's vernacular landscapes into petro-capitalism's official landscapes impact the refraction of oral community through the written technology of the novel? And finally, in the canons of environmental literature, what can we learn from novels that simultaneously globalize and provincialize America, envisioning America from abroad, from the outside in, thereby reconfiguring America's weight in the world?

Updike poses none of these questions, yet the angle of his approach allows us to engage them productively. He bristles at the novel's stance toward America: *Cities of Salt* is suffused with a hostility that shows, he argues, that "the maledictory rhetoric of the Ayatollah Khomeini is nothing new."⁵¹ But Updike's more elaborate quarrel concerns Munif's formal incompetence. Acknowledging the epic potential of the oil theme, Updike laments that this Arab author is "insufficiently Westernized to produce a narrative that feels much like what we call a novel."⁵² Here the bogeymen of authenticity and progress narratives both rear their heads again: Updike's proprietary "we" casts Munif as an uncomprehending outsider, peripheral to the central narrative of the novel's development. This Arab is a neophyte; he may get there, but not yet.

The markers of this foreigner's insufficiency, Updike argues, are twofold: he fails at character and he fails at voice. Above all, the novel doesn't work because Munif botches character: "no single figure acquires enough reality to attract our sympathetic interest. . . . There is none of that sense

of individual moral adventure . . . which, since *Don Quixote* and *Robinson Crusoe*, has distinguished the novel from the fable and the chronicle; *Cities of Salt* is concerned, instead, with men in the aggregate.”⁵³ The effect, Updike concludes sniffily, is simply “sociological.”⁵⁴

Updike thus seeks to give his generic complaint a genealogical authority; Munif, whether out of ignorance or disrespect, has failed to pay homage to the master genealogy. (There is something superbly apposite about Updike’s bewildered response to this Arab interloper’s unfathomable novel about Arab bewilderment at the unfathomable ways of American interlopers.) Yes, Munif breaks with the dominant traditions of the European and American novel, but his iconoclasm is not wholly eccentric: he is scarcely alone in working with a crowded canvas and with themes of collective transformation. His approach has much in common with Upton Sinclair’s hugely populous epic, *Oil!*, which certainly had no use for *Robinson Crusoe* as a viable forebear. Sinclair, like Munif, was imaginatively fired by social convulsions that occur at high speed and on a vast scale: both oil frontier writers were fascinated by the land heists; the snake oil artists; the naïfs and faux-naïfs; the corporate ruthlessness; the economic and imaginative speculation; the surge in wealth and poverty; and the emergence, manipulation, and insurrections of an extraction industry working class. Both writers were fascinated, moreover, by technologies of power, technologies that, in the explosive mix of hope and servitude they deliver, are tinged with an atmosphere of apocalypse. Above all, Munif and Sinclair bear imaginative witness to the collisions (and collusions) between old religious cosmologies and new ones, between the preachers and the preachers of profit, between damnation or paradise in the afterlife and the satanic or redemptive possibilities created by an unearthly oil-rush.

The novelistic strategies that Munif favors are also redolent of those that shape collective fictions of modernization like Emile Zola’s *Germinal* (*Cities’* great hydrocarbon forebear) and Ousmane Sembene’s *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* (*God’s Bits of Wood*). Munif, Zola, and Sembene are fascinated by the germination of revolt, the seeding of collective dissent—whether among coal miners in 1860s northern France, railroad workers in 1940s French West Africa, or Trans-Arabian Pipeline workers in 1940s Saudi Arabia. To this end, all three writers spurn an individual or familial focus, opting instead for a collective approach to character and form as they track across the sprawling

canvases of societies in violent flux working class, peasant, and nomadic responses to injustices wrought by the onset of industrial modernity. As such, in recasting historical worker uprisings all three writers also remodel the conventions of the novel, treating orality as an imaginative resource and individual character as secondary to collective metamorphoses. The resultant novels are all positioned at some dramatic interface between capitalism's primitive accumulations, an assailed environment, and an insurrectionary labor movement.

One can be drawn to the ambition of such novels or not; the fact is, they exist and many readers have been moved by them. Updike's genealogical allegiances—and his affective preferences—are quite different: whatever else Updike's novels contain, they eschew multitudes. His native terrain is the sparsely populated crabgrass frontier, where tumult takes the guise of (often almost inaudible) disturbances that rumble through suburbia. Updike's regionalism is internal to the nation and his imagination contoured to a particular strip and social stratum of America's northeast corridor, whereas Munif is a transnational regionalist whose imagination roams from Morocco to Iran. Munif's fascination with epic, tectonic convulsions is at the furthest remove from the assumed solidity—emotionally deep but geographically narrow—that Updike cites as his own creative foundation: “The street, the house where I had lived [in Shillington, PA], seemed blunt, modest in scale, simple; this deceptive simplicity composed the inhabitants' precious, mystical secret, the conviction of whose existence I had parlayed into a career, a message to sustain a writer book after book.”⁵⁵

Munif knew no such house. Imaginatively, he was housed and fed by homelessness; he never possessed a categorical nationality or a conclusive homeland. He understood what it meant to live and travel as a problem. He bore witness in his writings to upheaval after upheaval—the *nakbah* that drove Palestinian refugees into Jordan, the Nasserite revolution, the Suez Crisis, the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the Lebanese civil war, Sabra and Shatila, the Iranian revolution, the intafadah, the Iran-Iraq War, the Persian Gulf War, and the 2003 Iraq War shortly before his death. He felt drawn at a monumental and a micropolitical level to deracination as a theme: to societies and subjectivities rapidly undone and remade, not least at the ruined oasis and in the company town through petro-capitalism's dominion. His profound empathy for uprooted ecologies and communities carried over

into his empathy for the refinery town's bewildered workers, betrayed by the oil blessing, workers whose experience of subsistence time had become shrunken and precarious:

No one knew if they would remain alive or if tomorrow they would find food. True the company paid them, but what they received today was spent on the following day. Prices kept rising from day to day and money was accumulating in a few hands. As for the promises of houses and a comfortable life which Ibn al-Rashid had made them years ago as he herded them from 'Ajara and other places, they had vanished even before Ibn al-Rashid himself. And as for the promises of the personnel office in the company to build houses for the workers to enable them to bring their families over and return home in the evening to wife and children, years had passed without a single house being built.⁵⁶

This is not to suggest that Munif had been unhoused by history in as profound a sense as his fictional refinery town workers. Yet he was sufficiently intimate with statelessness; with censorship; with being threatened, banished, or shunted about by regimes inimical to his voice to have, as his place of imaginative departure, a sense that place itself is fragile, irredeemably provisional, always vulnerable to history's storms.⁵⁷ That certain knowledge of uncertainty permeated the way he imagined the environment, social ecologies, and the novel as a form.

When Updike bemoans Munif's failure to deliver the obligatory "individual moral adventure," one senses beneath the surface of that judgment a set of assumptions not just about what a proper novel should look like but, more specifically, about what the frontier novel should look like *a la Americaine*, replete with individualistic male moral adventurers (or homosocial twosomes) riding westward across a panoramic wilderness of boundless threat and boundless promise. To provincialize such sentimental interpretations of the frontier novel entails that we address the allied challenge of provincializing wilderness literature. It feels apposite that the first volume of Munif's quintet, a work enlivened by scenes of cross-cultural misreadings, should itself be known in English through an act of mistranslation—or rather, by an inability to translate the untranslatable. Peter Theroux's

English version assumes the charismatic title of the quintet as a whole—*Cities of Salt*—rather than attempting to find an adequate rendition of Munif’s title, *‘al-Tih*. When this discrepancy is mentioned at all, *‘al-Tih* is briskly translated as “the wilderness.” But the Arabic phrase suggests something more resonant, more dynamic than that: *‘al-Tih* refers not merely to wilderness as place, but to wilderness as an existential human condition, the state of being lost in the wilderness.⁵⁸ This human lostness, this wilderness bewilderment is, I would suggest, vital to the expansive reach and reverberant power of Munif’s novel. If *‘al-Tih* is a transnational masterpiece of Arab literature, as is conventionally observed, then it also warrants being read with a supplementary set of transnational questions in mind, among them this: how can such a novel help us rethink the conventional parameters of American wilderness literature?

Arabic literature boasts an immense tradition of wilderness literature in which the desert figures variously as a place of obliteration, threat, derangement, prophecy, and purifying promise. Yet the narrative arc of *‘al-Tih*—from wadi to refinery town—disturbs any straightforward opposition between oasis civilization and desert barbarism. The most threatening desert marauders, the barbarians out there, are by implication imperialism’s primitive accumulators. The full force of the novel’s titular bewilderment is felt when the Bedouin characters are thrust into the high-speed, unintelligible chaos of the company town—the urban wilderness that is petromodernity’s cultural creation.

By now, a considerable critical literature has accrued in an American context around the constructedness of wilderness—the fencings, the framings, the human evictions and erasures—in short, the cultural heavy lifting that has gone into evacuating cultural history from the concept and experience of wilderness. Munif’s *‘al-Tih* offers an innovative angle on the enterprise of American wilderness creation by erasure, not in Alaska or Wyoming, but way offshore in the Persian Gulf. What we witness are nomadic Bedouins rapidly remade as settled construction workers and tasked with constructing an urban wilderness that becomes the very condition of their dispossession and historic invisibility. *‘Al-Tih* thereby creatively reframes some profound questions, especially this: how can the wilderness novel help us reconceive the dynamic between imperial resource frontiers and the frontiers of genre?

One productive resource for addressing such questions is Robert Vitalis's richly archived history on U.S.-Saudi relations, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier*. Although Vitalis does not engage the novel as a genre, he is profoundly engaged, as his subtitle announces, by frontier mythologies. Vitalis uses ARAMCO archives and private correspondence to dispel the myths of American exceptionalism promulgated by the oil consortium's richly funded propaganda machine. The consortium habitually contrasted enlightened American practices in the Middle East with those of the benighted British, using the language of partnership, mutual respect, benign incorporation, development, and nation building to advance the story line that U.S. expansion into the Persian Gulf was anticolonial in spirit and thereby consistent with a long, honorable tradition of sensitive cross-cultural uplift that animated American exceptionalism. Yet as Vitalis succinctly puts it: "America can only be seen as avatar of a more humane twentieth-century abroad against the atavism of European empire by leaving out the unbroken legacy of conquest and subjugation at home."⁵⁹

Vitalis insists that the American West and the Saudi East Coast be read as conjoined frontiers held together by recycled tropes, myths, and political practices adaptively redeployed from the subjugation of Native American tribes to the creation, through coercive treaties and broken promises, of a "sovereign" Saudi nation. By exploring the company's private (and sometimes inadvertently public) utterances, Vitalis reveals how the rhetoric used to vindicate the internal colonization of Native peoples in the American West was reengineered and projected outward to justify an American imperialism that, while waving the banner of enlightened anticolonialism, was securing for itself an oil colony on the Persian Gulf's eastern shores. Many of the same personnel—Oklahoma and Texas oilmen, some doubling as the kind of CIA operatives who machinate in Munif's *The Trench*—adapted the practices of Western mining camps to the oil camps they established in the Persian Gulf. These practices included Jim Crow segregation; racialized pay structures; violent assaults on would be unionizers and civil rights campaigners; and what one oilman termed, in private correspondence, the cultivation of "a Texas herrenvolk atmosphere."⁶⁰ In trying to codify their relations to the Arabs and their lands, the oilmen repeatedly analogized to the American "encounter" with Indians

back West. Moreover, in order to legitimate their U.S.-dependent petro-oligarchy, the Saudi elite in turn would learn to reinvent their history in terms assimilable to U.S. narratives of benign nation-building, developmental ascent, and glorious progress. (Without, of course, any reference to democracy.) The flag, the national anthem-tooting brass bands, the national costumery were all marshaled for parades of self-determination. ARAMCO public relations man Patrick Flynn, reminiscing about Arab-American relations during the opening decades of the oil encounter, gets positively dewy eyed:

The early American oilmen coming to Saudi Arabia were extraordinary pioneers. They combined the can-do ingenuity of dedicated Americans with a great affection for the people and their customs. . . . Living with the Bedouins, sharing the hardships of life with the people in the desert and in town, they gained the respect and admiration of the Arabs. . . . The early Americans, it has to be understood, loved the Saudi Arabian people. They loved the country and spent their lives there in dedicated labor. There was no salary that could inspire such an outpouring and sacrifice, only love and affection.⁶¹

With that said, Franklin Roosevelt could still blithely declare that he “could do anything that needed to be done with Ibn Saud with a few million dollars.”⁶²

Against such a backdrop we are better positioned to revisit Updike’s complaint that Munif was too ignorant of novelistic conventions and insufficiently Westernized to convert his material into a memorable pioneering adventure. Might *Cities of Salt* represent less a missed opportunity than a canny effort to push back, imaginatively and politically, against the frontier novel as heroically individualized pioneer romance? Instead of crafting an adventurer who faces down some Persian Gulf version of the wilderness and Native Americans, Munif summoned to life a radically different kind of historical panorama, a violent conflict on a communal scale, as the uprooted Bedouin fought for ecological subsistence, cultural dignity, and scraps of power against an advancing petro-capitalist imperialism in league with an emergent oligarchic client state.

Orality, Geology, and Writing: The Technologies of Encounter

The narrative voice of *Cities* (disdained by Updike as that of “a campfire explainer”) enables Munif to recast genre by blending elements drawn from oral fabulation into the epic historical novel.⁶³ *Cities* is not a sustained work of what Jennifer Wenzel (with reference to Nigerian literature) calls petro-magic-realism.⁶⁴ Yet if the quintet contains nothing as fully phantasmagoric as, say, “What the Tapster Saw,” Ben Okri’s story about Niger Delta petro-modernity, *Cities* is peppered with scenes of cross-cultural mistranslation where the inexplicable, the hallucinatory, and the realistic converge. These nodal, often humorous scenes of apparent magic coalesce around technological encounters, as Munif simulates, from a Bedouin perspective, the complex emotions triggered by the arrival of a procession of technologies from beyond all possible belief: the radio, the air conditioner, the generator, the telephone, the thermos, and the automobile. The mixed sentiments the Bedouins feel on encountering these signs taken for wonders—the incredulity, the terror, the yearning—are intensified by the fact that only the Americans and the emir can own such things. The marvels exist but are unavailable; in their enchantments, their bewitchings, they reshape the dynamics of power, labor, and desire, becoming by implication condensations of petro-capitalism’s widening chasm between the haves and the never-will-haves.

This otherworlding of American technological practices reaches its apo-gee in a scene where Munif conveys how geological and spiritual substrates interpenetrate:

The diabolical Americans, who had come looking for water, why did they continually dig into the earth, never stopping but never taking anything out? The water from the wadi, from Sabha and from the many wells they dug was pumped back into a hole in the ground—why wasn’t it given to people? Did the ground hold such ghastly hordes of thirsty jinn, whose screams day and night could be heard only by the foreigners, who had come to quench their thirst? Were the jinn burning in the depths of the earth, and were the Americans pumping the water down to extinguish

the flames? Was there another world underground, with gardens, trees and men, all clamoring for water?⁶⁵

This scene of mistranslation doubles as a scene of make-believe. Flummoxed by the foreigners' failure to respect water's insuperable value, the oasis dwellers read the ceaseless pumping as a possibly merciful act that quenches invisible, insatiable spiritual need. Incredible technological ritual is thereby folded back into the circle of belief. The locals explain away ecological insanity and ethical insensitivity—the Americans' unproductive pumping fetish and their inhumane profligacy—by speculating that the foreigners are attuned not to water but to some alternate universe below. Only the Americans can hear, as it were, the clamorous substrate, the notes from underground. This scene offers up, then, mistranslation as prescience: before the locals are let in on the underlying oil script, their speculations establish an ominous aura of geological-demonic suffering that foreshadows the traducing of the oasis, when the thirsty cries of gardens, trees and humans—an entire life world—will become inaudible, buried beneath petro-capitalism's crescendo din.

The Americans themselves are engaged in elaborate acts of translation. The first technology that signifies their arrival is the technology of writing, which becomes integral to their incremental appropriation of the wadi and becomes one of their distinguishing rituals.⁶⁶ Each day the Americans wander the area, staring at, probing, and measuring the earth; at dusk, they retreat to their tents and stare with equal intent at paper, writing furiously. They bring in boxes of sand and write inscrutable things on them. From the outset, the wadi's denizens perceive this peculiar crepuscular ritual as sinister, most likely a kind of witchcraft.⁶⁷ What are they writing? For whom? What does it signify? Why does it happen when the light fades?

We can read these scenes as intimating the twilight of the oasis itself: the writing at day's end is covertly violent, masking its nature and intent, an act that sets in motion an escalating series of overtly violent acts. The power that a geological survey embodies may, of course, be used for positive or destructive ends. But here the implication is that in being written up, the place (and all the life forms that depend on it) is being written off. The prospectors' writing may be petro-capitalism's first act of proviolence, but it does not constitute a first mapping of the wadi; rather we can read their

industrious writing as superimposing an “official landscape” onto a “vernacular landscape.”⁶⁸ And thus the Americans will soon designate three oil camps outside Harran H₁, H₂, and H₃: the stark, affectless numerical counting, posing as rationality, discounts and overwrites the existing place names and the histories that animate them.⁶⁹

If in his own life Munif turned to writing as a technology of resistance, in *Cities* he dramatizes a less honorable tradition of writing as imperial technology of camouflaged intent—particularly as wielded against predominantly illiterate ecosystem peoples. One notes, more broadly, that this dimension to the politics of writing—writing as scripted obliteration—remains pivotal to the struggles that animate environmental justice movements around the world; central, too, to the author-activists who have written back against the tendency to inscribe whole socioecological communities as superfluous, as primitive obstacles to development, or as nonexistent. This pattern of writing off—and writing back—extends to realms far beyond Munif’s novels or the Persian Gulf. First the writer-geologists arrive, then the bulldozers and earthmovers as, step by step, the promise of wealth morphs into a heavily policed, militarized, imperially entangled, resource-cursed authoritarian state.

The wadi’s uprooted Bedouin soon find themselves at the violent end of another institutional novelty: a police force, instructed to beat to death if necessary anyone who refuses to abandon their oil-rich oases. Next, the people are moved to the coastal refinery town, their camels are taken away, and a prison is created in which nomads can be jailed for, among other things, the ironic crime of vagrancy. In the sequel to *Cities*, *The Trench*, Munif tracks the sophisticated repressive technologies put in place to defend the collaborative interests of indigenous oil sheiks and the foreign oil barons. By now, with help from the CIA, the paranoid, profligate ruler of America’s newly “postcolonial” oil colony has set up a surveillance culture, which he boasts, “can hear ants crawling in the dark.”⁷⁰ If the first two volumes of *Cities* describe an arc—from the coming of the writer-geologists, through the razing of the oasis, to the internal migrations to the company boomtown, to the petro-despotic carceral state—that arc should be understood as the passage from survey to surveillance.

Among the procession of repressive technologies deployed to secure the surveillance society, writing returns to play a second role in the remaking of

state and subjectivity. At the oasis, the Americans had asked few questions; what fascinated them—what demanded writing up—was the earth below, not the people above. But the Bedouins relocated to the urban wilderness of the company town find that the Americans have now turned into big-time questioners: after long interrogations each worker is inscribed into the system, shadowed by a paper trail identity. The bewitchments of writing now include the signature and the identity card: writing has become fundamental to petro-modernity's control of labor and to the administration of difference enforced by a surveillance-cum-carceral culture.

These circumstances in which, far from being a mightier alternative to the sword, the pen becomes a sword supplement, are consistent with dissident Israeli architect Eyal Weizman's observation that territorial domination starts not with bulldozers and tanks but with the notes and sketches amassed by architects and by town planners. Weizman portrays these written plans as a first move toward a "politics of verticality" whereby, as John Berger notes, "the defeated even when 'at home' are being literally overseen and undermined."⁷¹ This formulation is particularly resonant when applied to the resource curse: Munif's first volume portrays a community profoundly undermined in the most literal sense, and his second portrays a displaced, urbanizing community that becomes brutally overseen. This undermined-and-overseen dyad recurs across resource-cursed communities, in the Middle East and far beyond.

The Future Eaters and the Fuel-Fed Fire

When Europeans began to colonize Australia, some aborigines dubbed these unfathomable strangers "the future eaters": the newcomers consumed without replacing, devouring the future at a speed bereft of foresight, hollowing out time by living as if the desert were a place of infinite, untended provision.⁷² This image of resource depletion as self-devouring cultural practice resonates with Munif's depiction of that other, far-off first desert encounter between Bedouins and American oil prospectors: there and indeed across the span of his work, Munif writes against the cycles of heedless avarice that imaginatively and materially erode older ecologies of time. Again and again, he returns to interweave the themes of shortsighted political repression and environmental temporal compression.

The future eating that accelerated during the “American” century was unevenly spread between centers of consumption and extraction, an unevenness that intensified inequities, fomented violence, and solidified structural repressions. Early in that century, Upton Sinclair, writing from California (an extraction frontier already mutating into a consumption epicenter) concluded his great hydrocarbon epic with an apocalyptic eruption over the costs exacted by “visions of unearned wealth.”⁷³ Such visions were widening the breach between America’s oil-impooverished classes and the nation’s oil-enriched: Sinclair cast petroleum as a variety of religious experience that, in rending the earth, rent communities asunder. In so doing, he anticipated on an internal (though never wholly internal) American frontier a divisive dynamic that would soon replicate and mutate internationally, assuming its most exaggerated and politically costly forms in the Middle East.

Yet productive as it is to read Sinclair’s *Oil!* and Munif’s *Cities of Salt* in epic tandem, what passed for development in those two societies could scarcely have been more remote in their social outcomes. By the mid-1980s, when Munif was completing *Cities of Salt*, California boasted the world’s sixth-largest economy; whatever imperial and corporate ties still bound it to the Gulf States, economically diverse California was structurally shielded from the resource curse. However, at that stage, after almost fifty years of oil extraction, Saudi Arabia, which ranked twenty-first in GDP, still ranked only sixty-fourth on the United Nations Human Development Index (a combined measure of democratic, educational, and health achievement and income distribution). That gap of forty-three places between Saudi Arabia’s GDP and its Human Development Index was exceeded only by three other nation-states, all so-called oil rich: Oman, United Arab Emirates, and Gabon.⁷⁴

We can thus read *Cities of Salt* as an epic expose of the fictions of sovereignty and development in societies squeezed between petroleum overlords above and the desirable subsoil below. In interview, however, Munif is at pains to point out that it is not modernity per se that he laments but rather the particular mangled form that it assumed in the Arabian peninsula. What he deplores is perhaps best captured by Michael Watts who (reflecting on the Niger delta) writes of petro-capitalism’s “geography of intolerance.”⁷⁵ That geography becomes, in Munif’s work, inseparable from petro-capitalism’s omnivorous appetite for time. In his fiction and

nonfiction alike, Munif expresses a deep perturbation at (in both senses of the phrase) futureless states.

Having lived in five Middle Eastern countries, and having steeped himself in oil history for novels set in the Gulf States and Iran, Munif had a bird's-eye view of the ways in which America's cold-war strategizing converged with American support for tyrannies that helped secure stable access to petroleum. He foresaw how American policies—ranging from connivance through complicity to direct threats, assassinations, and the deliberate fomenting of unrest—increased the probability that uncontrollable blowback would ensue. Munif voiced outrage at the way, during the cold war's final decade, "the people behind fundamentalism's current hard line were recruited as youths, then nurtured in Afghanistan, and ultimately sent on to Bosnia, all with the enthusiastic support of the United States and Saudi Arabia."⁷⁶ The jihad was not some atavistic, medieval eruption, but was in large measure the child of modernity in the form of the Soviet-U.S. rivalry, of which control over petroleum reserves was a critical dimension.

Munif once remarked that the double standards of Washington's cold warriors left him nauseated: "They talked of democracy and human rights in the USSR, Eastern Europe and Cuba, but when they reached the Mediterranean coasts, they forgot about democracy. All they thought about was oil."⁷⁷ Five years before 9/11, when a bomb blast killed nineteen American servicemen stationed in Saudi Arabia at Dhahran (the basis for Munif's fictional Harran), Munif deplored the attack. He also sought to understand it, warning that America needed "to treat the causes of despair, not merely the symptoms. The United States, obsessed with oil fever and the need to control the oil states, has gone much too far in protecting regimes and individuals unworthy of protection."⁷⁸ Unless the United States backed those Muslims who sought to bring economic hope to the disaffected, unless it adopted a more even-handed approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and unless it closed the military bases in Saudi Arabia that Muslims viewed as symbols of a collective humiliation, Munif feared worse was to come: more violent hijackings of Islam with even more catastrophic consequences.

In essays and opinion pieces, Munif fleshed out as argument the short-sighted cross-cultural dynamics he had brought to life as fiction in *Cities of*

Salt. He insisted that America's obsession with creating client regimes, not equal partners, would exacerbate the region's instability, noting how the client-patron relationship "creates a psychological barrier between [the two sides], and makes it impossible for either to know what is going on in the minds and hearts of the other."⁷⁹ Munif's concern with the long-term, destabilizing effects of the resultant cross-cultural opacity permeates *Cities of Salt*. More than a decade after he began that vast work, he felt greater apprehension than ever toward the future: "I speak as a novelist who follows events, and tries to understand them. . . . In my book *Cities of Salt*, I wrote about the dangerous relationship between America and the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. Now it appears that what I imagined and expected—that the salt would dissolve in water—has begun."⁸⁰

In *The Trench* Munif turned to the Qur'an to ring the changes on his imagery of an apocalypse brought on by a self-immolating avarice. That volume's title, Sabry Hafez observes, "alludes to the Qur'anic verse in which the infidel ruler of Mecca casts believers into a pit of fire: 'Self-destroyed were the owners of the trench, of the fuel-fed fire, when they sat by it, and were themselves the witnesses of what they did' (LXXXV, 4–7)."⁸¹ This new religion, which incinerates all before it, is the creed of petro-despotism, marked by uncontrollable rapacity, corruption, brutality, and hypocrisy. The motif of the fuel-fed fire can thus be read as linking conspicuous consumption with its invisible twin, the inconspicuous consumption of irreplaceable oil time as, without hindsight or foresight, the petro-despotic state plunges headlong into the pit of collective self-destruction.

Munif was angered by the lost ground of the Gulf States—the geological, historical, and political lost ground. He was well aware that the energy wars are time wars as well; the temporal debt that the Gulf States had incurred pained him—how they had frittered away their resource wealth, betraying both past and future generations. His own exile—his inhabited impermanence—surely quickened his responsiveness to the soaring and plummeting of historical fortunes, to the unstable, fleeting riches of the petroleum age, an age whose bounty he saw squandered by a failure to provide—at a national, regional, and planetary level—for its own provisionality.

The official, sanitized histories disseminated by the Persian Gulf's rulers and their imperial oil partners were rife with bromides and selective

amnesia. Both parties made a big public relations push to distance themselves from any suggestion of imperialism. The most peculiar instance of this push is Wallace Stegner's *Discovery! The Search for Arabian Oil*, commissioned by the Arabian American Oil Company in 1955 as part of an effort to counter Nasserite denunciations of the House of Saud for capitulating to imperialism and betraying pan-Arabism. Stegner's book, after a sixteen-year delay, was eventually published in the company magazine, *Aramco World*, in fourteen installments.⁸² Stegner, in the unfamiliar position of writer-for-hire, nonetheless blithely reads Aramco's history in Saudi Arabia as a mostly benign extension of America's own mostly benign frontier development, an extension marked by a "spirit of goodwill and generosity toward the Saudi Arabs as people."⁸³ At pains to distance his paymasters from any intimation of imperial malpractice, Stegner underscores the company's "frequent altruism," its concern with "the total well-being of its employees, both American and Arab," and how, unlike the British, the Americans refused to retreat into "aloof enclaves."⁸⁴

Munif's interpretation of this history is closer to that of the "hostile propagandists" whom Stegner accused of maligning the well-intentioned, uplifting role that American companies had played in the region.⁸⁵ Munif profoundly mistrusted the whitewashed corporate and petro-despotic grand narratives of progress: as a postcolonial novelist writing in imperial times, he recognized, at least implicitly, that failures in the forms of memory are inseparable from failures of political foresight. Looking back on the myopic cities of the Arabian Peninsula, he viewed them as relics-in-the-making, as fossils from a fleeting past. "The tragedy," he declared,

is not in our having the oil, but in the way we use the wealth it has created and in the future awaiting us after it has run out. Trees were cut down, people uprooted from their land, the earth dug up and oil finally pumped out only to turn people into a crowd of open mouths waiting for charity or a crowd or arms fighting over a piece of bread and building an illusory future. In developed countries like Britain or Norway, the oil 'whim' . . . brings a new strength to the community, but in underdeveloped countries . . . oil becomes a damnation; a ceiling that screens the future from view. In twenty or thirty years' time we shall

discover that oil has been a real tragedy for the Arabs, and these giant cities built in the desert will find no one to live in them and their hundreds of thousands of inhabitants will have to begin again their quest for the unknown. Oil could have been a road to the future . . . but what actually happened is nothing like that. As a result we shall again have to face a sense of loss and estrangement, this time in complete poverty.⁸⁶

Munif's vision of imminent catastrophe viewed retrospectively as ruin makes him read, at times, like a Benjaminian Angel of Progress for the Petroleum Century: blown backwards into a post-oil future he watches the debris of progress pile up before his eyes.

Munif ranks as one of the most mercilessly visionary writers to have engaged imaginatively with the politics of sustainability in its local, regional, transnational and transhistorical dimensions. His obsession with time's tyrannies is more than metaphoric: his work returns, again and again, to the deathly dance between regional petro-despots and imperial petro-capitalists, both quickstepping with eyes determinedly averted from the sorrows of resource finitude. If Munif stands out as an epic chronicler of epic excess, beneath his satires runs an anxiety and a rage at the cultures of petro-amnesia that have erected cities of salt on a vast but delusory wealth, equally shallow in its social distribution and in its vision of inhabitable time. For although *Cities of Salt* spans well over a century, Munif is at heart a chronicler of violent temporal compression. The quintet follows the short road—but the great distance—traversed by Bedouin society as the engines of petro-capitalism propel it at speed through a wilderness of inequity toward a post-petroleum frontier that beggars the imagination.

"Cities of Salt," Munif once explained, "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. In antiquity, as you know, many cities simply disappeared. It is possible to foresee the downfall of cities that are inhuman. With no means of livelihood they won't survive."⁸⁷ Munif directs his anger at the Arab States' failure to shore up their future by diversifying their economies; by investing petroleum revenues in infrastructure; and critically, by cultivating a social democratic ethos, replete with a dynamic, resourceful civil society that would

better prepare them for an oil-less tomorrow.⁸⁸ Yet his choice of apocalyptic idiom—“when the waters come in”—befits an age that is facing those twinned calamities of squandered time: oil’s receding tides and the advancing tides of climate change, sped on by our brief, rapacious age of hydrocarbon extraction and combustion.