Mystical oil: mapping the oil narrative in fiction

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ABSTRACT

Oil’s representation is shaped by the resource’s biological properties and its material forms of flow, which are features that contribute to its mystification as a commodity that brings instant and laborless wealth. I examine oil’s impact on narrative by charting some of the transnational formal and thematic patterns in literature shaped by the oil fetish and its mystified transformative capacities. Through a comparative reading of Upton Sinclair’s *Oil*, Abdelrahman Munif’s *Cities of Salt*, and Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* and *Oil on Water*, I aim to locate the specific ruptures oil creates on temporal and spatial structures that shape the narratives of modernity and historical progress in the twentieth and twenty first century. I highlight two central tropes in oil fiction: oil’s alteration of the time-space dialectic and supernatualism as an expression of oil’s logic, in order to trace how oil’s undermining of older temporalities and transformation of space are revealed in global oil capitalism’s restructuring of the systems of production, the alteration of ecologies, and the new patterns of movement of people, ideas, and commodities.
This dissertation is dedicated to my wonderful parents, Moneer and Shaikha, who encouraged me to pursue my interests. Thank you for everything.

To Hawazin and Malak, thank you for supporting me through it all. I am blessed to have you both as my sisters and my friends. I also wish to thank my committee members who were generous with their expertise and time. A special feeling of gratitude to Dr. Paul Stasi, my committee chair, for guiding me in the process of writing this dissertation.
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Introduction:

Locating Oil in Literature

“Our [industrial] achievements became a source of infinite possibilities. But time goes on, and that flush of wonder began to turn. The car that drove cross-country began to represent not only freedom, but also something much more conflicted.” - Edward Burtynsky

“Petroleum resists the five-act form” - Bertolt Brecht

The last few decades have seen a growing critical interest in oil cultures as an object of inquiry and mode of interpretative critique. These critical discussions are multifaceted and interdisciplinary, as they explore the ways in which the dominant constructions of oil shape how we understand and imagine the natural resource and our relation to it. Among the most notable and substantial contributions within this field are the recent publications by members of the international group studying “petrocriticism” as an academic sub-field and cultural practice. Inspired by Amitav Ghosh’s call for studying oil’s absence from fiction in his 1994 essay “Petrofiction The Oil Encounter and the Novel,” these self-proclaimed “petro-critics” are concerned with producing an account of the cultural history of oil, which has been largely underrepresented in the humanities. Petro-criticism is, in fact, a contribution to the broader emerging cross-disciplinary research in Energy Humanities, which concerns itself with studying
the relationship between energy, representation, and culture, as a necessary step toward achieving a transition from fossil fuels.

Propelled by this newfound awareness of the importance of studying the impact of energy on culture, the various works of petro-criticism provoke ways for imagining new forms of being beyond oil. For as the editors of *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* explain, a transition from fossil fuels “involve[s] not only a change in the kinds of energy we use, but also a transition in the values and practices that have been shaped around our use of the vast amounts of energy provided by fossil fuels” (4). The ultimate goal, therefore, is to shift anti-oil discourse away from its fixation “on the irresolvable contradictions of dependence upon unsustainable energy forms [which] is often articulated in the key of catastrophe,” as Jennifer Wenzel explains in her introduction to *Fueling Culture*, and to resist “the not-so-implicit imperative to find ‘solutions’ in the face of crisis.” Among the most notable efforts being made to promote such dialogue is the prolific research of Imre Szeman who is one of the leading scholars in petro-criticism. Szeman notes that different systems of energy introduce alternate modernities and argues that “If oil modernity shapes our experiences of things, we must then be able to fundamentally reshape it via oil.”1 Indeed, if our subjectivities and identities are shaped by the type of energy we consume, as Szeman and others have argued, then, questions about the possibility for action and change must be centered around the impact of energy on culture and society. Extracting ourselves from fossil fuel dependency requires us to question the alarming belief that the continuation of human

1 The quote is taken from the interview article, “When Energy is the Focus: Methodology, Politics, and Pedagogy A Conversation with Brent Ryan Bellamy, Stephanie LeMenager, and Imre Szeman.”
progress depends on the increased consumption of cheap energy. Oil, as the hegemonic energy source in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has deeply shaped our social narratives and notions of historical progress. Thus, we must also examine the effects of our energy intensive freedoms and the values, goals and expectations that have been shaped by the transformative capacity of oil consumption.

Moreover, underlying the different contributions within petro-criticism is a critical insistence on oil’s social invisibility. For in its raw form, oil is largely absent from the public and yet, it permeates various aspects of social and cultural life. This elusiveness poses some methodological, organizational and representational challenges for humanities scholars and cultural practitioners. Graeme Macdonald discusses the nature of this obscurity, explaining that “a critical dialectic of visibility lies at the centre of the seemingly intractable contradictions between the social and physical costs and economic value of oil as a dominant world commodity. Perceptual and representative problems are generated by oil’s very invisibility—literally and ontologically—across large swathes of contemporary life” (“Containing Oil” 38). Indeed, the absence/ubiquity paradox characterizing oil’s social and material properties produce the commodity’s representational elusiveness. Another contributing factor to oil’s invisibility is the corporate control over oil’s public image. For as the industry remains highly territorialized and extraction sites are often not open to the public, oil’s image continues to be powerfully shaped by corporate constructions. As the Swiss artist and filmmaker, Ursula Biemann, puts it, “the discourse that shapes the image of oil is articulated in economic and industrial terms: it is, in other words, very much a corporate substance as well” (2). Hence, oil’s cultural image is greatly shaped by the resource’s biological properties and its material forms of flow, shaping the
processes of its extraction, production, distribution and consumption. These material features contribute to the mystification of oil as a commodity bringing instant and laborless wealth, which is a central focus in this dissertation. Indeed, I argue that understanding oil’s impact on culture requires an examination of the ways in which oil resists narrative. Such challenges are best approached by looking at the material and social properties of the natural resource, since oil’s materiality shapes its image. Therefore, as Szeman rightly notes, “there is something about the materiality of oil that allows [those who study energy resources] to imagine forms of change... [for] Oil gives students a concrete problem and object to work with when they are imagining environmental and political futures.”

Furthermore, exploring the rhetoric of oil through the invisibility dialectic must not stop at reading works merely as counter-narratives to official constructions of oil. A central concern in this dissertation is to explore how oil’s representational limits shape the aesthetic and formal structures of its figuration in literature. For while it is crucial to examine how creative and critical representations of oil can render the resource materially and intellectually visible in public discourse, it is equally important to take note of the limits and possibilities within their representations of oil, so that we may “embrace the new styles and forms that resist petroleum.”

Thus, this dissertation aims to examine oil’s impact on narrative by exploring oil’s figuration in literature and the formal and thematic patterns shaped by the oil fetish and its

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2 “When Energy is the Focus: Methodology, Politics, and Pedagogy A Conversation with Brent Ryan Bellamy, Stephanie LeMenager, and Imre Szeman.”

3 The quote is taken from Brent Ryan Bellamy’s entry under “Petrorealism” in Fueling Culture.
mystified transformative capacities. I highlight two overarching features that shape the various stylistic and thematic patterns in oil novels: the emphasis on topology in the forms of narration, and the deployment of supernaturalism as an expression shaped by the notion of oil as magic. First, however, it is important to foreground the impact of oil commodification on literary form by exploring some of the prominent thematic and formal structures constitutive of the oil novel.

Oil Fiction:

The inquiries into oil fiction as a distinct literary genre are mainly centered around two contentious issues emerging in Ghosh’s ground-breaking statements about petrofictions. First, petrocritics consider the implication of the exceptionalism of oil’s historical and social force as a global commodity that has inspired distinct aesthetic responses. Second, they interrogate Ghosh’s insistence on the scarcity of novels about “the oil encounter” by considering the nature of oil’s figuration in literature and tracing its defining features.

Ghosh notably compares oil to one of its predecessors as a global commodity—spices—by describing the oil industry as the “twentieth century equivalent” of the spice trade, as a way to underscore the peculiar absence of oil from literature compared to its more creative counterpart (29). In disagreement, Szeman finds that no commodity-based history is truly analogous to the history of oil, particularly in its unparalleled influence in shaping the global world order. Elaborating on Ghosh’s call to creatively and critically engage oil, Szeman states:

We need petrofictions not only in order to narrate the points of encounter between societies
and individuals produced by the trade of desirable commodities; we need them because oil (unlike spices) is an *ur*-commodity: the substance on which the globe depends to heat its homes, to move bodies and goods around, to build and maintain infrastructure—the substance that, for better and for worse, makes the world go round. (“Introduction to Focus: Petrocultures,” 3)

Bellamy also finds the comparison to other global commodities to be dismissive of oil’s pervasiveness and permeability within the infrastructures of modernity. Building on Szeman’s and Dominic Boyer’s idea of an “ecology-energy impasse” that presents a challenge to studying energy culture, Bellamy notes that “Attention to the formal strategies for representing the oil encounter would reveal that thinking big is itself among the subjects of this fiction” (*Fueling Culture*). And while Peter Hitchcock finds that the histories of the two commodities are comparable (even suggesting that the argument could encompass other commodities of colonization, such as sugar and coffee), he argues that Ghosh’s analysis of oil’s literary absence overlooks “the possibilities of a logic of oil that puts it in the shade” and has caused the encounter to be “missed” (81). Thus, an underlying argument in these responses—and in the scholarship on oil culture, in general—assumes that oil’s ubiquity and its unparalleled transformative potential require the development of new methods of analysis for understanding the commodity’s cultural, political, social and ecological implications. In this view, the scope and scale of the global impact of oil mystification on the social and cultural imaginaries is unprecedented.

As to whether there are enough literary texts written about oil for us to make a claim for oil fiction as a distinct literary genre, petrocritics are in less agreement. For while Szeman agrees
with Ghosh that oil novels are scarce, calling his claim “perceptive.” Hitchcock argues that petrofiction, rather, “has a more substantial and turbulent genealogy than Ghosh suggests” (81). Macdonald similarly concludes that there are a considerable number of novels related to oil and that addressing the lack of literary criticism about the topic of oil requires reconceptualizing oil’s figuration in national literary histories “on at least two fronts: geographic and generic” (7). Macdonald favors an expansive and inclusive approach to these framings and provocatively proposes that “oil’s sheer predominance within modernity means that it is everywhere in literature yet nowhere refined enough—yet—to be brought to the surface of every text” (“Oil and World Literature,” 31). Although Macdonald’s position seems unwieldy, petrocritics have taken his lead by turning to the ways in which oil and energy have been understood in literature and trying to develop methods that correspond to the scope and scale of oil’s impact on our social and cultural imaginaries.

Thus, some of the first questions to address when examining this category in fiction, to paraphrase Macdonald’s useful exposition, is what constitutes an oil novel? Is it limited to works that explicitly address the oil industry such as extractive novels? Or does the thematic-genre expand to include all works set in an oil-fuelled modernity? In his exploration of oil aesthetics, Andrew Pendakis perceptively asks: “Is there an aesthetics of oil or are its cultural manifestations too diverse and localized to be usefully generalized?” Applying his question to oil literature, how do we limit the scope of this genre so that these works can be productively

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4 In explaining his position, Szeman states, “the great works of petrofiction for which Ghosh longs remain to be written” (“Introduction to Focus: Petrofictions,” 3).
theorized? I will address these questions by exploring some of the oil-focused interventions in world literature that aim to trace a genealogy of oil fiction’s historical formation.

On multiple occasions, Macdonald insists on the importance of reading oil in texts in different genres, and across different moments in literary history. Describing energy as “the engine-room of plot,” he even suggests that representations of oil should be comparatively read across different energy periods (“The Resources of Fiction,” 19). In support of his argument, Macdonald notes that energy plays an important role in all fictions, and, thus, reading the “energy of fiction” is instructive to energy criticism because “energy tends to surface as an explicit matter of concern in fiction only periodically, in times of resource angst” (Fueling Culture). His approach is, indeed, useful for grasping how fundamental energy is to cultural production and offers a perspective on what Patricia Yaeger describes as an “energy unconscious,” through which she suggests that “energy invisibilities may constitute different kinds of erasures” (Fueling Culture). Hence, the argument goes, exploring this energy unconscious highlights the parallels between shifts in literary history and energy history (306).

Szeman builds on these critical framings offered by Macdonald and Yaeger and stresses the importance of forming “a new critical sensibility in our analyses of world literature” that will allow us to read literature through the lens of energy, thus, providing us with the critical capacity needed to bring about a transformation in the way we imagine our relationship to fossil fuels (“Conjectures on World Energy Literature,” 286). Because of oil’s centrality to the

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5 Szeman’s article (as well as Macdonald’s “Monstrous Transformer”) is published in a recent special issue on “Resistant Resources/Resources of Resistance: World-Literature, World-Ecology and Energetic Materialism” in the Journal of Postcolonial Writing. The special issue examines the cultural structures of resource economies through
infrastructures of modernity and the global capitalist system, Szeman suggests, “any and all examples of cultural expression in the era of oil have to be seen as crucially figured by its material, metaphorical and social relations, even if there are few fictions that take up the subject directly” (283). He warns, however, against falling into framings that assume that periodical transitions in world literature, i.e., modernism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, are directly brought about by developments in energy history.

Although Szeman and Macdonald are in favor of broad framings, the models they offer for reading oil fiction, in fact, consider the regional specificity and local forms of texts. Drawing on Moretti’s attention to “local materials” in reading what he describes as a “one, and unequal” world literature, Szeman argues that, because petroleum is “the hegemonic form of energy at the present time,” it produces a global petroculture that is, nonetheless, unequal and uneven (280). Thus, extractive novels produced in the global periphery uniquely offer “imaginative openings” into the social powers of oil, for “the significance of energy in shaping modernity is more readily apparent to those living in spaces where petroculture has yet to take hold” (283). Similarly, Macdonald argues that in the extractive sites of the (semi) periphery, “oil is or has been overtly visible, even if it is subsequently made ‘unseen’, either by privatization, securitization, and military enforcement or by its mediated mystification,” (“Monstrous Transformer,” 293).

an intersection of the interrelated fields of energy humanities, world-ecology and comparative studies of world literature.

6 Quoted in Szeman’s essay (281).

7 As an example, Szeman notes that the portrayal of the American workers in Abdelrahman Munif’s Cities of Salt identifies “[their] incapacity to represent the power of oil to themselves” (284).
Therefore, extractive novels produced in the periphery “register the recursive transnational contours of oil’s explicit and violent visibility” (293). He argues that the monstrous transformations in Cities of Salt and George Mackay Brown’s Greenvoe reflect the uneven and unequal petro-development, in which the “petro-world appears as if by magic and as magic itself: estranged and unprecedented, if ‘indescribably’ real (299). Thus, “the shift in texture of narrated events [in the two novels] registers the chronotopic warping of petroleum aesthetics in this charged, anthropocentric shift” (295).

Michael K. Walonen similarly produces a study that traces some of the basic contours of the thematic-genre, offering a survey of world oil literature concerned with dramatizing the ways in which oil production “drastically alters place” (57). Following Macdonald’s tracing of the lineage of petrofiction to Moby-Dick, Walonen reads Melville’s novel as a prehistory of oil. Although, he claims that the whale-oil industry “was the direct predecessor, and… antecedent, of the American oil industry” which is dismissive of the important role played by the history of the coal industry, Walonen is right to suggest the importance of the connections between the ways in which whale oil and petroleum shape the cultural structures of their economies (59). This

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8 Macdonald explains that Moby-Dick “narrates a megalomaniacal hunt and harvesting of a natural resource all over the world. It stands as a prototype representation of a process endemic to the global history of oil extraction and petrochemical commerce” (“Oil and World Literature,” 7).

9 Heidi Scott also examines the parallels between the two American industries of energy production and their impact in shaping specifically American values. She notes that “Whaling was the first American industry to make global economic impacts” and it “cultivated the entrepreneurial spirit of early Americans” and inspired a romanticization of the hunt for oil (4).
approach is useful, for example, in framing the aestheticization of oil in Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!*, as it highlights the centrality of the romanticized tale of the hunt for oil to the American narrative of exceptionalism and individualism. It also underscores the role that industrial social structures in America have in shaping notions of individualism and freedom, as ideals that, in turn, reinforce and legitimize capitalist structures. However, one must not understate the discrepancies between the social and cultural textures of the different extractive industries or overlook the distinctions in energy use of the different resources and their economic and political implications. For attending to oil’s distinct material and symbolic properties compared to other resources, such as whale oil and coal, will underscore the specific ways in which oil’s pervasiveness, ubiquity and its importance as a global commodity shape its representation and its figuration in literature.

To this end, there have been a number of notable efforts within the field to chart prominent themes and forms in oil fiction. Walonen highlights some of the thematic preoccupations in novels detailing the interactions between industrial infrastructures and local communities, such as oil’s “destruction of traditional spatial orders; its creation of vast levels of material inequality, with the attendant risk of undermining democratic political systems” (59). He notes the dramatizations of “new social spaces that allow for new possibilities of human solidarity, awareness, and interconnection” (67). Macdonald also concisely lists some of the topics emerging in what he considers as petrofiction, noting the “specific subconcentrations in exuberant (and damning) extraction narratives, local and transnational stories of oil’s development and its dramatic transformation of space, place and lifestyle. … [as well as] tales of corporate corruption and petro-despotism; spill and disaster; the conflict between oil capital and labor and even the ‘drama’ of barrel prices and fictive petro-capital enacted across international
territories” (“The Resources of Fiction,” 12-13). He adds that anxieties over the inevitable fossil fuel depletion have produced “post-apocalyptic, carbon-fretful narratives” that envision the “zombified afterlife of petroleum” (13). Others have also noted the prominence of this thematic category, such as Bellamy in his review of Steven Amsterdam’s Things We Didn’t See Coming, and Kerstin Oloff in her reading of George A. Romero’s film, Night of the Living Dead, in which she detects a shift in “zombie aesthetics” from figurations of the “zombie-labourer into the human flesh-consuming petro-zombie horde” (316).

I wish to contribute to this body of scholarship by locating the specific ruptures oil creates on temporal and spatial structures that shape the narratives of modernity and historical progress in the twentieth and twenty first century. Thus, I limit my study of oil literature to novels that bring oil to the foreground and explicitly engage the transformative effects of oil production on different regional, national and global spaces. I offer a comparative reading of novels by three authors writing from distinct literary traditions—from both the global center and the periphery—about different stages in the history of the oil industry. I begin with Upton Sinclair’s Oil! (1927), set during the rush and scramble for oil in America—the industry’s birthplace—and which details the processes of oil discovery and extraction in Southern California. I, then, turn to AbdelRahman Munif’s Cities of Salt (1984) which takes place after the internationalization of the industry and narrates the imposition of oil capitalism in the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula. Finally, I study two novels by Helon Habila: Waiting for an Angel (2002) and Oil on Water (2010), as each explores the forms of violence and marginalization experienced as a result of Nigeria’s entry into global oil capitalism. A central aim in this dissertation is to highlight some of the recurrent patterns in theme and form connecting the novels to each other while paying
attention to the regional specificity and analytic density of the structures within the contexts of their respective literary traditions. For as Macdonald and others have suggested, the impact of oil, as a global commodity, on literary and artistic production is porous and transnational.\(^\text{10}\) My aim, then, is to chart the transnational literary movements as they relate to the oil industry and to global capitalism.

**Themes and Forms:**

Addressing oil’s cultural ubiquity and social invisibility in creative and critical ways requires engaging certain aesthetic questions that will shed light on the relationship between oil and representation. There is a tendency, for instance, in discussions on the aesthetics of oil—which is a prominent direction within the field—to read and value contemporary oil works as texts that “reveal” hidden oil. In other words, since the cultural history of oil has been largely underrepresented in academic studies, readings often emphasize the political content of a work that “exposes” the unknown about oil. As a result, research on oil aesthetics selectively focus on documentary-based representations—such as, the documentary films, *Crude Awakening* (2006), *H2Oil* (2009), and *Crude: the Real Price of Oil* (2009), as well as Edward Burtynsky’s photography—which in explicit ways, aim to raise awareness, inspire a shift in public discourse, and ultimately, precipitate political change. For instance, Szeman’s multiple writings on oil

\(^{10}\) Macdonald writes, the “oil novel retains identifiable connecting and comparative peculiarities, indicative of how certain themes and forms ‘travel’ abroad or are ‘imported’ by writers in other oil-affected spaces” (“Oil and World Literature,” 31).
aesthetics primarily focus on documentary-based works, arguing that the formal emphasis on scale, especially prominent in documentary films about oil, is deployed to bridge the gap between “knowing” and “acting.”\footnote{Such works by Szeman include: “System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster” (2007); “The Big Picture On the Politics of Contemporary Photography” (co-authored with Maria Whiteman, 2009); “The Cultural Politics of Oil: On Lessons of Darkness and Black Sea Files” (2010); “Crude Aesthetics: The Politics of Oil Documentaries” (2012); “Oil Imag(e)inaries: critical realism and the oil sands” (co-authored with Maria Whiteman, 2012); “Non Public Spaces” (2012); “Art Against Oil Offshore and other experiments in eco-representation” (2015).} Reading such works is, indeed, crucial for facilitating an understanding of oil’s role in society and imagining ways of living free from fossil fuel dependency. For one of the greatest obstacles to resisting the uneven development characterizing the structures of oil capitalist production is our tendency to plunge back into “the safety and rationality of everydayness: it’s hard,” Szeman writes, “to transform political insight into political action” (“Art Against Oil,” 30). Yet, the emphasis on political intent often overshadows the study of aesthetics and what the formal structures of oil’s representation tell us about its mystification as a global commodity. In order to briefly explore some of the challenges in theorizing an aesthetics of oil, I turn to the discussions about Edward Burtynsky’s photograph series, Oil, and the exchange it inspired about the politics of reading oil in artistic production. For while Burtynsky works with a different medium from the texts I examine, his photographs provide a useful model for introducing some of the prominent stylistic and thematic features in representations of oil.
Burtynsky is among the first artists to creatively and critically address the understated centrality of practices of oil production and consumption in shaping social life. His series is representative of both the emergent documentary-style cultural narratives of oil, as well as, the category in photography concerned with capturing the infrastructures and apparatuses of fossil fuel energy, described as “energy photography” by Georgiana Banita and “petro-imagery” by Michael Watts. Moreover, the photo-narrative Burtynsky presents in the book based on the series maps the trajectory of the industry’s history in three chronologically divided sections: the spaces of production, the infrastructures produced by oil, and the afterlife of oil manufacturing.

Discussions of Burtynsky’s images mainly center around debates over their capacity, or lack thereof, to generate aesthetic responses that will inspire social awareness and contribute to political thought. His dramatic images of the impact of global industrial processes on various ecologies, social systems, and cultures are often read as an exposé, concerned with revealing the hidden practices and spaces of oil. Moreover, several petrocritics link the emphasis on scale and scope in his large-format photos—which are taken mainly from a construction crane or other aerial vantage points—to the aesthetics of the sublime. For example, Maria Whiteman argues that Burtynsky’s photos “prompt shock and awe in the face of the visual infrastructures” they depict, arguing that they are an “effort to produce a tale that might generate in its viewers the same oil epiphany that prompted their production” (6). Similarly, Banita argues that, in a Kantian sense, the sublime politics of oil in Canadian visual art exposes oil’s obscured cultural narratives.

12 Examples of this genre, as listed in Michael Watts keyword entry on “Petro-violence,” include Richard Misrach’s Petrochemical America, Ernst Logar Invisible Oil, Rena Effendi’s Pipe Dreams, Robert Smithson’s Asphalt Rundown, and George Osodi’s Delta Nigeria: The Rape of Paradise.
and deploys the unreadability of its culture, by “disturb[ing] material perspectives on oil in order to reach a level of abstraction that paradoxically permits a more concrete interiority” (443). Clint Burnham, on the other hand, rejects readings that embrace this potential. Instead, he argues, the work promotes a “sublime submission” and a Zizekian “gentrification of the sublime” that undermines the political force within the work. This function of the sublime, Burnham insists, is a product of neoliberalism’s influence in shaping our material and affective experiences (458).

Others, such as Amanda Boetzkes, argue against the critical emphasis on documentary-style works that engage oil’s material landscapes and the assumptions that such works actually reveal hidden information and, thus, engage an aesthetic capacity to demystify oil. For she suggests, Burtynsky’s work emerges “in the midst of a surplus, not a dearth, of visual imagery of dirty oil” (225). Shifting the discussion to “whether there is some kind of aesthetic operation that obscures rather than reveals global oil,” she suggests that a more useful approach to understanding oil’s invisibility is studying cultural productions on plasticity, as a derivative of petroculture (225). Concluding that there is “a certain incapacity in the face of knowing, seeing, and feeling, [that inhibits political consciousness and social action] as though our senses hinertave been rendered ” by oil’s omnipresence, she nevertheless still operates within the framework of moral and political imperative characteristic of this entire critical conversation (226).

Reading oil aesthetics must aim beyond the limits of locating moments that inspire awe at the realization of our destructive dependency on the resource and the urgency of achieving an energy transition. For to read the distinct formal structures is to investigate the nature of oil’s relation to representation and its impact on narrative; it offers ways for grasping our “energy unconscious” and how oil influences our social imaginaries. Hence, Burtynsky’s presentation of
oil’s pervasive force on various topologies produces more than just an awareness of the different ways the commodity has altered material spaces around the globe and our imbrication, as producers and consumers, within its destructive processes. It, in fact, offers a glimpse into oil’s impact on conceptual space by capturing the relational experience of a distinct time-space framework that characterizes the speed through which people, commodities, and images move and circulate in petromodernity.

Therefore, with the purpose of providing a closer look into the features and functions of oil aesthetics, the remainder of this introduction will explore two prominent structures in oil fiction that reflect the social, political and economic implications of oil production and consumption: topographical narration or spatial investment, and the deployment of supernatural elements that are linked to the mystification of the oil commodity.

Oil Spaces:

Similar to Burtynsky’s images, oil fiction invests in topographical forms of representation as a way to illustrate oil’s mark on the cultural structure of an economy. The shift from temporal development in the forms of narration to a spatial one stylistically corresponds to the accelerated speed of petroindustrialism and the transformative capacities of oil consumption. Topographical narration is deployed to express the impact of oil production on material and conceptual forms of space. Such spatial alterations brought about by oil include: the production of new spatial and temporal relations and patterns of movement, the displacement of traditional spatial orders and
the marginalization of local subjects, and the impact of oil’s spatial alterations on conceptions of nature, modernity, and history.

The alteration of the time-space relation by the processes of oil production and consumption is often represented in fiction in encounters with new objects of technology, most prominently the car as the archetypal object of petromodernity. David Harvey’s study of the “spatio-temporality” framework under the urban processes of capitalism is useful for understanding the transformative impact of the speed and autonomy enabled by automobility on its subjects. In highlighting the dialectical relation between the three elements constituting “the production of space” as proposed by Lefebvre (experienced, conceptualized and lived space), Harvey suggests that “lived space” is shaped by a subject’s relation to both “material space” and “representations of space.” Indeed, the freedoms enabled by oil-fueled automobility transform the subject’s experience of “absolute” material space. For instance, a motorist’s ability to autonomously move across vast natural landscapes in a relatively short period of time offers a new and customized way of experiencing nature. Further, this altered relation to material space provides new perspectives that transform the representation of space. As automobility transforms lived space (the way nature is experienced) and the way it is represented to the subject (via new perspectives), it produces new affective and emotional responses—hence, creating new forms of lived space.

It is no surprise, then, that the spectacle of automobility appears as a prominent motif in oil literature—often presented to mark the transition into the new spatio-temporal relations of petroindustrialism. Reading the various representations of cars across different texts offers perspectives on the multiplicity of experiences with petromodernity in different locations around
the globe. For instance, the famous joyride in the opening chapter in *Oil!* describes the pleasures of high speed automobility from the perspective of its agent and celebrates it as a freedom enabled by a distinctively American petromodernity, whereas, the hellish car ride in *Cities* presents an unsettling encounter with a foreign and sinister object—one that restructures the systems of movement and circulation in the region and displaces the social structures that have long been rooted in tradition and culture. Meanwhile, the contemporary perspective through which Habila writes reflects the oppressive demands for automobility, particularly in a society suffering from a paradox of plenty, where the “freedom” and “autonomy” promised by oil-fueled mobility have turned into a crippling dependency.

Topographical narration also offers ways of dramatizing the imposition of new systems of value and meaning by oil production and its displacement of traditional social relations. For cartography is often deployed to illustrate the vast levels of material inequality produced by the spatial demarcations of oil production, such as the racial segregation of workers and the material dispossession of local communities. Thus, the experiences of marginalization are expressed not merely thematically by describing direct events of displacement, but also can be reflected through spatial narration, such as by detailing the new patterns of circulation of people, information, and commodities that render traditional social systems obsolete.

Moreover, spatial mappings dramatize the ways in which the abrupt transition into a new system of production reconfigures notions of tradition and produces crises of authenticity and identity. The emphasis on spatial politics narrates the displacement of identities and the formation of new ones. For the forms of identification that emerge within these spaces are based on the shared experiences of displacement among different groups, rather than a sense of
rootedness. Such mappings reflect the emergence of new forms of spatial consciousness and sense of belonging that are often based on transnational and/or translocal forms of affiliation.

Topology is also central in depicting the nature of the abrupt entry of peripheral regions into the global market. Macdonald describes the transition into oil production as an entry into oil’s “automatic international provenance,” explaining that “As soon as oil is struck, its site is internationalized by virtue of the multinational capital and expertise required” (“Oil and World Literature,” 7). In addition to their international imbrication, extractive sites often acquire a specific national significance. For these spaces become entangled with the processes of the transnational commodification of a resource that is often central to a nation’s economy and is, perversely, discovered and extracted in the most peripheral regions. This feature makes the spaces of oil production simultaneously international, national, and regional. Further, while oil is an intensely globalizing commodity—economically and culturally—the historical realities shaped by oil vary across different locations. Corresponding with this dynamic, oil fiction’s representation of the global flows of ideas, values, commodities, and forms of identification is conveyed through regional investment. Indeed, “the transnational, as the fundamental if elusive space of economic globalization, tends to be most visible in regional sites of capital production and transshipment,” as Stephanie LeMenager explains (12). Therefore, the encounter with oil is represented through juxtapositions of local and global preoccupations.

Engaging transnationalism through an emphasis on regional experience makes oil fiction an important model for analyzing the politics of place in literary studies. For this trope offers ways for theorizing what Rob Nixon calls a “transnational ethics of place,” which he argues is necessary for bridging the conceptual gaps between environmental and postcolonial studies
For environmentalism is a prominent streak in oil fiction that concerns itself with the unprecedented and accelerating levels of environmental pollution and alteration of natural landscapes and seascapes, as caused by the increasing global demand for oil. Themes of ecological destruction include: violence inflicted upon oil-producing land—such as oil spills, oil fires, and gas flares—as well as violent conflicts over resource control.

Important to my discussion of space-time relations, the new attitudes toward place that express transnational forms of affiliation in oil fiction bear particular notions of history and time, as suggested in Nixon’s analysis of the main schisms between postcolonial and environmental politics. Nixon writes:

13 In explaining some of the assumptions within the conventional frameworks separating the two fields, Nixon notes that postcolonial criticism concerns itself with themes of displacement, hybridity, and interculturalism, and it operates within the frameworks of cosmopolitanism and internationalism. Environmental studies, on the other hand, favors the ethics of place and contextualizes its criticism within national—mainly, American—environmental frameworks. Nixon notes the emergence of a new kind of transnational environmentalism in the writings of the Nigerian environmentalist, political activist and fictional writer, Ken Saro-Wiwa—who was martyred in 1994 while resisting minority subjugation by multinational oil corporations. For Saro-Wiwa’s writings explore “the fraught relations between local, national, and global politics,” and his environmentalism is “profoundly local and profoundly international” (234, 235). While Nixon mainly analyses Saro-Wiwa’s nonfictional writings, which explicitly address the subjugation of his native Ogoni community and the exploitation of their oil bearing land by multinationals and corrupt regimes, it is worth noting that the author’s fictional works, which do not directly address the industry, also engage transnational preoccupations while simultaneously investing in local history.
postcolonialism has devoted considerable attention to excavating or reimagining the marginalized past: history from below and border histories, often along transnational axes of migrant memory. By contrast, within much environmental literature and criticism, something different happens to history. It is often repressed or subordinated to the pursuit of timeless, solitary moments of communion with nature. There is a durable tradition within American natural history writing of erasing the history of colonized peoples through the myth of the empty lands. Postcolonial critics are wary of the role that this strain of environmental writing (especially wilderness writing) has played in burying the very histories that they themselves have sought to unearth. (235)

Indeed, novels about the transition into petroindustrialism engage images of a “pristine” past while undermining histories of violence and subjugation—similar in a way to the notion of a “Golden Age” which Raymond Williams highlights as a prominent theme in English literary works concerned with the industrialization of rural regions and the transition into capitalist modes of production. In the context of oil fiction, however, the past is often deployed as a consciously exaggerated, and even, oppressive memory, often by undermining narrative realism and suggesting a mystical aura of the past. This deployment is evident, for instance, in the evocation of an idealized pre-oil life in Wadi al-Uyun in Cities of Salt which, then, is undermined by the formal disruption of realism and the shift from temporal to spatial narration. The novel Greenvoe by the Scottish writer, George MacKay Brown, also presents a stylistic shift in its treatment of the abrupt transition of the Orcadian island of Hellya, which occurs in the novel’s final section, by shifting from folkloric and historical descriptions of life in the island to scientific documentation and by depicting a sinister aura of mystery in describing the events.
The treatment of nature, therefore, is a prominent trope in oil novels, including texts published before the formation of western environmental discourse. For a central preoccupation in oil fiction considers the impact of oil practices on the perceptions of nature, which consequently reconfigures notions of history, time, and modernity. For instance, the construction of oil extraction as a primitive practice through the domestication of nature in Sinclair’s novel not only suggests that oil practices are nondisruptive to nature but that they are also consistent with the human relationship with energy since the beginning of time, as the following chapter will explain. This construction of oil as an energy source that is harmonious with nature, as opposed to previous forms linked to environmental pollution such as coal, conceals petromodernity’s disruption of both nature and the human relationship with fossil fuels. For such framings distance the practices of oil production from industrialism’s violent history and imply that civilization is moving forward. The reconfigurations of history and modernity—through an investment in nature and the relation to space and time—are central to the values and expectations that have long sustained the global dependency on oil. The centrality of this oil/nature relation is even underscored in the recent claims by scientists and environmentalists that we have transitioned into a new geological epoch described as the Anthropocene.14 For the periodization is uniquely defined by human’s vexed relationship with the natural world, particularly as a result of fossil fuel consumption. Thus, reading nature in oil fiction is important

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14 The Anthropocene is defined in the introduction to Petrocultures : Oil, Politics, Culture as “human-induced climate change on such a scale and to such a degree that it can now be mapped within geological time” (12). There are ongoing debates, however, around the ideological periodization of the Anthropocene, and it has yet to attain the official status of a geological epoch.
to the deconstruction of narratives of history and human progress that is necessary for our transition from fossil fuels.

The disruptions oil creates in historical and spatial structures are often expressed in oil narratives through the discourse of supernaturalism. Supernatural manifestations and the disruption of realism reflect the impact of the fetishization of oil as a magical commodity bringing instant modernization and wealth. This feature often creates formal disruptions on narrative realism, reflecting the contradictions within oil’s cultural logic. In the next section, I examine more closely the mythos of oil and its impact on literary representations.

**Oil as a Magical Commodity:**

A central concern in this dissertation is the mythos of oil and the spectacular qualities of oil capitalist production as it relates to modernity. The magical aura of oil is linked to visions of abundant and laborless wealth and instant modernization. In different ways, the novels addressed in this study explore how this concept of oil as magic functions in narratives of development and modernity and the notions of freedom and success in oil-producing regions.

Perhaps it is useful to begin by briefly evoking Ericka Beckman’s study of the correlation between the discourse of commodity magic as it relates to raw materials apart from oil and the emergence of certain formal structures in Latin American literature. Beckman’s book, *Capital Fictions*, studies “the rhetorical styles embedded within appeals to market utopias, [which] constituted images of ‘magical coffee beans and ‘mythical’ bananas” and other magical
commodities, such as Cuban sugar, tin, and rubber, which the author refers to as “capital fictions” produced during the era of export-driven modernization in Latin America (95). These fictions constitute literary and nonliterary texts that express liberal fantasies of national and regional wealth and a future of progress through the exportation of the gifts of nature—what Beckman describes as “export reverie.” Moreover, they echo the capitalist logic of naturalizing commodification and its rationale of resource exploitation and importation. Beckman also notes the centrality of the notion of commodity specialization which assumes that a “nation should specialize in commodities it might produce most efficiently for the global market.” The contributions of disadvantaged nation-states to the global system of trade often centralize around raw material importation, which is imagined to bring considerable wealth and to help a nation overcome the temporal and material gaps in development with industrialized nations. Indeed, the “mysteries of the commodity” are shaped by this economic unevenness within global capitalism, as well as the structure of trade, as the “invisible yet uncontrollable stirrings of money, by which the materiality of the commodity seems to disappear altogether into the winds of transnational exchange.” Beckman suggests that, among other forms, magical realism in Latin American literature is developed as an expression of the continent’s incorporation into global capitalist networks, and it “hails from the rationalized irrationality of modern capitalism itself.” For the

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15 Beckman’s study is invaluable for its method of reading texts with attention to the specificity of regional experiences with global capitalism. For it attends to the unevenness of geographical and social terrains through which capital circulates and diverts from the tendencies in liberal and Marxist teleologies “to erase this contingency by assuming a single uninterrupted trajectory of capitalism across the globe” (175).
“moment of the magically real comes with the transposition of the ultimate dream of capital—to overcome all physical and natural barriers—onto the plane of (fictional) reality.”

Beckman’s study of commodity fetishism echoes Fernando Coronil’s notion of “petro-magic,” through which the Venezuelan anthropologist argues that “oil, more than any other commodity, illustrates both the importance and the mystification of natural resources in the modern world.” It is important, then, to ask what distinguishes oil’s mythos from other magical commodities? The answer lies in oil’s centrality to the infrastructures of modernity and capitalism—as I’ve illustrated earlier through the responses to the oil/spice comparison—which can be grasped by examining the commodity’s flow in national and transnational economic structures as well as its physical properties and patterns of movement.

The metaphor, “black gold,” used in popular expressions to describe oil, reflects the mysterious aspect of the oil economy. For it indicates the substitution of use-value with “money/value,” which is one of the six characteristics of the oil mythos that Michael Watts argues shape the forms of “petro-violence.” “As surely the most global and commercially

\[\text{\textsuperscript{16}}\] The idea of oil’s aura of magic was first expressed by the Journalist Ryszard Kapuściński in his widely quoted description of the disillusionment of with petro-promise in Iran: “Oil creates the illusionment of a completely changed life [...] The concept of oil expresses perfectly the eternal human dream of wealth achieved through lucky accident [...] In this sense oil is a fairy tale and every bit of a lie.” Quoted in Michael Watts, “Petro-violence: Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology of a Mythic Commodity” (203). And later in Jennifer Wenzel, “Petro-magic-realism: toward a political ecology of Nigerian literature” (451).

\[\text{\textsuperscript{17}}\] Quoted in Michael Watts (189).
negotiable of commodities,” Watts explains, “‘Oil is money’” (204). Further, the unpredictable system of the commodity’s price determination gives oil money an aura of mystery and irrationality. Andrew Apter also points to this feature, explaining that “oil replaces labor as the basis of national development” in the Nigerian economy, which causes “a deficit of value and an excess of wealth, or a paradoxical profit as loss” (201). In countries where oil is not fully nationalized, as in Nigeria, wealth comes not from labor or commodity production but from royalties and rents appropriated by multinational corporations. Therefore, Apter continues, the mystified social relations of oil production “are not easily reduced to the class opposition between labor and capital, or even use value and exchange value, given the global and deterritorialized character of transnational oil” (22).

As petro-states in the global south often take on the role of distributing oil income and bringing modernity and progress to the nation, the influx of oil money into these states contributes to their legitimization and hegemony. Indeed, a state’s role in mediating social relations and entering into a “Faustian trade of money for modernity,” as Coronil puts it, allows the state to exhibit “magical performances” of authority. Nigeria’s “spectacle of opulence” and modernity during the oil-boom is an example of this exercise of power, as Apter observes. Through national cultural production during the years of the boom, Nigeria presented itself to the world as a petro-state, which aimed to foster national unity and construct heroic narratives of modernity and progress, and even present a distinct vision of universal blackness that was more

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18 “Oil is money” is a reference to a statement by the Chair of the Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO).

19 Quoted in Watts’ “Petro-Violence: Community, Extraction and Political Ecology of a Mythic Commodity” (204).
about money and value than ethnic difference and politics. This vision, in fact, exemplifies the sense of universalism suggested in the constructions of historical development shaped by oil.

Although oil is a global commodity, its production is mainly structured by national economies. Hence, the resource carries national significations across different nation-states, including western countries, where industries are privatized. For instance, the industry in America has been privately owned since its formation, yet oil industrialism still had a profound impact on the forms of national identification, especially in the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, oil continues to operate on national registers in many western nations, such as in Canada, where new official projects aimed at “Northern Development” have been initiated as well as other “recent efforts to brand the country as a strong, oil-rich nation.”

I’ve discussed, thus far, oil’s magical qualities as they relate to its flow in economic structures and the implications of the wealth it engenders on state sovereignty and national discourse. The other aspect shaping petro-magic involves oil’s bio-physical qualities, especially its flow from the ground, its distribution through pipelines, its material elusiveness, and versatile forms of its consumption. Magical petro-wealth is often juxtaposed with the image of oil as an “earthly gift” that naturally surfaces, bringing prosperity and wealth to the masses. This naturalization, paradoxically, obscures the economic and political contradictions within oil commodification. As Apter states, “oil conceal[s], within its natural forms, the social and political contradictions of its money-generating powers” (22). This effect is suggested, for instance, in the spectacle of the gusher, which is a prominent symbolic image in extraction

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20 As noted by the editors of Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture (407).
culture that implies that oil extraction is a natural practice. The processes of oil’s material manifestation and the symbolic significations it produces thus reinforce the contradictory values of individualistic financial growth and democratic access to wealth—values that are a byproduct of capitalism. Moreover, the naturalization of oil also promotes the idea that human dependence on petroleum for energy is consistent with the linear progression of civilization and conceals oil industrialism’s rupture on human forms of living. The perception of oil as an “earthly gift” also shapes the commodity’s national significations and influences the way a producing nation views itself as “divinely chosen” and as world leaders contributing to the advancement of human civilization.

Drawing from the political economic analyses of “petro-magic” developed by the above mentioned anthropologists and political ecologists, Jennifer Wenzel and Sarah L. Lincoln each present important studies in Nigerian oil fiction, in which they link the contours of the young state’s turbulent economic history to its national literary production. Wenzel identifies an overlap in the trajectories of Nigerian literary publication and petroleum production, as she notes Nigeria’s simultaneous entry into global print and oil capitalism, the parallel patterns of their international circulation, and the implications of such movements in national imaginings. By highlighting these intersections, Wenzel reads the deployment of “petro-magic-realism” in Ben Okri’s “What the Tapster Saw,” as a Nigerian adaptation of the transnational literary mode of magical realism. As an effort to “historicize and complicate the empty globalism of the label,” she argues that “petro-magic-realism” renders the local specificity of the Nigerian experiences with modernity and nationalism, which are profoundly shaped by the social realities of oil commodification (214). One of the most illuminating moments in her study is in her description
of oil’s impact on narrative in the Nigerian experience, in which she explains that oil is “a miraculous agent, external to a historical narrative, whose arrival makes possible what is otherwise impossible within the narrative’s own terms. That is to say, there is something almost antinarrative about the ontology of oil, if narrative is understood as the working out of cause and effect and oil is understood to produce something out of nothing” (212). Wenzel’s analysis captures the effects of one of the most intense and violent experiences with petroindustrialism on conceptions of reality and the representation of such reality, which figures in fiction as disruptions of realism by magical elements. “Petro-magic-realism” is, indeed, one formal type of expression of the distortion on the logic of cause and effect and temporal narratives of progress among several others, which this dissertation will explore.

Sarah L. Lincoln also underscores the interconnectedness of literature and economy, as we see in the critical analyses by Beckman and Wenzel, as she traces the parallels between Nigeria’s economic boom and bust and the proliferation of visions of progress and wealth that was followed by disillusionment. Drawing from Wenzel’s concept, Lincoln reads the deployment of “petro-magic-realism” in Okri’s *Stars of the New Curfew* as a way of pressing “the limits of literary realism against what [Okri] sees as the ‘fantastic’ realities of a culture and economy predicated on oil,” which, then, reflects “the paradoxical structure of value in an inflationary context” (250). She identifies an articulation of oil’s logic of semblance and spectacle in the theme of quackery, which reflects “the oil economy’s radical disruption in the bond holding signifier to signified, representation to reality, and the sign value to its substance” (250).

As the above overview indicates, the theorizations of “petro-magic” produced, thus far, are drawn from observations relating to the historical experiences of countries with oil-based
economies—mainly, the petro-states of the global south. And the examination of the figuration of “petro-magic” in literary expressions is limited to its manifestation in Nigerian oil fiction, analyzed through the concept of “petro-magic-realism.” But if there is a distinct quality to oil commodity fetishism that, in an abstract sense, shapes the way it is understood, imagined, and given meaning, then the notion of oil as magic needs to be applicable to various regions across the globe, including industrialized areas where modernity is not experienced as an encounter with oil. I aim to offer a more cohesive understanding of literary engagements of oil as magic by starting with the first global encounter with oil and examining the narratives of oil discovery, extraction and consumption in the United States. I describe, here, a spatially and temporally expansive understanding of the impact of mystified oil on literary expression by examining different engagements with the supernatural in oil literature in three distinct regions.

Ultimately, this dissertation is concerned with the ways in which oil undermines older temporalities and transforms space through a study of the two central tropes in oil fiction: oil’s alteration of the time-space dialectic and supernaturalism as an expression of oil’s logic. These effects are revealed in global oil capitalism’s restructuring of the systems of production, the alteration of ecologies, and the new patterns of movement of people, ideas, and commodities. The selected novels illustrate the experiences of individuals and collectives as they negotiate their sense of belonging, particularly with changing attitudes towards concepts such as identity, the nation, modernity, history and nature. I integrate these reflections on the emergence of new forms of consciousness and systems of meaning shaped by oil with questions about aesthetic form.
The first chapter begins with the origins of oil commodity fetishism and focuses on the short lived period of the industry’s history when oil was embraced in American culture as an enabler of individual freedom as well as America’s global leadership—economic, industrial, and cultural. As one of the earliest literary expressions, Sinclair’s *Oil!* offers a unique perspective on the way conceptions of oil practices energized notions of modernity, individualism, and democracy. This imbrication of oil and American values helped solidify oil capitalism’s hegemony in America and facilitated its imperial expansion. The novel’s detailed depiction of oil discovery, extraction, and consumption sets up the oil novel as it engages with the origins of oil’s mystification and its role in shaping cultural and national identities and altering the human relationships to both nature and history. I argue that the resistance oil presents to narrative manifests itself in the novel as an ambivalence toward oil, which is particularly evident in its simultaneous critique of the industry and valorization of oil production and consumption, as well as, in the narrative’s paradoxical deployment of the dominant discourses of oil during its peak in America.

Against this explicit and penetrating representation of oil’s image, I turn in the second chapter to the absence of oil’s physical form in *Cities of Salt* to trace the ways in which the values of petromodernity travel to oil-producing global peripheries. As the encounter with oil in such regions is characterized by socio-economic and cultural dispossessions of local communities by western companies, petromodernity is often experienced as an unintelligible reality that is profoundly disruptive on traditional ways of life. The violent and abrupt transition illustrated in *Cities*, which begins with the moment the American oil prospectors arrive into the Arabian Gulf, is largely expressed as a mysterious and sinister force, and the cultural values and
social relations imposed on the land are perceived as a foreign threat. The inexpressibility of the encounter is processed by the logic of supernaturalism and, thus, the narrative tension oil creates appears on a stylistic level as a disruption of realism and the temporal structure of development, as opposed to the rhetorical ambivalence seen in *Oil!*. Here I examine the transnational scope of Munif’s writing within the context of its regional specificity in order to highlight the narrative’s stylistic experimentation and its function in representing the region’s spatial reorientation and the introduction of new forms of time and space.

The final chapter turns to the aftermath of the violent thrust into an economic system centered around oil and explores the continued influence of oil’s cultural logic as a point of reference in contemporary Nigeria. Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* and *Oil on Water* illustrate the ways in which decades of political instability, social and economic stagnation, and ecological devastation have caused the disillusionment of the subjects of “petro-violence” with the petro-promises of progress and wealth. The novels explore oil capitalism’s imposition of its spatial politics and social relations in both spaces of extraction and non-producing urban centers. The trope of engaging hegemonic oil narratives is developed in these contemporary works, as they are less concerned with explicating the discourse of petro-magic evident in *Oil!* and *Cities* and are more invested in portraying the daily realities of living in the poverty and precarity oil produces. This development marks a shift in the oil novel—especially Nigerian oil fiction—from an interest in narrative deconstruction to reconstruction, as the characters in these novels engage in storytelling, writing, and mapping as a way to assert their existence within the dystopic spaces of oil. I argue that the topological narration in these novels reflects the emergence of a new spatial consciousness and forms of identity and solidarity based on shared experiences of
marginalization. These structures of affiliation are marked by a sense of transnationalism that is contrary to its presence as an intrusive force, as we find in Cities; here, it becomes a form of consciousness that opens up new possibilities for freedom and success for its subjects.
Chapter One:

An American Discovery: Oil Mystification in Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!*

Many petrocritics argue that there is a special quality to oil, relating to the way it is extracted, commodified, and consumed, that renders the resource materially and symbolically ubiquitous and, thus, resistant to narrative. This assumption is prevalent, for instance, in the numerous essays compiled in *Oil Culture*, in which the editors identify “Oil's signature cultural ubiquity and absence [as] the occasion of [the] book” (xix).\(^{21}\) Thus, oil’s representational absence, it is argued, is particularly evident in expressions of the first half of the twentieth century before the emergence of peak-oil and environmentalist discourses. If this is correct, a work like Upton Sinclair’s 1927 *Oil!*, published during the industry’s peak in America, must stand out as an anomaly. For the novel presents extensive detail about oil extraction and distribution and engages the natural resource on both material and symbolic levels. Moreover, the author’s ambivalent attitude toward oil practices, as his novel condemns the practices of the industry and, simultaneously, celebrates American oil culture, was the subject of critique in a number of the early reviews of the novel. Such reviews—published many decades before scholars began taking interest in oil fiction—express surprise at Sinclair’s choice of creating

\(^{21}\) In addition to these critics, some artists of the last few decades have addressed the commodity’s elusiveness as one of the central features shaping oil’s representation. For instance, the Austrian artist, Ernst Logar, entitled his exhibition of a series of large format photos of oil refineries in Aberdeen, Scotland “Invisible Oil.”
such a sympathetic protagonist. For instance Granville Hicks in his 1943 article, “The Survival of Upton Sinclair,” states that several reviews “noted with surprise that [the novel’s protagonist,] J. Arnold Ross, the big oil man, was not a black-hearted villain” (216). However, this representational tension is, I suggest, symptomatic of oil’s force as a commodity that “hijacks the imagination,” to use Jennifer Wenzel’s description of oil’s impact on Nigerian society and culture (“Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited,” 212). Indeed, oil’s resistance to narrative creates a notable turn to the language of mystification in expressions of oil. This chapter proposes that the contradictions within the discourses of mystified oil deployed in the novel, in which oil practices are framed as simultaneously modern and primitive, scientific and superstitious, capitalist and democratic, are at the core of the narrative’s ambivalence.

22 Some of the early reviews also critiqued the novel for the author’s explicit moral stances and viewed the text as left-wing propaganda. Even a recent review in the New York Times, published after the release of Paul Thomas Anderson’s film, There Will Be Blood, which is loosely based on the novel, suggests that, although “Oil! is one of Sinclair’s better novels, it still suffers from the author’s insistence that literature should lead to the solution of social problems.” “Blood and ‘Oil!’” (Feb. 24, 2008). Sinclair, however, was never shy to admit the politicization of his novels, and, in fact, he has famously stated that “all art is propaganda. It is universally and inescapably propaganda; sometimes unconsciously, but often deliberately, propaganda” (Sinclair, Mommonart: An Essay in Economic Interpretation).

23 Hicks’ responds to the early critiques by arguing that the sympathetic portrayal is a result of the fact that Sinclair “has always had the ability to withdraw himself from the struggle and to write with an astonishing degree of objectivity (216). For Sinclair “is also the historian doing his best to discover how things happened and why. He will lecture you for all he is worth, but he will not conceal from you anything he sees—and he sees a great deal” (215-16).
Since the renewed attention to Sinclair’s novel which came with the recent interest in the study of “petrocultures,” two seminal essays about the aesthetics of oil that explore the narrative’s valorization of oil have surfaced: “Oil in an American Imaginary” by Hitchcock and “The Aesthetics of Petroleum” in Stephanie LeMenager’s Living Oil. Both readings explain the narrative’s ambivalence as a formal consequence of “oil’s imaginative block on articulation,” to borrow Hitchcock’s phrase (86). I want to briefly highlight some of their main arguments in an effort to provide a useful framework for my reading of the prominent discourses within oil’s historiography that are engaged in Oil!

In response to Amitav Ghosh’s famous proclamation that there are no notable American novels about the oil encounter, which he explains is partly because “the history of [American] oil is a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic,” Hitchcock argues

24 Christopher Taylor notes that despite Upton Sinclair’s large literary output, publishing more than eighty books in his lifetime and winning a Pulitzer Prize, his novels “have all but disappeared from academic discourse,” stating that “those few critics who do deal with him as a literary figure tend to have a low opinion of his work” (166).

25 David McDermott Hughes also reads the valorization as a sign of narrative conflict and describes the novel as “the exception that proves the rule” (24).

26 Quoted from Gosh’s influential essay, “Petrofiction: the Oil Encounter and the Novel” (29) Ghosh continues by explaining that “To a great many Americans, oil smells bad. It reeks of unavoidable overseas entanglements, a worrisome foreign dependency, economic uncertainty, […]” (30). These economic and geopolitical realities about the American search for oil, however, are central to Sinclair’s novel. Therefore, we may assume that the novel either escapes Ghosh’s radar or, as Graeme Macdonald suggests, Ghosh might have “deemed” the work “unworthy of the adjective ‘Great’” (7).
that there must have been some sort of “imaginative grasp of [oil’s] otherwise abstruse narrative of modernity” that has inspired the emergence of counter-oil discourses that imagine a life free from oil dependency (81). For understanding that modern ways of living have become highly contingent upon oil consumption comes only by grasping not just “the mere content of oil’s omnipresence, but [also] the very ways oil has fictively come to define much of being in modernity, or what is sometimes referred to as an oil ontology” (81). Thus, Hitchcock argues, “It is oil’s saturation of the infrastructure of modernity that paradoxically has placed a significant bar on its cultural representation” (81). Consequently, oil operates as “a cultural logic that dares any writer to express its real, not as some character or passing reference, but as a very mode of referentiality, a texture in the way stories get told” (86). Significantly, this cultural logic, Hitchcock explains, is rooted in the history of the rise of American hegemony. This link between oil and America’s rise as a global power produced a certain “resistance to narration within the rhetoric of oil” in American artistic production (83). In explaining the narrative’s representational tension in *Oil!*—the way its critique of oil capitalism is frustrated by accounts of oil practices that celebrate oil as “the quintessence of Americanness”—Hitchcock writes:

Sinclair always loved that special American necromancy; he lamented, however, that it only seemed to flow through the most crass and greedy forms of capital accumulation. This is not just the moral and ethical dilemma of Sinclair’s novel (materialist and spiritualist options are equally reprehensible in the narrative) but a significant tension in how we gauge the emergence of an American century. (91)

Hitchcock reads the author’s ambivalence not merely as conflicted expressions of a desire for the freedoms enabled by oil consumption alongside a disdain for the capitalist mode of its
production. Rather, the ambivalence is a result of oil’s specific ubiquity, so that the critique of oil capitalism is marked by the pervasive cultural logic of oil and its shaping of the notion of living in modernity. How we perceive (and celebrate) this American way of life predicated on oil consumption is dialectically linked to the rise of American hegemony. Therefore, according to Hitchcock, the emergence of a considerable number of literary and cultural texts on oil in the last few decades is linked to America’s decline as a world power.

Similarly, LeMenager explains the ways in which “the aesthetics of petroleum pleasures undermine political solutions” as a result of oil’s centrality to the way we define ourselves as modern subjects. She turns to oil aesthetics in her extensive study of the ways in which “petroleum has come to play a foundational role in the American imagination and therefore in the future of life on earth,” because it reveals something about “the charisma of energy, as an American idea and force” (4). She argues that the ambivalence in Oil! is a result of the “representational problem oil presents to the committed artist, be he a socialist such as Sinclair or an environmentalist, [which] has to do with oil’s primal associations with earth’s body, therefore with the permeability, excess, and multiplicity of all bodies deemed performed and given. [...] oil itself retains the indeterminacy and openness to mystification of a living/performing spectacle” (92). An example of such spectacles, she notes, is the “‘mysteriously thrilling’ performance of the gusher, perpetuat[ing] the fantasy of public participation;” for the naturalization of its extractive process conceals the injustices within its system of production and, I would add, the

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27 LeMenager also suggests that attention to oil spills was a “revolutionary” aspect of the twentieth century which jumpstarted the U.S. ecology movement in California in 1969 and offered a reinterpretation of oil extraction as death-making, rather than as a realization of modern life.
commodity’s threat to the environment (92). LeMenager thus suggests that oil’s bio-physical properties, which shape its material and cultural fluidity and porousness, are at the core of its representational obscurity.

Both Hitchcock and LeMenager recognize that the valorization of oil in the novel reflects oil’s impact on the imagination and the way the resource defines the American experience of living in modernity. Thus, the epic of oil individualism depicted in the story of J. Arnold Ross’s rise from rags to riches reflects oil’s role in shaping the American values of freedom, individual enterprise, and democracy. Moreover, the novel’s representation of oil relates to the ways in which the commodity was imagined and articulated at a time before petroindustrialism became burdened by environmental or peak-oil concerns. Indeed, Sinclair’s work stands out as one of the earliest articulations of petroleum aesthetics, and, in fact, it wasn’t until several decades after its publication that artists began to take interest in representing an aesthetics of oil and investing in the material spaces of oil production. It is, then, worth examining the aesthetics of petroleum in relation to the early discourses of oil which predominated during the rise of the American oil industry, and, for that matter, the rise of America’s hegemonic global presence. During this early phase of oil industrialism—often described as oil’s “golden age”—the image of oil was largely controlled by corporate discourse. I suggest that the figuration of oil in the novel highlights the material, social, and cultural histories of the commodity and engages the corporate discourses that shaped oil’s image during the early twentieth century. It is worth examining this particular

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28 Such artists express a desire for a world beyond oil by reflecting an aesthetics of oil; as LeMenager puts it, “They bring to light the aesthetic of petroleum in their attempt to create new structures of feeling” (67). Most works that highlight a petroleum aesthetic tend to be visual as many works are in the forms of photography and film.
representation of oil in the novel, as an early literary expression, for it introduces some of the fundamental structures through which narratives of oil are framed and critiqued in subsequent works in oil fiction. These structures most prominently include an engagement with new spatio-temporal relations and a deployment of the language of supernaturalism, which are both linked to the idea of instant wealth and progress and its disruption of the logic of cause and effect.

Oil! is written to expose the political and corporate corruption within the industry through its author’s signature muckraking style—a style that was popular during the Progressive Era and deployed by writers and journalists who performed investigative writing on American industries, established institutions and political figures. The novel dramatizes every aspect of the oil boom in Southern California, from the rush and scramble for oil, the wildcatting, the drilling, the spectacle of oil production to the speculations and dreams of abundant wealth. The novel also exposes corporate ruthlessness, political corruption, economic instability, and the unequal

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An active socialist, Sinclair pushed for government regulations on the meat-packing industry in his 1906 muckraking novel, The Jungle, which “helped spur the public outrage that led to” President Roosevelt’s signing of “two historic bills aimed at regulating the food and drug industries into law on June 30, 1906” (NYT June 30, 2016). Sinclair even contributed his earnings for the novel, which was his first successful work, to establishing a socialist colony in New Jersey in 1906, and in that same year, he became a socialist candidate for Congress. He also ran for governor of California in 1934, and although he secured the Democratic nomination, he ultimately wasn’t elected for the position. Alongside the many pamphlets and books he wrote for the cause, he turned to novels to attack capitalist industries, which made him a prominent American novelist of the social scene. For instance, his novel, King Coal (1917), is one of his famous muckraking works in which he writes about the coal mining industry and dramatizes the 1913-14 workers’ strike.
distribution of wealth, which are prominent themes in the history of the oil industry’s national and global growth. These elements are revealed through the moral struggles of Bunny, the son of J. Arnold Ross, as he matures into a socially conscious individual who is conflicted over having to choose between acting on his socialist ideals or accepting the life fashioned for him by his oil tycoon father. The competing forces that shape Bunny’s internal struggle are manifested through his relationships with his father, who is a hero to his son and who teaches Bunny everything he knows about oil, and Paul Watkins, a leader of the workers’ strike at his father’s company and, later, a member of the communist movement who deeply inspires Bunny’s socialist views. The novel ends with the deaths of the two hero figures and, appropriately, the narrative dispels the mystified notions that shaped Bunny’s aspirations ending with the triumph of oil capitalism and its expansion abroad.

As it is my primary concern in this dissertation to explore the formal consequences for narratives of oil’s mystification, I suggest that the narrative conflict in the novel relates to the paradoxical articulations of oil that predominated in the early twentieth century. For the oil rhetoric of that period portrayed oil production as an individual enterprise and a triumph of capitalism, while simultaneously denoting its material and social benefits for the commonwealth. It also primitivized oil as an energy source and naturalized its production, while maintaining that its consumption is the pinnacle of modernization and industrial advancement. At the same time, embedded within the tale of oil discovery and production is an implication of the accidental, even supernatural manifestation of a hidden substance that can magically bring wealth and prosperity. By examining these paradoxical expressions, I suggest that the narrative ambivalence reflects the resource’s cultural mystification. I begin this chapter by exploring the valorization of
oil consumption, epitomized in the freedom experienced through driving. The depiction of an oil-fuelled experience of mobility as a form of “living” in modernity reflects the centrality of oil to narratives of American modernity and American exceptionalism. Next, I highlight the juxtaposition between the expressions of modernity and primitivism, which is particularly evident in the novel’s detailed depiction of oil extraction. I link this reframing of petroindustrialism to primitivist representations that predominated in the promotional culture of the industry in America, which assumed the naturalization of oil practices. This juxtaposition of primitive and modern images reinterprets the human history of energy and reinforces the notion of American petromodernity as the ultimate stage in human advancement. The third form of oil mystification deployed in the novel relates to the connection between petroindustrialism and spiritualism, which is thematized in the link between the growth of Ross’s company and the emergence of an Evangelical cult, led by Eli Watkins. I examine the formal parallels between the performative articulations of oil industrialism and Eli’s church to suggest oil’s magical aura in the American imagination, particularly during the early rush and scramble for oil. Significantly, even in a novel that embraces industrial prowess and scientific advancement, the theme of mysticism is engaged as a major trope in the novel. This configuration affirms the prominence of supernaturalism in oil fiction, which is one of the central claims I make in this dissertation.

Oil and Coal:

Understanding oil’s role in defining the American modern subject in the early twentieth century requires contextualizing the resource within the history of capitalism’s relationship with
fossil fuels, which began with the emergence of oil industrialism’s predecessor: the coal industry. For, as Frederick Buell suggests in his study, “A Short History of Oil Cultures; or, The Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance,” oil culture defines itself against the history of the human relationship with fossil fuel energy, and especially the history of coal capitalism. It is, therefore, worth highlighting some of the continuities and breaks between the two forms of energy, for oil corporations aimed to conceal the links between the two resources as a way to distance the industry from the social injustices and environmental threats of the coal industry.

The specific physical and geological properties of coal and oil, which dictate the processes of their extraction and production, shape the way each resource is culturally perceived. In other words, the materiality of a fossil fuel directly shapes its symbolic image. Barbara Freese discusses some of the differences between the two types of fossil fuels in her book, Coal: a Human History, noting that unlike the “more dazzling and worldly” oil, “Coal does not make us think of the rich, but of the poor” (2). Therefore, “Where oil is seen as a symbol of luck, coal is seen as a symbol of disappointment” (3). This difference in the way the two fossil fuels are perceived relates to the processes of their extraction, as coal mining is labor-intensive and requires a greater body of workers than oil extraction. I add that oil, which is imagined to flow abundantly once it is struck, usually by accident or luck, makes us think of the free, capitalist individual and not the laborers involved in its extraction. For the story of oil framed its practices as a one-man job, and tied the industry with ideals, such as individualism, capitalist freedom and even democratic access to wealth and opportunity.\(^{30}\) Also, the fact that coal extraction requires

\(^{30}\) In addition, the fact that coal mining is labor intensive which allows laborers access to and control over the commodity, ultimately gave the working class some agency within the social structures of the industry. Oil
going deep underground and that oil, on the other hand, erupts from the earth’s surface suggests the notion that oil is an earthly gift to humanity and that its extraction is a natural practice. The naturalization of oil is also underscored by comparison to the health risks that coal mining is known to pose for laborers and consumers. Ultimately, this conception conceals oil’s disruption of nature. Further, the notion that oil is more natural than coal promotes the idea that petroindustrialism is not an environmental threat, and distances oil from the pollution and diseases associated with coal mining.

Another crucial difference between coal and oil relates to the perception of oil as a national commodity. The copious flow of oil, often imagined as infinite, and the abundant wealth it accumulates frame oil as a national bounty. This perception is common in developing countries, where oil industries are often nationalized and where there is an economic dependency on oil importation, as oil is imagined to bring economic and social development and to help developing countries catch up with the rest of the western world. Although oil production in the US is a private enterprise and the industry is not nationalized, oil production was, nevertheless, also imagined as a national prize bringing progress to the nation, particularly during the early years of the industry. This is tied to the centrality of the story of oil’s discovery to the narrative of extraction, on the other hand, is less dependent on physical labor and, therefore, workers have less control over production. Thus, coal miners’ strikes were historically more effective than the strikes carried out by oil workers. This difference indicates that the processes of extraction and production impact the possibility of social democracy. Timothy Mitchell highlights this impact in his book, *Carbon Democracy*, as he argues that the apparatus of oil extraction, and the structures of its production and distribution hinder workers’ claim over the resource, and therefore, greatly influence the social textures of democracy.
American exceptionalism, as US soil is the birthplace of the oil industry. Even the transnational expansion of American oil corporations was perceived as a national conquest. Indeed, oil industrialism greatly contributed to bringing the country to the forefront as a national economic power. Coal mining, on the other hand, did not carry such national significance in the US because, among other reasons, the industrial revolution that coal capitalism brought began in Britain (and was instrumental in its imperial expansion). Therefore, to a greater extent than coal industrialism, oil has had a revolutionary impact on the American national identity.

While oil industrialism is considered to represent a rupture from coal mining, it is worth noting that coal industrialism preceded oil in producing a radical break from previous energy systems, particularly with its introduction of mechanical power. Indeed, coal-energy consumption surpassed the natural boundaries of physical energy and revolutionized the human experience of space. It enabled the crossing of great distances with far less physical labor than before and allowed humans to overcome the limitations of physical energy. This new spatial experience was advanced by the invention of the steam engine and the ability to cross great distances in a short time.\(^3\) In this transformation of energy into mechanical form, energy consumption became linked to technology and speed, and it created a vision of a modern,

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\(^3\) This domination of space, enabled by fossil fuel energy, extended to imperialistic claims over space and, thus, capitalist production of coal was central to the expansion of empire. And similarly the American oil industry is one of the key drivers of American imperialism, and it has been crucial to the nation’s rise as a global power.
enhanced way of life. Hence, in Buell’s words, coal was “the first truly exuberant” system of energy (278).\textsuperscript{32}

If the coal industry’s steam engine produced a new experience of space, the invention of the automobile took fossil fuel’s transformation of spatial experience many steps further. For automobility enabled more personal, customized, high speed movements, and, thus, provided a new pleasure in motion. Such potency transformed the experience of space, as motorists conquered physical space with the ability to autonomously move across long distances with little physical energy in a relatively short time. A consequence of this change is that a new kind of enjoyment of nature is made accessible. This accessibility is sustained by the building of asphalt roads which domesticate nature and provide motorists with an optimal driving experience. Such capacities produced what LeMenager describes as the “natureculture of petromodernity” in the US in the early twentieth century “when, ironically, some labored to imagine living oil just as now others labor to imagine living without it” (69). Hence, the American invention of commercial cars, powered by petrol, evokes the triumph of American modernity as a turning point in human advancement.\textsuperscript{33} Thus despite deep continuities between oil and coal in terms of

\textsuperscript{32} Buell historicizes “exuberance” and “catastrophe” as two cultural motifs “embedded in the materiality of coal,” explaining that “exuberance is no longer just surplus energy creating optimism, and its catastrophe is not hapless dependency on what is running out. Exuberance and catastrophe materialized as historically specific forms of capitalist triumph and oppression, of environmental domination and destruction, and of human liberation and psychic and bodily oppression” (280).

\textsuperscript{33} This link between American car culture and nationalism continues even during the middle of the twentieth century, as evident in the nationalistic propaganda during the second world war. Indeed, car driving was linked to notions of American identity even during the oil shortage of the second world war. Sarah Frohardt-Lane
environmental impact and the transformation of spatial relations, it was oil, rather than coal, that was understood to be central to American modernity.

**Petro-utopia:**

It is no surprise, then, that *Oil!* begins not with oil itself but with the automobile, as it is the ultimate embodiment of oil consumption. The opening chapter, “The Ride,” which describes Ross’s high-speed drive along the California-Highway with his young son, Bunny, valorizes driving as a result of the effort to represent the “natureculture of petromodernity” as well as the freedom of mobility made possible by oil. The opening lines present a detailed description of the road, for it is a fundamental aspect of the petroleum infrastructure and functions as a spatial embodiment of oil consumption:

> The road ran, smooth and flawless, precisely fourteen feet wide, the edges trimmed as if by shears, a ribbon of grey concrete, rolled out over the valley by a giant hand.

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demonstrates this continuity in her study, “Promoting a Culture of Driving: Rationing, Car Sharing, and Propaganda in World War II,” in which she argues that, contrary to popular conception, the fuel and rubber shortage during the war did not devalue driving in American culture. Rather, advertisements that encouraged the public to cut back on fuel consumption during the war and the shortage America experienced portrayed the deed as a patriotic sacrifice. Therefore, the ways in which the shortage problem was framed in promotional rhetoric actually asserted the importance of cars and driving to the American identity. For such advertisement solidified images of consumerism and driving as part of the national identity, as Frohardt-Lane explains, "by suggesting that the war was being fought to secure an idealized, abundant society built on free enterprise, advertisements conflated a potential outcome with the war's purpose" (342).
ground went in long waves, a slow ascent and then a sudden dip; you climbed, and went swiftly over--but you had no fear, for you knew the magic ribbon would be there, clear of obstructions, unmarred by bump or scars, waiting the passage of inflated rubber wheels revolving seven times a second. The cold wind of morning whistled by, a storm of motion [...] for the most part you sat silent and dignified—because that was Dad’s way, and Dad’s way constituted the ethics of motoring. (1)

The road is praised for its perfection and precision, which allow the motorist to enjoy the high speed whilst being safe. A capable driver like Dad has complete confidence in the system. External to this flawless system, is the threat of encountering “road-hogs, and drunken men, and women driving cars [...] and] Mexicans in tumble-down buggies, who failed to keep out on the dirt where they belonged” which Dad knows better to avoid (3). This confidence in the system reflects a general cultural attitude of complete faith in progress. Moreover, the image of the “giant hand” that created the road and made the freedom of driving possible reframes capitalist industrialism as a divine force, for the image is an ironic reference to Adam Smith’s metaphor of the “invisible hand” which he proposes in his discussion of the social benefits of individual self-interested actions. This use of irony is consistent with Sinclair’s tone throughout the narrative which undermines its often celebratory depiction of capitalist freedom.

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34 There are limitations to this freedom, however, that can result in car crashes or “disasters”, which Buell identifies as the dialectical opposite of “exuberance.” LeMenager also highlights this limitation noting that “the speed at which complex social negotiations have to take place on highways, along with the literally explosive potential of the internal combustion engine, reminds drivers and riders of the physical limitations of human agency” (92).

Significantly, while the narrative is primarily expressed in the third person, the ride is mainly narrated from Bunny’s perspective as a young child and uses second person perspective to include the reader and to accentuate the valorization of driving. The narrative’s modernist use of free indirect speech is evident in the strict reference to Ross as “Dad” throughout the chapter. The fact that the ride is expressed from a child’s point of view suggests an attitude of naivete, which undermines its celebratory account of driving. The narrative even directly points to Bunny’s romanticism, declaring that the young protagonist preferred “seeing the world, in a fashion men had dreamed in the days of Haroun al Raschid—from a magic horse that galloped on top of the clouds, from a magic carpet that went sailing through the air” (6). This stylistic feature creates ironic distance, which ultimately enables the narrative’s paradoxical expressions of oil practices. Moreover, the use of second person corresponds with the young, unworldly voice in the narrative and even suggests that this particular image of oil that is presented through such practices is *narrated* to a third party—the reader—and is, therefore, a construction. For instance, the phrase “but you had no fear, for you knew the magic ribbon would be there” not only invites the reader into the experience but even dictates the reader’s emotions (1). And while second person perspective is used here as a way to submit the reader into an enthrallment with the power and capacity of petro-freedom, the fact that it is expressed through the perspective of a child undercuts the authority of the voice. This narrative voice, which is frequently used in the first third of the novel, including the description of extractive processes in the drilling chapter, undermines the narrative’s valorization of oil and the practices of its production and consumption. Thus, the critique Sinclair presents of the social structures of oil capitalism is developed in parallel with the growth of Bunny’s social consciousness.
While Bunny’s character is granted narrative agency in the chapter, it is, in fact, Dad’s persona as a motorist which enjoys the true agency and freedom in this petro-utopia. Moreover, the characterization of Dad suggests the merging of man and automobile. For instance, stating that the “voice of his horn was sharp and military; there was in it no undertone of human kindness” conflates man and car, for the possessive pronoun in “his horn” links the object to Dad rather than the car (4). Dad blows the horn sternly without being kind and sparing to others for “at fifty miles an hour there is no place for such emotions” (4). This suggestion of man’s mechanization reveals some of the ways in which notions of subjectivity were influenced by the potency and freedom made possible by oil consumption. As Buell argues, “Dad is, in short, an enlivened, positive, capable, always energetic machine himself--one that is fueled by oil. Dad thus is part of a long line of figures styled and self-styled as ‘modern’” (286).

In addition to Ross’s portrayal as a motorist, which introduces him as a free modern subject, his identity as an oil operator renders him an epic individualist and a representative of a specifically American subject in the early twentieth century. Indeed, Ross is the epic-hero romanticized in the story of American oil. For his knowledge of the earth and expertise in discovering and drilling oil has turned him from a mule driver into a multimillionaire. Some readings assume that his character is loosely based on Edward L. Doheny, the California oil tycoon who was responsible for the development of oil production in Southern California and Mexico. However, Sinclair’s sympathetic portrayal of Ross’s character challenges this assumption, for Ross is an oilman who treats his workers better than most oil operators, offering them higher wages and better working conditions, even at the risk of being blacklisted by the Petroleum Employers’ Federation “which ruled the industry very strictly” (169). In fact, Ross’s
more powerful and ruthless partner, Vern Roscoe, “is the character whose biography most closely mirrors Doheny’s,” as Jason Vredenburg suggests (260). Sinclair’s decision to forego the strict characterizations of capitalist villains presented in his other novels, whether intentional or unintentional, illustrates the impact the oil epic of individualism had on the American imaginary. By depicting a sympathetic capitalist protagonist who embodies the American dream and inspires, to a certain extent, admiration and identification, Sinclair produces a panoramic and profound critique of oil capitalism—one that not only exposes the material conditions its structures produce, but also sheds light on oil capitalism’s influence as a cultural logic. In other words, by portraying an admirable, sympathetic capitalist subject, the novel reflects the ways in which subjective agency is ultimately determined by structural forces, so that even a well-intentioned subject who can relate to the working class by virtue of his humble background is nonetheless conditioned by the objective forces of oil capitalism.

Significantly, nonfictional depictions of oil industrialism as an epic-heroic phase in American history are evident not just in corporate propaganda, but also in some historical documentations--including ones that strongly critique the industry. For instance, the notion of heroic individualism is suggested in the writings of the journalist, Ida Tarbell, who was one of the leading muckrakers of the Progressive Era and whose investigative writings helped bring down Standard Oil’s monopoly of the oil industry. Tarbell’s introduction to The Birth of the Oil Industry by Paul H. Giddens deploys the nationalist rhetoric of the previous era, as Buell points out, particularly in her description of the way the industry operated. For example, she states that “things came about under a self-directed, democratic, individualistic system: the degree to which
men who act on the ‘instant need of things’ naturally supplement each other--pull together.”

Tarbell’s account not only distances itself from the social structures of the coal industry, but also embraces the transition into oil industrialism as a triumph of American individualism and democracy.

This union of individual enterprise and democratic opportunity is evoked in Oil! though the descriptions of the company operations which present Ross as a master of the oil fields who can instantly summon an army of laborers, equipped with machines and tools, to pave the roads and prepare the land for digging. As a successful oilman does, Ross manages the work personally and monitors every step. For an oilman must know how to deal with the “shiftlessness of the working-class whom he had to employ” (68). He takes pride in knowing the business well enough to hire the best workers, guaranteeing his investors proper and efficient work. He personally looks after his men (and even pays them for the hours spent waiting for wells to erupt), which reflects positively on their performance. Hence, the proficiency of the workers is perceived as a reflection of the vitality of their employer.

Petro-primitivism:

While the drive along the California highway suggests the conquest of nature through the ability to exceed physical limitation, the portrayal of oil drilling continues this notion of nature’s domestication. Indeed, “The Drilling” chapter presents detailed descriptions of the processes of oil extraction that reframe the relationship between petroindustrialism and nature as one that is nondisruptive, and, at the same time, imply man’s ability to conquer nature through

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36 Quoted in Frederick Buell’s “A Short History of Oil” (281).
petroindustrial practices. This portrayal can be read as a form of “petro-primitivism,” a term Ross Barrett proposes to describe the juxtaposition of primitive and modern images in the early industry’s promotional representations of oil. This juxtaposition serves to conceal petroindustrialism’s disruption of nature and of the human relationship to energy.

Barrett develops his theory through an examination of Henry Niehaus’s “The Driller” sculpture, exhibited at the Drake Memorial in Pennsylvania, which was commissioned by Standard Oil. Niehaus’s sculpture, Barrett argues, “reframed the ultramodern oil industry as an extension of timeless practices rooted in an imagined archaic past” (397). The image of the unclothed male figure digging the earth for oil figures the commodity as a “primordial object” (397). Indeed, the sculpture, I would add, recreates the image of the modern into one that is efficient, individualistic, and in harmony with nature. Furthermore, the omission of the labor involved in the extraction processes, and its replacement by an image of a single, primitive man distances oil practices from the social inequalities of the coal industry. Hence, primitivism was deployed in corporate representations of oil practices to, in Barrett’s words, conceal “the unsettling material conditions of oil capitalism in the beginning of the twentieth century” and to “reframe the chaotic cycles of oil capitalism, to counter conservatism, and to reassert the viability of domestic oil in the face of industrial globalization” (397, 398).37 This primitivism, Barrett contends, “would reappear in later promotional displays and gradually filter into the

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37 Significantly the tendency to frame oil operations as a nondisruptive form of energy is evident in the practices of the early automobile industry, for the first-mass produced cars were designed to resemble horse-carriages, and even “fake horse heads were sold as accessories to attach to the dash of one’s car,” as Gordon Sayre notes in his entry, “Automobile,” in Fueling Culture (location 1312 in Kindle edition).
rhetoric of advertising and publicity” (398).

Petro-primitivism, however, differs from modernist primitivism deployed in the anthropological and artistic representations of Sinclair’s contemporaries. While both forms celebrate the primitive as an ambivalent response to modernity, modernist primitivism’s expression of universalism operated through the appropriation of ethnic others. Petro-primitivism, on the other hand, isn’t an exercise of ethnographic authority; rather, it is an expression of domination over nature. Indeed, it expresses a form of universal identification by depicting petroindustrial practice as a nondisruptive transition in forms of energy extraction, and, in turn, suggests that the oilman is the image of advanced ‘man.’ In other words, by representing oil extraction as continuous and consistent with human energy practices since primitive times, it suggests that striking oil marks a triumph in man’s historic quest to find and produce sufficient energy. Therefore, American petroindustrialism is framed as a turning point in the progress of human civilization, and the American subject is portrayed as a universal representative of ‘modern man.’

If petro-primitivism entails imagining oil industrialism as a natural step in the “linear progression” of human civilization, then, this notion has saturated public consciousness, and manifests itself in representations unrelated to corporate propaganda. In other words, oil’s naturalization has shaped the ways in which oil practices have been socially and culturally imagined beyond the moral justifications of a corporate agenda. Such representations are particularly evident in expressions produced before the formation of peak-oil and environmentalist discourses. Hence, petro-primitivism is engaged even in a novel like Oil! despite the author’s intention to critique the industry and expose the corruption and injustices
within its social structures.

The idea of the domination of nature is especially suggested in the narrative’s phallic imagery evoked in the depiction of oil extractive processes. For instance, the “‘string’ of drilling tools, hollow tubes of the best steel [...that] went down into the earth” describes the penetration of the earth and suggests industrial dominance over nature (51). Hitchcock rightly notes that this “phallic power both consumes nature and forces it into a new configuration” (90). Yet, the embrace of industrial virility paradoxically reframes oil extraction as an interference that is, simultaneously, in harmony with nature. It suggests that oil industrialism is consistent with human utilization of nature throughout history, and therefore, that extractive practices are nondisruptive to the human relationship with nature.

The climactic scene of the gushing well closing the chapter describes the achievement of nature’s domestication signalled by oil’s euphoric eruption as a sexualization and feminization of nature:

There she came! There was a cheer from all hands, and the spectators went flying to avoid the oily spray blown by the wind. They let her shoot for a while, until the water had been ejected higher and higher, way up over the derrick--she made a lovely noise, hissing and splashing, bouncing up and down! (78)

The implication of sexual release of this latent energy—that is, of this combustible material formed in the earth’s crust by centuries of exposure to heat and pressure—marks the acquisition of oil and the triumph of individual enterprise. Yet the image of this copious flow of oil creates the idea that this conquest is beneficial to all members of society, even the earth itself, as the
opening line suggests. As suggested in LeMenager’s analysis of oil’s material flow, the spectacle of this natural and explosive manifestation portrays “a givenness that confers upon it an inherent value disassociated from social relations. . . an illusion of democratic access to such scenes, also an illusion that oil, and its profits, belong to everyone” (92). For although oil in the US is privately owned and is not the property of the public or the nation, “oil has been used to defend private land ownership as the basis of democratic access to social goods within the United States” (93). Indeed, this accessibility to which LeMenager refers is implied in the description of how “the news affected Beach City as if an angel had appeared in a shining cloud and scattered twenty-dollar gold pieces over the streets. You see, Ross-Bankside No. 1 ‘proved up’ the whole north slope; to tens of thousands of investors, big and little, it meant that a hope was turned into glorious certainty” (78). These lines conclude “The Drilling” chapter on a note of certainty of wealth for many, which is captured most vividly in the image of an angel as a benevolent force, like the “giant hand,” but one that distributes wealth equally among people. Moreover, the lines reflect the radical detachment of use/value and exchange/value in the context of oil industrialism, so that the sight of a gushing well is expected to cause land price and the value of other investments to skyrocket in an instant.

However, while the strike boosted numerous businesses, raised land prices, and enriched investors, many of the “little” investors in Beach City, such as the Watkins’ estranged aunt, Mrs. Groarty, do not share in the luck. Like many of her town members, Mrs. Groarty gambled with her money and bought units only to find that the company had ceased drilling on the land because the block next to them didn’t bring much oil, and therefore, “they couldn’t get anyone to continue the drilling” (73). Seeing her fate, Bunny realizes “what Dad meant when he compared
the oil-game to heaven, where many are called and few are chosen” (73). Therefore, while oil is linked to notions of equal opportunity and democratic access to wealth, symbolized by the spectacle of the gusher and oil’s material image, the social realities of many of the spectators who join the “oil-game” reveal that in a capitalist society oil money ends up in the hands of a “few.”

Juxtaposed with the divine strike in Beach City is another spectacular scene of oil drilling depicting the strike in Paradise—the ranch Ross buys from the Watkins family. Here, the forceful gushing of the well causes the cemented cap to explode, and the well starts shooting until “the whole mass of oil up in the air burst into flame!” (160). This “most amazing spectacle” exemplifies Buell’s notion of “disaster,” existing in dialectical relation to oil’s “exuberance” (161). For during this “golden era” of oil, oil fires did not culturally register as environmental tragedies; rather, they were understood merely as financial losses. Therefore, as expressed in the novel, “oil fires are the terror of the industry” (161). This conception relates to the prominence of “accidents” as a motif in the American story of oil and the idea that accidents may result in unsuspectingly striking oil, and, as an equal possibility, may cause the burning of a well and the loss of millions of dollars. A less dramatic but still impactful disaster involves the wasteful gushing of another well that is difficult to tap, “losing [the owner] thousands of dollars every minute” (26). Such disasters might even bring lawsuits “for damages to houses, clothing, chickens, goats, cows, cabbages, sugar-beets, and automobiles which had skidded into ditches on

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38 The fire scene is depicted more tragically in There Will Be Blood than Oil!. While the film, still, aestheticizes the spectacle of the fire, the explosion causes H.W.—the adopted son of the protagonist, Daniel Plainview—to permanently lose his hearing.
too well-greased roads,” costing the owner even more money (27). Nevertheless, the image of a well spraying uncontrollably and staining everything around it, increases the town’s speculative frenzy, as many gather at late night auctions to sell leases and lots at fabulous prices.

Thus, disasters registered differently during the first decades of the industry than in the late twentieth and the twenty first centuries. For disasters today recall oil spills, fires and gas flares that cause environmental pollutions and extinctions, and contribute to climate change and the irreversible alteration of the earth’s surface. Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann take note of this difference in their analysis of filmed scenes of a real oil fire in Baku, Azerbaijan, collected in the 1896 film, Oil Wells of Baku: Close View. Oil fires during the time the incidents took place, they explain, were viewed as “typical, if not ‘natural,’ and unthreatening,” and the “only disastrous result mentioned by historians of the period relate to financial loss, not environmental consequence” (35). For when a disaster becomes a spectacular image, “the notion of spectacle obscures or even erases ecological readings” (35). Similarly, Oil! narrates such accidents as fascinating public spectacles and doesn’t offer an environmentalist perspective as would be expected from a contemporary critique of oil industrialism. The novel’s reflection of the obliviousness to oil’s environmental harm as a common cultural attitude of the time highlights the perception of oil extraction as a practice that is environmentally nonthreatening.

While the figuration of oil as a natural commodity is most effectively conveyed through the novel’s depiction of the oil strike and the sexualization of oil extraction, petro-primitivism is deployed in other moments in “The Drilling” chapter which similarly uses imagery that frames oil drilling as a natural process. This framing is evident in the opening of the chapter which describes the clamor of the dozens of trucks, cars, and machines brought to Paradise on the first
day of the company’s operation: “All this [work] required continuous clamor of horns; you would have thought some huge flock of prehistoric birds [...] had descended upon Guadalupe Pass, and were hopping along, crying: ‘Honk! Honk! Honk!’” (51). The image of “prehistoric birds” in this metaphor reimagines the trucks and cars as natural objects and links them to a prehistoric era, and, in turn, indirectly suggests the naturalization of the processes of oil drilling. This primitivist and naturalist imagery is an aesthetic feature of the valorization of oil extraction that continues on in the depiction of oil drilling. For instance, the image of “the blunt steel teeth” that “ate into the solid rock” as the tubes go into the earth personifies these industrial objects and gives them a life of their own. And the use of “‘mud-hogs,’ snorting and puffing” to keep the drilling machines wet as they dive deep down also reimagines elements of the oil apparatus as animalistic figures. Such petro-primitivist depictions suggest both a historical continuity within oil industrialism, and, more importantly, that it is a practice that is not in conflict with nature.

Similarly, the celebration of the steam engine’s industrial capacity as it is used to turn the steel tubing links the energy it produces to primitive energy and suggests linearity in the evolution of energy forms: “Some engine, that! Fifty horsepower, the cathead-man would say; and you would imagine fifty horses harnessed to an old-fashioned turn-table with a pole, such as our ancestors employed to draw up water from a well, or to run a primitive threshing-machine” (66). The measurement of energy in horsepower units not only reflects a consciousness of this revolutionary capacity but also contextualizes this power within primitive forms of energy. In addition, the image of the “primitive threshing-machine” also links the energy produced in the age of oil to previous forms of energy. This rephrasing of industrial extractive processes offer a
new conception of the modern, one that is harmonious with nature and consistent with the evolution of human relationship with fossil fuel energy.

Thus, linking US oil production to the history of primitive “man” suggests a universalization of the American values of individualism and freedom, framed as essential to the progression of humanity. And, in turn, the American subject as the agent of petromodernity is reinscribed to embody the universal, developed man. Indeed, American petromodernity is imagined to bring civilization to global peripheries and to include them in the history of western development.

**Petro-spiritualism:**

I have argued that the deployment of supernaturalism in oil fiction, in which oil is often materially absent from the narrative, is tied to the mystification of oil as magical commodity. Sinclair’s novel consistently portrays oil in its material form; nevertheless, superstition remains a prominent theme in the novel. This deployment is evident in the sensational story of the rise of Eli Watkin as the “Prophet of the Third Revelation” who is known to perform public miracle healings and who, late in the novel, claims to have been rescued by “three angels”—thirty-five days after he supposedly drowned (476). Significantly, the formation of Eli’s doctrine is intricately connected to Ross’s prosperous investment in Paradise—the ranch Ross buys from the

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39 It is worth noting that narratives of oil industrialism engage history differently in the US than in the global periphery. For, whereas oil industrialism is reframed as historically continuous with primitive practices, in nonwestern producing regions it is imagined as the beginning of “History,” and as a welcomed disruption in the ways of living, as I argue in the following chapters.
unsuspecting Watkins family. For its teachings are, in fact, first articulated by Ross when he pretends to follow a secret doctrine he calls the “True Word” as a way win over Mr. Watkins, Eli’s fanatically religious father, and buy the family land. Moreover, Eli’s subsequent rise to power, as the messenger of the “True Word,” parallels Ross’s financial growth as Ross becomes one of the biggest independent operators in the country. These temporal and spatial links between supernatural beliefs and oil production in the novel’s plot reflect a connection between oil and the notion of magic as a mode of interpretation.

In fact, during the second half of the nineteenth century, when oil production in the US was in its early stages, superstitious methods were widely used by oil prospectors to help locate oil. Brian Fehner discusses the prominence of such methods, in his book, *Finding Oil: the Nature of Petroleum Geology, 1959-1920*, noting the popularity of individuals whom he describes as “charismatics,” who claimed to possess extraordinary abilities to find oil. One example is of an Italian woman named Augusta Del Pio Luogo, who claimed to experience “little shocks passing from her feet to her head, causing distinct pain” whenever she passed a field containing oil (29). Frehner notes that “her successes were so remarkable that oil companies began hiring her” (29). Another woman, known as Madame Virginia, claimed the ability to locate oil simply by talking to the landowners without even seeing the landscape. Similarly, “the x-ray-eyed boy” claimed to “receiv[e] visions of oil beneath the ground at a very early age” (30). Frehner attributes this phenomenon to “the culture of chance that had been Americans’ dominant idiom,” explaining that “Divination and magical rites function as performative acts, not prelogical or prescientific behavior. In the oil industry divining rods and other forms of doodlebugs [which charismatics used] reflected people’s recognition that chance mattered greatly in their potential opportunities”
Frehner, however, misses the link between these practices and superstition as a cultural attitude, as he confines his interpretation to the notion of chance. This inattention to the prominence of supernaturalism as a system of meaning in the oil fields results from his disregard of the material and cultural properties of the oil commodity and the connections between them.

Rochelle Raineri Zuck’s study of one of the early methods of finding oil, on the other hand, traces the link between American spiritualism of the late nineteenth century and the emergence of the oil industry, as she argues that the two phenomena mutually influenced each other. Zuck’s study follows the biography of the Christian spiritualist, Abraham James, whose spirit-guides presumably spoke to him through psychometrical episodes, through which Indian spirits communicated signals revealing to him oil-bearing land. The appropriation of Native American culture in this spiritualist evocation of Native spirits is consistent with the primitivist imagining of oil production. It is claimed that through these psychometrical episodes, James was able to discover several oil wells in Pennsylvania, including the historical well, Harmonial no. 1. “James and his spirit-guides,” Zuck notes, “were part of a larger cast of characters who populated the early oil fields and derived their authority not from geological expertise, but from spiritual, sensory, or extrasensory sources” (329). Moreover, the spiritualists were able to find an outlet within the industry’s practices to advance their beliefs and remain relevant in the age of industrialism and science. With the turn of the century, however, these spiritualist practices were replaced by scientific and geological methods, and subsequently, the industry sought to omit its embarrassing superstitious beginnings by reframing it in historical accounts as folklore and fraud. Thus, the relation is omitted from oil’s historiography, although evidence of it exists in
nineteenth century spiritualist publications, newspapers and even popular accounts of the oil industry.

The social acceptance of supernaturalism as a system of meaning explaining extractive methods reflect the way the mythos of oil registered culturally. For the supernatural logic of the psychometrical episodes corresponds with oil’s logic as a magical commodity bringing instant and laborless wealth. Further, oil’s material absence from the public eye and its sudden eruption from the ground, often by accident, gives oil a mystical aura that parallels the superstitious manifestations of spirits. As Zuck notes, spiritualism and oil industrialism "were both invested in a belief in the unseen, whether in the form of deceased loved ones or of underground oil reserves" (316). Indeed, superstition was deployed to make sense of the challenges that the oil commodity presented to the logic of cause and effect and to linear narratives of development. Thus, the link between the religious wave and oil industrialism is not a temporal and geographical coincidence; rather, it relates to the physical and cultural properties of the oil commodity.

Oil! engages this interrelationship between the spread of spiritualism and the expansion of oil industrialism in the story of Eli’s devised doctrine. The message of the True Word is instrumental to the growth of Ross’s business, as its teachings help Ross gain acceptance from the Watkins and the community to operate in Paradise. The link is best represented when, at Ross’s request, Eli publically blesses the first well launched in Paradise, praying in the presence of the members of the town that “this well should bring forth treasure” (and, thus, reinforcing the
idea of democratic access to wealth) (150). At the same time, Eli owes his success to Ross who, not only is the real inventor of the True Word, but also offers his financial support.

In fact, Eli’s elevation to “Prophet of the Third Revelation” is merely accidental. For during the second time Ross mentions his secret doctrine to the Watkins, his intention is to imply that its awaited messenger will be Mr. Watkin’s eldest son, Paul, claiming that its message will spread through an unexpected, black sheep figure. Ross makes the claim to appease Bunny who cares for Paul and to sway Mr. Watkins from exiling his son and abusing his children. However, Eli, who is believed by his family to have the ability to heal the sick and who frequently experiences religious seizures, jumps at the opportunity and claims his position as the leader of the True Word.40 Significantly, Eli rises to power by accident, in a similar fashion to the “accident” of striking oil and becoming rich. Moreover, like the epic narrative of oil capitalism which Ross embodies, “this True Word was to be revealed through the minds of men, and would be a message of freedom” (119). And naming the doctrine, the “True Word,” implies the power of a singular message or concept, which parallels oil’s exceptionalism as the commodity that uniquely brings instant and laborless wealth.

Once established, Eli’s doctrine quickly spreads in Paradise. And with the use of wireless broadcasts, “Eli’s preaching had thus become one of the major features of Southern California life. You literally couldn’t get away from him if you tried” (439). The message of the True Word mainly targeted the poor, and many of its followers are workers in Ross’s company and

40 Michael K. Walonen notes that Eli is based upon Aimee Semple McPherson, an evangelical based in Los Angeles who accumulated great wealth from the expansion of her ‘hellfire and damnation’ ministry effected particularly by radio broadcasts.
their families. In fact, Ross and his partner, Roscoe, financially support Eli in order to use his religion to distract the workers from focusing on their social conditions.

Eli’s dependency on Ross is not just financial. He has gained many followers by using public spectacles and by constructing fantastical narratives that formally parallel the spectacles of oil drilling in the region. For instance, Eli performs public miracle healings and spends large amounts of money “for spectacular effects” to captivate the attention of his audience and to affirm the power of his church (380). Like a “third-rate movie,” he uses “the bright lights and the silver trumpets and the heavenly ruptures” as props to astonish his crowd (380). Thus, what the church performed was Big Magic. Not only did it thrill the believers, and bring swarms of people to town, but it caught the fancy of the newspapers, and they rushed reporters to write up the event. Many new miracles were wrought, and many crutches hung up; and in the midst of the excitement the Lord vouchsafed a fresh sign of His Mercy. (379-80)

The church’s methods in gaining attention and in captivating its audience parallel the frenzy that the spectacle of oil derricks and erupting wells create in these small towns. Moreover, the notion of miracles and “Big Magic” is used to help make sense of each phenomenon. And like Ross’s business which transformed paradise into an industrial town, Eli’s church “put Paradise upon the map of California” (379). The establishment and expansion of the True Word is, then, geographically, conceptually, and formally linked to oil industrialism.

This link is further suggested in the ending of the novel when, toward the end of his life, Ross falls victim to the schemes of a “Spiritualist,” named Mrs. Olivier, whom he meets in Paris.
and marries soon after. Ross finds his own form of spiritualism when, with the help of Mrs. Olivier, he communicates with the spirit of his dead mother. And, “very soon he was learning all the patterns of the Spiritualists, taking it as seriously as a religion” (474). When Ross dies, Mrs. Olivier destroys her will of one million dollars and, thus, inherits fifty percent of Ross’s wealth, leaving only twenty-five each for Bunny and his sister, Bertie. Ross’s turn to superstition karmically brings the downfall of his legacy, for his children lose the company shares to his widow and his partner, Roscoe. Thus, Ross, the creator of magic, ironically falls victim to superstitious connivances. In addition to being a karmic misfortune, the abrupt collapse of Ross’s business paradoxically suggests Ross’s redemption, which is consistent with the narrative’s sympathetic portrayal of his character. For Ross is distanced from, although having once been involved in, the imperialistic expansion of the big oil corporations and the international spread of oil capitalism which brings the novel to its bleak ending.

In fact, it is only after Ross dies and his empire collapses that, for the first time, oil is explicitly described as an evil force. In the novel’s closing paragraph, oil figures as a “black and cruel demon . . . which roams the earth, crippling the bodies of men and women, and luring the nations to destruction by visions of unearthed wealth, and the opportunity to enslave and exploit labor” (548). At this point in the narrative, the predominant discourses that valorize oil are discarded, and oil materializes as a sinister force that consumes and destroys. This narrative transition signals the triumph of oil capitalism and the political and economic rise of the big oil corporations, both domestically and internationally. Further, this victory parallels the rise of spiritualism marked by the loss of Ross’ wealth, and, in turn, it reinforces the connection between superstitious tendencies and oil industrialism. Thus, the death of the novel’s epic hero is
a thematic manifestation of the formal dispelling of the narrative’s celebratory discourse of oil, for it suggests the death of the ideals and values that Ross’s success story represents in American culture.

This formal transition, suggested in the articulation of oil’s evil, is also brought about by another major death in the novel: the brutal killing of Sinclair’s socialist hero, Paul Watkins. Bunny idolizes Paul from the moment he first meets him as a young boy and takes him as a moral inspiration throughout his life. Through the story of Paul and Bunny’s relationship, the novel thus explores the political realities produced by the logic of oil economics, from the crushing of unions, the attack on the press, and the increasing political influence of the oil magnates. Hence, Paul’s death symbolizes the suppression of the socialist cause in the country, particularly with oil capitalism’s domestic and international expansion. When Bunny arrives back in the US after his father’s death in Paris, he learns that Paul had been beaten by a Red-baiting mob that crashed the Industrial Workers of the World Rally in California. The book’s final scene, which narrates Bunny’s last moments with Paul at the hospital, is presented through stylistic fragmentation, as the narrative shifts multiple times from descriptions of Paul in his final moments to the sounds of Radio VXZ, blasting from a neighboring window. As Paul whispers his final unconscious words of incoherent Russian phrases of the revolution, the sound of a jazz song repeatedly intercuts the scene. As LeMenager notes, this “rare nod to modernist technique,” suggests that the “controlling voice of the novel, at this point an earnest socialist youth, is silenced by popular lyrics: ‘What do I do/?I toodle-doodle-doo,/I toodle-doodle-doodle, doodle-doo!’” (70). Significantly, this modernist fragmentation is deployed only after the failure
of idealism, as embodied in the deaths of Ross and Paul, who, although they stood for radically opposing ideals, maintained a relationship of mutual respect.

**Petro-imperialism:**

The idea of American power is premised not just on the infrastructure of modernity, embodied in the novel’s depiction of an American way of life predicated on oil, but also “on an articulation of geopolitical and geocultural reach,” as Hitchcock suggests (92). Indeed, while oil industrialism did not create American capitalism, it produced a form of capitalism that brought about America’s rise to world-power status. Oil! demonstrates this relation by presenting the material conditions created by the oil economy, as well as the symbolic order of oil logic. And while the narrative keeps the major political events that brought the internationalization of the industry in the background, it suggests the inevitability of global expansion by depicting and critiquing capitalism’s logic of primitive accumulation.

Indeed, the internationalization of the oil industry was integral to the rise of American hegemony and the spread of US imperialism. This form of imperialism, with the exploitation of oil at its center, brought the circulation of commodities, values, and ways of living to a global level enabling America’s imperialistic expansion in the era of globalization. Such values as individualism, democracy, universalism—or, more simply, Americanism—that mutually shaped

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41 As expressed in the entry on “America” by Donald Pease in Fueling Culture 101 Words for Energy and Environment (ed. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel and Patricia Yaeger).
and were shaped by narratives of oil discovery and production, thus carried the seeds of American imperialism. As David Harvey explains, the universalization of American values of individualism and opportunism is essential to the legitimation of US oil imperialism and the growth of transnational capitalism. For US imperialism used the “spaceless universalization of its own values” to legitimize its imperialistic practices (55). Indeed, at the center of this distinct form of imperial universalism are notions of democratic opportunity and self-determination, which animate the official narratives of oil. Hence, various UNESCO studies as well as the UN Declaration of Human Rights pushed for “a universalism of private property and of individual rights” as Harvey notes (55).

Timothy Mitchell highlights the impact of the universalization of American values in the context of oil imperialism in his book, Carbon Democracy, through a discussion of the idea of “self-reliance” advocated in the speeches of President Woodrow Wilson in the early century. Mitchell explains that

The new call for self-determination seemed at first to be a way of generalizing this ability to make effective democratic claims to people in other parts of the world. In practice, however, it did something different. The doctrines and devices of self-determination turned an apparently democratic impulse into a set of universal claims that circulated rapidly around the world, but also very thinly. The claims had certain important uses, but only at specific sites. At the same time, the mechanism of self-determination could be used to defeat the kinds of democratic claims being successfully advanced in Europe. (68)
The American story of oil as an achievement of capitalist individualism, exceptionalism and democratic access to wealth, which are central values in the predominant discourses of oil during the early twentieth century, affirmed and valorized oil-based lifestyles. As Buell puts it, “American exceptionalism leaves the frontier and invests itself in the modernity of the US, and the gap between it and the world outside modernity becomes reinscribed as a gulf between advanced and developing or backward places. This new societal exceptionalism promotes a new notion of individualism” (286). Thus, the novel’s investment in oil aesthetics and its valorization of oil practices delineate the ways in which being in modernity, living in oil, and American exceptionalism are interconnected forms of consciousness that shape one another.

Understanding oil’s imbrication in all forms of American social and economic enterprises is essential to any reading of oil fiction. For the American story of oil has had a profound impact in introducing new cultural values and ideals in non-American locations and, thus, shaping multiple experiences of petromodernity, particularly in the regions affected by the expansion of the American industry. Indeed, the impact of the corporate rhetoric of oil, explored thoroughly in the novel, continues to shape other national narratives of the transition into petroindustrialism. Therefore, as one of the earliest texts about the encounter with oil, the novel introduces a useful framework for other petrofictions concerned with both addressing official narratives of oil and expressing a new set of values and structures of feeling that are profoundly shaped by petromodernity. By framing oil practices as an achievement of freedom, universal progress, and self-determination through the story of its sympathetic protagonist, the novel offers unique insight into the contradictions within the discourse of oil capitalism. In the next chapter, where I examine the first volume in Abdelrahman Munif’s Cities of Salt quintet, I trace some of the basic
structures and forms of expressions characteristic of oil fiction, as introduced in *Oil!*, and I explore the ways in which the values and ideals generated by oil’s mystification register and function in the oil-rich deserts of the Arabian Peninsula.
Chapter Two:

Petro-industrial Transformations in Abdelrahman Munif’s Cities of Salt

As demonstrated in the introduction to this dissertation, Amitav Ghosh’s seminal essay, “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel,” has catalyzed an emerging interest in literary expressions that respond to the pervasiveness of oil in the twentieth and twenty-first century. The essay was essentially written as a review of the first two volumes of Cities of Salt—Abdelrahman Munif’s quintet of novels that dramatize the birth of a transnational oil industry in the Arabian Peninsula and the oil-induced environmental and cultural upheavals that followed. Although one of the main objectives of the review was, in fact, to turn attention to Munif’s works as representative texts in petrofiction, not enough serious critical engagements of the novel have been produced that examine his work within the world context of petrofiction. Although some critics have gestured toward the centrality of Munif’s writing in the study of oil fiction—Graeme Macdonald, for instance, recognizes the vital presence of Cities of Salt within the “transnational literary line” of petroliterature that “span[s] one hundred years to the present”—the only serious study that considers Munif’s affiliation with a cluster of world writers who address the destructive forces of global capitalism and petro-imperialism is Rob Nixon’s exceptional study in postcolonial ecocriticism, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor, in which Nixon examines the forms of violence suffered by marginalized populations and the ecological destruction inflicted by new forms of Western imperialism (31). His book
considers “the political, imaginative, and strategic role of environmental writer-activists” and the representational power of their fictional and nonfictional writings in bringing to global attention what he terms as “slow violence”\textsuperscript{42} in the ecologies of the global South, by setting Munif alongside writers such as Ken Saro-Wiwa, Arundhati Roy, Wangari Maathai, and Jamaica Kincaid (15). In his reading of the first volume of the Cities of Salt quintet, Nixon even traces some stylistic connections between Munif’s writing and other works by writers such as Émile Zola and Ousmane Sembene in the way that they are all “positioned at some dramatic interference between [sic] capitalism’s primitive accumulations, an assailed environment, and an insurrectionary labor movement” which results in their treatment of “orality as an imaginative resource and individual character as secondary to collective metamorphoses” (88). This expansive, transnational context from which Nixon writes about political and imaginative activism against new forms of imperialism is a useful model for a productive approach to oil fictions.

For examining the novel’s representation of the oil encounter in the Arabian Peninsula in relation to other works that engage the theme of oil extraction and commodification highlights the ways in which the aesthetic expression of shared material experiences relating to oil have produced a set of transnational stylistic patterns. Reading Cities alongside oil novels by two other writers underscores the text’s contribution to the critique of the way oil is culturally imagined and politically narrated. Cities addresses a particular stage in the history of oil: the

\textsuperscript{42} Nixon describes slow violence as a form of ecological destruction that is slow and long-lasting, and therefore, “remains outside our flickering attention spans-and outside the purview of a spectacle-driven corporate media” (6).
internationalization of the industry and the global production and consumption of oil; it traces the growth of oil industrialism and its transnational expansion beyond production in the United States which began in the late nineteenth century and increased dramatically by the early decades of the twentieth century. Hence, while Sinclair’s *Oil!* demonstrates the beginnings of the oil industry in America, Munif’s novel shows how the ideas associated with the discourse of the early industry have travelled and been adopted with the international expansion of oil capitalism. A productive reading of the novel, then, would attend to the ways in which the encounter with oil in marginal Arab regions creates new global and globalizing experiences, as these spaces enter into national and international networks of trade and are integrated—however unevenly—into a global capitalist economy.

The examination of the novel’s transnational scope, however, must be pursued while attending to the regional specificity of Munif’s writing. Indeed, a lack of awareness of the cultural specificity of the novel’s aesthetic form is the fundamental reason for John Updike’s misreading of *Cities of Salt* in his infamous review published in the *New Yorker* in 1988—a year after the publication of the English translation. Updike takes issue with a number of stylistic choices, or what he views as limitations, that make the author “insufficiently Westernized to produce a narrative that feels much like what we call a novel” (117). First, he criticizes the narrative voice, describing it as “that of a campfire explainer” (117). He, then, implies that Munif’s characters are impenetrable, unsympathetic and undeveloped, claiming that the “characters are rarely fixed in our minds by a face or a manner or a developed motivation; no central figure develops enough reality to attract our sympathetic interest” (119). “The novel’s people and events,” Updike concludes, “are seen as if through a sandstorm, blurred by a hopeless
communal grief and sense of affront” (119). As to the plot resolution, “what intelligible conflicts and possibilities do emerge remain serenely unresolved” (119). Updike, then, follows the critique with a review of Anton Shamma’s Arabesque, in which he praises the novel for, by comparison Munif, “show[ing] no lack of sophistication in the ways of the literary West: his novel about Palestinians is intricately conceived and beautifully written, with epigraphs from Clive James, George Bernard Shaw, and John Barth” (119). His review essentially praises Shamma for citing the great Western novelists and paying tribute to the Western literary tradition.

Updike clearly overlooks the regional specificity of Munif’s writing, for he misses the significance of its deployment of both the bedouin oral culture and the theme of transience in representing petromodernity’s spatial reorientation and its impact on traditional social practices and movements, including those of people, trade and stories. In fact, Munif’s regionalist approach to depicting the experiences of the most peripheral areas of the Arab region (peripheral in both a geographical and a literary sense) with global capitalism—i.e., deploying oral culture and experimenting with language by mixing standard Arabic with colloquial—has transformed the generic inheritance of the modern Arabic novel. For as Roger Allen states, in response to Updike’s claim, the “evocations of traditional narrative, become, at the hands of the modern novelist writing in Arabic, fresh contributions to the development of that continually innovating narrative type that is the novel” (9). Moreover, the absence of a central character allows an investment in the collective, which corresponds to the novel’s representation of the emergence of a working class in the oil city and the formation of a new social consciousness that is different from previous tribal and communal relations. Focusing on the collective helps to illustrate the consequences of petromodernity on a people, their culture and their way of life, and it is, in fact,
paramount to the novel’s stylistic experimentation, as it enables the epic sweep necessary to dramatize the consequences of the transition into petromodernity. Ultimately, Updike’s critique misses the novel’s engagement with the theme of transience depicted in the dialectical treatment of a pre-oil past and a petro-urbanized present, which shows how oil industrialism’s alteration of physical environment marginalizes and reconceptualizes elements of traditional life that have long been rooted in time and place.43

In fact, even the more positive early reviews of the novel tended to overlook Munif’s regionalist aesthetics. The one published in the Village Voice, for instance, describes the novel as “history and allegory,” explaining that “By abandoning the ‘plot,’ Munif comes closer to history while subverting the official Saudi version” (15). Such a reading is, indeed, reductive. For while the novel offers a counter-narrative of the history of petromodernization in the region and gives fictional form to suppressed events—such as, the uprooting of communities, the transformation of their land, and the workers’ struggle of the sixties—Munif’s engagement with history is far more complex than a simple alternative to official accounts; as Stefan Meyer states, his intention

43 Updike’s review has stirred a number of responses calling out its cultural hegemony—the most recent one expressed by the translator, Peter Theroux, who explains in an online post that, among the other biased statements made about Munif’s novel, Updike “felt let down by the emphasis on oil instead of the story” (“Abdelrahman Munif and the Uses of Oil”). Theroux responds to this by stating that oil was merely “a plot mechanism that allowed the author to create a Balzacian panorama cast in a society—the eastern Arabian Peninsula—that had never found its way into modern literature in any language” Need citation info While I disagree with his understatement of the centrality of oil to the novel’s structure, Theroux is right to argue against readings that find value only in the historical content of the novel and overlook its aesthetic achievements.
is not to write social criticism. In fact, Munif himself has expressed in a video interview his effort to build a particular type of relationship between reader and work, one in which the reader is not presented with “preordained conclusions” but is rather made “aware that he is reading a work of fiction,” suggesting a more dynamic way of engaging history by drawing attention to its fictiveness and to the limitations of narrative. Thus, the reading I propose considers the novel’s performance as a counter-narrative of history and examines how the novel functions as a critique of the dominant discourses of oil and the official accounts of the industry’s history. As this chapter will argue, its critique is stylistically achieved by undermining the narrative’s realism through its presentation of dual temporalities within the narrative’s timeline as well as its deployment of nostalgic and supernatural language.

While there are a number of other notable Arabic literary works loosely dealing with oil, some even translated into English (a fact that has been largely unnoticed even in scholarship on petrofictions) *Cities of Salt* is one of only a handful of texts that address the oil boom.\(^{44}\) *Cities of Salt*

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\(^{44}\) For instance, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* by the Egyptian author, Nawal El-Saadawi, explores the gender politics in patriarchal capitalist societies governed by oil-rich dictatorial regimes, as it narrates the professional and spiritual journeys of a female archaeologist who goes on a leave of absence and disappears from her work and her family and performs spatial transgressions in a state characterized by the omnipresence of oil. Another work is by the Lebanese poet Nizar Gabbani who explores a similar theme to Saadawi’s novel in his poem, “Love and Oil,” where he addresses the issue of female sexual exploitation in *nouveau-riche* societies empowered by oil wealth. Ghassan Kanafani’s *Men in the Sun* is also about the oil boom in the Gulf and is set in a world where movement is restricted by the territorialization of newly formed states, telling the journeys of four Palestinian men who attempt to migrate to Kuwait in a smuggler’s car trunk in order to find jobs in the country’s flourishing oil industry, but do not survive past the checkpoint and die in the trunk from heat. Through four disruptive narratives, the novel demonstrates their
Salt thus offers unparalleled detail about the abrupt transition into petromodernization and the preeminence of the force of change on the communities affected by oil extraction, as oil undermines their cultural identity and traditional beliefs and robs them their sense of belonging to the land. The thrust into a new economic system centered on petroleum disrupts the social and economic structures that shaped the culture of the desert-dwellers and structured their patterns of movement. Furthermore, the prevalence of the fetishization of oil in the new era undermines the culture of the bedouin and the oasis community and destroys the natural resources that sustained them for centuries, rendering their social practices out of date, while displacing them both physically and culturally. Hence, the introduction of petroindustrialism in the region creates new temporal and spatial structures characterized by the mystification of oil as a commodity that brings instant wealth and modernization and its displacement of the natural resources of water and trees that had sustained the communities for centuries.

The novel first establishes the history of the oasis and the desert, suggesting the characters’ sense of rootedness and their harmonious existence with their environment that is structured by a cyclical form of time, and then moves on abruptly to dramatize the formation of a new and imposing form of space, the oil city, which violently displaces the desert community and destroys their land, rendering their lifestyles, values, and cultures outdated in the age of oil. I suggest, therefore, that the novel demonstrates the temporal and spatial forms of alienation of the dispossessed communities from the moment that the American oil prospectors arrive in the desert. My reading focuses on the rupture propelled by the community’s entry into the age of oil experiences of a double sense of exile as Palestinians living in the realities of the post 1967 war.
as it relates to the struggle to find new forms of expression—a prominent characteristic of Arabic modernism—in the narrativization of the oil encounter. This disruption manifests itself in a narrative tension that appears on both a thematic level, through nostalgic reconceptualizations of history and culture, which are considered essential to expressions of identity, and on a formal level, in the negotiation between traditional Arabic forms of narration—namely, realist narrative style—and modernist techniques.

I will begin my analysis of Cities of Salt by examining the nostalgic narrativization of the past as exemplified in the romanticized depiction of Wadi al-Uyoun in order to suggest a link between the ideal past and the visions of modernization and wealth shaped by the fetishization of oil. These forms of expression indicate two different forms of life: a nomadic semi-agrarian life and a way of life centered around petroleum production. I argue that the representation of the transition into petromodernity produces two notions of time in the narrative: one that is seasonal and organically linked to nature, in which the narrative uses nostalgia to evoke a mystified sense of place and history, and another form that represents “the accelerated time of petromodernity’s primitive accumulation” and uses the language of mystery and uncertainty about change. My discussion of the spatial transformation in Cities will focus on the change in the relationship between time and space, as the two notions of time are related to space in distinct ways. Cyclical time is directly linked to physical space—as seasonal rain brings life to the oasis and a means of

45 I am referring to Nixon’s brief discussion in Slow Violence of the profound rupture in time accompanying the representation of the transition from oasis culture to “a culture dominated by oil time’s linear narrative” (80). My interest is to examine the stylistic consequences of the rupture, as well as the connection between this feature and the oil novel’s critique of the dominant discourses of oil and modernization.
living for the inhabitants—while the second form of time bears an inconsistent relation to space, which is linked to the arbitrary existence of oil in the land. Further, I will demonstrate how the valorization of oil producing land creates new experiences of movement and new structures of feeling linked to the change in the relation between time and space. My reading of Munif’s counter-history, then, does not simply rest with the inclusion of repressed events, but also take into consideration how these events impact the spatial politics of the region and introduce new social relations. Thus, examining the transformation of the spatial-temporal dialectic and its relation to place leads to understanding the novel’s representation of how an oil-fuelled modernity is transplanted into regions of the Arabian Gulf, and how it consequently transforms the geographic, economic, social and cultural landscapes.

A Dual Sense of Time:

The beginning of the novel presents us with a detailed description of communal life prior to petroindustrialism as a way to highlight the destructive consequences of the oil industry on the ecology and culture of the desert. Alert to these consequences, which have been suppressed in national histories and official accounts of the industry, Munif seeks to bring to life stories about the dislocation of bedouin and oasis communities and the effacement of their culture.46 He

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46 Robert Vitalis briefly refers to this issue in America’s Kingdom, as he points out that it has been misleadingly suggested in official narratives that the Aramco enclave was built away from the oasis towns, when, in fact, the company was located in the midst of an oasis in Hofuf “where most of the sedentary population of the province resided” (54).
engages this theme in *Cities* by depicting the alteration in the movements of people, their stories, and trade that come as a result of petromodernity’s spatial transformation of the desert and its destruction of tribal social relations. He discusses this issue in his nonfictional book, *Democracy First, Democracy Always!*. In the chapter, “The Arab World and the New World Order,” Munif claims that for many centuries and up until the discovery and production of oil, the way of life in the region did not inhibit or restrain people’s movements, nor did the alterations in national borders affect their lifestyles, except to the extent that it related to grazing and water. The inhabitants belonged to a single tribe or several related tribes, and the social relations among them, including rights to mobility, residency, territorialization and citizenship, were dictated by common customs. Therefore, it was never necessary to create official and final borders in those regions until the discovery of oil.

In the novel, Munif represents the tribal relations that structured life in the desert by presenting life before petroindustrialization as a pristine state of nature through a portrayal of a mystical oasis called Wadi al-Uyoun. Most readings of Munif’s idealization of pre-industrial life have relied on the myth of the “Golden Age.” For instance, Robert Vitalis suggests that Munif conjures up a vision of the past and “turns to one of the most familiar tropes in western literature: the garden paradise that exists as if outside of time,” in order to dramatize how the arrival of the Americans to Wadi al-Uyoun “set history in motion in *Cities of Salt*, and history sweeps away the townsmen and their families” (1, 2). Ellen McLarney follows a similar pattern of interpretation of the theme of Paradise Lost but links the deployment to late classical Arabic poetry that expresses nostalgia for the desert and the past, in which “poets, separated in time and space from their cultural origins, imagined an idyllic landscape in Najd—[the central region of
the Arabian Gulf]—as a kind of Arcadia” (191). Indeed, a complex romanticization is deployed in the dramatization of the violent deracination of bedouin communities and their transition from a nomadic and semi-agrarian economy into an economy centralized on petroleum. However, it is important to further examine this adaptation and its function in the novel, specifically as it relates to the treatment of time and the conceptions of tradition and modernity, which are among the predominant preoccupations in the modern Arabic novel. For the idealization of the past, as represented in Munif’s romanticized depiction of the oasis, complicates the narration of the present and blurs the lines commonly established to divide such notions as past and present, tradition and modernity, superstition and technology. This treatment of the past and the present is suggested in the depiction of the two forms of time that permeate the novel’s narration: the first relies on a romanticized perspective of the past by envisioning a way of life that oscillates between an ideal lifestyle and a more realistic, yet still harmonious one; the second, relies on fantasies of the future that are produced by the shock of change, the promises of infinite wealth, and the sudden and instant transformations yielded by petromodernity. Thus, nostalgia is not so much endorsed as it is framed as a product of the abrupt transition into modernity.

The two forms of time conflict in the narrativization of the oil encounter. This is thematized in the disruptive displacement of bedouin communities, and it is dramatized on a formal level in the transition from a straightforward, linear narration that focuses on the social lives of the characters and expresses communal judgement—what I will describe as “communal, realist narration”—to a disintegrated narrative about the transformation of the land into oil cities. The change in style allows the narrative to move from a microcosmic lens, which uses a realist and linear depiction of the characters whose experiences are closely linked through a sense of
belonging to community, to a macro-cosmic representation of the newly transformed oil towns and the disintegrated experiences of the characters, which emphasizes their isolation and alienation. Further, the move from a micro to a macro lens allows the narrative to shift from a historical treatment of space—in the representation of the wadi—which highlights the characters’ sense of rootedness in the land and shows how this relationship shaped their sense of identity, to a topological treatment of space, depicting the formation of the oil city and the creation of a new system of social relations that alienates the bedouin. Ultimately, this shift in the treatment of space reflects an alteration in the relationship between time and space for the characters.

Further, the two conceptions of time are formed and expressed from the perspective of the present, as the first looks back nostalgically at the past, and, the second, from the same timeframe looks toward a future of modernity and progress. For the perspective from which Wadi al-Uyoun is described in the beginning of the novel is shown to emerge from a moment after the destruction of the oasis has occurred and after the industrialization of the land. This is indicated early on, as the narrator explains, “Those who had lived there in both periods—the one when Wadi al-Uyoun was as Miteb knew it, and the following period—would speak about it differently” (3). These lines imply a consciousness of the break in time showing how the narration of life in the wadi is constantly disrupted by a reflective voice from the future; the way of life in Wadi al-Uyoun is treated as a fading moment in collective memory. For instance, the narrator describes Miteb’s outrage when the Americans arrive for the second time and build themselves a camp, which indicates that they are staying longer this time, adding “People long remembered the moment he arrived, shaking like a leaf and glancing about him like a wolf” (68).
The shifting timeline from a moment after the industrialization of the land to a pre-industrial time is a stylistic technique that frames the nostalgic treatment of the past.

This nostalgic lens framing pre-oil life is apparent in the portrayal of Wadi al-Uyoun as a mystical place that was once a source of life, peace and harmony for all living forms in the desert. The opening lines describe “Wadi al-Uyoun: an outpouring of green amid the harsh, obdurate desert, as if it had burst from within the earth or fallen from the sky” (1). The tone in the opening sentence suggests an oratory voice that invites its audience to imagine an extraordinary and mirage-like oasis, one that “Was nothing like its surroundings, or rather had no connection with them” (1). Following this, the narrator tempers the bewilderment the wadi provokes, stating, “the wonder vanished gradually, giving way to a mysterious respect and contemplation. It was one of those rare cases of nature expressing its genius and willfulness, in defiance of any explanation” (1). This statement introduces the language of mysticism as the narrative normalizes the logic of the supernatural by suggesting that the phenomenon is better accepted as an extraordinary natural phenomenon that defies logical explanation. However, “Wadi al-Uyoun was an ordinary place to its inhabitants, and excited no strong emotions” (1). For them, it was a blessing from God and a “salvation from death in the treacherous, accursed desert” and, therefore, they understood their duty toward outsiders who stopped by for the water (2). And for the travellers and passersby who depended on the oasis water and vegetation, the oasis was “a phenomenon, something of a miracle, unbelievable to those who saw it for the first time and unforgettable forever after,” which takes the reader back to the language of the supernatural, as it moves between insider and outsider perspectives (2). The alternation between ordinary and extraordinary perceptions of the wadi and the normalization of the unreal create a
framework of mysticism through which the past is being envisioned.

The oasis water, as the primary resource, is integral to the temporal and spatial structures of desert life, for the importance of water as a means for living in the desert gives the experience of time a cyclical and seasonal form; the natural cycle conditions the social and economic structures. For instance, during times of drought—“which is what most years were”—people experienced much financial hardship and were not able to show their typically abundant generosity to travellers (4). The natural cycle also regulates their movement, for the people of the wadi “flooded out in times of overabundance,” travelling to new places when they could afford it (5). Movement in space is thus structured around the cyclical time that the water maintains, for the movement of people, both travellers and nomads, is influenced by their dependency on water and vegetation. The book invests in a historical depiction of the wadi as the site of the initial contact between the oasis community and the newcomers in order to dramatize how the shift of resource dependency from water to oil uproots the desert culture and alters the temporal and spatial structures of the place.

Wadi al-Uyoun is also of great significance for the travellers and caravan merchants who depend on it both for watering their animals and for their own nourishment. And not only is the wadi a communal resource for all living beings who live by it or travel to it, it is a central meeting point for traders, as merchants pass by to gather information about other caravans and the prices they offered. Hence, the wadi is central to the structure of movement of both populations and trade, and therefore, it is integral to the practice of social relations in the desert. This description of pre-oil life in Wadi al-Uyoun, then, shows that its inhabitants were not isolated, but were often in contact with outsiders, and their sense of communal responsibility
extended beyond the oasis.

Indeed, Madawi al-Rasheed’s study of oasis life in the northern part of Saudi Arabia in the twentieth century highlights the pivotal role that oasis communities had in sustaining the socio-economic and cultural structures of the desert regions.47 In explaining the economic and cultural impact of camel caravan trade on oasis community life before the industrialization of regions in the Peninsula, Al-Rasheed writes:

Trading relations had, in addition to their economic benefits, a non-financial advantage. Caravan trade and oasis-desert trade contributed to the creation of information networks between various groups. These networks covered a variety of issues ranging from the conditions of grazing land to the availability of water in distant regions. This information was essential for the nomadic population which was dependent for migration on such news. Foreign traders traveling between regions outside the reach of the nomads were able to bring news concerning the climactic conditions existing in distant areas. Trading caravans were also useful for the sedentary population in Hail and all those unable to travel outside the oasis. The caravans diminished the social isolation of the oasis dwellers as they became aware of the social and political conditions in Iraq, Syria, the Hijaz and the Persian Gulf.

(105-106)

We see, here, the important role that caravans played in the circulation of information, goods and

47 al-Rasheed’s book, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, is one of the few historical publications in English that take into account the ecological and social transformations brought about by both state formation and industrialization in the Arabian Peninsula,
people, as they were the main form of connection between oasis communities and the outside world. In the novel, the people of Wadi al-Uyoun clearly depend on the camel caravans and their movement, for “Echoes of the outside world reached the wadi intermittently by way of caravans or relatives absent for long years” (21). Hence, through a spatial engagement, Munif seeks to record the centrality of caravan trade in the social life of the oasis in order to dramatize how the introduction of a capitalist economy will alter the structure of movement and circulation of people, goods and news. Before the creation of the oil city and the establishment of new roads, mobility was directly linked to nature, for people depended on camels, especially caravan camels, for transportation, making the time/distance relation organically connected to nature. Indeed, the spatial depiction of the wadi underscores the disruption of this organic relation between natural time and the movement through space by the practices of oil industrialization and consumption.

Deeply embedded within this organic way of life represented in the depiction of Wadi al-Uyoun is the al-Hathal clan who “had been sown in this place like the palm trees,” ever since Jazi al-Hathal drove the Turks out and ended their occupation of the wadi (9). Miteb al-Hathal is the last of the al-Hathal clan to have a deep ancestral relation to the land—a connection he maintains through acts of remembering and storytelling, and through traditional practices such as his personal ritual of planting a tree each time a son is born. Further, Miteb is portrayed as an embodiment of the wadi’s history, for he is an orator of the place who “would tell stories which in some cases dated back to the days of Noah, or so said the old men” (3). Significantly, he remembers the times of hardship and struggle and notes the overwhelming changes that have occurred with the passing of time, which indicates that the representation of history is not static.
and that life in the wadi was never ideal. Furthermore, the representation of Miteb and his life in the wadi follows a communal form of narration, as Miteb is characterized through his relation to the wadi and its community: when he falls sick, people fear for his health and aid him, and when he announces his son, Shalaan’s, decision to marry, “a wave of joy and festivity [came] over everyone” (48). Hence, Miteb’s character, as the embodiment of Wadi al-Uyoun, its community and its history, is portrayed through a realist style in order to show his deep connection with the community and the way of life in the wadi. And while life in wadi al-Uyoun is idealized in several instances, as I have noted, this depiction is a result of the nostalgic treatment of time in which the representation of that life is mediated by the realities of the present. The form of realism is thus maintained throughout this section despite the mysticism of the oasis, for the communal cyclical life is, nonetheless, narrated in a straightforward linear way.

This realist form used in the narration of life prior to petroindustrialism is also apparent in the characterization of another archetypal figure who represents life in the wadi: Umm Khosh—a grieving mother who longingly awaits the return of her son, Khosh, who left the wadi with a passing caravan and has been absent for many years. Umm Khosh was widowed when her son was very young, and she took on the responsibility of raising him and providing for him alone. To make ends meet, she tended the date palms her husband left behind, raised a few goats and

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48 In noting some of the criticisms expressed in Arab literary circles, Sabry Hafez states, “Cities of Salt has earned its share of criticisms, some more founded than others. A legitimate reservation about the quintet is its tendency to idealize the bedouin past with a romantic nostalgia as a serene and well-ordered way of life, and to leave open the suggestion that the peculiarly distorted and corrupted forms of state and society created by oil wealth can be equated with modernity as such, overlooking the real gains and benefits” (“An Arabian, Master” 59).
chickens to sell milk and eggs to travellers, and did other small jobs like weaving ropes and mending torn clothes discarded by passing travellers. Because of this, she was seen to have “taken on a great many masculine qualities and aspects of appearance” and she was admired by her community for her strength and endurance in a life of hardship (53). Umm Khosh’s life story is here told from the perspective of the community, and the judgments being made about her character are expressed according to societal views, as society’s conception of gender roles understands the strength and independence of her character as masculine. Further, the communal perspective is suggested in the opening of her chapter, as the narrator explains, “It was a common thing, whenever a caravan came through or letters from travelers arrived, for everyone to ask the same question: was there news of Khosh? What had become of him?” (51). Umm Khosh’s well being is the concern of everyone in her community, and when she becomes too consumed with grief over her son to tend the palms and cattle, the men in her community take it upon themselves to do so, for that “was the way of life in the wadi” (56). Umm Khosh, then, like Miteb, is an archetypal figure who represents the affective aspect of the community, and early on the reader understands that after Umm Khosh’s displacement and death with the transition into petroindustrialism, her story, her grief and her strength, which left a great impact on the people will be forgotten, for the narrator states, “All this, however, was a nearly forgotten episode in the wadi’s history, because what followed was what left a deep impression in the people’s hearts and minds” (53). When the community is forced to leave the wadi, Umm Khosh, as a final act of resistance, dies and is buried in the land, symbolizing both her rootedness in the land, and her displacement by her inability to transition into the era of petroindustrialism.

Thus, life in Wadi al-Uyoun is imagined and remembered in collective terms, suggesting a
strong communal relation shaped by their physical environment. Furthermore, the narration in the beginning of the novel carefully details the daily practices of the inhabitants, demonstrating their way of life and showing the values and meanings expressed in such performances. Importantly, the sense of time, as it is evoked in memory, is closely linked to material reality. For instance, when they are pressed to recall the year of the birth of Miteb’s last son, Mugbel—whose name, translates to both, ‘future’ and ‘an arrival,’ foreshadowing the coming of a new era and the arrival of the Americans to the oasis—the boy’s aunt, Wasma, says he was born the year of the locusts, which was a bad year for the wadi. His mother, Wadha, though, disagrees and argues that the year he was born “was a good year in the desert and the wells had been full of water. She was positive, because the truffles and mallow and other herbs were everywhere” (19). The dispute over Mugbel’s birth, expressed through the act of remembering, indicates the close link between the sense of time and physical environment.

Hence, the alteration of the wadi, with the ravaging of the trees and the uprooting of the inhabitants, abruptly marginalizes characters that were central to the story, such as Miteb, his wife and Umm Khosh. The disruption is enacted by a series of mysterious disappearances and deaths of characters who were at the core of the narrative in the beginning of the novel and by a shift in style from a realist mode of narration to a modernist one. Miteb disappears from the wadi, Wadha is silenced as she loses her ability to talk because of her grief over her husband and their displacement, and Umm Khosh dies and is buried in the wadi, marking the end of that era. Moreover, after Miteb is marginalized from the narrative, he reappears later as a ghostly figure haunting the consciousness of the displaced community as it is forced to comply with the new changes and take part in the destruction of the oasis, thus, disrupting the narrative’s realism. His
figure surfaces exclusively in fantastical terms or in the form of hearsay, such as when he is believed to be leading the group of bedouin that come after Ibn Rashed, or when it is rumored that he is responsible for starting the fire in the worker’s compound. Miteb becomes more of a legend, for he no longer holds a natural and organic presence in the community and his character cannot be integrated within the narrative as it moves toward a more experimental style.

In an allusion to the ghost of Hamlet’s father, Miteb’s ghost appears to his sons, Shaalan and Fawaz; it is seen by Shaalan first, appearing near the camp gate and disappearing several times, and a few weeks after, when Fawaz and Suweyleh leave to Rawdhat al-Mashti and Miteb reappears during a violent thunderstorm:

When the great moment came and the men stood by in fear as the violent waves rose back, out of instinctive caution. Men and women, young and old, repeated with one voice, perhaps without even realizing it, “There is no god but God… there is no god but God,” and at that very moment, as a brilliant flash of lightening rent in the sky, creating fear upon fear, Miteb al-Hathal appeared. (151-52)

Miteb’s ghost appears as a public spectacle, for “when silence fell, and the people were filled with fear and anticipation, he spoke again. ‘This is the last of your happiness’” (152). However, the scene is mainly described as it affects Fawaz, for his breakdown at the end of the confrontation suggests his solitary experience, as he collapsed and “saw all the people of Rawdhat al-Mashti looking at him. They were all above or beside him like a surrounding wall of flames and appeared to be terrified” (154). Fawaz “looked at the faces around him; perhaps they had come to help him, or save him, to push away the others who wanted to prevent him from
getting to his father,” and he “hated these looks. He felt alone, utterly alone” (154). Hence, the appearance of Miteb’s ghost and his son’s subsequent breakdown is a moment in which the narrative’s realism is undermined by a supernatural eruption.

The scene also suggests a narrative movement from a communal and collective perspective to one centered on individual experience. For the possibility that the ghost was a vision haunting only Miteb’s sons is suggested in the rhetorical question opening the chapter:

Had the water of Rawdhat al-Mashti put its curse on one more of the Hathal clan, or was there some mysterious hidden force, cruel and intense in its ferocity, that would stalk them one after another until it destroyed them all, sparing nothing and no one? (150)

The sentence frames the event within the language of the supernatural and suggests that the incident was an extraordinary, individual experience afflicting the Hathal brothers. This turn to the individual and the supernatural indicates the loss of explanatory framework produced by the encounter with petromodernity. Further, the lines suggest that the vision could be either a result of a curse afflicting the Hathal clan for losing their deep ancestral relation to the land—which would be a way of reasoning that belongs to traditional system of interpreting extraordinary events—or, it could be another unnamed, “mysterious hidden force, cruel and intense in its ferocity,” which is an interpretation that gestures toward an ‘unknown’ system of logic, one that is linked to the logic of modernization and technological interference. The latter interpretation would suggest that Miteb’s reappearance in supernatural form—and his displacement, for that matter—is a result of the perverse modernity and the mechanization of the land.

Furthering this idea, there is a parallel between the discourses of the mystification of the
past and the enchantment with oil as a fetishized commodity. Hence, the spectacle of Miteb’s ghost appearing “as a brilliant flash of lightning [that] rent in the sky,” and then disappearing in “an angry flash of lightning [that] lit the whole sky and drowned the people’s voices with its rolling thunder,” echoes the language used to describe the spectacle of the first machines brought to the wadi (152, 154). For instance, as soon as the locals first witness the Americans unloading the machines, “a sound like rolling thunder surged out of this machine” (68). When it “was over, as fast as a magic trick,” scaring all living beings, the machine started again “only this time the sound was accompanied by a blinding light, [...] filling the whole area with a light that no one could believe or stand” (68, 69). Thus, “this marvelous incident” registers almost as science fiction for the locals who are unable to comprehend the nature of such objects and their appearance in their land. While people “expected strange occurrences that first night, as one expects thunder to follow lightning, [...] nothing happened,” which suggests that the incident does not follow a natural logic of cause and effect, and, thus, introduces for this first time the conflict of two systems of meaning—one associated with the tradition, and the other with the modern (69).

This clash of two systems of meaning introduced by the transition into oil industrialism is at the center of the compensation conflict between the bedouin and the company officials, which eventually causes the downfall of Ibn Rashed, as their mediator and as the person in charge of recruiting the local workers in the first place. When the local worker, Mizban, drowns in the sea from having his foot stuck in the crevice of a boulder, the other workers expect a compensation for Mizban’s death as well as medical compensation for his brother, Hajem, who is psychologically traumatized by the incident. However, the company refuses to pay, stating, “the
company is neither responsible nor liable, since the transfer of the workers to the company’s responsibility was not effected until after the decease” (356). Hence, the company’s reasoning and the language of corporate law it uses, which, to the locals, suggest an inconsistent and unstable system of meaning since they evade responsibility simply because of the timing of the incident, doesn’t convince the bedouin who seek justice. Indeed, one of the three men who arrive to Harran threateningly advises Ibn Rashed to understand that “truth is truth, and rights are rights” (353). The result is that Ibn Rashed is blamed for the accident and lives in fear and paranoia of the vengeful bedouin. Ibn Rashed is, thus, trapped between two irreconcilable systems of meaning that are at play and this conflict violently marginalizes him from the narrative, ultimately leading to his mysterious and sinister death. Further, his death exemplifies the disintegration of the characters who are abruptly attached to the discourse of petromodernization and who fall victim to the magical appeal of petro-wealth. Hence, the scapegoating of Ibn Rashed and his rise and fall encapsulates the uncertainties and inconsistencies within the systems of meaning created by the transition into petroindustrialism.

Furthermore, his displacement from the narrative by a mysterious death parallels Miteb’s displacement, suggesting how each character belongs to a mystified conception of time—Ibn Rashed to a form of time characterized by the accelerated speed associated with the ideas of sudden modernization and instant wealth, and Miteb to a time linked to the idealized construction of the past. Ibn Rashed’s death and Miteb’s disappearance are thus instances that represent the collateral damage within the narrative caused by the transition into petromodernity and by the disruption it creates culturally, socially and economically. Even more so, their displacement enacts the disruptive interplay between the notions of tradition and modernity, as
Miteb figures as the embodiment of a romanticized past, resurfacing, as I have explained, in supernatural form, while Ibn Rashed, as the embodiment of an abrupt, perverse modernity is brought down by the old system of meaning—that is through the law of ‘an eye for an eye’ which is the way “[bedouin] men secure their rights” (353).

The presentation of a dual form of time and system of meaning thus problematizes the dialectics between present and past and between present and future, and it challenges conventional interpretations of Arab modernity that conceive the dialectics in terms of dichotomous divisions between past and present; tradition and modernity; old and new.\(^{49}\) For this simplified theorization tends to overlook the permeability between the traditional and the modern and their dialectical relationship which characterizes the thrust into petroindustrialization.

Moreover, the romanticization of the past as a western aesthetic feature is adapted in the and modified in the novel, and it acquires its own regional specificity. As Wen-chin Ouyang’s suggests, in her study of the nostalgic treatment of the past in the modern Arabic novel *Politics*

\(^{49}\) The tendency to interpret the modern in Arab fiction as antithetical to the traditional is reflected in Amina Khalifeh Thiban’s reading of *Cities* in her dissertation, “Transformation and Modernity in the Desert Tribal Saga: *Cities of Salt*,” published in 2004 which, nonetheless, offers a useful, expansive contextual study of the five volumes. Thiban suggests a clear division between the two eras—pre-oil life of the wadi and life after petroindustrialism, with the characters neatly divided between them. Following this categorization, she states, “Ibn Rashid is pragmatic and is able to comprehend his role in the new life, in contrast to his opponent Mut’ib, who is impulsive, and tirelessly asks questions in Wadi al-Uyoun about the oil drilling campaign” (81). This reading overlooks the fact that Ibn Rashed’s integration into the new era is rather violent and disruptive and, although, he plays a central role in the transition into the new oil towns as a mediator and a servant of the emir, later events reveal how he is victimized by the unintelligible chaos of the company town.
of Nostalgia in the Arabic Novel, there is a tendency in modern Arabic novels to mobilize the language of the past and to produce nostalgic imaginings that are simultaneously connected to visions and aspirations for the future. Through an analysis of texts by Mahfouz and Adonis, she argues that “Nostalgia, used as a creative mechanism, gives a work an aura of authenticity while simultaneously giving it an aura of modernity, and, while these writers use ‘local currency’ and are concerned with reviving traditional forms of expression, they simultaneously inject into it global relevance” (51). Ouyang’s analysis of the treatment of the past in the Arabic novel builds on Stelvana Boym’s theorization of nostalgia, where Boym argues that nostalgia as a “historical emotion” is not “anitmodern,” nor is it “merely an expression of local longing,” rather, nostalgia is “a result of a new understanding of time and space that makes the division into ‘local’ and ‘universal’ possible” (8). In this sense, Boym identifies a paradoxical quality in nostalgia as a modernist aesthetic, as it constitutes a sense of universality—being a universal emotion, and being produced by globalized experiences, and yet the sense of belonging or the idea of the homeland that is sought is particular. Indeed, this notion of nostalgia as an expression of an attachment to the local that is produced by globalized experiences is an essential feature of Munif’s modernism. The nostalgic reconstruction of history in the novel is therefore performed to counter the linearity of the temporal measurement of progress and modernity, for as Boym indicates, nostalgia as a temporal experience is a “rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.”

50Quote is taken from an online post in “Atlas of Transformation”

Ouyang’s and Boym’s insights into understanding the dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity are useful in their consideration of the ways in which the ambivalence toward both the nation and modernity—common in the writings of Munif, as well as his predecessors, such as Mahfouz—shapes the way that the past is envisioned and expressed. This point is crucial to understanding Munif’s modernism, which is overlooked if we read Cities solely as a social realist novel and disregard its experimental style. His engagement with the theme of the past is not antimodern and traditionalist; rather, it reflects a desire for and an ambivalence toward modernity. In fact, Munif addresses the issue of modernization and the progress of oil producing Arab nations in his nonfictional writings and interviews, where he acknowledges modernization as a necessary step toward the advancement of Arab nations and their move toward democracy, and he critiques, instead, failed national development programs. For instance, in Democracy First, Democracy Always!, Munif argues that the dependency on primitive economies and the lack of fundamental elements necessary for a stable economy, such as a labor force and a national infrastructure are among the main obstacles that oil producing Arab nations face. Therefore, he argues, investments in oil aren't made according to the needs of the producing countries in achieving development, rather, they are made according to the needs of the global market. The events of the second half of the novel indicate to the ways in

51 Democracy First, Democracy Always! is among several progressive writings by Munif in which he urges Arab countries to focus on internal reform without the reliance on western nations. For example, the first book he wrote, The Principle of Partnership and the Nationalization of Arab Oil, studies the future of the oil industry in Iraq and was useful to the Ba’ath party during its rule, as Hafez notes in “An Arabian Master”.

52 The quote is from an interview concluding the book; translation is mine.
which the establishment of an oil industry marginalizes the locals from its system of production, especially through the racial segregation of labor.

The Oil Encounter:

One striking feature of *Cities of Salt* is its lack of details about the operations of the oil company and the process of oil discovery and extraction. In fact, never once is oil made visible in the story, despite its omnipresence and central role in the events that take place, which is ironic for a novel celebrated and read for its documentation of the oil encounter in the Middle East. Although it is scarcely mentioned, oil as motif nevertheless flows obscurely throughout the narrative, suggesting its elusiveness as a cultural object. The first time oil is mentioned is during Miteb’s confrontation with the emir—the deputy prince whose presence as a figure of authority in the region is as new and unsettling as the arrival of the Americans. The emir tells Miteb, who comes in search of answers, that the Americans were allowed into the wadi to extract oil from the rich land, which he promises will bring the community great wealth. However, the locals are not capable of imagining the significance of this commodity or why it was sought at the expense of their land and culture until they witness the importation of objects of modernity and the public spectacles they stir. While oil is hidden from the eye—and absent from the narrative—its significance is thus reproduced in images, such as in the lavish residential compound built for the Americans and in the spectacle of the automobile. To this end, the description of the spatial transformation that takes up the second third of the novel offers much detail of the establishment of the oil city, Harran, but even in this depiction, very little information is given about the
processes of oil extraction and production. The description of the oil apparatus involves only what the locals see as helpless bystanders, which includes sinister machines, barbed wire used to mark off the land and pipelines through which oil is concealed and moved, for “Hundreds of pipes lay by this roadside, but no one knew what their secret might be” (207). The anticlimactic depiction of the spectacle of oil further suggests the alienation of the local workers as agents of urbanization and development.

Furthermore, the spectacle witnessed by the locals is not of the initial encounter with oil and of its explosive eruption from the ground as depicted in Upton Sinclair’s Oil!; rather, the spectacle witnessed involves a cultural encounter. For while Harran was instantly transformed into an oil town with new roads and shops and a residential area for the American workers, to people of Harran, “it was [rather] a huge ship appearing on the horizon that changed everything” marking the transition into a new era (213). Indeed, “This day gave Harran a birth date, recording when and how it was built, for most people have no memory of Harran before that day. Even its own natives, [...] It was practically the only fate they remembered” (215). Significantly, this moment inaugurates the beginning of “History” in Harran which highlights the interference of a new form of history and a new sense of time that overrides the previous structure of history associated with the sense of rootedness expressed through the consciousness of characters, like Miteb and Umm Khosh.

New images that are foreign and modern are soon introduced to the bedouin community with the arrival of the ship, for when they see the women on its deck, “Every man’s head was a hurricane of images, for each knew that a new era had begun” (221). The infiltration of these images into the consciousness of the local individuals is symbolized by the walls of the town’s
bakery, where the baker, Abdu Mohammed, hangs pictures of foreign women cut out from abandoned magazines found in American Harran. The smuggling of these magazines into Arab Harran indicates the system of segregation imposed on the town and the inability of such spatial structures to fully separate the Arab workers from the Americans. Further, the enchantment by modern objects causes some of the characters to lose their sense of reality, and become trapped by their obsessions and their disillusionment. For instance, Abdu becomes lovesick after seeing an American woman on the deck of the ship during the Americans’ festivity, and he delusionally believes that they share a romantic connection, which causes his lethargic seclusion and alienation from the rest of the town. Abdu is eager to go to the shore when he hears about the second ship’s arrival, and he anxiously tries to finish baking and selling the bread, for “He seemed never to have had so much baking; he had never seen so many loaves in one place at once; and not only the bread, the fire was thwarting him; it did not cooperate: Why was the dough not cooking?” (399). Significantly, Abdu’s agony in this instance is described through stream of consciousness, which is a style the novel only uses after the transition to a new way of life, such as in Fawaz’s confrontation with the ghost of his father. Abdu’s stream of consciousness continues: “Everyone was against Abdu Muhammed. That was a known fact, and he knew it better than anyone else. He fed them all, every day, he was proud of giving them the best and tastiest loaves possible, but no one, yes no one, so much as looked at him or felt any affection toward him” (399). This form of narration marks a clear contrast to the description of the mental agonies of people like Miteb and Umm Khosh, whose sufferings were narrated through a communal perspective. The shift from a communal, realistic narration to internal consciousness in depicting the struggles of the characters reflects the isolation of the characters
and their detachment from their community.

Even the flat and static depiction of the American characters who arrive to Wadi al-Uyoun and Harran is contrasted with the “realist” depiction of the characters in the first quarter of the novel; the caricatured representation of the Americans shows a lack of narrative interest in depicting them dynamically, and rather features them as a collective with a common set of behavioral attributes. Importantly, the portrayal of the Americans as a largely nameless collective is highlighted alongside the narrative’s simultaneous shift to individual experience. The function of this portrayal is to project the attitudes and perceptions of the locals toward the outlandish behaviors of the foreign intruders and to dramatize their shock and wonder. In other words, we only know enough about the American characters to understand the relational experiences of the locals. Furthermore, while Ghosh explains the paucity of American novels about the oil encounter as resulting from the secretiveness and isolation of the industry from public consciousness in America, the flatness of the American characters in Cities and the absence of details on company operations dramatize the isolation and seclusion of the industry, not just from the consciousness of the American public, as Ghosh suggests, but also from the alienated oil producing communities. The aura of mystery surrounding the American workers, thus, reflects the marginalization of the local workers and their placement as low-grade workers who are denied any training and who do not comprehend the technicalities of oil extraction and production. Paradoxically, then, the Americans emerge as a collective as a way to express the locals’ loss of community.
The Spatial Transformations:

The absence of depictions of oil practices in the novel is striking given the extensive detailing of the spatial alteration of the land into an oil town that is essentially built by local labor. This transformation becomes the main development in the narrative, as the story details the experiences of the locals witnessing the placement of fences and barbed wire around the sites of extraction. The transformation of the land happens suddenly and quickly: “Within less than a month two cities began to rise: Arab Harran and American Harran. The bewildered and frightened workers, who had in the beginning inspired American contempt and laughter, built the two cities” (206). The locals are even further alienated when the company adopts a system of segregation that displaces the bedouin from the land, and, subsequently, from the narrative. As the style of communal realism is abandoned, the story begins to emphasize the transformation of the landscape and the establishment of oil towns, and moves from a micro to a macro perspective of narration, reflecting the shift in the consciousness of the characters. Hence, the displacement of the oasis-dwellers, after they are told by Ibn Rashed to “Leave of [their] free will like the ones who went before [them]. It’s better than being driven out,” marks the end of the former way of life (111). The narrator describes how quickly the land is urbanized:

Soon after the arrival of a new group of foreign men in a ship different from the other, a phase of work began that never slowed or stopped. It was like madness or magic. Men raced back and forth with the raging yellow machines that created new hills racing behind them. They filled the sea and leveled the land; they did all this without pausing and without reflection. [...] What with the crazed racing to and fro and the rumbling machines that
swerved like untamed camels, the men were utterly frightened and confused. (199)

We see, here, how the narrative speeds up drastically to match the accelerated pace at which the transformation of the land occurs, reflecting the alteration of the time/space relation. Whereas the depiction of life in the wadi focused on daily social practices—from tending cattle and planting trees as the community’s way of making a living to more minor practices, such as Miteb’s ritual in making coffee for his family and guests—once the story moves to the formation of Harran, it shifts to a topological investment in space, taking the oil city as its main protagonist. The narrative, then, depicts the mapping of the oil city in the consciousness of the locals, as petro-urbanization rewrites the social relations that structure the new system of production, enforces new values and ways of living and privileges a new form of history—one that is linked to global involvement, modernization and petro-wealth.

Men who were uprooted from the oasis, including Fawaz, Shalaan and Suyweleh, take part in the transformation of the land, for they are left with no choice but to join the company when the semi-agrarian economic system that had structured their lives is also displaced with the transition into petromodernity. For when Fawaz went back to Wadi al-Uyoun, he no longer recognized the place nor did he feel any connection to it. Even Shalaan, who had stayed in the wadi to collect the compensation for his family’s land, “planted himself in Wadi al-Uyoun not like the palm trees that had filled the wadi in times gone by but like one of the iron columns that now stood everywhere, and within a short time he changed very much indeed” (134). Fawaz reflects on the isolating way of living in the newly transformed place, for “It seemed to him that each of these men lived by himself, without any connection to the others around him” (137). Their isolation and displacement is not just physical, but is also socio-economic, occurring with
the alteration of their physical environment and the introduction of a capitalist society that has replaced their older economic system. Hence, the displacement of oil producing communities differs from the sense of displacement associated with the experiences of colonialism; for migration, in this sense, is not enforced by the political control of colonial authority. Rather, the experience involves a “stationary displacement,” what Rob Nixon calls a “radical notion of displacement, one that, instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable” (9).

The relation to place based on a sense of rootedness in history, suggested in the historical investment in space that characterizes the depiction of Wadi al-Uyoun, is no longer relevant to the people living in the new era. The former relation assumed a close link between spatial and temporal forms of identification, for it was an identification based on a notion of place—the oasis as a physical, personal location—and a notion of history that connected the people to the land over a period of time and reaffirmed their rootedness and belonging. Hence, the transformation of the land into an industrial oil town and the displacement of its inhabitants has disrupted the spatial and temporal relation to place.

The “stationary” displacement of the communities living near extractive sites and the industrialization of the land similarly alters the nomadic lifestyles of the bedouin and the patterns of their movement. In his reading of Cities, Nixon describes the impact of “stationary displacement” on the specific situation of desert communities and he perceptively highlights the

53 It’s worth noting that Nixon’s notion of “stationary displacement” is used to refer to the situation of extractive communities all over the globe and is not exclusive to desert communities.
difference between nomadic movement which is integral to the identity of bedouin culture and the patterns of movement created by petroindustrialism. Nixon argues that

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. (76)

Indeed, the bedouin’s transition into a capitalist system based on the extraction of oil as fetishized commodity displaces them culturally and economically. This is exemplified forcefully when the workers are ordered to give up their camels, as Ibn Rashed explains to them that “From today onward [the camels] are of no use here” (186). The men, here, begin to realize how their displacement involves not just a physical dislocation from land, but also the effacement of their cultural values since camels are not only a primary means of transportation and central to nomadic movement, but are integral to the bedouin identity as a source of pride as well as a sign of wealth. 54 Thus, the camels and their cultural signification are undermined in the new form of

54 Abdullah Alqathami explains how the transition into a capitalist system in the Gulf has altered conceptions of tribal relations in his book, Tribe and Tribalism, or Postmodern Identities, suggesting that nomadic lifestyles were based on both economic necessity, which had a great impact on patterns of movement, and on tribal agreements for protection.
life, and the people are subsequently “afflicted by total paralysis; in this isolated place; which had lost even its name, they were only a band of men besieged, not knowing what to do or what their lives would be like in the days to come” (191).

Even worse, the patterns of movement in the desert prior to industrialization have been replaced by a new global system of circulation, represented by the vast sea that functions as a bridge to an infinitely expansive, unknown world. The urbanization of the land and the change to a capitalist mode of production introduces a new form of space, and, consequently, produces a new spatial experience for the locals. The narrator explains how the locals experience this new, expansive relation to space: “And so it is throughout most of the world. The idea that eyes might turn instead toward the raging water, to gaze unceasingly at the sea—that men and caravans and news could come from that quarter too—never occurred to most of them; but this is how it was in Haran” (189-90). The expansion of spatial horizons—symbolized in the sight of the sea—and the new forms of migration and movement it creates are accepted as part of the reality of the oil era and the entry into the new global order. Although water has been displaced by oil as a primary resource and commodity in the desert, it gains new meaning as it connects people to other places and stimulates new imaginations and desires, becoming a part of the spatial expansion that represents consuming and participating in global flows. Hence, the community’s relationship to water has shifted. While it had once organically structured the social and economic life and provided a sense of rootedness as a commodity that was extracted vertically from beneath the ground, since the spatial transformation and the building of port, it has culturally acquired a horizontally expansive image that suggests a sense of limitlessness and infinite possibilities. This shift in the relationship to water reflects the formation of new globalized experiences and
structures of feeling shaped by the new images and subjects, arriving at the shores of Harran. And thus “the sea, especially for those who had never seen it before, excited undying wonderment and fear” (191). While local workers never received any of the oil wealth they were promised nor any form of improvement in their living conditions, they are nevertheless conscious of the connection between the proliferation of modern images and objects and the valorization of their oil-producing land, which has linked them and their land to unknown, global forces. Thus, petromodernity’s spatial alteration has created a global spatial consciousness for the locals. Moreover, these new structures of feeling suggest the open-ended temporal horizon of modernity and its future orientation. Significantly, such temporal—and spatial—open-endedness, symbolized in the image of the sea, is a clear shift from the cyclical, recursive and thus past-oriented temporality used in describing life prior to petroindustrialization.

Perhaps the enthrallment with the new images is best exemplified in the figure of the emir who, as a member of the native elite, is most exposed to the appeal of modern objects, as opposed to the other locals who are further removed from the center of the oil world. The emir obsesses over the idea of speed and the compression of distance when he is introduced to new technologies such as the radio, binoculars and the automobile. These objects contribute to the spatial expansion of his experiences. For instance, the emir is astonished to know that the radio broadcasts all the way from London to Harran, as Rezai tells him that “Nothing in the world happens without that station knowing it first, and knowing the most about it” (459). The emir’s exposure to technologies of communication and mobility ironically causes his obsessive seclusion, and he is eventually unable to connect either with reality or with his people.

Indeed, toward the last few pages of the novel, we see the emir’s condition worsen as he
becomes disturbingly delusional and childlike, struck with paranoia that causes him to isolate himself in his room away from everyone. The workers “could not explain his silence or his indulgence toward the Americans; it was more than they could understand, and they could not overlook or tolerate it” (442). They feel let down by the emir, and, as the narrator exclaims through collective stream of consciousness, they wonder “was he their emir, there to defend and protect them, or was he the Americans’ emir? [...] he changed abruptly when Hassan Rezai and others started bringing him gifts—he was enthralled by those gadgets and left all of his responsibilities to Johar” (595). The emir’s neglect of his duties leaves the local workers feeling ignored and marginalized, especially under the company’s system of inequality. While in the past strong tribal relations provided protection for the members of the community, the social realities of the capitalist system offers no form of social protection for the working class.

Corresponding to the accelerated speed of movement introduced by oil practices, the narrative progresses at an even faster pace in the last third of the novel, as it demonstrates life a few years after the formation of the oil city and the influx of migrants who arrive to work in the oil industry. Significantly, these new subjects that populate Harran are defined only by their role in the city’s new economic system. Moreover, they are presented as agents of the modern institutions that have come to replace the old ways of life. For instance, Dr. Subhi, who is one of the main protagonists in the second volume, Trenches, is a migrant physician with a shady background who is “the greatest physician in the Near East and the Middle East, as Muhammed Eid loved to point out. Eid loved these cryptic geographic designations” (543). That is about as much as the people, as well as the readers, know about Dr. Subhi’s past. This de-emphasis on the historical backgrounds of subjects corresponds to the shift to topological engagement and it
contrasts the historical investment in characters deployed prior to the spatial transformation. Therefore, what we know about Dr. Subhi only shows him as a figure representing modern medicine who is the binary opposite of the traditional healer, Mufaddi al-Jeddan, on whom both bedouin and town dwellers still depended for treatment. Mufaddi, in fact, is one of the last characters representing traditional practices and he maintains an aura of authenticity in the town, which is especially demonstrated in his disdain for urban life and in his refusal to accept money in exchange for his treatment; “Harran changed every day, but Mufaddi never changed” (549). However, Dr. Subhi’s success and status among the emir’s group alienates Mufaddi, as Dr. Subhi calls him a quack doctor and a vagabond and turns the town against him. As a result of this aggression, Mufaddi is imprisoned three times on different charges, and eventually he is forced into exile when Johar chases him out of Harran. Muffadi’s downfall thus suggests the failure of the final attempts at resistance as well as the continued displacement of traditional values by foreign forces. Further, the conflict between Mufaddi and Dr. Subhi embodies the displacement of historical continuity and linearity, suggested in the traditional practices of healing that have been passed over throughout the years, with a foreign form of temporal logic, suggested in the scientific—thus unintelligible and mysterious—methods of “instant” healing.

Along with the foreign Dr. Subhi, the Armenian truck driver, Akoub, emerges as a central character of the last third of the novel, thus, sustaining the marginalization of characters who once had a rooted connection to the place. This shift to migrant subjects working in the new city both reinforces the theme of transience characterizing the experience of time and space after petroindustrialization and underscores the introduction of new subjects and forms of affiliation. For identification through a sense of historical rootedness to land is no longer relevant in the new
system as connections to place become based on topological and economic attachment rather than communal. Thus, Akoub quickly “became part of Harran,” and he is presented as a seamlessly integrated character, even though not much is known about his background (467). What is apparent, however, is that he provides services for mobility between Ujra and Harran and imports some technological items, such as stoves on his trips back from Aleppo. Therefore, Akoub is central to the structure of movement in the oil city and embodies the alteration of the structures of circulation of commodities and people in the region. Significantly, when Akoub dies, the local workers grieve over his death and bury him in Harran, and on his tombstone is written: “HERE LIE THE REMAINS OF YAACOUB AL-HARRANI,” suggesting that he is a Harrani and a member of the city (504).

We can see, then, that the social relations produced by the new spatial experiences help form a new sense of social solidarity, one that is no longer based on historical rootedness to place, but is rather based on an experience of oppression and marginalization. For the workers begin to see the emptiness of the promises of housing, financial stability, and improvement in their life conditions, as “the promise had been repeated for years on end, but not a single house was built, and the workers remained huddled and cramped in the accursed barracks, which grew hotter and filthier with every passing day” (594). Consequently, the workers organize a strike to protest against several issues, such as the termination of a number of workers, the exile of Mufaddi al-Jeddan, and the company’s exploitative system of segregation and inequality. They organize a peaceful protest to demand their rights, chanting:

Stone by stone, we constructed,
Inch by inch, we built the pipe.
Now do you say, O company, O God!

God is our witness, you have no rights.

Our rights are everlasting, they are ours.

With our blood and sweat we will achieve them! (597)

The soldiers try to crush the protest first by attempting to stir violence among the protesters, and then by attacking and shooting at the strikers while they rest, causing the workers to enter into battle with the soldiers. Through their political action, the workers enact a spatial transgression, as they attempt to defy the barriers that enforce their marginalization; the men move in unison to the gates of American Harran, and the “concrete posts shook like empty branches and were uprooted like dead trees. In moments the barbed wire was buried under the sand, and the human waves plunged forth” (615). Later that day, it was rumored that Miteb al-Hathal was among the men who fought the soldiers as he was said to be seen on a white camel firing at soldiers and attacking the main gate. This time, joining the ghost of Miteb is “a phantom shaped like a man flying above their heads, and it looked exactly like Mufaddi al-Jeddan” (616). The novel ends, here, on a hopeful note as it suggests a connection between the previous forms of community and the new one through the manifestation of Miteb and Muffadi, who yet appear in supernatural terms. The solidification of the working class in this instance suggests that as modernity destroys the communal relations of life before oil, a new form of collective arises as a result of the exploitative nature of the capitalist system and the new social relations to production it imposes. Hence, as modernity destroys bedouin communal relations, it potentially produces a new form of community that is more transregional and emerges from a class consciousness.

The untranslatability of the novel’s Arabic title into English is, in a sense, a testimony to the
universalism of the text. Peter Theroux has chosen the general title of the quintet, *Cities of Salt*, for his translation of the volume, instead of finding an adequate translation for its Arabic title, ‘al-Tih. Some scholars have chosen alternative translations in their discussions of the book, such as Amina Thiban and her mentor Sabry Hafez who both translate the title to *The Wilderness*. Nixon observes the inadequacy of producing a literal translation, stating “the Arabic phrase suggests something more resonant, more dynamic than [*The Wilderness*]: 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. This human lostness, this wilderness bewilderment is, I would suggest, vital to the expansive reach and reverberant power of Munif’s novel” (90). Indeed, choosing “the wilderness” for an English title entails a physical, locational notion that understates the conceptual notion of wilderness as a universal condition of human lostness. Munif has stated his interest in transcending place and finding transnational commonalities of experience in an unpublished interview with Aljadid when he is asked why place is “nowhere to be found in [his] novels [and why] it remains ambiguous.” Munif responds that the exact definition of place is irrelevant to his writing, for “the difference between one place and another is relative, marginal, and insignificant,”—a view that is, he explains, “influenced by the nature of [his] life and movements.”55 To miss the transnationalism of Munif’s writing by reading the novel “reductively as an item of sociopolitical evidence,” to use Edward Said’s phrase, and by understanding the novel as a set of experiences pertaining to a specific location, i.e the oil producing Arab region, is symptomatic of the tendencies within conventional approaches to

Arabic novels. I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter that the tendency to overlook the universal meanings of *Cities* and its transnational importance is also a problem linked to the category of oil fiction which features a regionalist investment in its narration of the oil encounter and engages transnational preoccupations and experiences which is a feature that parallels the nature of the oil phenomenon, as it involves a transnational commodity and the necessary localization of its point of production.

The encounter with oil has catastrophic and irreversible consequences on the landscape of the desert and on local communities and the lifestyles and traditional beliefs that had structured their live for centuries, and, yet, oil is accidental and ephemeral, which makes life after the transition into petromodernity a shaky and unstable experience. The transience and instability is suggested poetically in the title of the quintet, *Cities of Salt*, which Munif explains, “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.”

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56 Quote is taken from an interview with Tariq Ali https://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/amusif.htm
Chapter Three:

Mapping Oil Dystopias in Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* and *Oil on Water*

The encounter with oil in Nigeria is linked to the historical realities of postcolonialism and the politics of nation building, for the formative years of the oil economy coincided with the nation’s early years of independence (the first barrel of oil was exported in 1958—two years prior to independence). As stated by Michael Watts, who has written extensively about Nigeria’s political ecology and the ways it is shaped by oil capitalism, the profits made from oil exportation during peak production were “large enough to lay the basis of an economic revolution” (212). The oil commodity, then, was perceived as the nation’s ticket to building a national economy, an infrastructure system and to developing social services as “Nigerians chose a capitalist road, an ambitious import substitution industrialization strategy that required roads, banks, electrification, capital goods, and a developmental state” (212). Moreover, the country’s oil-induced urbanization projects transformed public spaces into images that signaled national development and, simultaneously, helped to solidify the newly formed state’s legitimacy and power. For the spectacle of petromodernization presented in the sight of the large buildings and paved roads helped to affirm perceptions of oil as Nigeria’s golden-egg that could bring instant progress through the vehicle of the nation-state. Nationalized petroleum, in this context, can be said to produce the state.

Moreover, as I have already argued, conceptions of petrowealth as a right of citizenship
helped to push forth a sense of national homogeneity in many petro-states—most effectively in Nigeria, as a country comprised of more than 500 ethnic groups. Indeed, state-sponsored festivities, such as the nationally televised event FESTAC ‘77, promoted a “spectacle of opulence” that created a veneer of national unity and masked ethnic and social tensions across the country’s vast lands, as Andrew Apter explains in his study of Nigerian cultural production during Nigeria’s economic boom. In addition to solidifying national identification, these staged performances also suggested Nigeria’s cosmopolitanism, derived from the fact that the country became internationally visible through its entry into the global oil market. FESTAC ‘77 articulated a “Nigerian vision of universal blackness” and the state presented itself as an “unequivocal leader of the new black world” (54). Indeed, this exchange of a national resource for international petromoney, supposedly used for bringing modernization to the country, creates an aura of universalism that suggests a promise for the state’s entry into global history and its inclusion within the western narrative of modernity.

While the boom of the sixties and early seventies radically transformed the social, political, cultural, and physical landscapes of Nigeria, the country’s perverse petrocapitalism left Nigeria in a state of poverty and underdevelopment. For one, the subsequent bust brought the country into major national debt. Also, the irrational exuberance of the oil boom, along with the misappropriation of oil money due to the corruption of regimes (80% of oil money went to 1% of the population) resulted in the deterioration of the country’s urban infrastructure and buildings and the dysfunction of its public institutions. Whereas petro-money during the boom brought instant urbanization and helped to solidify Nigeria’s identity as a petro-state, the decades of government greed and neglect caused the deterioration of these same urban structures. Along
with government dysfunction, the political contestation over oil fostered a climate of violence, corruption, and instability. As Watts puts it, “oil converted Nigeria into a petrostate but one constituted by vast shadow political and economic apparatuses in which the lines between the public and the private, state and market, government and organized crime, are blurred and porous” (201). In addition to deeply shaping Nigeria’s political and economic textures, petrocapitalism caused great ecological devastation to the producing regions and restructured the systems of extractive and agricultural production. As a result of government neglect and unregulated extractive processes in the region, the country’s agricultural economy collapsed and much of the rural population migrated to urban cities, therefore, transforming the country’s social and human landscape. These socio-economic and spatial realities conditioned by petrocapitalism produced spaces characterized by violence, impoverishment, and despair—in other words, oil dystopias. For the combination of forms of state corruption and political violence, a destructive system of accumulation, and social disillusionment with notions of wealth and modernization produced living conditions characterized by radical precarity.

I am interested in examining the connection between the mystification of oil as a magical commodity bringing instant and laborless wealth and modernization and the expressions of Nigeria’s identity as a unified, sovereign state on the cusp of great modernization. I will examine the ways in which the intertwined relationship between the discourses of petro-magic and national homogeneity expressed during the first couple of decades after independence have, in many ways, shaped political and social consciousness in contemporary Nigeria. For oil functions not just as a commodity exchanged for petrodollars and a means for material wealth in Nigerian society, but also as a system of values and meanings that shapes new attitudes and structures of
feeling. More specifically, I will explore the ways in which the political and ideological visions generated by the oil boom and the conditions of violence and poverty in the aftermath of oil industrialism have created a prevailing sense of disillusionment with the model of the nation as well as with oil.

The linked failures of either the nation or petromodernity to deliver democracy, progress, and prosperity have caused numerous political and social upheavals since Nigeria’s independence, leading to the emergence of a social consciousness that is deeply shaped by the experience of petrocapitalism. In the oil-producing regions, in particular, which are populated by politically and economically marginalized minority groups, several resistance groups have emerged that protest against the destruction of the Delta’s ecology and the economic and political marginalization of its population, who have expressed desires for autonomy and self-determination. For these groups’ daily struggles are shaped by the systematic forms of ecological and social exploitation and violence imposed by the processes of petroaccumulation. They have also contested and challenged the legitimacy of the nation-state and the nationalization of the oil economy. Among these groups was the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) led by the author and political activist Ken Saro-Wiwa.\textsuperscript{57} Saro-Wiwa was executed in 1995 along with eight other members of MOSOP as an effort by the government and oil companies to suppress the movement that was growing nationally, which sparked international recognition of the environmental genocide of the Niger Delta.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{57} It is worth noting that the Ogoni plea for independence from the state started before oil was discovered in the region as a response to their marginalization during colonial rule.

\textsuperscript{58} Saro-Wiwa’s native, Ogoniland, was populated by a “micro-minority” community, to use Rob Nixon’s
Saro-Wiwa’s politics of place departed from the activist-writers of his previous generation, as it cultivated, in Rob Nixon’s words, “a deeply international sensibility while standing outside any lineage of African socialism” (109). In fact, the appeal for minority and environmental rights was the fundamental drive in his writings and he sought out various means to bring international attention to the Ogoni situation. Thus, “environmental justice became for him an invaluable concept through which to focus the battle between subnational micro-ethnicities and transnational macro-economic powers” (112).

Years after the executions of Saro-wiwa and the Ogoni eight, Ogoniland continues to be under military occupation, and the marginalization of that region persists even after the return of civilian rule under Obasanjo’s regime in 1999, which has “not changed the overwhelming sense of siege under which the entire Niger Delta lives,” as Watts explains (192). The continuing description, consisting of approximately 500,000 people in a nation of 140 million. Saro-Wiwa wrote tirelessly of the devastations of the Ogoni community, their land and their culture by multinational oil corporations, and, in Nixon’s words, his writings “lay the ground for a broader estimation of the global cost, above all to micro-minorities, of the ongoing romance between unanswerable corporations and unspeakable regimes” (105).

59 Nixon notes that the uniqueness of the Ogoni genocide which was caused by “slow violence” hindered international recognition. For instance, Amnesty International rejected Saro-Wiwa’s appeals, stating that they could take up a justice issue only if it involved the killing of innocent people by the government or their detention without trial, to which Saro-Wiwa later responded: “The Ogoni people were being killed alright [sic], but in an unconventional way” (quoted in Slow Violence, 110). Therefore, Nixon explains, “Saro-Wiwa’s campaign for environmental self-determination may well prove historically critical to the development of a broader image of ecological activism,” as environmental activism is no longer an elitist form of activism exclusive to members of white middle classes (110).
struggle of the Ogoni is best understood by examining the intersections between the environment and “petro-violence,” namely the forms of violence surrounding oil that are shaped by the biological, as well as, the ideological properties of the natural resource. Watts examines this relationship and demonstrates the ways that petro-violence created new regionalist and ethnic waves that reflect minority consciousness and express resistance to exploitation by the majority ethnic groups in Nigeria:

the Ogoni struggle is a response to the violence perpetrated upon the environment by the slick alliance of state and capital. It is an effort by a Nigerian ethnic minority (an ‘indigenous people’) to simultaneously construct representations of other Nigerians as ‘ethnic majorities’ and of themselves as minorities and indigenous people. The struggle also is about political rights and entitlements on which alternative histories and geographies are constructed. [...] the Ogoni struggle for recognition is part of an incomplete decolonization of Africa, an effort to redeem something from the carapace of reformist nationalism and to maintain the imaginative liberation of an African people. The Ogoni struggle to identify themselves and others in relation to themselves turns, in large measure [...] on articulations of history and geography, on nature and biology. (192)

As Watts demonstrates, the alternative histories and geographies expressed in the Ogoni movement challenge national constructions of history and territorialization. And yet, these forms

60 In his study of “petro-violence” Watts explores questions, such as “how and why does violence figure into [the] spectacle of oil and petro-ambition? [and] Why is petroleum extraction such a violent endeavor?” and he examines the physical and social properties of oil that make the violence constitutive of the commodity (203).
of identification deploy patterns of historical connection similar to those used in nationalist discourse. In other words, the kind of spaces produced in both national and regional forms of affiliation are based on “a historicity of territory and a territorialization of a history,” in Nicos Poulantzas’s words (192). Watts also explains that the fact that “there is no pan-Ogoni myth of origin,” has come in the way of the Ogoni people’s ability to assert themselves as an ethnically unified organization (199). As a result of this disadvantage, “a number of the Ogoni subgroups engender stronger local loyalties than any affiliation to Ogoni nationalism,” and even the affiliation of some groups like The Eleme is being questioned as it is argued by some that they are not Ogoni (199). Hence the MOSOP didn’t reach far in its fight against the exploitation of the land, as the environmentalist discourse deployed still fell back on older patterns of African decolonization and used familiar connections to land and history. Watts’ critique of the spatial and temporal politics of these movements is important for understanding the kind of transnational forms of identification that contemporary Nigerian writers, like Helon Habila, present in their novels. In contrast to both regional and national forms of identification, Habila explores the possibility for forming collectivities that refrain from adapting patterns of identification to place and history similar to the ones deployed in both nationalism and decolonization discourses. Instead, connections are built among populations of urban and rural spaces that emerge through transregional solidarity and transnational affiliations.

I am interested in examining how the emerging identities in rural oil-producing regions and in urban cities express translocal and postnational sentiments, as opposed to the ones advocated in Saro-Wiwa’s movement. In this chapter, I explore the relation between the transnational trope in contemporary Nigerian novels and the political, social, and cultural realities shaped by
Nigeria’s encounter with oil through a reading of two novels by Helon Habila: *Waiting for an Angel* and *Oil on Water*. For these novels illustrate the emergence of transnational forms of identification in contemporary Nigerian society within new spatial structures marked by petro-violence. The author’s first novel, *Waiting for an Angel*, explores the political and economic realities of living in the urban ghettos of Lagos and describes the frustration of dreams for the characters living under pervasive corruption and their sense of disillusionment with visions of petromodernization and progress. The multiple and intersecting stories map out the urban periphery through the everyday practices of the characters and their creative expressions. Habila’s most recent work, *Oil on Water*, is set in the producing Niger Delta and demonstrates how the country’s oil frontiers have turned into war zones between anti-government guerrillas and the army in a fight for control over resources. The novel’s ecological mapping highlights petroindustrialism’s spatial restructuring of the region and the plight of many of the oil-producing communities that have been marginalized by national and transnational forces of oppression and systematic exploitation. In both works, contestations over oil are the basis for political instability as well as economic and social paralysis. These representations explore the contradictions of oil capitalism in Nigeria and its role in creating a climate of political corruption and violence and of increasing poverty and spatial marginalization.

As I have already discussed, Ghosh and other petrocritics argue that oil extraction practices are concealed and secreted away from the public and that, for this reason, the encounter escapes literary expression. Yet, oil surfaces excessively in Habila’s novels in ways, however, that are distinct from the literal representation of the resource in Sinclair’s *Oil!* and its conflicted desire for and repudiation of oil. The lack of the ambivalence characterizing early narratives of oil in
Habila’s works is due to the fact that, unlike Oil!, which depicts the beginnings of the oil industry, his novels are set during a later stage of the oil industry and, therefore, express a clearer account of the realities shaped by the encounter that become apparent in the aftermath of oil-production as opposed to the fantasies attendant upon its discovery. Indeed, Habila’s novels illustrate the ways in which oil in Nigeria is constitutive of political, social and ecological violence. Hence, they depict the general sense of disillusionment with oil wealth and the dispelling of the commodity’s aura of magic for individuals and communities that have suffered for decades from the oppressive discourse of oil. I examine the representations of oil dystopias in these novels as they highlight oil’s direct link to political and social oppression and environmental destruction, arguing that petro-violence registers as the “real” of petro-magic. Furthermore, by exploring the ways in which oil is a dominant undercurrent in the daily lives of Nigerians, I argue that the impact of oil on society is central to the formation of new identities of crisis in Nigeria and the emergence of new subjectivities that are transregional and cosmopolitan. For these affiliations are constituted by petrocapitalism’s restructuring of the political, social and cultural landscapes. Moreover, I suggest that these forms of identification reflect a different relationship with territory and history from previous forms, as individuals are able to create connections with others based on shared experiences and their contemporary realities rather than relying on identifications provided by national constructions of his history and territory.

**Mapping the Urban Ghetto and Reinscribing Identities:**

The events in *Waiting for an Angel* are animated by a dual motive: to tell stories about
personal and collective experiences of living in Lagos, and to map out the physical and social geography of the city. The multiple stories about the lives of individuals in Morgan Street reflect an underlying desire within the community to transcend the physical and ideological limitations imposed on them by urban socio-economic structures. For they reflect the ways the realities of the country’s political upheaval and its failed social systems create forms of economic and spiritual stagnation. Therefore, individuals perform symbolic and literal mappings as a way to make sense of the city’s social order and to transcend the ideological limitations in the way of their self-actualization.

The connection between mapping space and affirming identity is best represented in the struggles of the artist protagonist, Lomba to find a creative expression amidst crippling political and economic conditions. During his two years of living in financial and creative impoverishment, Lomba writes an article about Morgan Street which earns him a job at The Dial newspaper. In this article, he maps out the socio-economic and political structures of the city that shape the living conditions of its ghetto-dwellers as a way to highlight how people’s experiences and dreams are affected by their marginalization. By making sense of how these forces impact their lives, he challenges the political and ideological limitations inscribed on these spaces.

Indeed, a few years later, he learns from Joshua, one of the leaders of the protest at Morgan Street, that his article was very influential in the community and gave hope for many. Lomba describes the organizational structure of his article as follows:

I use my street, Morgan Street, as a paradigmatic locale, the fuel scarcity as the main theme. The long lines of cars waiting for fuel at petrol stations and obstructing
traffic I use as a thread to weave together the various aspects of the article; in front of the petrol pumps I place the ubiquitous gun- and whip-toting soldiers, collecting money from drivers to expedite their progress toward the pumps. I place the pot-bellied, glaucomatous kids of Morgan Street, with their high-defined ribs, beside the open gutters where they usually play; [...] For local colour, I bring the aged and the dying to peep through open windows [...]. To conclude, I use the kerosene-starved housewives of Morgan Street. I make them rampage the street, tearing down wooden signboards and billboards and hauling them away to their kitchen to use as firewood. (117)

Lomba’s description highlights three interrelated aspects of life in the ghetto: the centrality of the oil dependency problem in Nigerian society, the pervasive military violence, and the crippling poverty of the ghetto-dwellers. The relationship is represented in a topography of public space that is structured around the oil fetish. The long lines of cars at the gas station illustrate the city’s stagnation caused by the dependency. The “ubiquitous gun” suggests the omnipresent and oppressive power of the military government. And the “soldiers, collecting money from drivers” reflects the impoverishment of the Nigerian citizens by dependency and political corruption. Hence, the depiction of Morgan Street suggests the intertwined relationship between oil, violence, and poverty.

Further, Lomba chooses the fuel crisis as a central theme for it reflects the contradictions within Nigeria as a failed petro-state. For although the country is one of the world’s leading producers of oil, it is dependent on the importation of refined petroleum as a result of corruption and neglect within the nationalized oil industry that has left its refineries inoperable. Hence, the fuel shortage is an embodiment of the paradox of petrocapitalism in Nigeria: commodity scarcity
Despite resource abundance, increased poverty despite the flow of petrodollars into the country, a deteriorating infrastructure and collapsing buildings following the construction frenzy during the boom. Such realities have become defining characteristics of Nigeria’s experience with petrocapitalism. Significantly, Lomba does not present the fuel shortage problem from an economic or political perspective; rather he depicts how the issue factors in the daily experiences of individuals inhabiting these spaces, and how oil dependency manifests itself as a structuring principle of Nigerian life. This engagement is represented in the image of the “kerosene-starved housewives” scavenging the streets for pieces of wood and surviving on the remnants of the decaying urban buildings. Hence, Lomba’s mapping of Morgan Street structures the chaotic elements of life in the ghetto to make them legible and draws connections between different sources of oppression to offer a way of making sense of the social conditions. Indeed, his topological narrative even inspires forms of contestation toward deprivation and injustice.

Another central character who participates in the mapping of Morgan Street is Kela, whose father sends him there to live with his Aunt Rachael, as a form of punishment and to teach him “What life is really like” (146). Kela is dedicated to narrating the “story [...] about how the street came to be called Poverty Street,” which he describes as “one of the many decrepit, disease-ridden quarters that dotted the city of Lagos like ringworm on a beggar’s body” (122). Like many other marginalized and impoverished districts of Lagos, Morgan Street maintains a parasitic existence within the topology of the city. It is a space that functions as a modern black hole swallowing up the waste, excesses and materials devoid of function and meaning that come as a product of the country’s speedy modernization and its defective infrastructure. Kela maps out the topological structure of the district, noting that it consists of a “single tarred [central]
road” and other tributary “dirt roads” that lead “to the dark interior of the street” (123). The “University Road” is among these tributaries, known to be “the flux point of all vices” for its sex, drugs and alcohol markets (123). Significantly, many of the sex-workers are university students who have moved to Lagos to get an education and to work, and who had dreams of becoming part of the city’s success story, only to find themselves financially entrapped by the failing economic and social systems. Many of these girls have personal stories of abandonment and neglect, some for bringing shame to their families, which result from the clash between traditional values and the ways of the city as well as collapsing familial and social structures.

Appearing in ironic contrast to these women is the “Women Centre,” short for the “Mariam Abacha Women Centre” which was formerly known as “Mariam Babangida Women Centre.” It is located at the beginning of the main road and is “the biggest and newest building on the street,” standing out like “a showpiece” among other buildings that “looked shaky, adventitious, as if the first strong wind that passed this way would uproot them” (123). Ineffective and abandoned, the Women Centre is symbolic of the unkept promise for social improvement made by the different regimes that Nigeria has seen over the last few decades. Moreover, the fronts and backs of the other run-down buildings are hidden by huge hills of refuse that overflow the roads, whereas, the infrastructure is weak and decayed, which is reflected in the “unfinished, abandoned appearance of an underwaterscape” (124, 128). Indeed, many of the families inhabiting these buildings live in extreme poverty, as Kela explains that the fathers in most families are “out-of-work drivers, laborers, fugitives convalescing between prison terms” (128).

Kela’s mapping describes how these socio-economic structures of urban space produce an informal working class consisting of individuals and communities that are marginalized in
relation to the city’s system of production. These individuals form what Mike Davis calls the “outcast proletariat”—a new and rapidly growing social class emerging in the urban cities of the global south as a result of the disparity between urban population growth and industrial growth, making formal jobs unavailable to many. Davis examines the emergence of new subjectivities and forms of agency within these marginalizing urban cartographies, noting that due to the simultaneous increase in mass migration to urban cities and the significant decrease of rural populations, the zones of resistance to imperial powers have shifted. Whereas the suburbs were the main sites of resistance during colonialism, these forms of agency have shifted to urban areas. And yet, the formation of a collective in the city is more difficult than in the colonial villages, partly because of the complacency of the middle class “whose nationalism, if it existed, usually took cautious, incremental, and nonviolent forms” (9). In addition, Davis explains, “many of the urban poor were also integrated, as servants, soldiers, prostitutes, and petty traders, into the parasitic ecology of the colonial metropolis” (9). These individuals make up a new, informal working class that exists on the outskirts of the city’s system of production. This class is a “surplus humanity” that lacks the agency to disrupt the flow of capitalist production, since it does not have the resources available to groups of the working class to organize, go on strike, and to demand better conditions (13). This body, Davis contends, has not yet reached a globally unified political or ideological expression, for while its members share a background of

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61 In the Nigerian situation, as in many countries of the global south, the informal working class is growing due to the failure of national debt programs and because of the structural adjustments that have disfranchised many people. Therefore, according to Davis’ study, poverty has increased after the inflation of the nation’s oil economy “from 28 percent to 66 percent, from 1980 to 1996” (12).
marginalized existence, they “constitute a startling spectrum of differential identity and activism” (13). However, Davis sees a possibility for new forms of collectivity based on shared experiences of exclusion that will have the ability to “subvert urban order,” and he suggests that urban slums carry the seed for the possibility of resistance which conventional geopolitics has not yet registered (12).

Habila’s novel suggests the spark of a new form of solidarity in the Nigerian ghetto that resonates with the kind of social awareness Davis hopes for it presents a form of identification based on shared experiences of urban marginalization. In a climactic scene where people gather in front of the Local Government Secretariat building to demand better living conditions and social services, the inhabitants of Morgan Street draw attention to their social conditions. This peaceful protest is led by Kela’s tutor, Joshua, who has become an influential figure in Kela’s life. Joshua voices the concerns of his community, asking, “Where is the subsidized drug programme promised us from the Special Petroleum Trust Fund? We need it now, because our children and our wives are dying from diseases. We are dying from lack of hope” (173). Joshua, here, expresses the community’s right as citizens for better living conditions and addresses the government’s undelivered promise for a share in the oil money that will go toward providing the marginalized population a decent living. His speech shows that the protesters are well aware of the centrality of oil to their social marginalization. And, as an exercise of agency, he announces that the community will change the name of the district to “Poverty Street,” for they “don’t know who Morgan was—some colonial administrator, perhaps, a reminder of [their] hopeless, subjected state” (73). Joshua makes this statement by raising a placard that reads “Poverty Street,” and everyone cheers in agreement, including the secretaries and clerks working in the
building. In this brief moment of triumph, the protesters come together in solidarity and reinscribe their district into the city’s topology by choosing a name that reflects their social reality. Further, by “refus[ing] to be known as Morgan Street,” they can replace the remnants of their colonial history with the historical realities that shape their contemporary conditions. Hence, through this spatial remapping, they reinscribe their histories and identities within the spaces they inhabit.

As demonstrated in these scenes, the ghettos of Lagos exist materially and socio-economically on the outskirts of the city’s “modern” life. The simultaneous proximity of the ghetto to the urban center and its peripheralization make these spaces vulnerable to the idiosyncratic notions of development, wealth, success and freedom generated by the discourse of oil as a magical commodity. For despite the pervasive sense of disillusionment in Nigerian society, after decades of political and economic turmoil, the logic of spectacles and mystified commodities still functions in the public spheres of the ghettos. Street spectacles and crowds are common. As Lomba points out, “Crowds were a normal aspect of Lagos streets: bell-ringing commodity hawkers offering a bargain, or a miracle healer plying his trade, or a fight, or a robber being lynched, or a preacher” (74). Scammers and con-artists make a living out of exploiting the dreams and desperation of their customers by marketing their products as magical commodities that will bring happiness and success. They rely on public performances to influence public opinion and sentiment and deploy a marketing rhetoric that parallels the oil discourse which divorces material base from value and attaches an aura of magic to the commodity in a way that defies the logic of cause and effect. This demonstrates how the replacement of commodity-based wealth with the notion of magical money has had a deep
impact on the imaginative lives of many Nigerians.

Moreover, this crisis of representation, on which petty merchants capitalize, is, as Sarah Upstone has argued, a product of the inflationary culture that emerged from Nigerian’s boom and bust oil economy. Reading Okri’s magical realist style in *Stars of the New Curfew*, Upstone argues that the protagonist’s role as a theatrical salesman, selling deadly quack medicine through spectacular public performances, represents “the logic of semblance and spectacle that governs all levels of social and political life in oil-boom Nigeria” (252). The theme of spectacular performances is presented briefly in Habila’s Lagos, as the depiction of its public sphere suggests lingering traces of the logic of spectacles and features “bell-ringing commodity hawkers” and “miracle healers” (74). However, unlike Okri’s work, these figures and events are not presented in terms of the fantastic or through “petro-magic-realism.” Instead, Habila uses realism to undermine the aura of magic placed onto commodities and, in this way, reflect the prevalent sense of disillusionment in contemporary Nigerian society. Hence, the narrative marginalizes the spectacular effects of public performances, showing them to be part of the mundane aspects of Nigerian public life and as kitsch in contemporary culture.

Further, while the novel abandons magical realism’s method of conflating reality and fantasy, it suggests the notion that reality is represented in the dreams of its subjects. This connection is one of the most important lessons Kela learns from Joshua—that “people become

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62 Wenzel coins the term “petro-magic-realism” to describe the form of magical realism deployed in Nigerian fiction, suggesting that it reflects the notion of oil as magic and its saturation in Nigerian society and that it corresponds with the nation’s intensely destabilizing experience with petromodernity.
dreamers when they are not satisfied with their reality, and sometimes they don’t know what is real until they begin to dream” (121). As a result, Kela’s representation of the realities of life on Morgan Street and his attempt to narrate contemporary history features the hopes and dreams of the people he got to know which sheds light on their present and past experiences. Some characters are entrapped in dreams of the past, such as Aunt Rachael, who “dreamt backward, groping back to a time dissolved, to figures blurred in the astigmatic lens of history,” and who “kept her memories inside her, pickled in alcohol” (138, 142). And some invest in dreams for the future, such as Joshua who wishes for stability, security and different circumstances, so that he can marry the woman he loves and start a family with her. Through both passive and active dreams, these individuals are able to confront and understand the limitations imposed upon them that have shaped their lives and experiences. For their dreams are expressions of dissatisfaction with reality. Kela’s narrative thus builds a collective sense of disillusionment out of the stories dreams of the members of the community, and, in turn, affirms their existence within the spaces of the city.

Kela also learns about the power of imagination and its capacity to overcome spatial and ideological boundaries, for as Joshua tells him, “the world was not as big and as incomprehensible as some people would have us believe. [...] everything lay within our grasp, if only we cared to reach out boldly” (127). By taking him to see the ocean for the first time, Joshua teaches Kela about the ability to imagine new possibilities, explaining to Kela that “if the vast ocean were magically shrunk into a tiny brook, or a narrow river, we could be staring at some beach on the American coast” (127). Joshua here suggests a symbolic way to understand the nature of spatial demarcations and the relativity of space, in that space is not fixed and can be
deconstructed—and remapped—through imagination. This approach to space allows one to carve out new notions of belonging and attachments to place. Their trip to the ocean is, then, one of the clearest instances in the novel that express a transnationalist sentiment, extending the notion of place beyond the boundaries of the nation. In this instance, however, freedom and dignity are sought out in the contours of another nation: America. As Adélékè Adéèkó writes, America appears as “the location of exilic recuperation” in the novel and in contemporary Nigerian fiction in general (13). This figuration in literature suggests the importance of the possibility of migration to the US in contemporary Nigerian reality. Adéèkó also points out the

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63 It is worth noting that in his study, Adéèkó understates the transformative role of global capitalism in restructuring the social, political and cultural dimensions of Nigerian life in ways that have conditioned the consciousness of its subjects. In his reading of *Waiting for an Angel*, Adéèkó defends his position, stating, “If my description of the main characters in the novels shows them untouched by the angst of the late capitalist subject whose psyche has been smashed into pieces by the repercussions of dispersed production systems, my intention is not to argue for a Nigerian exceptionalism but to make a case for how the dominant flows of global developments are infracted in postcolonial Nigeria. I am contending that the desire for a nation remains alive in the Nigerian imagination because the state never had the chance to consolidate requisite constructs for fully inserting itself in the ways and manners of its citizens” (22-23). And yet, Adéèkó affirms, what other scholars, such as Apter and Watts have argued, that the oil boom promoted the legitimacy and sovereignty of the nation-state, as well as “a trans-Nigerian affective community” (21). This statement reflects an inconsistency in his arguments, for the oil boom and the entry into petrocapitalism is inarguably the region’s most intense experience with global capitalism, which essentially, produces the state in the global south, as Watts demonstrates. Therefore, suggesting that the impact of global flows, produced by cultural activities like traveling and the internet, trumps the economic aspect of globalization greatly understates the role of capitalist system of accumulation in creating the social relations that condition consciousness and produce subjectivities.
disillusionment with the model of the nation-state and the shift in attitudes toward national attachment, explaining that subjects typically represented in contemporary Nigerian fiction don’t express a dedication and a willingness to die for the nation as in the works of older generations of Nigerian writers. Rather, they express the possibility of migration without the fear of being branded traitors. For “the conscientious individual can leave the nation’s shores untainted by the odium of betrayal. This difference radically reorders how to think about the nation state, the individual, and the relation of the latter to the former” (12). Moreover, the figuration of America replaces the deployment of the native village in earlier fiction, as a locale through which subjects can find alternative forms of identification and overcome the forces of oppression. I suggest that the replacement of the village, which is typically evoked as a space that bears closer connections with an authentic past, with America, and other cross-national spaces, results from the reconfiguration of notions of history in the context of the disappointment with the postcolonial condition. For history, like other totalities, such as the nation-state, is interrogated in contemporary forms of identification, rather than engaged in an effort to recuperate a lost, more authentic form of identity. This change in the approach to history influences the politics of place and restructures the forms of identification that subjects feel to their places of origin. As a result of this shift, the older figuration of history in literature, typically framed within the contours of the African village in earlier works, is rendered obsolete as contemporary writings turn to cross-national spaces in search for alternatives to current realities.

Indeed, the change in the figuration of the nation-state in liberation discourse, and, in turn, in contemporary fiction, is also linked to a shift in the agents of history, for as Adéèkó notes, the nation-state “has no charming myths, no great heroes and no legendary saviors” (22). Whereas
in earlier nationalist discourse, notions of history and culture were evoked as ways to resurrect an authentic identity that was undermined by colonial cultural oppression, in contemporary approaches, the past is not a constructed, image of an original self that bears no connection to the historical realities of the present. Rather, identification with the past is based on shared experiences, and the past is evoked as a narrative that offers a way for understanding present realities.

This form of history is embodied in the slave museum located by the slave port in Badagry village, mentioned several times in the novel. James takes Lomba to the museum to help Lomba understand the realities that frustrate his desires for self-expression and affirmation and the importance of overcoming these forces by resistance. They witness the methods and instruments used to enslave their ancestors, and James explains that mouth-locks were used on slaves on the ships, “No two persons of the same language were kept together” as a way to suppress communication and to prevent the formation of solidarity between the slaves (198). The history evoked in this passage is of the continent’s first experience with globalization and the oppression of its populations by the demands of the global market. Lomba and James observe the methods used to physically and spiritually chain their enslaved ancestors, in order to understand their own experience of confinement. This evocation of history thus exposes the recurrent patterns of oppression in African history and suggest continuities with precolonial and colonial histories that are far from the idealized constructs of the past. Hence, the visit to the slave museum enables the characters to reconnect with subjects of the past based on shared realities of racial and capitalist oppressions. Moreover, we know from the story by the unnamed narrator in “Angel” that Lomba had visited the museum with the narrator and Bola when they were university students. But that
visit didn’t seem to have the effect on Lomba as it does this time around, for this visit helps Lomba realize, as he later tells Kela when he meets him for the first time, “why it is important to agitate against injustice, no matter the consequence,” (168). While Lomba had once tried to resist politics as an artist concerned with representing universal experiences, he here begins to understand that universalism can be reached only through expressions of the personal and that his personal experiences are entirely shaped by the socio-economic and political realities of the present. Hence, his second visit to the museum opens his eyes to the fact that politics is unavoidable in representations of reality, especially in the context of the increasing violence and censorship against thinkers and writers during the Abacha regime. Furthermore, Lomba learns that to express universalism is to strive for representing the wholeness of the experience, and to understand the present both in relation to the experiences of the past and the aspirations for the future. The museum is then central to how the characters navigate the contemporary city’s relationship to the past, as the characters reinscribe their identities and personal and collective experiences within this institution which embodies history and culture.

This is not the only moment, however, when Lomba is pushed toward activism. One of the earliest of such moments occurs during the protest at the university where Lomba studies, which is based on the 1993 student demonstration against the Babangida regime's annulment of the presidential election, a demonstration that was violently suppressed by the police. Although Lomba misses the demonstration, when he arrives back at his room, he finds that the police have raided the dorms and destroyed his writings. Lomba describes the impact of the incident on him: “I felt the imprint of the boots on my mind; I felt the rifling, tearing hands ripping through my very soul [...] I have been writing these stories and poems for as long as I can remember now,
these are my secret thoughts and dreams” (78). Up until that moment, Lomba liked to express himself through writing and to discuss his poetry with his professor, for writing provided him “a sense of place in the larger scheme of things,” helping him reach a sense of universalism that surpassed the boundaries of his social realities (86). But this incident opens his eyes to the fact that, as an artist, he is restrained by the turbulent political situation in the country and the government’s assaults on democracy and freedom. After the riots, the university temporarily shuts down, Lomba drops out and leaves the campus feeling “the fences suddenly transform into thick walls, standing tall, top-tufted with barbed wire and broken bottles, arms widespread to restrain and contain and limit” (81). Hence, the university, as a public institution through which the values of enlightenment, progress, and freedom can be imagined and sought out, and as a hallmark of the city’s development is undermined by the regime. Once a haven for Lomba’s creativity, the university has become an ideologically confining place.

Another moment of violent censorship that is central to Lomba’s transformation occurs when the police raid The Dial building and set it on fire. The attacks on newspaper headquarters in Lagos and the arrests of journalist are also based on the Abacha regime’s arrests of writers who were outspoken about government corruption and violence. By basing the narrative on historical events, such as the attacks on the university and the journalists (also, by referencing Saro-Wiwa’s execution), Habila establishes the connections between historical context and his fictional world. Indeed, Lomba’s status as a poet—turned—journalist furthers the parallel between writing fiction and writing history in representations of Nigeria’s contemporary realities. Furthermore, the government’s attack on the free press and the suppression of the media as a public institution that promotes the ideals of democracy and freedom has a transformative
effect on Lomba’s life, as well as that of his boss, James. For in an instant, they become runaways evading the Secret Services, and even consider fleeing the country. They drive to James’ house which they find under surveillance, and Lomba stops by to pick up James’s passport and some exchange money from James’ wife. Seeing James’ house for the first time, Lomba takes note of how, prior to this moment, James led a normal and stable life. This climactic moment reflects uncertain and unstable conditions that can turn anyone’s life upside down in an instance. At this point in the narrative, Lomba reflects on the triviality of his emotional agonies over his girlfriend, Sarimam, who just a few hours ago was the source of his sufferings. While trying to figure out how to find fuel after they run out, he “suddenly remembers Sarimam [...] it is as if she belongs to another world, another life” and asks, “Has that much time passed?” (220). Ironically, two years after writing the article about the fuel shortage and its centrality to the socio-economic conditions in the urban periphery, the problem persists even obstructing James’ and Lomba’s escape.

Lomba is eventually captured, and this brings us back to the beginning of the novel which narrates his experience in prison. There, he secretly writes to survive his physical and spiritual confinement, but when the superintendent discovers his pen and paper, he is brutally attacked and sent to solitary confinement. And in a twist of events, the superintendent releases Lomba from solitary on the condition that Lomba ghostwrites love poems for the superintendent’s lover as a plan to win her heart. Lomba eventually leaves a cryptic S.O.S message, exposing himself as the real author. He explains that the S.O.S message was an act of recuperating his identity and dignity, after prostituting his writing in exchange for cigarettes and a bit of freedom in prison, explaining, the message “was for myself, perhaps, written by me to my own soul, to every other
soul, the collective soul of the universe” (38). Again, Lomba uses writing as a means to transcend the conditions that cause his physical and spiritual confinement by formulating a sense of cosmopolitanism that helps him rise above his limitations as a Nigerian subject.

Although Lomba’s struggle for freedom as a Nigerian artist is presented as a major conflict in the novel, the fragmented narrative structure undermines the centrality of Lomba’s story. For the novel is divided into seven sections, shifting to stories about other characters whose lives intersect at certain points with Lomba’s, such as Joshua, Bola, as well as, Kela whom Lomba meets only once. The narration of their personal experiences presents a panoramic depiction of Lomba’s struggles in relation to the experiences of different individuals who are also affected by the political and social circumstances in Morgan Street and the country, at large. Hence, individual experiences and ways of thinking, even the most personal ones, such as those expressed in Lomba’s diaries and love poems, are presented through the prism of collective history. Therefore, Lomba’s story becomes one about the dire living conditions in Lagos, and especially its ghettos. The deemphasis of individual experience is also evident in the second section, entitled “The Angel,” which presents the unnamed narrator who sits in a bar during a “dusk-to-dawn curfew,” awaiting the Angel of Death. Indeed, the narrator remains unnamed throughout the novel, which undermines the status of the individual as the focal point of the story and shifts focus to the emotions the narrator expresses in a way to present these sentiments through a universal light.

In addition to the shifts to different storylines, the narrative also switches from present to past, creating a circular narrative timeline. For as I’ve already mentioned, the structure of the story begins from the end, as the first section narrates Lomba’s psychological and physical
torment during his imprisonment and solitary confinement. This stylistic choice disrupts the timeline throughout the novel. It also helps to present the realities of living under the oppressive political and economic conditions from a microcosmic scope, connecting Lomba’s existential crisis and emotional agonies—over his writing and, the love of his life, Alice—to a macrocosmic engagement, showing how his personal struggles as an individual is shaped by political and social realities. In addition, this nonlinearity is evident in the first section as the narrative shifts abruptly from stream of consciousness and personal writing to the third person which undermines Lomba’s solipsism and presents another narrative voice. The inclusion of a third person voice is another way to open up Lomba’s story to other perspectives and undermine the personalization of the story, allowing the narrative to form connections with other voices and stories. These shifts help to contextualize Lomba’s difficulties within the broader context of the realities of contemporary Nigerian society.

In addition to the obstacles created by the country’s political and economic conditions, there are other forces beyond the problems of the nation that come in the way of Lomba’s goal of becoming a published writer. For as James tells Lomba, along with the fact that people are too poor and troubled to have the luxury to read, paper is both scarce and expensive in Nigeria as a result of the international economic sanctions placed on the state for its human rights violations. Even participation in the Commonwealth Literary Prize is no longer an option for Lomba, “[b]ecause Nigeria was thrown out of the Commonwealth of Nations” (194). Therefore, when James tells Lomba, “[y]ou can’t write with chains on your hands,” these chains are not only domestic issues like government suppression of free thinking, but also external forces that determine in many ways the economic conditions for Nigerians and the opportunities available to
them (195). Hence, Lomba’s fate as a writer is entangled with both national and international circumstances. And while international influence, in these cases, is restrictive, it can also be an outlet for Nigerian writers who succeed in attracting an international audience. This prospect is suggested to Lomba when he and James attend the artists’ event honoring imprisoned writers, in a scene that celebrates the cosmopolitan life of Lagos with Afrobeat music, poetry readings, and a gathering of Nigerian artists from different ethnicities. During a conversation with a female photographer, Lomba is told that the easiest way to make it as an artist is by getting arrested, which will make him famous and attract publishing agencies abroad. The fact that gaining this kind of notoriety will most likely grant an artist a recognition abroad shows that the artist’s political condition, as well as his work are valorized as an export commodity. In other words, state censorship within the nation-state produces the fetishization of political works in this context.

Indeed, the pivotal role of international forces in offering possibilities for the Nigerian subject relates not just to artistic freedoms, but to physical and ideological freedoms, as well. This is suggested during Lomba’s imprisonment when Lomba is told to be patient, for even though he is imprisoned without trial or hope for release, there is a possibility that the country will see another coup, or he might even be released by pressures from Amnesty International. These possibilities function like a Deux Ex Machina as a result of the arbitrariness and instabilities of their realities, highlighting how the connection between national and international circumstances influence the political and economic conditions that determine and shape the consciousness of the characters and the nature of the lives that they live.

Lomba’s ambivalence toward action and even political writing is thus an extension of the
general sense of disillusionment with the model of the nation-state in contemporary Nigerian society and fiction, reflecting a repudiation of the nation-state as the vehicle through which freedom and prosperity can be achieved. As Adéèkó notes, contemporary Nigerian novels depart from assertions about the power of the collective and the possibilities for nation building and mostly feature “Single-minded, self-assured protagonists [who] fail to become centers of progress . . . not because nationalists embody some inherent epistemological defiance; they fail because the Nigerian nation state lacks sturdy democratic guarantees for its citizens” (11). While I agree with Adéèkó’s contention about individual struggle, I think he undermines the role of collective consciousness in Habila’s novel. For while the protest at Morgan Street was violently suppressed, Habila, still, suggests a spark of a new form of consciousness based on the affiliations with a larger collective, which differs from the patterns of collectivities of the working class and even of colonized subjects. Because of the difference in the textures of these collectivities, the manifestations of collective solidarity in contemporary novels often go unnoticed. Indeed, the solidarity dramatized in the novel is not based on an ethnic, national, or even working class consciousness, rather it is based on a transregional solidarity of subjects from diverse backgrounds, and, therefore the formation of these subjectivities is not typically interpreted as an emergence of a collective that could possibly have the power to disrupt the order of things. But Adéèkó is right to suggest that the sense of ambivalence toward forms of political activism and the obliviousness toward the nation are underlying issues in these novels.

Habila elaborates on the aesthetic and ideological effects of this shift in the attitudes toward the nation-state in his introduction to the *Granta Book of the African Short Story*, arguing that the current generation of African writers are “postnationalist” and are concerned with questions
beyond the contours of the nation-state. He suggests that the ideological and creative preoccupations with nationalism and national politics that characterize earlier postcolonial African fiction have become imaginatively limiting to the talents of contemporary African writers, leading them to search for expression in “more cosmopolitan visions for the African condition, cultural production, and the subjectivities of gender, class, and sexuality.” Habila also explains that their “apolitical” direction represents “intentional” and “ideological” choices that underscore the complex relation of subjects to previous forms of identification in an increasingly globalized world (10). The eminence of this imaginative turn in Nigerian writing is projected in Lomba’s search for universal expression, which starts as a callous disregard of the forceful impact of the protagonist’s historical realities on his writing, then grows into a bitter realization of their power, as Lomba is pressed to consciously negotiate his existence within the political and social spaces he inhabits. As the following section will show, in Oil on Water Habila expands his exploration of this crisis of representation and the methods of writing and mapping that subjects pursue in order to achieve self-assertion by engaging a different type of dystopic space: the oil-producing villages and peripheral islands.

**Petro-violence in the Producing Periphery:**

In Oil on Water, Habila departs from the urban spaces mobilized in his first novel and turns to the Nigerian periphery to illustrate the social and ecological decimation of the oil-producing regions of the Niger Delta. By mapping out the dystopic spaces of oil in these regions, the novel shows how oil extraction restructures physical and social landscapes in a way that is compatible
with petrocapitalism’s logic of accumulation, which has been socially and environmentally destructive in the region. Further, it illustrates how petroindustrialism has altered the social and cultural textures of the Nigerian village which has, in term, become determined by the global flows of transnational capitalism.

The novel’s protagonist, Rufus, who is an aspiring journalist searching for “the perfect story,” embarks on a journey to the Niger Delta with his idol and mentor, Zaq, to find out if the wife of a British oil company official, who has been taken by militants for ransom, is still alive (7). Rufus’s story about the kidnapped woman becomes a parable of the dispossessed, as he and Zaq witness the environmental and social devastation of the villages and islands. Hence, the journey into the “heart of [Nigeria’s] darkness” explores the producing periphery, which is central to the state’s national economy, and yet politically, socio-economically, and culturally marginalized. These regions exist on “the margin of the margin,” to use Watts’ description of Saro-Wiwa’s Ogoniland, and they figure as the subconscious space of the petrostate (195). Further, these spaces are populated by underrepresented “micro-minority groups” which Nixon coins to describe the ethnic minorities of Niger Delta who are too “powerless to influence national events, particularly in a society run on principles of kleptocratic militarism” (114). Indeed, the daily struggles of these groups with poverty and environmental pollution are ignored.

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64 “The Niger Delta is the most extensive lowland forest and aquatic ecosystem in West Africa,” as described in Where the Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights, and Oil in the Niger Delta (61). Indeed, the region is known for its rivers, mangrove swamps, vast fertile agricultural land and extensive coastal shores. And since the discovery of oil in commercial quantities, the Niger Delta has become the center of Nigeria’s onshore oil industry, and its ecological landscape has been drastically altered as a result.
by the ruling majority and remain unknown to many. Rufus’s spatial mapping of the Delta, through his story and photography, thus reflects the paradox of oil industrialism in the region as it has brought underdevelopment, pollution and poverty for Nigeria’s indigenous populations.

The novel produces many scenes portraying the irreversible violence of oil extractive processes on natural life. These scenes often use a surrealist depiction of nature linked to death and decay. One of the earliest of these scenes presents oil’s biological form as an evil substance that envelops and decomposes all living beings. Rufus explains:

The atmosphere grew heavy with the suspended stench of dead matter. We followed a bend in the river and in front of us we saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fishes bobbed white-bellied between tree roots.

The next village was almost a replica of the last: the same empty dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick, and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return. (9)

Whereas oil is culturally imagined as a natural resource that magically enhances the lives of many, the reality of oil extraction is its threat to life and its disruption of nature. The irreversible environmental devastation, brought about by oil spills, gas flares, and unregulated extractive practices, has radically disrupted the ecological balance of the region; therefore, the land can no longer be productive. Hence, oil figures in the passage as an unnatural and deadly matter that disrupts nature’s ability to renew itself. This figuration is suggested, for instance, in the image of
“the punctured zinc roofs” reflecting the level of pollution, as the roofs are damaged by the acidic rainwater, which forms from the pollution of rivers and air.⁶⁵ Hence, this impotent land is transformed into a ghostly place of death and decay. Furthermore, if oil commodification was once envisioned to be an entry ticket into the global history of development and progress, the violence it has engendered, in fact, displaces these spaces from development. Therefore, the encounter with oil pushes these spaces outside of history. Oil extraction and its devastating consequences on land and water which are the basis of the delta’s economy have caused the underdevelopment of the region.⁶⁶ Where the delta had once been a strong contributor to the national food supply (which, by the time of independence, was self-sufficient) many of its villages have now been abandoned, for they are no longer profitable within the system of

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⁶⁵ The writers in *Where the Vultures Feast* describe the formation of acid rains as an ecological phenomenon caused by Shell’s almost completely unregulated operations in the region, as they note that the Iko community suffered from acid rains, caused by the many oil spillages, which killed the crops, destroyed the soil and ruined many homes (83).

⁶⁶ In “The Development of Underdevelopment,” the economic historian and sociologist, Andre Gunder Frank, argues that the condition of underdevelopment debunks assumptions about universal patterns of economic development with successive capitalist stages, explaining that the pasts and presents of underdevelopment countries do not resemble the pasts of developed countries (3). Following Frank’s idea, I read Nigeria’s underdevelopment—as often described by political economists of Nigeria, such as Michael Watts—as a material and ideological marginalization from the dominant narrative of historical development. Because Nigeria hasn’t succeeded in following the models of western development, and because it has rather regressed economically and socially over the last few decades, the country’s most marginalized regions are imagined as being pushed outside of History.
accumulation. The logic of petrocapitalism that valorizes and territorializes oil bearing land, pushes the exploited spaces outside of the system of production, once they are deemed incompatible with its processes, which then reproduces them as repetitive spaces of oil dystopia.

Other depictions of oil dystopias in the novel juxtapose nature and industrial machinery to suggest that the once flourishing villages of the Niger Delta have turned into industrial wastelands, reflecting the sinister amalgamation of natural life and oil machinery. For instance, Rufus describes one of the villages that has been consumed and wiped out with nothing remaining but machinery:

Abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia was strewn around the platform; some appeared to be sprouting out of widening cracks in the concrete, alongside thick clumps of grass. High up in the rusty rigging wasps flew in and out of their nests. A weather-beaten signboard near the platform said: OIL WELL NO. 2. 1999. 15000 METRES. (8)

He also encounters another area that

looked like a setting for a sci-fi movie: the meagre landscape was covered in pipelines flying in all directions, sprouting from the evil-smelling, oil-fecund earth. The pipes criss-crossed and interconnected endlessly all over the eerie field. (34)

These two scenes depict petroindustrialism’s suppression of nature by suggesting oil machinery’s dominance over land and nature. They evoke a petro-aesthetic of industrial waste and biological decadence that counters early western representations of the natural resource that aestheticized oil extraction and production and portrayed them as natural practices. Indeed, the
dystopic imagery counters the representations of an American oil utopia in Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!,* whose primitivist discourse of oil, as we have seen, imagines a harmonious relationship between nature and oil industrialism, suggesting that oil practices are rooted in an archaic past. Habila inverts these representations to show how industrial machines have been violently imposed on natural life, furthering the idea that oil extraction implies the end of natural life. Furthermore, through gruesome and violent images of nature, the passages suggest nature’s transformation into a dark and supernatural force. The “wasps” that gather around the “rusty rigging,” for instance, suggest that rot and decomposition are the only forms of life found, the “weather-beaten signboard” evokes an image of violent and destructive winds, and the “evil-smelling, oil fecund earth” and “eerie field” present olfactory and sensory images suggesting the transformation of nature into a sinister force. Hence, the surreal depiction of natural landscape suggests that petro-violence is the *real* of Nigeria’s petro-fantasy, and that death and destruction are the material reality of life in petromodernity.

These surreal depictions of nature are a direct response to—and critique of—the magical aura of oil as a commodity and its disruption on narrative realism. Indeed, Habila’s supernatural depiction of nature bears some resemblance to what Wenzel has argued are transformations of natural landscape into evil and sinister forces that “effect something like magical realism’s natural(ized) supernaturalism” (215). Wenzel presents this idea in “Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited Unimagining and Reimagining the Niger Delta,” in which she argues that the representational function of magical realism in oil fiction manifests itself even in works that do not deploy magical realist style, such as in Ogaga Ifowodo’s long poem, *The Oil Lamp.* The personification of elements of natural landscape and their representation in the poem, Wenzel
argues, are “instruments or even agents of petro-violence” (215). Wenzel further suggests that these transformations of natural landscape and the juxtaposition of natural and unnatural elements depict “an ‘alternative reality’ not of fantasy and imagination, but of environmental history” (215). Similarly, the depiction of nature’s encounter with oil as a transformative relation in *Oil on Water* suggests that natural realism is here replaced by a supernatural and sinister depiction of nature. The treatment of nature also resembles the surfacing of supernatural elements in *Cities of Salt*, where the narrative conflates the imagery of nature with mystical forces and disrupts the narrative realism once the machines are instilled in Wadi al-Uyoun. This transformation, I’ve argued, is represented in the manifestations of Miteb’s ghost and its association with a sinister form of nature, such as the violent and frightening thunder. Habila’s novel, however, concerns itself with the after effect of petroindustrialism and not the moment of the initial encounter as in *Cities*, or even the immediate effects of oil boom and bust, as in Okri’s works. And, in the context of the disillusionment with oil, decades after the oil encounter which have shown petrocapitalism’s destruction, manifestations of petro-magic are replaced with petro-violence. Therefore, narrative realism is not disrupted in the same manner as in Munif’s and Okri’s works because oil’s mystical aura is here being neutralized by the realities of petro-violence. This treatment of nature is, I would argue, a characteristic turn in Nigerian oil fiction that comes as a result of the prevailing sense of disillusionment with oil and the magical transformations it promises to bring. For while petro-magic’s deep saturation in Nigerian society has created a disruption of narrative realism in works that engage Nigeria’s intensely destabilizing encounter with oil, contemporary works like Ifowodo’s poem and Habila’s novel, explore the aftermath of oil industrialism and the violence and destruction oil has incurred. The
sinister and supernatural depictions of nature in these novels are thematic and aesthetic features that correspond with the sense of disillusionment caused by oil’s physical disruption on nature and ideological disruption on society.

Another manifestation of oil as violence is its use as an instrument for inflicting pain and terror in a way that counters the fantasy of petro-magic. This deployment appears in the scene where the Major, leading the fight against the militants, orders the torture of his captives to punish them for their acts of sabotage and terror, which they commit to disrupt the system of production and gain resource control. The Major asks to have petroleum poured over their heads, and as it scalds their skins, he asks, “What? You can’t stand the smell? Isn’t it what you fight for, kill for?” and he tells them “By the time I’m through with you, [...] You’ll hate the very name petrol” (55). He drenches them in petroleum to inflict pain and stir up their repulsion of oil, as a way to cure them of their supposed fantasies of becoming rich from oil money. Further, while oil’s appeal is linked to petrodollars and what it can buy, most Nigerians, especially those in oil producing regions, encounter oil exclusively in its biological form and not its material form as petrowealth. For that reason, oil appears in the novel most often in its biological form, as the encounter has brought nothing but ecological destruction to the land. Indeed, Nigeria’s oil industry is mainly run by multinational oil companies, and members of local communities are excluded from any form of agency or profit as they suffer the consequences of oil spills, fires, and the constant gas flares that have ravaged their lands. Hence, the disparity between oil’s material properties (as unclaimed petrodollars) and its biological form (as a deadly substance used in acts of violence) shapes Nigeria’s “shock of [petro]modernity.” Therefore, the Major plays on the magic/violence dynamic by deploying it in his own torture methods, as he
supposedly attempts to dispel the magic of oil for the militants whom he believes act on greed and a desire of “becoming instant millionaires,” replacing oil’s monetary dream with its biological reality (96).

While the novel focuses on the Niger Delta’s present material and social realities through the use of imagery that corresponds with Rufus’s background as journalist and photographer, there are also many instances in which the narrative shifts to stories of the past. The past, which is presented either through memory—in the form of stream consciousness—or evoked in dialogue, centers around life immediately before the imposition of petroindustrialism. These representations romanticize the past and imagine it as an ideal way of life. For instance, Rufus meets Chief Ibiram who tells Rufus the story of how his community was violently displaced by the oil company and how their former—ideal—way of life was disrupted. Chief Ibiram tells Rufus that “Once upon a time they lived in paradise” and they “lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them, happy” (37). Chief Ibiram’s recollection idealizes their former way of life and ignores the region’s history with colonialism, for the Niger Delta was exploited for many decades by the colonial palm industry. And it even disregards the region’s history of ethnic tensions that had violently affected Nigerians. This evocation of life prior to petroindustrialism as a lost paradise thus resembles the depiction of pre-oil life in Munif’s Wadi al-Uyoun, for both depictions imagine a seemingly timeless and static form of living unaffected by historical change. As I discuss in Chapter Two by drawing on Raymond Williams’ analysis of the “golden age” trope in English literature, such depictions suggest that the romanticization of the past in cultural and fictional expressions is a product of the encounter with capitalist industrialism. Hence, the aestheticization of the past is a
result of the alteration on the sense of time caused by industrial processes and the intensity of commodity production. This shows that fiction which concerns itself with the encounter with petroindustrialism affects the constructions of the past not just temporally but also spatially. For, like the people of Wadi al-Uyoun, Chief Ibiram’s community, which was based on tribal connections and kinship, was once characterized by its isolation from other communities. This valorization of geographical isolation in narratives of the past is, therefore, a direct result of the region’s entry into global oil capitalism, for it displays a spatial consciousness of the outside world expressed as resistance to the entanglement with global forces. The loss of this isolation suggests the transition into a new global world order—a transition that is irreversible and that prevents any “return to the past” as an ideology.

Furthermore, even while it was territorially isolated, the community was nevertheless aware of the changes around it, for Chief Ibiram explains that although

they were happily insulated from the rest of the world by their creeks and rivers and forests, they were not totally unaware of the changes going on all around them: the gas flares that lit up neighboring villages all day and all night, and the cars and the TVs and video players in the front rooms of their neighbours who had allowed the flares to be set up. (38)

The fantasies of petro-magic were made imaginable for the villagers by the introduction of modern objects like automobiles and television sets, functioning as empty signs of petromodernization that reinforced the idea of living a “modern life” and sustaining the spectacle of petro-magic. Chief Ibiram’s community watched how these villages lived and how, eventually, “the cars had broken down, and the cheap television and DVD players were all
gone,” and the rest of the money they were given was spent away (39). They were left with polluted rivers and land, and they found themselves in a condition worse than before. Therefore, his community refused to make this “Faustian” deal with the oil company, when the company tried to lure them with promises of modernization, wealth and even a chance to send their children abroad to study and train for jobs in the company. Despite their resistance, the company eventually invaded his village, killed the former chief and other members, and displaced the members of the community. They were forced to relocate to several places and have become “mere wanderers without a home” (40). Their story thus highlights the ways in which the uprooting of indigenous communities by petroindustrialism produces new migratory subjects who, in their attempt to find a place of belonging, forge new forms of affiliation to place and other people.

Moreover, as I explain in the previous chapter, the form of uprooting caused by environmental devastations for communities like Chief Ibiram’s is a type of “situated displacement,” Nixon’s term for the experience of displacement caused by the forms of slow violence perpetuated on the ecologies of the producing regions of the global south. This experience is described during Rufus’s encounter with a village doctor who tells Rufus the story of how he witnessed the village where he works transform into “a dead place, a place for dying” (90). He explains that the oil company was initially welcomed in the village and the villagers celebrated the spectacle of the burning oil fields as a sign of their entry into petromodernization. For the villagers “got their orange fire, planted firmly over the water at the edge of the village. Night and day it burned” and illuminated the entire village (91). The fire became the center of the village square as the enchanted villagers surrounded it, “singing their thanks and joy” (91).
Not too long after, “A night market developed around that glow [and people] came from the neighboring villages [and] bought and sold” (91). These events illustrate how petrocapitalism restructures the socio-economic space of the village by transforming it into an oil town, and how the village economy is spatially expanded with the migration of outsiders to the town. Furthermore, the doctor explains that the villagers named the oil fire the “Fire of Pentecost,” which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is a reference to the Christian “Feast of Pentecost” that commemorates the day “when the Holy Spirit is reported to have entered into the Apostles.” Attributing divine associations to the burning fire of the oil well signifies the mystification of oil in the imaginations of the villagers, who worshipped the fire and believed “it was a sign, the fulfillment of some covenant with God” (92). While the doctor warned the villagers about the pollution and the diseases the fire was causing, they did not heed his warnings, and “they were still in thrall to the orange glare” (92). The villagers were, rather, victimized by the oppressive rhetoric of petro-magic which had deeply saturated their society, as the environmental devastations have brought them poverty, diseases, and death.

By listening to the stories of the different people he meets and by witnessing the effects of oil extraction and oil wars on the Delta, Rufus is able to revisit the traumatic memory of his town’s displacement and the fire that killed and maimed a quarter of his town, including his sister, Boma. Rufus was in Port Harcourt when the accident happened, and when he came back and learned about the events and saw his sister’s deeply scarred face, he felt great guilt for being the one that escaped, for since they were little, his sister would always tell him he was a “lucky, lucky boy. Always lucky from the day you were born” (17). He found that his family had to

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move from one town to another in search for jobs after the oil company ended its operations in their town. For his father lost his job with the ABZ oil company, as did half of his town, after the company closed down their operations. The oil economy’s boom and bust in places like Rufus’s hometown created great instability within the socio-economic structures of the producing regions, and the boom towns were abandoned as quickly as they had emerged, leaving locals without employment and with a destroyed land. “Once awash with oil money,” local businesses boomed with the migration of many people into the town. Shortly after that, the town members watched their “streets daily fill up with the fleeing families, some returning to their hometowns and villages, some going to Port Harcourt in the hope of picking up something in the big city” (61). Rufus’s family finally settled in a town called Junction, “whose economy rode on the back of the two asphalt roads that neatly divided the town into four equal parts” (63). The town’s economic topology suggests petrocapitalism’s remapping of boom towns, as commodity exchange occurs mainly on the two intersecting “asphalt” roads. Many migrants populate the areas around these roads in the hope of being included within the town’s system of production. And many who failed to find steady jobs were forced into the outskirts of the town’s economy. Among them is Rufus’s dad who survives buying oil drums from children and reselling them to the public, which he says is “the only business booming in this town” (64). Rufus’s dad maintains his business by bribing officers knowing that they might eventually take over his business once it has flourished. Hence, Rufus’s family, like many others, was forced to flee their town because of the environmental devastation which caused the collapse of agriculture and the fishing industry. On another level, they were displaced by the socio-economic transformation of their town as petrocapitalism produces new spaces centralized on oil commodification.
Therefore, Rufus identifies with the communities he encounters, for his family and village were also displaced by petrocapitalist exigencies.

The journey into these islands also allows other characters to establish connections with the people they encounter. A clear moment of this is when Zaq and Boma, each decide to stay in Irikefe island within the white-robed animist community. Their sense of community developed as a response to the decades of systematic exploitation and neglect. For the community unites individuals from different ethnic groups, and it is led by a coalition of priests from several religious communities, who together built a shrine by the sea. The “urbane priest” explains to Rufus the cult’s doctrine: “We believe the sun rising brings a renewal. All of creation is born anew with the new day. Whatever goes wrong in the night has a chance for redemption after a cycle” (83). Their sculpture garden includes sacred statues that represent new figures of worship and old ones that “go back almost a hundred years to the founding of the shrine” (83). The formation of new figures of worship and their inclusion alongside figures from different ancestral religions establishes connections between past and present and creates transhistorical and transregional forms of tradition and spiritual practice. Significantly, life in this island is not idealized, for the community manages to survive only under the patronage of a militant leader. And its members remain under threat of violent eruptions, as when the military attacks their island because they were believed to be harboring militants. The community is able, however, to establish a place for belonging in their state of in-betweenness, both on a physical level, through their displacement and migration, and on an ideological level—through their trans-ethnic and transnational forms of identification.

This turn to spiritualism in the aftermath of petro-violence is distinct from the supernatural
logic of petro-magic present in earlier oil fiction, including the other novels mentioned in this study. For example, in contrast to the doctrine of the “True Word” dramatized in Sinclair’s *Oil!* which attracts its believers through spectacles and performances of “Big Magic” that parallel the aura of petro-magic, this doctrine observes the destruction of the natural world and finds hope for renewal in the consistency of the sun’s movements. Indeed, spiritualism in this context is not fixated on the idea of the “unseen” and its disruptive manifestation as a powerful force, as the logic of mystified oil suggests. Rather, the community’s spirituality honors the material and visible elements of nature and the linearity of natural change. Through daily practice, it seeks to retrieve a lost sense of time that is linked to the natural processes of change, which was replaced by a temporality sustaining the notions of instant and laborless wealth and progress. Hence, the form of spiritualism in this context corresponds with the “real” of petro-magic—that is, “petro-violence.”

Moreover, the transhistorical and transregional connections established by this form of spiritual practice reconfigure the space of the Nigerian village. For the village was conventionally imagined as a source of authentic identity and a haven from outside forces of cultural and political oppression, and therefore it is often linked to an image of the past. The figuration of the rural space in the novel, however, suggests that these spaces are affected by external forces and are evolving spaces; therefore, the village is reconfigured in connection to contemporary realities. Further, the village is not presented in a binary relation to urban space, for these forms of transregional identification that emerge parallel those in cosmopolitan, urban space. Hence, Zaq—the famous Lagosian journalist who wrote articles about the changing attitudes toward tradition in the cosmopolitan Lagos, which revolutionized urban society as well
as journalism—was able to find peace in the island to spiritually heal, and he decides to spend his last days of life there. Similarly, Boma, who grew up in one of the booming towns near the urbanized Port Harcourt, discovers the community in her search for her brother, and she is able to find a sense of belonging there. Rufus, for his part, is content with her decision to remain on the island when his journey is over, for he found the island to be a “place for healing” (216). Hence, Habila concludes the events of the novel by presenting the possibility for redemption and cleansing through transregional and transhistorical forms of community.

As I alluded to at the beginning of this section, the search for the British women in the oil war zones of the Nigerian periphery parallels Marlow’s journey to find Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Through this intertextuality, the novel inserts itself within the tradition of fiction about Africa that explores subconscious African spaces that offer existential revelations and expose unknown truths about human nature. The different deployment of this classic theme in African literature presents various routes of the journey into places of brutality and exploitation. Tayeb Saleh’s novel, *Seasons of Migration*, for instance, presents a voyage out and a journey into the European metropolis as a way to rewrite “[colonial] History,” while Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* illustrates a transnational journey within modern Africa and explores the turmoil of the continent after colonialism as a way to critique national discourse. Habila inverts this classic theme of cross-national journey, by presenting a journey within the borders of the African nation-state, to show the ways in which transnational forces shape the consciousness and the experiences of local subjects, even in the most marginal spaces within the nation-state. For the journey in *Oil on Water* establishes identifications between micro-minority groups that are marginalized in a double sense: they are oppressed and marginalized from the space of the
nation-state as well as from the broader landscape of the global economy. Here the African village and forest, conventionally mobilized in African fiction as a fixed, authentic space, is reconfigured as a space susceptible to change and affected by globalization.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to evoke one of the most prominent discussions about the transnational idiom in contemporary Nigerian fiction in order to understand the relation between regional investments and transnational expressions, by examining the theorizations in *English in Africa’s* special edition on “Nigeria’s Third Generation Writers.” The editors, Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton, argue for the absence of the “ritualistic centre” that is “constructed on a foundation of historical and traditional totalities,” typically deployed in first and second generation fiction, and they suggest that the transnational frame through which the politics of identity are reconfigured in contemporary Nigeria replaces rural textures with urban settings (16). They further argue that this category of fiction features “questions of subjecthood and agency [that] are not only massively overdetermined by the politics of identity in a multicultural and transnational frame but [are also explored] by questioning erstwhile totalities such as history, nation, gender, and their representative symbologies” (15). While I agree with most of these

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68 Some critics take issue with the deployment of the label, “third generation writers.” Hamish Dalley, for instance, questions the conceptual validity of the grouping, arguing that contemporary “fictional narratives are shaped by ambivalent spatio-temporal constructs that encompass and exceed the generational-national framework” (18). Hence, he finds such a label to be reductive as it does not account for texts that express alternative forms of spatio-temporal imaginaries.
statements, their theorizations, however, understate the role of regional investment in contemporary fiction and the way it reflects the transnational sentiment. For Habila, whom they identify as one of the three leading authors of this category and among those who have brought about the revival of Nigerian fiction after a significant lull in the late twentieth century, presents issues of subjecthood and agency by mapping both rural and urban spaces. His narratives perform crossings between center and periphery and explore the interrelationship between both spaces: how they are affected by local, national and transnational pressures, and the kinds of subjectivities that emerge within these spaces. These crossings show the ways in which the forms of identification that emerge in the structures of the Nigerian village display similar patterns of identification emerging in the Nigerian city, for they are not based on fixed and totalizing notions about tradition and history, as evoked in earlier representations of the village. Hence, the village is refigured through its interrelationship with its cosmopolitan counterpart, suggesting that subjects of rural areas display a spatial consciousness that reaches beyond the boundaries of national identifications. The novel also presents crossings between village and city with several scenes set in Lagos and Port Harcourt, as Rufus both physically and mentally returns to these spaces in his narrative. By presenting these movements, the novel offers new ways of understanding the transnational idiom in contemporary Nigerian novels.

The inattention to the transnationalism of the Nigerian village in literary criticism is a result of this interrelationship being featured in Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *A Forest of Flowers*, which is another work that focuses on life in the oil-producing periphery. The collection of short stories present crossings between rural and urban spaces, with several stories in the middle section set in Lagos, suggesting the fading boundaries of tradition and social systems between the village and the city in contemporary society.
of the fact that the regionalism of works focused on rural areas is typically interpreted as antithetical to cosmopolitan engagements in fiction. The representations of the Nigerian periphery in Habila’s novels, however, show the impact of global flows of culture and commodity on both village and city and how they affect the consciousness of subjects and shape their experiences. Therefore, examining the figurations of rural regions as dynamic and evolving spaces is crucial to understanding the local/global nexus in contemporary Nigerian fiction and the relation between regionalism and cosmopolitanism.

Ultimately, the spatial mappings in Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* and *Oil on Water* reflect a rejection of the fixity of history and territory, expressing alternative spatial and temporal imaginaries through which transregional and transnational forms of identification emerge. These mappings, performed through narrativization and writing, affirm a new form of historiography in Nigerian literature. This feature relates to what Frank Schulze-Engler describes as a “decisive break with normative historiographic framework [in contemporary Nigerian fiction] predicated on the perpetuation of an anti-colonial imperative” (280). For the notions of place and belonging are not based on ethnic connection or the idea of rootedness, rather, they are based on shared experiences of class inequality. Habila’s representation of the effects of petrocapitalist industrialization on the quality of life for Nigerians, both in urban cities and peripheral villages, demonstrates how a particular form of modernity—one that is determined by the socio-economic and political centrality of the oil commodity and its direct relation to systematic violence and poverty—enters the region and produces new forms of subjectivity and agency that are shaped by transregional and transnational experiences.
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