Oil Fictions

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Documenting “Cheap Nature” in Amitav Ghosh’s The Glass Palace
A Petro-aesthetic Critique

Stacey Balkan

“My dear doctor,” said Flory, “how can you make out that we are in this country for any purpose except to steal? It’s so simple. The official holds the Burman down while the business man goes through his pockets. Do you suppose my firm, for instance, could get its timber contracts if the country weren’t in the hands of the British? Or the timber firms, or the oil companies, or the miners and planters and traders? How could the Rice Ring go on skimming the unfortunate peasant if it hadn’t the Government behind it?”
—George Orwell, Burmese Days

It’s too often forgotten that capitalism’s energy revolution began not with coal but with wood—and with the privatization that forest enclosure implies.

The “fragile hegemony of extractive capitalism” under which our global petro-sphere operates is made possible (in part) through networks of itinerant labor regimes that are strikingly absent from extant discussions around “economic development”—a euphemism that rings particularly hollow in nations such as Myanmar (formerly Burma) where global speculation has decimated local communities and their respective landscapes.¹ This absence, as we know from the voluminous work on imperial liberalism, has historically been enabled by classificatory systems cultivated during the early modern period—what has been termed the “white geology”—according to which such taxa as colonized laborers would be rendered nonhuman and thus fungible, without agency
or political consequence.² As such, the laboring nonhuman (e.g., the colonial subject, the indentured worker, or the miner) living in the “extractive zone” of occupied Burma is virtually invisible—off-sited both literally and imaginatively.³

In this chapter, I examine the imbricated phenomena of extractive capitalism, colonialist improvement projects, and the violent abstractions that gave rise to indentured labor and plantation monocultures through a reading of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace*. I interpret the novel as a documentary of an emergent system of “cheap nature” in colonial-era Burma—that is, the commodification of timber, petroleum, and peasant labor—as well as an oil fiction in its attention to the genealogy of the modern petro-state.⁴ As I further demonstrate, *The Glass Palace* stages a materialist intervention that makes evident the immiscible histories of both: as “dead abstraction,” petrol—the commodity form produced from petroleum extraction—is indistinguishable from timber and also labor.⁵

In tracing the historical confluence of emergent extractive economies and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theories of ontology qua taxonomy through Ghosh’s fictional plantation economies, I likewise read the novel as a potent critique of imperial liberalism—in part engendered by René Descartes’s formulation of the thinking subject (nay “Human”) and emboldened in the era that follows, in the work of John Locke and, perhaps especially, John Stuart Mill.⁶ In this way, I join Ghosh and others in emphasizing the role of race and associated forms of taxonomic violence in the foundations of liberal thought—a critical intervention that seems ever more urgent as contemporary critiques of development (and capital *tout court*) persistently reproduce the sorts of “simple” divisions, if also disingenuous indictments, that we see in the chapter-opening epigraph from George Orwell’s *Burmese Days*.⁷

Despite (or perhaps because of) its resonance in thinking about new forms of development sanctioned by imperial interests, as a conventional/liberal critique of empire, *Burmese Days* is in many ways an unremarkable novel. Anticipating works such as V. S. Naipaul’s 1979 *A Bend in the River*, which is similarly marked by primitivist caricature and a conspicuously imperialist prospect, it is a typical portrait of colonial racism in the guise of political critique. I cite it here because it concisely instantiates the liberal worldview that Ghosh takes to task; and its rendering of colonial-era Burma—rife with offensively physiognomic, often grossly abstract images of local residents—offers a perfect foil for *The Glass Palace*. Not to mention that if we consider the earlier passage...
in light of the increased attention to colonial-era improvement schemes reliant on the accumulation of fossil capital, the novel offers a useful frame for thinking about the development ethos implicit in Flory’s remarks, dependent as they are on a neatly Manichean worldview that understands British might in contradistinction to an “unfortunate” peasantry.

Operating under the Lockean mandate to improve, through agricultural enclosure via “rational” modes of husbandry, development as such depended on a rigid distinction between colonial “society” and the uncultivated, or “rude,” peasantry under its control. Preceded by the partitioning of the reasoning modern subject (Human) defined over and against all nonhuman matter, local peasants—Burmese farmers, for example, who had previously worked on preindustrial plantations under local landlords—would be subjected to colonial-era taxonomies that posited them within a capacious category of unimproved Nature. New classificatory systems, or taxonomies, imagined by Carl Linnaeus and others in the eighteenth century—who were themselves influenced by an early modern materialism that, pace Descartes, understood the natural world in terms of domination and subjugation—made possible imperial networks of trade reliant on such agricultural innovations as plantation monocultures as well as on new forms of mechanized labor: “Nature’s activity [would become] a set of things [that could be] yanked into processes of exchange and profit, denominated and controlled.”

Now classified as commodities, workers could be thrust into a mode of production reliant on the reduction of complex ecosystems “into impoverished but exchangeable forms”: “ecological simplifications in which living things [were] transformed into resources [and] future assets by removing them from their lifeworlds.” Impoverished indeed, Orwell’s characterization of Burmese peasant farmers is redolent with a particularly egregious form of onto-epistemological violence—a mode of violence both central to the so-called Cartesian revolution, or the “cosmology of the moderns,” and essential to the ethically bankrupt, if also historically deficient, formulations of an Anthropocene that deny the long history of uneven development characteristic of global capitalism. As is also demonstrated in Ghosh’s resolutely materialist depiction of occupied Burma, the presumed separation of the knowing subject and the observable object, which forms the basis of the colonial episteme, was fundamental to contemporaneous modes of production as well as to theories of being that continue to infect popular thinking about Human and nonhuman communities—“Human” here understood as a restrictive category

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denoting a small segment of the global population and thus a vexed referent for a particular type against which the category of “nonhuman” is made possible.\textsuperscript{14}

In an effort to move beyond such simplifications, I read \textit{The Glass Palace} against the sorts of historical abstractions at work in independence-era novels such as Orwell’s and in more recent instantiations of imperial liberalism such as we see in discussions around the Anthropocene—a stratigraphic term designating an age of humans and coined to explain anthropogenic climate change. Ghosh presents us with a historical epic that traces several generations of the family of its principal character, Rajkumar, across Burma, India, and Malaya—all British colonies in the century or so that the novel spans. Rajkumar’s tale begins with the siege of Burma’s royal palace and the fall of Konbaung, the last dynasty, and his story effectively concludes in the aftermath of World War II. Characteristic of the author’s broader oeuvre in its attention to environmental violence and the material impact of the colonial encounter, the novel presents a robust ecological history of colonial Myanmar in its representation of the nation’s teak and rubber economies and the families whose lives are irrevocably transformed by colonial occupation.

Rather than eschew the evident substrate of the peasants’ misfortune, the novel foregrounds the material means of their dispossession. So too does Ghosh meticulously illustrate the imaginative coupling of peasant laborers with commodity crops such as teakwood, which was both a product of the previously mentioned cosmology and a necessary taxonomic condition for successful plantation economies in Burma and elsewhere. Only as constituent parts of such a system could the otherwise variegated category of “unimproved” nature—Human and nonhuman—be subordinated to a universalizing scalability so critical to the domestication of native teak forests, “teak being ruled, despite the wildness of its terrain, by imperial stricture in every tiny detail.”\textsuperscript{15} Like the teakwood qua timber, peasant farmers would also be “ruled . . . by imperial stricture.”\textsuperscript{16} Farmers such as Rajkumar were thrust into a category of labor wherein they were effectively denied autonomy and rendered so many “dead abstractions” indeed—concise figurations, that is, of “cheap nature,” which is herein understood as “capitalism’s ontological praxis.”\textsuperscript{17}

Put more simply, cheap nature refers to the cheapening of work in which the labor of “many humans—but also of animals, soils, forests, and all manner of extra-human nature—[is rendered] invisible or nearly so.”\textsuperscript{18} Jason Moore
explains such modes of cheapening as the process through which capitalism
must “[convert] the living, multi-species connections of humanity-in-nature
and the web of life into dead abstractions.” Marx would characterize this
process similarly, although, significantly, he replaced “humanity-in-nature”
with humanity and nature. Thus, the production of a sort of cheap nature/
labor in Capital is rendered as “a degraded and almost servile condition of the
mass of the people . . . and the transformation of their means of labour into
capital.” The dissolution of “the unity of living and active humanity with the
natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature, and
hence their appropriation of nature,” which Marx also outlines in Grundrisse,
similarly privileges such a rift; for Ghosh, though, this relationship is some-
what more complicated.

Following Moore’s understanding of cheap nature, then, I read The Glass
Palace as in fact a documentary of the cheapening of Myanmar’s colonial land-
scape through the domestication of its native forests and the commodifi-
cation of the local peasantry—“documentary,” that is, insofar as Ghosh records, with
vivid imagery, Burma’s denuded forests. Cheapening is here understood as “a
set of strategies to control a wider web of life [and] . . . a [form of] violence that
mobilizes all kinds of work—human and nonhuman, botanical and geologi-
cal.” As Rajkumar remarks, “It wasn’t that you were made into an animal. . . .
[N]o, for even animals had the autonomy of their instincts. It was being made
into a machine: having your mind taken away and replaced by a clockwork
mechanism.” Here the less-than-human subject is made machinelike by
the mandate of plantation logic: “New patterns of work were being invented
[which relied on] new patterns of movement, new ways of thought.” That
is, “capitalism’s first great remaking of planetary life . . . was scarcely possible
without a revolution in ways of thinking and seeing the world.”

Significantly too, and as I have suggested earlier, this process of cheap-
ening, which Ghosh illustrates primarily through teak, was predicated on
the same epistemological and material foundations that allowed for Burmah
Shell’s speculative ventures in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The
aforementioned classificatory systems made possible the commodity forms
of teak and petrol that formed the basis of the colonial economy and embold-
ened imperial interests well after independence. The oil industry figures as
an uncannily absent presence, enjoying only a few errant references, “so con-
tained within the quotidian landscape of modernity that it does not present
itself to view,” but it haunts the novel’s foreground. Thus, while the reader
might muse, à la Rajkumar, “A war on wood? Who’s ever heard of such a thing?,” the bombing of the oil fields toward the close of the novel will come as no surprise.27 As we also come to learn, the Burmese petro-state was well established in the eighteenth century, inviting British interest in “earth oil” decades before the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824—that is, prior to the consolidation of imperial Britain’s Burmese colony.28 Oil speculation would ultimately rival interest in teak, while both forms of energy were co-constitutive of the colonial economy and the formation of the modern state.

Although the novel has rarely been read as an oil fiction, with most critics taking on what seems the more overt critique of empire and thus effectively severing fossil capital from occupied Burma’s political economy, The Glass Palace offers a remarkable glimpse into the complicated genealogy of the nation as a modern petro-state.29 British Petroleum currently owns Myanmar’s vast oil reserves, but it was their predecessors, first the Burmah Oil Company and later Standard Oil and Burmah Shell, that would help to transform the nation’s plantation economy into a modern extractivist regime by co-opting a centuries-old tradition of oil extraction that had been effectively nationalized by the Burmese monarchy. Thus, after tracing the emergence of cheap nature in nineteenth-century Burma through the nation’s teak economy, I offer a petro-aesthetic critique that makes visible the intersections between the aforementioned colonial-era taxonomies and the “thick ooze” percolating in the hillsides beyond the colonial capital at Rangoon. In this way, I place Ghosh’s novel within the generic category of “oil fiction” that petro-critics such as Imre Szeman and Graeme Macdonald have increasingly embraced as a means of building on the narrower framework of Ghosh’s earlier coinage of “petrofiction.”30

I also unsettle the neat temporalities attendant to dominant theories of the Anthropocene, which foreclose the sorts of radical imaginings that might allow for one to read The Glass Palace as anything other than a chronicle of the teak industry. As oil fiction, The Glass Palace provides a possible model for imagining what critics have lately termed a “Thermocene”—a geological epoch forged through carbon emissions, whether wood or petrol—and thus a more productive heuristic for mapping the planetary transformations that mark the latter Holocene. As such, the novel forces a more nuanced engagement with critiques of anthropogenic climate change that seem insufficiently concerned with the material legacies of empire. Before offering a reading of the novel as a documentary of cheap nature, I thus turn briefly to its role in
figuring what we might call a Thermocene aesthetics, if only to dispel materially deficient interpretations of our geological history. In this brief excursus, I provide the logical conditions for understanding the fluidity of the carbon economy in the ages of wood and oil and thus the necessity of reading *The Glass Palace* as an oil fiction.31

**Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Thermocene**

The novel begins in 1885—the year British Burma would become an autonomous province given sanction by then secretary of state Randolph Churchill and the year before Burmah Oil would establish its monopoly; the opening scene features the expulsion of the extant monarchy. As Ghosh’s character Matthew points out, 1885 also marks another momentous birth: that of the “motorwagon” . . . the small internal-combustion engine, the vertical crankshaft, the horizontal flywheel. . . . It had been unveiled that very year . . . in Germany by Karl Benz.”32 But it is teak, not petrol, that occupies the central frame. The timber economy is one in a series of imperial projects, each of which depends on the abstraction-cum-cheapening of the human, non-human, and more-than-human landscape.

Ghosh is careful to demonstrate the intersections between what are often read as succeeding generational investments in energy forms: illustrating a “proto-fossil fuel” economy, he invites the reader first into the teak plantations where competing energy technologies participate in the disruption of local economies and the devastation of local environments.33 Adding oil to teak, and later rubber to oil in the case of colonial-era Burma—because energy histories don’t operate along neat breaks—*The Glass Palace* dramatizes how teak, oil, and rubber are co-constitutive of the nation’s evolving petro-economy. As the engine thrums on a 1939 jet during the second half of the novel, its passengers deftly soar above the thriving rubber plantations that provide for their immense wealth and help to make modern flight possible.

Foregrounding what Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz have termed a “political history of carbon”34—a history in which “fossil fuels should, by their very definition, be understood as a social relation [because] no piece of coal or drop of oil has yet turned itself into fuel”35—the novel intervenes radically in the aforementioned Anthropocene narrative from which such material histories have been persistently omitted. Such a history
is also central to Ghosh’s own *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, in which the novelist foregrounds multiple energy sources—including wood, oil, and steam—as well as the role of empire in his alternative history of the carbon economy.\(^3\) If we think not in terms of transitions or stages but instead in terms of crises of energy and capital (as well as their material continuities), such histories enable a more rigorous understanding of fossil capital’s uneven histories. *Pace* historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, “human civilization . . . did not begin on condition that, one day in his history, man would have to shift from wood to coal and from coal to petroleum and gas.”\(^3\)

The novel forces consideration of the lineaments of an ascendant petrosphere remarkable for its uneven impact on figures like Rajkumar, not to mention the scores of other workers who populate the novel. As a praxis for a sort of Thermocene thinking, this allows for a broadening of the imagination, for a consideration of emergent forms of cheap nature and cheap labor that predate, for example, the 1784 steam engine that all too often functions as a trope in Anthropocene studies. Citing the “Romantic period as the moment during which the capitalism that now covers the earth began to take effect,” Timothy Morton, for example, eschews consideration of the epoch’s *longue durée*, thus foreclosing a reading of capital and its pernicious effects on climate that takes empire into account.\(^3\) But empire must be taken into account, and this is precisely what novels like *The Glass Palace* afford, as does Moore’s reformulation (following sociologist Andreas Malm) of a Capitalocene—a comparatively more capacious framework for thinking through the environmental impact of global networks of accumulation—which similarly undermines efforts to provincialize capitalism by blurring any easy distinction between the historical processes of capitalism and colonialism.

As a work about empire and also in many ways an oil fiction, *The Glass Palace* takes on the necessary material conditions of petrol production as well as the always intertwined phenomena of extractivist regimes and the dispossession of the poor and marginalized. So, too, when read as an “oil fiction,” this energy-intensive novel instantiates a robust generic intervention—not so much a historical correction as the sort of broadening at stake in Szeman’s coinage of the term. The novel marshals new forms of storytelling—explicitly energy intensive while also agentially rich, severed from the always already singular *Anthropos*—to tell a new story, a “geostory” of sorts, in the form of an oil fiction.\(^3\) In line with Donna Haraway’s imperative to look for new modes of storytelling, the novel makes clear that “the arts of a world powered by horses
and the labour of bodies cannot help but be different from the expanded and compressed time, space and power of . . . petromodernity.”

Accordingly, as petrocultural production, *The Glass Palace* replaces, for example, the individualist (and anthropocentric) pathologies of the modern novel—the “art” of which was forged at a very different moment in our energy history—with a rich polyphony of voices.

As such, Ghosh’s historical novel departs substantively from popular novels like Orwell’s. A materialist intervention par excellence, the novel offers an intimate glimpse into colonial-era labor regimes too often elided in the Orwellian fictions that replace material history with liberal lament. Its commitment to the legibility of labor and the correlative production of cheap nature through the dispossession of local farmers contests the Naipaulian abstractions of an earlier generation of postcolonial fiction writing. Reading *The Glass Palace* alongside Orwell, whose reception among the academic left continues to place him in a sort of progressive elite, also makes clear Ghosh’s alignment with projects such as Haraway’s in which the Kantian bootstrap narratives that necessitated the exploitation of Native persons and colonial environments are exposed in all their material horror.

Of course, discussions around what Romantic critic Alan Vardy has called “aesthetic enclosure” are not new; nor are critiques of the “postcolonial picturesque” tradition evinced by the works of Anglophone writers like Orwell and Naipaul. “Postcolonial picturesque” is a term coined by Pablo Mukherjee to mark the adaptation of a violent aesthetic tradition wherein marginalized persons, from itinerant laborers to decommissioned soldiers, were rendered picturesque objects in mid-eighteenth-century landscape paintings. Regarding the erasure/objectification of labor, whether the colonial subject or the rural peasant (their violent abstraction such that farmers, for example, as well as forms of nonhuman labor are all but invisible), capitalism as a project and process aligns not only with such historically constituted modes of dispossession as we see in colonial Burma but also with aesthetic forms that have long hinged on such imaginative erasures.

In opposition to such problematic representations of the colonial landscape, *The Glass Palace* presents a sweeping historical epic that foregrounds labor and documents, in excruciating detail, the transformation—ecologically and thus economically—of colonial-era Burma wherein informal labor regimes from the subcontinent would find themselves on newly minted plantations owned by colonial landlords and their local proxies. Like his
character Dinu—a photographer, and Rajkumar’s son—Ghosh paints a landscape “replete with visual drama: the jungle, the mountain, the ruins, the thrusting vertical lines of the tree trunks juxtaposed against the sweeping horizontals of the distant sea.” But where Dinu “labored to cram all these elements into his frames,” Ghosh undermines this imperialist prospect by lingering closer to the soil. Here the novelist, unlike his character, resists the urge to imaginatively enclose the native landscape.

Documenting Cheap Nature

Although teak, rubber, and petroleum are different substances—the slippery technics of petroleum in particular marshaling an altogether different means of extraction and engendering new forms of precarity—each economy operates under the aforementioned principle of improvement, or cheapening in the onto-epistemological sense. On Ghosh’s teak plantations “[the landscape] stretch[ed] away as far as the eye could see. . . . There were orderly rows of saplings, all of them exactly alike, all of them spaced with precise, geometrical regularity.” The central plantation in the novel—Morningside, which would produce first teak and later rubber—was, according to one of Ghosh’s principal characters,

like neither city nor farm nor forest; there was something eerie about its uniformity; about the fact that such sameness could be imposed upon a landscape of such natural exuberance. [Dolly] remembered how startled she’d been when the car crossed from the heady profusion of jungle into the ordered geometry of the plantation. “It’s like stepping into a labyrinth,” she said.6

Later descriptions of its internal workings reveal a more disturbing glimpse into the human and environmental costs of teak: “To look at it, it’s all very green and beautiful—sort of like a forest. But actually it’s a vast machine, made of wood and flesh. And at every turn, every little piece of this machine is resisting you, fighting you, waiting for you to give in,” “it was when [Dinu] crossed back into the monochrome orderliness of the plantation that he felt himself to be passing into a territory of ruin, a defilement much more profound than temporal decay.”

Morningside is a concise instantiation of cheap nature—its forests impoverished by commodity abstraction, and its laborers, human and nonhuman (in
the case of Rajkumar’s elephant comrades), reducible to so much “wood and flesh.” This depiction of the geometrical regularity of the forest also testifies to the critical role of agricultural scale—call it rational improvement or call it imperial violence—so vital to the cheapening of the local landscape. Additionally, the reference to “flesh” forces consideration of, and also animates, the otherwise invisible labor regimes conscripted to transform rubber trees into, for example, a viable commodity for the nascent automobile industry. In this sense, Ghosh’s novel, more than simply dramatizing the domestication of native forest to the mandates of plantation logic, makes flesh an otherwise abstract instantiation of cheap nature, “as though life had been breathed in a wall of slate.”

His elephants and the majestic teakwood itself are also endowed with a peculiar, unfamiliar sort of agency. Perhaps the more radical intervention is the novel’s attention to nonhuman work:

[Rajkumar] could not resist the spectacle of watching elephants at work: once again he found himself marveling at the surefootedness with which they made their way through the narrow aisles, threading their great bodies between the timber stacks. There was something almost preternatural about the dexterity with which they curled their trunks around the logs.

In yet another scene, an elephant laborer exacts revenge against a colonial officer—possibly an authorial indulgence, but a compelling one nonetheless. The novel carefully attends to the ways in which Burma’s human and nonhuman laborers were effectively rendered machinelike in the interest of amassing capital. Depictions of similarly subdued local landscapes abound in the novel: “To bend the work of nature to your will; to make the trees of the earth useful to human beings—what could be more admirable, more exciting than this?”

Such passages provide a model for conceptualizing a resource aesthetics—a means of undermining “the resource logic of capitalism [that] presupposes that resources have no aesthetic whatsoever” and thus refusing an “aesthetic that effortlessly normalizes the brute inputs” of human and nonhuman labor long invisible to consumers of what we may surely call the post-colonial picturesque, here in the form of a petrified amorphous peasantry.

The novel simply refuses to normalize, if also to abstract, “the brute inputs of energy” on which the petro-economy depends. As if to drive home the material impact of the new energy regime, in one particularly prescient scene the
brutal killing of a local missionary is coupled with the presence of a shiny new automobile: “a motorcar—a gleaming, flat-topped vehicle with a rounded bonnet and glittering, twelve-spoked wheels.” This scene, set in 1914, also positions the gleaming spectacle alongside scores of dead Burmese and Indian soldiers.

The novel thus makes visible the material means of production and extraction as well as the relations of resources like oil and rubber to capital abstraction. If the automobile is reducible to a symbolic evocation of mobility and freedom, the novel is interested in materializing the means of its existence—an existence made possible by the combined forces of plantation logic, technological ingenuity, and empire. Not unlike the earth-oil in the hills beyond Morningside, “the [teak leaf] . . . came from a tree that had felled dynasties, caused invasions, created fortunes [and] brought a new way of life into being.”

**Reading Oil: A Petro-aesthetic Critique**

While on the surface *The Glass Palace* is generally a story about teak and rubber, it is surely also an oil fiction. Its almost fleeting reference to oil is immaterial when one considers the evolution of Myanmar’s carbon economy, not to mention the emergent automobile industry for which rubber would be just as critical: “[Rubber] was the material of the coming age; the next generation of machines could not be made to work without this indispensable absorber of friction. The newest motor cars had dozens of rubber parts; the markets were potentially bottomless, the profits beyond imagining.” It was also a source of colonial violence, as the reader learns that “every rubber tree in Malaya was paid for with an Indian life.” Unlike the British in the nation, “in Malaya the only people who lived in abject, grinding poverty were plantation labourers.”

British Malaya was critical to an imperial petro-imaginary, which was codified through the 1934 Petroleum Act. This act essentially consolidated British rule over regional petroleum reserves, which, as we also see in the novel, had been the province of local speculators for some time. Given its ascending hegemony then, the novel’s oblique treatment of Burmese petroleum seems to attest to Ghosh’s own assertion regarding the narrative illegibility of petroleum—a substance that seems to have resisted more explicit representation in the abovementioned modern “arts.” Although “it does very
little to point to the presence of fossil fuels in fiction, to go searching about for those few places where coal, gas or oil might resurface, receive mention or be extracted from the narrative. What we need instead is a new critical sensibility in our analyses of world literature.”58 We also need a new critical sensibility in our understanding of the origins of the carbon economy. And so despite the fleeting presence of “earth oil” in The Glass Palace, I read the novel as an oil fiction—a variant of Ghosh’s much-remarked-upon category of petrofiction in which the trope of the oil encounter is sublimated within the broader lineaments of our contemporary petrosphere.

To approach literary productions in the age of oil from within the narrow frame of the conventional oil encounter—that is, “the intertwining of the fates of North Americans and those living in the Middle East around this commodity”59—is to deny what we ought rightfully understand as the mise-en-scène of all artistic production within the era of petromodernity. As Graeme Macdonald and others have argued, we need to understand oil fiction as more than a literal index of the relationship between energy and the arts. Particular forms of energy make ways of being in the world possible. That is, energy, the freedoms that it promises, and the cultural productions that it enables cannot be severed from one another. In addition, Ghosh’s formulation of “petrofiction,” depending as it does on the oil encounter, not only forecloses the inclusion of novels such as The Glass Palace but also denies entry to a novel like Moby Dick, which Macdonald suggests was a “prototype representation of a process endemic to the global history of oil extraction and petrochemical commerce.”60

There is, nonetheless, explicit mention of petroleum in the novel. Beyond the aforementioned reference to burning oil fields, there is a long passage about Yenangyaung, where the “foul-smelling” stuff oozed endlessly to the surface:

On the eastern bank of the river, there appeared a range of low, foul-smelling mounds. These hillocks were covered in a thick ooze, a substance that would sometimes ignite spontaneously in the heat of the sun, sending streams of fires into the river. Often at night small, wavering flames could be seen in the distance, carpeting the slopes. To the people of the area this ooze was known as earth-oil: it was a dark, shimmering green, the colour of bluebottles’ wings. It seeped from the rocks like sweat, gathering in shiny green-filmed pools. In places, the puddles joined together to form creeks and rivulets, an oleaginous delta that fanned out along the shores. So
strong was the odour of this oil that it carried all the way across the Irrawaddy: boatmen would swing aside when they floated past these slopes, this place-of-stinking creeks—Yenangyaung. This was one of the few places in the world where petroleum seeped naturally to the surface of the earth. . . . The gathering of the oil was the work of a community endemic to those burning hills, a group of people known as twin-zas, a tight-knit, secretive bunch of outcasts, runaways and foreigners. Over generations twin-za families attached themselves to individual springs and pools, gathering the oil in buckets and basins, and ferrying it to nearby towns. . . . Some of these wells were so heavily worked that they looked like small volcanoes, with steep, conical slopes. At these depths the oil could no longer be collected simply by dipping a weighted bucket: twin-zas were lowered in, on ropes, holding their breath like pearl divers. . . . Wooden obelisks began to rise on the hillocks, cage-like pyramids inside which huge mechanical beaks hammered ceaselessly on the earth.\(^6\)

Perhaps the “shimmering” earth–oil labors too—bubbling to the surface and combusting spontaneously, as it were—thus contesting the aforementioned perception of its “brute” nature.

Reading the preceding passage, set a century ago, one might be forgiven the immediate visions of contemporary Myanmar, in which displaced citizens flock to these nearly exhausted oil fields. In Nga Naung Mone, the site of the nation’s largest unregulated oil field, a small city has emerged wherein migrants have constructed dangerously shoddy derricks in the hope of earning a daily wage from the nation’s refineries.\(^6\) As in the case of nineteenth-century Burma, their labor will not sustain them; their (largely) unpaid work merely greases the much larger engine of British Petroleum or Chevron. The latter also owns a significant stake in the nation’s oil industry.

That the current administration has opened the fields to general speculation speaks also to the persistent power of rhetorical abstraction: oil speculation continues to promise forms of freedom that have never been available to the nation’s rural majority. Since independence in 1947 and then a brutal civil war, the shadow of empire persists in the form of a British stronghold on oil and precious minerals—all mined by a rural precariat in unspeakable conditions—as well as public-private partnerships between the government and multinationals like Chevron, which continues to tout the false promise of “economic growth.”\(^6\) In line with Ghosh’s argument in \textit{The Great Derangement}, such promises are but “grotesque fictions”\(^6\)—evidence not only of the
necessarily uneven forms of development that enable capital accumulation in the colonial and neoliberal eras but also of what we might call uneven and combined enlightenment.

Of course, however grotesque the promise of freedom or mobility, the shimmering stuff continues to represent an oasis of capital for a resource-starved population. And despite American and British stakeholders owning the lion’s share of the nation’s oil reserves—Chevron’s most recent endeavor secured 2.6 million acres in the offshore Rakhine Basin, adjacent to the Rakhine State, where the Rohingya population live under what Amnesty International has characterized as apartheid—and knowing the abject conditions associated with petroleum extraction for industry workers, impoverished Burmese citizens remain undeterred. As in the example of the rubber plantations cited earlier, while American and British elites profit from the industry, laborers may “[live] in abject, grinding poverty,” but they continue to show up daily for lack of an alternative.

In another example of the characteristic precarity of such labor regimes, Ghosh’s fictional Yenangyaung is mirrored by the palm oil plantations that would eventually replace teak (and rubber in some instances) and, pace our discussion of faulty historical periodizations, persist in the putative age of petroleum—plantations like Morningside also present a resonant portrait of extractivist violence, one that might recall similar scenes in the Niger Delta. Described as having “air . . . the texture of grease,” Morningside—at this point producing palm oil—is also a harbinger of Myanmar’s current palm oil industry, which continues to decimate local village economies through illegal land grabs, resulting in an internal diaspora of the sort that we see in The Glass Palace.

Returning to Yenangyaung, however, in our consideration of a novel that rightfully ought to be read as “oil fiction,” it must also be noted that this “foul-smelling” place is especially significant for another reason: it was in colonial Burma in 1859 (and not Titusville, Pennsylvania) that the modern oil industry would be born. As the author states elsewhere,

It could be said that the first steps toward the creation of the modern oil industry were actually taken in Burma. But where these steps might have led we do not know because Burma’s attempts to control its oil came to an abrupt end in 1885, when the British invaded and annexed the remnants of the Konbaung realms, deposing

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Thibaw, the dynasty’s last king. After that, the oil fields of Yenangyaung passed into British control, and, in time, they became the nucleus of the megacorporation that was known until the 1960s as Burmah Shell.67

Thus, while Ghosh chooses (in *The Glass Palace*) to sublimate the imperium of the oil industry, opting instead to conjure the grander sphere of influence that it would wield, the novel closely follows its ascendancy, opening with the siege of the Burmese palace in 1886. This is no accident. The history of carbon, for Ghosh, is a central determining factor of the loose constellation of discourses and material conditions that we call modernity, or more appropriately, modernities. Logically, then, the twin births of British Petroleum and a consolidated Indo-Burmese state constitute the temporal anchor in this otherwise sprawling historical novel, thus placing *The Glass Palace* alongside other works of oil fiction that similarly recognize the role of energy in any plausible narrative of modernity.

**Conclusion**

As an oil fiction, *The Glass Palace* gestures to the *longue durée* of carbon by opting to begin with wood and ultimately demonstrating that the “machine made of wood and flesh” may as well be the machine dripping with oil and blood. In documenting the ascendancy and imperium of colonial-era taxonomies that made new forms of cheap nature possible, the novel likewise speaks to the historical-material conditions necessary for the modern petro-state and thus the contemporary petrosphere. If the plantation, like its latter-day correlate the oil field, is reducible to a symbolic evocation of improvement in the Lockean sense (and certainly development in its liberal and neoliberal senses), the novel instead marshals a materialist critique to indict the sorts of imperial liberalism at work in novels such as *Burmese Days*. So, too, in undermining the facile time scales of Anthropocene narratives that begin with steam, *The Glass Palace* makes clear the imperialist origins of the latter Holocene, which should really be located centuries before the steam engine and surely also before the “satanic mills” of more popular Anthropocene narratives—those icons of the industrial age from which William Wordsworth would notoriously flee.68
Notes


2. See, for example, Lisa Lowe’s The Intimacies of Four Continents (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). For a discussion of “white geology,” see Kathryn Yusoff, A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).


5. Ibid., 598.

6. See Descartes’s configuration of the subject in his 1641 Meditations on First Philosophy as well as discussions about nonhuman animals in his 1657 Discourse on Method.

7. In his correspondence with Dipesh Chakrabarty regarding the publication of Chakrabarty’s Provincializing Europe, Ghosh remarks, “I do not understand . . . how it is possible to discuss J. S. Mill (or Bentham or any other 19th-century British liberal) without accounting for the place that the idea of race occupies in their discourse. . . . [T]o omit [race] is merely to ignore the ground on which liberal thought is built” (148).

8. See John Locke’s 1689 Second Treatise on Government. See also John Stuart Mill’s characterization of India’s “rude” peasantry in Considerations on Representative Government (1861).

9. I use the term “preindustrial” despite the false periodization that wrongly privileges the 1784 pivot to steam as a “revolution.” I use it because of its relationship to discussions of peasant labor within a Marxist view of political economy.


16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 600.

19. Ibid., 598.


22. Ibid., 3, 22.


24. Ibid., 221.

25. Ibid., 605.


28. Ibid., 122.


37. Ibid., 216.


44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., 198.

46. Ibid., 199.

47. Ibid., 232.

48. Ibid., 336.

49. Ibid., 140.

50. Ibid., 458.

51. Ibid., 75.


54. Ibid., 71.

55. Ibid., 182.

56. Ibid., 233.

57. Ibid., 346.


59. Ibid., 282.


61. Ibid., 122–23.


63. Per Chevron’s company website, “For more than 20 years, Chevron, through its subsidiary Unocal Myanmar Off shore Co., Ltd., has worked with partners in Myanmar to spur economic growth and development.”


67. Ibid., 102.