THE HIDDEN LIVES OF OIL

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As a teacher of international literature, I'm constantly looking for books that will enable my students to vanish with engagement into other worlds. Reading works by non-Americans usually poses some challenges, but I hate the idea of students' recoiling from foreign authors because they associate foreignness with the unfathomable or the threateningly remote. I want to help them discover those points of passion that plunge them, like Alice, down a bolt-hole into a kind of astonishment that is also a kind of recognition.

I like students to come away from a world-lit course with more than a dutiful set of multicultural sensitivities. I try to teach books that will transform a class's inner geography, giving emotional dimension to the fresh ways that students map the world. The foreign isn't important just because it's there, but because it meshes with the places we inhabit, because over there is, in subtle and unsubtle ways, also over here.

In 15 years as a professor, I don't recall a time when students needed less encouragement to intensify their engagement with foreign lands. Like most of us, they've had their imaginative limits violently overturned by recent events. Now, they are open about their impatience with the insular fictions on which they have been reared. The self-enclosed stories that the United States routinely tells itself -- on television, in film and literature -- seem glaringly incomplete, unequal to students' suddenly insistent need to integrate into a wider world.

Kashmir, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkmenistan are names and places previously obscured to most Americans by apparent irrelevance. What kinds of books can help make them less remote? Perhaps more important, what issues and topics can, while engaging our students' curiosities and fears, also show them that such places are, in fact, seamed through with America's past and American interests?

Oil, for one. Few subjects resist a national frame as self-evidently as oil. And few subjects open up the classroom to such varied perspectives on the current crisis: terrorism, Islam, tyranny, imperialism, patriotism, globalization, environmental wreckage, SUV's, and fuel efficiency are all cross-hatched with the question of oil. In responding to our students' desire to broaden their worlds, we can find an ally in the extensive literature on oil.

It was a graduate student who reminded me that the environmentalist Aldo Leopold, who lived just north of where I teach in Wisconsin, once observed: "When I go birding in my Ford, I am devastating an oil field, and re-electing an imperialist to get me rubber." Our challenge is to unpack the almost aphoristic compression of Leopold's utterance in order to give the oil story historical depth and geographical reach.

To do that, I have tried teaching Upton Sinclair's Oil!, the most ambitious American oil novel to date. However, while Sinclair does give his 1927 epic an international dimension, Oil!
predates what has become the dominant story of petroleum, the one linking the United States to the Middle East in a matrix of mutual, volatile dependencies.

The most ambitious literary exploration of these dependencies appears in the work of the Jordanian-born novelist Abdelrahman Munif. Beginning in the mid-'80s, he produced a quintet of epic oil novels, collectively called Cities of Salt, that possess a deep resonance today. For the novels help track the human consequences of America's oil-driven entanglements with Islamic repression, political unrest, and environmental devastation.

If ever a writer was summoned to his subject by the stars, it was Munif, born on the very day in 1933 when the Saudis signed the Gulf's first concession agreement with an American corporation, the California Arabian Standard Oil Company. His great subject is the rise of the Gulf State petrodеспots; his subsidiary theme, the role that American oil gluttony has played in sustaining them. The novels include, within their sweep, a sense of growing disillusionment among ordinary Muslims, whose lands and lives have been trampled by the petroleum behemoth.

Munif has led a peripatetic life -- first as that most improbable of creatures, a left-wing petroleum engineer, then as a full-time novelist. He has lived in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, and France, eventually settling in Syria. Saudi Arabia stripped him of his citizenship and, along with several other Gulf states, banned his novels for their excoriating satires of the peninsula's oil elite.

The quintet's first and finest novel, also called Cities of Salt, is the most teachable as well. Students at first may be a little daunted: At more than 600 pages, it is, for many of them, the longest book they've ever attempted. But the pacy narrative soon draws them in, and it's also a novel that throws out issues on every page. Munif begins his story in the 1930s and '40s, revealing how an emergent international oil culture created in the Gulf states a chasm between local beneficiaries and the masses uprooted, dispossessed, and subjugated by oil. The newly wealthy feared losing their sudden cornucopia, while their subjects had less and less to lose and soon began to lose all fear.

For many students, Munif's writings provide their first real encounter with a textured Muslim world, something more intimate and more complex than the parade of demons and victims who flash by in the news media. But the classroom value of Cities of Salt goes well beyond that. Munif once remarked that he sought to give imaginative shape to "the deep, internal movement of history." Arguably, his greatest gift is for bringing to the surface, through his historical vision, stories that trace the relations between economic power and the uprooted peoples of the Middle East. A product of the Arab diaspora, born in Jordan to an Iraqi mother and a Saudi father, Munif is perfectly positioned as a witness to displacement.

Cities of Salt is a story of upheaval that begins in the 1930s with the arrival of specter-pale Americans at an oasis. The Americans first come to test-drill the earth, then reappear in otherworldly "yellow iron hulks" to rip up the oasis groves that have long sustained Bedouin culture. The first consequence of the oil strike is environmental ruin. The bewildered Bedouins soon find themselves at the violent end of another cultural novelty: a police force, instructed to beat to death, if necessary, any nomads who refuse to leave their oil-rich lands. Next, a prison is created, in which nomads can be jailed for, among other things, the ironic crime of vagrancy.
In the second novel, The Trench, Munif continues to track the repressive machinery that the oil sheiks introduce, with assistance from foreign oil barons and U.S. intelligence agents. Soon the sultanate's paranoid, profligate ruler has established a surveillance culture that, he boasts, "can hear ants crawling in the dark."

As Munif chronicles such upheavals, he distinguishes implicitly between the nomadic and the rootless. The culture of nomadic Bedouins had been inscribed on the land through movement; it was a form of belonging in motion shaped to an arid world. But the deracinations of the oil age have plummeted them into a rootlessness that becomes the opposite of their once-nomadic lives. Driven from their lands, the locals find themselves impoverished, culturally diminished, and politically estranged. Their severance from their nomadic heritage becomes a mark of their new, oil-inflicted homelessness.

Rereading Munif last semester, I thought of an insight by the French economist Jacques Attali: Ours is a world increasingly divided into rich and poor nomads, a wandering elite that travels expansively and a disenfranchised poor whose movements are propelled by misery.

Cities of Salt also offers an imaginative sketch of a third population uprooted by the oil encounter, giving voice to the swelling discontent among the most volatile of the deracinated: the armies of migrant workers drawn to the Gulf from poorer Islamic and semi-Islamic nations like Bangladesh, Malaysia, Egypt, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Yemen. On the edges of the novel, one feels their hopes curdling into despair and rage.

In an interview during the Gulf War, Munif reflected further on this devastating history of injustice and squandered opportunities: "The tragedy is not in our having oil, but in the way we use the wealth it has created and in the future awaiting us after it has run out," he observed. In underdeveloped countries, he said, "oil becomes a damnation. In 20 or 30 years' time we shall discover that oil has been a real tragedy for the Arabs, and these giant cities built in the desert will find no one to live in them and their hundreds of thousands of inhabitants will have to begin again their quest after the unknown."

Munif’s lament applies not just to the Gulf states, but also to other oil-rich, oil-ruined societies, like Brunei, Indonesia, and Nigeria. It is relevant, in short, to almost any of the world's fossil-fuel authoritarian regimes. As a rule of thumb, the greater a state's economic reliance on a single product, like oil, the higher the chances that the society is undemocratic, militaristic, and riddled with corruption. That is what economists call the "resource curse": the paradox that resource-poor societies typically have more-diverse economies, which grow faster than those of resource-rich ones.

Munif’s determination to testify to the violent mutilation of his oil-scarred society is an impulse shared by the Nigerian writer Ken Saro-Wiwa. In the classroom, Saro-Wiwa’s prison memoir, A Month and a Day, can serve as a powerful companion piece to Cities of Salt. He became Africa's most visible environmental martyr in 1995, when Nigeria's Abacha regime executed him on trumped-up charges of murder. Through his writings and international activism, Saro-Wiwa emerged as the most vocal opponent of the oil companies' despoliations in Nigeria. Like Munif, he was alert to the complicity between transnational petroleum companies and the brutal repressions inflicted on local populations by undemocratic, unpopular, oil-empowered regimes.
Saro-Wiwa called it "genocide by environmental means." One year before executing him, the Nigerian government issued a memorandum: "Shell operations still impossible unless ruthless military operations are undertaken for smooth economic activities to commence."

I have taught Saro-Wiwa's memoir several times. What it offers students more explicitly than Cities of Salt is an example of transnational activism as a potential counter to the global power of the oil corporations. Saro-Wiwa inventively fused an environmentalist discourse (something he first encountered on visits to the United States) with the powerful vocabulary of human rights. Together, the two languages gave him a way of broadcasting the plight of his Ogoni people in terms intelligible to those who know nothing about Nigeria.

Students respond strongly to a similar movement in Joe Kane's Savages, which chronicles the plight of Ecuador's Huaorani, who had the misfortune to inhabit an oil-rich land. Like Saro-Wiwa, Kane, an American environmental journalist, weaves into his story of brutality and dispossession a fragile strand of optimism: Just as the oil despoliations in Saro-Wiwa's Nigeria generated a protest movement that took on the joint might of Shell and the dictatorship, so, too, in Ecuador, Accion Ecologica arose to challenge the power of Texaco and the Ecuadorian state.

Read in sequence, Cities of Salt, A Month and a Day, and Savages bring into focus the double standards that bedevil the international politics of petroleum. In terms of human rights and environmental standards, oil corporations typically reserve one ethic for their operations in the West, another for their operations in the so-called developing nations. Even when law-abiding at home, they too often join forces with lawlessness abroad. For a writer to protest the corrupting intimacies between petrodespots and oil transnationals can be a life-threatening enterprise. Saro-Wiwa was executed; Munif lives in exile, as does George Aditjondro, the vocal Indonesian intellectual who has written against his nation's oil-driven authoritarianism.

Munif once told the British journalist Tariq Ali that the double standards of Washington's cold warriors left him nauseated: He said they talked of democracy and human rights in the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Cuba, but "when the West reached the Mediterranean coasts, they forgot about democracy. All they thought about was oil." In 1996, when a bomb blast killed 19 American servicemen stationed in Dhahran, Munif lamented the attack and sought to understand it. The United States needed "to treat the causes of despair, not merely the symptoms," he warned. "The United States, obsessed with oil fever and the need to control it, has gone much too far in protecting regimes and individuals unworthy of protection." Munif feared that, unless America helped those Muslims who wished to integrate the disaffected into democratic processes, and unless it adopted a more evenhanded approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, worse was to come: further violent hijackings of Islam, with calamitous consequences.

While teaching the literature of oil, I have found myself returning to a remark that the Indian novelist Arundhati Roy made in her essay "The Greater Common Good." Roy portrays globalization as "like a light which shines brighter and brighter on a few people and the rest are in darkness, wiped out. They simply can't be seen. Once you get used to not seeing something, then, slowly, it's no longer possible to see it." We can readily apply her remark to oil's invisible casualties.

Trying to bring those lives into focus is a challenge that requires creativity. In my experience, the evocative testimony of writers like Munif, Saro-Wiwa, and Kane offers students what TV and
newspaper reports cannot: a close-up sense of oil's impact on the health and fortunes of individuals about whom they have grown to care. From there, ethical questions about how we can act more forcefully. Shortly after we read Cities of Salt, one student announced to the class that she had calculated that an improvement of a mere 2.7 miles per gallon in the fuel efficiency of America's cars and light trucks would be enough to liberate us of the need to import any further Saudi oil. Our conversation quickly fanned out to include the morality of driving SUV's and drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, as well as government failures to support petroleum alternatives.

Munif's novel had served as a wonderful catalyst for a story about the entanglements of another society with our own. But it was crucial, I felt, that the students not move from "us" to "them" -- that they not start by peering briefly at foreign stick figures through the wrong end of a telescope. Instead, Munif's novel offered the class a long, intimate view of the Gulf; then they could stand back and say, "OK, what about us here in America and the life choices that we make?"

After we'd read Saro-Wiwa's memoir, a reserved young Nigerian in the class suddenly found himself the center of attention. He didn't just rise to the occasion, but at semester's end mentioned to me that several friendships had sprung from the experience of sitting for the first time in a roomful of Americans who showed a detailed curiosity about his country and who possessed at least one book's worth of knowledge on which to base their conversation. "That feeling was good," he said. "And new."

The tumult of recent months has instilled in many students a yearning to envisage lives and cultures that had previously passed unseen. I feel the urge to respond to that shift, encouraging my students to live with a more encompassing sense of what constitutes their world. Oil literature is one way of enabling them to do that, for it helps them connect the dots between the consumer lives they lead, human rights, environmental justice, and geopolitics. Driven by the way world events have reshaped personal needs, many students will find that oil stories give imaginative dimension to places that, until now, had never made it onto their maps.