

**ROOTS:
THE ORIENTALIST TREE AND STORIES OF DERACINATION FROM THE
ARABIAN PENINSULA**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Walsh School of Foreign Service
of Georgetown University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Science

in

Foreign Service

By

Austin Corona

Washington, DC

April 20, 2020

Table of Contents:

Introduction.....	3
Orientalism and the Structure of Aramco.....	7
<i>The Historical Context for the AAD's Nature as a Local Agent.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Human Geology.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Sucking the Oriental Matter into the Corporate Tree.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>The Dream of Modernity: The AAD Perceives the Eradication of Anecdotal Knowledge and the Modernization of the Arab.....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Is Oil Orientalist?.....</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>The Wilderness as an Imperfect Weapon of Resistance.....</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>A Weapon of Resistance.....</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>Historical Inaccuracies and Self-Defeating Accuracies: History though One Man's Imagination.....</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>Acceptance, Rest, and Meditation.....</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>The Fluidity of Soil.....</i>	<i>46</i>
Conclusion.....	48
References.....	50

Introduction:

In 1942, the OSS sent Carleton Coon, a noted anthropologist and expert on North African tribal confederations, to northern Morocco on the eve of the American landings there in Operation Torch.ⁱ The OSS sought to make use of Coon's social connections, limited though proficient language skills, and regional knowledge. Coon collected intel, orchestrated the demolition of railroads and roads serving Nazi interests, and made a name for himself as an intrepid social scientist-gone-warrior. In the spring of 1945, Coon found himself back in Cambridge, MA where he took up his old position at Harvard and continued to advise the OSS in a consulting role. While settling back into civilian life, Coon reflected on his time in the OSS and dreamt of the world's postwar future as he wrote a postscript to his historical analysis of the OSS operations in North Africa, titled "The World after the War: OSS-SOE: The Invisible Empire". Coon foresaw the necessity for a covert group of individuals, erudite and undetectable, who would use rigorous social science and good conscience to prevent any disaster like the Second World War from ever occurring again. He warned that humans' "mastery" over the natural world, accomplished through modern science, had meant catastrophic consequences when diplomacy and human interaction failed. He writes, "Just as we have learned the principles of technology, so must we learn those of human relations", and later continues, "The social sciences can, (...) and must, be used objectively and compassionately to adapt our human relations to the new technological world". Coon saw the future CIA and MI6 operatives as insurance against the pollution of intelligently designed, tech-compatible societies, and he ardently believed those organizations were critical for the survival of the human species.

Though drenched in quixotic assumptions and self-congratulation, "The World after the War" was a strangely far-sighted document. Coon's personal preferences aside, his call for the use of systematic social sciences as a response to technological development speaks to the relationship between social sciences and physical technology as implements of control for colonial powers, postcolonial states, and private enterprises that grew up in the Middle East throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Timothy Mitchell writes, "The history of the Middle East has always been a history of human interaction with nature." Of course, the same could be said of any part of the world, but Mitchell wishes to draw particular attention to the way nature, and imaginary images of nature, have been used to justify colonial rule, the expansion of postcolonial states, and the operations of private corporations in the region since the 19th century. In *Carbon Democracy*, Mitchell argues that the creation of neoclassical economics, a science resulting from the economic possibilities opened by cheap Middle Eastern oil, allowed for the intellectual estrangement of human societies from their natural, non-human components. The result, unfortunately for Coon, has not been to generate lasting harmonious peace. Instead, Mitchell notes the way economics and

ideas like the “resource curse” have served to justify militarized Middle Eastern states and increased arms sales to the region from the United States. The effects of this dynamic include global Islamic terrorism, authoritarian governments, and a concentration of geopolitical power with those who claim formal “expertise” rather than popular know-how.

Coon and Mitchell are two very different minds. One was obsessed with promoting expertise, concentrated authority, and social sciences as insurance against future calamities. The other argues that many modern calamities have arisen as the result such concentrations of power. Nonetheless, they both construct sweeping visions of an international collaboration between experts of the physical and social sciences to manage natural resources and human interactions with titanic effects on the world’s geopolitics. The dissection of the modern Middle East into ethnic, religious, cultural, social, political, economic, and environmental spheres by various cadres of experts and bureaucratic organs has not only been an intellectual journey, but a material one as well. The seemingly infinite possibility for oil-fueled growth endowed on Persian Gulf states allowed for the manifestation of foreign experts’ scientific categories on the populations of those countries. Centralized states, funded by oil profits, razed coastal cities, centuries in the making, and replaced them with top-down visions of modern urban planning.ⁱⁱ Oil companies drilled wells in previously dry locations and interrupted nomadic migration patterns. The non-human environment began to reflect newly imbalanced grazing patterns, the ecological impacts of oil drilling, and new schemes of state-controlled land management. Not unlike the rest of the global south, the countries of the Persian Gulf underwent a violent reorganization of material and social networks that forged new interest groups, divided communities, and shook local people’s self-perceptions. As the common narrative goes, bureaucratic governments, foreign NGOs, and international oil conglomerates forged a world of scientific divisions between natural, social, and political processes, alienating people from their natural surroundings, senses of identity, cultural heritage, and communities. At the same time, tribal networks persisted, and while governments and corporations saw themselves as contributors to an organized, technologically updated society, the people of those states never ceased interacting intimately with their nonhuman surroundings, producing new environmental imaginaries and establishing dynamic communities. As such, in an effort to manifest a harmonious world built on neatly organized compartments of scientific thought, western-backed states in the Arabian Peninsula have since found themselves confronted with insurrections, political dissidents, and terrorist networks. While the Saudi state in particular has succeeded in quelling labor riots and popular resistance in its Eastern Province,ⁱⁱⁱ the state has nonetheless had to engage with political dissidents from within its own ranks, armed insurgencies in the mountains of Yemen and Oman,^{iv} and global terrorist networks that have struggled in ugly ways to upend modern capitalist imperialism in the region. Western governments have mobilized resources, knowledge, and personnel to understand, document, and counter these forms of resistance.

These movements have received varying international responses. Artistic forms of resistance, however, have received little attention in the modern western perception of the Peninsula. Artistic expression represents a unique form of resistance against the networks of experts that Mitchell sees accumulating power in the modern Middle East. Artistic expression, especially in literary form, serves to embrace the vagaries and turbulent affairs of human life, something Coon so direly opposed, and opens insights into the changing form of the forces that modern states in the region combat. Often, insurgents seek shelter in the margins of state control, attacking and exploiting their rigid channels of power by emerging suddenly from the mire of public society before they retreat and plot their next attack.^v As agents of the states and their associated research institutions, universities, and corporations perpetually seek to understand the development of resistance movements, they often fail to sublimate those understandings into successful counterinsurgency practices. The inherently different aims of artistic expression and objective reportage (as they are stated by their practitioners) opens a window into the frustrations of expert-powered institutions and their never-ending failures to squelch new, creative forms of resistance, armed or not.

With particular regard to the modern Middle East, Abdelrahman Munif one literary voice that stands out as a blade against pernicious and alienating effects wrought by marriages between oil and politics in the region. Munif (1933-2004) was the son of a traveling merchant who spent his childhood in Amman, traveling to stay with Saudi family in the summers. Originally trained as a petroleum economist at the University of Belgrade, Munif worked in various political regimes around the Middle East region until his vocal activism pushed him towards fiction-writing. His most famous work, a five-part novel series entitled *Cities of Salt*, is, in Amina Thiban's words, an epic "tribal saga"^{vi} that spans a century of modern Saudi history to document the distorted growth of modernity under the aegis of American oilmen and a despotic state in a fictional Persian Gulf country almost universally assumed to be Saudi Arabia (where the book is currently banned even after his death). Munif's documentation of Saudi history through a fictional lens reflects real events and people through Munif's own imagination. Far from a history book, the work is a sensitive and dramatic work of fiction. This paper will focus exclusively on the first installment of the series, whose title commonly translates as *The Wilderness* (published in Arabic in 1984). *The Wilderness* spans a historical period from the discovery of oil in the country in 1933 until the Dhahran labor riots of 1953.^{vii} Over the course of the novel, characters rise and fall, but none claims the role of protagonist. In this way, much like an authoritative history, Munif tells the story of change on a societal scale without neglecting the individual experience.

While Rob Nixon reads Munif's novel as a use of fiction in order to accurately and engagingly portray long processes of violent change otherwise invisible through the fleeting attention-span of the media, this paper will take a different approach, comparing the *The Wilderness* with records from Aramco's Arabian

Affairs Division (AAD) to analyze the difference between modes of artistic self-expression and objective social science in the context of the Arabian Peninsula. The AAD was the unit of the company, under authority of the Local Government Relations Office, that served to inform the rest of the company about the local societies in which the company was operating. Its staff included regional experts, anthropologists, linguists, archaeologists, and practitioners of other related fields. The Aramco documents in question are part of the William E. Mulligan Papers, currently managed by the Special Collections Division at Lauinger Library (Georgetown University). Mr. Mulligan himself was an Aramco employee in the Government Relations Office from 1949 until 1978 (He was also the Chairman of the Historians Committee at Aramco).^{viii} While the documents in question postdate the novel's historical period by seven years, the nature of social sciences and anthropology in the Middle East remained notoriously stagnant through the 20th century until the mid-1960s, and so the practices of the company likely resemble those used during the period of Munif's novel. More importantly, the records at hand frequently come into close contact with Munif's novel through common references to company practices (assuming, of course, that the oil company in *The Wilderness* is meant to depict Aramco) and dynamics between American company personnel and local people. This analysis finds a stark difference between the intended of the two documents, with a vague and complicated overlap in their content. This conclusion is the opposite of Nixon's reading that the novel represents a direct refutation of Aramco's narrative and historical memory. While Nixon reads the novel as, like Aramco's documentation, an attempt to depict historical facts and dynamics, this paper emphasizes Munif's use of the novel as a form of meditation and expression of identity.

In order to understand the difference between the novel and the documents in the AAD's files, this paper employs an under-appreciated aspect of Edward Said's theories on orientalism, that being the metaphor of the empire as a "great machine", and improves on it for a more nimble and accurate metaphor, that of a tree, to describe the organization of expert-driven bureaucratic organizations like oil companies. The inherent difference between the company's attempts to ensure its survival and growth through objective understanding when juxtaposed against Munif's creative expression as a portrait of pain in all its answerless complexity serves to texturize and illustrate the tree metaphor more fully. The tree then becomes a being that seeks to colonize and control the soil, that which it doesn't understand and seeks to exploit, without obliterating it, constantly struggling against the limitations of its own form and existence.

Orientalism and the Structure of Aramco

Edward Said's *Orientalism* appears so frequently in scholarship on the Middle East that to further analyze it can seem repetitive and unnecessary. Even so, there are aspects of Said's theory that have received widespread attention and recognition while there are others which have not, and this paper will mobilize an under-analyzed aspect of his theory, situated in the broader scope of his ideas, to explain and contextualize the role of the Arabian Affairs Division at Aramco in the 1960s. Said begins the first chapter of *Orientalism*, "Knowing the Oriental", with a description of Arthur J. Balfour's 1930 lecture to the House of Commons in which he lays out his case for continued British colonial administration in Egypt.^{ix} Said notes that Balfour employs the value of knowledge and historical fact to represent Egypt in the frame of Western expertise and empirical knowledge.

Two great themes dominate his (Balfour's) remarks here and in what will follow: knowledge and power, the Baconian themes. As Balfour justifies the necessity for British occupation of Egypt, supremacy in his mind is associated with "our" knowledge of Egypt and not principally with military or economic power. Knowledge to Balfour means surveying a civilization from its origins to its prime to its decline-and of course, it means *being able to do that*. Knowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant. The object of that knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny: this object is a "fact" which, if it develops, changes, or otherwise transforms itself in the way that civilizations frequently do, nevertheless is fundamentally, even ontologically stable. To have such knowledge of a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for 'us' to deny autonomy to 'it' - the oriental country - since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it.^x

Said then proceeds to describe the way in which the reification of fact as an contained and trusted entity, one which floats outside of any one human's individual grasp or control, allows for the scientific and ideological division between the Western "we" and the Eastern "them". Said thereby describes the orientalist tendency to classify and describe "Oriental" people so as to construct an objective body of facts limited by the ever-present desire to maintain a uniquely western identity which juxtaposes against the empirically circumscribed Oriental identity. This ideological tradition is critical in understanding the nature of Aramco's Arab Affairs Division, but for the sake of this paper, there is another, more intriguing aspect of Said's theory that provides a new and slightly more poetic image of the marriage between orientalism and extractive industry. Several pages after his discussion of Balfour, Said goes on to describe colonial administrator Evelyn Baring, First Lord of Cromer's image of the British empire as a "machine":

Cromer envisions a seat of power in the West, and radiating out from it towards the East a great embracing machine, sustaining the central authority yet commanded by it. What the machine's branches feed into it in the East – human material, material wealth, knowledge, what have you – is processed by the machine, then converted into more power. The specialist does the immediate translation of mere Oriental matter into useful substance: the Oriental becomes, for example, a subject race, an example of an "Oriental" mentality, all for the enhancement of the "authority" at home. "Local interests" are the Orientalist special interests, the "central authority" is the general interest of the imperial society as a whole.^{xi}

Cromer's vision, as described by Said, depicts a mechanical apparatus that collects and organizes information before transferring it back to a central node of power that coordinates the operation of the machine in a general sense. At the extremity of each "branch" of the machine is a specialist or local agent, a servant on the frontier who produces useful intelligence and interacts with the otherwise unorganized and useless material outside the inner workings of the machine. This "local agent" is supposedly necessary because of the inherently illogical nature of the Oriental mind. The Oriental cannot express himself with any kind of clear sense of rational meaning, and his society is a black box, filled with a self-contained mysterious organization that only the analytical skills of the local agent can decipher and communicate back to the central authority. The work of the local agent is therefore to interact with the unknown world beyond the organization of the machine, to boldly leave the known realm like a vesicle of western rational conscience in a dark sea of chaos and confusion. Once the local agent has entered the Oriental world, s/he "does the immediate translation of mere Oriental matter into useful substance" for the central authority. "Oriental matter", as Said describes it, can include "human material, material wealth, knowledge" and so on.

This aspect of Said's theory, his employment of the machine-metaphor as a way of visualizing the mechanics of orientalist activity and its purpose should give the reader pause. Here, Said is certainly expanding on the orientalist tendency to romanticize or exotify Oriental society, but he is also highlighting a more inescapable and perhaps more disturbing aspect of Orientalism which extends far beyond even the relations of Western and non-Western societies. Said is noting that bureaucratic structures that gather empirical knowledge and codified factual data engage in "Orientalist" practices as they attempt to use data they collect about the masses of transient material outside their grasp. The implications of such a theory extend deep into the composition of modern society. It is possible to say, under this logic, that environmentalist NGOs can "Orientalize" nature, or that companies "Orientalize" their customer-bases through activities like environmental science and market research. The form of Orientalism, not merely as an intellectual practice, but as a structure for organization and dissemination of authority brings Said's theories into overbearing intimacy with the dynamics of modern labor and corporate organization. This aspect of his theory is therefore particularly salient for the discussion of extractive industries and oil companies.

That said, to properly understand the nature of the oil company as it processes, metabolizes, and acts upon information it receives about "oriental matter", the metaphor of a tree is more apt than that of a machine. One might picture the *Vachellia Pachyceras*, an acacia tree native to the deserts surrounding the Persian Gulf. The so-called "lonely tree" bears symbolic resonance for this project as modernization, the destruction of cyclical grazing habits, and war have left Kuwait with only one specimen left.^{xii} The tree

relies on a complex network of fungi around its roots that help fix water and nutrients for the tree, transferring life-giving substances from the sandy soil into the trees roots. Plant researchers in Kuwait might have assumed the fungal networks in the desert were less complex than those in wetter climes. On the contrary, they found that fungal networks in deserts are highly complex, and their existence is vital for the life of desert trees. Of course, in this metaphor, the local agents are the fungi, existing within the soil, the oriental matter, and supplying the tree with necessary nutrients they extract therefrom. The fungi exist at the trees extremities, surrounding its root system. The tree thus survives by sending down new roots, retrieving nutrients fixed by fungi in new and unexplored regions of the soil. This habit is general behavior for trees, but the “lonely tree” is a poetic example. Using the “orientalist tree” as a model for the organization of the oil company, one can see the purpose of the AAD as Aramco’s fungal network, observing the Arabian Peninsula and translating its various facets into useful nuggets of information that the company can then use for survival and growth.

Of course, some readers may find it strange that an oil company employed anthropologists and supported ethnographic documentation of the people in the region. As a profit-driven enterprise, one would assume that oil companies only do what is necessary to maximize rents – that is, pump oil at a sufficient rate to keep prices high and secure market share. But of course, those goals involve politics. Oil companies are highly political enterprises, relying on governments, both democratic and despotic, to obtain concessions and control production. All of this goes to, as Timothy Mitchell argues, produce scarcity;^{xiii} oil companies don’t merely scramble to find oil, they rope off sections of the planet for their exclusive use and only produce a very measured amount of petroleum in response to global markets. This process is, of course, structurally similar to colonialism. Often, the actual discovery of oil and its extraction are an almost peripheral aspect of successful oil companies’ operations. Far more important are the company’s interactions with regional and global politics that allow them to exert knowledgeable mastery over the areas in their concessions. For an oil company, exclusive knowledge of and access to oil is often more important than the oil itself, so local intelligence is critical. As it happens, when American oilmen first discovered crude in Saudi Arabia in 1933, the existing western-language literature on the region and the practices of ethnography employed there by western researchers often served British and French colonial administrations. When Aramco’s anthropologists and regional specialists came onto the scene, they were serving an institution reminiscent of colonial empires with literature developed for their benefit. As they continued to process “oriental matter” and transfer useful information back into the company, AAD personnel opened the door for a new order of existence in the peninsula, that defined by Aramco’s engineers, cartographers, social scientists, and community engagement project managers. The effect was a drastic reorganization of life and identity for local communities. As such, the world Aramco’s AAD studied became more and more a production of Aramco’s own operations. Regardless, the company

maintained a notion of “local” versus “foreign” through the abstraction of local culture into a system of symbols and names it smeared across its operations, disguising the internal operations of the company by imposing a false sense of local-ness on its exterior. The result was a margin between the narrative of the company, built on an Orientalist concept of locality, and the reality experienced by the people of the peninsula.

The Historical Context for AAD's Nature as a Local Agent

Examining oil companies, particularly Aramco, as Orientalist trees requires some explanation of the companies themselves and the way they perceived their local environment (the very distinction between the companies and their “environment” is both a source and a product of their work). Looking back into the history of European local agents in the Arab world – travelers, anthropologists, spies... etc. – reveals the nature of Aramco’s Arabian Affairs Division as a form of local agent in itself, and also reveals the inherent connection between social studies and physical geography that allow for an oil company to become a manipulator of local communities and culture, even when its main goal is the extraction of inanimate geological substances.

Firstly, the discipline of modern anthropology, as seen through its development in the Arab world during the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century included relevant a wide range of study which we now consider “anthropological”. The types of information-gathering described in this section of the paper span from spying to travel writing to philology, all of which contributed to the development of the anthropological discipline, even if they continued parallel to it after its definitive birth in the final decades of the 19th century.^{xiv} Anthropology as a discipline does not always conform to any specific definition. While distinct from academic disciplines like sociology or history, anthropological work can often incorporate historiographic practices and sociological frameworks to answer questions about the cultural aspects of its subject population. While recognized in the United Kingdom and United States as a defined academic discipline several decades beforehand, it was only with the arrival of the 20th century that universities in both countries began to appoint chairs of anthropology.^{xv} Before that period, Western researchers engaged in ethnographic study with the peoples of the Middle East may not have been strictly considered anthropologists, but their work would inform the later anthropological work to be conducted in the region. These included travelers, spies, archaeologists, theologians, philologists... etc. What may now qualify as anthropological work in the Middle East therefore stands on the shoulders of ethnographic work done by a menagerie of western travelers and researchers not necessarily reserved to the

anthropological sphere, and as the uses of ethnographic fieldwork continued to entangle themselves with Western political interests in the region, the performance of anthropological work there would continue to rely on research and local social connections which stemmed from other, sometimes more sinister western operations of information-gathering.

Even after its formulation as a circumscribed discipline, the development of anthropological literature specific to the Middle East was addled by orientalist tropes, colonial agendas, and a lack of general interest.^{xvi} Modern reflections on the trajectory of anthropology in the 20th century Middle East commonly cite the enactment of the National Defense Education Act (1958) as a milestone in the development of the discipline.^{xvii} Because the scope of this paper extends only until mid-1960s, this milestone may have had an impact on Aramco's social studies practitioners whose records appear in this paper, although it would have been limited as the AAD would not have hired any significant number of newly trained experts between the passage of the act and 1961. The trends and practices described in the following paragraphs therefore represent a broad array of activities that contributed to the western-language ethnographic literature on the region, the same literature that regional experts in the AAD would have been reading before going to work at the company.

By the time Aramco anthropologists were engaged in study of tribes and local politics in the Arabian Peninsula, European colonial administrations had long been using ethnographic work as a tool for their development in the Arab world. Well before the adventures of British agents like T.E. Lawrence, French colonists in North Africa employed social integration and regional cultural awareness for colonial aims leading up to the end of the 19th century. In his invasion of Egypt in 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte set the stage for such a practice, employing anthropologists and regional experts to help secure popular support for the French regime. He is even known to have dressed in local raiment and attempted prayer at a mosque to advance his image in Egyptian popular dialogue. As Dale Eickelman claims of this practice, "what is crucial about such actions is that they pre-figure later, more systematic, attempts of colonial regimes to legitimate their presence in the eyes of the ruled and whenever possible to win over key elements in the indigenous society. Ethnographic investigation was seen as an important contribution to this aspect of the colonial enterprise."^{xviii} And so it did, French military administrators like Thomas Bugeaud (1784-1849) and Joseph Gallieni (1849-1916), stationed in Algeria and Morocco respectively, developed particular organizational strategies for handling insurrection and popular revolt in French colonies during the 19th century which relied heavily on French intimacy with the local social structures in their colonies. Bugeaud, responsible for the defeat of 'Abd al-Kader's famous Algerian revolt at the Battle of Isly in 1844, goes to great lengths describing the necessity of peace and agricultural

development in Algeria as a method of “civilizing” local people.^{xix} Inherent to that strategy was a deep integration with local populations. Gallieni would move a step further in his later stint in Morocco where he made a concerted effort to employ fluent Arabic-speakers in his ranks. Gallieni was a strong proponent of social integration between his soldiers and local Moroccan communities, something he saw as critical to understanding and tranquilizing Moroccan people. As such, military figures of the French empire, eccentric as these two were, were seasoned practitioners of ethnographic study for empire, and while the French colonial experience in North Africa may have produced more ethnographic literature than did British colonial administrations in the Near East,^{xx} there exists a clear influence from the former on the latter. In fact one of the British empire’s earliest champions of special tactics for the suppression of popular insurgency, Charles Callwell (1859-1928), directly mentions Thomas Bugeaud and his tactical recommendations in the “Counterinsurgency” chapter of *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (1899). Callwell, whose only region-relevant work was in Afghanistan, emphasized the use of human intelligence and light military units in countering popular insurgency. Proficiency in local languages and a sound knowledge of local terrain would have been necessary for both intelligence gathering and quick mobility in the Afghan theater, and so local knowledge and intimacy with regional communities would have been crucial.

Such an emphasis on the importance of local knowledge for empire mingled with a popular culture of romantic orientalism, producing a generation of spies and agents in the British empire who pursued thorough social integration where they worked in the Arab world. At the end of the 19th century, as anthropology was beginning to ossify as a defined discipline, British firms, particularly those selling medicinal and confectionary products, were busy using images of the Orient to equate their products with sensations of bodily pleasure and relaxation commonly associated with exotic cultures.^{xxi} The use of those images corresponds with a period of European-Middle Eastern interaction dominated by what Susan Slyomovics refers to as a “swashbuckler school of intrepid fieldworkers, archaeologists, and undercover agents.”^{xxii} Men like Charles Montagu Doughty, Robert Cunninghame Graham, Marmaduke Pickthall, and T.E. Lawrence demonstrated the connection between burgeoning British consumerism and romanticized images of the orient through use of near eastern garb and region-specific *mise en scene* in photographic portraits circulated in popular media of the time. Andrew Long notes that whether these various photographs and their emphasis on region-specific clothing, props, or landscapes depict an accurate image of the region and its people, that image’s accuracy is not so important as its reflection of Britishmale fantasy and heroism.

Just as British corporations used the image of the Orient to stimulate desire or fantasy in its British customer base, so did the commodification of literature and writing create the same dynamic for reportage

and fieldwork done in the Middle East at the time.^{xxiii} The Arabian peninsula, administered under British influence far more than that of any other western power (until the end of the Second World War), experienced the real-world effects of such an approach to anthropological (or related) work done by British agents and researchers. While their writing did not spread into the public sphere, British spies engaged in the exotification of the region as a context through which to view British identity. This tendency affected their approaches to landscape and ecology. Because of growing domestic antipathy towards imperial adventures, accelerating decolonization in the first three decades of the 20th century, and a cultural crisis of meaning experienced by British elite at the time, agents who worked intimately with Arab populations in the Arabian peninsula sought out intimate networks and local expertise for their intelligence-gathering.^{xxiv} As such, even intimate relationships between British agents and local populations, while often personal and fluid, were inherently imperial and political at their root. Integral to this process was a common British conception of the Arabian desert as an infinite horizon from which infinite treasures and secrets could be gleaned. British agents sought to construct an image of so-called “Arabia” which conformed to the needs of their cultural existential crisis, one which Priya Satia relates to the rise of philosophers like Edward Carpenter, William James, and Bertrand Russell. Such philosophical work emphasized the idea that infinite truths could be gleaned from simple entities - a framework that, when applied to the vast and seemingly inscrutable deserts of Arabia, opened a necessity for western spies to abandon empirical reasoning and enter the landscape as freeform beings with little need for structured conceptions of time, space, or logic. Such an approach to navigation and intelligence in the region corresponds precisely with the orientalist tropes pandered by British travelers about Arab people, one example being the words of famous travel-writer Gertrude Bell, who refers to Arabs as “an old child, with no use or concept for practicality or utility as westerners no them”.^{xxv} As such, British agents concluded that to navigate Arab lands meant to think like an Arab, casting off empirical reasoning altogether and relying on innate senses and memory. It is no surprise then, that a trend of dressing in local garb developed amongst western travelers in the Near East. British agents intentionally became that which they perceived local people to be, and in so doing changed the way they viewed the local landscape. The result was an image of Arabian ecology and landscape as a foreign, perhaps even extraterrestrial place, inscrutable to the reasonable mind and inhospitable to empirical reasoning. The shifting location of populations, vegetation, and political relations could only be understood through the use of memory and intuition, as British agents saw it. To circle back, this is precisely a case like Andrew Long describes, a situation where truthful reportage of the region’s geography and affairs was not so important as the image of region and its relationship with British self-perception.

Beyond the cases explored by Priya Satia, the experiences of Colonel Harold P. Dickson (1881-1951), British Political Agent in Kuwait from 1929 until 1936, illustrate a similar fascination with local customs and population movements as a means of colonial administration and military control. Dickson himself wrote multiple works of ethnographic fieldwork on the badu tribes surrounding Kuwait City. His work, *The Arab of the Desert*, dives deep into social customs, seasonal movements, and political networks at play within and beyond nomadic camel-herders modern Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq.^{xxvi} Dickson was also participant in the use of British airpower as a repellent against badu raids on Kuwaiti merchants, caravans, and farms. His journal entries from the 1940s mention many such raids and the use of airpower to suppress or destroy raiding parties. Administrative reports kept in his files from the late 1910s and 1920s consistently mention the movements of badu tribes and the continued badu practice of raiding.^{xxvii} That Dickson was a fluent speaker of local badu dialects of Arabic and an expert in the anthropology of the region is no coincidence to his emphasis on such affairs.

Finally, it will be necessary to draw at least some connection between these British and French colonial uses of ethnographic fieldwork with the contemporary practices of American agents in the region as well. Though small, a similar practice of ethnographically informed intelligence can be noted in the American experience during the first four decades of the 20th century in the Middle East. Aside from Aramco's use of ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological research in its Arabian Affairs Division, Americans were engaged in similar work for military and cartographic purposes. One example is Charles Raswan's *Tribal Areas and Migration Lines of the North Arabian Bedouins* printed by the American Geographical Society. Dickson himself possessed a copy of this work, which is an attempt to map the movements and territorial heartlands of nomadic tribes in what is now northern Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Israel/Palestine.^{xxviii} This work represents an important process of translation between qualitative ethnographic fieldwork and the kind of empirical cartographic representations useful to a western government administration in the region. The maps rely heavily on the anthropological works of Alois Musil, a Czech anthropologist active in the region from 1896 to 1902.^{xxix} In this project, Raswan attempts to translate Musil's verbal descriptions of Bedouin movements into the visual language of a map which could be used for systematic reference by someone who had little or no knowledge of the region (a similar map drawn by the American Geographical Society in 1926 adorns one of the introductory pages of the 1927 English translation of Musil's *Deserta Arabia*). Beyond the work of the American Geographical Society, the American government and military also placed anthropologists in several locations around the world, including Morocco, during the Second World War as a covert method of intelligence gathering. The afore-mentioned Carleton Coon is one such anthropologist who worked under the authority of the OSS for intelligence-gathering purposes. As such, the world of "anthropology" and regional cultural

studies in the Middle East leading up to the enactment of the National Defense Education Act in 1958 demonstrates a clear relationship with the construction of colonial administrative bodies. Regional studies experts and anthropologists in the employ of Aramco would have utilized the literature born from this tradition for their work in the region, (Coon himself is referenced in an AAD report from the summer of 1960 titled “Status and Role of the Aged in Saudi Arab Society.”)

Human Geology

One inevitable aspect of security for state aparati, local or colonial, in the Middle East and North Africa was documenting and stabilizing the unpredictable movements of nomadic people, movements which British agents came to associate closely with the illegible shifting sands of the desert. In particular, the anthropological emphasis on the use of memory for navigation by nomadic tribes emphasizes a connection between physical geography and local people in the eyes of western local agents in the Arabian Peninsula.

The cultural and political reasons for intense emphasis on the role of nomadic tribes (as opposed to that of sedentary agricultural populations) in western-written histories of the region include a romantic association with Bedouin as “a savage with Victorian gentleman’s values”^{xxx} and a geopolitical necessity to control the tribes whose mobility and capacity for armed attacks made them unique security threats. The prevalence of nomadic cultures in the ethnographic literature of the region has generally been so intense, especially in the Arabian Peninsula, that by the time of Soraya Altorki and Donald Cole’s field work in the modern Saudi village of ‘Unayzah (published in 1989), the two anthropologists were still complaining of the disproportionate emphasis historically placed on the Bedouin tribe as at least the central, if not the only, form of social organization and economic production in the Nejd region.^{xxxi} While the context of early Saudi Aramco is more anchored in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, Kathryn Tidrick makes the argument that such an emphasis extended as a general trend throughout the peninsula and the region.^{xxxii}

It has already been mentioned that British agents found the Deserts of the Peninsula so intimidating and vast that, when aircraft were unavailable, they resorted entirely to the use of local guides for navigation. That trend extended to American anthropologists in the region into the 20th century. Donald Cole himself, who criticizes the overwhelming emphasis on nomadic groups in the anthropological study of the region,

tells a vivid story about the abilities of local nomadic tribesmen in navigating the desert purely from memory. He marvels at the ability of one such Bedouin man to nap for long periods in the front seat of a truck as it traverses the desert, only to awake and almost instantly realize the truck's location and heading. According to Cole, war parties and tribes traditionally relied solely on word of mouth and visual memory for their navigation across wide swaths of the peninsula.^{xxxiii} As the British discovered in the early 1900s, and, no doubt, as American oil explorers learned (Aramco made its first use of an airplane in 1934 for exploration – a highly celebrated development)^{xxxiv}, the land of the peninsula was only reconcilable through the mind of a local person. Effective surveys, roads, and maps had not yet been developed for effective on-the-ground navigation. As such, when American geologists began some of their first exploration missions into the Saudi Eastern Province from Bahrain in the early 1930s, they wore traditional local garb.^{xxxv} For the oilmen and their cultural experts, the desert and the people constituted a collective mass of Oriental matter. The oil company, therefore, was interacting with, in their eyes, a being not entirely geological, and not entirely human. The AAD was responsible for interactions with this entity.

In fact, even in the early 1960s, when empiric documentation of local geography had progressed somewhat, the company still relied on its ethnographers and regional experts for authoritative interpretations of international boundaries. Those boundaries were of course critical to the company's ability to drill within their legally defined concessions. The Bill Mulligan Papers include multiple correspondences concerning the accuracy of international boundaries. One memorandum recorded in March of 1960 by AAD employee Robert Headley recounts an internal debate over the location of the offshore boundary in the neutral zone between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.^{xxxvi} At that time, the boundary had not yet been officially surveyed and recorded. Of principle concern for Headley and his colleagues in this case were the intentions of the Saudi government and the company's interpretations of Saudi political aims. The discussion that ensued was less an attempt to properly demarcate an international border, and more an attempt to accurately interpret human intentions in the local power structure. At one point, Headley remembers asking his superior, a Mr. Goodyear, if he thought a conservative approach to the boundary might bring accusations of being too "loose with Saudi real estate." Ultimately, Mr. Goodyear answers the question by asserting his certainty that the Saudi government intended for the boundary to lie further south than Headley assumed. These were the kinds of monumental interpretive tasks handled by departments charged with, in the words of then-active Aramco anthropologist James P. Mandaville, "interpret[ing] Arabian geography, people, customs, and language for its (the company's) then all-American management"^{xxxvii}, indicating the massive importance of such local knowledge for the company.

James P. Mandaville, an anthropologist for Aramco's Arabian Research Unit (which also fell under purview of the Local Government Relations office) illustrates the understanding that American employees of Aramco shared about the geography of the peninsula in the preface of *Bedouin Ethnobotany* (published 2011):

“As I worked day to day with these masters of desert lore, the Bedouins, I noticed that they often used the names of plants in describing the boundaries or characteristics of different geographical areas. Their version of geography sometimes seemed to involve as much botany as topography. Having something of a penchant for natural history, I began collecting the Bedouin's names for plants and tried to learn the plants' scientific identities with available references, which for Arabia were preciously scant in those days (the early 1960s).”^{xxxviii}

Mandaville's fellow employee, cartographer Charles Matthews, makes a yet stronger case for the necessity of local expertise for the company's geographic knowledge of the region. In a letter to P.C. Speers of the AAD in June 1960, Matthews outlines the services he might provide as a cartographic consultant to the company after his presumed retirement in December of that year. Matthews offers his services specifically as a “consultant on geographic nomenclature.”^{xxxix} The company did, in fact, have numerous issues with geographic nomenclature as depicted in a letter written by P.C. Speers only a month prior in which he informs his superior, Local Government Relations office manager G.E. Mandis, that one of the company's pump stations near the Saudi-Jordanian border had been improperly named. The nature of the mistake (the station was named “Qaryatain” when it should have been “al-Riyatain”) exposes the difficulty for anglophone employees in understanding local place names; transliteration of spoken Arabic can pose difficulties in areas where local dialects omit or warp certain letters from how they sound in standard or Qur'anic Arabic. Matthews, an expert in local dialects (a map of his illustrates the geographic spread of each spoken dialect in the region), therefore offered a critical service to the company as it constructed new facilities and geographic points of interest around the country. In a letter to Robert Headley later that summer, Matthews reports that the difficulties of properly transcribing the many non-Arabic names for places recently surveyed by the company are “almost beyond explaining.” Matthews and other “company Arabists” therefore served as an important converter from local knowledge, speech, language, and history into the company's legible maps and surveys, usable for any employee who may never speak a word of Arabic or meet an Arab person.

Beyond geographic material, the AAD served generally as a chokepoint for information about the region at large, collecting numerous local and foreign news media, scientific research, and other materials for dissemination within the company. Employees were assigned various Saudi publications which the company regularly received. After reading regional media sources, employees organized them in the

office's files and prepared relevant information for internal dissemination in 8 company publications covering the following issues: "All items regarding the Arabic Press, Boundary and Oil Industry matters, All items regarding southern Arabia, etc., Near East and SAG (Saudi Government) items, Items regarding Arabic language and Aramco, Place names – also all anthropological – natural history, etc. material, all biographic material, material on Arabian Peninsula and Islam."^{xi} The amount of information available from both the Current Affairs Division (separate from the AAD) and the AAD become sufficient to be called a "an excessive and confusing flow of news and current affairs materials"^{xii} by one company executive (of course, the division took immediate response to such an accusation and began to streamline its new reports).

As such, for Aramco, to understand local people was to understand the land, and to understand the land was critical for finding oil. Oil, as such, was extracted not only from the land, but indirectly from the shared geospatial and cultural conscience of the people who knew it best. Rob Nixon describes this process as a forced transition from "vernacular geography" to "official geography".^{xiii} In order to begin surveying, mapping, and exploiting the area's physical geography, the human society within it first had to be probed and classified. Then, the company could produce maps and other documents legible to their experts that would guide the company's operations in the peninsula. The AAD therefore served as a local agent, receiving and redefining knowledge of human lives for the benefit of what many people may consider an exclusively geological operation.

Sucking the Oriental Matter into the Corporate Tree

Of course, the AAD's absorption of this information involved regular interaction between company personnel and the people they studied. Mandaville states, "We were encouraged to collect all kinds of information about the tribes in whose territory the company carried out its operations (...) We worked over the data bit by bit with a roomful of Bedouin consultants chosen for their knowledge of each geographical area."^{xiii} Such close contact between company personnel and local sources of knowledge was one form by which indigenous people entered the sphere of the AAD's operations. These interactions could be saccharine and friendly. Often relationships could become intimate, and cross-cultural interactions were sometimes a source for positive sentiments and genuine interpersonal connection. One of the most fascinating documents from the AAD's 1960 files is a long-winded letter from Lovelind Hoel, a former employee of the company under the AAD to G.E. Mandis. Hoel writes the letter from Pocatillo,

Idaho where she had been living, awaiting word on the status of her employment with the company.^{xliv} She does not describe why her employment is in jeopardy, but as she pleads for an opportunity to rejoin the AAD, she describes some of her favorite memories working with the company. She begins by describing her experience reading and learning the lessons of the Qur'an, which supposedly lead her to many intimate experiences with local people. As she states, "understanding about God in their way opens any Arab door." Her time in local communities includes many moments of intimate interaction, eating in family homes, meeting mothers and children, discussing religious topics. She includes stories of receiving gifts and beautiful compliments from local people with whom she developed personal relations. One "Bedouin" man, 'Ali, supposedly gave her a ring as a gift telling her, "From the first moment you arrived here you have brought us all happiness, and there is no price on happiness. This is but my token of happiness back to you." Hoel goes to great lengths explaining the friendships she's made and the genuine appreciation she has for intimate human connection. Unfortunately, as Satia reminds us, intimacy in a relationship does not remove the inherently colonial nature of those relationships when one party represents the interests of an organization like Aramco. As such, regardless of her friendships, Hoel's identity as a member of the AAD precludes her from just being a "friend" in many cases, and her actions have political effects, some of which are surprisingly sinister.

First, she describes the pleasure of using the Qur'an to argue against communism when chatting with Saudi students. Here the political nature of her relationships begins to shine through. At one point, Hoel describes her proposal for planned field trips on which she would invite Americans and their families to visit Arab communities and enjoy social gatherings. The goal of these gatherings, she claims, is to build mutual appreciation and friendship between the two cultures. Notably, she proposes the project as a "personal" one, exempt from company control and company association. The aim of the project, it seems, falls outside the aims or the operations of the company. As such, she indirectly defines the activities of the company as those which do not aim solely to promote cross-cultural intimacy, but rather seek a concrete purpose in support of the company's aims. This is not surprising – an oil company is, of course, primarily interested with profits – but it sheds light on the nature of extractive industry and its social impact. The company interacted consistently with local people, and yet every interaction on the company's watch was designed to complete some task or project. There was always an *aim*. The lack of normal social interaction between company personnel and local people, unclouded by any long-term company-oriented goal becomes clear in a later paragraph of Hoel's letter where she describes the difficulty in explaining to Bedouin people why they cannot come back to visit the Aramco compound where primarily American employees live:

After re-reading PART II (the second section of the letter in which she describes her plan to run the field trips), I can see a question that will no doubt come to mind: ‘but won’t these Arab visits and social gatherings lead to their wanting to come into our compound with their families and see how we live, too?’ The direct answer to that is: ‘Yes, they will.’ However, I will tell them the truth, and being understanding people, they will see the point. I say: ‘We would love to have you... but, you see, we’re very grateful to be the guests of you and your King in Arabia – and, as guests, we don’t wish to ‘chance’ offending by any of our ways you, your King or your religious leaders. When we come to visit you in your homes, we can follow your ways and the ways of Arabia, as you guide us, and we probably won’t make too many mistakes. But, should you come to us, the situation is reversed. In your politeness you would feel obligated to try to follow the American way. This is not wise here. Should you come to America, it would be important for you to keep the American way, and now that we’re in Arabia, it is our desire and duty to uphold the good customs of this land.’ To my knowledge, I have never lost an Arab friend – or offended any Arab with the above-stated ‘truth’.

Here again politics seeps into the relationship between her and the local people with whom she interacts outside the company. Again, the company serves as a context for her interactions that stymies any illusions of equality between herself and the people to whom she is explaining this “truth.” The effect is hard to quantify, but the form of the insult is clear: American Aramco employees may learn about Arabs and enter their world while Arabs are asked to remain in darkness concerning the Americans’ life. The irony, of course, is that while the company did not allow local people inside the Aramco compound without proper reason, it would require many of them to adopt jarring truths and practices in order to fit themselves into the new capitalist landscape that the company was busy constructing in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province and beyond.

Nowhere is this forced transition clearer than in the company’s handling of low-level Saudi employees. Hoel’s experiences demonstrate that one of the AAD’s main responsibilities was to communicate and deal with Aramco’s Saudi employees. In the second page of the letter, she briefly mentions an assignment in which she negotiated the terms of an unpaid medical leave for an employee, Mr. ‘Ali Ibn Humaid, whom she describes as “a long-timer”. While she states that the negotiation was no issue, concluding “harmoniously”, this task embodies the concrete outward effects of the AAD’s work. As Hoel describes, the “casually-employed” Bedouins in the company “never understood the necessity for concentration on paperwork”. And yet, in interactions like her negotiations with Ibn Humaid, she must hoist the value of that paperwork on the Saudi employees in meaningful ways that affect their health and their financial stability. At one time Hoel was even in charge of the “Bedouin payroll”. Wages were one of the main ways in which the company’s inner workings emanated outward into societies in its areas of operation, and the AAD was intimately associated with the payment of Saudi employees at the lower rungs of company authority. Employee relations and issues of pay were a site for all kinds of local agent-style work undertaken by the company. Cultural differences frequently complicated the company’s efforts to implement such standard policies as retirement and pension programs, and the company tasked the AAD with translating local cultural sentiments into legible nuggets of information for higher management. On

June 1, 1960, the AAD submitted the afore-mentioned report titled “Status and Role of the Aged in Saudi Arab Society”.^{xlv} The report, without context, is a bizarre document with little apparent utility. Seemingly a piece of anthropological literature meant to contribute a yet unexplored topic of academic interest, the report was actually part of an effort to define the “age” of Saudi employees who were nearing retirement. Non-urban Arabs of the peninsula often had trouble stating their chronological age (Munif depicts this trend partly an act of resistance to authority, and partly a lack of emphasis placed on empirical age altogether).^{xlvi} The result is a bizarre case of an oil company attempting to define age for multiple old Bedouin men. 30 days after the completion of the report, Malcolm Quint penned a document called the “Saudi Arab Retirement Program” in which he describes the age issue. Quint reports that Aramco’s Medical Department approached the AAD in May requesting information on the status and role of the aged in Saudi Arabia, the reason being that the department had no way of finding an “objective estimate of age” for older employees. Instead, the department’s best alternative was to allow a physician to examine the employees and, after subjective analysis, estimate their “biological age”, which was essentially an appraisal of their physical capabilities. Quint notes that “it is possible, therefore, for a man to 35 years old chronologically while biologically he may be 70 or vice versa.” He goes on to explain that if an employee disagreed with the physician’s estimate and felt wronged because of the resulting impact on his eligibility for retirement, the employee could drag the company into “long, costly, and acrimonious litigation.” The rest of the document describes ways to avoid such a calamity. Now, the company was re-defining strangely personal aspects of its employees’ self-perception, and the AAD was serving as an advisor in this process.

The AAD helped to define many intimate aspects of Saudi employees’ lives, including the physical makeup of their communities. One much-discussed project undertaken by the company in the early 1960s was the Home Ownership Program. The homes constructed in this project were different from the barracks where low-level Saudi employees commonly slept. These were family homes, designed and sometimes built by the company. The company disbursed loans to its employees for purchase of the houses. Aramco had been engaged in similar projects during the 1950s as well. For the sake of the Home Ownership Program of the early 1960s, Phebe Ann Marr proposed interviews with women living in Ras Tanura (the site of Aramco’s first refinery and port) to learn their opinions on a range of issues pertaining to the new houses. The issues included the installment of modern kitchen appliances, the layout of communal spaces, and the impacts of loneliness of the women after leaving their former communities to move into new housing units. While employees could build their own houses on land financed by the company, the homes designed by the company would take their needs into consideration. Here the AAD was busy translating local sentiment into documentable actionable information for the construction of

people's homes. The information given by these women would enter the company through Marr and would later emerge as components of the employees' families' new homes. And this was only one of Aramco's frequent forays into construction, urban design, and planning. Towns in the Eastern Province like Dammam received considerable support and planning expertise from company personnel, and local politics in the region soon saw the tensions that arose from such rapid development and often inequitable assistance given to select townships.^{xlvii} In 1960, the AAD expressed an avid interest in local political affairs, especially as they pertained to land politics and finance. Many local *baladiyya* or municipal governments were populated by former Aramco employees, and these communities were closely associated with the work of the company. In May of 1960, the AAD reported the process and results of a local *baladiyyah* election in the town of Rahimah, illustrating a political process fraught with novel debates and issues pertaining to newly established systems of land management and relations with the company. At the time of the election, Rahimah had only been a formally incorporated municipality for three years, and this moment marked the town's first election. Some candidates were illiterate, and Phebe Marr, the author of the report, calls the overall process "fluid", a factor she attributes to the town's young age. Notably, four of the six members elected to the municipal council were employees of the company. After listing the members of the council, the report goes on to describe the structure of local government before noting the town's peculiar financial issues:

Normally, there are two major sources of income open to municipalities: the sale of municipal lands and a percentage of customs duties. In accordance with a royal decree issued in 1955, lands within the limits of the municipalities were transferred to them for public sale. At this time Rahimah was not administratively independent. The lands now comprising the townsite had been developed by Aramco and sold, mainly to government officials and company workers, before Rahimah became a municipality. Much of this land is still being held for speculation. As a municipality, Rahimah has been unable to profit from the decree of 1955 because it had no land to sell. The unused land surrounding the present Municipality of Rahimah is gradually being developed by the Company for transfer to company employees. Another Royal decree in 1956 provided that company employees building homes in Abqaiq, Dammam, and Rahimah could receive the land free. Some of this land was turned over to the Municipality through sale, but with the exception of about 35 houses and a few private business establishments, it has not been adequately utilized. In any case, ownership of additional land does not solve the financial problem, according to the Director (of the Municipality), since it is difficult to get workers who already have access to free land under Company home-ownership programs to buy the land from the municipality.

Rahimah thus finds itself stuck. Its formal entry into a new world of commodified land management seems like a self-destructive act. It seems almost as if Rahimah would be better served if it refused to incorporate, remaining an informal entity beyond the financial apparatus of the state-sanctioned land management policies. This was the route taken by residents of Umm al-Khamam who vehemently opposed efforts by the *Baladiyyah* of Qatif to pave a road leading through their community. According to another AAD report in 1960, the road had been in disrepair for some time, and the residents of a nearby village, al-Jishsh, had been demanding work on the road for some time. Residents of Umm Khamam opposed the project because they feared the encroachment of the *baladiya* government in their

community. At that point, Umm Khamam hosted no baladiyah officials and two local sources reported to the company that they enjoyed “freedom” because of that fact. The sources, one Sunni and one Shi’i, both stated that they disliked the baladiyah governments because of their constant “meddling” in local affairs. As such, the road conflict resulted in a protest march from Umm al-Khamam to Qatif.

The stories of Rahimah and Umm al-Khamam illustrate a strange effect of the company’s involvement in the region. Aramco received “Oriental matter” and combed it out into actionable intelligence for its authority figures, and then used that intelligence to interact with and influence the communities connected with its operations. Even in cases like the reorganization of local land, a project largely undertaken by the government and not Aramco, the company’s research and interests had marked effects. Toby Craig Jones details the ways in which seemingly apolitical company employees like geologist Karl Twitchell composed an integral part of Saudi Arabia’s political development and accumulation of absolute power under the House of Saud. More importantly, Jones draws numerous connections between the land-management policies of the Saudi government and its rise to absolute power in the peninsula. As the company furnished the government with sociological, geographic, and geological data, the royal family became capable of re-shaping those surveyed spaces. The result was a system of resource management in which authority flowed upward through tiered bodies of government submissive to royal decrees. In his chapter of *Desert Kingdom*, Jones describes the vocal resistance that came out of the Eastern Province directed at Aramco and its impact on the agricultural and natural resources of the region.^{xlviii} Often Aramco’s influence created a trade-off for local institutions and people. As seen in the case of Rahimah’s finances, the transition of local entities into modern systems used or supported by Aramco, they often made sacrifices. The creation of the municipal government was also the creation of a financially troubled entity which, had it not existed at all, would have no balance sheet to worry about in the first place. Likewise, for Saudi employees hoping to see retirement, age would have to become an imposed value and might mean a later or earlier retirement than was envisioned. Of course, if those employees had never become employees at all, then the issue wouldn’t have even existed. As Aramco made new maps, those maps produced new locations, new meanings for local land, and new problems. The company’s Americans could navigate the region more easily with maps in hand, but that was partially because the production of new information was likewise producing new realities for the region. With every step it took to better understand the local people and land, the company was re-fashioning them to be more understandable. The effect on local people was to become like immigrants in their own land. Aside from the literal relocation of many Saudi people, the changes developing around them would have thrust them forward into a new world hardly similar to their old one, save baubles like language, architectural details, and place names. These processes of modernization, applied to both land and people, had the effect, as

mentioned, of making American company managers natives in a foreign country, building up a system they could understand around them.

The Dream of Modernity: The AAD Perceives the Eradication of Anecdotal Knowledge and the Modernization of the Arab

In 1959, Aramco's company library contained 3,300 volumes. The company placed particular emphasis on books about the Arabian Peninsula, and it was the intention of Aramco personnel to make it "one of the best in the world on the Arabian Peninsula."^{xlix} And yet, as Aramco's operations (in tandem with the operations of the Saudi government) came to define life for those who lived in the peninsula, modern analysts may wonder where the subject of the Arabian Peninsula ends and the story of Aramco's development begins. At what point had or would the company consume the entirety of the Arabian Peninsula through its orifice in the AAD, digest it with analysis and translation, and incorporate it into the world of Aramco (yes, there is humor in the fact that Aramco's modern cultural publication is named *Aramco World*). What was Aramco learning about when it claimed to be studying the Arabian Peninsula and its people and land? The company faced a peculiar dilemma in this case. As Oriental matter passed into the maw of the company's re-organizing structures and sacrificed past understandings for a place at the modern economic table, Aramco might have seen the sea of oriental matter closing in on it and threatening to destroy its sense of self. But that was not the case in the 1960s. The borders between the company and the world outside it would not dissolve in the increasing "westernization" of the peninsula, because the company made an effort to construct an edifice to "local culture" rooted in the pre-oil past and aestheticized for adornment of its facilities and operations.

It is true that Charles Matthews found his mapping projects were practically impossible without the help of local guides and the place-names he could learn from them, but while a later Aramco publication would refer the use of local names for new company facilities as "an oil industry practice at the time",¹ the real necessity isn't really clear. For instance, why does it matter whether the "Qaryatain" pumping station is properly named by local linguistic standards. The company could and did survey large tracts of land in which it relied simply on coordinates and numbered markers for navigation. There was nothing necessary to oil production about using appropriate local names. Regardless, the company put some effort into giving the new locations they established some element of legitimate familiarity for local people. Even while the company relied on local knowledge for place-names, however, they still had the agency to

choose among the various terms they were given. The fact was that, in many cases, the company was naming places that really had little prior significance as places unto themselves (pumping stations and drill sites constructed in the middle of the desert), and so, in multiple cases, they were able to choose from several names regarding nearby geological features. In some cases, the company would choose a name simply because it was easier to pronounce for native English-speakers. In fact, the AAD had its own transliteration system which it codified and to which it adhered. This was an empirical system of geography that seemingly relied on the regional knowledge of indigenous people, but even if newly constructed locations built or designated by the company had local names, the names were devoid of their original meaning; it was probably unimportant to company personnel and later generations of Saudi people whether a place was named for its copious fields of *rimth* bushes or not. The company selected the names, sometimes at the expense of their accuracy, and often for the sake of their accuracy. Accuracy in this case was not as important as the veneer of local-ness to be draped on a decidedly new or foreign installment.

The local names assigned to newly designated locations thus functioned like the local clothes worn by previous western travelers in the region. In effect, the AAD constituted a cloaking mechanism for the company. Just as Lovelind Hoel lead interactions with local people through the lens of asymmetrical information – she could visit them but they could not visit her – the company’s use of local culture prevented honest interaction by promoting mutual cooperation established asymmetrical information. Whereas company employees merely changed clothes, learned new languages, and discovered new names as they ventured outside the Aramco apparatus, Saudi employees had to re-organize their physical communities, systems of land ownership, and perceptions of their own age to enter into the world of Aramco in proper form.

As such, what the AAD allowed the company to “understand” local culture to the point that it was able to abstract that culture and use it to build an edifice of “local-ness” before which it could prostrate itself in apparent respect for local people and norms. So when the world of the Arabian Peninsula started to change, it became an Aramco world by another name, or rather, by many other local names. In that way, what the company was “understanding” officially, and acting upon was never the experiences of the people with whom it interacted. Rather it was the image of those people and their place which could be used to access local affairs and separate local people’s culture from their experiences. The company made local people into immigrants and then continued to refer them to locals. Thus the two poles of “traditional” and “modern” arose with the Saudi people situated uncomfortably in between.

The AAD aided in the production of a system of knowledge that seemed controllable, useful, and navigable to its personnel and other foreign experts. It is important to notice that what started as an

understanding of the land and people being synonymous was only a useful imaginary baseline from which, through the thorough documentation and study of the company, the land and the people would ultimately become separate. As such, just as explorers and travelers from Europe and North America commonly donned local clothing, clothing which they would later remove once they had finished their work, the company allowed itself to throw off the mantle of empiricism for a moment and allow its personnel to journey out into the unknown wilderness of local knowledge before returning with useful data that could be translated for official use. One might think of this activity as spying, or as deceit. After all, the purpose of the office was to dress up the company in ideological garb that made it palatable to local politicians and people, and that allowed the company access to the land from which it sought to make profits. Ultimately, of course, the company had no intention of fully integrating itself into local society. Robert Vitalis makes this point abundantly clear as he describes the segregationist layout of housing developments built for white and Arab company employees.^{li} However, Vitalis also posits an important notion that while critics often accuse Saudi society of backwards religious oppression, Aramco under *American* management was a company so steeped in antiquated racial politics that *it* failed to modernize. Aramco notably suffered from the illusion that its projects in the region constituted modernization, when in reality they promoted a strange dichotomy of local and foreign that allowed the company to understand the region around them by inherently altering his socio-geographic form into something the company already understood. The company asserted that once anecdotal knowledge of the terrain had been translated into objective geographic data, comprehensible to anyone with the proper training, the old knowledge of the land could be relegated to such unnecessary baubles as place-names and folklore.

As such, the company established the knowledge of local people, their social connections and their understandings of self, as figments of the past, an origin point from which the country would progress as it embarked on a journey towards modernization. Only the aspects of local culture aesthetically different from American customs were allowed to stay – clothes, religion (which, at that time, posed no threats to the production of oil), and language, institutions the company could use as adornments on its projects and its marketing materials. As the company took in information and sublimated it into useful new entities like chronological age and geographic location, those redefinitions became disorienting and unsettling realities for the people whose information was being collected. The oriental matter entering into the company was not only information, but people as well. These were people whose senses of self, community, and location were changing as their homes, finances, and geographic locations changed. As such, in the process of transferring local cultural knowledge into actionable data and empirically organized systems turned the people of the region into immigrants in the land they once knew. When

“local” or “Arab” culture became a systematic set of truths and institutions, and not the daily interactions of communities and the accumulations of lived experience, the organization can strip people of their homes and send them to a new temporal and imaginative “place” without having to relocate them (though relocation was a consistent trend). What the company may have seen as a translation of anecdotal knowledge into empirical data and modern systems was really just a violent transition from something the company refused to be a part of, local society, into something agreeable and manageable. All the while, people continued to have lived experiences, because practices like anecdotal navigation are not unique to Arabs (of course), they are universal to some degree. As such, rather than infusing itself with local society, the company essentially attempted to re-orient local society to learn a new lifestyle, one amenable to American minds and practices. Inherent to this vision was maintenance and respect for local culture, but in a world that hardly resembled that of the local person’s childhood, the definition of local culture would have to define all that the company no longer felt it needed to understand and reorganize.

Is Oil Orientalist?

It is not the project of this paper to compare an American oil company in Saudi Arabia blow for blow with a British colony in Egypt. Of the most subtle but also the most important differences here was a seemingly genuine belief by Aramco personnel that Saudi people were capable of great things – ambitious, intelligent, and creative. As Said describes, British administrators saw their occupation of Egypt as a caretaking operation, necessary because Egyptians would never be able to lead themselves. Regardless, this paper instead sees the oil company as an orientalist entity insofar as it sees all extractive corporate structures as orientalist. The oil company must accurately locate oil, access it, and understand its properties, but oil must undergo complete relocation, combustion, and ultimately a violent transformation into another form. Even without all the impacts on local people, who in this case live in “the Orient”, the company is structured like the machine of Cromer’s description, or rather like the tree in my own. No doubt race and racist ideals were a deep and pernicious factor in much of Aramco’s interactions with local people, but scholars like Vitalis have already written salient works of literature on that topic. This paper contends that the company is an orientalist entity by virtue of its inherent organization. As the company adopted old practices of associating local people with the land on which they lived, the processes of changing the land and exploiting it became inherently tied with processes of changing social and political structures in the country as well. This paper certainly understates the role of the Saudi government in these projects, but even where the government is concerned, Aramco was a

perpetual and significant source of geographic, ethnographic, and geological information for the government. As such, the work of the AAD was work for the Saudi state almost as much as it was work for Aramco. As the company sought to re-write the local landscape, it constructed and fortified the differences between itself and the world outside, imparting jarring changes on local societies while refusing to fully integrate with them.

The Wilderness as an Imperfect Weapon of Resistance

Rob Nixon defines long process of geographic redefinition and the imposition of a new ecological and political regime in the Arabian Peninsula as an example of “slow violence.” The idea, born in Nixon’s work, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, appears as an explanation for the difference between environmentalist movements spearheaded by powerful citizens of wealthy nations and those that arise from personal experiences of disenfranchisement, alienation, and impoverishment of poor communities around the globe. Nixon’s broad description of slow violence depicts a phenomenon that includes processes like postwar nuclear fallout, acidifying oceans, climate change, desertification, and social stratification. Nixon concerns himself not only with identifying these processes, but also representing them in accurate ways that incite popular action and generate change.

A major challenge is representational: how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects. Crucially, slow violence is often not just attritional but also exponential, operating as a major threat multiplier; it can fuel long-term, proliferating conflicts in situations where the conditions for sustaining life become increasingly but gradually degraded (...) How can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time?^{lii}

Nixon then argues that the solution lies, in part, with the “writer-activist”, a figure whose historical role is as nebulous as his/her genre. The environmentalist writer-activist in this case is a figure of resistance who employs his/her imagination to access and depict processes that the media cannot capture with any meaningful effect. Nixon writes,

In a world permeated by insidious, yet imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses. Writing can challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and bring into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration. The narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen.^{liii}

As such, Nixon crafts a compelling argument for the use of fiction and imaginative storytelling as a resource and a tool that brings the reader into close contact with long, collective processes of decay and alienation. Of course, the second chapter of Nixon’s work stars Munif, the exiled novelist with a fiery “rage” against the all-consuming onslaught of capitalist petro-despotism that has gripped the societies of the Persian Gulf. Munif’s use of a collective protagonist, in Nixon’s eyes, is a tool of fiction with historical predecessors in western fiction (writers like Emile Zola and Upton Sinclair)^{liv} and it serves as technology that represents the long and collective injustice done on societies whom the media commonly

characterizes through momentary acts of violence and short-term outbursts of conflict. No doubt, Nixon is correct in his assertion. In *The Wilderness*, Munif does use a collective protagonist, one that not only includes many characters, but whose characters do not remain constant throughout the trajectory of the plot. There are only two characters who remain present during the entire novel, Fawaz and Miteb al-Hathal, and really only by circumstance – the emphasis of the novel does not stay pinned to either of them for too long though they continue to linger in the background of the developing plot, sometimes resurfacing in brief moments. And the effect is, no doubt, to depict a long and violent transformation under which a society changes. The product, as Nixon describes it, is a story of slow violence.

That said, Nixon's analysis leaves a loose end. There is, in fact, another literary technology that can accurately depict processes of slow violence, and that is the academic amalgam of anthropology, objective history, and sociology. As shown above, a glance into the records kept by the proponents of petro-despotism themselves, British agents, colonial administrators, anthropologists in the service of empire, and Aramco personnel also depict a process of slow violence. In fact, as has been demonstrated in the previous section of this thesis, it does not require a single native voice, save those filtered by the editorial processes of American, British, and French voices, to demonstrate that slow violence is real. The AAD's records clearly demonstrate the strange and deeply human processes of modernization-by-petroleum that occurred in the Arabian Peninsula, and yet, Nixon remains correct that Munif's novel paints a different picture from what the Aramco records contain. Both the Aramco records (and the academic historical accounts written to contextualize them) and Munif's novel construct stories with collective protagonists (an academic historical account of a region likewise engages a collective, changing cast of characters) and the long, wide sweeping effects of slow violence. Even so, Munif's novel is distinct from the records in at least one way, that being the total uselessness of its content for intelligence-gathering or extractive industry.

One major aspect of Nixon's analysis of Munif is his reference to John Updike's notoriously ignorant and scathing review of *The Wilderness*. Nixon writes,

The markers of this foreigner's (Munif's) insufficiency, he argues, are two-fold: he fails at character and he fails at voice. Above all, the novel doesn't work because the novel botches character: 'no single figure acquires enough reality to attract our sympathetic interest.... There is none of that sense of individual moral adventure ... which, since *Don Quixote* and *Robinson Crusoe*, has distinguished the novel from the fable and the chronicle; *Cities of Salt* is concerned, instead, with men in the aggregate.' The effect, Updike concluded sniffily, is simply 'sociological'.¹⁴

Nixon argues that Updike's review reflects the impact of frontier mentality from anglophone expansion into the American West as a central influence in modern American novels. Updike's inability to appreciate a novel with such a collective protagonist, Nixon claims, runs parallel to the use of frontier mentality by Aramco personnel themselves. Using Vitalis's *America's Kingdom*, Nixon demonstrates the

way the Arabian Peninsula became an extralocal extension of America's western frontier. In all, the product of Nixon's argument is an image of two narratives – one (Munif's) a collective epic of deracination and environmental dispossession, the other (Aramco's) a story of pioneering grit and justified racial segregation – duking it out with each other for supremacy over the history of the Arabian Peninsula.

Of course, the strangeness of the argument is that, if Nixon is correct, and Munif's novel erects a historically accurate narrative (in the abstract) that points to the reality of the region's history, then it is highly sociological. In that case, Munif's novel is nothing more than an imaginative summary of history for the sake of empiric documentation – a clear-eyed documentation of the past through fictional characters meant to re-define the reader's perception of the past and motivate future actions of resistance or policy that thwart or destroy the progression of petro-despotism in the peninsula. Under that gaze, one might read Munif like a "local agent" for the resistance movement who probes the nature of American oil exploration and sublimates the material into an actionable nugget of information. And yet, Munif could have accomplished the same goal through a thorough and academic account of Saudi history, like Vitalis's or Jones's, that highlights the nature of petro-despotism. Instead, he wrote a piece of fiction, rife with emotion, and his use of fiction was not merely for sensational appeal. Instead, the work's fictional nature serves as a reflection back on the emotional trauma of the author that re-focuses the emphasis of the novel away from the already monstrous dialogue about the nature of America in the world, landing instead on the equally intriguing and dramatic story of those lives that were entangled in America's foreign adventures, but whose existence and value stands independent of America's involvement.

A Weapon of Resistance

Nixon's characterization of the novel as a counter-narrative that contravenes or corrodes the American pioneer-narrative proposed by the company is not simply incorrect. Indeed, the novel re-tells the history of the region in a way that frustrates and diminishes such a narrative projected by the company. In characterizing the benign pioneer narrative pushed by Aramco, Nixon quotes one of the company's public relations figures, Patrick Flynn:

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

The statement's absurdity almost needs no description. Even if Munif had not written *Cities of Salt*, and even if no critical scholarship had ever been produced on the matter, a minimally critical eye could identify the dubious nature of this statement if only by the generous layer of Velveeta cheese under which it suffocates. Munif invites the reader to laugh at such statements through the humorous scenes he writes about the construction of a pipeline (assumedly modeled after the trans-Arabian pipeline, completed in 1950) in the latter half of the novel. Indeed, the company regarded the construction of the pipeline as a case for the endurance and the toughness of its American employees as they shared in the hardships of desert life with Saudi laborers during the long years of work in the desert.^{lvii} Per Munif's story, many of these hardships were not the natural products of work in the desert, but rather the antics of the Bedouin laborers mixed with the thin-skinned irritability of the American foremen. Munif writes, "The workers knew how to adjust to the ocean of desert around them, and knew even better how to infuriate the Americans and make them lose their tempers."^{lviii} Munif then tells the story of Majalli al-Sirhan, a quick-witted laborer who hunts lizards and rats in the desert so he can later release them in the Americans' tents. Al-Sirhan's pranks help the laborers to survive the long months in the desert, providing them with comic relief during the cold nights and scorching days. And the relief is necessary, for while the Americans take months-long vacations away from the worksites, Munif indicates no respite for the Bedouin laborers. The Americans undergo constant irritations at the hands of the Bedouin laborers. Often, the laborers collect wood and light small fires in the camp for preparing tea and coffee. The resulting smoke, mixed with the dust and airborne sand (both from the surrounding desert and, notably, from the machinery at work on the construction site) drive the American foremen into fits of rage: "some of them tore off their masks and goggles and threw them on the ground, like children or madmen, while others were seized by fits of coughing."^{lix} When Majalli pranks them, he slips large hissing lizards into their toolboxes. The Americans' reactions are notably childish and soft. Munif writes:

One of the engineers asked Majalli to hand him his toolbox, and Majalli brought it to him while Mr. Hamilton was inspecting the installation of some equipment. When the [engineer] opened the box, he screamed and ran away, because a lizard as big as a cat was reclining on top of the tools, glaring at the American with his gray eyes and drawing deep, crazed breaths. Mr. Hamilton, whose face turned yellow and horror-struck, could not budge forward or retreat. The engineer who had fled in fright stumbled and fell. He was in a lamentable state: sweat poured off him, his lips trembled, and the color of his face changed from blue to yellow to waxy white. Majalli, who had been standing silent amid the fear and horror, stepped forward, snatched the lizard by the neck and pulled him from the box, his arm stiff as a stick, heaved the lizard above his head and struck him against the ground. The lizard got dizzy and ran off, then changed direction. The Americans, who had been standing, stunned with fright, now ran away, colliding with each other to escape the perilous beast. They had no idea what it was or where it had come from."^{lx}

Later on, Majalli sings a song as he carries a box of lizards to a company celebration for the completion of the project. He later gives the lizards to an American manager, Mr. Middleton, in a public prank.

O blue-eyed Americans, wherever you go

Wherever you try to flee,
 The sun is above and scorpions below.
 The lizards mangle your balls
 And the foxes feast on your asses,
 O blue-eyed Americans, wherever you go
 Where will you flee, O eyes of blue?^{lxii}

Majalli's song exposes the true nature of the desert and its hardships, as depicted by Munif. There is no mention in the book of Americans having problems with wild, uncaptured lizards; they only encounter the creatures when the Bedouin workers use them for pranks. As such, Munif undermines Patrick Flynn's nostalgic pioneer narrative on three fronts. Firstly, Munif describes the Americans not as tough or resilient, but cowardly, soft, childish, irritable, and weak-willed. Secondly, he explodes the idea that the Bedouins and the Americans "shared" the hardships of the desert – while the Americans slept in climate-controlled tents (the AC units were constantly breaking down, causing great irritation for the Americans), the Bedouins were in separate tents, staying warm with long nights using "games they invented to stay warm" (506). Finally, he questions the nature of the "hardships" faced by the American employees. Some of them surely arose from the desert and the hard work, but many of them, like the lizards and the smoke, were the artful pranks of the workers. As such, Flynn is made to seem a fool, duped into imagining a sense of comradeship and heroism in the face of difficulties which were, themselves, signs of a community lacking in comradeship. At the same time, Munif makes Flynn look like a liar, exposing that the Americans themselves did not share their quarters or even their time with the Bedouin workers.

Munif similarly points out the foolishness or the lies in AAD personnel's attempts to accurately name company facilities and new sites created through the imposition of the region's new official geography. As the company constructs the pipeline, they erect three work camps along its length. The Americans name the three sites H1, H2, and H3 – references to Harran, the outlet for the pipeline. The workers, meanwhile, "used the old names for these places or gave them names of their own." (509) The workers thus dub the camps Muteira (an old place-name), Askar (meaning soldiers – named for the military-like discipline imposed by the camp's foreman), and Quss'a (meaning "eats" in the Theroux translation, so named in reference to the Indian cook in the camp). Munif thereby demonstrates that naming sites for their nearby points of reference, as Aramco did with its improperly named "Qariyatain" pumping station, marks a hollow gesture without much real meaning for local people. Particularly, the use of new, invented names by the workers makes Aramco geographer Charles Matthews's obsession with accurate old place-names seem useless and self-gratifying.

In a similar fashion, the Munif's fictional scenes erode the sense of benevolent comradeship and partnership in Lovelind Hoel's letter. The letter is soaked with the "benevolent explorer" narrative present in Patrick Flynn's quote. Munif exposes the absurdity of intercultural visits like the "jaunts" Hoel describes in her letter to G.E. Hoel describes the "jaunts" undertaken by American friends and family out to Bedouin communities as "wonderfully satisfying experiences and productive of good." Additionally, she describes "the bedouin desert party which the bedouins gave for me and my friends." According to Hoel, it was such a moment of happy American-Bedouin interaction that Aramco's Public Relations office even sent a reporter and a photographer to the event. Hoel writes, "This single event not only laid foundations for understanding, it produced a solid structure on those foundations that I'm sure cannot be toppled – at least in the minds and hearts of all who attended, Americans and Arabs alike. Americans saw bedouins of seven different tribes work hard together in perfect teamwork to give them, the Americans, the very best they could provide of Arab hospitality, including a fine meal served in true Bedouin surroundings. And the bedouins saw the Americans appreciate enthusiastically and gratefully every detail of their provisions. Hearts spoke to hearts that day. There didn't even appear to be a language barrier." She then goes on to describe the way the Americans took photos of Bedouin children milking goats and riding camels. Hoel's scene is eerily reminiscent of Dabbasi's wedding in *The Wilderness*. A group of Americans attends the wedding, and like the Americans' in Hoel's party, they take pictures, ask questions, and received the hospitality of the townspeople with exaggerated mirth. And yet, even after asking so many questions, the Americans in Munif's novel ultimately reveal their complete and utter lack of the "understanding" Hoel craves and lauds so much. Munif's scene includes a depiction of the overflowing hospitality Hoel praises, but its source is not simple good will. "Dabbasi's joy at being married was equal to his joy at the presence of the Americans (...) He asked the Harranis to treat the Americans with deference and to see that all their wishes were satisfied." (262) As such, the hospitality received by the Americans in *The Wilderness* represents more of Dabbasi's desire to appease the powerful American company personnel than it does a genuine democratic interest to welcome the Americans with warmth and grace. Furthermore, Munif complicates Hoel's statement about the Americans' open excitement and enthusiasm. Munif writes, "The Americans, who looked and behave like small children, showed endless, unimaginable surprise and admiration"^{lxii} As with the story of the pipeline, Munif uses this moment to describe the visiting Americans as children. Munif likewise addresses the issue of photography, a subject Hoel repeatedly mentions in her letter. Hoel remarks multiple times on the difficulty of taking pictures with Bedouin women present, and Munif likewise describes the Americans' interest at the wedding of photographing Dabbasi and his son. However, rather than treating the photography like an act of reverence and respect, Munif explains that it is simply "their way of finding out whether or not such things were acceptable to their hosts."^{lxiii} Munif's depiction of Dabbasi's wedding thereby stands out as an eerily direct response to

Hoel's letter (both Hoel and Munif even address the practice of rolling rice balls as a source of fun and entertainment for the Americans). This scene has the same effect as his account of the pipeline, drawing out and beating the misty-eyed emotional narrative of Aramco employees by presenting their absurdity in the face of the Bedouin's true intentions and, incidentally, the irony of depicting companionship and warmth between two groups of people whom the Americans themselves forcefully kept separate. Where Munif's wedding scene departs from Hoel's letter is in his description of a musical performance. As the night wears on, Suweyleh, a displaced Bedouin and laborer for the company, begins to sing a long, sorrowful song. Through the song, the singer and the audience alike vent their sorrow at the changes their lives have endured. After Suweyleh finishes, the Americans, blissfully unaware that the pain expressed in the previous song is largely due to the company's monumental impact on the region and the land, discuss the song as a strange expression of mysterious Bedouin sorrow. "You can't explain the sadness of these people's lives unless you've known the desert and lived in it. This damned desert breeds nothing but this kind of people and the kind of animals we saw on our way here (...) weeping relieves them, but they're hard people, and stubborn. They weep inside – their tears fall inside them and are extinguished again by the shouting and lamentations they call song".^{lxiv} The other American responds, "these people are strange – they seem so mysterious. You never know whether they're sad or happy. Everything about them is wrapped up, layers upon layers, just like the desert under their feet!" And so, the Americans leave the party with an overwhelming *lack* of understanding. They depart having feigned childish innocence and pleasure as a way to step inside and learn, not to make real connection. In the end, they only receive in understanding what they gave in the first place, falsehood.

Finally, Hoel's letter reveals another site where Munif undermines and weakens Aramco's benign-explorer narrative: wages and employee relations. While Munif does not address Hoel's letter in as much striking directness with this issue, he does texturize her statement that Bedouin employees don't understand the need for so-called "paperwork" related to their employment – a perpetuation of the notion that while the Bedouin don't see its use, the Americans keep their files as a benefit to the employees (and of course as legal protection). Munif sheds a new light on this issue when he describes the company's attempt to properly compensate Bedouin laborers based on their family size and their number of dependents. Daham, one of their laborers' supervisors, arrives suddenly at their barracks and marches a group of workers to the American compound, a place some of them had never seen. Many of the workers must wait to be interviewed in the hot sun outside. Only five enter the American facility at a time, chilled and mystified by the air conditioning as they enter. Ibrahim al-Faleh is the first worker to enter the interview while the others remain in a chilly waiting room. The Americans, through the use of their translator, begin to ask him questions about himself and his family. At first, the questions are simple and

innocuous, but when the Americans begin asking about his mother, Ibrahim becomes uneasy. The translator explains that the questions are necessary so that the company can raise Ibrahim's pay, promote him, and send him to the US for training. Ibrahim doesn't care. By the end of the interview, the company employees and the translator have thoroughly humiliated and insulted him, asking him about his religious piety and his political views. At that point, it becomes clear that the "paperwork" necessary for his classification and his pay is really a thinly-veiled attempt to extract ethnographic information. After the interviews, Suweyleh remarks that the Americans had even asked him to sing for them so they might write down the lyrics of his song. He refuses. Ibrahim says, "the bastards want to know everything (...) they want to know who has planted every seed and laid every egg in history."^{lxv} Here the orientalist tendencies of the company again rise to contradict the benevolence Lovelind Hoel attempts to depict.

As such, when comparing Aramco's narrative with the Munif's novel, it is clear that Munif seeks to undermine and expose the seemingly benevolent sentiments expressed in the AAD documents and the company's public relations material. As such, Nixon is correct in identifying *Cities of Salt* as a use of the imagination and fictional genre for resistance against a large and often misleading story built by proponents of petro-despotism. Munif's "rage",^{lxvi} as Nixon describes it, is certainly real, and it manifests in a ruthlessly crafted literary weapon. From the depths of the sorrow in Suweyleh's song, a sorrow no doubt felt by Munif after a life watching the stratification, oppression, and disorientation of Arab societies, the novelist sharpens an action-ready blade against the forces of history that wrought such misunderstanding and damage on the region. It is critically important not to discount that aspect of his work. It is also critically important to recognize the value and the urgency in resistance movements and literature that promote democratic, free-minded validations of human life as Munif's does (as opposed to, per se, Osama bin Laden's violent oppressive response to American imperialism).^{lxvii}

All the same, a close reading of both the Aramco documents and Munif's novel reveals the flawed nature of such a weaponized narrative, important and useful as it may be. In fact, Munif seems, occasionally, to betray his own cause through his writing.

Historical Inaccuracies and Self-Defeating Accuracies: History though One Man's Imagination

All the same, a close reading of both the Aramco documents and Munif's novel reveals the flawed nature of such a weaponized narrative, important and useful as it may be. In fact, Munif seems, occasionally, to betray his own cause here. For every moment in *The Wilderness* when Munif attacks Aramco's pioneer

narrative, there are others that cripple his attack. These moments arise in several forms. Some constitute moments where Munif seems, against all intuition, to corroborate the Aramco narrative. Others arise from the sheer historical improbability of his account. And still others arise from his unflinching portrait of his characters, many of whom are not perfect victims, but rather complicated and often foolish, sometimes misguided personalities.

To start, one can hardly identify or circumscribe which people are the victims of slow violence, and which are the perpetrators in Munif's novel. The society Munif depicts is difficult to identify as a "self" which has received harm and must mobilize for resistance against it. Within Munif's narrative, all kinds of intersectional boundaries cross each other to establish a well-textured and poorly circumscribed society whose identity and classification are very difficult. Frequently academic sources on the subject refer to non-Americans as "Bedouin", sometimes calling them "townspeople". Nixon even criticizes Munif of associating foreignness with loss, implying that the author saw Peninsula Arabs as the only rightful members of the local society that earns his sympathies.^{lxviii} In reality, the society depicted by Munif, from start to finish, is not entirely comprised of Bedouin and/or townspeople. Nor does it even limit itself by indigeneity to the Arabian Peninsula, Arab identity, or even the Islamic faith. There are characters throughout the novel who arrive from far-off places to become part of a society reeling from the modern development of the oil industry. An Armenian Christian truck driver from Damascus, a sexually charged Sumatran baker, well-traveled young men who have sought labor in Egypt and Iraq, women, men, powerful elite, and poor laborers all take their part in the tumultuous upheavals that take place throughout the novel. In fact, the characters in Harran who ultimately become servants of the petrostate often undergo changes as violent and unnerving as do the people whom they will eventually oppress (the emir undergoes a psychological breakdown in response to Harran's riots). Even during the climactic acts of violence that define the end of the novel, when the new lines of opposition seem to be drawn between the underprivileged (townspeople, laborers, etc.) and the privileged elite (the emir, his soldiers, the Americans, etc.), there is one character, Dabbasi, who straddles the line, expressing his sympathy toward both sides as he attempts to maintain his friendships and social networks. Nixon seems to find the opposite, criticizing Munif of associating foreignness with loss.^{lxix}

Furthermore, Munif writes scenes that make it difficult to establish clear blame for the alienating nature of Arab-American relations in the book. One such moment arises at the end of the segment concerning the pipeline. This scene is the one in which Majalli al-Sirhan presents Mr. Middleton with a box of lizards shortly after singing his crude song. Majalli approaches Mr. Middleton with the box closed, telling him it is a gift for him. In that moment, the laborers hold their breath, awaiting a negative response from the Americans after this prank. Middleton, on the other hand, remains ignorant, though he suspects the gift

will be some kind of trick. Upon opening the box, Middleton is surprised, but he conceals his shock as the laborers begin laughing. He picks up the box, shakes it, and yells cheerfully for Majalli to take it back. Here Munif again seems to be portraying an instance of false connection and polite posturing by the Americans – it seems Mr. Middleton is feigning humor to simply avoid embarrassment and win the hearts of the laborers. At the same time, Munif could have easily depicted another scene of humiliating cowardice and chaos for the Americans, but he doesn't. Instead, he depicts a more complex moment of communication. Here, Majalli has opened toyed with the authority of the foreman, and while the response seems disingenuous, the spontaneity of the interaction provides fuel for what could have been a relationship more intimate and open than the worker-foreman relationship thus far. In a sense, it's more a sad moment than a funny one – an instance of miscommunication, but likewise a moment of honesty. In the end, it becomes clear that a more spontaneous, even-footed relationship between the laborers and the Americans could have been born, but the nature of the company's organization, its mission, and its history render that possibility barren. Curiously, Munif (perhaps accidentally) opens the question, could there have been openness and affection among the American workers that would have been nurtured with more open communication, less sneaky pranking, and less trickery on the part of the laborers themselves? Is it possible the Americans felt no ill will, but rather warm acceptance for the workers and that their irritation at their troubles precluded them from expressing warmth more freely? Of course, the answer certainly not an bold and clear "yes". That said, Munif offers a small and confusing concession here, and it should not go unnoticed.

This scene is not the only instance in which Munif portrays Arab characters as impediments to intimacy between the two groups. As described above, the Americans certainly make intimacy and positive interactions difficult through their behavior. In fact, in some cases, it is the prickliness of the Arabs themselves that precludes more positive interactions with Americans that may have ultimately produced a more richly connected social world and thawed some of the icy racial segregation at work in the Harran. Beyond the case of the workers on the pipeline, the Arab residents of Harran likewise prevent interaction with American visitors through their suspicion, coldness, and ultimately, their open aggression. At one point, the Americans in the compound who speak Arabic begin to expand the number of residents they visit in Arab Harran (of course, the townspeople weren't visiting anyone in American Harran). As the Arabic-speaking Americans begin to make more visits to more people, they start bringing books and asking information. Soon enough the books incite fear in the townspeople. They don't understand the purpose of the books, and they don't understand that sometimes the books are about history, while other times they're about geography. They don't understand what the books have to do with water and gold, the things the Americans claim to be seeking for the good of the people around them. With time, rumors

spread that the books involve dark magic and curses. Ultimately, when one American brings a book about pre-Islamic pagan religions, asking whether any animistic tribes still exist in the nearby deserts, Ibn Naffeh, a religiously conservative member of the community, tells the others that the Americans have come to turn them against Islam and that they are, indeed, purveyors of black magic. When he accuses the Americans of harboring jinn and demons which they will unleash on the town, the Americans respond by quoting the Qur'an, saying "accusing Christians and Jews of disbelief was a sin against God."^{lxx} Ibn Naffeh then explodes into rage. Finally he says to Abdullah al-Saad, who is hosting the Americans, "my boy, foreign lands are corrupt, and foreign people bring corruption, and money corrupts worst of all."

This deeply layered scene exposes the difficulty in fully trusting Munif's work as a weapon of resistance. Inevitably, Ibn Naffeh is made to look backwards and ignorant during this discussion. His pre-disposed suspicion of the Americans, his general distaste for foreign people, and his blatant rudeness towards the American guests cast him in an ugly light. Even though Ibn Naffeh, though factually inaccurate, is metaphorically correct – the Americans have not come out of pure benevolence, and they do ultimately spread corruption in the community -, Ibn Naffeh helps to bring about the destruction he foresees by making efforts to convince the townspeople that they should not interact with the Americans, leaving only the town's traveled wealthy elite to enjoy relationships with them. Additionally, Ibn Naffeh's reaction scares the Americans away from any further discussion of religion with local people. In this sense, he compounds the image of religious conservatism that makes the Americans so nervous about behaving naturally with their Arab hosts – the same apprehension that figures in Hoel's letter (although that apprehension also certainly stemmed from nervous government policies aimed at preserving religious legitimacy). In that sense, Munif depicts a sober and grave image not of an evil juggernaut come to destroy a community, but rather of two fearful parties, both unwilling to integrate or democratically connect with the other. What is left is a thin bridge between American Harran and Arab Harran that enriches the few and neglects the masses.

The figure of Miteb Al-Hathal is an equally vexing and morally vague character. Miteb is the most avid resistor against the Americans when they initially arrive in Wadi al-Uyoun (the oasis in which the novel begins). Early on, foresees the end of his society and, as the Americans begin uprooting trees in the wadi, he disappears, riding into the desert on his camel. He leaves his wife and sons effectively orphaned and widowed. While he returns periodically throughout the novel, it is only in the form of apparitions, some seen only by Fawaz, Miteb's son, and others seen collectively by the people of Harran. He remains a figure of resistance against the Americans and the government like a thorn in their side. What is questionable, though, is whether his disappearance or the continued use of his name as a source of fear for the authorities are beneficial developments for the people he leaves behind. While he stands as an

emblematic symbol of resistance, his disappearance is also a painful injury inflicted on his wife and son; no doubt they would have found solace in his guidance and his support while they entered the strange and difficult landscape of their future. Likewise, rumors continue to spread about him, claiming that he intends to attack and hurt elite Arabs and Americans. More often than not, these rumors drive the authority figures into states of paranoia and incites their rough treatment of the less powerful. Neither the Americans nor the government kill Miteb, nor do they force him to leave. Munif writes Miteb as a character who *intentionally* leaves his family, and while he may serve as a metaphor for the loss of an old past, he likewise represents stubbornness, callous self-concern, and uncompromising rigidity.

Munif thereby depicts multiple instances whereby non-American characters react to the changes in their society with little grace or adaptability. Instead, they sometimes turn to childish games or paranoid anger to sabotage honest relations between themselves and the Americans. These actions appear as small acts of resistance in the face of a long and grinding injustice, but they combine to form more than isolated events. They become a common mood of intransigence among the people and help stymie any hope of fruitful, democratically beneficial development in the community. While likely a coincidence, it is worth noting here that the book's Arabic title, *al-tih* (التيه), means more than "the wilderness," or, as Nixon notes, the "state of being lost in the wilderness."^{lxxi} A less-used meaning of the word, though still valid, is "haughtiness" or "pride".^{lxxii} It's unclear whether this was a factor in Munif's choice of a title, but the coincidence is uncanny. This depiction of obstinance and pride among the community-members reminds the reader that Munif was not a poor or uneducated Bedouin at the time of oil exploration in the peninsula. In fact, his ability as a third party to recognize and depict the comparatively ignorant but strangely prescient superstitions of the townspeople and Bedouin during that period betrays his status as a well-traveled, well-educated, and at times politically powerful administrator who studied petroleum economics and worked in the same state apparati he ultimately despised. As Amina Thiban notes, Munif 's education distanced him from the communities about which he writes.^{lxxiii} Had he been less politically vocal, Munif certainly could have become part of the despotic class that fed off oil profits. As such, it is critical to remember that while a useful resource in analyzing the development of the modern Middle East, *Cities of Salt* is still the product of one man's imagination. The nature of that man is vital in appraising the narrative he crafts.

Just as Munif seems to lament the townspeople's refusal to embrace, or at least fully understand the changes occurring around them, he likewise romanticizes their way of life. Sabry Hafez describes several existing critiques directed at *Cities of Salt*, beginning with the "legitimate reservation about the quintet and its tendency to idealize the Bedouin past with a romantic nostalgia as a serene and well-ordered way of life," which "leave[s] 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 its real gains and benefits.”^{lxxiv} Nixon also describes the same phenomenon, noting how Munif’s tendency to depict the wadi as a paradisaic harmonious entity promotes historically inaccurate tropes common in postcolonial and neocolonial literature.^{lxxv} Nixon also notes that Munif makes some effort to puncture that myth by mentioning the existence of droughts and famines in the wadi, but the effect is still largely nostalgic and romantic. The issue of Munif’s individually censored historical memory arises in several other cases as well where his undermining attacks on the Aramco narrative equally represent slanted readings of history that fail to recognize the competence and the rigor of company operations.

When considering this aspect of the novel, the pipeline saga again reveals its complexity. As mentioned, the Americans name the three campsites along the pipeline “H1, H2, and H3”, meaning “Harran 1, 2, and 3”. The workers decide to develop their own names for two of the sites, but for the third, they use a so-called “old name” for the place, Muteira. Of course, this part of *The Wilderness* draws figures like Charles Matthews into intimate dialogue with Munif. If anything, Munif is implying laziness in the company geographers, highlighting their ability to understand simple enduring place-names like Harran, but failing to access and use more socially apt “old names” like Muteira. While Aramco certainly sacrificed local resonance for convenience with the names of its new worksites and facilities, it was not a general rule. As seen in Matthews’s document on non-Arabic place-names, the company was certainly aware of, and sensitive to the vernacular history of place names across the peninsula, and it certainly made an effort to incorporate those names into its production of the region’s “official geography”. Munif does reveal that the Americans are surprisingly knowledgeable about the region where they work, but the pipeline saga marks a place in the novel where he depicts the Americans as naïve, self-serving, and unsympathetic to local manifestations of vernacular geography. As Charles Matthews’s work proves, the company’s approach to geographic documentation was not so lazy or so intentionally naïve as Munif’s novel may lead the reader to believe. Insidious in nature or no, the company demonstrated genuine interest not only in learning general facts like wind-patterns and water sources but also the changing practices of local people as they underwent modernization, including their use of place names and their understanding of their surroundings. Munif’s novel generally depicts the company’s employees as technically erudite but socially naïve. Again, Lovelind Hoel’s letter comes to mind. Where Hoel sees “Bedouin hospitality”, Munif sees sycophancy and social manipulation for the sake of power. Nonetheless, Hoel betrays a more perspicacious reading of her social surroundings than Munif depicts of his peripheral American characters. Lovelind writes that she began to worry when she realized her Bedouin hosts were patiently waiting to eat until the American guests had had their fill. Then, she writes, “If there had been only Americans, no doubt our Aramco bedouins would have eaten with us, but because of the number 1 (sic.)

Al Manassier Shaikh Mubarrak and his brothers, all of Al Jiwa, being guests, too – this seemed to be the proper desert etiquette.” Hoel thus displays her conscious knowledge that power structures between Arab participants at the party have influenced the seemingly self-sacrificial hospitality of the Bedouin hosts. Hoel is therefore not ignorant, or naïve, but rather aware and hopeful for a tighter connection between the American women and the Bedouin hosts than that which existed between the Bedouins and their own political authorities. Of course, there is the fact that Hoel is a woman, which allows her easier access to homes and private spaces inhabited by local people. As such, her narrative may be more socially intelligent or intimately aware than those of male employees, but nonetheless her story is meant to support sentiments like those of Patrick Flynn, and so they fit together in a grand company narrative. Another female employee, Phebe Ann Marr, combats Munif’s depiction of American naivete through her interest in exploring local women’s “loneliness” as they relocate to company-built homes. Marr thereby demonstrates her awareness around the pain inflicted on local communities due to rapid changes in their lifestyles and communities. She stands in sharp contrast to Mr. Sinclair of Munif’s fictional oil company who, while listening to Suweyleh’s sad singing, claims that Bedouin have mysterious implicit sadness that one can only understand though living in the desert like they do. Marr, of course, sees sadness in its context, ascribing it not to the inherent nature of nomadic desert peoples, but rather to the violent social changes they’ve endured.

As such, where Munif seems to paint American efforts toward cross-cultural understanding and intimacy as naïve gestures of self-importance, he comes awkwardly close to resembling Patrick Flynn in his emotionally charged and historically dubious reading of the company’s operations. His nostalgic construction of a harmonious paradise in the oasis likewise threatens to delegitimize his nature as a clear-eyed purveyor of societal truth and cast him as a butthurt propagandist, desperately grasping for ways to attack and transcend the powerful enterprises that crushed the political dreams of his youth and failed to heed his advice. To read Munif solely as a fictional demonstration of the slow violent injustices done on a society in one part of the world is likewise to ignore the doubt, inaccuracy, and vagueness that plague that aspect of the novel.

Acceptance, Rest, and Meditation

In his discussion on wars of national liberation, Robert Taber writes,

If revolution is to be understood as a historical, social process, rather than an accident or a plot, then it will not do to consider guerrillas, terrorists, political assassins as deviants or agents somehow apart from the social fabric, irrelevant or fortuitously relevant to the historical process. Guerrillas are *of* the people, or else they cannot survive, cannot even come into being. Terrorism, while it arouses the popular will to revolt, is at the same time a manifestation of that will, expressing the first stiffening of popular resistance to established authority, the first surge of the popular impulse toward a new and different order of existence. It may be argued that terroristic movements attract criminals and psychopaths. So they do. But criminality itself is a form of unconscious protest, reflecting the distortions of an imperfect society, and in a revolutionary situation the psychopath, the criminal, may become as good a revolutionary as the idealist.^{lxxvi}

Here, Taber notes an important facet of popular resistance to established authority, even when it has no violent aspects. Of course, Munif's novel represents a chance to create a new ideological structure around the history and present situation of the oil-dependent Middle East. Whereas modern economists may define Saudi Arabia's relative lack of democracy and human development as a symptom of "the resource curse", Munif clearly tells a different story of violent change, foreign intervention, and terrible political oppression that arise from misguided and often malicious extractive activities and the dynamics of American-Saudi relations that promote authoritarian rule and racial segregation. Nonetheless, there is another aspect of Munif's work that contributes to his production of a resistance narrative. It, like criminality and psychopathy, is both deeply connected to his own personal endeavors (independent of a resistance mission or movement) and universal in its existence. It is his use of self-exploration through the creative process, and in many ways, it represents a far more fundamental protest that, when refined to be an implement of political or social change, takes the form of an imperfect but effective weapon against the Saudi government's and Aramco's official narratives.

Thiban describes Munif's nostalgic representation of the wadi as "an attempt to return, by means of the narrative, to the homeland from which he had been banished."^{lxxvii} Thiban goes on to describe the way Munif reveres the oasis as a lost paradise and reviles Harran as an newly constructed hell. No doubt, Munif paints Harran as an inferno of development and slowly accumulating violent change. Nonetheless, as Thiban notes, Munif's story is not simply an homage to the oasis, it is also an epic saga of departure, change, and (perhaps most importantly) survival in the hell of Harran. The majority of *The Wilderness* is not a depiction of the wadi. In this sense, Thiban draws out the personally relevant nature of the wadi to Munif, excusing the author's romantic nostalgia as a legitimate emotion that resides within him, not as a romantic daydream that taints the accuracy of Munif's narrative. As such, Thiban incidentally addresses the issue with Nixon's reading that he never fully handles: if Munif's use of fiction is a tool for accurately

depicting the slow violence that the modern media can only handle in bite-sized moments of sporadic violence, then why didn't he write an academic work of history or anthropology like Vitalis and Jones have done. These texts serve as ample illustrations of slow violence without the use of fiction. Perhaps Munif used fiction because it was more sensational and accessible than academic writing so his message might reach a broader audience, but such a calculated choice would cheapen the visceral development of Munif's personal trauma and loss that so clearly arises in the work. This is the aspect of *The Wilderness* that makes it such a fundamental and universal form of resistance, something much different from an anthropological report, an objective historical account, or a politically motivated ideology of resistance. The work's deep exploration of emotional trauma undergone by completely fictional characters, and likewise of the author himself, is an entirely useless project for colonial administrators, freedom fighters, fomenters of political change, and oil company executives alike. Even when an academic figure analyzes the work for political purposes, as Nixon does, the work betrays the analyst with its previously described imperfections. Moreover, the novel is not an imperfect weapon of resistance merely because Munif is an angry fool or because he cannot construct a coherent, historically accurate narrative. Instead, the resistance weapon's flaws represent something far deeper in the writer's conscience, uncertainty. Frequently, after the death of a community member or a calamity, Munif's characters seek to define the culprit. Often, these discussions end with Ibn Naffeh blaming the Americans. Nonetheless, the doubt lingers, and such conversations continue to arise. These discussions parallel Munif's own inability to properly describe who in the novel is at fault for the poor state of social interactions between the poorly defined "sides" of the novel's central conflict. On one side, the ignorance and staunch pride of the townspeople make them inaccessible to the Americans. On the other side, the avarice and wrath of the country's elite have initiated processes of modernization under distorted conditions, leading to oppression and inequality. Then again, the arrival of the Americans and their technology have enabled those elites to exhibit such oppression on the people. But even the Americans and their money cannot be solely blamed for that influence as well-traveled Arabs like Rezaie bring the technology of the outside world to the emir and encourage his own panicked insanity. So, who here is to blame? Is it, as Ibn Naffeh describes, "foreigners" and "money" as a general concept? Munif would have balked at such an idea. Hafez notes that he was an avid believer in the power of modernization and oil as a tool of empowerment and development for the peoples of the Middle East. What Munif hates is not modernization as a concept, but rather the lack of dignity and equity with which it has taken root in the Arabian Peninsula, a phenomenon for which he cannot consistently place blame on anyone in *The Wilderness*. This deep sense of uncertainty, this inability to properly identify a culprit, makes the work somewhat useless to an analyst who would seek to glean some nugget of actionable knowledge from it. As such, when read as a personal

exploration of trauma, loss, and growth, Munif defies more than the particular historical trajectory of Aramco's operations, he defies the orientalist nature of the tree structure within the company.

In this process, Munif both takes attention away from the real people about whom he writes, and simultaneously returns unconditional attention to their plight. Sabry Hafez writes of Munif's first novel, *Trees and the Assassination of Marzuq*, as a work that "probes the sensitive question of continuous Arab defeat from the perspective of the insider." Hafez's emphasis on *The Trees* as an exploration of defeat, loss, and failure sheds new light on the nature of *The Wilderness*. Munif's life was one marked by continuous success as a novelist and thinker, but consistent failure to change the political trajectory of the world around him. Now, after his death, Aramco struggles to make itself marketable and convert its operations into a diverse economic activities that might save the Saudi state and its people from a semi-apocalyptic reconfiguration when oil markets inevitably run dry.^{lxxviii} As Munif penned *Cities of Salt*, he must have seen, or felt, a great sense of doom arising over his homeland. As such, while the novel can serve as an active resistance to the petro-state, it is more deeply an ultimate admission of defeat. It is likewise a realization that attempting to change the future with the use of narrative involves a strange orientalist process that transfers external material into useful information, constantly pitting writer of the narrative against their own ability to effectively make their case and succeed in their goals, regardless of the imperfect reality that surrounds them. In this way, Munif's book is not an acceptance of defeat that surrenders the dignity of oppressed peoples to the overwhelming power of petro-despotism, but rather a recognition that change is large and drastic, and that many individuals may die without retribution or justice when change arrives. The novel therefore creates a space for Munif and his readers to rest, to put down the weapons of struggle and meditate on the stories of loss and defeat that define many people's lives. This reading of the novel validates Munif's vision regardless of his inability to change the system with which he wrangled so avidly. When read as a personal meditation, or a radical acceptance of change in all its confusing detail, the novel becomes more than an accusation or a grounds for struggle against modern forces of extractive industry and global politics. Instead, the work's emphasis travels away from the already peripheral American characters in the novel and centers on the experiences that happen in reaction to, or parallel to the development of a powerful new petro-state. The novel's personal and meditational nature asserts that the stories of people who "don't matter", as Nixon describes those outside the persistent spotlight of the global media, are important regardless of where they interact with development of entities that "do matter." As such, the novel, irrespective of its utility in the struggle against petro-despotism, is a valuable expression of intimacy and identity from the author to the reader that does not hide behind some grand ulterior motive. An academic account, on the other hand, exposes

the mental process of its writer to the reader, but does so with the overarching goal of convincing the reader on a point of contention.

The Fluidity of Soil

Munif's novel appears like Suweyleh's song of sorrow:

Suweyleh said as much for himself as for the audience (...) What longings filled the hearts of men in this desolate corner of the earth? What joys were detonated by song? And this coarse, overpowering sorrow – where did it come from? (...) Had the men been in any other place, or been fewer in number, or not had to deal with the foreigners, they would have known how to express all their sorrow and anguish, but something held them back. Only their eyes roamed in the distance to encounter the distress in the eyes around them, exactly like those of a prisoner in his cell or an animal tied to a post. Only their eyes spoke, and at times vented pained screams. When they faded or dwindled away, or suddenly shone in a prolonged appeal for help, blazing, the pain flamed out and called others near, to extend a hand or rope to save them. Suweyleh, singing to himself and the others, intensified their pain; the men were immersed in far more sorrow than they had felt at the start of the evening.^{lxxix}

Sinclair's (the fictional character's) condescending interpretation of the song as the mysterious sadness of those who live in the desert signifies the problem with Nixon's reading of *Cities of Salt*. Munif's novel does not demonstrate sadness only by virtue of the context from which it rises. When relieved of the prying and studious gaze of analysts and orientalist local agents, it is an expression of sadness and loss as they belong to the author himself, and not to the academically or vernacularly defined environment that surrounded it. As such, the author might return his sadness and emotion to his own breast, re-appropriate it as a facet of his own life, and not a well-studied psychological phenomenon as defined by experts and observers.

In this sense, Munif's novel is a representation of the soil between the roots of the orientalist tree. As much as the tree may appropriate nutrients from the soil, sending down new roots to access more layers of earth, the soil's form remains its own, and if the tree sends down too many roots in too many places, it will displace the soil, and the tree will die. So too do the subjective experiences studied by anthropologists and other local agents continue to change and redefine their shape, for once the anthropologist understands everything, and there's nothing left to process, then the tree and the local agent alike must die. As an entity built to process and control, there always must be new material to process and control, and so there will always be pools of ungovernable personal sentiments, histories, and thoughts for further study from which acts of resistance will arise. In order to properly appreciate those acts of resistance, one must first realize the independent value and presence of the people from whom they arise, a frustrating task that often requires the reader to forget their initial goals of understanding and

appreciate such states of doubt and loss that Munif depicts. Once the reader attempts to analyze those states, s/he loses the understanding as quick as s/he gained it, sending down a new root into the soil and altering its shape into something new and unrecognizable. As Trinh Minh Ha writes of Malian poet Hampate Ba's poem, *Cotton and Iron*,

Acknowledging the complexities inherent in any speech-act does not necessarily mean taking away or compromising the qualities of a fine story. Simple and direct in its directness, it neither wraps itself in a cloud of oratorical precautions, nor cocoons itself in realist illusions that make language the simple medium of thought. Who speaks? What speaks? The question is implied and the function named, but the individual never reigns, and the subject slips away without naturalizing its voice. S/he who speaks, speaks *to* the tale as s/he begins telling and retelling it. S/he does not speak *about* it. For, without a certain work of displacement, 'speaking about' only partakes in the conservation of systems of binary opposition on which territorialized knowledge depends. It places semantic distance between oneself and the work; oneself (the maker) and the receiver; oneself and the other. It secures for the speaker a position of mastery; I am in the midst of a knowing, acquiring, deploying world – I appropriate, own, and demarcate my sovereign territory as I advance, while the "other" remains in the sphere of acquisition.^{1xxx}

In this sense, Minh Ha exposes the frustrating nature of Aramco's pursuit of understanding, that understanding, whenever perceived as such, distances the observer from that which s/he observes. Then, the understanding becomes filtered and flawed, producing new margins of understanding which must later be probed. The task of the local agent is thus not only to take in and classify oriental matter, but to constantly produce more of that material by constantly failing to fully achieve intimacy with the material, and so the purpose of the apparatus remains and the tree stays alive. In that strange sense, the orientalist tree is supremely sustainable, and while individual trees may die with time, the species will stay alive. As wealthy countries, the same that initially spurred on the development of the oil economy, develop new scientifically advanced methods of "sustainable" energy production, so will the juggernaut of bureaucratic orientalist organization continue to survive even if/when oil companies close their doors. That is why I choose to describe the oil company like a tree and not as a machine: its organization is highly natural and highly acclimated to an ecosystem that spins around it. It is capable of adaptation, adjustment, and sustainability. It is not a clunking mechanical behemoth, but rather a sensitive lifeform that stays alive by maintaining its integrity and interacting with the world around it without compromising the boundaries between itself and the transient unorganized material it feeds on.

Conclusion:

In all, Nixon is certainly not wrong about this book. Its political importance is vast, and it casts a much-needed light into a much obscured corner of world history. And that history continues to unfold. Since 1960, Aramco has undergone significant changes. The company, now owned almost entirely by the Saudi state, boasts the largest profits of any company in the world.^{lxxxix} Saudi Aramco almost single-handedly maintains the Saudi state's budget. The country is notoriously vulnerable to oil market fluctuations, and with the global oil market's future becoming vague, there is a question of whether the country will even exist "after oil". Now, the state is privatizing parts of the company, but non-Saudi investors fear the political vagaries of the region and the authoritarian reach of the royal family. The same government that made the company's dominance possible has now added its chances of survival. The state has claimed it's using the public offering to fund economic diversification projects. Even so, as oil prices plummet during the COVID-19 pandemic, the dangers of relying on oil for steady future income are making themselves clear. Now the Saudi state seems almost like it's jettisoning the company, shoving it off on investors while it uses liquidity for new, more sustainable projects; few investors are interested in a company whose signature product, crude, has become its largest liability. On April 13, 2020, Saudi security forces shot and killed Abdelrahim Al-Huwaiti, a Saudi landowner whose property the state required for "The Red Sea Project", a gargantuan development aimed at bolstering tourism, tech, and other forms of diversified economy in Saudi Arabia. Al-Huwaiti refused compensation, preferring to stay on his land.^{lxxxii} In a cruel twist, diversification away from an oil-dependent economy, even if unsuccessful, has begun to resemble the injustices wrought by the creation of oil in the peninsula. Far from over, the slow violence inflicted on Saudi people is still unfolding. What new, jarring changes await people whose vernacular geography, customary land uses, and natural resources have been reorganized to exclude them functionally from their own national heritage? In this case, *The Wilderness* is not "environmentalism of the poor", but rather "environmentalism of the briefly rich." Saudi elites will have to leave the country in search of better opportunities abroad, and the fate of the country's state-dependent millions will darken.

But in the event of such a cataclysmic process, Munif's voice will hopefully live on not only as an vengeful war-cry, but as a graceful final breath. Said describes Orientalism not as a fixed set of ideals, but rather as a limitation on information.^{lxxxiii} This limit applies as much to practitioners of orientalism as it does to members of "subject races." Using the tree metaphor, the barrier between the flesh of the tree and the soil is both a limit on the tree and a limit on the soil. This barrier is both integral to the structure of the tree and obnoxious to its goal. As the tree seeks to obtain more soil, the soil constantly changes around it, pushed away by the hardness of the roots. As such, Aramco set out to "understand" the culture of the

Arabian Peninsula, but by process of understanding it distanced itself from the material it originally probed. Munif's novel likewise estranges itself from history by producing a historical narrative, but that narrative is not essential to the novel's existence. Weaponizing Munif's story thereby partially ignores its central existence as a work of fiction.

As earlier stated, the purpose of this paper is not to discredit Nixon's approach to the novel. Rather, this paper should serve as a counterweight to Nixon's chapter, balancing it with an equally important yet fragmented understanding of Munif's novel. Nixon's treatment of the novel as a voice of resistance is an incomplete truth, as is this paper's view of the novel as a meditation on, and acceptance of defeat. Munif was vocal about resisting defeat and sadness. He was an outspoken critic. This paper does not mean to assert that his active intention was "admitting defeat" in the sense of surrender – that is something he would not have done openly. Munif's intentions with the novel are not the object of this paper's argument. It is rather the effect and the nature of his book as a reflection of his life story at issue in this analysis. Nixon's reading fires the novel into the world of global politics, empowering it as a tool for change, but sees the text much like an anthropological report. This paper de-fangs the text and sets it afloat in the uncertainties of history but certifies its validity as an assertion of personal identity irrelevant of geopolitical context. Readers are free to analyze all texts this way. Readers may weaponize texts for greater projects, or they may incorporate them as meditations on a complex reality. The art of Munif's novel is that it readily opens itself to both interpretations, bearing the heart and soul of its author while crafting a formidable tool of conscious revolution and resistance. As such, Munif tells the story of injustices arising from oil extraction in the Arabian Peninsula without submitting to the company's probing local agents. The text reveals no secrets for local agents to grasp, and yet it conceals nothing, exposing every bloody ventricle in Munif's heart.

لا تظن الهدوء في الوجوه يدل الرضا... لكل إنسان شيء في داخله يهزه ويعذب

- عبد الرحمن منيف

-
- ⁱ David H. Price, *The Deployment and Neglect of American Anthropology in the Second World War* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 248.
- ⁱⁱ Stephen Gardiner, *Kuwait: The Making of a City* (London, Burnt Hill: Longman, 1983).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Toby Craig Jones, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011)
- ^{iv} Referring to the Dhofar Rebellion and the North Yemen Civil War as described in Fred Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans* (London: Saqi, 2002)
- ^v *Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency* (US Government, 2012)
- ^{vi} Amina Khalifa Thiban, *Transformation and Modernity in the Desert Tribal Saga: Cities of Salt*, PhD thesis submitted to SOAS, University of London, 2004
- ^{vii} Sabry Hafez, "An Arabian Master", *New Left Review*, 37, Jan Feb 2006, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/II37/articles/2597?token=etICOR5Rbtu9>
- ^{viii} "William E. Mulligan Papers," Georgetown University Library Website, <https://findingaids.library.georgetown.edu/repositories/15/resources/10670>, accessed 4/16/2020
- ^{ix} Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) 31.
- ^x Said, *Orientalism*, 32.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, 44
- ^{xii} Suleiman MK, Dixon K, Commander L, Nevill P, Quoreshi AM, Bhat NR, Manuvel AJ and Sivadasan MT (2019) Assessment of the Diversity of Fungal Community Composition Associated With *Vachellia pachyceras* and Its Rhizosphere Soil From Kuwait Desert. *Front. Microbiol.* 10:63. doi: 10.3389/fmicb.2019.00063
- ^{xiii} Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York and London: Verso)
- ^{xiv} Dale Eickelman. *The Middle East: An Anthropological Approach* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981) 7.
- ^{xv} Eickelman, *The Middle East*, 11.
- ^{xvi} Sherine Hafez and Susan Slyomovicz. *Anthropology of the Middle East and North Africa: Into the New Millennium* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013) 4.
- ^{xvii} Sources include: Hafez & Slyomovicz, *Anthropology*; Eickelman, *The Middle East*; Suad Joseph, "Theory and Thematics in the Anthropology of the Middle East", in *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Middle East*, ed. Soraya Altorki (Chichester, UK: Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2015).
- ^{xviii} Eickelman, *The Middle East*, 27.
- ^{xix} T.R. Bugeaud de La Piconnerie, *Mémoire sur notre établissement dans la province d'Oran par suite de la paix*, pt. 5 (Paris, 1837), Translated from the French by A.M. Berrett.
- ^{xx} Eickelman, *The Middle East*, 43.
- ^{xxi} Andrew C. Long, *Reading Arabia: British Orientalism in the Age of Mass Publication, 1880-1930* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014)
- ^{xxii} Susan Slyomovicz, "State of the State of the Art Studies: An Introduction to the Anthropology of the Middle East and North Africa" in *Anthropology of the Middle East and North Africa: Into the New Millennium*, ed. Sherine Hafez and Susan Slyomovicz. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013) 6.
- ^{xxiii} Long, *Reading*, 3.
- ^{xxiv} Priya Satia. *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
- ^{xxv} Gertrude Bell. *The Desert and the Sown: Travels in Palestine and Syria* (Newburyport, MA: Dover Publications, 2012) page # to come
- ^{xxvi} Harold Dickson, *The Arab of the Desert*, (London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1951)
- ^{xxvii} Administration Reports of the Kuwait Political Agency for the Years 1918-1928. Lt.-Colonel Harold Richard Patrick GB165-0085, MECA.
- ^{xxviii} *Tribal Areas and Migration Lines of the North Arabian Bedouins*. Lt.-Colonel Harold Richard Patrick GB165-0085, MECA.
- ^{xxix} Alois Musil. *Deserta Arabia: A Topographical Inquiry* (New York: American Geographical Society of New York, 1927) Introduction.
- ^{xxx} Eickelman, *Middle East*, 24
- ^{xxxi} Soraya Altorki and Donald P. Cole. *Arabian Oasis City: The Transformation of 'Unayzah* (Austin, University of Texas Press: 1989)

-
- xxxii Kathryn Tidrick, *Heart Beguiling Araby: The English Romance with Arabia* (London and New York: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2010)
- xxxiii Donald Cole, *Nomads of the Nomads: The Al Murrah Bedouin of the Empty Quarter* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, Inc., 1975)
- xxxiv Arthur P. Clark, James P. Mandaville, William Tracy, Jane Waldron Gruntz, ed., *Aramco and its World: Arabia and the Middle East* (Houston: Aramco Services Company, 1995), 194.
- xxxv *Aramco*, 194
- xxxvi ART, AAD, etc., Jan. - Jun. 1960., 01/05/1960-06/29/1960. William E. Mulligan papers, 48528. Georgetown University Manuscripts.
- xxxvii James P. Mandaville, *Bedouin Ethnobotany: Plant Concepts and Uses in a Desert Pastoral World* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 12.
- xxxviii Mandaville, *Bedouin*, 13.
- xxxix ART, AAD
- xl *Ibid.*
- xli *Ibid.*
- xlii Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 17.
- xliiii Mandaville, *Bedouin*, xi
- xliv ART, AAD
- xlvi *Ibid.*
- xlvii Abdelrahman Munif, *Cities of Salt* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), Translated from the Arabic by Peter Theroux, 19
- xlviii Aramco Annual Reports, 1953 - 1955., 01/01/1953-01/01/1956. William E. Mulligan papers, 48615. Georgetown University Manuscripts.
https://findingaids.library.georgetown.edu/repositories/15/archival_objects/1307617
Accessed April 17, 2020.
- xlviii Jones, *Desert Kingdom*
- xlix ART, AAD
- ¹ *Aramco and Its World*, 194
- ² Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007)
- ³ *Slow Violence*, 3
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 15
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 87
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 87
- ⁷ William E. Mulligan Papers. Quoted in Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 91
- ⁸ *Aramco and Its World*, 198
- ⁹ *Cities*, 506
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 507
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 508
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 517
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 261
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 263
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 267
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 329
- ¹⁷ *Slow Violence*, 112
- ¹⁸ Pascal Menoret, *The Saudi Enigma: A History* (New York: Zed Books, 2005), 6
- ¹⁹ *Slow Violence*, 84
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 84
- ²¹ *Cities*, 335
- ²² *Slow Violence*, 90
- ²³ *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J.M. Cowan, (Urbana, IL: Spoken Languages Services, Inc., 1994), 121
- ²⁴ Thiban, *Transformation*

lxxiv Hafez, "An Arabian Master"

lxxv *Slow Violence*, 84

lxxvi Robert Taber, *War of the Flea* (United States: Potomac Books, 2002), 109

lxxvii *Transformation*,

lxxviii "Aramco is Both the Oil Sector's Goliath and a Firm Vexed by Problems: Is it Worth a Prince's Ransom?", *The Economist*, Oct 31, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2019/10/31/aramco-is-both-the-oil-sectors-goliath-and-a-firm-vexed-by-problems>

lxxix *Cities*, 265

lxxx Trinh Minh-Ha, *The Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 12

lxxxi "Aramco is Both"

lxxxii https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxq_DYcOtcY&time_continue=1&feature=emb_logo&app=desktop

lxxxiii *Orientalism*, 42