

7-25-2013

Crude Designs, Slick Resistance: Petrofiction in the Global Age

Tracy J. Lassiter

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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CRUDE DESIGNS, SLICK RESISTANCE:
PETROFICTION IN THE GLOBAL AGE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Tracy J. Lassiter

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

May 2013

Indiana University of Pennsylvania
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of English

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Tracy J. Lassiter

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

David Downing, Ph.D.
Professor of English, Director

Susan Comfort, Ph.D.
Professor of English

Sharon K. Deckert, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English

ACCEPTED

Timothy P. Mack, Ph.D.
Dean
School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: Crude Designs, Slick Resistance: Petrofiction in the Global Age

Author: Tracy J. Lassiter

Dissertation Chair: Dr. David Downing

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Susan Comfort
Dr. Sharon Deckert

In the twenty-first century, few topics are more pressing or as global in scope as the search for oil. We remain addicted to oil despite the devastation wrought in the process of extracting, transporting, and selling this commodity. In this study, I examine several fictional texts set in the 1920s and 1930s for what they say about how the petroleum industry impacted local populations when it began its international reach. I build upon the term “petrofiction,” first coined by Amitav Ghosh in 1992, to demonstrate how examining texts through this lens gives us important insight as to the consequences of the industry’s dominance, especially through its use of neoliberal economic policies and state apparatuses like the media. Furthermore, I correlate episodes from this fiction with current and historical events to show how, despite approximately a century of literature to learn from, we still permit such destructive behavior to continue. I argue the petroleum industry has replaced the nation-state as a form of neocolonial power, and I highlight both fictional and nonfictional acts of confrontation to that power. In sum, I link petrofiction to the political economy, showing that the oil industry is a world-wide system incurring real harm on markets, societies, and individuals.

The novels and short stories analyzed in this study include authors Upton Sinclair, Linda Hogan, Charles Red Corn, Abdelrahman Munif, and Ben Okri. I also discuss recent related texts such as the films *There Will Be Blood* and *Promised Land*, as well as Barry Unsworth’s novel *Land of Marvels*.