

Fossil Capitalism in the Global South: A Symposium

Neubauer Collegium, University of Chicago
5701 S. Woodlawn Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637

Friday, May 5, 2023

9.00–9:15am Coffee and pastries

9.15–9.30am **Opening remarks**
Elizabeth Chatterjee, Ryan Jobson, and Victoria Saramago

9.30–11am **Panel 1: Upstream**

- Matt Shutzer (Harvard University), “The Nation’s Geobody: Property and Expropriation Before the Great Acceleration”
- Omolade Adunbi (University of Michigan), “Extractivism as Whiteness: Crude and the Racial Construction of Oil Enclaves in Nigeria”
- Irem Az (Columbia University) “The Accidented: Between Labor and Disability under Fossil Capitalism in Turkey”
- *Chair*: Aaron Jakes (University of Chicago)

11–11.15am Coffee break

11.15am–12.45pm **Panel 2: Downstream**

- Santiago Acosta (SUNY College at Old Westbury), “A Darker Side of Petromodernity: The Political Ecology of Oil in Nature-Exporting Societies”
- Mark Schuller (Northern Illinois University) and Mamyrah Dougé-Prosper (University of California, Irvine), “PetroPolitics and Popular Revolts in Contemporary Haiti”
- Zachary Cuyler (New York University), “‘Our Principal Aim Is To Secure Stability in Our Beloved Lebanon’: Lebanon’s Infrastructural Terrain and the Making of the Post-Shihābist Welfare State”
- *Chair*: Carol Iglesias Otero (University of Chicago)

12.45–1.45pm Lunch

1.45–3.15pm **Panel 3: Beyond**

- Ying Jia Tan (Wesleyan University), “Niche-Constructing on the Ruins of Japanese Colonial Rule: The Reconfiguration of Taiwan’s Industrial Ecology by Plastic Engineers, 1950-1960”
- Jennifer Wenzel (Columbia University), “The Fossil Fueled Imagination: Reading for Energy, Between North and South”
- Bret Gustafson (Washington University in St. Louis), “After the Gas Runs Out”
- *Chair*: Alexander Arroyo (University of Chicago)

3.15–3.30pm Coffee break

3.30–4.30pm **Final roundtable**

All participants, led by Diana Montañó (Washington University in St Louis)

4.30pm Drinks reception

TBC Dinner for speakers, organizers, and chairs

ABSTRACTS AND BIOGRAPHIES

Santiago Acosta, “A Darker Side of Petromodernity: The Political Ecology of Oil in Nature-Exporting Societies”

This talk examines the socio-ecological impacts of oil in the Global South, with a focus on extractive capitalism and petroleum dependency in Latin America. From a political ecology and environmental humanities perspective, the talk focuses on three key themes: the ontology of petroleum, the relationship between state power and international capital in the context of oil-exporting nations, and the place of the Global South in the global fossil economy. Drawing from Venezuelan cultural and environmental history, the talk sheds light on the “darker” side of petromodernity and the challenges of achieving climate justice in postcolonial and resource-dependent nations.

Santiago Acosta is a Postdoctoral Fellow and Visiting Assistant Professor at SUNY-Old Westbury and an incoming Assistant Professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Yale University, starting in Fall 2023. His research centers on modern and contemporary Latin American cultural production, which he examines through the lenses of critical theory, political economy, and environmental history. His book project, *We Are Like Oil: An Ecology of the Venezuelan Culture Boom, 1973-1983*, explores the relationship between the visual arts, cultural institutions, and state-led ecological transformations in Venezuela during the 1970s oil boom.

Omolade Adunbi, “Extractivism as Whiteness: Crude and the Racial Construction of Oil Enclaves in Nigeria”

This paper examines the relationship between race and oil extraction in Nigeria. The paper particularly pays attention to the ways in which oil interacts with race with a specific focus on what I call the whiteness and crudity of extraction. The paper suggests that in Nigeria’s history of oil extraction, race and racial injustice has always been a constant marker of extraction in the oil creeks of the Niger Delta. In this ethnography, I situate my analysis within a particular history that constructs Nigeria as an enclave of resource production. I look specifically into how oil enclaves are enclosed in the lexicon of race and racial injustice. Using the example of Escravos—a Portuguese name for slaves—an oil export terminal operated by Chevron and Forcados, one of the largest and oldest oil export terminals in Nigeria, I argue that race and white supremacy has always been the hallmark of extractive practices in Nigeria dating back to the colonial encounter. Forcados was a slave port operated by the Portuguese in Nigeria’s Niger Delta but became an oil export terminal after the discovery of oil in 1956. Therefore, I ask: How is it that the practice of extractivism in Nigeria is entangled with a racial practice that started with colonialism and got entrenched through the extraction of oil over time? Why is it that oil as a global commodity is engrained in particular practice that is entrenched in white supremacy? My use of colonialism here encompasses the history of slavery and the eventual colonization of the territory known as Nigeria today. In today’s Nigeria, I argue, race and racial injustice is crucial in understanding the properties of oil and the practice of extractivism and its resonance to how capitalism and its affordances are continually racialized.

Omolade Adunbi is a political and environmental anthropologist and Professor of Afroamerican and African Studies, Professor of Law (courtesy) and the Director of the African Studies Center at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. There he is also Faculty Associate, Program in the Environment (Pite), the Donia Human Rights Center (DHRC) and the Energy Institute. His areas of research explore issues related to governance, infrastructures of extraction, environmental politics and rights, power, violence, culture, transnational institutions, multinational corporations and the postcolonial state. In 2016, he received The Class of 1923 Teaching Award at the University of Michigan. His book, *Oil Wealth and Insurgency in Nigeria* (Indiana University Press, 2015) won the 2017 The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland's Amaury Talbot Book Award for the best book in Anthropology of Africa. His latest book, *Enclaves of Exception: Special Economic Zones and Extractive Practices in Nigeria* (Indiana University Press, 2022) interrogates the idea of Free Trade Zones and its interrelatedness to oil refining practices, infrastructure and China's engagement with Africa. His new project is at the intersection of social media, climate change and the politics of the environment.

Irem Az, "The Accidented: Between Labor and Disability under Fossil Capitalism in Turkey"

Now known as the deadliest fossil fuel and industrial disaster in modern Turkish history, the Soma mine disaster of 2014 took the lives of 301 miners in the Soma Coal Basin of western Turkey. The decline of coal and other fossil fuel extraction in the Global North unleashed renewed forms of (spectacular and slow) labor-based and environmental violence in the Global South. The Soma mine disaster thus exposed the ordinary truth of fossil capitalism in the Global South: spectacular and slow disasters of industrial accidents, occupational injuries and illnesses. Within the course of my 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork, my interlocutors who survived the disaster used the unusual verb and adjective forms of the noun *kaza* [accident] hundreds of times: becoming-accidented [*kazalanmak*], and the accidented subject [*kazalı*]. These coinages are used only in mining contexts in Turkey, and only for disabilities (such as limb, hearing, or vision losses) and chronic illnesses (such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and pneumoconiosis) that occur as a result of the experience of labor itself. While miners struggle to go back to work with their injuries and impairments, or obtain a disability report that will render them eligible for disability benefits (a combined disability rate of 40% or more), "to become-accidented" signifies the violence experienced in the bioeconomic space between being a worker-human and a disabled-citizen. While neither a worker-human nor a medico-legally recognized disabled one, Soma miners embody and reveal a social pattern of accidents—or an accidentology (Virilio 2007)—that systematically and violently keep workers in a limbo state of nonrecognition. In this limbo, the accidented coal miners embody not only the effects of neoliberal developmentalism in Turkey, but also of the global shifts in fossil fuel production.

Elif Irem Az is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University, a poet and an essayist. Her doctoral research explores the afterlives of a coal mine disaster under extractive capitalism in Turkey. The infamous Soma mine disaster took place on May 13, 2014 and took the lives of 301 miners. Irem's dissertation examines how the effects of the Soma mine disaster and injurious work accidents are dissimulated in many facets of labor and everyday life, and how these effects are experienced both as imminently present injuries and as the holders of

the future. She is the author of an ethnographic poetry collection in Turkish, which came out of this research, and is titled *Our Sheer Living*.

Zachary Cuyler, “Our Principal Aim Is To Secure Stability in Our Beloved Lebanon’: Lebanon’s Infrastructural Terrain and the Making of the Post-Shihābist Welfare State”

This chapter examines the role played by Lebanese oil workers in the construction of the Lebanese welfare state. It argues that between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s, oil workers used their strategic position in Lebanon’s petroleum infrastructure complex to help build a labor movement and welfare state that stabilized economic life for a privileged stratum of Lebanese workers and their families, while simultaneously reinforcing existing patterns of gendered-, national-, class-based, and sectarian exclusion and dependency. It builds on works of labor and environmental history to ask how Lebanon’s oil infrastructure complex afforded leverage to oil workers, and how those workers in turn used their positional power in redistributive struggles. It contends that oil workers’ position in the terrain created by Lebanon’s oil infrastructure complex gave them the capacity to mobilize effectively and strike disruptively at a national level, and thus the ability to play a major role in the construction of a welfare state.

This argument builds on Timothy Mitchell’s *Carbon Democracy* but challenges Mitchell’s contention that the materiality of oil and its attendant infrastructures inhibits the mass labor mobilization that constitutes the foundation of the welfare state. But what kind of welfare state did oil workers assemble? I show how Lebanon’s “brotherhood of labor” achieved a degree of economic stability for formally employed male citizen workers and their families through organized labor and the welfare state while reinforcing patterns of gendered, national, class-based, and sectarian dependence and exclusion. In making this argument, I aim to counteract a tendency to treat Lebanese history as exceptional by emphasizing the Lebanese labor movement and welfare state’s similarity to their contemporaries in both the global North and the global South.

Zachary Davis Cuyler is a PhD candidate at New York University and a fellow at Century International. He will be starting as an Assistant Professor of Modern Middle Eastern History at the University of Illinois Chicago in the fall of 2023. His work focuses on the historical and contemporary politics of infrastructure, energy, and the environment in the *mashriq*. His academic work has appeared in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, *Historical Materialism*, and the *Arab Studies Journal*, and he has written for *Middle East Report*, *Synaps*, and *L’Orient-Le Jour*. Zachary’s dissertation, “Fossil Lebanon,” examines how Lebanon’s relationship to the regional oil industry shaped the country’s politics, economy, and built environment.

Mamyrah Dougé-Prosper and Mark Schuller, “PetroPolitics and Popular Revolts in Contemporary Haiti”

In July 2018, unarmed people erected barricades blocking all commercial activities in Haiti, signaling the majority’s rejection of the late President Jovenel Moïse’s IMF-dictated decree to

raise taxes on petroleum products. A month later, a transnational network of Haitian artists launched a social media campaign demanding state accountability for Venezuela's PetroCaribe funds. By October, over 1 million "PetroChallengers" marched throughout the country to denounce state corruption. In response to the movement, centralized in Port-au-Prince, paramilitary groups massacre with impunity popular neighborhood residents known for their militancy and kidnap working and middle-class city dwellers, with almost all cases including collective rape. Our conversation examines the politics of fossil capitalism against the entanglements of popular revolts in Haiti.

Mamyrah Dougé-Prosper is an Assistant Professor of Global & International Studies at the University of California, Irvine, whose work focuses on racial capitalism and social movements in Haiti. Her work has appeared in *NACLA*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, and *International Studies Review*. She is currently working on a monograph entitled *Development Contested in Occupied Haiti: Social Movements, and the Gangster State*. Dougé-Prosper is also the International Coordinator for Community Movement Builders.

Mark Schuller is Presidential Research Professor of Anthropology and Nonprofit and NGO Studies at Northern Illinois University and affiliate at the Faculté d'Ethnologie, l'Université d'État d'Haïti. Schuller's research on NGOs, globalization, disasters, and gender in Haiti has been published in fifty peer-reviewed chapters and articles. His eight books include *Humanity's Last Stand: Confronting Global Catastrophe*, and he co-directed/ co-produced the documentary *Poto Mitan: Haitian Women, Pillars of the Global Economy* (2009). Recipient of the Margaret Mead Award and the Anthropology in Media Award, and the Haitian Studies Association's Award for Excellence, he is active in several solidarity efforts.

Bret Gustafson, "After the Gas Runs Out"

Thanks to exports of natural gas during a period of relatively high prices, Bolivia's past fifteen years or so were characterized by a relatively stable economy, growth in international reserves, and government-funded efforts to ameliorate poverty. By way of the fourteen-year presidency of Evo Morales, the country's first Indigenous president, the natural gas boom also fueled discourses of revolutionary change, a plurinational reformation of the liberal republic, Indigenous rights, and decolonization. But now the gas is running out, Morales is no longer president, his party is riven by divisions, and the once enviable economic stability is morphing into crisis. In this paper of speculative futurity, I outline what the downstream effects of fossil capitalism have been and might be, focusing in particular on the distorted contours of a once robust language of 'left' politics and the unraveling of Indigeneity and decolonization as anchors for imagining new political horizons.

Bret Gustafson is a Professor of Anthropology at Washington University in St Louis. He is the author of *Bolivia in the Age of Gas* (Duke University Press, 2020) and *New Languages of the State* (Duke University Press, 2009).

Diana J. Montañó is Assistant Professor of History at Washington University in St. Louis. Her teaching and research interests broadly include the construction of modern Latin American societies, with a focus on technology and its relationship to nationalism, everyday life, and domesticity. Her book, *Electrifying Mexico: Technology and the Transformation of a Modern City* (University of Texas Press, 2021), looks at how “electrifying agents” (businessmen, salespersons, inventors, doctors, housewives, maids, and domestic advisors) used electricity, both symbolically and physically, in the construction of a modern city, the self, and the other.

Matt Shutzer, “The Nation’s Geobody: Property and Expropriation Before the Great Acceleration”

Between 1948 and 1957, post-colonial India laid the legal and infrastructural groundwork for what would become one of the largest fossil fuel economies on earth. Historians of the Anthropocene have argued that this turn to energy-intensive growth was driven by a human-centered ideology of development, blind to the ecological entailments of a post-colonial social order built on carbon. This presentation points beyond these critiques of ideology by locating the origins of post-colonial India’s fossil economy in social conflicts over the control and redistribution of coal-bearing land. These conflicts took the form of failed efforts to transform colonial systems of subterranean property-holding after India’s independence, resulting in the entrenchment of landlord power in the subcontinent’s extractive heartland, and seeding peasant and trade union struggles that exploded into open violence against the state in the mid-1960s. This presentation will contrast the framework of “property and expropriation”—historical ideologies and practices of ownership—within and against accounts of the Great Acceleration that engage climate change primarily as a consequence of production and technology.

Matt Shutzer is an Academy Scholar at the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies and an incoming Assistant Professor of Environmental History at Duke University. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, the *Radical History Review*, *Past and Present*, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *Borderlines*, and other journals and edited volumes.

Ying Jia Tan, “Niche-Constructing on the Ruins of Japanese Colonial Rule: The Reconfiguration of Taiwan’s Industrial Ecology by Plastic Engineers, 1950-1960”

How did an island without petroleum emerge as the leading supplier of plastic products around the world? The formative phases of two plastic companies, namely Changchun Petrochemical and Formosa Plastics reveal how these companies functioned as niche constructors building off the ruins of fifty years of Japanese colonial rule. Both companies started out by devising products that could offer cheap substitutes for wood, leather, and rubber. Both companies started out by specializing in the synthesis of certain plastic polymers before branching upstream to build supply chains of raw materials and downstream to open up new product pipelines. Changchun, which carved out a niche in phenol resins, seized on an opportunity to formulate urea-formaldehyde glue used to make water-resistant plywood for the US military after the Korean War. In the face of competition from other firms that replicated their formula, Changchun diversified its

operations by opening up methanol distillation plants to gain a foothold in the chemical industry. Formosa Plastics, which evolved into the largest supplier of poly-vinyl chloride, was founded in 1954 by a former timber merchant invited to apply for loans offered through US Aid. With low domestic demand for PVC powder, Formosa Plastics built an R&D arm that designed consumer products such as synthetic leather and PVC soles. Its research arm also began acquiring technology to manufacture vinyl-chloride monomers on their own, as the company scaled up its production scale to drive down average costs. The experience of both firms reveal how manufacturers reengineered the supply networks in the face of market competition and laid the groundwork for exponential growth of the plastic industry in Chinese East Asia.

Ying Jia Tan is Associate Professor of History and East Asian Studies at Wesleyan University. He is the author of *Recharging China in War and Revolution, 1882-1955* (Cornell University Press, 2021). He teaches the full sweep of East Asian history and begins every history lecture by performing a karaoke favorite in Chinese, Japanese, or Korean.

Jennifer Wenzel, “The Fossil Fueled Imagination: Reading for Energy, Between North and South”

This paper reflects on the aims and central questions of my current book project, which attends to the importance of affective attachments, cultural imaginaries, and embodied memory as non-technological obstacles to energy transition – the reasons why so many remain attached to the worlds that oil has made. This project emerges out of my multiple commitments to postcolonial theory, world literature, and energy humanities, and I consider how the emergence of energy humanities has drawn key insights from, and also bears important methodological implications for, the discipline of literary studies. I also reflect on the challenge and necessity of thinking between my institutional location in North America – which is also a key site in the global oil industry – and sites in the Global South. I offer several examples of contrapuntal reading, between North and South: put briefly, these can be categorized as chains of ease, borrowed futures, and false binaries.

Jennifer Wenzel is a scholar of postcolonial theory and environmental and energy humanities, jointly appointed in the Department of English and Comparative Literature and the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies at Columbia University. Her recent book, *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature*, was shortlisted for the 2020 Book Prize awarded by the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present (ASAP) and was also a finalist for the 2022 Ecocriticism Book Award from the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment. With Imre Szeman and Patricia Yaeger, she co-edited *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment*. Her first book, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond*, was awarded Honorable Mention for the Perkins Prize by the International Society for the Study of Narrative. Her current research examines the fossil-fueled imagination, in literature, visual culture, and public life.