ARAB OIL TOWNS AS PETRO-HISTORIES

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The petroleumscape concept draws attention to how oil may underpin and structure everyday life in ways that are taken for granted and go unnoticed.¹ Pipelines may be underground and consumers may have no idea that the products they use are connected to the petroleum industry. Like refineries or oil rigs, oil towns that were built or expanded in the shadow of the oil industry might seem to be an exception to oil's invisibility as they illustrate petroleum's diverse histories in different corners of the globe. They are clearly identified with oil as an historical extractive industry in a way that New York or Oslo are not. As veritable "material" witnesses of this petroleumscape, linking together oil's past and present financial, infrastructural, and political streams, towns and cities closely associated with the industry seemingly defy petroleum's proverbial invisibility as commodity and underground resource.² Yet in reality, the history of these urban landscapes and of the experiences and images associated with them can make oil both visible and invisible. In other words, the physical, represented, and lived practices of oil towns are intertwined with petroleum in often subtle and discreet ways.

It is in the literary field—rather than in the historiography of the oil industry—that the black gold has been connected to cities. Contrasting Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water* (2010) with 'Abd al-Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984), Amy Riddle reads Munif's work as portraying oil as physically absent as a substance, but transformative as a market commodity with corrosive social, political, and cultural consequences. In Munif's narrative, oil is a mood of gloom, an atmosphere of loss and oppression, and crucially a dystopic urban landscape of damnation. The novel represents oil as part of the distorted developmental framework of foreign capital, personified by the American multinational corporation that operates in a fictional desert kingdom of the Arabian Peninsula. Yet it also presents its main protagonists—the city of Harran and the people associated with it, both Arab and American—as the almost inevitable physical and social formations of the early modern petroleumscape in the region.³ In fact, as it unfolds in the novel, the making of Harran represents the prototypical development of the early oil towns of the Arab World and Iran. Built very quickly in a rather inhospitable environment by a foreign company, Harran is

culturally and socially segregated (there is an “American” Harran versus an “Arab” Harran), and brings to the locals a mixture of opportunity and excitement, but also alienation and despair, an ambivalence that was characteristic of early petroleum experiences and anxieties throughout the region.⁴ This ambivalence was also part of the experience of Arab labor that did not come from oil-producing regions as evoked by the moving family history of the Khayyat sisters. They tell the story of their Hijazi grandfather, who was employed by the Arab American Oil Company (Aramco) between 1942 and 1975, and of their mother, who had an all-American childhood in one of the company’s oil camps. Their upbringing is suggestive of the powerful cross-generational hybrid subjectivities that the family transported from Dhahran to Beirut once their mother relocated to Lebanon after marriage.⁵

Oil Towns as Infrastructural and “Hinge” Urbanism

It is no coincidence that Munif uses the fast developing oil town of Harran as the protagonist and stage set of his petro-story, a corrosive critique of the collusion between Arab governments and Western (most notably American) imperialism in an unspecified age of mounting economic and cultural colonization. In the Arab world, the history of oil urbanization, and of the associated political and social struggles it generated, is usually identified with the spectacular transformation of pre-oil towns into glitzy modern cities: think of Baghdad, Kuwait, and Manama in the 1950s and 1960s, and Riyadh and Dubai in the following decades.⁶ Yet the urban domains connected to oil exploitation across the region were diverse, both in terms of the territories they occupied and the infrastructures that supported them. The oil company town was one of the most prominent of these domains, the center stage of petroleum’s industrial urbanism, and the brainchild and headquarters of the powerful consortia of foreign companies that set up and controlled the industry throughout the Arab world until the 1970s.⁷ Besides embodying the troubled history of oil under colonial and neocolonial conditions, these towns also exemplify the regional history of industrial capitalism: before the early twenty-first century, petroleum was the most important industrial enterprise in the Arab world. This capitalism was both extractive and corporate, and until nationalization it was dominated by a very powerful foreign cartel of multinational companies attached to old colonial powers such as Great Britain and France, and neocolonial newcomers such as the US. In Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Libya—but also in Iran—oil towns became central to the large industrial conurbations that sustained the infrastructure of oil extraction. Initially built to serve this infrastructure, particularly in the early years of the development of the industry, in later years they functioned as central places of industrial growth and oil-related employment, key nodes in the management of oil operations, from infrastructure to work force. From the time oil was first discovered in Iran in the early twentieth century, oil towns underpinned the new geographies of petroleum refinement and transport that shaped local, regional, and global geopolitics. In underdeveloped and sparsely populated countries such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar, they also set the pace of urbanization and urban modernization, and their expansion measured the demographic growth of the oil industry.⁸

The first of such towns was Abadan in southwestern Iran built by the Anglo Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) before World War I. Although located in Iran, Abadan was very close to Iraq and to the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. It was connected to both areas by strong cultural and political links and located in a region that had large Arab populations and was

historically known as Arabistan.⁹ The construction of Abadan was followed by that of Awali in Bahrain (1937), Kirkuk-Arappha in Iraq (1946), Ahmadi in Kuwait (1946), Dhahran, Ras Tannura, and Abqaiq in Saudi Arabia (after 1938), Umm Sa'id in Qatar (1949), and Marsa al-Burayka (also known as Marsa el-Brega) in Libya (1959). Abadan developed around a large oil refinery, a stunning and awesome sight that in the 1950s AIOC liked to portray in propaganda postcards as a holiday resort of sorts. Kirkuk's oil town Arappha (or in popular parlance *Kirkuk al-Jadida*, the New Kirkuk) developed as the terminus of the pipeline that connected Kirkuk's oil fields to the Mediterranean. Similarly, the Libyan town of Marsa al-Burayqa, built by Esso, owed its existence to the oil pipeline that transported crude to the coast. Ras Tannura in Saudi Arabia served the refinery and the port with the same name that was a major point of transport for Saudi crude, and Umm Sa'id in Qatar was developed as a tanker terminal. With the exception of Arappha, which occupied the northwestern corner of Kirkuk's urban area, all these towns were built in sparsely populated and inhospitable areas not too far from major oil fields. Around oil towns, and part of the infrastructure of oil production that gravitated around them, workers' camps mushroomed in the desert. Some were shantytowns that grew spontaneously, others were subsidized by the companies, which provided masonry buildings and basic amenities. These permanent settlements included the largest pumping stations along the Kirkuk-Mediterranean pipeline. Planned as miniature oil towns, they were hailed by the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) as harbingers of a new urban future¹⁰ (Figures 7.1 and 7.2).

As the pivots of petroleum infrastructure, these towns supported the new and intersecting regimes of technology, expertise, work, and life created by the petroleum industry. As high-tech enclaves and administrative zones serving oil fields, they constituted nodes of

FIGURE 7.1 Aerial view of Ahmadi, Kuwait, 1956. Kuwait Oil Company Archive.

FIGURE 7.2 Aerial view of Ahmadi, Kuwait, 1956. Kuwait Oil Company Archive.

novel transport and communication links, most notably roads and airfields, but also telephone and telegraph lines. They shaped new technology and energy networks, oil wells, refineries, and pipelines, but also electricity grids. By the early 1950s, they stood at the center of the development of early information and knowledge societies that gravitated around the public relations offices, training centers, and media outlets supported by the companies striving to present the compassionate face of the oil industry to increasingly politicized local publics.¹¹ The influence of these towns crossed the political and cultural boundaries of the Arab nation-states that emerged or became consolidated after World War I. While physically rooted in national territories like the petroleum they owed their existence to, oil towns emerged as transnational and supranational enclaves, reflecting the cross-regional and global influence of the companies that controlled them.

Visually, experientially, and discursively, these glitzy oil enclaves differed starkly from existing urban and rural settlements, at least at the time of their construction. In some cases, until the 1960s and 1970s, they stood as a neat and orderly radical break with the urban past of the region, a fact that was very much emphasized in the propaganda of oil companies and local governments keen to portray oil as the benevolent modernizer of Arab societies. These towns fostered contrasting experiences as powerful connectors between old and new: between desert or rural hinterlands and industrial sites, between historical centers and oil fields, and between local politics and cultures and the neo-imperial and corporate worlds of British and American oil companies. In many respects, they functioned as urban “hinges”—to use Richard Sennet’s metaphor for Istanbul¹²—that brought together disparate peoples, often through spatial and social segregation. They acted as powerful symbols and catalysts of collective memory and experience, and as models of modern urban life and architecture.

Ahmadi greatly influenced the development of Kuwait City in the 1950s and 1960s, in terms of residential and public architecture, family life, and even ideals of female behavior.

To this day, life in Ahmadi in the 1960s and 1970s evokes nostalgia among an older generation of Kuwaitis. As the primary symbol and model of American petro-capitalism in the Middle East, Dhahran and the oil camps built by Aramco in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia have produced intimate geographies of family, memory, and empire among the offspring of former Arab residents. These geographies have recently become manifest in recuperated material and mnemonic traces of life in the oil conurbation, traces that include family photographic collections and oil company archival and visual materials. In planning terms, Saudi Arabia's oil conurbation served as the model for the development of the first modern residential districts in Riyadh in the 1950s, particularly Malazz, located in the northeast suburbs of the Saudi capital. In Bahrain, Awali became one of the coveted symbols of the youth consumer cultures that epitomized Bahrain's oil modernization and shaped the country's political mobilization in the 1950s and 1960s.¹³

Oil and Urbanization: Circulation and Velocity/Blockage and Viscosity

As the geographical, social, and political footprint of the fast-developing petroleum industry in the Arab world, oil towns were important sites of mixing, negotiation, and transfer, in spite of the worlds of economic privilege and racial segregation they represented. As the material and discursive traces of early petroleum modernity, they reflected the dialectical powers of oil as a mineral substance, fossil fuel, and industry. To put it differently, and drawing on concepts such as circulation and velocity, these industrial/residential enclaves show how oil in the Arab world had the historical ability to set in motion and incrementally define and redefine the matrix of regional modernization.¹⁴ This process started at different moments in time across the region following the diachronic discovery and exploitation of petroleum resources, first in Iran before World War I, followed by Iraq and Bahrain in the 1920s and 1930s, and Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and Libya after World War II.

The boom of Middle Eastern oil in the world markets after World War II transformed petroleum into the master of the mobilities and materialities that became associated with the process of city-making.¹⁵ The growth of the industry imparted new direction to and intensified the circulation and exchange of people, commodities, and technical and scientific knowledge, playing a key role in the creation of new urban space and societies, inside and outside oil towns. Large waves of human bodies flowed to Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar from across the region and from Europe, the US, and the Indian subcontinent: skilled and unskilled workers, technicians, oil executives, and people working in key service sectors such as construction, transport, and air travel. In the smaller Arab states of the Gulf and in Saudi Arabia, employment figures for Arabs provided by oil companies until nationalization are generally misleading and do not account for the high mobility of labor across the region. This was the result of the unclear nationality of some of this labor force, but also because companies manipulated labor statistics to meet the terms stipulated by oil concessions regarding the employment of a certain percentage of nationals. After World War II, the industry experienced a labor boom that peaked in the mid-1950s in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Bahrain and in the 1960s in Kuwait. Large infrastructural projects such as oil towns, refineries, plants, oil storage tanks, and pipelines brought in considerable numbers of skilled and unskilled personnel from neighboring regions and farther afield. Bahrain relied on a large workforce from Iran for the construction of the refinery at Sitrah between 1936 and 1938. During the early postwar expansion of oil installations in the Eastern province,

Aramco employed large numbers of Italians coming from Eritrea through a recruitment scheme that ended in 1954.¹⁶

The influx of new objects, particularly cars and consumer items, Western household furniture, and construction materials, also played a considerable part in defining petroleum's new urban worlds. Beginning in the mid-1950s, the petroleumscape of Tehran developed in line with US styles of consumption and car use.¹⁷ Company planners designed and built oil towns as car and consumer-oriented societies following the blueprint of British and American suburbs. These models of urban and suburban living often had a powerful impact on the lives of those who resided outside company towns, oil camps, and industrial areas. As early as 1937 in Manama, the capital city of Bahrain, which experienced precocious oil modernization along the Gulf's Arab coast, local merchants started to import European and American goods for the residents of Awali, Bahrain's oil town. By the early 1950s, the taste of the city's upper classes was radically transformed. The interiors of their houses had tables, chairs, and curtains rather than the traditional carpets and cushions. The supply of electricity encouraged the richest households to buy refrigerators, fans, gramophones, and radio sets. Cars became a coveted status symbol for many households, and their numbers skyrocketed between 1960 and 1967¹⁸ (Figures 7.3 and 7.4).

Finally, the increased circulation of technical reports, glossy magazines, newsletters, and propaganda materials produced in the headquarters of oil companies contributed to creating more politically and socially aware individuals, often in juxtaposition with a vociferous, anti-imperialist, and nationalist press. This new type of literacy encouraged locals on the payroll of companies to acquire new skills and technical expertise in order to escape poverty and an oppressive labor regime that favored white and Indian employees. Company magazines and broadsheets, which started to appear in both Arabic and English in the late 1950s, reached considerable popularity: *al-Najmah al-'Usbu'iyah* (the *Weekly Star*) in Bahrain, *Iraq Petroleum* and *Ahl al-Naft* (Oil People) in Iraq, *Risalah al-Naft* (the *Oil Newsletter*)

FIGURE 7.3 Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, Toiletries store, 1958. Ali Akbar Bushihri Archive.

FIGURE 7.4 Oil Camp, Kuwait. Kiosk and Canada Dry advertising for locals, 1961. Kuwait Oil Company Archive.

and *The Kuwaiti* in Kuwait, and *Aramco World* in Saudi Arabia. Emerging oil departments within local governments also started their own publications. The Directorate of Petroleum and Mineral Affairs in Saudi Arabia is one example: under the leadership of the famous oil technocrat ‘Abdallah al-Tariki, the directorate started publishing a four-page newsletter on oil affairs in the late 1950s.¹⁹

As suggested by Erik Swyngedouw—a geographer concerned with the relationship between nature, society, and social power—the city and urbanization can be approached as circulatory systems underpinned by but also as generating a series of metabolic relations. Besides mobility and circulation, metabolism and speed are thus key features of urban modernity as a qualitative and quantitative process in a transformation involving both human and material worlds.²⁰ Petro-urbanism—in the Arab world as in many other corners of the globe—can thus be explained as a process of circulation and recirculation of matter and resources. While the extraction of oil from the ground dislocated and de-territorialized it as a natural resource, the construction of oil towns re-territorialized petroleum as built environment and infrastructure. This process was activated by the wealth generated by oil as a commodity and the technical expertise and infrastructural capital provided by foreign companies.²¹ By the 1950s, the metaphor of oil as the most vital part of a human body involved in a series of metabolic reactions had become part of a new vocabulary of resistance to the powerful oil corporations deployed by Arab oil technocrats working for governments and the Arab League. In 1960, Ashraf Lutfi, a Kuwaiti-Palestinian who became secretary general of OPEC in 1965, made an impassioned plea for “Arab Oil for the Arabs”:

Petroleum, then, is to the world as blood is to the human body, and both would expire without them. In this simile, an oilfield might be likened to a human heart. If the

body is to remain healthy, care must be taken of the heart which pumps blood to the various parts of the body, supplying them with the essential daily nourishment. If the heart should fail, the body would come to a standstill.²²

The cultural theorist Peter Hitchcock has recently suggested that there is a flipside to the idea of oil's velocity and circulation as the life-enhancing, revolutionary, and creative force of modernity. As a mineral substance, oil sticks and its viscous properties often impair movement, creating inertia.²³ Translated into the urban worlds of petroleum in the age of Western imperialism, this has meant that oil bonanzas often fragmented political and spatial experiences, both individually and collectively. In this respect, the history of early petro-urbanism in the Arab World and Iran can be also read as one of circulation and blockages, of velocity and viscosity, of friction and violence, a history that became especially visible in oil towns as exclusive industrial enclaves.

In these towns, the effects of petroleum flows generated a great deal of instability, both political and physical. As key nodes of industrial conurbations, oil towns represented interconnected points of social and political "vulnerability"—to use Timothy Mitchell's wording—and they became enclaves of order and disorder dominated by the politics, geographies, and disciplines of oil production.²⁴ As early as the late 1940s, the oil conurbations that developed around Abadan in southwestern Iran, Dhahran in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, and around Kirkuk in northern Iraq, including the pipeline that transported Kirkuk's oil to the Mediterranean, ceased to be frontier regions of exploration and exploitation. They had become frontlines and vanguards of nationalist and left-wing politics, trade unionism, new forms of surveillance, urban planning, and state violence. Before the 1960s, the shantytowns and informal communities that accommodated indigenous and migrant laborers who lived within or near the perimeters of oil towns often had violent histories. In 1942, Iranian workers living in the shantytown of Ahmabad in Abadan attacked neighboring Indians in what became known as the Bahmashir incident. Infuriated mobs, resentful of the better conditions enjoyed by Indian employees of AIOC, expelled Indians from their houses and chased them.²⁵ Mobilization against the companies resulted from dissatisfaction with slowly improving living and working conditions, differential treatment meted out to different communities, which was exacerbated by the close (yet separated) proximity in which workers lived in oil towns and camps, and the unfulfilled expectations of modernization that urbanization had created. In 1953–1956 and in 1967, sustained labor unrest beset the Saudi oil conurbation. In 1967, there were indications that in the "native" oil towns of Ras Tanura and Abqaiq, which were inhabited by Saudis, class divisions mobilized youths not exclusively against Aramco but also against Saudis, who enjoyed better living conditions.²⁶

A number of interesting questions emerge in relation to how labor unrest and criminal activities triggered changes in urban form. In 1965, the sabotage of oil installations in Marsa al-Burayqa prompted Esso Libya to establish army checkpoints and to erect security barriers around the town, exacerbating the separation of Libyan workers that lived around it in tents and makeshift dwellings. The securitization of oil towns and camps after episodes of unrest and hooliganism was a common practice across the region. In redefining living spaces and experience, labor and political struggles also subverted hierarchies of power. A case in point is the takeover of the large K3 oil station along the Kirkuk-Mediterranean pipeline by labor and Communist activists in 1948. In an act of policing in reverse, strike leaders established a

new Communist order inside the station through the organization of committees to manage security, negotiations with IPC, and food provisions.²⁷ The sites where towns were built could become *lieux de mémoire* linked to past violent events. For instance, Marsa al-Burayqa in Libya stood on the site of a concentration camp for Cyrenaica tribes that had resisted Italian colonial rule.²⁸

Another unsettling dimension of the early petroleum age was—to paraphrase Reinhardt Koselleck—the tension between spaces of urban experience and the horizons of expectation.²⁹ In the fictional world of Munif's *Cities of Salt*, oil permeates the mindset of the characters—in the words of Amy Riddle—as “some kind of wealth or gold to come.”³⁰ In reality, the advent of oil undoubtedly altered expectations of modernity and of the future, but the solidity, security and fulfillment promised by this future could be deceiving, as exemplified by modern architecture and planning. Observers of early Kuwaiti oil urbanism in the late 1940s and 1950s explained the accelerated development of the oil conurbation linking Kuwait City to Ahmadi and to the oil fields in terms of *orderly chaos* and *disconnection*, casting doubts over the benefits accrued by the indigenous population.³¹ Seemingly, solid built environments and modern infrastructure—which particularly in remote areas stood as the unmistakable markers of Vitruvian/European modernity—proved to be impermanent. A large number of construction failures—from houses to roads—marked the UAE's late oil boom in the late 1960s because cement and other construction materials were improperly treated with salt water. Eventually, a special UN commission was dispatched to Ras al-Khayma in 1974 to investigate the matter.³² The tension between real and ideal and expected and experienced was also observed by the British anthropologist Peter Liendhart in his perceptive account of Kuwait in the 1950s, appropriately titled *Disorientations—A Society in Flux*. In the outskirts of Kuwait town, Liendhardt hopes to find a rich site to conduct fieldwork focused on settled Bedouin communities. With some disappointment, he soon realizes that his expectations are not going to be fulfilled, because in Kuwait's new suburbia, Bedouin are being replaced by foreign migrant workers, employed in oil installation and in the thriving construction industry of Kuwait's oil boom.³³

Twentieth-Century Frontier Urbanism: Imperial, Colonial, and National Modernities

The industrial urbanism of Middle Eastern oil towns flourished in the midst of a generally wild, inhospitable, and rugged frontier, in the desert and mountainous regions of southwestern Iran, northwestern Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Libya. This frontier was not dissimilar to that which since 1900 had shaped much of Canada's industrial development around staple industries such as cod fishing and mining. As with other commodity frontiers, the development of oil resources, the extension of central government, and the process of nation-building were to different degrees part of a larger narrative of British colonialism and of new trajectories of neo-imperial/colonial expansion ushered in by the advance of American power after World War II.³⁴ A case in point is Dhahran, the most tangible manifestation of US control over the oil industry in the Arab world, and of the ability of petroleum's powerful corporations to act as state-makers. Dhahran was in fact the instrument through which, what was known historically as, Eastern Arabia was incorporated into the Saudi state, whose modernization and integration into the world economy depended on oil production (Figure 7.5).

FIGURE 7.5 Signpost indicating distances to Kirkuk, Baghdad, Paris, London, and Beirut outside the K3 Pumping Station, Iraq. BP Archive.

Throughout the region, oil towns were unmistakably enmeshed with the corporate values of oil companies that celebrated the maximization of profit and made companies urban entrepreneurs of the early oil age. Yet oil's industrial urbanism reflected diverse ideals of imperial/colonial modernity. The planning of Abadan, Ahmadi, and Kirkuk/Arappha, as convincingly shown by Mark Crinson and Reem Alissa, reflected what Alissa has termed "colonial capitalism." It followed the blueprint of colonial New Delhi as planned by the architect James Mollison Wilson (1887–1965) who worked for the AIOC, IPC, and Kuwait Oil Company (KOC), all of which were under the spell of the British government. While the garden city movement had an important influence on Wilson, the guiding principles of the planning of oil towns under British control were the same ones that underpinned the creation of so-called dual cities around the nonwhite world in the high noon of colonialism: the enforcement of ethnic segregation and the drawing of color lines.³⁵

Racial hierarchies also played an important role in the development of Dhahran and Awali, the two oil towns built by American companies Aramco and the Bahrain Petroleum Company (Bapco). In the initial model envisaged by company executives, pay grades rather than color lines were to structure the organization of settled space. As the development of Dhahran and the oil camps that surrounded it unfolded, relations between different resident communities came to resemble that of earlier colonial encounters in Africa and Asia, with the inevitable creation of zones of exclusion, color lines, and the deployment of surveillance techniques to contain social unrest. Developed as an oil camp after 1938, the year oil was discovered in commercial quantities in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, Dhahran

was built around a fenced enclave, known until the early 1950s as American Camp (later renamed Senior Staff Camp, but popularly referred to as White Men's Camp). Around the American compound, Aramco planned a constellation of separate worker camps populated by Saudis, Pakistanis, Italians, and Indians, many of whom were skilled laborers. In addition to the segregation, there were gross disparities in living quarters, wages, rights, and access to services and amenities. For many locals, who were arguably at the bottom of the socioeconomic order promoted by Aramco, the oil camp complex of Dhahran came to represent the "shock" as well as the "allure" of the modern, acutely felt from their *barasti* dwellings made of palm leaves, which well into the 1950s dominated the landscape of Dhahran's "Arab village."³⁶

Central to American oil urbanism was the model of suburbia. Images, spaces, and experiences of this suburbia dominated the life of Dhahran. In 1956, the "White Men's Camp" was described by the journalist Wanda Jablonski as a frontier organization that looked like "a lovely suburb of Houston."³⁷ Other American observers characterized its villas as Californian-style ranch homes. Until 1971, Awali in Bahrain, an oil town that followed a Caltex standard plan but with a British suburban style, was a key pole in the urban geography of white/European settlement in Bahrain, alongside the British military and political establishments.³⁸ Oil towns such as Dhahran and Awali were part of broader plans to transplant the American ideology of suburbia in the Arab world after World War II. In other words, they fitted in very well with community-building projects overseas, which construed suburbia as a site of both consumption and capitalist values. This was a reflection of—in the words of Nathan Citino—"the suburban single family home becoming the most sought after commodity in the US alongside cars, both sites and object of consumption." British oil companies continued to see industrial urbanism through the old lens of the "white man's burden" which had shaped British colonialism in the nineteenth century. In contrast, after World War II, most American companies and entrepreneurs saw corporate investment as coterminous with modernization. Central to this investment was the model of suburbia driven by supposedly universal middle-class values.³⁹

The irony was that in spite of ubiquitous suburban spaces and facilities, life in oil camps and towns did not appear to perceptive observers as particularly suburban or urban. In the mid-1950s, Roderic Owen, commenting on Umm Sa'id in Qatar and Awali in Bahrain, noted:

They [the oil camps] are an isolated, unnaturally young, society organized on paramilitary lines where salary scale replaces rank. The result is bound to be a mixture of the holiday camp and the army, with hints of a new satellite town more predominant as the number of wives and families increases ... It is a common criticism to call oil camps suburban.... People in oil camps have no city.⁴⁰

While some European and American residents longed, like Owen, for the excitement of their hometowns and felt deprived of metropolitan life, the locals—particularly those on the company payroll—often saw modern housing and facilities as a symbol of affluence, social advancement, and a better life. Unequal and unfair housing policies and the inability on the part of many locals to gain access to oil towns proved extremely divisive and dangerous. Demands for better housing and access to basic amenities often triggered rioting in the Saudi oil conurbation in the 1950s and 1960s, with workers' demands often framed in the context of labor grievances and radical Arab nationalism.⁴¹ In Iraq's oil townships, inequality eluded

the logic of European-versus-indigenous employees of IPC. Iraqi Christians and Armenians, the privileged “minority” groups that occupied higher positions in the industry and lived in modern accommodations, experienced constant threats and intimidation by labor activists. In Arappha/Kirkuk, many Christians complained of insufficient police protection and the insecurity of modern housing, which were more vulnerable to theft and intrusion than traditional dwellings. In American oil towns, company housing policies often created friction among white employees as nuclear families received preferential treatment over single males. The so-called bachelors’ quarters in Dhahran and in Awali were not particularly happy places, with residents often complaining of poor facilities and social isolation from other white residents. In the early 1960s, the expanding American female workforce in the Libyan town of Marsa al-Burayqa also lamented their loneliness and discrimination in the workplace.⁴²

In the 1950s, companies started to provide home ownership loans as an attempt to integrate the indigenous workforce into capitalist modernity. First introduced in the new industrial towns of North and South America at the beginning of the twentieth century as part of new ideas that underpinned the development of the new industrial town, this social program yielded mixed results in the Middle East.⁴³ The Aramco home ownership scheme started in 1951 in order to tackle the issue of the mushrooming of shantytowns inhabited by rural migrants employed or searching for employment in the oil fields. The scheme did not prove popular with locals, and by 1960 applications sharply declined. Company surveys found that women in particular did not like living in modern housing: they felt isolated from extended family and abhorred the anonymity of the town. After having considered the political implications of building houses for the Iraqi workforce in Kirkuk’s suburban oil enclave of Arappha, IPC decided to initiate a home ownership scheme in the old city center of Kirkuk. This scheme was readily taken up by Turkmen, Arabs, and Kurds, but not by Christians and Armenians, who preferred to live in the secluded comfort of Arappha as company protégées.⁴⁴

After nationalization, company towns became the exclusive property of governments. As white residents were forced to vacate and were replaced by locals, the towns became the architectural and social settings of a new national modernity, primary instruments of state and nation-building. Ahmadi in Kuwait provides an excellent example. The propaganda documentary “Story of a Town,” shot in 1978 a few years after nationalization, is a celebration of national achievement with the nationalized company starring as a benevolent state enterprise. It portrays Ahmadi’s public and private spaces of sociability—the residential suburb, the modern villa, the garden, the school, the hospital, the social club, the workshop, and the classroom—as the archetypal stage sets of Kuwait as a modern nation.⁴⁵

From the Material to the Representational

Oil companies were the first to promote the use of oil towns for propaganda purposes in the 1950s and 1960s. It is not by coincidence that “Story of a Town” was commissioned and first scripted in 1965, following instructions from the KOC head office in London.⁴⁶ Throughout the region, companies’ public relations departments packaged alluring images of corporate urbanism in order to publicize locally the benefits of employment in the oil industry, to maximize productivity, and to dissipate discontent and avoid lingering industrial conflict. These new urban imaginaries, carefully constructed to target local publics, focused on particular spaces inside oil towns in order to enforce new modes of urban socialization

and to promise local employees happy and fulfilled oil futures. This new corporate culture, which became superimposed on an American model of suburbia, was the result of a new rhetoric of indigenous development adopted by oil companies in the 1950s, when they came under the increasing attack of nationalism and anticolonial and anti-imperialist ideologies, both in the Arab world and internationally.⁴⁷

Canteens were central to this rhetoric. One of the first development enterprises publicized by oil companies was the provision to local employees of subsidized “Oriental” meals—as they were frequently referred to by company managers—in between shifts in oil towns and in camps, in a clean, modern, and organized environment. The leading article of the first issue of *al-Najmah al-Uṣbu’iyyah*, (the *Weekly Star*), Bapco’s Arabic publication, reported in detail the construction of the first modern refectory in Awali, placing emphasis on its state-of-the-art facilities: toilets, neon lighting, and air conditioning. In Iraq, by the early 1950s, all major centers of oil operations, including Kirkuk/Arappha, had refectories that featured prominently in company publicity and brochures. Canteens were not only publicized as an essential entitlement of workers but also as places of leisure and pleasure, part of the training in modern and “civilized” lifestyles offered by the companies. In towns like Ahmadi, which by the late 1950s also accommodated Kuwaiti families, these modern lunchrooms were often shown hosting parties and company and community celebrations.⁴⁸

Yet, particularly in Iraq and Kuwait, by the mid-1950s the suburban villa had become the key setting in the imagery depicting oil urbanism as a new way of corporate life for local company employees. Company magazines started to devote considerable attention to housing developments sponsored by IPC and KOC or subsidized through home ownership schemes. Company housing was not necessarily located in urban areas or in large oil towns. Larger oil camps and stations that mushroomed in the desert were veritable mini towns, with facilities such as canteens, clubs, cinemas, and, in some cases, supermarkets and schools. Feature articles included aerial views, house plans, and images of leisure and social activities taking place.⁴⁹ Villas were publicized as urban skylines in their own right, as suggested by a number of striking images of houses built by IPC in the outskirts of Kirkuk. Published in *Iraq Petroleum*, these images show an empty and desolate suburbia which the caption describes as “imaginative town-planning.”⁵⁰

Company houses became the accessory that defined the image of the model Iraqi and Kuwaiti employee. Their modern design was often juxtaposed with images of family life that popularized the archetypal oil household as a nuclear family. Publicizing “moving in” days often served this purpose. An article published in *The Kuwaiti* in 1954, the English language magazine published by KOC, shows the first Kuwaiti family to take possession of a company villa in South Ahmadi. Four years later, IPC celebrated the Basra Home Ownership Scheme with the publication of a similar feature article in *Iraq Petroleum*.⁵¹ This type of advertising was also used to maximum effect in articles that publicized model villas and the organization of viewings for prospective buyers eligible for home ownership schemes. These articles are highly suggestive of how the company instructed its workers in the art of modern urban living. They included pictures of fully furnished interiors, modern kitchens and dining rooms, linoleum floors and built-in cupboards.⁵² By the early 1960s, company publications in both Arabic and English were also instrumental in linking the space and fittings of the modern oil villa to new models of female domesticity. These articles created the image of the oil town housewife, an image that in Kuwait had a profound influence on the lifestyle of the young female population in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵³

Conclusion

Before nationalization, oil towns were central to the development of the petroleum industry in the Arab world. Looking at these towns as spatial, political, social, and discursive formations of foreign capitalism and imperialism—but also as the harbingers of indigenous modernities—offers insight into a complex set of oil relationships: between oil as a market commodity, mineral substance, and industrial/imperialist enterprise on the one hand, and as the material and ideological building block of modern societies on the other. These urban petro-histories objectified as part of the petroleumscape are also suggestive of a set of highly mobile connectivities, which accelerated as the development of the industry gathered momentum after World War II, when most of oil towns were built. These connectivities linked foreign companies, local governments, and indigenous populations in concentric circles, binding them at local, national, regional, and international/global scales. To go back to Ashraf Lutfi's allegory of petroleum as the blood in a human body, both the oil field and the oil town can be considered the pulsating heart of the early Arab oil industry.

Notes

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- 5 Yasmin Munira and Rola Khayyat, "Pieces of Us. The Intimate Imperial Archive," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 14, no. 3 (2018): 268–90.
- 6 See, e.g., Farah al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed: A History of Oil and Urban Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Ahmad Kanna, *Dubai: The City as Corporation* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011); Caecilia Pieri, *Bagdad: La Construction d'une Capitale Moderne (1914–1960)* (Beirut: IFPO, 2015).
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- 10 Nelida Fuccaro, "Reading Oil as Urban Violence: Kirkuk and Its Oil Conurbation, 1927–58," in *Urban Violence in the Middle East: Changing Cityscapes in the Transition Between Empire and Nation State*, eds. Ulrike Freitag, Nelida Fuccaro, Claudia Ghrawi, and Nora Lafi (New York: Berghahn, 2016), 228.
- 11 Nelida Fuccaro, "Telling the Human Story of Oil: Oil Propaganda and Corporate Representations of Urbanism in Iraq, Kuwait and Bahrain," paper presented at the conference "The Comparative Social Histories of Labour in the Oil Industry," International Institute of Social History, University of Amsterdam, 14–15 June 2013; David H. Finnie, *Desert Enterprise: The Middle East Oil Industry in Its Local Environment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 90–141.
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