Foliage and Fog: Uncanny Petrocultures in Tash Aw's *We, the Survivors* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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Abstract

EcoGothic studies has, so far, primarily focused on uncanny environments imagined by Western writers. In response, this article compares polluted, haunting environments in two contemporary Anglophone novels from the Global South: Tash Aw's *We, the Survivors* (2019) and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2011). Through vivid representations of the forbidding jungles of Malaysian palm oil plantations and the toxic waters of the oil-rich Niger Delta, both novels render extractive economies palpable and monstrous. This essay analyses how dystopian atmospheres, fragmented first-person narration, and circular crime fictions contribute to the EcoGothic aesthetic in both novels. Re-focusing scholarly attention from the dark woods of Europe and North America to the decaying mangroves across Asia and Africa foregrounds the ruinous aftermath of Western imperialism and neoliberal capitalism. By examining uncanny environments in Aw and Habila's novels, this essay sheds new light on the neglected EcoGothic effects of Global South petrofiction.

Keywords: EcoGothic, Global South, petrofiction, Malaysian literature, Nigerian literature, Anthropocene

Introduction: Petrofiction from Below

Reading fiction in the Anthropocene, the current geological epoch where humans have become the dominant force on Earth (Lewis and Maslin 2015), necessitates closer engagements with polluted settings and plots premised on industrialization. This essay compares two contemporary Anglophone novels from the Global South—Malaysian Tash Aw's *We, the Survivors* (2019) and Nigerian Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2011)—in order to explore the Gothic effects of strange, monstrous environments across Asia and Africa ravaged by neoliberal extractive capitalism. By "neoliberal extractive capitalism," I refer to the unprecedented accumulation of industrial capital gained by "recasting huge swathes of the world's environment" following neoliberal economic policies advancing globalization in the 1980s (Beckert 2021). My methodology stems from Sharae Deckard's provocative case study of the global EcoGothic, which proposes that environmental literary studies pay more attention to the myriad terrains of "uneven development" between the

Global South and Global North (2016: 177-78). In her essay, Deckard analyses the diseased and deformed human bodies in Rana Dasgupta's *Tokyo Cancelled* "as Gothic apparitions that register the world-ecology" (2016: 178). Deckard's article demonstrates how aesthetic forms of global EcoGothic literature can be read not only to plumb the "geopolitical unconscious" of planetary capitalism but also to resist and critique "the ecological regimes associated with the present phase of neoliberal, post-Fordist accumulation" (2016: 181). These ecological regimes stem from the growth of finance in the post-1980s United States. As Karen Ho notes, elite financial actors "increasingly abandoned ... any notion of the commons and the earth as goods to be valued" and "virtually any collection of assets ... [became] a fungible source of wealth ready to be translated into financial gain" (2021). In short, examining EcoGothic settings in *We, the Survivors* and *Oil on Water* in the context of neoliberal extractive capitalism exposes the darker side of globalization.

In both novels, the spectre of petrocapitalism looms large in festering rainforests and poisoned rivers. Despite Nigeria and Malaysia's respective bounties of petroleum and palm oil, poverty plagues the protagonists of *Oil on Water* and *We, the Survivors*. The pervasive yet unfulfilled promises of oil exhibit a haunting EcoGothic quality. Critics like Graeme Macdonald note the oppressive magnitude of petroleum, writing that "oil is not only exceptional in its multiform refinements or unprecedented power, but potentially 'monstrous' in its socio-ecological and geopolitical ramifications" (2017: 290). To Ursula Biemann, the "monstrous" transformations of oil have no parallel. Biemann states that oil permeates everything in our lives: it has "literally propelled humanity into a different era of mobility and consumption" (Pendakis and Biemann 2012: 6). To elucidate the extent to which oil links contemporary society, Stephanie LeMenager uses the terms "petroleum culture" or "petroculture" to refer to all "objects derived from petroleum that mediate our relationship, as humans, to other humans, to other life, and to things" (2014: 6). Amitav Ghosh, in his essay coining the term "petrofiction" for fiction about the Oil Encounter, insists that the story of the transnational oil industry is just as epic as tales of the legendary Spice Trade, with the Oil Encounter sparking "horror, sympathy, guilt, rage, and a great deal else" despite petrofiction's relative dearth in bookstores (1992: 30). Along with the invisible, inescapable characteristics of oil noted by Macdonald, Biemann, and LeMenager, Ghosh's impulse to list "horror" as the first of many dreadful and bewildering emotions engendered by the Oil Encounter is particularly telling. Drawing on these theories of the global EcoGothic and petroculture's frightening reach, I argue that oil saturates both the narrative content and stylistic forms of both

novels, and that both authors adapt the Gothic mode to render the powerful capitalist forces behind the Niger Delta and Malaysian palm oil plantations grotesque and freakish.

I compare the novels with each other, rather than comparing each one to Western analogue texts, in an act of literary South-South cooperation. Malaysia and Nigeria have a rich history of bilateral relations stemming from the onset of both countries' independence from British governance in the 1960s, with Malaysians investing in the Nigerian oil boom in the 1970s and trade relations surpassing $4 billion in 2016 (Bello et al. 2017: 751-757). In the education sector, Malaysia is a popular destination for Nigerians pursuing university (Bello et al. 2017: 757-58), a phenomenon dramatized early on in *We, the Survivors* when Nigerian students are stopped by the police (7-10). While the topography and political landscapes of Malaysia and Nigeria differ, both are tropical countries and former British colonies involved in the international trade of oil. Oil is Nigeria's "black gold," while palm oil is Malaysia's "red gold"— the economy of these commodities shapes their country's political and physical landscapes. Nigeria, a member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries since 1971, is Africa's main oil producer and the world's sixth largest oil producing country (Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation). Malaysia is a key oil and gas producer in the Asia-Pacific region and the world's twenty-first largest crude petroleum exporter, but its most important natural resource is palm oil, an edible vegetable oil derived from the crushed fruits of oil palm trees (The Observatory of Economic Complexity). Originally native to West and Central Africa, oil palms were brought to Malaysia as ornamental trees (Encyclopaedia Britannica); now, Malaysia and Indonesia hold ninety percent of the world's oil palm trees (World Wildlife Fund). As the migration of the oil palm tree from Africa to Asia shows, the time is ripe for more comparative studies between African and African literature. By paying attention to the flows of oil and labour in both novels, and their heterogeneous transcultural terrains, the essay attempts to excavate a fuller picture of the ecological regimes that have shaped the Global South.

This essay focuses on three aspects that contribute to the EcoGothic aesthetics of both novels: dystopian atmospheres, fragmented first-person narratives, and circular crime fictions. In the first edited volume in the field, editors Andrew Smith and William Hughes define the EcoGothic project as bringing "current ideas about ecocriticism … to Gothic narratives in order to help draw out their often dystopian ecological visions" (2016: 4). As opposed to "sunny" ecocriticism, which has its roots in pastoral literature, Romantic literature, and American

Transcendentalist writing celebrating the environment, the EcoGothic is concerned with the darker, more disturbing affects of nature (Smith and Hughes 2016: 1-2). While the growing EcoGothic area may suggest ecocritical readings of Gothic literature bound by Western periodization, in this article I will rely on Tom J. Hillard's capacious definition of the EcoGothic as a framework that analyses how "Gothic effects" in any text "register concerns related to environment or ecology in the broadest senses" to break out of the Western canon (2018: 22-23).

Dystopian Atmospheres

Both novels meditate on hostile environments and the exploitation of the marginalized. Tash Aw's *We, the Survivors* (2019) tells the story of an unwitting murderer caught in dire financial straits. The novel's protagonist, Ah Hock, is born to a family of Chinese fishermen in a remote Malaysian village on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. He tries to climb out of the mudflats and into the office in the hopes of a middle-class future for him and his wife, but Malaysian modernization is cut-throat. At the beginning of the novel, Ah Hock has just finished serving a prison sentence for murdering a Bangladeshi migrant worker for reasons that remain opaque even years after the event. Ah Hock narrates his life to a writer, Su-Min, an upper middle-class Malaysian doctoral student in sociology who is researching Ah Hock's life for her creative nonfiction novel. Like Aw's novel, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2011) is a brutally realist account of poverty. Two journalists in Lagos search for the kidnapped wife of a British oil engineer in the conflict-ridden Niger Delta. Zaq, a decorated veteran journalist, accompanies Rufus, a greenhorn reporter, as they attempt to write the perfect story about a white woman who becomes collateral damage in a war between militias and corporations. Rufus finds himself increasingly unmoored and disillusioned by this simplistic account as they venture into toxic rivers and ghostly villages. In the same vein as Aw's writing, Habila's novel functions as witness writing, a moving testimony to ravaged tropical landscapes and defeated people in the shadow of globalization.

Both novels portray their environments as lethal and apocalyptic, demanding that readers pay attention to setting. From the scorching sun and creepy jungles of Malaysia's palm oil plantations to the oil-drenched trees and dead fish in the Niger Delta, the novels continually emphasize the sickness of the land and water. The polluted landscapes evoke Rob Nixon's definition of "slow violence," "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of

delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2011: 2). Examples of slow violence include "climate change," "deforestation," and "acidifying oceans" (Nixon 2011: 2). In other words, the climate crisis slips out of frame because its temporal scales defy our assumptions that violence is always "immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space … erupting into instant sensational visibility" (Nixon 2011: 2). Environmental cataclysm escapes human comprehension; however, Nixon notes that literature can help us fine-tune our ears and eyes, "bring[ing] into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration … offer[ing] us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen" (2011: 15). Nixon cites Nigerian writer-activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, executed for his protest against Shell and Chevron's incursions into Ogoni territory, as an example of galvanizing prose (2011: 103). Through their vivid, dynamic descriptions of environments and peoples invisible to the Global North, writers like Aw and Habila "challenge our perceptual habits" by refusing to represent the Global South as static (Nixon 2011: 15).

The opening scene of *We, the Survivors* exemplifies the alarming afterlives of ruined economies and ecologies in Malaysia. In the first paragraph of the novel, Ah Hock reflects on the wild vegetation encroaching on pitiful shops in forgotten towns, situating us in landscapes that evade neoliberal capitalist control:

> You want me to talk about life, but all I've talked about is failure, as if they're the same thing, or at least so closely entwined that I can't separate the two – like the trees you see growing in the half-ruined buildings in the Old Town. Roots clinging to the outside of the walls, holding the bricks and stone and whatever remains of the pain together, branches pushing through holes in the roof. Sometimes there's almost nothing left of the roof, if you can even call it that – just fragments of clay tiles or rusty tin propped up by the canopy of leaves. … the doorway [to the shophouse] is now just a shadowy space that leads into the heart of a huge tangle of foliage. Where does one end and the other begin? Which one is alive, which is dead? (Aw 3)

Ah Hock details jungle figs appearing to choke the life out of small establishments like printing presses, tire repair shops, and cake shops in backwater places where "people haven't made a decent living for twenty years" (4). Uncultivated nature appears to strangle any hope of commerce or urban aspirations. His own ambitions of class mobility dashed, it is telling that Ah Hock uses the Gothic imagery of gnarled trees smothering businesses to explain the ways in which life and death are entangled. Paradoxically, the trees seem more alive than the elderly shopkeepers or their sad merchandise of cheap leaflets and dusty biscuits. While neoliberal imperialism would make an

inventory of such trees to turn environment into profit, the wild foliage destroys any fiction that capital can control the land. The green trees grow in abundance, not the green of paper money. After Ah Hock inadvertently kills the Bangladeshi migrant worker with a piece of wood in a financial dispute, the midnight rainforest morphs into a landscape of "swollen ghostlike fruit" (5), "strange shapes drifting in the middle of the river … like some sort of mythical beast from *Journey to the West*" (5), and "a body so bloated … a could-be cat or a could-be monkey" (6). The image of antagonistic nature obstructing commercialization and domination recurs throughout the novel.

Likewise, in the opening scene of *Oil on Water*, the young journalist Rufus compares storytelling to navigating a sinister, unknown environment, questioning human mastery over the world around us:

> I am walking down a familiar path, with incidents neatly labelled and dated, but when I reach halfway memory lets go of my hand, and a fog rises and covers the faces and places, and I am left clawing about in the dark, lost, and I have to make up the obscured moments as I go along, make up the faces and places, even the emotions. Sometimes, to keep on course, I have to return to more recognizable landmarks, and then, with this safety net under me, I can leap onto less certain terrain. (Habila 3)

Here, the bewildering fog, like the foliage in Aw's novel, throws human exceptionalism to the wind. Like the gargantuan trees that outshine the derelict Old Town shophouses in *We, the Survivors*, the smog on the river dissolves all human efforts. Although air pollution is largely caused by the activities of the petroleum sector, the extent of the fog defies human management. While the fog is abstract in the beginning of the novel, a meta-moment explaining Rufus's artificial construction of the story, the haze quickly manifests itself in its humid, heady glory. On the next page, the rivers along the Niger Delta are "blue and green and blue-green misty," the "whole landscape … a mere trick of light, vaporous and shape-shifting" (4). Rufus tells the story of the search for kidnapped Isabel Floode in spurts and stops, the tides of recollection pulling him every so often back to Irikefe Island, enveloped by "mist that rose like smoke from the river banks" (4). The crescent-shaped island is one of the only "recognizable landmarks" in the Niger Delta and the "dense grey stuff" cloaking the canoe enshrouds the humans on the boat, hiding each other's faces (4-5). The inability to properly read or plot the land defies industrialists who would reduce vibrant ecologies to commodities. In both novels, the Gothic effects of shadowy foliage and murky fog heighten the sense of potent nature thwarting neoliberal managerial logistics.

From fires and floods to fog and foliage, the nonhuman overshadows human actors in both novels, exerting frightening agency. In a review for *The Guardian*, Bernadine Evaristo names the foul mangrove swamps in *Oil on Water* as the novel's most compelling element, to the extent that "the most powerful and interesting character in the story proves to be the fetid, viscous, menacing landscape" (2010). The journalists are defenceless against mosquito swarms, the stench of decomposing chickens, and black rivers slick with oil. Even the houses on the coastal islands crumble into sameness in the oppressive Niger Delta: "the next village was almost a replica of the last … the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs" (Habila 9). The plundered Niger Delta refuses to recede in the background, echoing Timothy Morton's description of the idea of nature "hover[ing] over things like a ghost" (2007: 14). The slipperiness and out-of-reach qualities of nature appear in *We, the Survivors* as well. The jungles of Selangor become a labyrinth. Ah Hock and his childhood friend Keong, a drug dealer turned illegal migrant worker smuggler, misidentify landmarks and lose their bearings searching for migrant camps along identical palm-oil estates (207). Palm oil corporations have ruthlessly reconstituted riotous, verdant rainforests into "a flawless, flat green carpet of plantations", "palm trees deepening into a shade so dense and resolute it seemed to last infinitely … [to] the seventh ring of Saturn," with each estate "the size of Singapore, or Luxembourg" (243). The indistinguishable landscapes, an omen of planetary neoliberal capitalism, loom over and confound the two men. In an interview, Aw explained that "for people like Ah Hock, the ecology isn't an ideology, it's yet another thing that can ruin his life in an instant, and which he is powerless to resist" (Chan 2020). Ecological catastrophe defines the key moments of Ah Hock's life: from the factory run-off that eradicates his village's cockle harvests, to the flood that sweeps his mother's farm away, to the dying fish that threaten his job security after a cholera outbreak incapacitates his fish farm workers. The dystopian environments of both novels refuse to stay put.

Fragmented First-Person Narratives

The Gothic fog and foliage are more than mesmerizing special effects. Fog and foliage percolate in the fragmented first-person narratives adopted by Aw and Habila. The meteorological conditions seep into the structure of the novel, reminding us of the dual meanings of "plot" as both a piece of ground and the main events of a story. For instance, the two novels are

constructed around the nebulous and clouded memories of Ah Hock and Rufus. The criminal Ah Hock tries to talk about life but ends up talking about death, while the journalist Rufus sets out to factually record the happenings of the Isabel Floode kidnapping but ends up fabricating fictions of his journey. Although these failed storylines may seem disappointing (Ah Hock never answers why he murdered Mohammad Ashadul and Rufus never publishes his front-page story), the novels' negation of empirical truths powerfully subverts narrative conventions of linear progression. The literary techniques of both novels mirror "chemical and radiological violence," which Rob Nixon characterizes as "invisible, mutagenic theater … slow paced and open ended" (2011: 6). The lack of a neat, tidy conclusion suggests the ecological and economic tragedies of deprived communities in Malaysia and Nigeria cannot be solved because they are ongoing. The driftwood nature of Aw and Habila's novels slip through the net of neoliberal extractivism's design. The fetid forests and rivers not only morph from setting into characters, but also reformulate the narrative structure.

The whirlpooling narrative of *Oil on Water* mimics the chaotic physics of the oil spill. Although the novel is divided into two parts, the sections do not correspond to the first and second legs of the journey. Rather, in the spirit of the title, *Oil on Water* disperses important plot points, like the oil drum accident that burns Rufus's sister Boma, as they float in and out of the sea of Rufus's recollections. Key events swirl in a mix of textual flotsam and jetsam; the first chapter opens in media res with the hellish boat ride, Zaq suffering from a fever, and soldiers barging in with guns before we know who is who and where Rufus and Zaq are going. Like the turbulent spread of tens of thousands of oil droplets in water, the novel's form maps the tides of memory. In the following passage, Rufus describes the shape of water, but he might as well be describing the strange Gothic ambivalence of a novel that resists comfortable identification:

> We got Zaq into the boat with the help of the Chief and we drifted almost aimlessly on the opaque, misty water. The water took on a million different forms as we glided on it. Sometimes it was a snake, twisting and fast and slippery, poisonous. Sometimes it was an old jute rope, frayed and wobbly and breaking into jagged, feathery ends, the fresh water abruptly replaced by a thick marshy tract of mangroves standing over still, brackish water that lapped at the adventitious roots. Then we'd have to push the boat, or carry its dead weight on our shoulders until we found the rope again. (Habila 33-34)

The novel shuttles between the past and present with deliberately disorienting topography: the reader goes in circles around Port Harcourt, Irikefe Island, Bar Beach, and Chief Ibiram's village,

trying to grasp the storyline. The action in the first chapter is only contextualized in chapter sixteen. Combined with haunting descriptions of maggot-infested chickens, broken window hinges, and squalid pools, the constantly shifting places and times of the novel create a keen sense of nausea. It is almost as if the reader is in the canoe with Rufus and Zaq, recoiling from the contaminated landscapes, sailing in fits and spurts at the mercy of the Niger Delta. The stylistic form of *Oil on Water*, in simulating the oil spill, emphasizes how uncanny and disconcerting neoliberal capitalism can be. In the endless flow of petroculture there are no roots and no firm ground; as the famous Karl Marx saying goes, "all that is solid melts into air." Phrased another way, all that is water vanishes into oil. The quintessential symbol of life is supplanted by capital. Fittingly, the circular novel ends in another loop — on his way back to Port Hartcourt to report the story of Isabel Floode, the last sentence states that Rufus "turned" and "began [his] descent" (216).

If the form of *Oil on Water* mimics the oil spill, the form of *We, the Survivors* mimics the splintering of wood. Fragmented first-person narration points to the limits of our own human perspectives. While the structure of *We, the Survivors* is not as circuitous as *Oil on Water*, the novel is not a straightforward retelling of the beginning, middle, and end of a murder. Divided into four sections demarcated by date (October, November, December, January), the novel chronicles Ah Hock's conversations with Su-Min over these four months. Although the novel appears to be a collection of transcribed interviews arranged chronologically, the timespan of Ah Hock's memories veers wildly, from his post-prison hobbies to his befriending Keong as a young boy to his courtroom experience listening to his lawyers. Jagged ends and thin, sharp pieces of story — the pivotal moment of the murder, when Ah Hock raises the piece of wood to hit Mohammad, is fractured and incomplete. Ah Hock cannot remember how many times he hit the man and is unable to articulate why he did it. As opposed to the form of a sturdy tree, the "classical image" of a book with the words sprouting in logical progression from its "pivotal spine and surrounding leaves" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 5), the novel as coarse woody debris signals all that is left for dead on the forest floor. In this way, the subterranean story fragments of *We, the Survivors* mimic the non-hierarchical, non-linear plant systems of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomes or creeping rootstalks (1987: 5-7).

Furthermore, the fractured first-person narration signals socioeconomic disparities that prevent people from receiving horizontal treatment. In *We, the Survivors*, placeless, stateless people appear like disturbing apparitions Keong and Ah Hock cannot shake off. In the second half

of the novel, Keong promises he will supply Ah Hock with migrant workers to replace Ah Hock's sick labourers at the fish farm, but Keong's workers go missing. As Keong and Ah Hock search for the men, their perspectives shift between viewing the migrant workers as objects and recognizing them as human beings. Keong becomes incensed over the loss of his "shipment" (250) of labourers from Myanmar and regards the problem of obtaining refugee papers for Rohingya workers as a logistical nightmare, reducing the enormous trauma and violence experienced by the refugees to financial costs (274-276). Ah Hock, who is repulsed by Keong's callousness, nevertheless describes the refugees as "half-dead" (276), evoking images of zombies in line with his earlier description of Bangladeshi migrants navigating a hellish underworld: "skinny red-eyed … with patches of skins on their arms and faces rubbed raw from all the pesticides they sprayed … swim-walking … the oxygen sucked out of their world so they were forever in motion, but never making progress" (130). The supernatural presence of the migrants calls to mind the first appearance of the palm oil plantation workers in the novel. The people in Ah Hock's dilapidated fishing village do not socialize with the Indian migrants on the plantation across them, dismissing the Indians as "*poor black devils, dead but not dead* [italics in original]" (24) and avoiding the plantation workers in case they "infect us with their poverty" (25). Aw self-consciously uses EcoGothic effects to show how hypercompetitive extractive economies pit people against one another, until some people cease to be human at all and transform into demons or ghosts. The fragmented first-person narration in both novels shows how the category of personhood is always politicized; moreover, the limits of first-person narration suggest the voice of the human is never the only perspective we should take into account in a teeming, biodiverse world.

Circular Crime Fictions

The EcoGothic play on perception is also apparent in how both novels subvert the search for empirical truth in crime fiction. *We, the Survivors* and *Oil on Water* could be described as mysteries or thrillers, but they resist climactic reveals. This subversion of crime fiction conventions is crucial because the genre typically revolves around uncovering the motives of culprits or the grounds for unlawful acts. The figurative language of discovery in the crime fiction genre delves into ecological metaphor: detectives must track down the quarry, hunt suspects, fish out felons, mine evidence, dredge up information, and bring to the surface all that is secret. Instead, in Aw's and

Habila's writing, the hidden stays buried in the earth, and the environment is foreboding and unutterable. By unsettling the linearity of the crime fiction genre, the novels defamiliarize extractive economies of attention and complicate our assumptions about culpability and agency. In *Oil on Water,* Rufus sets out to reel in the perfect headline, competing for the best scoop of the Isabel Floode kidnapping story and imagining "a hero's reception from our colleagues and editors" (78). The highly marketable story of a white woman's disappearance, capitalizing on the old journalism adage "if it bleeds, it leads," slips away as Rufus is unable to distinguish the atrocities performed by, or enacted on, the militias, corporations, foreigners, and villagers in the ruthless fight for control of the Niger Delta's oil reserves. Zaq and Rufus are punished when they dare to desecrate a grave that supposedly holds Isabel Floode's remains in journalistic pursuit of the truth, even if the mound of earth turns out to hold a "huge, round boulder sitting insensate, incognizant, like a corpse" instead of "rotting flesh" (143-45). Although they did not disturb a human grave, Zaq and Rufus are castigated by the priests of Irikefe Island, and the two reporters are forced to flee discreetly (158-59). As subversive crime fiction novels, both texts flip the script on the victim/perpetrator roles and what constitutes a crime. The real crime Rufus discovers is not Isabel Floode's kidnapping, but what has been done to the Niger Delta in the aftermath of the expansion of the international oil industry.

There is a corresponding refusal of the "whodunnit" mystery format in *We, the Survivors*. The novel fixates on Ah Hock as a down-on-his-luck-everyman-turned-criminal. From the get-go, the reader is kept in the dark about what drove Ah Hock to commit murder. The novel's aim is ostensibly to gradually reveal the circumstances that led to the crime; however, even though Ah Hock speaks for the entire novel, he struggles to comprehend what led to his actions. He warns the sociology graduate student Su-Min that if she is trying to discern a motive through her interviews, she will be "disappointed" (104). The novel circles back again and again to Ah Hock insisting that there is no answer to why he did what he did. He uses ecological metaphors to describe the futility of his own testimony:

> For many months, while waiting for my trial, and afterwards in prison, I tried to find the reasons behind what I did. I tried to excavate the layers of my thoughts, my memories, digging patiently the way I used to in the mud on our farm when I was a child, and later at the fish farm. Sometimes you hit a layer of rock, other times the mud was compacted so solidly that your *cangkul* couldn't dig through it, no matter how high you raised it over your head, how hard you brought it crashing down into the earth. That was how I felt. (Aw 221-222)

The stark image of the search for reason as a *cangkul* striking mud is mirrored in Ah Hock's actions during the night of the murder. Terrified that Mohammad would use his knife on Keong, Ah Hock grips the piece of wood and aims for Mohammad's head (319-320). Ah Hock hits the Bangladeshi man fourteen times, and only remembers "raising [his] arm time and time again" as if it was "the only thing my arm was capable of doing" (320). Although Ah Hock is a white-collar worker, his body taps into the sensory memories of his formative years spent hoisting heavy crates, lugging sacks of concrete, and digging soil. It is as if Ah Hock's arm is a phantom limb, a conduit for the gruelling physical labour of Ah Hock's past. Rather than condemn Ah Hock as a crazed criminal, the description of alienated manual labour places the blame on the capitalist systems that pit Ah Hock, a poor, uneducated Chinese fishing-village boy, against Mohammad, a Bangladeshi migrant worker. While Ah Hock is a minority in Malaysia due to his ethnic and socioeconomic background, Mohammad occupies an even lower rung of society as a South Asian migrant labourer without the protections of citizenship. *We, the Survivors* complicates the crime fiction genre conventions of guilt and accountability.

The real crime of *We, the Survivors* is the hypercompetitive economy, from which Ah Hock's murder cannot be disentangled. After the adrenaline rush and the panic of killing the man, Ah Hock says he felt "an aching in my limbs so intense that I thought for a while I would pass out" and lies down next to the corpse, "so close that his [Mohammad's] outstretched hand was almost touching me" (322). The almost-handshake is an ironic image since, in another life, Ah Hock may have sympathized with Mohammad. Throughout the novel, Ah Hock has expressed sensitivity to the plight of the plantation workers and South Asian migrants in Malaysia. Before his promotion to foreman, Ah Hock worked side-by-side with the Indonesian men at the fish farm and knew their names and personalities by heart (44-45). Ah Hock even winces when Keong refers to the foreigners as "shipments" (250). The tragedy is that Ah Hock, himself a minority who has been made to feel like a second-rate citizen of his own country, will turn on another disadvantaged group in a dispute over labour. *We, the Survivors* shows how the desperate bid to survive in a neoliberal economy stokes the flames for the fatal encounter between two men who are just trying to earn a living. The collective "we" in the novel's title suggests both the possibility and failure to imagine solidarity in the neoliberal capitalist world order. At another point in the novel, Ah Hock wryly observes that whenever well-meaning environmentalists of the Global North try to intervene

in the Global South, they fail to consider local perspectives and the livelihoods of people employed by polluting industries: "the Europeans want to save the fucking planet so they ban the use of palm oil in food; within a month the entire port is on its knees" (317). From the vantage point of the Global North, the razing of rainforests and the trials of people like Ah Hock and Mohammad drift out of view, lost in the high-stake games of globalization.

Conclusion: Undermining Extractive Capitalism

The capital-driven ecological regimes of petroculture are not just the subject but constitute the very structure of *We, the Survivors* and *Oil on Water*. The two contemporary novels use dystopian environments, fragmented first-person narratives, and circular crime fictions to produce a vivid simulation of the uncanny world of neoliberal extractive economies. We might read the EcoGothic effects of both novels as examples of Timothy Morton's dark ecology, "[undermining] the naturalness of the stories we tell about how we are involved in nature" and "[preserving] the dark, depressive quality of life in the shadow of ecological catastrophe" (2007: 187). By animating fetid mangroves and decaying rainforests in their prose, along with adapting the aesthetics of the oil spill and wood splinters to the narrative form of the novel, Aw and Habila transform business-as-usual into something uncanny and disconcerting. In aping extractive capitalism, the two novels defamiliarize a neoliberal world economy until its core tenets of infinite financial gain, competition trumping compassion, and the stripping of the environment appear strange and delusional. Reading both novels together shows how EcoGothic literary techniques can make visible the unseen, noxious ecologies of the Global South. As opposed to looking away from "poisoned ground" (2007: 205) to pastoral Edens, Morton wants us to "identify with the monstrous thing" and obliterate the division between us and them (2007: 195). By forcing us to become cognizant of the power of oil, and by compelling the reader to inhabit the fractured "I" of the exploited in petroculture, the novels shed light on the precarity of the poor in the Global South while alluding to our culpability in their conditions.

While I have chosen these two novels for their rich EcoGothic effects and the history of Malaysia and Nigeria with oil, more EcoGothic work needs to be done comparing the literatures of countries in the Global South with one another. Through this comparative analysis, I do not mean to efface the very real differences between the socio-political and environmental landscapes

of Malaysia and Nigeria, but instead aim to show how aspects of petroculture in the Malaysian and Nigerian experience resonate with each other. This paper suggests that the global EcoGothic exposes the uneven development of neoliberal extractivism across various terrains and allows postcolonial studies scholars to go beyond the dialectic of East-West or Global South-Global North interactions. By studying global EcoGothic literature, we can see more clearly how environments and peoples are made strange — and how we can use narratives to welcome the stranger.

Notes

1. The author would like to thank Professor Shirley Chew at Nanyang Technological University for her generous feedback on an earlier version of this essay.

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