**Oil Cultures, World Drama and Contemporaneity: Questions of Time, Space and Form in Ella Hickson’s *Oil***

“We Fuel the Future.” (GE Oil and Gas, General Electric 2018)

“Form [is] the most profoundly social aspect of literature: form as force” (Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, and Trees*)

“The representational problem oil presents to the committed artist, be he a socialist [...] or an environmentalist, has to do with oil’s primal associations with earth’s body, and therefore with the permeability, excess, and multiplicity of all bodies . . . . [O]il itself retains the indeterminacy and openness to mystification of a living/performing spectacle.” (LeMenager “The Aesthetics of Petroleum, After Oil!”, 73-4)

**I. Preface: Oil and World Cultures**

Oil has not only been described with epithets as diverse as “black gold”,[[1]](#footnote-1) “devil’s excrement”,[[2]](#footnote-2) “a prize from a fairyland”,[[3]](#footnote-3) “capitalism’s lifeblood”,[[4]](#footnote-4) and a viscous, nonlocal, and uncanny “hyper-object”[[5]](#footnote-5). Oil has also been referred to as “the most powerful fuel and versatile substance ever discovered”[[6]](#footnote-6)— thereby being unanimously recognized as the most vital, valuable, ubiquitous and yet, paradoxically, invisible commodity of modern and contemporary global economics and history.[[7]](#footnote-7) In *Carbon Nation* (2014), Bob Johnson confirms the point at issue: “we industrial peoples have preferred to keep our energy dependencies out of sight” (p.xxix; see also Logar *Invisible Oil*, 2011). Similarly, Ruth Salvaggio argues that oil has turned out to be a “spectral substance” due to its being “curiously concealed” through various ideological-discursive or infrastructural means, including the politics of representation (such as media discourse), political hegemony, pipelines, storage containers and car engines (386 in *Oil Cultures*). Oil has been referred to as “the machine of destiny” (Maas, *Crude World*, 2009) and “the mediator of futurity”; that is, “a vanishing mediator between industrialism and family life”, and “a singular force capable of producing singular effects—oil wars, oil addiction, and oil states” and—we might add—palpable *cultural affects*.[[8]](#footnote-8) Yergin draws our attention to how oil has proved not only “the lifeblood of suburban communities,” but more importantly, the “very nature of civilization” (1992, xiv). Accentuating the fun

Humanity’s fundamental dependence on oil has not been confined to the industrial, economic and social aspects of life, but has rather come to assume psychological and emotive-affective dimensions too. One such dimension is to be found in the ostensibly abstract ideas of freedom and selfhood. As Szeman observes: “Despite being a concrete thing, oil animates and enables all manner of abstract categories, including freedom, mobility, growth, entrepreneurship, and the future in an essential way” (2014, 146). Significantly, this profound attachment does not involve an attachment to the substance itself but rather to “all of the things that oil make possible” (Jennifer Wenzel p. l, 2014). Discerning the “ultra-deep” (p.3, 2014) nature of this dependence-attachment, LeMenager describes this dynamic in terms of “loving oil”—albeit qualifying it as a “Bad love” (p.11, 2014). The modifier “bad” can be construed here as involving disastrous and detrimental moral, existential and ontological implications, not only for humanity and nature but for social and interpersonal relations. This affective relationship, however, as our exploration of Hickson’s *Oil* will also demonstrate, can be toxic, not only due to the nature of oil itself, but also because of the sometimes irrational means through which oil is extracted, distributed and consumed.

Drawing on Latour’s idea of “natureculture”[[9]](#footnote-9) (designating the “inevitable intermixture of the self-generating (organic) and the made”), LeMenager pushes the argument concerning the vital and pervasive role of oil, particularly in late capitalist, technologically-advanced Western societies, to the point where she contends: “the human body has become, in the wealthier parts of the world, a petroleum natureculture” (2014, p.5). Furthermore, as many scholars have noted, petroleum products provide the supplementary materiality for a neoliberal cultural politics of “life.” (Huber, *Lifeblood* xv-xx, 19-25, 97-128). As Huber notes, the most salient manifestation of this neoliberal cultural politics of subjectivity, is discernible in the hegemonic promotion of “entrepreneurial life”, both as the norm and the ideal image of citizen-subject. The rise of this neoliberal h

human-induced environmental-ecological damage, aggravated by the extraction-production-consumption of oil (and other fossil fuels, including coal), *Oil* primarily accentuates the capitalogenic nature of the consequences of both oil-driven modes of life, subjectivation and desire-production, and the oil-based energy regime in the world, particularly in the West.[[10]](#footnote-10) *Oil* not only considers the effects of an oil-based energy culture as indelibly intermeshed with political-economic dynamics and the history of capitalism (as a global system), it also situates its consideration of oil in a world-historical and world-environmental context. As such, as will be demonstrated here, the effects of this capitalogenic oil-based *lebenswelt* are depicted by Hickson to be discernibly registered on at least three levels: the social-cultural, the political-economic and the affective-cognitive.

Whilst a handful of other plays and performances have appeared on the scene of modern European drama—most prominently *Konjunktur* (1928) by Leo Lania and *Petroleuminseln* (1927) by Lion Feuchtwanger—Ella Hickson’s *Oil* is, to my knowledge, one of the first works in modern and conte

evidently reflected in both the form, structure and content of *Oil*, Hickson, consonant with Moore’s argument, shows how the capitalist world-system is a system of “cyclical” and “cumulative” crisis-formation (Moore p. 11). Hickson’s play indeed shows how oil comes to adversely affect and redefine the individual’s (here Mary’s and Amy’s) mode of relationship (particularly in terms of ethics and economy) with the family, local community, native land and the nation.

Premised on the conceptual framework delineated above, I will argue that world drama, and Hickson’s *Oil* as a paradigmatic example, features as a potent means of registering the different meanings of “oil” available in different historical moments, social systems, and world cultures. More specifically, I will be probing the meanings of oil under a range of rubrics, including oil as commodity, as social agent, as cultural signifier, as hyper-object,[[11]](#footnote-11) and as impossible object of desire.If

caustically reprimands her.

Moments later Joss “kisses May, pulls her into him, sits her on his lap. Rests his head on her chest” and professes his profound love to her: “My blood would run cold without you. I’d die” (23). May, however, is not content with this display of emotion and finds this amount of proximity alienating. As she professes to Joss: “I know your face better than I know my own. […] Sometimes I think I know it so well I'll see it instead of my own when l look in the mirror” (23). May’s dismay with her existential circumstances, coupled with her profound sense of self-alienation and suffocation in the economy and gender politics of the household (along with her relentlessly ambitious spirit, intensified by the magic light, power, and freedom promised by oil), finally impels her to leave home and husband in quest for her object of desire: the freedom and economic autonomy promised by oil. In the subsequent Parts, May proceeds to accompany BP and British Empire’s officers and engineers into Iran/Persia in their quest for oil. She subsequently becomes an oil-based entrepreneur and finally an MP.

Hickson’s *Oil* thus depicts the almost “magic” transformation of a rural, working class, pregnant British woman (from Cornwall) - from both a domestic and farm worker, initially into a libertine barmaid, and then, by gradual ascent of the social-political hierarchy, to an oil-based entrepreneur and ultimately a Member of Parliament. To accomplish this, she moves from 1889 Cornwall to 1908 Persia and 1970 Hampstead, and then to 2021 Iraq, eventually ending up in 2051. On

in Nature. There are no solitary, free-living creatures, every form of life is dependent on other forms.” This epigraph primarily reflects a logic of assemblage, at work on interpersonal, communal-social, national and multi-national or worldly levels, which can be deployed either symbiotically or exploitatively. In other words, such a logic of assemblage can be construed along three lines. Ontologically, it points to the relational logic of the web of life, thus designating life as an interconnected ecosystem. Politically, economically, and socially, it evokes a worlded and systemic conception of human world – both within a national and internati

them to undertake a recognition of the world-system dynamics underlying them, as well as a cognitive re-mapping of the psychogeography and political economy of modern geopolitics and eco-politics. As such, it foregrounds the manner in which Western late modernity and late capitalism exploitatively batten on these resource frontiers.

Thirdly

JOSS. We got light.

WW. It creates much more heat than whale lamps or wood, it’s hotter than coal—and you saw how easy it was to light.

THOMAS. It's expensive, I guess?

WW. Cheaper by half than whale, last three times as long.

A bit of the kerosene has spilt on MAY 's finger—she lifts it to her nose and inhales deeply—she loves the smell. (18)

The second instance of the first moment emerges when WW is explaining the nature and benefits of oil to the Singers. His remarks illuminate the aporetic attribute of oil, namely its being the almost invisible condition of possibility of vision (conceived literally and metaphorically). Oil thus assumes a transcendental aura. Significantly, this characterization of oil as light presents an aporetic moment of simultaneous blindness and insight for May (reflected in her fascination or

, and (2) on the creaturely life of the individual subjects (characters).[[12]](#footnote-12) The most conspicuous example of the latter characteristic is the last interscene, where we find the sovereigns of oil—May and William Whitcomb—now deposed and reduced to a creaturely life left/kept in the museum of history, like two marionettes or remnants of an extinct historical era now in ruins.[[13]](#footnote-13) My argument concerning Hickson’s world-historical account and vision of history as a baroque-like allegory is confirmed by Benjamin’s description of the Baroque mode of allegory as the representation of historical decay: “In the ruin history has merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things” (OGTD, pp. 1 77-8). This is poignantly evidenced by the stage direction of the last interscene: “MAY and WW freeze, as if stuck in time; snow globe, museum exhibit. FAN WANG puts a coin into the machine and brings the historical exhibit to life—she stares at it, barely interested. Her phone rings—she answers it and chats over the top of EXHIBIT RECORDING” (124). Immediately after, we are made to listen to the exhibit recording worded in Chinese with English transcription inserted bel

in the audience. If the history of oil/energy is a Godless one, in which neither the metaphysical God of monotheistic religions nor the physical-pantheistic Goddess of Nature/Earth are deemed alive, then oil drama is the most fitting space for this “profane ill

. In this essay, Benjamin sketches a discontinuous theory of history. Pitting his radical account of historical materialism—involving the task of brushing “history against the grain” (257)—against the universalizing strategies of bourgeois historicism (in which history is posited to involve a linear progression towards further rationality and emancipation/liberty). Conjoining the Marxist concept of revolution with the Jewish notion of Messianic time (in which all history is endowed with meaning retrospectively by the untimely com

of its argument, Michael Niblett’s distinction between the subjecivization of the system through individual characters and the systems as an elusive, highly abstract totality on the one hand, and the differences between “saccharine irrealism” and petro-aesthetics on the other is highly germane to Hickson’s concerns in this regard. As Niblett explains: “to think oil is to think the world-system. [ … ] And this is where the problem lies; for to attempt to make oil the direct subject of a narrative is the attempt to subjectivize the world-system—to make it representable in terms of ordinary (subjective) experience. But whereas the lived experience of the effects produced by the system’s petro-driven dynamics would be representable in this way, the system as such, as an immense bundle of human and extra-human relations in movement, could not be reduced to such subjective experience” (2015, 275).

To expose these asymmetrical core-periphery dynamics driven by the logic of extractivisim and commodification/objectification of persons and nations, Hickson predicates her play on encounters between these two unequal forces (to wit, core/imperial/global and peripheral/national/local) occurring at the pivotal points of extraction. These points are predominantly extraction sites (Persia/Iran, Iraq, and Africa): “the site of extraction becomes the territorial center through which conflicting social forces congregate and struggle over the oil ‘prize’ unfolds” (Huber 25). Relatedly, all the spatial/geographical and temporal/historical nodal points of the play are structured around oil-related places and dates.

By subjecting bringing critical scrutiny to bear upon the intricacies of *Oil*’s treatment of form at various levels (the aesthetic (representational or performative), the ethical, the economic, the psychodynamic, and the political), this essay seeks to demonstrate how its conceptions of (human) history (along with its vision of futurity), of gendered Western subjectivity and of the Capitalocenic critique of petro-capitalist world system are reflected in its form. The tragic irony of such a negative-dialectical dynamics and asymmetrical pattern of interdependence, as Hickson’s *Oil* accentuates, is the possibility of inversion and/or reversal. In other words, the moment when the core of world, petro-capitalist system (the West) falls victim to its own economic-relational logic and, consequently, devolves into a periphery to a newly-emerged core. This reversal and devolution of the center, as *Oil* shows, primarily stems from the unsustainability of its economic logic of unlimited growth and the depletion of the resources upon which its system is predicated.

By depicting William Whitcombe and May as marionettes in a snow globe or as on exhibition (and as part of a museum) in the concluding part (set at once in 2051 and an allegorically indefinite time), the play indeed makes the present seem archaic, already perished/past and unsustainable. Set, as it is, in 2016, the play also foregrounds a new (less familiar) conception/picture of contemporaneity and its implications. This metamorphosis of characters and their world (in 2051), I would argue, reveals the issue of the “contemporaneity” of the play—in the sense elaborated by Agamben. *Oil* can be construed as a “contemporary” work/intervention in the Agambenian sense because firstly, it “inscribes itself in the present by marking it above all as archaic. Only he who perceives the indices and signatures of the archaic in the most modern and recent can be contemporary”. And, secondly, “to be contemporary means in this sense to return to a present where we have never been”. Agamben characterizes “the contemporary” with a simultaneous “distancing and nearness” and proceeds to ascribe such characterization to the fact that both “have their foundation in this proximity to the origin that nowhere pulses with more force than in the present” (*What Is an Apparatus* 50). Such a present however is inevitably disjunctive with itself and hence open:

To perceive, in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but can not—this is what it means to be contemporary. As such, contemporaries are rare. And for this reason, to be contemporary is, first and foremost, a question of courage, because it means being able not only to firmly fix your gaze on the darkness of the epoch, but also to perceive in this darkness a light that, while directed toward us, infinitely distances itself from us. In other words, it is like being on time for an appointment that one cannot but miss (46).

The vision we are granted in the last part of the play is the prospect of a future underpinning the present which is not yet, but is bound to happen. This part depicts how an oil-less future affects the geopolitics and hegemony of energy resources and human life, giving rise to the emergence of a new world order and a new cultural-social hegemony. Although parts of the play are located in the past or future, Hickson presents it as a contemporary play, thereby revealing her conception of what history as contemporaneity means. Hickson’s contemporaneity not only alerts us to capitalism’s occlusion of ecological destruction through its uchronistic picture of futurity, but also tries to salvage us from this capitalocentric eu-chronos. Hickson, it can thus be inferred, has a non-neoliberal view of history, that is, one which is non-linear, non-teleological, alterable and not necessarily progressive.

In the light of the establishment of the Capitalocenic and world-systemic consciousness informing Hickson’s tackling of the history and political economy of oil, it is apt to recall the significance of allegory to this multi-scalar and complex mode of contemporaneity at stake in works of world dramas. Indeed, if allegory, as Benjamin discerns, appears at the moment of acute historical crisis, then allegory can act as a highly efficacious formal and epistemological form for reflecting the genealogy, scale, and symptomatology of the ecological crisis besetting the world today. One of the pivotal features that makes Benjamin’s account of allegory highly pertinent to the study of the works of world dramas, among whose vexing concerns are the issues of genesis, scale and developmental dynamics of a historical and ontological problem, is its establishment of a dialectical relation between human history and nonhuman nature. This is evident in Benjamin’s concept of “nature-history” (*Naturgescichte*) – where history is conceived to belong to nature (hence subject to decay) and nature is construed to be historical (see Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne New York: Verso, 1998), pp. 155-167).[[14]](#footnote-14)

By the same token, the allegorical and Trauerspiel dynamics informing *Oil* is manifested, at the conclusion, in the state of “fallen nature which bears the imprint of the progression of history” (Benjamin, *OGTD*, p.180.). Such dynamics also reveals the extent to which, in her new-materialist conception of history, Hickson’s approach diverges from [sp] the teleological understanding of dialectics informing Brecht’s approach and gravitates towards the melancholy materialism permeating Benjamin’s account. Equally significantly, apart from its foregrounding of “revolutions” within the cycles of capitalist exploitation of nature and natural resources on planetary and extra-terrestrial levels, if there is any room for the notion of “revolution” in Hickson’s view of history, it takes place (in keeping with its Benjaminian view of revolution) at the level of individual’s “lived experience” rather the Brechtian sense of actual social-historical revolution. Nevertheless, partly diverging from entirely corresponding to the premises and implications of Benjamin’s dialectical materialist account of nature-history in terms of “future as decay”, “decay” does not capture the totality of the ethics and ontology (its account of the future of human world) in Hickson’s *Oil* (as allegorical as it is). *Oil* is also concerned with the possibilities oil (or lack thereof) offers for individuation and ethics of love particularly in the later May in/and her relation to Amy and the now lost past.

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1. Ed Kashi 2008; see also Federici p.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Juan Pablo Perez Alfonzo in Michael L. Ross, 2012, p.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Winston Churchill’s remark on the oil extracted by British Petroleum from Persian/Iranian oil resources/wells; see also Watts, “Oil as Money”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Matthew Huber’s Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital (2013), particularly Chapter 1 and 2 ; see also Atkinson p. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Timothy Morton 2013, pp. 28-40, passim. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tyler Priest, “The Dilemmas of Oil Empire,” 2012, p.236. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See LeMenager 2014, pp.1-6, and Mitchell 2011, pp. 4-9, pp.23-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Huber “Refined Politics” in *Oil and Culture*, 226; see also Maas 2009, Hitchcock 2010, et. al.). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The concept of “natureculture” has also been elaborated by Donna Haraway in a fairly similar context. See Haraway, Donna J. 2003. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Vol. 1.

   Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Moore “Anthropocenes & The Capitalocene Alternative” (74) . [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Timothy Morton, in his object-oriented ontology, opens his delineation of what he terms “hyperobjects” by providing a number of examples notably including a black hole. “hyperobject” (see Morton 1; also see 49). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Other affinities between Hickson’s *Oil* and Benjamin’s elaboration and account of *Trauerspiel* include the representation of the powerful puppet-like characters. The characters in the play (particularly two of them) appear as at once human beings and puppets (*papier mache*) and this feature stems from their association with the magic/monstrous matter (oil), both literally and ironically. May has been subtly and ambiguously depicted described as both human and monster. Relatedly, WW’s return to the place where play started constitutes also an allegorical moment (the return of a phantasmatic figure representing reunion not with a real love and human being but the spectre of oil and affluence). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The sovereign-like status of both characters is reflected in their being described as “gods” and “monsters”. As it reads: “WILLIAM WHITCOMB enters—he looks at MAY. Music plays. MAY and WW line to dance to Justin Bieber. He takes a bottle of brandy out of his saddlebag and gives MAY a glass—he laughs. His lamp throws a soft light across the room. He takes MAY, he spins her round—they waltz. The Light throws their shadows up large across the walls. Two aging survivors dance and dance—like gods, like monsters” (123). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. However, it has only been recently that the significance of allegory to cultural and literary reflections of large- or world-scale crisis has been discerned by scholars. Bruce Clarke, for instance, argues how “Allegory typically models a concept of world-space through an articulation of nested structures, universal systems with a montage of ontological levels.” (28). Elizabeth DeLeoughrey, in her sustained deployment of “allegory” as for Anthropocene world literature narratives of ecological crisis bred by global capitalism, argues that “[d]ue to its ability to represent both historical and scalar relations, allegory has arisen as a notable form for this moment of planetary climate crisis” (5). Notably, she adds that “allegory is known for its embeddedness in history (time), its construction of a world system (space), and its signification practices in which the particular figures for the general and the local for the global” (Ibid.). Averring how “environmental discourse is rife with allegorical modes” (5), DeLoughrey not only underscores “allegory’s pedagogical incentives and its incitement to action” (4) but also posits “allegory” as a formal-epistemological remedy for overcoming the ontological split/duality (the disjuncture between human history and nature /planet) variously posited/assumed by both discourses of the global capitalism and Anthropocene. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)