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Offshore Mysteries, Narrative Infrastructure: Oil, Noir, and the World-Ocean

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Abstract: Situated within debates of world literature, petrocultures, and the blue humanities, this article provides a methodological approach to interpreting genre, energy forms, and world-literature. This relies on Dominic Boyer's concept of 'energopolitics' (adapted from Foucault's biopolitics), which considers the codependence of political power, electricity, fuel and energy infrastructure. Echoing Fredric Jameson (1981) and Patricia Yaeger (2011), the article argues that looking for a text's 'energopolitical unconscious' is a means of discerning the way energopolitics and energy are encoded in world-literary plot, form, and genre. Then, it turns to a comparative reading of two novels, Carlos Fuentes's *The Hydra Head* (1978) and Ian Rankin's *Black & Blue* (1997), to argue that such novels provide an understanding of relationships between world-literary genre, forms of energy, and the world-oceanic regime of the offshore. The offshore is a juridical-spatial regime that circumvents nation-state regulation through extraterritorial ownership practices. It is a political and infrastructural power over the oceanic flows of capital and energy, to produce a spatial environment that exceeds the juridical boundaries of nation-states. Thus, if the world-ocean is the space upon which fossil capital depends for its realisation, the offshore is the legal form of fossil capital in the world-ocean. Finally, the article argues that noir mysteries are *the* genre of the offshore, as it is a genre particularly capable of indexing its social tensions. Noir's settings and atmospheres are intimately connected with petromodernity's infrastructure: hotels, highways, flickering streetlights and eerie hinterlands, ports and warehouses; the mystery is an excellent formal device, providing both narratorial motivation and a code for traversing imagined territories and detecting their secrets. At the same time, noir's generic investment in investigations of legality and power—its 'legal grammar'—makes it a useful stage through which to pursue questions of sovereignty, ocean-space, territory, and juridical forms.

Keywords: *The Hydra Head*; *Black & Blue*; world-literature; petrofiction; blue humanities; offshore; mysteries; noir; infrastructure; logistics

Offshore Mysteries

Let's begin with a mystery, set in some of the world's largest ports: "*A ship is mysteriously renamed. Someone crosschecks cargo manifests, notices a pattern of erratic offshore movement, and begins to construct a story, a suspicious sequence of events, where before there were only lists and voyages, a repetitive and routine industrial series*" (Sekula 1995, p. 32). In Allan Sekula's photowork *Fish Story*, this mystery in the world of international shipping is placed alongside photographs taken of workers in shipping ports, including San Diego, Rotterdam, Gdańsk and Barcelona. The motivation for this is that ports are "a position to see the global patterns of intrigue hidden in the mundane details of commerce" (p. 32). While the global circulation of commodities is mundane, Sekula's formulation suggests that it nevertheless exerts a palpable fascination, given the way that global commerce and geopolitical intrigue are "pictorially condensed" (p. 32) in settings essential to the infrastructure of capital. The problem that Sekula articulates is one of representation: hidden in repetitive and banal transport

are patterns of intrigue, and intriguing patterns, that remain *undetected*. Against the backdrop of the 50,000-strong global fleet of merchant ships, carrying ninety percent of the world's internationally traded commodities and two-thirds of its oil, it is only through a "pattern in erratic offshore movement" that a story begins to be constructed. Here, Sekula employs a language typical of noir fiction to focus his description of the shipping ports and the events that take place in them; to investigate and detect, as he writes elsewhere, "the world's increasingly grotesque 'connectedness,' the hidden merciless grinding away beneath the slick superficial liquidity of markets" (Sekula 2002, p. 7). This hinges on the offshore, which he describes as a mystery: simultaneously effacing, and a clue to seeing, the centrality of ocean logistics to capital's power over life, energy, and labour.

My interest in this article is in the generic strategies employed to represent the offshore, which might provisionally be defined as "a logic through which capitalism carves out and exploits legally distinct and supposedly exceptional spaces" (Potts 2019, p. 198). The offshore is a juridical-spatial regime that circumvents nation-state regulation through extraterritorial ownership practices, and can include offshore finance, special economic zones, and flagging practices. Flags of convenience, the offshore that Sekula is referring to—and elsewhere described by Sekula as an "ensign of camouflage and confusion" (Sekula 1995, p. 50), and by Rodney Carlisle as "systems of subterfuge" (Carlisle 1981, p. 179)—effectively conceals ownership of ships, oil-rigs, and other sea-going vessels through complex systems of incorporation, in order to limit regulation and obfuscate social responsibility (Appel 2015). While it seems like a topic for dusty textbooks, the offshore has a surprising currency in a subset of noir fiction, set in and around ports, in which "a pattern in erratic offshore movement" (Sekula 1995, p. 32) is the key to unravelling a sinister plot. A small (but by no means exhaustive) sample of these offshore mysteries reveals their broad political geography: novels such as *The Hydra Head* (Fuentes 1978), *Black & Blue* (Rankin 1997), *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (Høeg 1996), *Black Water Rising* (Locke 2009), *Murder at Cape Three Points* (Quartey 2014) and *Waste Tide* (Chen 2019); and TV and film such as *The Wire* (Simon 2003), *Syriana* (Gaghan 2005) and *Occupied* (Skjoldbjærg 2015). Central to the noir sub-genre, the focus of this article, is a fixation with crime and legality, the porosity of borders and boundaries, conspiracy and paranoia, and alienation and social disquiet. It is a genre in which the world is closed to its characters, and becomes accessible only indirectly through traces of evidence. A code is laid over its settings in order to transform alienated terrains of everyday life into landscapes alive with intrigue. The mystery is a formal device, providing both narratorial motivation and a code for traversing imagined territories and detecting their secrets. The affinities between noir fiction and the mundane offshore world is the mystery that this article will investigate.

The motivation for interrogating novelistic registrations of the offshore intersects with several literary-critical research fields. Firstly, the nascent 'blue humanities', the topic of this special issue. Among other things, this research field aims at a "historicization of the oceans" (Gillis 2013), to consider the relations of ocean ecology, commerce and culture. Secondly, the field of the energy humanities, which traces the constitutive role energy plays in forming culture, and vice versa. One of the key elements of this in literary studies has been the study of 'petrofiction', fiction whose form and content is subtended by oil's energetic cultural force. The two fields share matters of concern. From mechanized trawling, offshore oil development, petroleum-guzzling navies (the largest, the U.S. Navy, guarantees the safety of the oil industry) carbon absorption and sea level rise—oil and the ocean are inextricably bound. Further, in the era of cargo ships, one of the 'prime movers of globalization' (Smil 2010), global commerce runs on oil (indeed, one of its dirtiest forms, bunker fuel, in quantities so vast if it were a nation it would be the world's sixth largest emitter of CO₂). Most of these ships are registered 'offshore', in a state different to the one in which the ship's owner is incorporated (UNCTAD 2019). Both fields have begun to address the importance of the offshore in social and cultural life.¹ It provides a useful

¹ For example, see Campbell (2019); Jones and Motha (2015); Macdonald (2015); Paye (2019); Polack and Farquharson (2017); Sheller (2018).

optic, the multiple meanings of which—flagging, offshore oil-rigs, offshore finance—suggest a way of interpreting the links between oil, the ocean, and literary genre.

My argument moves through three claims. Firstly, I outline a methodological approach to interpreting genre, energy forms, and world-literature. This relies on Dominic Boyer's concept of 'energopolitics' (adapted from Foucault's biopolitics), which considers the codependence of political power, electricity, fuel and energy infrastructure (Boyer 2019). Echoing Fredric Jameson (1981) and Patricia Yaeger (2011), I suggest that looking for a text's 'energopolitical unconscious' is a means of discerning the way energopolitics and energy are encoded in world-literary plot, form, and genre. Secondly, through tracing scholarly work on the offshore, a juridical-spatial regime that encompasses shipping and deep-sea oil extraction, I suggest that it is an element within an energopolitical apparatus: "power over (and through) energy" (Boyer 2011, p. 5). It is a political and infrastructural power over and through the oceanic flows of capital and energy, especially oil. Finally, I argue that noir mysteries are the genre of the offshore, through a comparative reading of two novels, Carlos Fuentes's *The Hydra Head* (1978) and Ian Rankin's *Black & Blue* (1997). These two novels track patterns of intrigue in offshore oil boom towns, Coatzacoalcos in Veracruz, Mexico, and Aberdeen, Scotland (although the plots encompass a much wider social terrain). These two novels especially are exemplary demonstrations of the peculiar difficulties that the offshore poses to representation, and of the efficacy of mysteries as a formal device to encode and index political and infrastructural power. Further, both works are concerned with interlocking modes of the offshore—oil, shipping, and finance—and thus strongly register its social logic. Of special interest is the way that the offshore infrastructure provides the novelistic settings, mood, and plot. The article will argue, then, that the narrative infrastructure, which connects events within a plot and creates novelistic atmospheres, is a formal mediation of the conflicts and contradictions of the offshore.

For Boyer, energopolitics, and its related term, energopower, describes "the energo-material contributions of fuel and electricity to political power" (Boyer 2019, p. 5). Energopolitics names the relation between energetic infrastructures, forms of knowledge, political power, and sovereignty (Boyer 2019, pp. 13–16). Energopolitics, then, is a lens for understanding how political and energetic power constitute each other. In its dominant form, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this has been used to secure the reproduction of fossil capital (Andreas Malm's term for capital that has a constituent input of fossil energy (Malm 2016)). This can be usefully incorporated in energetic literary studies. Combining Foucault's biopolitics (the inspiration for Boyer's energopolitics) and Jameson's 'political unconscious', Leerom Medovoi writes that "the key contribution of a Marxist ecocriticism, or an ecocritical Marxism, would be to focus attention on the recordings of setting as a mechanism through which the biopolitical environmentalization of actual spaces (as governable milieus for life) might pass into the literary" (Medovoi 2010, p. 133; see also Diamanti 2016). Adapting this approach, I argue that the way literature registers energopolitical recoding of settings—through political power, energy resource, and infrastructure—constitutes a given text's 'energopolitical unconscious'; or, how a text mediates energopolitics in its contents and form. In Jameson's schema in *The Political Unconscious*, texts move three semantic horizons: a response to a political situation; an utterance in class discourse and an index of class conflict; and the traces and signs of the coexistence of several modes of production: the residues of older social forms, the dominance of the modern capitalist world-system, and an emergent social order struggling to be born. Rereading this through energopolitics, we might say that a text's semantic horizons are: a response to a situation of political and infrastructural power subtended by energy resources; the way control over energy resources maintains the world-system's unequal division of labour; and the uneven coexistence of forms of energopolitics in the world-system.

Informing this approach is the Warwick Research Collective's (WReC) theorization of 'world-literature' (the other half of this special issue's focus), which has sought to reformulate literary comparativism through the perspective of world-systems analysis (for an introduction to world-systems analysis see Wallerstein 2004). Their central claim is that "the world-system will necessarily be discernible in any modern literary work, since the world-system exists

unforgoably as the matrix within which all modern literature takes shape and comes into being" (Warwick Research Collective 2015, p. 20; emphasis original). Arguing for a comparative framework to foreground the aesthetic registration of energy forms, Graeme Macdonald writes that a world-literary outlook is a useful "compass of interpretation" for "energetic texts and literary forms whose unlikely likenesses correspond with the world-system's carbon flows, exchanges, relations and circulations" (Macdonald 2017, pp. 290–91). Given that oil's production of logistical space integrates extraction, production, circulation, and consumption through and across the ocean, we might say, with Philip Steinberg, that the "modern world-system is, characteristically and importantly, an oceanic system" (Steinberg 2001, p. 23). Therefore, world-literature can be conceived through its encoding of the modern world-system as a world-ocean system. This frame is a useful one when tracing the circulation of offshore mysteries across the ocean of world-literature, given that the locus of offshore's energopower is in its extraterritorial evasion of nation-state sovereignty through a world-oceanic legal and logistical space. Therefore, investigating its literary encodings requires a framework that encapsulates the oil-fueled circulatory system of the world-ocean.

A final note on genre, before turning to the offshore. The two key terms of this article's title, mystery and infrastructure, correspond to the link that Boyer identifies as key to energopolitics: political power and energy infrastructure. Viktor Shklovsky provides an adequate formal definition of a mystery story: "one told in such a way that what is happening is incomprehensible to the reader" (Shklovsky 2009, p. 101)—to which might be added: a story made deliberately incomprehensible, generating an intriguing plot and atmosphere. Luc Boltanski argues mysteries are primarily concerned with suspicions about the location of power (Boltanski 2014); while many critics, including Jameson, have identified noir fiction's sustained interest in the underbelly of society, its infrastructure (Jameson 2016). Further, noir's filmic and literary global spread has been interpreted as a cultural register of globalisation (Fay and Nieland 2009; Pepper and Schmid 2016). What has not been emphasised is noir's "narrative energetics" (Macdonald 2013, p. 4), the way it depends on energy forms and infrastructure in constructing plot, character, and narrative impetus. Noir settings and atmosphere are intimately connected with petromodernity's infrastructure: hotels, highways, flickering streetlights and eerie hinterlands, ports and warehouses, and so on. From the genre's origins in the 1930s Los Angeles metropolis (e.g., Raymond Chandler, whose novels obsessively investigate an emergent petro-consumer society) to its contemporary ubiquity—and its innovative combination with other genres such as science fiction in Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* (Chen 2019) and Gabriela Alemán's *Poso Wells* (Alemán 2018)—these spaces are perhaps the paradigmatic settings of 'world-noir', a genre that accompanies the spread of oil culture across the world-ocean. This, I am suggesting, is an element of the genre's energopolitical unconscious: the way energy infrastructure is insinuated into and excluded from narrative. The mystery is a formal device, or code, that ties together a number of infrastructural elements in a narrative to make each element illuminate the others. It is a way of coding a setting—in this case, the offshore—that is deliberately organized to be opaque. That is, it is a formal response to an infrastructural situation, to which I now turn in greater detail.

The Offshore

Tankers, cargo and container ships carry ninety percent of the world's internationally traded commodities and two-thirds of its oil. Over half of these ships fly flags of convenience (FOC), creating an opaque web of international ownership and registration, the advantages of which are depressingly predictable: lower taxation, poorly enforced labour and environmental regulations, and fewer fuel efficiency standards (DeSombre Elizabeth 2006, p. 3). At the heart of this story lies the oil tanker. Oil, unlike coal, is light and easily transported by sea, which gives political and juridical advantages to oil capital. Timothy Mitchell writes that "transoceanic shipping operated beyond the territorial spaces governed by the labour regulations and other democratic rights won in the era of widespread coal and railway strikes" (Mitchell 2013, p. 38). He argues that while coal-based energy systems are vulnerable to the collective political demands of workers whose capacity to strike and interrupt key

nodes in energy networks give them power, the smaller labour force required to extract oil and the flexible routing of oil tankers counteract the power of organised workers to limit and sabotage energy production, making “energy networks less vulnerable to the political claims of those whose labour kept them running” (Mitchell 2013, pp. 38–39). Further, the capacity to store and transport oil, to choose the market in which it is sold, and accelerate or slow down production means that power over energy resources is exercised by oil companies and petrostates—those that control the ‘flow’—while those that live in proximity to the resources are excluded from decision-making. For example, oil can be extracted by offshore oil rigs flying an FOC, taken by tanker, also flying an FOC, to a different state with a more advanced refining capacity, and distributed in a different market entirely (as shown below, this happened to an extent in Mexico during the 1970s oil boom).

China Miéville, in his study of international law, argues that class relations are embedded in legal forms, which mediate social relations governed by the commodity-form and exchange (Miéville 2005, p. 119). Through his reading of Marxist legal scholar Evgeny Pashukanis, Miéville argues that the formal equality of international legal relations, which cannot be adjudicated by a sovereign power, mobilises means of coercion that are embedded within legal forms (p. 140). This is clear in the offshore, a set of legal forms that guarantee extraterritorial ownership, used to ensure the power of oil and shipping companies and reproduce the unevenness of access to and sovereignty over oil and capital. According to historian Rodney Carlisle, the development of FOCs was in essence an extension of the American system of multinational corporations. The drafting of Liberia’s Maritime Code, which would influence the entire legal structure of ship registration including the 1958 Law of the Sea Convention, was checked and approved by the American Overseas Tanker Corporation, Standard Oil, and ESSO, who wished to use the Liberia flag to weaken ship workers’ unions and undermine the European shipping nations (Carlisle 1981, pp. 110–32). An entire legal structure of global shipping shaped by the needs of fossil capital by creating a juridical realm that circumvents the political and legal risks associated with ‘onshore’ activity ensures that legal titles to valuable oil resources are available to extraterritorial ownership. For Ronen Palan,

offshore consists of a set of juridical realms marking differential degrees of intensity by which states apply regulation, including taxation. Offshore is an enclave distinguished from ‘onshore’ not necessarily because of its location, but because it defines a territory or realm of activities in which states choose to withhold some or all of their regulations and taxation. (Palan 1999, p. 25)

This can be a tangible form, like territorial enclaves such as offshore oil development, or it can have a virtual existence, such as ship chartering and registering, banking and tax havens (Palan 1999, p. 24). “This strange world of offshore,” Palan writes, “is all a fiction. Side by side with the state system, therefore, emerges a virtual world of make-believe, driven by a commodified form of sovereignty” (Palan 2003, p. 4).

In other words, the offshore does not *replace* older legal forms, it coexists with them. As Susan Dianne Brophy argues “older legal relations can restrict the growth of capital, and on such occasions new laws may be introduced that do not absolutely abolish extant legal forms, but instead combine with them to establish new grounds of application and exploitation” (Brophy 2017, p. 188). This combined development of law creates juridical exceptions, the offshore, which exist alongside national ‘onshore’ laws. The offshore reveals that the world-ocean is not “a formless void *between* societies but rather a unique and specifically constructed space *within* society” (Steinberg 2001, p. 23); not a *res extensa* for fossil capital’s flow, but a contested spatial-juridical field used to construct legal distinctions between spaces connected through world-oceanic logistics. In other words, oil is strategically circulated through an environment that, through the powerful instrument of the offshore, exceeds the juridical boundaries of nation-states. Thus, if the world-ocean is the space upon which fossil capital depends for its realisation, the offshore might be understood as the legal form of fossil capital in the world-ocean. It is the legal dimension to the connection between oil and the world-ocean.

This has consequences for blue humanities scholars. Elizabeth DeLoughrey contends that “fluidity, flow, routes, and mobility have been emphasized over other, less poetic terms such as blue water navies, mobile offshore bases, high-seas exclusion zones, sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), and maritime ‘choke points.’ Yet this *strategic military grammar* is equally vital for a twenty-first-century critical ocean studies for the Anthropocene” (DeLoughrey 2019, p. 22). There is an analogous and complementary way of conceptualising the ocean: through a *legal grammar* that encompasses terms like flag of convenience, offshore, jurisdiction, territory, environment, and sovereignty. This would disclose how, employing Katharina Pistor’s (2019) terminology, ocean assets and spaces are ‘coded’ by law as capital, and how legal regimes are encoded in literary form. The energypower of offshore is also stored in its legal grammar, the way it shapes and defines what can and cannot be said, what is legal or not, what is communal or private, what is onshore and offshore, etc. The offshore, conceived as an infrastructure and legal form, is a legal power over energy in settings optimized for the accumulation of fossil capital, forming subjects dependent on and deliberately excluded from its operations. Pierre Bourdieu writes that, through the power of naming and classifying, laws “succeed in creating a situation in which no one can refuse or ignore the point of view, the vision, which they impose” (Bourdieu 1987, p. 838). It is the literary responses to this situation to which we now turn.

Intriguing Matter(s)

In Carlos Fuentes’s *The Hydra Head* (1978), a thriller about the 1970s Mexican offshore oil boom, two spies, one a Mexican bureaucrat named Felix Maldonado, the other a mysterious British financier, meet in a skyscraper in Houston, Texas. Looking out over the skyline, the British spy says to his Mexican counterpart: “look outside, and see the evidence of petrodollars [. . .] Does *anyone* know for whom he’s working?” (Fuentes 1978, p. 167). This narratorial interrogation of an urban setting, Houston, dominated by offshore oil and fossil finance, perfectly captures the epistemic problem of the offshore: how to represent something both everywhere and nowhere. Felix is a bureaucrat, born on the day of the nationalisation of Mexican oil in 1938, and thus is, in a sense, biographically inscribed by oil nationalism, whereas the British financier is interested in clandestine, extraterritorial control of Mexico’s oil, secured through petrodollar loans. Petrodollars, power, and plot are sinisterly entwined, providing both mystery and the narrative impetus to pursue it. The plot follows opaque currents of oil and petrodollars on a circuitous route around the Gulf of Mexico, in pursuit of a secret technology that would provide total power over Mexico’s oil infrastructure. Something similar occurs in Ian Rankin’s *Black and Blue* (1997), a ‘Tartan Noir’ novel about a police detective inspector, John Rebus, who uncovers a trail of crimes while investigating a murder of an offshore oil worker in Edinburgh’s financial district. He pursues two killers, which leads hard-boiled detective Rebus on a chase around Scotland. Both, it turns out, are oilmen: “he’d played with the connection between the victims, and numbers one and four had given him his answer: oil. Oil was at the heart of it” (Rankin 1997, p. 396). The first killer, whose crimes set in motion the events of the novel, is a Scottish-American man from Texas, who comes to Scotland for work in the 1970s North Sea oil boom. While *The Hydra Head* was written in the oil crisis decade of the 1970s, *Black and Blue*, written over twenty years after the boom started, locates the original crime in the same moment. The intriguing matter that ties the novels together is the offshore infrastructure built amid soaring oil prices in the 1970s. It forms a great, amorphous backdrop, cloaked in “epistemological murkiness” (Watts 2017, p. 255), through which events are ordered by a mysterious plot.

The sinister conspiracy to capture Mexico’s national resources moves through a murky underworld, populated by nefarious characters and shady deals. Felix meets a conspirator, a high-ranking Mexican state official working with American oil interests, “in the vast, deliberately murky penumbra of the windowless office, where an occasional lamp seemed strategically placed to blind the visitor” (Fuentes 1978, p. 29). Such a setting is typical of the noir genre, and typically signals the presence of forces deliberately concealed from the reader. As the narrative moves into a secret, dark, and windowless space, illuminated by an artificial light that obscures more than it reveals, the setting

initiates Felix into a web of intrigue that spans the world-ocean. The peculiar qualities of the Mexican oil boom—its reliance on petrodollars ‘recycled’ through London and New York’s offshore international banking, the accelerated tempo of oil extraction, the dependency on American oil refining—are encoded in its noir settings. In Rankin’s novel the influence of offshore oil is more localized but felt everywhere, just below the surface of everyday life. Rebus holds meetings in shadowy corners, where the reach of legal power is at its limit: “They met in the car park at Newcraighall [. . .] in a gully, surrounded by closed shops [. . .] their eyes darted, using wing mirrors and rearview, looking for shadows [. . .] A gathering of engine-noise, exhaust fumes and headlights, tall shadows on the canyon walls, the car park emptying” (Rankin 1997, pp. 46–47). Here, in a former coal mining town, on the outskirts of a retail park opened in the late 1980s, the novel creates a sense of unease and uncertainty in fraying communities. Oil did not make communities in the way coal had done and accelerated the closure of Britain’s coal industry. The oil industry is technologically complex, funded by large foreign investment and expertise, and the oil itself transported via enclosed pipelines and oil tankers. It requires a smaller workforce, unlike the sizeable communities and union power built through coal mining (Brotherstone 2012, pp. 80–81; Harvie 1995, p. 259; Mitchell 2013, p. 29). Detectable in settings such as the one quoted above is an unspoken unhappiness with the transition from a manufacturing to a consumer society (Brotherstone 2012, p. 81), while the uneasy coexistence of unevenly developed regions provides sites of narrative friction and anxiety, a mood of fear and suspicion. This space performs a similar function to the windowless room in *The Hydra Head*: it is the infrastructure of narrative. They are literary settings that appear hostile, strange, and populated by mysterious characters who seem to possess unattainable information and expertise. These spaces are narrative entrances, as it were, to a different, hidden world.

From a hotel window Rebus “pulled open his curtains. It had started to rain, the tarmac glistening [. . .] As he stared, the rain began to resemble smoke, billowing out of the darkness” (Rankin 1997, p. 403). These petrolic and postindustrial spaces rendered in noir style—car parks, dimly lit highways, shopping centres, hotels—evoke a petrocultural paranoia, a fear of a run-in with a sinister stranger in a fragmented, unsettled and mobile society. It is no exaggeration to say that the emotional atmosphere of noir depends on the infrastructure of oil—the flickering street lights in the urban hinterlands and the empty highway; the individual perspective that tries to discern patterns in the collective movement of strangers; the fear of the other in the street; the coexistence of social groups that accompanies rapid urbanisation. Perception is key here: the reified lifeworld of petromodernity—alienating infrastructures, vast assemblages of dead labour imprinted into the social and ecological landscape, shaping the texture and rhythm of everyday life—is transformed, by Rebus’s gaze, into a space infused with latent violence. *Setting becomes plot*. The textualization of the offshore in the ominous, encroaching settings of noir reveals a deeper truth about fossil capitalism’s development: it expands through the changing ratio of the organic composition of capital as an ever-increasing quantity of fixed capital and fossil energy is required for capital’s valorisation, which appears as an infrastructural force that dominates the lifeworld of individuals. And this is rendered in a world as if without colour: rain, tarmac, smoke, and shadow in the flickering electric lights of the highway—*Black and Blue* thrusts the reader into the dimness of a terminally estranged world. The energopolitical unconscious of such moods, then, is the failure of collective social and political experience, as the social logic of the offshore carves out exceptional and distinct spaces to extraterritorialise and exploit. If part of offshore’s aesthetic disposition is to hide in plain sight the spatialization of energy and capital in a social environment, then *Black and Blue* registers this in its atmosphere of disquiet. It, if only on the level of the energopolitical unconscious, expresses the historicity of perception and mood in an offshore environment; the way it infuses the ambience of everyday life.

Ostensibly looking for clues to a series of murders, it becomes clear throughout the novel that Rebus, himself from a former mining town, actually detects history, change, and development. As his investigations leads to Glasgow’s criminal underworld, he looks at a scene of an old crime and thinks, “it was hard to look at the street and see the year 1968, hard to get any feel for that era. Everything

and everyone had changed” (Rankin 1997, p. 95). His narratorial function is to disclose the secrets of history: “as a detective, he lived in people’s pasts: crimes committed before he arrived on the scene; witnesses’ memories ransacked. He had become a historian, and the role had bled into his personal life. Ghosts, bad dreams, echoes” (p. 461). This marks the text with a sense of irrecoverable loss: of a way of life, a historical community, that no longer exists—in short, of transition. These ghosts and echoes that Rebus hunts across Scotland are a nostalgia for an imagined past and a lost future. One of the defining national issues of oil in Scotland has been that of where its benefits have gone, with much national ire directed at the British state (Harvie 1995). The mystery is infused with a sense of collective loss as oil transforms the social landscape into a consumer society, the benefits of which are ‘offshored’ to multinational capital and the City of London.

Back in the Gulf, Felix tracks a spy to the port city of Coatzacoalcos, which he arrives in by plane. I quote at length to convey the sense of setting:

From the air, [Felix] had seen the expanse of the *Petróleos Mexicanos* refineries in Minatitlán, the stormy Gulf in the background, the industrial capital inland, a modern fortress of towers and tubing and cupolas glinting like tinfoil toys beneath a storm-sated sun, the busy port with its railroad tracks extending onto the docks, and long, black, sleek-decked tankers [. . .] Swift glimpses of coconut-palm forests, zebu cattle grazing on brick-colored plains, and the Gulf of Mexico whipping up its early-evening thundershower yielded to a view of a port city with low, ugly buildings, their windows blasted out by hurricanes, and dirty neon signs, unlighted at this hour, a whole consumer society installed in the tropics, supermarkets, television-sale and -repair shops, and in the foreground the everlasting Mexican world of tacos, pigs, flies, and naked children in mute contemplation. (Fuentes 1978, pp. 121–22)

This aerial perspective captures the vast size of the oil boomtown, the port and the refineries, and its proximity to agricultural and fishing industries. Meanwhile, the offshore rigs, out of sight, were registered under flags of convenience, so exempt from local law and taxation (Mitchell 2013, p. 38). As with Sekula, who sees in ports the world “pictorially localized” (p. 32), the description tries to capture the entire infrastructural reality of the region, its sense of scale. As soaring oil prices in the 1970s led to huge capital surpluses in the OPEC nations, it was necessary to find ways of ‘recycling’ and profitably investing them. As a result, Mexico was flooded with petrodollars and huge amounts of capital was pumped into offshore oil development (Roddick 1988; Kuczynski 1988). The new depths at which oil could be retrieved from the ocean, and the incentive of high oil prices, had a transformative impact on the Gulf of Mexico, with Coatzacoalcos at the forefront of rapid oil-fuelled development. For Fuentes, it is an ugly scene. The boomtown consumer society is out of place, an American import as much as the offshore technology and money funding it and the noir genre itself. And this registers in the literary style of the novels. It appears inscrutable: the infrastructure seems to resist and soak up meaning.

Scanning the landscape from the air, this perspective reveals the utility of a central formal device in noir, the investigator, as a means of representationally unifying a setting made unfamiliar by short-termist oil development. Rankin does something similar, with maps: “Rebus opened it, saw a map of the Bannock field, laid out across a grid showing which blocks it occupied. A note explained that the North Sea had been divided into blocks of 100 square miles apiece, and oil companies initially made bids for exploration rights to these blocks. Bannock was slap-bang up against the international boundary—a few miles east and you came to more oil fields, but this time Norwegian rather than British” (Rankin 1997, p. 132). The world is strange and unfamiliar; in response, the sentences become more certain, abstract, precise. This makes sense, given that our two investigators are a bureaucrat and a police detective, organs of the state apparatus, rationalizing space, intervening against the intrusive extraterritorial offshore. Simplistic, bureaucratic, cold: words roll over the landscape, peering into its crevices, describing the banality of pipelines, ports, shipping, decoding the environments they pass through. And this is one of the definitive stylistic contradictions that reveal the offshore’s energopolitical unconscious in the texts: the mysterious plot ties together a wide-scale, amorphous and deliberately opaque network of power; and the individual sentence, more localized and small-scale,

plots though this epic setting, naming and ordering it, slotting each element into an allotted place, doing the work of giving meaning to inert, alien infrastructure. This also suggests why noir is particularly useful in giving form to the dissonances of the offshore, because of how it stylistically mediates the contradictory scales at which it operates. This is the narrative energetics of noir: the incessant rolling forward of a figure that slowly assembles all the mysterious pieces together. In the context of oil noir, it expresses how the scalar disorientation created through oil infrastructure precedes and necessitates an entire reorganization of the perceptual field through which such infrastructure is represented.

The scene is set, laid out in advance for Felix to chase a man through Coatzacoalcos, who is trying to escape Mexico with its advanced oil technology (a crude formal conceit, a ring, that contains knowledge of all of Mexico's key oil reserves and infrastructure, which might be understood as figurative of energopower, a way of subjecting energopower to the necessities of plot). The thickness of prosaic language gives way to the narrative energetics of the chase:

The *cambujo* broke into a run toward the market, swinging the beef carcasses aside, turning over crates, scattering straw in his wake [. . .] The *cambujo* continued his flight through the market, zigzagging back and forth and sowing obstacles in Felix's path [. . .] They emerged at the far end of the market onto the railroad tracks, and Felix saw the mestizo bounding along the rails like a rabbit, following the tracks toward the port outlined in the distance by scattered yellow lights [. . .] The rainstorm had ended with the same abruptness with which it had begun, magnifying to an even greater degree the pungent odors of the tropical port. A moist lacquerlike film shone on the long expanse of dock, the moribund rails, the asphalt, and the distant hulk of oil tankers [. . .] Felix clasped his machete more tightly in his hand; at any moment the *cambujo* might turn with a pistol in his hand, his pursuer now within sure range. He stopped beside a black rain-washed tanker sweating gray drops of water and oil; Felix dropped the machete and threw himself upon the dark little man. (Fuentes 1978, pp. 136–37)

The port provides narrative and energetic excitement, with great energies and movements expressed through the chase. Crashing crates and swinging goods; changes in atmosphere and weather; the sudden inhalation of foreign smells; the threat of violence; and in the distance, ominous oil tankers enclosing the horizon. Unlike the stable panorama from the plane, kinetic energies swirl throughout this scene, from human movement to the olfactory register of the movement of climate, commodities, and culture. Narrated from the perspective of Felix, the chase captures the texture and rhythm of the boomtown, the great clash of social forces emerging from the “planless, complex, combined character” (Trotzky 1965, p. 27) of uneven development.

The mystery is reasserted as the chase ends and the ring escapes, destined for Galveston.

Felix threw himself against the side of the tanker still bumping against the dock, and, swinging his machete, an unlikely Quijote, attempted to pierce the body of the slowly moving giant [. . .] The tanker churned the dark waters of the Gulf of Mexico. [. . .] Felix read the name on the tanker's stern, *S.S. Emmita, Panama*, and saw the flag of four fields and two stars floating limply in the heavy air. (Fuentes 1978, p. 139)

As the ring disappears on an oil tanker flying a Panamanian flag, the plot offshores, onto the world-ocean. Here “the fictive force of law” (Aristodemou 2017, p. 6), as a complex set of conflicting forces, is indexed in plot. Felix, the heroic national bureaucrat, is positioned against a mute, extraterritorial behemoth that eludes claims of national sovereignty—a register of larger conflicts over legal order, ownership, and energy sovereignty in oil-producing regions. Knowledge is circumscribed by secretacies of conspirators who use the offshore as a means of concealing power over oil, while the mystery plots the logic of the offshore: legally distinctive zones of extraterritorial ownership in combination with, and undermining, territorial sovereignty.

Something formally analogous happens in *Black and Blue*. The crime takes Rebus to Shetland and Sullom Voe, an oil terminal, described as “an impressive monster [. . .] like a sci-fi city transported to prehistory” (Rankin 1997, p. 214). The extractive world appears futuristic and alien, the North Sea itself sublime. Looking outwards from an oil platform, a version of Rebus’s earlier gaze from the hotel or car window, this time looking upon the North Sea,

He’d expected to see and smell oil, but the most obvious product around here wasn’t oil—it was seawater. The North Sea surrounded him, massive compared to this speck of welded metal. It insinuated itself into his lungs; the salt gusts stung his cheeks. It rose in vast waves as if to engulf him. It seemed bigger than the sky above it, a force as threatening as any in nature [. . .] The Nationalists said it was Scotland’s oil, the oil companies had the exploitation rights, but the picture out here told a different story: oil belonged to the sea, and the sea wouldn’t give it up without a fight. (Rankin 1997, pp. 246–47)

Then he turns inside, looking away. Like in *The Hydra Head*, the offshore space seems to be an absolute narrative limit, as if the sea itself constitutes an edge of the novels’ cognitive maps. The sublime and petro-heroic description of offshore infrastructure conceals a rather different political effect: a cognitive failure produced by offshore infrastructure, articulating on the narrative level what earlier was described as the logic of the offshore: its radical separation and exploitation of legally distinct spaces. Felix and Rebus both gaze outwards—normally a signal that they are detecting some social truth below the surface—and both turn away, back to land, searching for the mystery elsewhere.

With no way of knowing who owns the tanker or where it is going, Felix must turn to logbooks, but they provide little information: “It’s hard to tell one tanker from another [. . .] All a tanker has to do is change her name” (Fuentes 1978, p. 147). The tanker is given away by a crime: it changes names and flags to avoid port regulation, concealing its operations from national authorities—the crime, it turns out, is little different from the actual mundane operations of ship registration. Eventually, through a series of literary codes, Felix works out that in the Wonderland of offshore the tanker has been renamed *Alice*. This will lead him down the offshore rabbit hole—Palan’s “virtual world of make-believe” (Palan 2003, p. 4)—to a company named Wonderland Enterprises, Inc., which, like the Cheshire Cat, can disappear without a trace. From this viewpoint—the abstract world of legal form rather than material infrastructure; the tracing of ‘erratic offshore movement’ rather than the movements of the tanker—the mystery is decoded. It is through the amusing yet contrived conceit of *Alice in Wonderland* clues that textualizing the offshore is made possible.

Black and Blue follows a similar trajectory. It is only when he finds another mystery, an oil-spill, that Rebus is back on track: “Something that *had* been covered up. Namely the tanker’s real owners. It’s not easy with these boats—they’re registered here, there and everywhere, leaving a real paper trail in their wake [. . .] and sometimes the name on the papers doesn’t mean much—companies own other companies, more countries are involved . . . ” (Rankin 1997, pp. 424–25). Like in *The Hydra Head*, the plot comes up against a secretive offshore world which conceals a crime made by an American oil company, leaving patterns of intrigue in paper trails, clues through which the Real of offshore can be detected. This narrative suggests that it is only through attention to what is displaced by, or hidden behind, the material infrastructure, that the ‘Real’ of offshore is accessible. But at the same time, some specialist, inside knowledge is required to decipher this. Confronted with logbooks and ship registers, some other code must be invented to make the offshore decipherable. Like much crime fiction, the novel slips into a conspiratorial register: “it seemed part of some larger pattern, accidents forming themselves into a dance of association [. . .] History turning sour, or fading away like old photographs. Endings . . . no rhyme or reason to them” (p. 461). The larger pattern fails to assemble into a coherent narrative. If oil is at the centre of things, what satisfying closure can there be to its mystery? All Rebus can do is follow a pattern—crime, violence, bodies—“leaving only paper trails in their wake” (p. 425). This recurrence of erratic offshore movements found in paper trails suggests a political and aesthetic anxiety that society is shaped by forces as immaterial as offshore finance or as invisible as tankers on a distant sea.

The oily paper trails lead, as they must, to Aberdeen, the oil capital of the UK. Aberdeen's development was fuelled by a neoliberal short-term extractivist model of oil production. The UK's policy of "rapid exploitation meant dependence on overseas experience rather than developing the necessary expertise in the United Kingdom. It was primarily the American majors, with their anti-trade-union-culture, that were on hand" (Brotherstone 2012, p. 78). Like Coatzacoalcos, it was a boomtown formed on top of a fishing industry. A rapid demographic shift, an influx of capital funded by the speculative and internationally oriented City of London, dominated by foreign multinationals: global fossil capital rapidly "embedded [Aberdeen] within much wider global networks" (Cumbers 2012, p. 230). In the development of boomtowns, crime, corruption, and social unrest is common, while the benefits of the boom are distributed unevenly (Ruddell 2016). *Black and Blue* finds this clash and remaking of class composition uncomfortable, with Americans appearing as serial killers, gangsters, and powerful oil executives. However, they are not intruders, as in *The Hydra Head*, but are embedded within the social landscape of the novel, occupying key—usually corrupt or criminal—roles. What defines this setting is how it is dominated by distinct spatial enclaves that appear to be immune to state power and law. Rankin's Aberdeen is a city where "the legit and the illicit [work] side by side, each feeding the other" (Rankin 1997, p. 391). Here, Rebus tells another police officer, "I know you could live here for years without glimpsing what's beneath the surface" (p. 232). The novel's incessant violence reveals an obsession with illegality carved out of legal spaces and populated by oil executives, businessmen, and corrupt state officials.

For example, the perennial noir figure: the gangster. A key player in Aberdeen is an American nightclub owner, suspected of supplying drugs from Glasgow to offshore workers. Rebus drives to confront him, with "darkness on the short drive in, thin rain filling. Rebus felt jolted by coffee, loose wires sparking where his nerves should be" (Rankin 1997, p. 436). Attacked, he is taken underground, where "the place reeked of alcohol. It was a cellar. Bare lightbulbs and aluminium kegs, boxes of bottles and glasses. Half a dozen bricks pillars supporting the ceiling" (p. 438). Rebus confronts a hidden violence lurking underground, beneath the surface, seeping across the country. The offshore seems to require an appropriate style of writing; of mean streets and oppressive settings, heavy weather that drives people indoors, a focus on grime, illegal activity and violence. Like a Brechtian estrangement effect, the mystery transforms the familiar environment into an ominous setting, in which a mysterious and impersonal force channels the detective down its maze of dimly lit streets and work spaces, of industry and private businesses, all with murky connections to oil.

The key American is Bible John, in the novel a Scottish-American businessman in an oil platform construction business. He commits a spree of murders before going into hiding, never found but always present in Scotland. In *Representing Capital*, Jameson "hazard[s] the suggestion that figuration tends to emerge when the object of conceptuality is somehow unrepresentable in its structural ambiguity" (Jameson 2014, pp. 33–34). If the offshore is unrepresentable as such, it can nevertheless be approximated. This, I think, is the function that Bible John fulfills: he figures the invasive power of the offshore into everyday life. He is oil capital personified. Disruptive and violent, he shocks communities but remains invisible, faceless, duplicitous: "there was nothing memorable about either face or figure, and the clothes were always conservative [. . .] the guile and disguises, the secret life behind the everyday face" (Rankin 1997, pp. 57–58); "His own past ceased to exist" (p. 397). Like capital which "no longer bears any marks of its origin" (Marx 1992, p. 516), Bible John circulates invisibly through Scottish society, a hidden chaotic agent that continually escapes the state's juridical authority.

Early in the novel Rebus meets him at a conference centre in Aberdeen, unaware of his hidden identity, which is the clue that will eventually solve the crime, although belatedly, because Bible John will be gone. It is one of those unbelievable coincidences in detective fiction, charged with a sense of destiny, drawing all the pieces of the puzzle together; that plotting of connection between what Jameson calls "two incommensurable levels of being [. . .] and in which the individual subject of the protagonist somehow manages to blunder into the collective web of the hidden social order" (Jameson 1992, p. 33). Bible John disappears, probably 'offshore', back to America. The criminal,

associated with the coming of oil, cannot be contained and the state is revealed to be porous and fallible, its capacity to halt American oil power limited. Offshore is everywhere and nowhere in this novel. It permeates the entirety of Scotland but is obtuse and inaccessible, unable to be held down. This opposition between Rebus, whose narratorial expertise reveals offshore mysteries, and Bible John, who personifies its absence and inscrutability, speaks to the way that the imaginative codes used to navigate energopolitical settings are marked with class antagonisms. What cannot be fully articulated or represented, the novel suggests, is due to an energopolitical constraint on the imagination. It expresses discontent with the narrative efficacy of the offshore.

Unsolved Mysteries

This article compares two novels linked by the world-ocean and the offshore. In demonstrating their aesthetic and formal unlikely likenesses, I have argued that the two mysteries effectively articulate social tensions produced in the infrastructural and legal space of the offshore. The mystery is a sort of measuring apparatus, plumbing depths, measuring space, and testing the limits of credibility as thought traverses the imagined geographies of the offshore. Earlier I suggested, following Jameson, that the energopolitical unconscious might be conceptualized through three semantic horizons. Firstly, through its response to an immediate energopolitical situation. In the fallen world of petromodernity, the novels suggest, the investigator is a figure that preserves a sense of sovereignty during the gradual downfall of stable environments. The second horizon is located within a class discourse shaped by the world-systemic division of labour created through world-oceanic logistics. The offshore mystery is a desire to track the offshore's patterns of intrigue in everyday life, so that it can be named, returned to the realm of the social, and acted upon. The fact that neither text can do so satisfactorily functions as an allegory of its dominance. In *The Hydra Head*, the moment of demystification never comes. As the conspiracy is revealed, the mystery is not alleviated but intensified, as the leader of the Anglo-American oil interests tells Felix: "probe into the secret motives of any of us who participated in this comedy of errors [and] you will always be wrong, because behind every label there is some unnameable, obscure political or personal reality" (Fuentes 1978, p. 244). As the assembled puzzle falls apart, individual motives disappear, as if the narrative purpose of individual actors is secondary to that larger narrative of oil modernisation, which Felix and the other conspirators are swept up in.

The third semantic horizon is how the text registers the uneven coexistence of residual, dominant, and emergent energy forms. *The Hydra Head* ends with a pronouncement on the destiny of Mexico and the offshore:

sealed in geological pits more ancient than the most ancient empires, the treasure of Chiapas, Veracruz, and Tabasco is a promise in a sealed bottle [. . .] the patient drillers penetrate two, three, four thousand meters deep into the sea [. . .] Dark semen in a land of hopes and betrayals, oil fecundates the realms of the Malinche beneath the stars and their nocturnal portents. (Fuentes 1978, p. 292; emphasis removed)

Destiny traced in the portents of the stars, a mysterious and distant sign, visible only in an endarkened world. Here the novel is at its most pessimistic, the future enclosed within the horizon of oil. What must ultimately be repressed, by a certain form of energopolitics, is the possibility of transition to a post-oil world, which fossil capital seeks to delay in its endless search for new frontiers and its 'lock-in' of a mode of profitability wedded to fossil extraction, which would seem to constitute the outer limit of the energopolitical unconscious. But it is this third horizon that becomes visible at the moment that the mystery reveals the failure to think beyond offshore, as it articulates, if only negatively, a desire to overcome these conditions. If it is possible for the spaces of political and communal life to be degraded, for mysteries to flourish and individual perception to attenuate, it can be undone by an emergent social order. As the characters remain imprisoned perceptually, politically, and affectively within the "nocturnal portents" of offshore's energopower, the satisfaction of the novel's ending is not found in mysteries solved. Perhaps the offshore mysteries, then, in this ultimate horizon of

the collective future of energy and life, are the unconscious anticipations of that mysterious, as yet unimaginable future beyond an offshore world.

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