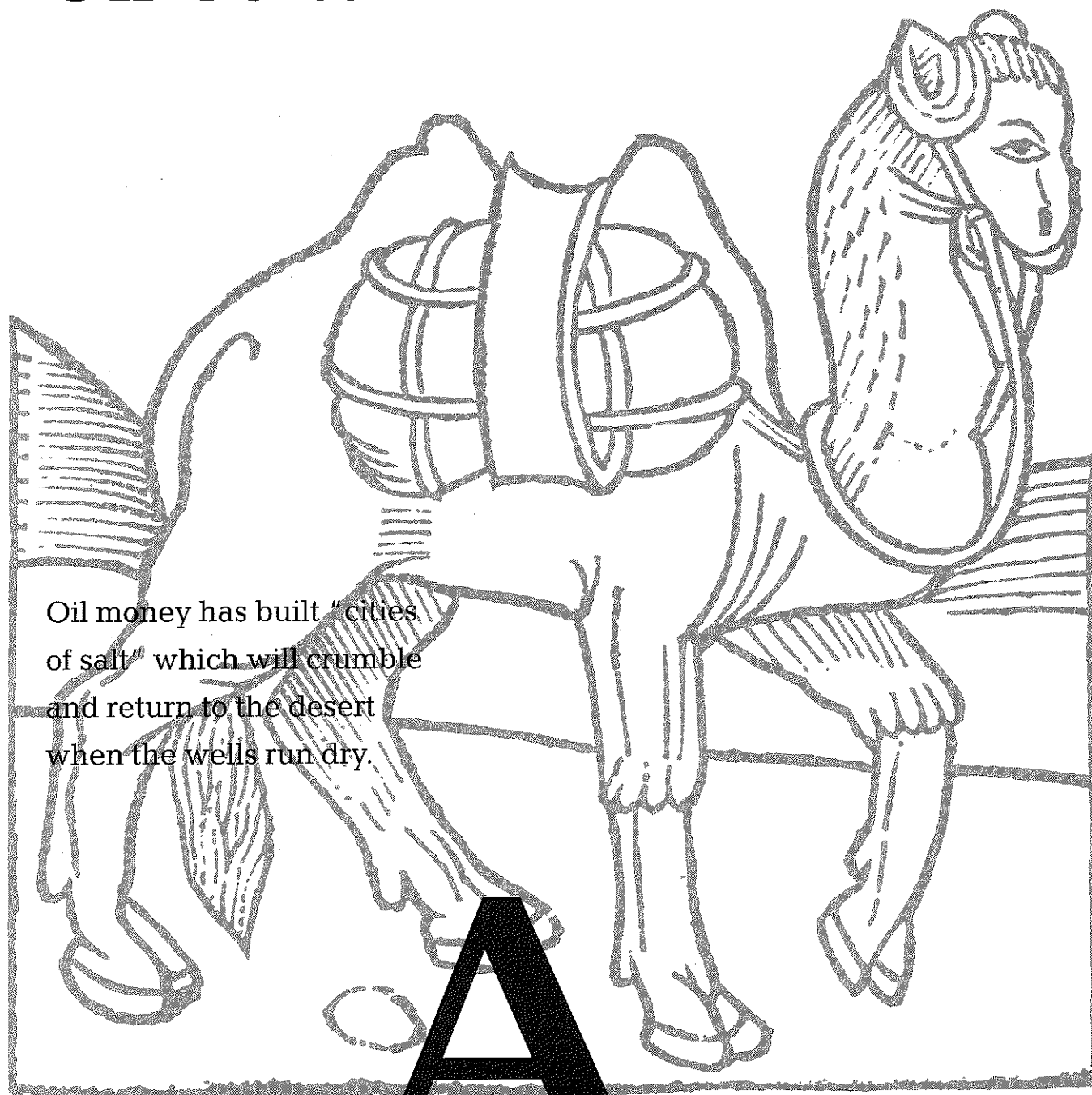


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Oil Culture



Oil money has built "cities of salt" which will crumble and return to the desert when the wells run dry.

*If I have sailed into your eyes
searching for spring, I have
not cast anchor yet. My camel
is still waiting, standing at
the gates with eyes still un-
blinded by the airport lights.*

Muhammed al-Thubaiti,
from "A Page from a
Bedouin Notebook"

Although the literary achievements of the Saudi author Abd al-Rahman Munif are less well-known than those of the Egyptian novelist and Nobel laureate Najib Mahfuz, Munif's work provides a counterweight to the Gulf war-inspired proliferation of images of "Arab realities" in popular North American culture.

Munif was born in Saudi Arabia in 1933, although his country later stripped him of his citizenship. His date of birth coincided with the signing of the Concession agreement between the Saudi government and the California Arabian Oil Company, which became ARAMCO in 1944. Munif's life parallels Saudi's oil life. Indeed, Munif spent much of his career in the oil business before devoting himself to writing.

Munif's remarkable novel *Cities of Salt*—this first volume of a projected trilogy was published in Arabic in 1984 and translated into English by Peter Theroux in 1987—renders the moral, cultural and political degeneration of Saudi Arabia which came about as a result of the development of an international oil culture. Oil money has built "cities of salt" which will crumble and return to the desert when the wells run dry.

Edward Said, in an article in *The Nation* (Feb. 11, 1991), singled out Munif's novel as an exception to the rule that "there is still hardly any literature in Arabic that portrays Americans." What makes this exception particularly relevant is the way



in which the novel unambiguously connects oil development with an American occupation of the desert. Oil culture and armament culture are effects of "diabolical" American incursions. By the end of the 1970s, Saudi Arabia, one of the richest OPEC states, had joined the elite club of the top ten international military spenders. The discovery of oil has been, as the critic Rasheed al-Ehany has remarked of Munif's portrayal of this development, a curse.

We do not claim to have any special knowledge of Arab culture and therefore we accept the general cultural authenticity of the literary perception until corrected; we cannot speak for Arab readers. We find in Munif's work, however, an insightful representation of the American oppressor's long-standing economic occupation of "the desert." These Americans in the desert are strange, opaque creatures, all of whom are fundamentally other to most of the Arabs - familiarity between Arab and American characters comes in the forms of capital and ambition, yet even these are not enough to bridge the gap more than momentarily. Still, Munif successfully builds a bridge between the North American and Arab cultures through the workers' struggle. Of course, what Arab and American workers have in common is that they are both

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In the initial scenes of *Cities of Salt*, and with an equal amount of prescience and nostalgia, Munif relates the transformations which the oasis of Wadi Al-Uyoun undergoes when the Americans establish a fenced encampment. At first, the people of the Wadi were puzzled by these foreigners: "They certainly didn't come for water - they want something else. But what could they possibly want. What is there in this dry desert besides dust, sand and starvation?" The technological instruments of the initial exploratory phase of this extractive colonialism were simply unintelligible for the Bedouin. This puzzlement reached comic proportions when the Americans' calisthenics were understood as morning prayers. Even the assurances of the Emir that the "godless machines" which flattened groves of trees would bring riches and happiness by extracting oil from beneath the people's feet brought solace only to those who were prepared to

betray tradition for profit; for many of the people, trust in the Emir was the only recourse against the new and deep bitterness which arguments over the Americans had brought to the Wadi. The Wadi was eventually emptied by the Emir's "Desert Forces" who either euphemistically "relocated" the inhabitants or used them as cheap labour. As Miteb al-Hathal, the Wadi's most doom-saying (and as it turns out, accurate) foreseer of cultural carnage by the Americans put it, "from the first day they came to our village life has been camel piss." This colloquialism may surprise those American GIs for whom the racist slur "camel jockey" exhausted the field. And like oil, uranium too, plays a game of hide-and-peek beneath the shifting international view of Iraq's reconstruction. But uranium has always been as shifty as a dune of pure sand.

One of Miteb's sons finds himself living in the workers' barracks in what is now called Arab Harran. This small, seaside town was appropriated and transformed by the Americans' into two quarters - American and Arab Harran. American Harran is a showcase of air-conditioned bungalows and swimming pools which stand in stark contrast to the workers' tin-roofed (and therefore unbearable in summer) barracks. The men in the workcamp were photographed, fingerprinted and forced to carry identification cards. The Americans even stole the "best and fastest camels," thereby depriving the workers of any means of transportation. After the bungalows were built, they were no longer allowed in American Harran without special permission.

The new Emir of Harran, a seemingly mild but strongly traditional man when he arrives in Arab Harran, is progressively seduced and driven mad by the array of technological "toys" offered by the Americans and by a cosmopolitan Harrani returnee. With his new telescope, the Emir sees for himself the bikini-clad women brought into American Harran on their noisy "King Solomon's Ship." The incomprehensibility and shock of the women's lack of clothing and the familiarity with which the American men and women mingle is the beginning of his obsession to see them again and again and his descent into madness. With the later introductions of a radio, telephone, western medicine and rides in the Americans' machines which seem bent on killing their passengers on land and in the water, he becomes incapable of understanding or representing the people of Arab Harran.

Following the workers' threats to withdraw their labour after their humiliation at the hands of prying American bureaucrats, the Americans mount an Arab (but not Bedouin) Desert Army to police them. Further insults, including the Americans' failure to pay compensation for a fellow worker killed on the job to his aged father and their reluctance to bring to justice the murderer of an outspoken traditional doctor, led to the strike action which is not only an act of revenge, but a sudden insight into their no longer complete subjugation:

Why did they have to live like this, while the Americans lived so differently? Why were they barred from going near an American house, even from looking at the swimming pool or standing for a moment in the shade of their trees? Why did the Americans shout at them, telling them to move, to leave the place immediately, expelling them like dogs?

The general strike brings the first volume to a close. It serves as the moment of awakening and has two related effects: it provokes the formation of a committee to study the violence perpetrated by the Desert Army and, having sunk further into madness, the Emir leaves Harran.

Although Munif's *Cities of Salt* may serve as a cultural and political counter-representation to the electronic "theatre" of the weapons systems-propelled "new world order," it has been virtually weightless. No one should be surprised by this. But this does not mean that this situation should be tolerated.

Munif's work is a complex parable of intra-Arab relations and American intrusion. It treats sardonically American sponsored Desert Forces and Armies which exploit cultural differences between Arab peoples. Indeed, although it is class struggle which transcends if only momentarily some of these differences, there is no solution to the American problem. Moreover, while Munif prepares us for the return of Miteb on his white Omani she-camel from his self-imposed exile in the desert, he does not return, not in the first volume at least. His presence does, to be sure, manifest itself in the forms of rumour, the vicissitudes of collective memory, and the occasional "sighting." His resistance takes the form of nomadism and his spiritual connection with monkey-wrenching operations on the oil pipeline.

Upon his arrival in America in the spring of 1946, Albert Camus described one of his impressions in this way: "An enormous 50-foot-high Camel billboard: a GI with his mouth open blows enormous puffs of real smoke." In America, a camel is a smoke and the GI's mouth, like his gun, smokes. By contrast, Al-Thubaiti's complex image of the camel with which we began expresses a tension in the lover's desire: it awaits him faithfully, unsexed by the light shows, but in order to carry him away from them. The camel is the anchor that is cast to the lover's desire and already weighed against the lover's fascination. The camel is the cultural animal the loss of which signifies the Bedouin's enslavement. It is through this vehicular substance that al-Thubaiti and Munif render the misfit of imported technology and morality and Bedouin craft and faith. ♦

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