



Dolly Kikon. *Living with Oil and Coal: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India (Culture, Place, and Nature)*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019. 204 pp. \$28.78, paper, ISBN 978-0-295-74395-0.

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What does it mean to live *with* oil and coal? Practically everyone on earth lives with these carbon natures in one form or another. Oil is more globally distributed because its material properties are more easily transfigured, masking their points of origin. As I write this, my fingers move across a keyboard covered in plastics produced by petrochemical manufacturing. The soles of my sneakers are wrapped in ethylene vinyl acetate, another derivative of waxy crude and natural gas. These substances seep into things that do not appear connected to oil at all, including my sense of the basic necessities required to reproduce daily life. The geographer Matthew Huber calls this all-encompassing petrol consumption “a vision of life” subtended by cheap oil.[1] Elsewhere on the value chain, fossil fuels make life in different ways. Recent ethnographic work on global petroleum production has turned from accounts of oil as a spectacle of cultural power, or a “mythos” of national modernity, to an experiential structure mediating relations between labor, technology, and capital.[2] In the wake of the anthropologist James Ferguson’s incantation to “see” like an oil company, ethnographies of oil firms, energy markets, pipelines, and gas installations have bloomed.[3] These infrastructures and institutions constitute “life worlds,” according to a recent ed-

ited volume, which shape how we make meaning under life dominated by carbon dependency.[4]

This is not exactly the type of “living” invoked by Dolly Kikon’s superb recent monograph, *Living with Oil and Coal: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeastern India*. An ethnographic account of one of India’s most economically important and politically volatile sites of petroleum production, Kikon’s book follows the lives of farmers, laborers, coal traders, students, separatist militants, and geologists who move across this highly securitized extractive zone. These stories unfold within the agro-ecological interface that separates the petroleum-producing areas of upper Assam from the highland Indian state of Nagaland. In between are the Assam-Nagaland foothills, where sloping tea plantations and forested farmlands of *jhum*, or shifting cultivation, enfold the relatively newer pursuit of small-scale coal mining. The combined political economies of oil and coal bring analytical coherence to a space otherwise comprised of vast ethnic, linguistic, and social differentiation. As Kikon further demonstrates, this coherence has also been forged by the security architecture imposed by various wings of the Indian military that police the foothills in the name of securing extractive investments.

Readers seeking an ethnography of the corporate or infrastructural life worlds of resource extraction may not find exactly what they are looking for in Kikon's book. These themes do appear. But for a monograph entitled *Living with Oil and Coal*, there are large segments where direct attention to fossil fuels fades from view. What emerges instead—and what is truly the exceptional strength of the book—is a richly textured ethnography of how individuals and communities make their lives in the shadows of a region transformed by extraction. Oil and coal appear as macro-structuring features of everyday life, generative of wage work, land conflicts, familial disputes, imaginaries of future wealth, and even insurgent civil wars. Yet these experiences are by no means the horizons of social interdependence, nor are they the determining self-identifications of Kikon's interlocutors. There is a way in which the conjunction “Living *with*” invites us to see oil and coal as perhaps more ephemeral to local ways of being and meaning-making that center around affective labors, reciprocal socialities, gendered expectations, relations of trading and trust, and long histories of ethnic marginalization. To live with oil and coal is sort of like living with an unwanted houseguest, or, more appropriately, like living with an occupying army. There is a sense that pervades the book that life might be lived otherwise.

Kikon enters the foothills at various checkpoints and border crossings, but the book is structured to undermine identifications of this region as a frontier of state power. The foothills appear in the early chapters as a space bisected by what Kikon calls the “triadic state,” a distribution of overlapping sovereignties between the union government of India, the state governments of Assam and Nagaland, and para-state actors including oil companies and insurgent groups. These sovereigns are characterized by different interests in the value of the land, as well as their respective capacities to fulfill the aspirations of various constituencies seeking protection under their authority. The Indian state's interest in the region stems

from the enormous petroleum and natural gas reserves of upper Assam, which were first commercially mined by British firms during the colonial era, but have now been controlled by the state-owned corporation the Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC) since the 1950s. In Assam, oil belongs to the union government in New Delhi, but its value is shared in the form of royalty, concessionary, and tax payments with the state government. Since the inception of the ONGC, social movements in Assam have agitated for a greater share of this wealth. These tensions took a particularly violent turn after 1979 with the formation of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which spurred a cycle of violence in which other minority groups formed paramilitaries to assert stronger communitarian claims over the land. The ULFA was motivated by the oil question, but it was also founded as an ethno-linguistic movement seeking to expel non-Assamese “foreigners,” especially Bengali-speaking Muslims (pp. 69–70).

These outbreaks of insurgent violence were the result of the Indian government's own militarization of the northeast since independence. The postcolonial government appropriated an existing colonial architecture of military law with the implementation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in 1958, which gave the Indian military extraconstitutional authority to make preventative arrests, shoot and kill suspected civilians with impunity, and suspend all fundamental rights in areas deemed “disturbed.” AFSPA was initially imposed in Assam as a response to a secessionist movement led by Naga rebels, but, as the political scientist Sanjib Baruah has argued, it has been used continuously as a tool of authoritarian governance that strains any interpretation of the law's original intent.[5] The construction of watchtowers, military encampments, and barbed wire fences has shaped a sense that the northeast is an internal colony under siege by the state itself. In the present, these existing military infrastructures provide cover for the expansion of oil production and prospecting operations, which are

deemed to be in the “national interest.” As Kikon shows, the extractive enclaves constructed by both the military and the ONGC filter into the impressions of distributed sovereignty articulated by those living in the foothills. Occupation is an expression of “India’s law,” locals claim, and the military are employees of “Delhi” (p. 73).

Instead of a state frontier, Kikon represents the foothills as a heightened site of state activity, realized through the constant negotiations and impositions of sovereignty on the ground. The foothills themselves mark the formal break between the states of Assam and Nagaland, the latter carved out of the northeast in 1963 in part as a compromise to the Naga secessionists. Both the state governments continue to dispute the exact boundaries of their territory, as well as the laws governing natural resources that these jurisdictions enable. Unlike in Assam where the union and state governments share statutory control over the oilfields, in Nagaland titles to natural resources belong to the local community under Article 371A of the Indian constitution. This guarantee has generated intensive local interest in prospecting across the oil- and coal-bearing areas of the foothills. The ONGC had drilled for oil in Naga villages here between 1973 and 1993, but largely abandoned the project due to contestations over royalty arrangements and local ownership. Kikon brilliantly demonstrates how the labor-intensive methods of small-scale coal mining, contrary to the capital-intensive methods of petroleum production, enable Naga villages to participate in extractive economies linking them to Assamese traders and investors (chapter 6). Although the rights to these resources remain nominally vested in the community, Kikon shows that in fact the profits from these properties belong to individual Naga landowners, and are associated with the inheritance practices that strictly confer land values to male heads of households (pp. 126, 129-130).

The geological distributions of oil in Assam and coal in Nagaland thus define the different at-

tachments people feel toward these extractive regimes. In Kikon’s analogy, like the sloping geological formations that “trap” oil, gas, and coal in sediments beneath the earth, so too do people find themselves ambiguously trapped according to the distributions of fossil fuels (p. 58). But Kikon’s book also closely attends to spaces of interaction and mobility. A crossing-ground between the plains of Assam and the highlands of Nagaland, the foothills have long served as a site for pushing at the boundaries of community, as well as sharpening the edges of ethnic, linguistic, and religious differentiation. These spaces are not, for Kikon, liminal sites that suspend hierarchies of belonging. Boundary crossing entails immense social costs. Instead, Kikon focuses on the role of market towns, or *haats*, in mediating trading relations that draw highland and lowland communities into new, regulated social bonds (chapter 4). Networks of trust, contracts, and conviviality underwrite cross-cultural connections, even as racial and ethnic distinctions shape how commodities are valued, especially for Naga farmers selling produce in Assamese-dominated monopsonic markets.

Kikon also interposes other figures within this in-between space. Bengali-speaking merchants, Marwari traders, and Adivasi tea plantation workers all move throughout the foothills too. In a book filled with evocative vignettes, one of the most memorable is Kikon’s excursion to the Adivasi village of Gorejan early in chapter 1. Adivasis in Assam are the descendants of communities brought from the Chotanagpur plateau during the colonial era as laborers for British tea plantations. Like many Adivasi villages in the foothills, Gorejan was settled by Adivasis who deserted the violent work regime of tea plantations in the 1930s, preferring instead to clear slopes of jungle for farmland and to work as day laborers. As one of Kikon’s Adivasi interlocutors explains, their family “caught land” in the forest (p. 42). Today, however, Gorejan sits at the crossroads of a “high potential” site for oil exploration, with the ONGC engaged in prospecting and drilling all around the village. In a single

place, Gorejan embodies past and future regimes of extraction in the foothills, and the many different ways people make life in their wake.

In the final chapter, “Carbon Citizenship,” Kikon turns to the interior world of the ONGC. We are met with familiar figures populating mining conglomerates across the world: cloistered geologists, the (ineffectual, powerless) corporate social responsibility officer, carnivalesque events demonstrating the high science of brutal extraction. What Kikon shows us is that the structure of management within the ONGC, which parcels out projects into autonomous divisions, is also the company’s theory of society (p. 137). ONGC employees operate with an “enclave” mentality, viewing their projects as besieged by an unruly “public,” and adjudicating social difficulties arising from their purely “technical” work by calling in the Indian military. Oil is understood to be a sensitive and secretive issue. The effects of these attitudes in the foothills, however, reproduce what the geographer Michael Watts has called the “permanent” emergency of oil extraction.[6] ONGC employees move freely across check-points and into areas of political unrest with military escorts. Foothill residents moving between villages and towns, on the other hand, are subject to a range of humiliations, interrogations, and demands by security forces to produce often difficult-to-obtain identity documents (p. 143). Everyone is potentially a suspect, except those pumping oil from the ground.

Interdisciplinary scholarship on the environment has much to gain from Kikon’s book. It elevates the particular experiences of India’s northeast into comparative discussions on extractive regimes, petro-violence, and resource frontiers across the world. It is an especially welcome contribution in a moment in which scholarship on energy has become infused with vitalist and onto-theological language about “life” in the age of our carbon-fueled climate crisis. *Living with Oil and Coal* is a slim reminder that fossil fuels may have

fundamentally remade what it means to live, but that social experience is not exhausted by them. So often in Kikon’s text the reader encounters oil not through its production of new socialities, but rather through its detritus. Accidentally we stumble upon an agricultural village named after an ONGC operation once active in the area, or an oil pump now abandoned to an encroaching forest, or farmland laid waste by lingering oil seepages. The power of Kikon’s ethnography lies in its subtle, and unromanticized, insistence on the creativity and fortitude of those communities living amidst such extractive debris. Kikon’s careful mapping of friendships, enmities, grieving, laughing, dying, working, loving, healing, teaching, struggling, and building helps us to see all of the fragile things that hold life together, and what we will still have to tend to once the oil is gone.

Notes

[1]. Matthew Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

[2]. Andrew Apter, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Michael Watts, “Petro-Violence: Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology of a Mythic Commodity,” in *Violent Environments*, ed. Nancy Lee Peluso and Michael Watts (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[3]. James Ferguson, “Seeing Like an Oil Company: Space, Security and Global Capital in Neoliberal Africa,” *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 3 (2005): 377-82; Douglas Rogers, “The Materiality of the Corporation: Oil, Gas, and Corporate Social Technologies in the Remaking of a Russian Region,” *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 2 (2012): 284-96; Katayoun Shafie, *Machineries of Oil: An Infrastructural History of BP in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018); Hannah Appel, *The Licit Life of Capitalism: U.S. Oil in Equatorial Guinea* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

[4]. Hannah Appel, Arthur Mason, and Michael Watts, eds., *Subterranean Estates: Life Worlds of Oil and Gas* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

[5]. Sanjib Baruah, "AFSPA: Legacy of Colonial Constitutionalism," *India Seminar* 615, November

2010, https://india-seminar.com/2010/615/615_sanjib_baruah.htm.

[6]. Michael J. Watts, "Spaces of Insurgency: Power, Place, and Spectacle in Nigeria," in *Geographies of Power: Recognizing the Present Moment of Danger*, ed. Heather Merrill and Lisa Hoffman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

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