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Palm Oil

The Grease of Empire

Max Haiven

PLUTO  PRESS

First published 2022 by Pluto Press
New Wing, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 1LA

www.plutobooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 4582 6 Paperback

ISBN 978 0 7453 4586 4 PDF

ISBN 978 0 7453 4584 0 EPUB

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and
made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.
Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are
expected to conform to the environmental standards of
the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton,
England



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Artist: Amanda Priebe



Whose grease?

We find ourselves in a system of racial capitalism that appears as a vast, globe-spanning system of mystified human sacrifice, hidden in plain sight. The stories of palm oil I want to tell you will trace this system's contours and seek answers in its past. These are a story of how one largely invisible thing emerged from the nexus of capitalism, colonialism, and empire to define the cruelties of our world. Secreted within it is a story of our collective power to transform the world for the better. The story of palm oil is our story. This almost magical and ubiquitous substance is part of the way our bodies reproduce themselves and the way our material world is reproduced. It is a key element in the vortex of labor, commodities, meaning-making, and social relationships that make up the world in which we both live. Palm oil binds us, revealing the space in between, the syntax of the world.

Nearly every element of the process that now finds you reading these words could have been touched or facilitated by palm oil:¹ it could be an additive in the paper, a stabilizer in the ink, or part of the resin in the binding of the book; it is almost certainly either inside or essential to the manufacture of one of the hundreds of the

components of the digital electronic device on which I am typing these words, and on which you might be reading them. It's probable that one of the transport vehicles that conveyed these artefacts to you burned hydrocarbons that included palm oil-derived agrofuels. And it must be taken as given that the body and brain that writes and that reads has been reproduced, in part, through the metabolism of palm oil. We have both used palm oil products to clean or care for our skin. We have ingested palm oil as a carrier of medicines. Though I suspect neither of us are intentionally investors in the palm oil industry, we are nonetheless economically entangled with it. The money that we receive for our labor is blood in the same ocean. Though it derives from a natural source, we created refined palm oil as it exists today, and it has, in turn, helped to created us.

In the story of palm oil, we can catch a glimpse of the world as it is made and unmade. To read a world of palm oil as if it were our story is to recognize what connects us and what divides us. My hope is that in paying attention to palm oil we might exercise some shared narrative muscle, so long atrophied in this world of competitive individualism, so that some "we" emerges that can better know itself and act in concert to change our fate. If we made this world from palm oil, what else could we have made? What else might we yet make?

In the past, my work has been dedicated to trying to grasp what we don't understand about capitalism. We understand that it is a global system that organizes the energies of humans and

non-humans toward the production of commodities in the interests of profit. We understand that it has given birth to the structure of the corporation, that terrifying metahuman entity that magnifies our worst qualities (avarice, indifference, rapaciousness). We understand that capitalism arose entangled with colonialism and racism and has never survived without them. Elsewhere, I have tried to understand how, today, in a global capitalist economy dominated by debt and credit, we are all compelled or seduced into transforming ourselves into competitive risk takers, miniature financiers, leveraging all aspects of our lives as assets and gambits to secure our individuated futures.² I have also tried to understand how, when these individual acts of risk management manifest on the level of a system, it produces a pattern that appears as if capitalism is taking a needless, warrantless, and terrifyingly self-destructive vengeance on people and the earth.³

In this short book I am trying to understand something that is abundantly obvious and yet somehow also unseeable: this system seems to be a vast and merciless organization of human sacrifice. Unlike the sensationalist images of that bloody custom, which has been practiced by many of the world's civilizations though under very different circumstances, the global capitalist order of human sacrifice is one that denies itself. The relentless logic of the market insists that the millions of needless deaths from malnutrition, toxic poisoning, overwork, sabotaged migration, climate chaos, or neo-imperialist wars are somehow accidental, incidental, or inevitable. But

4 my wager is that, in telling a story of palm oil, we can recognize that we live in what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls “the age of human sacrifice.”⁴ And we can see how it emerges from a longer history of racial capitalism that makes some people vastly more susceptible to disposability than others.

By palm oil I am speaking of the derivative of specific palm plants, mostly *Elaeis guineensis*, the African oil palm, but also sometimes cultivated from its central American relatives, *Elaeis oleifera* and the more distant *Attalea maripa*. Oil palms are among the world’s most bountiful and useful plants. *E. guineensis*, from which we get most of the world’s palm oil, is native to West Africa, where people have cultivated and treasured it for centuries. From its marvelous saffron-colored seedpods (which, when ready to harvest, can weigh over 10kg) African people have for millennia derived not only cooking oil but also lamp oil, cosmetics, medicines, artistic materials, sacraments, and dyes. From its sap comes palm wine and a wide variety of remedies. From its leaves come roof thatching and arrow and spear shafts.⁵ Yesterday and today, fragrant, fleshy, palm oil has served ceremonial and spiritual purposes in Africa and its diaspora. For many, red, virgin palm oil is the taste of home, the taste of family, the taste of history.

In the course of my research I had the pleasure of hearing stories of palm oil and *E. guineensis* from many who hail from West Africa. They universally told me of the great admiration people have for this ever-giving plant, how central it and its gifts are to ancient traditions and also to the spirit of innovation and creativity that has seen

West African people transform it into so many things. My friends vividly described the aroma of the fruit. West Africans have an almost infinite number of uses for many of its parts: the fleshy exterior, the hard husk that protects the inner kernel, and the oily inner mass. Its unique textures and pigments both season and decorate hundreds of savory dishes. It's so beloved that, in the remote, cold Canadian city where I wrote the bulk of this book, the local Nigerian community goes to great lengths to import different varieties of it. The particular *terroir* bestows a unique and subtle taste. More than once I have been shown a photograph of children knee-deep in a bathtub full of palm kernels helping to expel the precious oil, much as their ancestors had done, in moments of familial and community solidarity. Some have pointed to the palm plants in the background of these photographs, which tower over family compounds or garden allotments like flagpoles bearing the standard of some republic that was never allowed to exist. In their natural habitat, *E. guineensis* can live up to 200 years and bear usable fruit for 60 of those – they have long memories. My friends tell me that “before” (the European missionaries, the slave trade, imperialism, postcolonial debt bondage), palm oil wasn't only an important source of nutrition, but an intimate common cultural reference point, a spiritual sacrament and a staple trade commodity, even a form of money. It tied together vast trade networks throughout Africa and beyond. The fat was the medium of cosmopolitan material and cultural exchange, a lubricant of social life.⁶ In northern Brazil, com-

6 munities of Africans who liberated themselves from enslavement found in the local variant of the oil palm a familiar friend that supplied many of the necessities of a fugitive life.⁷

But, of course, the form of palm oil that you and I know is something else entirely: industrially produced derivatives of the palm fruit can, like a god with many faces, appear as some 200 different ingredients in nutritional, industrial, and cleansing products around the world.⁸ RBD (refined, bleached, and deodorized) oil has become a staple of the diets of billions of people, especially poor people, around the world. This globally traded, indifferent commodity emerges from intensive processing plants, predominantly located in Indonesia and Malaysia, but also in West Africa and Latin America, typically on clear-cut or razed lands that once sustained rainforest, though they may have taken many other forms since. Fertilizer, pesticide, and herbicide used in the intensive cultivation of this cash crop has, more often than not, found its way into local waterways.⁹ At these factories, as well as at the nearby plantations on which lab-germinated *E. guineensis* grow in neat rows, nine meters apart, most of the workers are, in one way or another, displaced, sometimes for multiple generations. Perhaps it was civil war, perhaps imperialist-backed counter-insurgency campaigns, perhaps the ecological impacts of mining, perhaps land grabbing, perhaps it was government or international “development” incentives seeking to relocate workers to locales more convenient for corporations in need of cheap labor.¹⁰ As a result, palm oil workers are now typically dependent on

precarious employment for a means of buying the necessities of life. Even those who nominally own the land they work find themselves ensnared in systems of exploitations.

Today, you and I find palm oil, palm kernel oil or derivatives of these substances in an estimated 50% of the world's supermarket foods, predominantly in industrially produced, processed foods like packaged baked goods, edible spreads, ramen noodles, dairy products, and snack foods. But palm oil also enters us in trace amounts in a mind-boggling diversity of preservatives, emulsifiers, stabilizers, coagulants and additives.¹¹ Palm oil's unique chemical composition and extreme cheapness makes it a perfect base or additive to industrially produced foods to afford a long shelf life and facilitate transit through globe-spanning networks of trade.¹² It covers us, too: it is in the lion's share of cosmetics (though some higher-end brands occasionally boast of avoiding it). It is an important element in the production of plastics, dyes, inks, paints, and even paper products, including product packaging. It is in many of the lozenges, pills, suppositories, and other consumer and professional medical products that we use to transform our bodies. And it is also present in a multitude of industrial and manufacturing products and processes, notably in the surfactants that are an important part of machine lubricants, dying and tinting processes, detergents, and a dizzying array of other processes.¹³ Globally, 72 metric tons of refined palm oil was consumed in 2020, roughly 20 pounds per human being.¹⁴ Its intensive cultivation has transformed our planet:

over 27 million hectares of the earth's surface is under palm oil cultivation, an area greater than the size of New Zealand and approximately equivalent to all the agricultural land in France.¹⁵ The clearing of forest and especially peatland for palm oil cultivation adds significant quantities of carbon to the earth's atmosphere—an estimated 6% of global annual emission—contributing to the dire, if unevenly distributed, risks of climate change.¹⁶

How did this happen to us? Our story will necessarily begin with the origins of the global commodity of palm oil in the European colonization of West Africa in the nineteenth century, where whole civilizations and millions of lives were sacrificed on the altar of that three-faced god: capitalist accumulation, white supremacist ideology, and inter-imperialist rivalry. We will visit nineteenth century Liverpool, where palm oil literally and figuratively lubricated the wheels of empire and furnished rich and poor alike with new commodities like soap. We will travel with some tender seedlings on steamships with palm-greased engines to South East Asia, to British and Dutch colonies where imperial powers took advantage of the social, economic, and environmental disjuncture they themselves had unleashed to open up new lands for palm oil plantations, and to recruit dispossessed and migrant workers, often through techniques of debt bondage.¹⁷ Today the independent nations of Malaysia and Indonesia are undisputed palm oil superpowers, though the legacies of colonialism remain pivotal in the industry. We will follow the oil as it seeps through

the fabric of our world, becoming the fat of the world's poor and the grease of capital's global empire.

This is a story of human sacrifices: the sacrifice of people and places made cheap by a system driven by profit, a system that seduces most of us in one way or another, as consumers, as entrepreneurs, as people just trying to survive. By following palm oil, I want us to recognize the way we are all bound up in a global paradigm none of us chose, but that benefits some vastly more than others, and places so many on the altar of accumulation. Primarily, those sacrificed are the exploited workers who cultivate and process the commodity, and those who have been dispossessed of their relation to the land by its reckless spread, driven by the desires of the market of which we are all an unequal part. In the corruption-prone palm oil industry, where local elites, large corporations, national governments, and international agencies dance together, labor abuses are rampant.¹⁸ Millions of animals and whole species are snuffed out as rainforests burn to open new plantation lands. Under blood red skies, the carbon released tears at the lungs of workers, villagers, and Indigenous people who live and labor in the shadow of the palm industry and smog suffuses the skies over South East Asia. But the deforestation and the carbon released by burning also represent one of the gravest threats to the global ecosystem. Also sacrificed is the health of millions around the world who this same set of systems has rendered so poor that palm oil and its cheap derivatives

become staples of their diet, with devastating consequences.

This book tells something of a chronological story, but it is not a history. It is an attempt to trace the contours of something hidden in plain sight. It has its origins in a series of modules I developed while teaching material culture and capitalism at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. I was seeking to do more than sensitize these fine art students to the facts and figures about this substance, which was found in the paints, inks, dyes, resins, computers, plastics, and other materials with which they worked. I also wanted to explore with them the dense enfolding of past and present, here and there, us and them. As a result, our story here is impressionistic and idiosyncratic. It is written by someone who has never seen a palm tree, never visited a plantation, by an end user of a commodity, trying to find his way back to the source and, through that journey, better understand the world.

This book will not offer a comprehensive overview to the palm oil industry; I encourage you to consult journalist Jocelyn C. Zuckerman's *Planet Palm: How Palm Oil Ended Up in Everything and Endangered the World*. Neither will it offer a systematic history; this has already been done with admirable skill and sophistication by Jonathan E. Robins in *Oil Palm: A Global History*. I am not going to catalogue the crimes of today's palm oil industry, or its cynical manipulation of the truth to hide those crimes behind aggressive public relations campaigns and toothless voluntary regulatory schemes. You will find no shortage