

# ‘We work for the Devil’: Oil extraction, kinship and the fantasy of time on the offshore frontier

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## Abstract

In the offshore oil industry of Takoradi, Ghana, white expatriate workers describe oil extraction as both ‘the work of the Devil’ and a ‘labour of love’. While companies strive to produce the offshore as a timeless and spaceless fantasy of ‘frictionless profit’, workers emphasize oil work as a sacrificial economy where risk, loss and distance are traded in the pursuit of an ideal of family life. In this article, I argue that the operational structures and labour regime of the offshore (characterized by a rotation pattern, continuous production, distant locations, a segregated workforce, and mobile installations) create not only a model of capital accumulation, but a mode of being and making kin. I describe oil workers’ aspirations to a ‘good family life’ and parental care, pitting time against distance, and the interpersonal ruins that remain when they fray. In probing how oil workers make petro-capitalism affectively workable, by exploring the entangled processes of extractive and reproductive labour, this article contributes to recent scholarship on the role of kinship in sustaining global capitalism.

## Keywords

Affective labour, capitalism, extraction, kinship, offshore, oil, time

‘Is it really God we are worshipping?’ asks Kofi Kinaata, a popular Ghanaian singer. On stage at the luxurious Atlantic Hotel in Takoradi, Ghana’s new ‘Oil City’, he sings about a Church that is falling apart, corrupted by false prophets that have turned religious services into organized theft: ‘Nowadays we want it all fast-fast / Fast life, fast cars / So we wait for

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God no more / Part-time Christian, but you want to fight a full-time Devil (...) So is it God we are worshipping like this?!

Kinaata's words of warning against the fast life and moral ruin of global capitalism couldn't have found a more suited – if unlikely – audience: the concert is courtesy of the Petroleum Commission's conference aimed at promoting the indigenization of the nascent oil industry. International oil companies (IOCs), local businesses, oil and gas stakeholders and energy policymakers have gathered to address the challenge of transferring expertise, jobs and contracts to Ghanaian professionals and businesses in an industry dominated by multinational corporations and Euro-American expatriates. Tom,<sup>1</sup> the country manager of an oilfield service company providing engineering services and inspections to the rigs, has travelled from Accra for the event. 'Local content' isn't the only thing on his mind: he hopes to glean valuable information from his connections about an upcoming tender that will set his company ahead of competitors. Tonight, he's feeling 'pumped': he's celebrating a promotion for successfully expanding his company's business interests in Gabon. As we discuss the industry's newest incursions on the continent in places like Ghana and Uganda, at a time that urgently calls for an end to fossil fuels elsewhere, Tom – impervious to Kofi Kinaata's words of warning – flashes a defiant smile: 'I always say: we work for the Devil – and the Devil pays well.'

But, he is quick to add, money isn't the only reward. Echoing a popular refrain among expatriate oil workers, he says: 'It's all about family, it's all about your children: I do it all for them.' He points to his right calf: five people holding hands, lopsided silhouettes etched in black ink. 'One day,' he explained, 'my daughter Taylor was missing me – I'd been offshore for weeks, hadn't seen them for ages. I told her to make her best drawing, and that Daddy will get it tattooed when he gets back.' For weeks, Taylor was making sketches. When Tom eventually got home, she proudly handed him the finished artwork. Permanently inked into his skin, Taylor's family portrait reminds Tom of the family bonds that anchor him when so much of his life is lived away; but it also warns of the toll that 'working for the Devil' might take. On his arms and chest, other tattoos narrate various stages of his life offshore: some wild times in Argentina; a memory of his late mother, whose death when he was 17 marked his entry into the industry; an evocation of his girlfriend Lucy, who 'saved' him from a bad patch offshore. Together, they trace an embodied biography of oil work, linking sites of extraction with kin relations, global capitalist networks of resource exploitation with affective projects of care.

For many of my interlocutors who work in the offshore oil industry, oil is presented as a compromising yet enticing form of labour. In Tom's invocation of the Devil, oil work is cast as a Faustian bargain reminiscent of the moral economies of extractive capitalism on other and earlier frontiers (Nash, 1993; Taussig, 2010). On one level, oil work is 'affective labour' (Hardt, 1999), constituting a livelihood and a way of life that promises an ideal of family prosperity and masculine selfhood. At the same time, working offshore entails repeated absence and loss: working 12-hour shifts 7 days a week for weeks at a time on a rig that never stops, oil workers sacrifice their labour, time and ultimately kin for an industry that always asks for more and gives back less and less.

In this article, I explore oil workers' aspirations for a 'good family life' promised by and sought in the peculiar time-space of the offshore. Through interlocutors' narratives

and biographies – mostly white expatriate Scottish employees in mid-level positions of international oilfield service companies<sup>2</sup> – I describe the aspirations that motivate a career offshore (time, money, respect, love) and the ruins that remain when they fray or fall short. While money is an important initial driver in entering the industry, oil workers are ultimately bound to the offshore by a desire for time, and an ideal of parenting and family life that only the offshore can offer. In what follows, I argue that the operational structures and labour regime of the offshore create not only a model of capital accumulation through ‘modular’ (Appel, 2012) expansion, but a mode of being and making kin, prompting the need to re-examine the role of kinship in sustaining and reproducing global capitalism.

### Kinship, oil, capitalism

As the ‘lifeblood’ of capitalist economies (Huber, 2013), oil has taken on a ‘demiurgic power’ (Appel et al., 2015: 10), symbolizing modernity’s quest for prosperity as well as the violence and destruction of capitalist appropriation. While much scholarship has been devoted to the political economy of oil, the industry itself remained – until recently – relatively opaque. Oil workers, in particular, have remained remarkably side-lined from the growing anthropological scholarship on oil.<sup>3</sup> This ‘black-boxing’ of labour (Ehsani, 2018: 23; High and Smith, 2019) has tended to reify a reductive view of the industry as a geopolitical game of conflict and profit, and obscured the social patterns and labour conditions through which capitalism is kept afloat.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding recent work on corporations (Rogers, 2012; Sawyer, 2012; Shever, 2008), the oil industry remains characterized by an ‘asocial logic of accumulation’, where ‘*capital, not kinship, shareholder value, not sentiment*’, holds sway (Gilberthorpe and Rajak, 2017: 193, emphasis added). It is precisely with kinship and sentiment that this article is concerned. By focusing on oil work as affective labour, I foreground the biographical and kin-making projects of global capitalism through the singular lives of those who carry it out. As Tom expressed:

Many people know about companies, but nobody has ever told an oilfield story. Nobody has ever asked us what we do, what our life is about. We are the people that run this industry – we *are* the Company!

In her work on offshore oil in Equatorial Guinea, Hannah Appel (2019) convincingly argues for the need to interrogate ‘the licit life of capitalism’, the practices and regimes that allow it to work. The ‘*how* of capitalism’, as Appel puts it, requires ‘a tremendous amount of work’: it relies on large-scale infrastructures, legal regimes, and processes of abstraction, standardization and modularity to realize its aspirations of ‘frictionless profit’ (Appel, 2019: 3). In this article, I argue that we also need to understand how people make these spaces affectively *workable*, and thereby logistically, financially and ethically viable. Attending to oil workers’ lifeworlds reveals how the work of capitalism is enabled by aspirations that stem from, but also exceed, capitalist ideology. Through oil workers’ projects of family life, patriarchal desire, parental care and leisure, I explore how kinship both enables and corrodes the ‘frictionless’ flows of oil and capital.

In doing so, I join recent scholarship that seeks to re-address the centrality of kinship and family formation to the production of global capitalist economies (Høyer Leivestad, 2021; Mannov, 2021; McKinnon and Cannell, 2013; Shever, 2008; Yanagisako, 2002). This scholarship challenges capitalism's artificial distinction between economic and socio-reproductive processes – a divide that has always been foundational to the capitalist utopia of an autonomous economic system. Kinship, these scholars argue, is not only a site of capitalist desire or a resource to be exploited, but a 'force of production' (Yanagisako, 2002) that organizes capitalist production and accumulation. In her work on family capitalism in the textile industry of Northern Italy, Sylvia Yanagisako (2002) argues that kin ties, sentiments and desires are instrumental in shaping the economic fortunes of family firms that operate through patrilineal inheritance and networks of trust. Similarly, Elena Shever's (2008, 2013) ethnography of the Argentinian oil industry demonstrates that kinship bonds and practices in the national company were crucial in organizing oil production and fostering national interests. Through the provision of company housing, education, medical care and job inheritance for oil workers' families, the oil company produced 'not just oil but also modern family structures, kinship sentiments, and national belonging' (Shever, 2013: 85).

This scholarship helps to conceptualize capitalist ventures like the global oil industry as a site of kin-making, self-making, and fantasy. Rather than seeing kinship and sentiments as cultural forces that shape the inflections of capitalist production, however, I argue that the material properties and organizational features of the offshore oil industry – its rotation system, continuous production, distant locations, racialized and segregated workforce, mobile and modular installations – promise and fail certain family formations, attachments to home and kin, and ideals of (mostly Western, white, patriarchal and nuclear) family life and parental care.

In his sweeping energy history of the Western economy, Timothy Mitchell (2011) argues that oil's material properties, and mode of production and circulation, enabled the emergence of a specific biopolitical and economic regime. While coal is labour-intensive, spatially concentrated in the mines, and relies on extensive territorial networks of railroad transportation that makes its operations vulnerable to workers' strike action and sabotage, oil liquefied the modern economy and enabled the smooth circulation of capital through dendritic networks that increasingly removed human interference from its processes of accumulation. But offshore oil's specific mode of production, infrastructure and labour regime, I argue, also condition social relations, attachments, and affects that are both specific to the offshore and indicative of the wider workings of extractive capitalism.<sup>5</sup>

The offshore is the ultimate 'liquid' dream of global capital (Campling and Colás, 2021): away from public view, rigs are spatially and politically removed; its labour force is small and largely invisible; production is continuous. Transforming the ocean commons into 'operational landscapes' (Brenner and Katsikis, 2020), the offshore promises a fantasy of timeless and placeless accumulation. In Takoradi, the oilfields are located 60 km away from the shore and production takes place on floating production and storage offloading unit (FPSOs), mobile rigs that combine drilling with processing and storage, and offload the oil directly onto tankers for export, minimizing the need for land-based pipeline infrastructure and allowing the industry to expand to deeper and more remote

locations. In contrast to coal, whose labour force is organized in semi-permanent company towns as with other mining operations, offshore oil workers lead a dispersed, temporary and itinerant way of life, moving across rigs by air and sea to inhabit virtually identical living quarters. Oilfields are leased to or owned by an operator, but rigs operate through a maze of subcontractors, hired for short durations and subject to the volatility of oil prices. As a result, workers are not generally tied to any rig, location, or company; they go contract by contract, moving from well to well. Production vessels themselves constantly move around the globe's waters, sometimes spending longer travelling in between locations than in any oilfield. Because of the high capital expenditure involved, the industry is dominated by large IOCs that privilege expatriate workers and foreign service companies (often their own subsidiaries) over local employees, goods and services.

In this mobile and stratified industry, oil workers chase the fantasy of a 'double life' in the 'non-time' of the offshore, splitting their lives between the rigs and back home. Spending 28 days abroad for 28 days at home, they strive to earn 'quality time' for their family while spending half of it away from them. In the repeated interruptions of intimacy, relationships become strained and difficult to maintain. Ultimately, oil workers' aspiration to a rotational model of parenting and family life is undermined by the hyper-productive demands of offshore work, leaving them mourning a particular type of capitalist fantasy. Casting themselves as 'providers' of an essential global commodity, my interlocutors rationalize oil as a 'necessary evil': a substance whose vital necessity to human life entails commensurate loss.

In this article, I look at the entangled processes of extractive and reproductive labour. The work of *making* resources is deeply linked to notions of generativity, and to the exploitation of potential and its promise of value (Ferry and Limbert, 2008): extracting oil transforms subterranean deposits into products (oil, petrochemicals) that enable other things to move or work. In turn, this generative potential structures temporal experience and imaginaries (Ferry and Limbert, 2008: 12–13). In what follows, I describe how the multiple temporalities of offshore oil extraction map onto conflicting projects of care and ambition. Through the attachments, aspirations and disaffections of oil workers' experiences, I explore the affective world of oil extraction (Weszkalnys, 2016) in order to shed new light on the generative and simultaneously destructive potential of extractive labour.

### **'Gypsies of the oilfield'**

Takoradi, a port town in the Western region, found itself renamed as Ghana's new 'Oil City' following the discovery of oil in commercial quantities in 2007.<sup>6</sup> As the country's first deep-water port, designed in 1921 to connect the region's abundant natural resources in the hinterland to the sea, Takoradi became the de facto logistics hub of the emerging oil industry. The domestic airport has been transformed into the oilfields' main air base, shuttling workers to the rigs, and doubles down as a storage yard for the FPSO's operator. Oil companies have established their operational bases around the airport, the port, and the maritime base in Sekondi, Takoradi's twin city and former administrative capital under British colonial rule. A shopping mall and luxury hotels and apartments have sprung up to cater for the arrival of foreign companies and a white expatriate class. As the helicopters,

supply vessels and oil tankers depart from the coast to service the rigs and take away its oil, the coastline reveals a stark temporal collision of new and old extraction: dotted with former slave forts and castles that tower over the industry's operations, it visually exposes entangled histories of racial capitalism and extractivism (Figures 1 and 2).

Since 2019, I have been conducting fieldwork on the oil industry in Takoradi as part of a wider project on energy infrastructures and environmental futures in Ghana. In this article, however, I focus on the lifeworlds of expatriate offshore oil workers to explore how global capitalism is reproduced by exclusionary forms of patriarchal desire. For the purposes of this article and reasons of space, there will be little about Ghana or Ghanaian oil workers, as I explore the itinerant kin-making projects of workers whose privileged mobility in the international spaces of the offshore afford them an exclusive – and exclusionary – capitalist fantasy of family life. I focus on a group of white expatriate oil workers, most of them Scottish men in their 40s and early 50s originally from Aberdeen and villages around it, who grew up in the midst of the 1980s oil boom in the UK North Sea.<sup>7</sup> Described by one of them as ‘Gypsies of the oilfields’, throughout their lives they have been travelling on rotation between offshore sites around the world. Most of them first trained in the North Sea, before moving to new frontiers like Ghana and other places



**Figure 1.** Harbour yard for an oil company's Christmas trees (equipment used for flow control on an oil or gas well); in the background, Fort Orange, a former Dutch trading post built in the 17th century.

Source: Photo by the author.



**Figure 2.** Fort Metal Cross in Dixcove, seen from a helicopter on its way to a rig.  
*Source:* Photo by Mark, helicopter pilot.

in the Gulf of Guinea when oil majors started to move away from mature oilfields in the North Sea. They described the offshore oil industry as a ‘global village’ – a Scottish community and expatriate class that is re-created in cities around the world. In contrast to ‘settled’ expats in Takoradi, many of whom worked for mining or other extractive industries, had retired or established businesses and re-married locally, my interlocutors led a transitory life oriented to their relations back home.

As mostly white, male, British nationals and elite migrants, they were in a privileged position in a number of aspects. They occupied supervisory or managerial positions, were paid salaries above average (and starkly disproportionate to those of Ghanaian counterparts and employees) and enjoyed unfettered international mobility. Since the neoliberalization and increasing financialization of the industry since the turn of the century, many were hired as contractors with limited employment security – a key industry strategy to discipline labour by discouraging collective organization through unionization and limit corporate liability (Labban, 2014). Ghana has implemented ambitious local content and participation laws, stipulating a progressive replacement of expatriate roles by, and knowledge transfer to, Ghanaian employees (Ackah and Mohammed, 2020), but the industry’s key roles remain dominated by expatriates and IOCs. The industry routinely invokes spurious and racist claims about the ‘lack of expertise’ of local staff and the ‘poor quality’ of locally sourced goods and materials to justify discriminatory hiring practices

and contracts.<sup>8</sup> As the industry relies on an extensive network of subcontractors, its labour force is stratified between a ‘local’ workforce that remains concentrated in lower-tier positions, and a highly mobile and privileged ‘expatriate’ class of workers in managerial positions (Otchere-Darko and Ablo, 2022). Unequal and differential mobilities underpin the dynamics of offshore labour, including precarious and contrived employment in its supply chains, and relatively immobile, gendered, and unpaid labour of social reproduction (Cresswell et al., 2016).

While it presents multiple challenges for access, the offshore is as much seaborne as it is land-based (Campling and Colás, 2021): much of the work occurs at the companies’ base, testing and monitoring equipment, training staff, preparing for a particular operation, and waiting to be called offshore. I met with my interlocutors during their onshore stints, for formal interviews and casual conversations, at dinners, barbeques, company parties and other social outings.<sup>9</sup> Living close to the port where I did most of my daily research (aboard supply vessels to the rig, with port agents, and in and around the industrial enclave where oilfield waste is processed), I was within walking distance of the majority of oilfield companies’ housing, and was able to partake in the more routine aspects of their life abroad.

In what follows, I describe how the spatial and temporal aspects of offshore work structured and compromised their ideal of family life, paying particular attention to the conflicting temporalities of resource-making and kin-making.

## Fantasy

### *Providers*

Oil, all my interlocutors agreed, had given them ‘everything they have’, ‘everything they’ve ever known’, and ‘more than they ever expected’: a livelihood, social mobility, a sense of community, specialized skills, international travel, a fulfilled and rewarding life. For those born in or around Aberdeen, entering the oil industry in the North Sea was an obvious choice: it offered higher-than-average salaries with little or no qualification required. They enjoyed the challenging and technical nature of the job, and the camaraderie and solidarity one often finds in confined working conditions. Many spoke with gratitude of the respect, social recognition and sense of purpose that oil had given them.

My interlocutors described themselves as ‘providers’ who engaged in risky, rough, and demanding work ‘at the end of the world’ (Watts, 2018) to meet patriarchal duties of care towards their loved ones, and to provide a basic necessity to a world dependent on – or ‘addicted to’ (Huber, 2013) – oil. Nick, a supervisor for a well-known engineering technique referred to as ‘slickline’, explained:

I think this is going to sound quite hypocritical, perhaps to my ex-wife, when I say this, but I do believe it, when I say: what I do, I don’t do it for myself, I do it for my family. To look after them, that’s what I see my role as being, I’m the provider.



Through the patriarchal figure of the provider, and what Jessica Smith has called ‘an ethics of material provisioning’ (Smith, 2019), oil workers assumed oil work as a labour of love towards their kin and the world at large. They saw themselves as providers in two related senses: as devoted fathers and partners materially supporting their family; and as dedicated workers delivering an essential product to a world hungry for oil and petrochemical products. They felt unjustly vilified for working in an industry that delivered a crucial commodity to the world (cf. Keskula, 2015) – and often denounced the complicity and hypocrisy of their critics. ‘If there’s no oil, there’s no world,’ as one of them put it. Or as Nick cynically observed, ‘Greenpeace still need our oil to power their boats when they come to occupy our rigs.’ The imperative of providing a basic energy source fetishized oil itself and imbued oil work with a sense of irrefutable responsibility, reinforcing the myth of inevitability (McDermott Hughes, 2017: 92; Nader, 2004: 775) that maintains the hegemony of oil as a global necessity.

‘Family’ – most often invoked in its heteronormative and nuclear form – and its associated professions of love, care and patriarchal duty saturated discussions about oil work. My questions about oil were diverted to the children or partners they missed, interrupted by phone calls from home, images of family gatherings, and excitement about their upcoming time off. An appeal to family values and affective aspirations in a context of extractive labour is perhaps not too surprising. Feminist anthropologists have long been critical of claims to family values that validate and reproduce capitalist relations. Offshore work depends upon gendered forms of domestic, emotional and reproductive labour ‘at home’, and is known for its culture of ‘toxic masculinity’ (Austin, 2018) and ‘frontier consciousness’ (Miller, 2004: 61).<sup>10</sup> An appeal to the primacy of kin relations also works to screen out racialized and unequal relations of labour, deflecting awareness and criticism away from ‘local’ affairs, people, and issues.

Yet the kind of exclusionary fantasy that motivated my interlocutors also departed from traditional understandings of capitalist and patriarchal desire in several respects. Offshore work was financially rewarding but, above all else, it provided an amount of free time unequalled by any other industry. Offshore configurations of time, money and distance promised an alternative ideal of family life, parenting and leisure that many found worth pursuing – and, later, found lacking. In what follows, I describe in greater detail this vision of a ‘good life’ (Robbins, 2013) in relation to time and parenting.

### *Chasing a double life*

The rotation system of offshore work entails long periods of time away from home (usually 28 days) for the same (or a higher) amount of time-off back home.<sup>11</sup> Working on rotations, they live what many of them refer to as a ‘double life’. Ian, a colleague of Nick, described it this way:

It’s almost like you have a double life. Like a superhero: you have an alter ego. That’s how I’ve done it over the years. I’ve separated my life there, and my life here. My kids, my wife: they’ve got their own life.

Ian had entered the industry as a roustabout in the North Sea, then worked onshore in the downstream sector as a pipeline controller in a refinery for one of the oil majors. When he was let go in the late 1990s, he moved to international postings in Oman and Qatar. Since the early 2000s, he has been rotating between oilfields in the Gulf of Guinea.

Like ‘superheroes’, offshore workers try to achieve an impossible ideal: trading distance against time, they chase jobs abroad to earn more time to spend back with their family. For Ian, this demands a splitting of the self to manage the bifurcated sense of home and intimacy. The notion of a double life is a recurrent trope in offshore workers’ narratives and experiences (Appel, 2012: 696; Parkes et al., 2005). It has also been noted in other forms of employment that involve long periods of time away or prolonged shift work, such as seafaring and the military (Thomas and Bailey, 2009).

Writing about the logistics of commercial riverboats in Colombia, Zeiderman (2021) describes that ship workers perceive their state of perpetual motion as a positive source of flexibility and freedom. Seafarers on the supply vessels to the rig in Takoradi, who spent six months at sea for three months back home, spoke of being bound to the sea; they disliked the time spent at the port loading up, and yearned to be moving again. By contrast, work offshore is overwhelmingly oriented to the return home. For oil workers on rotations, time on the rig is spent fantasizing about it elsewhere. As Max, a colleague of Ian’s described:

When you work offshore, you spend a lot of it wishing your life away. Wishing you were at home, counting down the weeks, the days ...

In the gap of the offshore, oil workers try to beat time by living it doubly. Many were aware of the limits to the chase, as they struggled to maintain a balance between intimacy and absence, time and money, family care and individual ambition. ‘Sometimes, this job feels like a dog running after its own tail,’ reflected Eric, a rig superintendent who had been working offshore for 37 years. ‘Working offshore’, explained Max,

it’s got its rhythm, it goes by steps. Step 1, when you’ve just arrived after time at home, I call it ‘hitting the offshore wall’: you hate it, you just want to leave. But the next day, it’s not so bad. Then you just get used to working, 7 days a week, 12 hours a day. And the day you go home, it’s the best job in the world.

My interlocutors would often ask: ‘What other job can pay you this much for working half the year?’ The time off was overwhelmingly seen as the single main attraction of offshore work. If the money initially enticed them into the industry, for many, it was the time off that ultimately kept them in (Ljoså and Lau, 2009; Solheim, 1988).

‘For most people who have been in oil, after a few years, it’s the time – the valuable time you get with your family’, said Alistair, the country manager of an oilfield service company providing subsea equipment. ‘Financially’, he said, ‘I’ve given them [his family] something – university education, a comfortable life – but I think I’ve been able to get them more by being there for them.’ In monetary terms, working offshore could never

compensate for the sacrifices of a life partly lived away from home. But the perceived *quality* of the time it afforded went a long way:

When I'm home, I'm home. I can do the school run, I can go to the school play. I can help them build something for the school project. We can do so many things together, we can spend so much time together. I can give them *that quality time*. If I'd been working Monday to Friday, I'd leave before the kids went to school and come back when they're in bed at night.

Oil workers' parenthood aspirations challenged an understanding of intimacy predicated on physical presence. Many of my interlocutors considered themselves 'better dads than most': their absence, they said, gave their family a financial stability and lifestyle they would not otherwise be able to afford, and their time at home was always 'quality time'. As Tom said: 'When I'm there, I'm there 100%.' 'The family time you get, it's fractured,' Ian said. 'But you can do so much with the time off. It's attractive, that ability to know that for the next 20 days, I don't have to do anything – I can be there for them.' Despite the 'fractured time' of intimacy, the length and quality of the time-off made room for a different way of doing fatherhood – one that they deemed superior to a 9–5 routine.

### *In the deep of time*

Recent work on the ocean economy has critically theorized the role of oceans and maritime jurisdictions in channelling, securing and moving capital (Campling and Colás, 2021). In her work on oil extraction in Equatorial Guinea, Hannah Appel (2019) compellingly describes how 'the offshore' is conjured as a capitalist fantasy of 'frictionless profit'. Through mobile infrastructures, subcontracting regimes and standardized technological processes, oil production is disentangled from the concrete specificity of its places of extraction, acquiring a modular quality that enables it to replicate in roughly similar forms the world over – making the offshore a peculiar kind of 'non-place' (Augé, 2009).<sup>12</sup>

But the fantasy of the offshore is also constructed temporally: drilling into the depths of geological time in what Michael Watts (2021) has called 'a great deepwater land grab, or primitive accumulation at 7000 meters', the rigs run continuously to extract 'deep time' in the compressed form of hydrocarbons. Production platforms never stop: they work 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, with personnel working in pairs, doing back-to-back shifts of 12 hours each. This is partly due to their remote location and the challenging logistical arrangements they require, and partly to the high capital costs involved in developing and operating an offshore installation, which can cost from a few hundred thousand dollars to a million a day. On the rig, every second counts, and any 'NPT' (non-productive time) costs big money.

Living in confined space, time and relations are compressed for weeks at a time. 'Working on the rig takes a certain kind of person', said Max. 'Not a specific skill or degree, but a certain personality. Because you work a 12-hour shift, sharing a room with the same people you just spent 12 hours with. You go crazy at times! Who do you spend 12 hours straight with, every day? Not even your wife!' Eric compared the rig to a prison,

sharing small living quarters with others with nowhere to escape to except the vastness of the ocean.

Away from their family, stuck at sea on an industrial beast that never stops, workers live a life of intermittent intimacy suspended between the compressed time of the rig's hyper-production and the extended periods of quality time spent back home. They described rotations as time split and bracketed out from the continuity of their lives back home. While new communication technologies in the past few years had made everyday contact easier, many still expressed difficulties in maintaining synchrony with their families back home.

My fieldnotes are filled with corrections to dates in my interlocutors' biographies. For instance, Ian initially told me he came to Ghana in 2003 – four years before the oil discoveries by Kosmos, or seven years before first oil production. When I pointed this out to him, he exclaimed: 'Oh! Was it 2007? Gosh, I don't know, it's all very confused in my mind – and you know, when you're here, it's like, it's a different place.... Time runs differently.'<sup>13</sup> At once compressed and boundless, the time of the offshore appears as a site of accelerated accumulation carved in the brackets of linear time. One could say that the offshore, as a temporal fantasy of capitalism, promises not 'money without work', but 'money without time' – rewarding work waged outside of the time that counts.

The offshore is thus constructed in my interlocutors' experiences and biographies through multiple temporalities. On the rig, time is constant but also suspended; rotation time is routinized to cope with repeated ruptures, but also spent longing for the prolonged quality time at home, and in eager anticipation of their return home. Over one's career, it is the punctuated time of biographical milestones that is used to chart the 'price' of distance and represent the losses and sacrifices incurred offshore. As we will see in the next section, this suspended but punctuated sense of time often conflicts with their families' experiences back home.

## **Fallout: Capitalism and interpersonal ruins**

What sacrifices do fantasies entail, at what cost, and to whom? For many, 'working for the Devil' entailed accepting and enduring loss. They invariably spoke of the missed milestones that could never be factored into their paychecks: weddings, funerals, birthdays, anniversaries, the births of their own children. 'You miss out on a lot,' they often said, 'You sacrifice a lot.' They weighed the benefits they had accrued from oil against the toll of a 'double life' partly lived away from home, comparing their life choices against more conventional pathways:

I have friends who work, they call it 'normal jobs', like a Monday to Friday job. They get home and have supper with the kids and the kids go to bed. They see them just for a couple of hours before, if at all, during the week and then they just have the little short bursts on the weekend together. I don't know what's better. I don't know if we're justifying it to ourselves? If we just tell ourselves that the time off is worth – I don't know. It seems to work. I believe it. It also causes trouble, too. So I don't know what's better, it's tough. *This is the stuff we tell each other, tell ourselves.* If you ever figure that out, let me know because I wonder. (Jamie)

In Jamie's comment, the fantasy of the time off and a double life away from home starts to fray, torn between affirmation and self-deception. After years working as a helicopter pilot bringing oil workers to and from the rig, he had recently separated from his partner, who had relocated to Denmark with their kids. Yet unlike many of my interlocutors, he was reluctant to attribute his marital problems to his job, blaming other incompatibilities. Singing the praises of the oil industry, he still believed (though, as he himself suggests, perhaps out of self-preservation) that a life offshore could give the best of both worlds: material benefits and a happy family life.

Reflecting upon two 'oilfield divorces', Eric was more sceptical: 'The chunk it takes out of your life, the time you spend away from your family, I don't think it compensates for that.' He felt ambivalent about the choices he'd made, weighing the livelihood that oil has given him against the milestones he was never around to experience. Recently, his daughter had confessed that she had developed trust issues with her husband, who also worked offshore, because of the way she had seen it destroy her parents' marriage and affect her mother. Early work on the psychological impact of offshore work on the families of oil workers in the North Sea reveals widespread feelings of social isolation, concern for the husband's safety offshore, child-rearing issues, and an imbalance in domestic work (Mauthner et al., 2000; Parkes et al., 2005). Some women described being perceived as 'intermittent widows' and, in 1985, a team of psychiatrists working with offshore oil workers' wives in Aberdeen identified an affliction specific to the offshore that they named 'the intermittent husband syndrome' (Morrice et al., 1985). Interestingly, spouses 'at home' emphasized the challenge of repeated mutual adaptation required upon the return of their spouse over that of repeated separation (Thomas and Bailey, 2009). While oil workers found the 'quality time' back home to make up for what they missed offshore, their spouses valued synchrony and continuity – precisely those aspects of intimacy and the everyday that are compromised in their rotating lives.

The repeated ruptures of offshore work strain relationships at home, gradually exposing the 'cruel' (Berlant, 2011) edge of the offshore fantasy: in trying to maintain a 'double life', oil workers end up with a life halved by the demands of work and the longing for home. What have they gained, if they have missed as much? Compelled to the offshore by an imaginary of family intimacy and prosperity, many learn to live in its fallout, inhabiting a peculiar form of alienation, disaffection, and rootlessness.

A site of intense capital expenditure and accumulation, the rig was also a space of loss and longing. 'The biggest thing that every guy working on a rig fears,' asserted Nick, is a phone call from home:

That phone call, when something's happened to your family and you're stuck floating in the middle of the sea. I've seen it many times and it's the most helpless, godawful thing to see, when a man can't get back or there's been an accident and they've lost loved ones, sons, daughters, wives ... it's terrible.

Some had lost friends and colleagues on the rigs, in helicopter crashes, on the drill floor; many had witnessed or sustained serious injuries. Eric was part of the crew that first resumed operations after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and Harry had been rescued

from the Bourbon Dolphin accident in 2007. Only three years in to the industry, in 1988, JB found himself on the recovery effort for the Piper Alpha disaster – a massive explosion that killed 165 workers on board and 2 rescue workers. Following the Cullen Inquiry, the disaster led to a regime change in offshore safety and regulations, and to the rise of a new culture of occupational risk. Yet this ‘safety culture’ became tied to the evaluation of individual employee performance, leading to widespread under-reporting and declassifying of incidents (Collinson, 1999). This obsessive culture of risk took on heroic and moral proportions in workers’ careers:

You go through shit times, and the dangers.... It’s not an exaggeration. Somebody can kill 200 people, in the blink of an eye. So the way I see it, why should a person that’s worked hard for all these years expose themselves to that level of danger? Away from their family? (Nick)

As ‘providers’ of a ‘necessary evil’ in a high-risk environment, oil workers situated their labour as part of a sacrificial economy in which accumulation becomes indissociable from loss and destruction. To cope, many turned to various forms of self-medication. Interim periods of work onshore were spent drinking heavily at the bars and clubs of the city that attracted a mixed clientele of international offshore workers, seafarers, and miners. Ian jokingly referred to the offshore as the ‘Betty Ford Foundation’ – a reference to the addiction treatment centre founded by the wife of US President Gerald Ford, because addictive substances are banned from the rigs. Ian’s Ghanaian co-worker joked that the Church of expats was the pub – and that their piety rivalled that of the most devout among them. Some, like Ian, described the compulsive urge to drink away in order to pass the time abroad:

To be honest, I just drink for the sake of drinking. Your family’s far away, you’re working all the time.... When I’m here I just switch off. ‘Cuz *I’ve missed so much already*. I’ve missed so much over the years, birthdays, funerals, weddings.... When you’re home, it’s great, but when you’re here, you just switch off. Shut it off. That’s my way of coping with it.

Many of my interlocutors had left the industry at some point – worn out by the distance, or let go as companies move towards casual employment. Their working lives and careers followed the cyclicity of the industry, with periods of booms and busts redeploying risk, optimism and futures. Upon a recent return to Ghana (July 2021), none of the interlocutors mentioned here remained. They had moved on to Kenya, Uganda, Mozambique (where recent large oil and gas finds are under development), or were waiting out the Covid-19 stagnation in Aberdeen. There was an acute sense that the industry’s ‘cut-throat’ strategy was a stark change to earlier, more generous working conditions that had made the challenges of the job worthwhile. In this ‘feast or famine’ industry, as Eric put it, the feast was increasingly reserved for shareholders and company executives. Companies, they complained, had become ‘greedy’, driven solely by shareholder value. Workers had become ‘secondary’, ‘second-grade’, and ‘replaceable’.

Compounded familial and occupational pressures led many to exit the industry in order to reassess their life choices, embark on a radically new career, or simply spend more time

at home. Yet most of them ended up re-entering the industry after a few months away, even accepting pay cuts or longer periods away. They described being unable to take on a nine-to-five job, craving the time off they had become accustomed to and the sense of belonging in a workplace that was ‘all they’d ever known’.

## Conclusion: Intimacy for the planetary

In seeking a better life offshore, oil workers trade time and distance for an ideal of family life that the labour regime of the offshore makes both imaginable and, in most cases, unattainable. In describing the interpersonal and emotional ruins that remain when it unravels, I have tried to explore how the extractive dimensions of oil work shape its (re) productive dimensions. [Shapiro and McNeish \(2021\)](#) have argued that violence is a ‘core logic’ of our current ‘age of hyper-extractivism’, and called for the need to recognize the pervasive and insidious ways that extractive violence works – not just through outright force or conflict, but also through symbolic and benevolent means ([Behrends and Reyna, 2011](#)). In this article, I have argued that fantasies of the good life, kinship sentiments, and affective projects of care drive and rationalize exploitative and extractive practices, deploying love and responsibility in ways that violently exclude the racial, gendered and structural inequalities they rest on. Responsibility, as [Trnka and Trundle \(2017\)](#) cogently argue, often denotes an imperative of care that is difficult to refute and subject to critique. Yet there is a need to examine such claims and imperatives precisely because capitalism has always sought to present itself as a system removed from ‘sentiments’ and other ‘unruly passions’ ([Hirschman, 2013](#)). I have shown that an attention to the affective world of extraction reveals global capitalism as a site of fantasy and ruination, rather than an economic project, and I have described the interpersonal ruins that it brings. In describing the desires for time, love, and care in an age that consistently undermines them, I have sought to understand how industry workers craft visions of a ‘good life’ within extractive ventures, and hang on to them even as they fray ([Berlant, 2011](#)). While recent work on extraction ([Shapiro and McNeish, 2021](#); [Watts, 2021](#)) argues for a ‘planetary perspective’ to recognize the complex ecological contribution of extractive processes to our present existential threat, I want to reclaim the ways in which singular aspirations and lifeworlds shape the operations of petro-capitalism. My interlocutors spoke about the ethical difficulties of working in an industry that was multiple in its effects and purposes. As a place that gave them financial stability and a sense of belonging, but also compromised their personal life and threatened the environmental futures of their children, the industry was one they loved and, at times, loathed. As Freddy, the regional manager of a Big Oil company put it: ‘I’m all twisted. I *want* to say “fuck the oil industry”. But at the same time, that’s kind of my life, it’s my livelihood. I’m all twisted.’ Against a tendency to ‘abstract’ the moral world of capitalism itself, rendering its workers and their motivations invisible, this article has attempted to explore how the extractive operations of offshore labour both promise an ideal of, and ultimately compromise, the reproductive and affective labour on which it depends.

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## Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. 'Oilfield services' encompass a dizzying range of activities and expertise, from the procurement of equipment and chemicals, to well services, maintenance, inspection and completion, to drilling and rig provision.
3. There is an important literature on the mental and occupational health of oil workers and shift workers, that began in the 1970s North Sea context. See for example (Asare et al., 2021; Ljoså and Lau, 2009; Parkes, 1998; Rodrigues et al., 2001). Recent work includes the extensive research project on oil workers and FIFO (fly-in, fly-out) work mobilities in the Alberta Oil Sands led by Sara Dorow (Cresswell et al., 2016; Dorow and Jean, 2022; Dorow et al., 2021) and the oral history project with the University of Aberdeen on the UK North Sea 'Lives in the Oil Industry': <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/oillives/>.
4. The relatively small labour size of the industry might account for this gap, although the extensive 'complex' and logistics networks of the industry (Appel et al., 2015) indirectly employ an immense labour force. As Mazen Labban (2014) argues, we also need to think about labour beyond a mere focus on the number of workers or their proportion to capital. In monetary terms, the industry represents one of the largest sites of capital accumulation – and therefore of its 'promise of profitability' (Labban, 2014).
5. Mitchell (2011) does put coal and oil workers at the centre of his analysis, but only in their strategic capacity to make political demands, not in the affective, social or reproductive dimension of their work.



6. Ghana's oil production is modest (about 200,000 bpd) but its significance for the local economy should not be underestimated, as oil has become Ghana's second main export – replacing cocoa, and second only to gold.
7. They belong to what Carola Hein identifies as the 'fourth generation' of the petroleum industry, between 1970 and 2000, a 'time when spaces on sea and land had become saturated with petroleum-related structures' (Hein, 2021: 4–5).
8. On the experiences of Ghanaian oil workers and the discriminatory work environment of the offshore see Ablo (2018, 2022) and Otchere-Darko and Ablo (2022).
9. My first attempt at getting access to a short-term placement offshore failed when the contact I had with the rig contractor was suddenly redeployed to Guyana; my second, when the drillship I had been trying to get on was contracted for a well in Peru, and left within weeks.
10. While this differs between companies and locations, the offshore oil industry remains heavily male-dominated. Where women do work offshore, hegemonic masculinity only tends to be reinforced, not challenged (Austin, 2018). Norway has the highest proportion of women employed offshore – around 16% (Parkes, 1998), but they tend to be younger (34.7 years) than their male counterparts, likely due to the difficulties of accommodating childcare in offshore work schedules.
11. Rotation times vary slightly according to location and labour regime. 'Overseas' rotation times are typically longer and less regulated than in the North Sea. Norway has the most generous leave pattern, and has operated a 2–4 pattern since 2002 (Mikkelsen et al., 2004). By contrast, workers recruited 'locally' tend to have shorter and less favourable work/leave schedules.
12. My interlocutors described having favourite rigs, but preferences were largely due to the crew and its atmosphere, rather than any particular feature of the rigs, which were all broadly similar.
13. He arrived in Ghana (in all likelihood, in 2007) on account of an administrative glitch: he was bound for the Arctic, but applied for the wrong visa, was rejected and relocated to Ghana – a fine example of the oil industry's 'evacuation of specificity' (Appel, 2012).

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