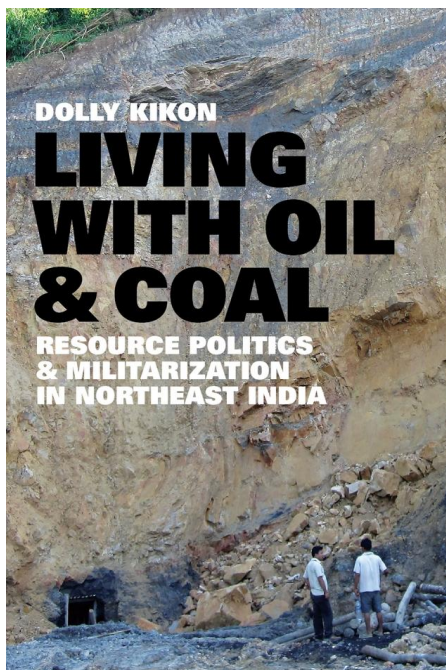


## BOOK REVIEW

### A Wealth of Information in a Novel Narrative

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Dolly Kikon. 2019. *Living with Oil and Coal: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India (Culture, Place, and Nature)*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. ISBN: 978-02-9574-395-0, pp. 204, USD 30 (PB).



Amplifying local voices in Assam and Nagaland, Dolly Kikon’s ethnographic account along the border of these states shows us what marking a territory as “fossil fuel rich” does to the daily lives of the people there. She uses emic metaphors to describe everyday entanglements with oil and coal in spaces of extraction, which are physically separated from local communities and heavily guarded by security forces but socially conjoined with people’s lives. Kikon’s narrative tells us how fossil fuels rise from the ground beneath and seep into the social relations and worldviews of the locals, configuring everything from political struggles and

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administrative procedures to personal aspirations, future plans, and subjectivities.

Just as the presence of rigs, wells, pipes, tankers, and gated oil sites alters the physical landscape, the presence of geologists, traders, bureaucrats, engineers, and armed forces alters the social landscape. The production of an extraction site is just as much the work of soft infrastructures and social networks as it is of material infrastructures. The effect this has on the micro and macro lives of the people living there, Kikon points out, is largely shaped by violence and surveillance.

The growing literature on oil extraction suggests that living with oil implies living with violence, as it isn't just an *effect* of extraction but has been fundamental to fossil fuel production (Sawyer 2004; Vitalis 2007; Watts 2008; Shever 2012). Given oil's centrality to economic growth and state power, its sites being armed and surveilled and the people living there being displaced and doubted have become regular features. However, Timothy Mitchell (2011) urges us to question the obviousness of this linkage between oil and violence: can a bureaucracy and management of oil look more egalitarian and transparent if its leadership and the goals and meanings attached to it are different? Or is there something inherent to the physicality of oil that leaves a trail of oppression? In most cases, certain characteristics of oil are emphasized by certain modes of its management, to coproduce the structures we have around it, which illuminates the ways in which material and human factors co-create particular regimes, which are historically contingent (Jain 2020). Hannah Appel (2012, 2019) has illustrated the role of capitalist economies in allowing oil sites to disengage with the local, while Kikon's research demonstrates their entanglements with the local. Similar to Kikon, Mandana Limbert (2010) studies how lives are affected by oil by exploring how locals understand the transformation of their worlds, institutions, practices, and infrastructures, and their expectations from the future. This book does not engage with these discussions.

It focuses on how the Indian state views the North Eastern states, how that impacts the lives of the people there, and how they articulate their demands to the state in a vocabulary provided by resource richness. Rights over resources—the ability to extract and sell them—become the primary talking point in political struggles, and hailing from regions rich in minerals becomes embedded in people's cultural and personal identities. This implies that once a place gets marked as “fossil fuel rich”, it changes the terms of the debate irreversibly, even for the locals. That identity, once given to them, cannot be escaped. Kikon describes the ordinary ways in which place making, borders, resource richness, and the military get woven into local

stories, histories, and myths, which enable people to make meaning of their lives.

Resistance against the state is then also expressed in the language of oil, either via resistance to it or a fight to control it. Control over oil becomes a metaphor for sovereignty. As Fernando Coronil (1997) elucidates, oil comes to be seen as a “magical” substance, the owner of which can either be a “devil” or a “magnanimous sorcerer”, bringing riches to the people. But once local dreams of self-determination are sought to be realized through the ownership of oil, the model of governance and socio-economic life they aspire to are often aligned with capitalist development and are not radically different from their current state. The book does not provide us with a history of Assam’s political struggle and how it is mired with oil. Instead, Kikon sets out to explore the ways in which a fossil fuel identity has unfolded in Assam and Nagaland.

The extensive narrative presents a series of observations about living with oil and coal, but the text remains largely descriptive, making no solid argument and offering little theoretical insight. Even the observations are often inconclusive. The one observation that is strongly emphasized is the mundane ways in which oil infrastructures interfere with quotidian lives, the militarized encounters that upend their lives, and the relationship of force and threat between the state and local citizens. While the ethnographic vignettes are appreciated, if the author is not using them to make a larger argument, they remain mere stories. One cannot help but wonder who her intended audience is. What body of literature is she speaking to? How does she position herself in the existing work on resource extraction? What conceptual framework is the book deploying and what are her theoretical assertions? What conversation does she want to open with this? If the book is meant to be read by the people she writes about, and not by academics, then too wouldn’t a central argument that strings together their stories into a body of analyses be appreciated by them? What are the people—with the lived experiences narrated in the book—meant to derive from it?

Her use of emic categories is admirable, but she leaves the work incomplete by not conceptualizing them enough to draw connections between local ideas and the observations she makes about them. For instance, her use of love as an analytic tool to understand social relationships amidst oil is fascinating, but it remains confusing because the reader is left wondering what she is attempting to highlight with it. What analytical work does this tool do here? Evidently, she is making connections between love, belonging, bodies, gender, ethnicity, geography, and mining. But these knots are not explained adequately. How are the different types of love tied to oil and coal? As independent stories, they are interesting empirical pieces,

but what do they tell us about living with oil? Is love a response to state violence and a form of resistance or a coping mechanism? It remains for the reader to guess. The only place where there is clarity regarding this is where she describes the relationship between state-sponsored development and citizens, which the latter define as love when the former is effective.

Kikon uses the framework of citizenship to analyse her field. The idea of a “good person” being defined by their position vis-à-vis oil sites is insightful (142). This can be elaborated upon and analysed further by using the many frameworks of citizenship Niraja Jayal (2013) lays out in her capacious and authoritative theoretical work on the subject. However, Kikon does not conceptualize this any further. Instead, she discusses two ways of producing what she calls “carbon citizenship” (143). The first is that citizens in these regions have to constantly produce documents and undergo profiling at security checkpoints. The second entails the violent interrogation of people by state authorities and oil companies in order to ensure that they are citizens. However, neither of these forms produce a “carbon” citizenship. Their documents are not carbonized, the way an LPG account’s document to prove one’s citizenship is or the documents required to procure an LPG account are. An affiliation with oil is not required to prove one’s citizenship, or vice-versa, according to the two methods she describes. Going by her descriptions, those methods are the results of the presence of carbon and end up assessing people’s citizenship. They are not tying people—through specific carbonized documents or interrogations—to the state and producing an alternate type of citizenship emanating from fossil fuels. While they do speak of citizenship, should they be termed “*carbon citizenship*”?

In sum, the book is narrative rich, but it does not deliver on the promises it sets up in the introduction. It flags some concepts but does not flesh them out or follow through. That said, because of its empirical wealth, it is informative, providing fodder for analyses of sites of extraction. It is useful for scholars of resource politics as well as scholars of North East India for whom it will act as a rich repository of knowledge for future research projects.

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