Max Haiven, *Palm Oil: The Grease of Empire* (London: Pluto Press, 2022) 160pp. Paperback £14.99, eBook £7.99.

In *Palm Oil*, Max Haiven writes a short but powerful narrative where he shows how palm oil became one of the most essential commodities of today's world. But Haiven does not stop at commodity level, where palm oil remains a local object of production and comsumption; through his analysis, the commodity appears in its truly global dimensions: economic, historical, socio-political, technological, and biological. Haiven's goal, which he quickly surpasses, is to present a totalizing picture of palm oil to the reader; by the end of the book, the picture he paints transcends the subject of palm oil. Densely informative and beautifully written, Haiven's book falls somewhere between a work of academic inquiry and a politically inspiring pamphlet—a valuable addition to the current scholarly trend of tracing global social histories of select commodities.

Central to the narrative is that *palm oil is ubiquitous*, something that the author will not shy away from repeating as many times as necessary. Using his physical book as an example, Haiven illustrates the point: "Nearly every element of the process that now finds you reading these words could have been touched or facilitated by palm oil" (1). Wherever you go, and no matter what thing you look at, palm oil's presence can be felt, either directly or indirectly. And not only is it ubiquitous, but it is also necessary for the reproduction of both our human bodies and the material world as a whole.

The story begins with the miracle of palm oil as a resource. It is cheap to produce and extremely stable. And it can be refined into anything: versatile fuel, great industrial lubricant, the perfect base for cosmetics and other derivative products, neutral cooking oil, and so forth. Palm oil is thus the skeleton key of the modern industrial world, joining other mythical resources, such as petroleum, coal, and steel, as solutions to an unimaginably large set of problems. As with the other technological panaceas, the price to pay for palm oil will be great, albeit not economic.

Haiven conducts a brief history of palm oil as a commodity. He begins in Africa, where palm oil served ritual, symbolic, and nutritional purposes. The shift toward the commodification of palm oil came with the European colonization of Africa in the 19th century. What is most interesting about palm oil within the context of colonization is how it served as both a means and an end to the construction of colonial empires. The initial small amounts of it cultivated in Africa were used to power the industrial machinery—literally as fuel and grease for machines and trains—to industrialize its production further. This positive feedback

cycle of using the industrial power of palm oil to increase its production has turned palm oil into the global force that it is today. The majority of palm oil production has moved out of Africa and into Southeast Asia primarily, making Indonesia and Malaysia "undisputed palm oil superpowers" (8).

Haiven describes palm oil as an "almost magical substance" (1), but this is where his praise ends. The book shows no naivete vis-à-vis palm oil or miracles. Haiven understands that palm oil is part of the material world: as humans, we must grow the oil palm, harvest its fruit, and refine and distribute it according to our needs. It is only within the context of the "three-faced god," or "capitalist accumulation, white supremacist ideology, and inter-imperialist rivalry" (8) that palm oil works miracles. And under such conditions of racial capitalism, the extraction of resources—even miraculous ones—always comes at a cost. What, then, is the cost of a resource that is both ubiquitous ano our capitalist world? Haiven answers with terrifying simplicity: "this system seems to be a vast and merciless organization of human sacrifice" (p.3). In order for palm oil to exist as a miraculous good, countless humans must go through an arranged death. Following capitalist logic, those sacrificed are "primarily [...] the exploited workers who cultivate and process the commodity" (9).

The palm oil industry may be gigantic, but the scale of human sacrifice Haiven is examining goes far beyond a set of workers in one sector. The agro-industrial side of palm oil is only a tiny portion of human sacrifice; looking at palm oil as a foodstuff sheds light on a much broader altar. The miraculous cheapness of palm oil has made it the food of the poor: it is their cooking oil of choice, a main ingredient in instant ramen noodles, and a pivotal component in the invention of canned foods (61–7). The overconsumption of palm oil has also revealed its disastrous effects on our bodies. This is the double-binding of palm oil: it simultaneously fuels and poisons the working-class. This double-binding exists across the globe but it is more prevalent in the Global South, where economies rely on the production of palm oil and individuals use it more often as a cheap cooking oil.

At this point, the palm oil narrative moves away from the traditional paradigm of worker exploitation and enters the realm of necropolitics, where "the colonized subject [is] destined for a kind of managed death to reproduce the power and profit of the colonizer" (101). This managed death is the entire life cycle of palm oil as a commodity. Producing palm oil requires the slow death of agricultural and industrial workers, and once fully manufactured its consumption is poisonous. Again, the necropolitical side of palm oil disproportionately affects workers and consumers of the Global South. Haiven thus inscribes the necropolitics of palm oil into a larger system of racial capitalist.

The beauty of Haiven's narrative is in how it transcends itself. The book begins with a discussion centred around palm oil, but as it progresses, palm oil is revealed to be only an example of a commodity under racial capitalism. Analyzing

palm oil, like any other commodity, allows one to understand the general logic of racial capitalism. And this is where Haiven poses his most interesting question: "If we created palm oil and, through it, created our world, what else might we have created? What else might we yet create?" (p.109). When the book is at its most pessimistic and most critical of the palm oil industry and of global capitalism, Haiven turns the narrative on its head: in spite of the necessity for unfathomable suffering and death, palm oil proves that we have the power to shape the world we live in, for better or worse.

With this turn, palm oil reclaims its miraculous qualities—not as an economic good or a technological resource, but as a product of human imagination. What Haiven asks of the reader is to see palm oil as an incredible human creation and use it as inspiration to fuel ambitions for a better world. He does not wish for mere reform, of which he is "deeply skeptical" (p.111); a reforming project is not ambitious enough to take on the palm oil industry and global capitalism. Instead, Haiven calls for a worldwide revolution which would "enhance the scope and sensitivity of our collective imagination to envision a different habit of relation, or many habits of relation, working in solidarity" (115).

The call for a global revolution is where the book ends. Outside of a quick look at moments of worker resistance in the palm oil industry, there is very little in the way of revolutionary praxis. The closest he gets to praxis is in redefining the capitalist figure of *homo economicus*, the economic human—a figure he criticizes throughout the book—as *homo narrans*, the storytelling human. Haiven wants humanity to "transform itself *alchemically* through stories" (109). The reader is asked to use their imagination to think beyond the world of palm oil and capitalism, and in what is perhaps an act of humility, Haiven does not claim to have done the work already. Despite this seemingly disappointing conclusion, the reader will have difficulty faulting Haiven for how he ends his narrative because he repeatedly emphasizes the need for solidarity, collective action, and mutuality. Undoubtedly, Haiven's call for revolutionary imagination is not aimed at individuals but at communities who, together, have the power to change this palm oil world.

Takin Raisifard
University of Toronto