N Word delivers a serious pummeling.

Asim, deputy editor of *The Washington Post Book World,* begins by disputing lexicographers' claims that the first recorded usage of "nigger" was neutral. Jamestown colonist John Rolfe described the arrival in 1619 of "twenty negars" in his diary. In fact, Asim writes, none of the terms—among them "nigger," "niger," "negur," and "negar"—used to refer to black Africans was devoid of negative connotations. Long before the Revolutionary War, black people fought against efforts to dehumanize them through language, but "the notion of black inferiority spread as rapidly as the spirit of independence that enlivened the new nation."

American ideologies are on trial here, and so are a few individuals who embody them. Thomas Jefferson, for instance. Asim calls Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784–85) "a handy, influential primer for those who aspired to advance the cause of white supremacy." Jefferson represents a quintessentially American paradox: The legacy of one of this country's most prominent statesmen cannot be separated from its white supremacist roots. Of course, as Asim points out, the black American experience is steeped in this same paradox. Campaigns against white supremacy have been central to the evolution of African-American identity.

And yet, he argues, "nigger" survives because Americans want it to. He buttresses this claim with prodigious examples from literature, music, theater, film, and science. Josiah Nott, a 19th-century scientist who sought to prove blacks' inferiority, described his work as "niggerology." Asim links widespread acceptance of this pseudoscience to anti-Negro campaigns evident in courtrooms, congressional committees, churches, and the popular media.

Asim does not believe the word can or should be expunged from our language. He applauds black artists, such as comedian and actor Richard Pryor and poet Sonia Sanchez, who have used the word for aesthetic, historical, and ethical purposes. Ultimately, however, he calls black people's casual use of "nigger," even in an attempt to reclaim it, unimaginative: "As long as we embrace the derogatory language that has long accompanied and abetted our systematic dehumanization, we shackle ourselves to those corrupting white delusions—and their attendant false story of our struggle in the United States."

Determining when use of the "n word" is permissible—even constructive—and when it is harmful is a delicate and subjective matter. For Asim, the issue comes down to a distinction between the public and the private spheres. "A man may have as bad a heart as he chooses," he quotes Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., "if his conduct is within the rules." Though Asim does not make good on the definitive and prescriptive promise of his subtitle, readers come away with an appreciation of the fact that every utterance of the word is accompanied by a history to which we must all be held accountable.

Asim displays a curious obsession with quantification ("nigger" appears some 95 times in *Gone With the Wind*, 215 times in *Huckleberry Finn*, 21 times in the 1859 novel *Our Nig*), and his careful cataloging of these mentions functions as a kind of rhetorical assault. Perhaps his private ambition is that readers will be forced to reflect on the psychological effects of this constant confrontation with the word on the page. Each repetition compels us to revisit the awful history the word carries. And we have Michael Richards, Don Imus, and the others who will come after them to remind us that the history of the "n word" is by no means concluded.

—***Emily Bernard***

Oil's Final Frontier

UNTAPPED:
The Scramble for Africa's Oil.

By John Ghazvinian. Harcourt. 320 pp. $25

On a 2005 visit to southern Chad's Doba Basin, John Ghazvinian stood on a road outside a fenced compound occupied by ExxonMobil. On one side, a 120-megawatt

power plant operated by the U.S. oil company produced six times the amount of electricity generated in the rest of Chad, and posh amenities abounded: modern apartments, air conditioning, Internet access, basketball courts, a health clinic, even an airport. A sign proclaimed, "Home of the World's Greatest Drilling Team."

On the other side of the road, 10,000 people lived in squalor. Atan, a town that had taken root in the desert a decade earlier as a squatter camp for job seekers, lacked clean running water. Nightclub prostitutes served an American and French clientele a short distance from Atan's houses of worship and tiny schools. "Despite the veneer of respectability, Atan is an enormous festering embarrassment for ExxonMobil," Ghazvinian writes, "a living, breathing metaphor for the failure of the Doba drilling operation to bring meaningful development to the people of Chad."

For Western oil and gas producers, Africa is the world's last El Dorado. Since the early 1990s, advances in deepwater-drilling technology and the terms of "production-sharing agreements" with host nations have cleared the way for substantial American and European footholds off the coast of West Africa and south of the Sahara. After 9/11, Big Oil and the Washington elite were captivated by the prospect that exploring for oil in Africa could loosen OPEC's stranglehold on U.S. energy supplies—and that locating wells offshore would separate them from the political upheaval that troubles so much of the oil-producing world. China joined the bonanza more recently.

Journalist and Oxford-trained historian Ghazvinian steers clear of caricatures or smug prescriptions for Africa's feeble democracies as he explores the complex political, economic, and social factors that fuel the "curse of oil." Every developing country in Africa where oil has been discovered, he notes, has seen decreased living standards and increased suffering, a phenomenon scholars call the "paradox of plenty."

African oil, Ghazvinian argues, is neither an easy source of energy security for the West nor a spur to the African continent's healthy development. The history he recounts and the people he meets in his travels—from the young Nigerian who leads him to an illicit oil-trading post to the Chevron executive who blithely deflects reports of widespread corruption—suggest that there is more than enough blame to go around for the entrenched poverty and violence in Africa's oil-rich states.

In recent years, billions of dollars in national oil wealth have landed in the private accounts of ruling families or been redirected from development projects to arms purchases. Meanwhile, Washington often turns a blind eye. Ghazvinian's most disturbing stories emerge from Africa's small rentier states, where once-diversified economies have become dangerously dependent on the royalties paid by oil exporters. The opulence he finds in Libreville, the capital of Gabon, is a mirage. The national unemployment rate is 40 percent, and Gabon imports most of the food once produced in its jungles. Meanwhile, the oil is running out.

Like other recent books whose authors roamed the world to expose the underbelly of "energy security," including Paul Roberts's *The End of Oil* (2004) and Lisa Margonelli's *Oil on the Brain* (2007), *Untapped* taps into our growing, converging anxieties about oil supply, national security, and global warming. But Ghazvinian and his fellow authors also shed light on an important question that Americans still rarely ask: What does our relentless hunger for oil mean for those who vie to feed it?

—***Joel Kirkland***

HISTORY

Gertrude of Arabia

GERTRUDE BELL: Queen of the Desert, Shaper of Nations.

By Georgina Howell. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 481 pp. $27.50

The life of Gertrude Bell (1868–1926) cries out for a biopic. More famed and influential in her day than her colleague T. E. Lawrence, with whom she rallied Arab tribes