

# **Ecocriticism and the Oil Encounter: Readings from the Niger Delta**

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**Declaration**

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## **Dedication**

In affectionate salutation to Onajite:  
one shy of a score since  
you first took the dough  
and began to knead...  
That the bread may never  
run out!

### **Abstract**

The study seeks to understand the ways that environmental concerns and the phenomenon of oil production in the Niger Delta are captured in contemporary literary representations. In the thesis, I enlist several works, five poetry collections and a Nollywood video film, produced between 1998 and 2010, to investigate and analyse the different ways they engage with the effects of oil extraction as a form of violence that is not immediately apparent. Amitav Ghosh argues that representing something of such magnitude as oil modernity can only be done adequately through narratives of epic quality such as realist fiction or the historical novel. I move away from Ghosh's assumptions to argue that the texts, poetry and video film have adequately captured the oil encounter, but not on a grand scale or through realist fiction. I situate Niger Delta representations of the oil encounter within the intellectual frame of petrocultures, a recent field of global study which explores the representational and critical domain within which oil is framed and imagined in culture. In their signification of what I call the "oil ontology", that is, the very nature and existence of oil in the Delta, lived-experience in its actual quotidian specificity, takes precedence in the imagination of the writers that I study.

I propose that the texts, in very different ways, articulate these experiences by concatenating social and environmental concerns with representations of the oil encounter to produce a petro-literary form which inflects and critiques the ways in which oil extraction, in all its social and environmental manifestations, inscribes a form of violence upon the landscape and human population in the oil sites of the Delta. I suggest that the texts articulate a place-based, place-specific form of petroculture. They emphasize the notion that the oil encounter in the Delta is not the official encounter at the point of extraction but rather the unofficial encounter with the side-effects of the oil extraction. The texts, in very different ways address similar concerns of violence as an intricate feature in the Delta, both as a physical, spectacular phenomenon and as a subtle, unseen category. They conceive of

violence as a consequence of the various forms of intrusion and disruption that the logic of oil extraction instigates in the Niger Delta. I suggest that the form of eco-poetics that is articulated gives expression to environmental concerns which are marked off by an oily topos in the Delta. I maintain that in projecting an artistic vision that is sensitive to environmental and sociocultural questions, the writings that we encounter from this region also make critical commentary on the ontology of oil. The texts conceive the Niger Delta as one that provides the spatial and material template for envisioning the oil encounter and staging a critique of the essentially globalised space that is the site of oil production.

### **Opsomming**

Hierdie studie ondersoek die maniere waarop omgewingsbelange en die instellings van olieproduksie in die Delta van die Niger-rivier vasgevang word in kontemporêre letterkundige voorstellings. In my tesis gebruik ek verskeie werke – vyf versamelings van gedigte en ‘n Nollywood [Nigeriese] video, almal geskep tussen 1998 en 2010 – om die verskillende wyses waarop hierdie tekste omgaan met die gevolge van olie-ontginning, as ‘n vorm van geweld wat nie onmiddellik opvallend is nie, na te vors en te analiseer. Amitav Ghosh argumenteer dat, om ‘n fenomeen van sulke geweldige omvang soos olie-moderniteit uit te beeld, slegs na behore uitgevoer kan word in narratiewe van epiese dimensies; byvoorbeeld realistiese fiksie of die historiese roman. Ek beweeg weg van Ghosh se aannames deur te argumenteer dat die tekste (gedigte en ‘n video-film) wel die olie-ervaring behoorlik vasvang, maar nie op groot skaal soos in realistiese fiksie nie. Ek plaas die Niger-Delta uitbeeldings van die olie-ervaring binne die groter raamwerk van Petro-kultuur: ‘n nuwe studiegebied wat die voorstellings- en kritiese domein waarbinne olie gekonseptualiseer en kultureel verbeel(d) word, ondersoek. In hul voorstellings van die olie-ontologie van die Delta neem die ervaringswêreld in sy daaglikse werklikhede (in die gekose skrywers se uitbeelding daarvan) ‘n sentrale plek in.

Ek konstateer dat die tekste, hoewel op heel uiteenlopende maniere, hierdie ervarings artikuleer deur sosiale en omgewings-oorwegings byeen te bring met uitbeeldings van die olie-ervaring ten einde ‘n petro-literêre vorm te skep wat die maniere waarop olie-ontginning, in al die sosiale en omgewings-effekte daarvan, ‘n vorm van geweld op die landskap en die menslike bevolking van die olie-ontginningsgebiede van die Delta inskryf, inflekteer en krities analiseer. Ek stel dit dat die tekste ‘n plek-gebaseerde en gebieds-spesifieke vorm van Petrokultuur artikuleer. Hulle benadruk die feit dat die olie-ervaring in die Delta nie die offisiële ontmoeting by die ontginningspunt is nie, maar eerder die onoffisiële ondervinding van die newe-effekte van die olie-ontginningsproses. Op hul verskillende wyses spreek die

tekste ‘n ooreenstemmende besorgdheid uit aangaande die ingewikkelde rol wat geweld in die Delta speel – beide as ‘n fisiese, ooglopende fenomeen en as ‘n subtiele, ongesiene kategorie. Die tekste konseptualiseer geweld as seinde die gevolg van die verskeie vorme van ingryping en versteuring wat deur die logika van die olie-ontginningsproses in die Niger-Delta meegebring word. Ek suggereer dat die vorm van eko-poëtika wat hier geartikuleer word, uitdrukking gee aan omgewings-oorwegings wat in die Delta deur ‘n olie(rige) topos omgrens word. Ek maak die stelling dat, deur middel van ‘n artistieke visie wat gevoelig is vir omgewings-en sosiale vrae, die tekste wat in hierdie gebied ontstaan, kritiese kommentaar bied op die ontologie van olie. Die tekste verbeel die Niger-Delta as ‘n gebied wat die ruimtelike en materiële templaats voorsien om die olie-ervaring te visualiseer en te konseptualiseer, om sodoende ‘n kritiek te skep van die geglobaliseerde ruimte van olie-produksie.

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## Contents

Declaration .....	i
Dedication .....	ii
Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgments .....	vii
Contents.....	ix
Introduction: The Niger Delta and oil production: a critical context.....	1
The Niger Delta.....	11
Negotiating resource control and the principles of derivation .....	15
Ken Saro-Wiwa: poetics of non-violence and the shaping of Niger Delta literature.....	19
Chapter One : Ecocriticism, the Oil Encounter, and Petrocultures: Inflections in the Niger Delta.....	29
Ecocriticism, African environments and ‘oily’ inflections in Niger Delta writing.....	30
The “Oil Encounter” and literary imagination .....	53
Petrocultures as critique of oil capitalism: signifying oil in cultural representation.....	62
Chapter Two : The Niger Delta, Temporality, and a Literature of Environmental Justice .....	80
Temporality and Ebi Yeibo’s <i>A Song for Tomorrow &amp; Other Poems</i> .....	94
Environmental activism, rights movement and Nnimmo Bassey’s <i>We Thought it was Oil But it was Blood</i> .....	110
Chapter Three : Versifying the Delta Environment and the Oil Encounter as Critique of Nationalism.....	134
(Auto)biographical narrative of the Delta environment: localism contra nationalism in Tanure Ojaide’s <i>Delta Blues and Home Songs</i> .....	139
Contesting hegemonic facts with moral truth: speculation as subversive agency in Ogaga Ifowodo’s <i>The Oil Lamp</i> .....	158

Dialogic engagement with images of hegemonic power: geopolitics and distributive justice in Ibiwari Ikiriko's <i>Oily Tears of the Delta</i> .....	174
Chapter Four : The Currency of Resistance: Violence as Rebellion and Commodity in the Oil Encounter .....	193
Nollywood and the politics of mediation .....	203
Natural resources and resource rebellion .....	215
Dialogue, story-telling, and the mediation of violence in <i>The Liquid Black Gold</i> .....	219
Embedded-narrative of internal violence as critique of nationalist ideologies .....	226
Local resistance, politics of neoliberalism and global circulation of oil.....	230
Chapter Five : Conclusion – in quest of meaning through experience .....	237
Bibliography.....	242

## **Introduction: The Niger Delta and oil production: a critical context**

*We must understand that oil is not just a patrimony. It is something that is woven around the identity of the people. It gives a certain measure of control of the resources they have, that they have control over the environment they live in; this all enhances their sense of identity.<sup>1</sup>*

On Tuesday 3 July 2012, an exhibition opened at the Wits University Substation. Titled “Delta Remix: Last Rites Niger Delta”, it showcased the trajectory of oil production and its social and environmental repercussions in Nigeria’s Niger Delta. Curated by Wits School of Arts faculty Zen Marie and five other colleagues, the exhibition was part of a series of workshop events at the Johannesburg Workshop on Theory and Criticism (JWTC), organised by the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WiSER) of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. The slideshow exhibition was a “representational intervention”, a splendid re-enactment recreated through the vehicle of video, of a previously commissioned exhibition by the Goethe Institute and the Cultural Department of the City of Munich, which had opened in Munich, Germany, with the title, “Last Rites Delta: The Drama of Oil Production in Contemporary Photographs” (*Weltoffen seit*). The Germany exhibition produced a book of catalogue which was circulated at the JWTC workshop in Johannesburg, South Africa.

The title of the book, *Last Rites Niger Delta: The Drama of Oil Production in Contemporary Photographs* is an understatement for what the photographs in the book actually capture and depict: the violence that oil production perpetrates in the Delta, both on the landscape and in the life of the human population at the sites of its operations. *Last Rites* suggests that the transition that is about to be performed is a permissible ritual. But what it describes in pictures is an incongruous operation of violence, destruction and death in the oil sites of the Niger Delta. Nevertheless the title of the book, as subtle it may seem in its

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<sup>1</sup>Saro-Wiwa, Ken. *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*, Port Harcourt: Saros International, 1992: 36.

caption, also hints at certain (perhaps unintended) polemical intentions. The phrase *Last Rites* comes with a loaded eschatological undertone to suggest a concluding ceremony of transition, a final ritual that precedes death. It seems to project a certain imperceptible presence and performance of immolation in the Delta, one that is at once self-inflicted by acts of community protests and more devastatingly visited upon the ecosphere by the technologies and politics of oil production; the latter being deployed in objectionable and crude modes of petro-colonialism by the oil extraction complex in the Niger Delta.

The exhibition is an attempt at capturing and representing the quotidian realities of oil production and all the manifest social and environmental repercussions in the Niger Delta. As to be expected, it provoked robust debates at the JWTC workshop around questions of environmental devastation, militancy and violence, the so-called righteous indignation by local communities on account of perceived injustice, and finally, the vexing question of representation. What kinds of protocols of representation are available for negotiating and understanding the oil phenomenon in the Niger Delta?

In the Niger Delta milieu as elsewhere, representation is, without doubt, a controversial term in the sense that it defies a clearly delineated epistemology. Perhaps this explains why Judith Butler in a very different context, thinks of the concept as an “operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy” (*Gender Trouble* 1). In effect, representation lends itself to two markedly different explanations: as an extension of visibility and as a vehicle to articulate (claims of) legitimacy.

In considering Butler’s idea, I propose that these two categories of visibility and legitimacy are ineluctably entangled and brought into sharp focus in the Niger Delta context. Crucially, I want to problematize the place of these two categories in the representation of the oil phenomenon which the catalogue captures in photographs. To speak of legitimacy and visibility as important concatenating forms in the representation of the Niger Delta and to

fault their convergence at the same time is to risk contradicting oneself. But in the embattled oppositionality to which popular dissidence in the Niger Delta is trapped, legitimacy claims seem to be at odds with the modality through which it is made visible: violence.

Violence is a very important trope in negotiating the Niger Delta situation. To be sure, the notion of violence is a complex one which resists easy glossing. The form of violence that the Niger Delta situation orchestrates is an intricate one. It is one that features violence in its varied textures. The Niger Delta situation complicates the very notion of violence as a physical phenomenon. The trope of violence which features in this region is both a spectacular phenomenon and a subtle one. In its subtle aspect, it is, as Rob Nixon argues, slow and deficient in visibility (6), but powerfully permeates every aspect of oil production in the Delta, and this stimulates unstable understanding of the occurrence. It is one that obstructs and destabilizes the grammar with which violence is articulated to make the category an unstable, contradictory term. I want to use two photographs from the exhibition to give some grounds for my claim. I will attempt to unpack the ways that legitimacy or its claim thereof coalesces with insurrectionary visibility to complicate the forms of violence that operate in the Niger Delta.





**Plate 1:** “The first oil well from Shell (1956)” (Kadir van Lohuizen, *Last Rites Niger Delta* 21). This photograph captures the signpost indicating the location of the first oil-well that was drilled in Nigeria’s Niger Delta in 1956 at Oloibiri, a village in present day Bayelsa State.



**Plate 1<sup>a</sup>:** A relatively more detailed photograph of the first oil-well. It captures more clearly the site of the first find of oil showing the first wellhead: it is also known as “Christmas Tree”. On the timeworn, rusted sign is written “Oloibiri Well No. 1. Drilled June, 1956. Depth: 12, 000 Feet”. These photographs are viral images on Google whose source cannot be established.



**Plate 2:** “Macon Hawkins, an American oil worker held hostage by The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta MEND” (Michael Kamber, *Last Rites Niger Delta* 11)

*This photograph was released to press by his captors in February 2006. The photograph has since gone viral on the internet and has become the iconic image of the militarised sociality of local communities in the Niger Delta in their relationship with the oil industry and the Nigerian state.*

The photograph in plate 1 depicts the signpost which describes the first oil well in the region; it is captured without the weight of its significance. One notices the sorry-state of the signboard: the fast-fading inscriptions on the rusty white board that describes a supposedly significant beginning of oil exploration in Nigeria, and the bush growing around this signpost which makes the signboard increasingly invisible. This is symptomatic of the invisibility of Oloibiri—and perhaps the entire Niger Delta—in the context of social development, even when it [this village] bore the first fruits of the oil wealth for the Nigerian state. A cursory look at the photographs reveals significant points that are consistent with the features of legitimacy and visibility that I have identified, qua Butler, as inherent in the operations of representation.

Other than the cover photographs on the preliminary pages, the photograph in plate 2 is the first picture that one sees in the opening in-text pages of the book: a captured white man



in the midst of gun-toting young black men. This picture is held up to highlight the spectacular violence that flourishes in this region. In a sense, it stands to prejudice the reader's judgement, for it invokes the now familiar (image) critique of Africa by the West: a crises-ridden outback of filth, poverty, sickness, violence, insurgents, war and death. The Niger Delta no doubt embodies all these! But from what perspective might we account for and intervene in the oil phenomenon in the Niger Delta? What happened to the polluted landscapes: the farmlands, the spilled-oil floating on the rivers, the sea and other water bodies? Are these not compelling enough to be captured in the first pages of this catalogue? Why this obsession with the dramatic images of youth violence, which Michael Watts has described as "the masked militant armed with the ubiquitous Kalashnikov, the typewriter of the illiterate" ("Blood Oil" 62)? The catalogue confirms this romance with the spectacular visibility of violence by its laconic caption, the very theatrical "*Drama of Oil Production*".

Crucially, it is important to state that the white man does not even look frightened or agitated as would a hostage: he seems calm and collected. I would suggest that the valorisation of violence through the reification of militarised images demonises claims of legitimacy which revolutionary justice might catalyse – however misguidedly the youth may have gone about staking that claim. But on the other hand, it seems to me that in attempting to draw attention to their social and environmental plights in the Niger Delta through the instrumental ideology of political propaganda and guerrilla tactics, the 'resource rebels' have succeeded in complicating their own claims to legitimacy, their righteous indignation, by falling into the trap of this intricate operation of violence; a violence that constitutes for itself and within itself "the news", an essentially ideological presence which Edward Said in a different context describes as that which "determine[s] the political reality" ("Opponents, Audiences" 25) for the Niger Delta. And this contaminates the youth's moral claims for justice when they are made visible through the instrumentality of representation.

The incongruous condition of violence which the trajectory of oil production proliferates in the Niger Delta is an appropriate opening for this thesis. But let me hasten to state that my study is not about violence as a social category per se. My study stages a literary/cultural analysis which investigates and examines the ways in which a complex arena of violence is instigated and performed in contemporary representations of oil modernity in the Niger Delta. The study seeks to understand the ways that environmental concerns and representations of the oil's presence are captured in literary and other cultural forms, and how these imaginings enable an understanding of the social world of the Delta in the context of oil production. The texts, poetry and film, which I explore in this study perform an affirmative politics by representing, in a very different way from the photographs I discussed earlier, the experience of inhabiting the sites and embodying the social contradictions and environmental repercussions of oil extraction and production in the Niger Delta.

In the following chapters, I suggest that the texts articulate these experiences by concatenating social and environmental concerns with representations of the oil encounter to produce a petro-literary form which inflects and critiques the ways in which oil production, in all its social and environmental manifestations, inscribes a form of violence upon the landscape and human population in the oil sites of the Delta. I focus on how certain forms of disruptions – cultural, social and environmental – are imagined in these texts as the operations of violence at the sites of oil extraction. I propose that the texts implore the reader to probe further, using alternative grammar, to rethink “the fields of struggle, to introduce a longer sequence of thought and analysis”,<sup>2</sup> so as to be able to disambiguate sensationally circulated news around violence in the Niger Delta that is spectacularly disseminated without the contexts of its historical provenance.

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Said. “Worldly Humanism v. the Empire-Builders.” *Counterpunch*, August 4, 2003:8.

The study takes as its frame of reference a post-Ken Saro-Wiwa Niger Delta. The significance of the environmental rights activist, Saro-Wiwa, to my study is found in the discursive grammar of counter-articulation that his activist life and political polemics have performed in the contexts of the Niger Delta struggle. To be sure, the focus of the study is texts produced after his extrajudicial murder in 1995. In this thesis, I enlist several works, five poetry collections and a Nollywood video film, produced between 1998 and 2010, to advance the notion that the texts, in a post-Saro-Wiwa cadence, capture and orchestrate certain moment of catharsis in Nigeria's chequered contemporary history; a time when the trajectories of the oil encounter seem to invoke and poetically realise Paul Anderson's 2007 film adaptation with that disturbing and evocative title: *There Will Be Blood* – wherever crude oil is mined.<sup>3</sup> By this I mean that the texts seem to suggest that there will be violence and death operating alongside the production of oil in Nigeria's Niger Delta.

Before moving on to outline some key moments of the Niger Delta's oil history, I will briefly introduce the texts I will be discussing in this thesis. The poetry collections I will focus on all engage in different ways with the effects of oil extraction in the region. They address a form of violence that is not immediately apparent. The texts conceive of violence as a repercussion of the various forms of intrusion and disruption that the incursion of oil production instigates in the Niger Delta. Some of the poets I engage are established writers with international recognition while others are quite marginal figures. At least one of them combines poetry writing with environmental activism to portray the form of petro-induced violence which this study seeks to investigate.

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<sup>3</sup> I have in mind the state-sanctioned execution of Saro-Wiwa by General Sani Abacha, and the new grammar of violence that has come to achieve salience both in the social world of the Delta and in the aesthetic tropes of artistic representations of the oil encounter in this region. My argument is that these conjunctures seem to give a special evocation—an eerie one—to Paul Anderson's film title, *There Will Be Blood*, an adaptation of Upton Sinclair's novel, *Oil!*, a fictional story of the discovery of oil and the capitalist ethos of individualism, ambition, greed, and violence which shape the ontology of oil since its discovery in 19<sup>th</sup> century United States of America. CF *There Will Be Blood*. Dir. Paul Thomas Anderson. Perf. Daniel Day-Lewis and Paul Dano. 2007. DVD.

The poet Ebi Yeibo, in *A Song for Tomorrow and Other Poems* (2003), articulates the oil's presence in Niger Delta environment by focussing on the diverse temporalities of the oil encounter in the region. In *We Thought it was Oil but it was Blood* (2002), Nnimmo Bassey confronts the reality of the oil encounter with a vision that straddles a fictive realm of poetry writing and a political sphere of environmental activism. Through tropes of lived and imagined memory Tanure Ojaide in *Delta Blues & Home Songs* (1998), deploys an autobiographical mode in versifying the Delta, where he (re)constructs a self-sufficient, paradisiac landscape of the pre-oil production Niger Delta to question the logic of human development and petro-modernity. The locus of Ogaga Ifowodo's creative vision in *The Oil Lamp* (2005) is the ethical question of truth. He uses poetry to refract the material texture of *real* events: the state-endorsed judicial murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the 1998 Jese fire disaster, and the colonial-style *pacification* of a Niger Delta oil-bearing town of Odi in 1999, where the Nigerian state sent military troops to sack the community. In *Oily Tears of the Delta* (2000), Ibiwari Ikiriko's artistry is located in the concrete vestiges of power-bearing symbols, in images which circulate in the spaces of oil production in the Delta. The final text is a very different medium, that of video film, and it offers a contrasting mode of engagement with the oil encounter but one which resonates in interesting ways with the poetry collections of the earlier chapters. The Nollywood film, *The Liquid Black Gold* (dir. Ikenna Aniekwe, 2010), engages with tropes of violence that underwrite the agitations for environmental remediation and local control of the oil resources in the Delta. The video film expresses the dual role that violence plays in the oil politics of this region: both as a transgressive strategy and as a commoditised tool. In a sense, it sums up discursively, through the vehicle of motion picture, the notions of violence that the poetry collections attempt to surface in their use of poetic language.

Finally, the individuality, the creative core of each text provides a uniquely interesting perspective on the collective concerns that I grapple with in this study. Taken together, I will show how all of the texts capture the apocalyptic import of the oil encounter to instantiate certain ways in which oil production in the Delta orchestrates a politics of violence and death in the Delta.

This thesis is partly motivated by what Amitav Ghosh in a related context terms “The Oil Encounter”. Ghosh suggests that there is little presence of oil in cultural expression and reflects on why the oil “encounter [has] proved so imaginatively sterile” (75). He argues that “In fact, very few people anywhere write about the Oil Encounter [...and] the silence extends much further than the Arabic or English-speaking worlds” (75). My thesis will therefore proceed based on three basic assumptions. First, that the oil encounter in Nigeria has inspired creative works in the Niger Delta, which capture the oil trajectories in all their manifest social, environmental, historical and geopolitical textures. Second, that the concerns espoused in the cultural representations (both poetry and video film) are counter-narratives to the dominant local and international oil narrative, engaging with oil imaginings in a particular way, one that focuses on the socioenvironmental repercussions that oil has inscribed on the local landscape of the Niger Delta and in the lives of the *native* population around its sites of extraction. In a sense, the imaginative texts foreground a form of invisible violence which sociological studies or development narratives cannot surface. Third, that the inadequacy of Anglo-American ecocriticism in taking into consideration the socio-political and cultural contexts in addressing environmental concerns articulated in these literary texts, calls for a rethinking of the theoretical approach. At the analytical level, the study focuses on the sets of cultural meaning and fields of possibilities that are conjured, performed and realised in the poetry and video film texts under examination.

## The Niger Delta

In recent times, the Niger Delta has seemed to figure in the global public imagination as an “oil landscape” and not as an environment inhabited by human beings, aquatic animals and other floras and faunas. Even in scholarly writing, the Niger Delta seems to feature in the idiom of news-breaking statistics. The America-based scholar Michael Watts, for instance, describes the Niger Delta in a most telling candour:

To put the matter as starkly as I can: The Niger Delta is a [*vast oil basin*] of some 70,000 sq. km. [...] a population of roughly 28 million; it possesses a massive oil infrastructure consisting of 606 fields, 5284 wells, 7, 000 kilometres of pipelines, ten export terminals, 275 flow stations, ten gas plants, four refineries and a massive liquefied natural gas (LNG) sector. Currently the Delta is, more or less, ungovernable. (“Petro-Insurgency” 639)

No doubt, Watts’s statistical description of the Niger Delta is accurate, captivating and powerfully informative. He writes and is able to capture the Niger Delta from a commanding knowledge and expertise, so that faulting his representation would be an exercise in ungraciousness. But what is curious about his analysis is the near absence of the human and ecological heterogeneity that inhabit this “vast oil basin” (639). As a preeminent geographer Watts fails to mention the prodigious freshwater and ecological diversity of countless species of aquatic life forms that have come under the threat of hydrocarbon pollution in the wake of oil extraction. In reading Watts’s facts and figures one would have thought that the Niger Delta is one vast “oil complex” (his own coinage too: see page 643) that is devoid of any human or ecological presence. The Delta is one of the most densely populated places on earth. Covering only about 75, 000 square kilometres, it has an estimated population of 31 million people and over 100 linguistic communities out of the more than 400 languages spoken in Nigeria (Darah, “Revolutionary Pressures” 4). It is one of the largest freshwater wetlands in the world – second only to the Amazon Delta (Obi and Rustad 3).

The culture of the people of the Niger Delta has been uniquely configured by their environment. Because almost fifty percent of the landscape is covered by water for most of the year, the inhabitants depend on the water for their existence. They have three basic and

symbiotically related occupations: fishing, farming and petty-trading, all compelled by the geography. The Nigerian scholar and novelist Sule Egya writes that the people of the Niger Delta region are mostly rural peasants engaged in farming and fishing. With the soils damaged, the waters polluted, the air invaded by permanent gas flares, and the debasement of the fauna and flora, the people become extremely vulnerable (62). Recent developments have shown that this vulnerability morphs into anxiety which is expressed through insurrectionary acts and violent protests for environmental and social justice.<sup>4</sup> But more troubling is the degeneracy of this insurrection into destructive acts of brazen violence and other criminal activities by opportunistic entities.<sup>5</sup>

The region is a vast coastal plain in the southernmost part of Nigeria, where West Africa's longest river, the Niger River, flows into the Atlantic Ocean. James Tsaaior describes the region as a "reservoir of priceless mineral resource [...with] rich, fertile and alluvial wealth with prodigious crude oil deposit" (72). This vast region of wetland is also called the Oil River because of its history of bearing two types of oil resources: palm oil and, later, crude oil for the Nigerian state.<sup>6</sup> This history dates back to the 1890s and the palm oil trade which took place both before and during colonialism in Nigeria, and which made the

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Charles Ukeje's "Changing the Paradigm of Pacification: Oil and Militarization in Nigeria's Delta Region." *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta: Managing the Complex Politics of Petro-Violence*. Cyril Obi and Siri Aas Rustad, eds. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute/Zed Books, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine Ikelegbe discusses this concern in his essay, "Popular and Criminal Violence as Instruments in the Niger Delta Region." *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta: Managing the Complex Politics of Petro-Violence*. Cyril Obi and Siri Aas Rustad, eds. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute/Zed Books, 2011. Ikelegbe analyses the factors responsible for what he notes to be a blurring of the "boundaries between militancy-as-resistance and criminal violence" (125). He identifies the complex relations of power which exist in a vortex of the oil's ontology in the Delta. Ikelegbe argues that all parties (known as "stakeholders" in Nigerian parlance), consisting of the Nigerian state, its military agency, the multinational oil corporations, local community chiefs, and local youth groups, are enmeshed in an incongruous politics of bellicosity, jostling for power and control, one that is "spawned by the oil economy", which has enabled a once radically instructive socioenvironmental movement of subversion to degenerate into "criminal violence" (125). I shall return to this point in the chapter on film to discuss violence and commoditised rebellion as contemporary forms of environmentalism in this troubled region. See also Michael Watts's analysis in his essay, "Petro-Insurgency or Criminal Syndicate? Conflict and Violence in the Niger Delta." *Review of African Political Economy*, 34.114 (2007): 637-660.

<sup>6</sup> See Michael Peel's *A Swamp Full of Dollars: Pipelines and Paramilitaries at Nigeria's Oil Frontiers*. Ibadan: Bookcrfat, 2010.

British colonialists christen the region “Oil Rivers Protectorate”.<sup>7</sup> At the time palm oil and palm kernel were the main exports of the Niger Delta and Britain’s Royal Niger Company quickly seized on this and established a monopoly. Palm oil flowed to Britain and elsewhere in Europe, where it served to power the apparatuses that drove Europe’s industrial prosperity and colonial incursion (Peel 37).

In 1956, Royal Dutch Shell discovered crude oil in commercial quantity at Oloibiri, an Ijaw Town in the Niger Delta, and began exportation in 1958. Today, there are over 606 oil fields in the Niger Delta, and Nigeria is the largest oil producer in Africa, with an average 2.6 million barrels of oil per day and second largest oil-bearing nation in Africa after Libya, with a proven crude oil reserve of 32 billion barrels.<sup>8</sup> Between 1975 and 2006, oil accounted for about three-quarters of government revenue and 95 per cent of the national export earnings, making Nigeria the most oil-dependent economy in the world.<sup>9</sup> Much of the natural gas extracted in oil wells in the Delta is flared and wasted into the air every day. In fact, gas-flaring burns off and pollutes the environment with more than 70 million cubic meters of gas per day into the Delta atmosphere.<sup>10</sup> Chinyere Nwahunanya has noted that the Niger Delta represents for the imagination “the symbol of the ironic contradictions of the consequences of capitalist exploitation by multinational economic interests teaming with the local comprador bourgeois class” (xiii).

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<sup>7</sup> In the 1890s, there was significant boom in palm oil trade in this region. The Niger River and its numerous tributaries provided ease of access for the colonial traders to transport the palm commodity from the hinterlands of the Delta to the coast. This ease of access which the rivers provided gave birth to the nomenclature, “Oil Rivers Protectorate”. Check further W.B. Morgan. “The Nigerian Oil Palm Industry.” *The Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 71.3 (1955): 174-177; G.I. Jones. *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers: A Study of Political Development in Eastern Nigeria*. Oxford: James Currey Publishers, 1963; and A.E. Afigbo. “Trade and Politics on the Cross River, 1895-1905.” *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 13.1 (1972): 21-49.

<sup>8</sup> The Nigerian Vanguard “Editorial”, February 22, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Michael Ross’s “Nigeria’s Oil Sector and the Poor.” The UK Department for International Development (DFID) London: May 23, 2003. Lecture.

<sup>10</sup> See the United Nations Environment Programme 2011 report on Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland, 4 August 2011 at <http://www.unep.org/nigeria>



It is important to mention that there are no existing well-defined environmental laws and policies governing possible natural and environmental disaster in Nigeria. One instance that comes to mind is the Jesse pipeline fire disaster of 1998 in Delta State, Nigeria, for which neither the Nigerian state nor the oil corporation took responsibility for the lives, limbs and property that were lost to the inferno. The environmental devastation associated with the industry and the lack of distribution of the oil wealth have been the source of numerous environmental movements and inter-ethnic conflicts in the region, including recent guerrilla activities by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and other subsidiary resource-rebel groups.<sup>11</sup>

Much has been written about the relationship between violence and natural resources in Nigeria, especially in the fields of social anthropology and political science.<sup>12</sup> Arguments about the cause of the petroleum-related violence in the Niger Delta have been, among others: weak governance and lack of moral will to implement people-oriented policies concerning natural resources,<sup>13</sup> and weak laws and regulations governing wealth distribution.<sup>14</sup> A third category worth mentioning is the involvement of a global cartel of oil bunkering which fuels and finances militancy, thereby making illicit trade in crude oil

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<sup>11</sup> There is a recent book collection devoted entirely to this subject, entitled *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta: Managing the Complex Politics of Petro-Violence*, edited by Cyril Obi and Siri Aas Rustad. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute/Zed Books, 2011. See also Alao, Abiodun's *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa: The Tragedy of Endowment*. New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007. With detailed analyses of facts, figures, and concrete examples, Alao discusses the relationship between natural resources and conflicts in Africa, of which Nigeria, with its vast oil reserve, is a case in point. I return to Alao's book in the fourth chapter of this study where I explore violence and rebellion in the Nollywood film, *The Liquid Black Gold*, as forms of the bellicose politics through which oil extraction and the environmental talking points it provokes are instantiated in the social world of the Delta.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Eghosa Osaghae's "Ethnic Minority and Federalism in Nigeria." *African Affairs*, 90 (1991): 237-258; also Osaghae's "The Ogoni Uprising: Oil Politics, Minority Agitation and the Future of the Nigerian State." *African Affairs*, 95 (1995): 325-344.

<sup>13</sup> See Sam Oyovbaire's "The Crisis of Governance in Nigeria." Convocation Lecture: University of Port Harcourt, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> See Itse Sagay. "Nigeria: Federalism, the Constitution and Resource Control." Resource-Control Sensitisation: Lagos, 2001. Lecture; see also Michael Ross's *Nigeria's Oil Sector and the Poor*. The United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID) London: May 23, 2003. Lecture.

possible as a result of the porous security condition that is occasioned by such agitations in the region.<sup>15</sup>

While all this scholarship provides important and detailed information about the complex web of local and international geopolitics and economics, it engages with the oil encounter as an object of study and not as a lived experience (see, for instance, Watts's analysis which I discussed above). This existing scholarship in a sense operates at a level of social scientific abstraction. The poetry and video film I examine in this thesis introduce a different kind of knowledge. Through imaginative rendering, the texts give expression to a quotidian existence in the oil sites. They articulate the ways in which the oil's presence shapes the actuality of being in the Delta, in all its material manifestations of cultural, social, geopolitical and environmental specificities.

### **Negotiating resource control and the principles of derivation**

The formula for sharing national resources among the geopolitical regions of Nigeria has been a contentious issue for political debates among the Nigerian state (federal government), the three 'major' ethnic regions and the 'minorities' of which the Niger Delta is part. These debates provide an essential context for understanding the aesthetics of geopolitics and petro-environmental consciousness that the texts, which I examine, adumbrate. In exploring how the oil encounter and its environmental aesthetics are refracted in literary and cultural art forms in the Delta, I want to briefly foreground the way that certain interactions resulting from resource control and the principle of derivation generate a triadic geopolitical tension among the government, the transnational corporations and the oil-producing communities in

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<sup>15</sup> Again this is extensively discussed in Cyril Obi and Siri Aas Rustad's edited *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta*, especially in the introductory section: "Petro-Violence in the Delta-The Complex Politics of an Insurgency." 1-14; also see Michael Watts's "Black Gold, White Heat: State Violence, Local Resistance and the National Question in Nigeria." *Geographies of Resistance*. Steve Pile and Richard Keith, eds. London: Routledge, 1997; and James Ferguson's "Governing Extraction: New Spatialization of Order and Disorder in Neoliberal Africa." *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006: 194-210.

the recent post-independence history of Nigeria. I will show how these experiences are articulated in literary representation, especially in the manner the writings project human subjects in this region as marginalised people within the context of a neoliberal democratic Nigeria.

To be sure, Watts's diagnosis is succinct when he notes that "[t]he history [...] of post-colonial Nigeria is in a sense the history of the reconfiguration and contestation over revenue allocation" ("Petro-Insurgency" 642). The history of oil exploration, production, circulation, and resource management in Nigeria is one that is fraught with geopolitical crises and revenue sharing conflicts among the constituent states of the Nigerian federation. The trajectory of oil can be better understood in the contexts of the debates concerning resource control and principles of derivation which underscore Nigeria's geopolitical economic history since independence. These debates have not produced convincing workable alternatives. Rather, they have only exacerbated ethnic, political and economic tensions in the region and in the country as a whole. The tensions have in turn degenerated into violent confrontations—of rebellion and reprisal—between the Nigerian state, the transnational oil corporations, and the oil-bearing communities in the Niger Delta, resulting in a spiral of violence that makes insurrection itself a form of commodity circulating alongside the oil.

Prior to 1900, there was no geopolitical entity known as Nigeria. There were different ethnic 'nations', empires, kingdoms and quasi-kingdoms scattered around the regions, North and South of the Niger River.<sup>16</sup> The first attempt at unifying the country for the convenience

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<sup>16</sup> See Obafemi Awolowo. *Path to Nigerian Freedom*. London: Faber & Faber, 1948. As early as 1948, the foremost Yoruba nationalist leader and politician Obafemi Awolowo identified an inherently problematic foundation on which Nigeria was created into a nation-state. He intimates:

Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no 'Nigerians' in the same sense as there are 'English', 'Welsh', or 'French'. The word 'Nigerian' is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not. There are various national or ethnical groups in the country. (48)

of British colonialism was in 1906 with the unification of the British colony of Lagos and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. The successful creation of Nigeria into a modern political entity by colonial Britain was achieved in 1914 with the amalgamation of Southern and Northern Protectorate into a unified colonial realm.<sup>17</sup> At independence in 1960 there were initially three regions – the North with a preponderance of Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, the East with the Igbo as the major ethnic group, and the Yoruba as the predominant group in the Western region. At the time, all three, competing among themselves as geopolitical enemies along ethnic lines (Falola 10), agreed to have total control over the natural resources produced in their respective regions, and to only pay taxes to the central government. This was entrenched in the Independence Constitution (see Itse Sagay 2001). When crude oil emerged after 1958 as the major source of the federal government revenue, the resource control arrangement was no longer applied as the wealth-sharing formula. It was expunged from the constitution by an act of military decree when the Army took over reins of power in January 1966. In its stead, a Principle of Derivation was introduced as a revenue sharing formula for the Nigerian federation. The principle of derivation stipulated that fifty percent of the resource earnings went to the regions from where such wealth was derived. This pitched the minority Niger Delta against the Nigerian state. It led to the first “oil war” instigated by Isaac Adaka Boro on 2 February 1966.

Adaka Boro was an undergraduate student of chemistry at the University of Nigeria. Together with some 150 Ijaw youth, he declared secession from the Nigerian state and named the region, the Republic of the Niger Delta. They held the federation in a mortal combat for

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With the benefit of hindsight the above pronouncement is a prescient statement. This is precisely because the ethnic miscegenation – or what is commonly known as The 1914 Amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorate – which gave birth to Nigeria, is continually conjured, identified and vilified as the roots of Nigeria’s geopolitical tensions and weak federal system of political existence and governance. See, for instance, Ibiwari Ikiriko’s poetry which I analyse in chapter three of this study.

<sup>17</sup> See Toyin Falola’s *The History of Nigeria*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999.

twelve days before they were eventually rounded up and jailed for treason.<sup>18</sup> Less than one year after, the eastern region declared a breakaway (Republic of Biafra) from the Nigerian state on account of the lopsided federal structure and the mistrust that had eaten deep into the fabric of the national politics. Isaac Boro was quickly granted state-pardon and enlisted into the Nigerian Army, made an army major, and was asked to help crush the Igbo ‘rebels’. This was where violence was first commoditised as the federal government seized on Boro’s militant instinct evident in his earlier rebellion against the State to push back the Biafran secessionists who had invaded the Niger Delta. He died under mysterious circumstances after successfully forcing the Biafran soldiers out of the Niger Delta region.

What this history reveals is the way that violence has always been deployed as the necessary state repressive tool to crush any form of dissent against the Nigerian state, however progressive such dissent may be. As the Nigerian scholar Okey Ndibe glosses it, “As a concept, Nigeria is mostly an experience steeped in violence. In many ways, the institutions of the State [...] treat Nigerians less as citizens than as serfs”.<sup>19</sup> In effect, Nigeria is a nation that was created not by popular and active participation of its constituent regions but by and for, the convenience of British colonialism. This artificial nationhood has misbegotten a culture of violence as a veritable geopolitical currency, in fact, a form of brute capital with which legitimacy to State power and control over natural resources, namely oil in the Niger Delta, is accessed, expressed, and performed. Thus, it is not surprising that violence continues to feature as the idiom with which the national political process is negotiated, both in the concrete social sphere and in the regional literature, which seems to adumbrate a contra-national consciousness.

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<sup>18</sup> Isaac Boro’s account of this revolution was collated and published posthumously as *The Twelve-Day Revolution*. Benin City: Idodo Umeh Publisher, 1982.

<sup>19</sup> Okey Ndibe. “Scholars as Criminals.” *Sahara Reporters*, 9 July 2013.

### **Ken Saro-Wiwa: poetics of non-violence and the shaping of Niger Delta literature**

Transgressing perceived oppressive regimes in Nigeria may be seen as being expressed through acts of violence since Nigeria's independence. But this has not always been the case; there have been some other forms of response to protest against marginalisation. The long years of disaffection which stems from petro-induced dissension in the Delta congeals in a sub-national, ethnic consciousness of the Niger Delta and is expressed through civil disobedience and cultural performances of various kinds, including literary expression. Godini Darah has noted that "The contradictions and fury generated by the ruling class are what animates the literary and artistic output of the Niger Delta" ("Revolutionary Pressures" 11). But this geopolitical, regional articulation did not just happen suddenly from the rubble of Nigeria's fraught history of national becoming. It owes much of its temperament to the environmental rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa. His life and writing within the context of the geopolitical and socioenvironmental discourses in the Niger Delta have attracted ample scholarly attention.<sup>20</sup> In his lifetime, Saro-Wiwa succeeded in challenging State's authority over the oil revenue by deploying a non-violent strategy of cultural protest and imaginative writing with remarkable effect – although he met with a tragic death in the cause of doing so.<sup>21</sup>

Saro-Wiwa was many parts to many people in and outside Nigeria: a writer, scholar and environmental rights activist. In Nigeria, he is remembered as a politician, successful businessman, newspaper columnist, television scriptwriter/producer and a prolific creative

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<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Rob Nixon's "Pipe Dreams: Ken Saro-Wiwa, Environmental Justice, and Micro-Minority Rights." *Black Renaissance*, 1.1 (1996): 39-55; Onookome Okome edited book collection of critical essays, *Before I Am Hanged: Ken Saro-Wiwa; Literature, Politics and Dissent*, written in dedication to Saro-Wiwa's Writings and Politics (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000); and Austin Tam-Opubo George's "Ken Saro-Wiwa's Art and the Aesthetics of Non-Silence." Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of the Witwatersrand, 2008. See also, Ken Wiwa's *In the Shadow of a Saint*. Toronto: Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 2000; and Timothy J. Hunt. *The Politics of Bones*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Ato Quayson has an excellent discussion of this notion in his book, *Calibrations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003; see especially the last pages of chapter three with the title "African Postcolonial Relations Through a Prism of Tragedy." Pg. 56-75.

writer. His detractors demonise him for his role in the Nigeria/Biafra Civil War of 1967-1970; he was said to have supported the Nigerian state against the secessionist Biafrans, after which he was rewarded with Sole Administrator of Bonny Council in the Eastern Delta.<sup>22</sup> He is seen to have benefitted from the lopsided geopolitics of Nigeria's federalism which he later campaigned against in the 1990s. To the international community and his admirers within Nigeria, he will forever be remembered as the champion of environmental rights and social justice, especially for the Ogoni and other minority peoples around the world. His campaigns against environmental pollution and decimation of the agricultural economy of the Ogoni People, in which the Nigerian Government and Shell Oil Corporation were complicit, attracted international attention; one example was his success at framing the Ogoni (minority) agitations within the project of Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO) in The Hague.

In May 1994, four Ogoni chiefs and senior members of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni Peoples (MOSOP) were lynched to death by a mob of protesters, after being accused of betraying their community and compromising their principles to the federal government for selfish gains. The mobsters who committed this atrocity were alleged to be members of the youth assemblage of MOSOP who were loyal to Saro-Wiwa, the then spokesman for MOSOP. He was arrested with eight other Ogoni leaders and blamed for the killing of the elders. Having consistently staged non-violent international campaigns to embarrass the Nigerian government and the oil corporations on the atrocities oil production has brought to Ogoniland, it is possible to suggest, in retrospect, that Saro-Wiwa had been marked for destruction by the Nigerian state and, perhaps, the oil conglomerates (especially

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<sup>22</sup> This notion is to be found in Adewale Meja-Pearce's two controversial essays on Ken Saro-Wiwa. The first, "Feed the Charm." (*London Review of Books*, 24. 14, 25 July 2002: 23-26), is a review of Ken Wiwa's memoir of his father Saro-Wiwa - *In the Shadow of a Saint: A Son's Journey to Understand His Father's Legacy* (2000). The other, more scathing and perhaps snide, is to be found in his book of essays, *Remembering Ken Saro-Wiwa and Other Essays* (Lagos: The New Gong, 2005), see especially pages 9-48.

Shell), for stirring up international sentiments against their affairs in the Niger Delta. The charge of complicity in the murder of the four Ogoni elders, though unsubstantiated, was just the pretext his adversaries needed to silence him once and for all. And so this accusation of murder provided the Sani Abacha junta with an opportune text to accomplish their plan and drive his organisation underground.

On 10 November 1995, Saro-Wiwa and eight others, Barinem Kiobel, John Kpuniem, Baribor Bera, Saturday Dobe, Felix Nwate, Nordu Eawo, Paul Levura and Daniel Gbokoo, were executed under the unconvincing charge of incitement of the youth to murder the four Ogoni elders. His death produced antithetical effect from the intended motive of his accusers. The ripple effect marked the beginning of a new (arguably more radical) chapter of oil geopolitics in Nigeria. It brought to the fore a robust and intensely embattled opposition to the legitimacy of the oil extraction industry and a representation of its repercussion on the Delta ecology. It also inflamed international opprobrium to Abacha's dictatorship in Nigeria. And this led to international sanctions and expulsion of Nigeria from the Commonwealth Group of Nations in 1995.

Saro-Wiwa's murder by State executive decree has also been a sort of moral albatross which has dented the corporate image of Shell (otherwise known in Nigeria as Shell Petroleum Development Company, SPDC) in the eyes of global community. It is not out of magnanimity that Shell offered (actually agreed) to pay the sum of \$15.5million to the family of Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni 8, as part of an out-of-court settlement for their role in the 'murder' of the Ogoni leaders and environmental rights activists.<sup>23</sup>

Critics Nwahunanya and Darah argue that the Niger Delta not only hosts Nigeria's economic hub, oil, but also its literary creativity. As Nwahunanya notes: "it is often not recognised that while the Niger Delta has made a tremendous and inestimable contribution to

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<sup>23</sup> See Ed Pilkington, "Shell Pays Out \$15.5m over Saro-Wiwa Killing." *The Guardian*, Tuesday, 9 June 2009. at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/08/nigeria-usa> Web. 13 March 2013.



the Nigerian economy, it has also literally championed the evolution and sustenance of Nigerian literature through its contribution to the intellectual bank through creative literature” (xiv). Darah on the other hand, traces literary creativity in the Delta to its earliest tradition of letters in pre-colonial times of coastal exchanges, through trade and cultural bilateral relationship with pre-slave trade Europe. Darah comes to the conclusion that “the flourish of literary works by both old and young Niger Delta writers [makes] the region...the most active site of literary creativity in Nigeria” (“Revolutionary Pressures” 12).

In identifying and building on their points, I want to locate my discussion in a historically post-Saro-Wiwa literary and cultural context. I am interested in the way that his polemical writing, political life, and ultimately his death provide a near grand narrative of geopolitical and cultural resistance to the social and environmental repercussions of the oil encounter in the Niger Delta. I propose that it is from him, especially, that contemporary literary creativity in the Delta draws its discursive and aesthetic consciousness. In effect, the socio-historical and geopolitical contexts of Saro-Wiwa’s poetics in the Niger Delta, particularly accentuated by the oil encounter, have given a peculiar character to the literature emanating from this region. I suggest that the literature, for the most part, can be situated within an atmosphere of militancy and brazen violence which their unjustifiable execution created in the region.

The geopolitical contradictions and social injustice which provoked Saro-Wiwa’s global campaigns have continued to shape the literature emanating from this space. The literature is forceful, polemical in nature, raw and urgent in temper and resistant in character, reminiscent of South Africa’s anti-apartheid literature. In their representation of the social world of the Delta, conceptions of the human subject acquire a new meaning, especially in relation to the natural environment and in relation to the larger Nigerian state. If, as Darah argues, “literature has become an extension of the politics of emancipation and human rights”

(13), then “Saro-Wiwa’s ghost” seems to loom large in the literary culture which captures the forms of petro-sociality which characterise the Niger Delta (see footnote 25). I would like to suggest that in modelling their literary creativity on Saro-Wiwa’s geopolitical polemics to address questions of socioenvironmental injustice in the Delta, recent writers deploy their arts, as Nwahunanya suggests, to “put literature in the service of society by allowing it perform a political and cultural function” (xviii). They continue to poetically apprehend, negotiate, and discursively engage the forms of violence which underscore the oil’s presence in the Delta. The chequered geopolitical economic history of post-colonial Nigeria is implicated in this oil conundrum, just as the political arrangement of the country feeds into the politics of oil production with a semblance of legitimacy and provides it with the ‘right’ atmosphere where it (the oil) continues to be the weft that holds the country’s warped nationhood together. Ibiwari Ikiriko’s *Oily Tears of the Delta* gives expression to this grim reality.

Furthermore, Saro-Wiwa’s heroic quality has also gained salience in the moral and geopolitical aesthetics around which filmic plots are woven in the Nigerian movie industry called Nollywood. In the video films produced around the subject of the oil encounter and its environmental issues, especially in the revolutionary textures of insurgency and violence in the Delta, Saro-Wiwa’s poetics and praxis have inspired the manner in which narratives get spawned.<sup>24</sup> Nollywood returns to the intellectual, legendary, activist figure of Saro-Wiwa to create stock-characters that are modelled on his archetype as a way of not only propagating

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<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, films such as *The Liquid Black Gold* (which I discuss in chapter four), *Crude War* (2010), and *The Amnesty* (2011), all written, produced and directed by the same individuals using virtually the same cast. There is also the forthcoming *Dark November*, titled in commemoration of the November execution of Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni 8. The film is directed by the Nigerian-born Jetta Amata, and the film is still undergoing post-production.

his legacy but also projecting the discursive import of socioenvironmental activism, to which the films bear witness and contextually re-enact for public consumption and debate.<sup>25</sup>

This study involves a close reading of the selected poetry collections and video film. Though the selected primary texts are multi-generic and mediated through the vehicle of both writing and video film, the trope of violence with which they engage is what links them together. I will investigate them within the contexts of the oil encounter and the social realities of environmental concerns that generate their narratives. Among other strategies, I will examine how the artists, within the different genres, deploy language and visual codes to negotiate tropes of violence and the insurrectionary possibilities that an eco-justice critique might catalyse. I propose that the chosen texts implore the reader to probe further, using alternative grammar, to rethink the forms of violence and the sphere of subversive articulations that operate to make visible this violence in the site of oil extraction in the Niger Delta. In the analyses of the chosen texts under study, I take as starting point the assumption that a writer's cultural roots are important in understanding his or her creative oeuvre. This is especially pertinent for the poets whose work I examine in this study: their conception of the oil encounter seems to proceed from a consciousness of their birth-place in the Delta, one that captures the oil encounter in the actual setting of the region.

By its very nature, a thesis can never be exhaustive. This thesis is not an exploration of *all* possible meaning of the Oil Encounter in literary representations from the Niger Delta. I have looked neither at (the) entire corpus of Niger Delta writing and cultural production nor privileged the study of an entire oeuvre of any particular poet. Save for Tanure Ojaide whose writing has attracted ample scholarly attention, most of the poets discussed here are, in a

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<sup>25</sup> Nduka Otiono shared this very interesting point in a panel discussion at the Petrocultures Conference, where he presented a paper with the title "Saro-Wiwa's Ghost: the Niger Delta Struggle and Nollywood Filmic Representation." Petrocultures: Oil, Energy, Cultures Conference. University of Alberta, Canada. 9 September 2012.

sense, quite marginal and, therefore, have attracted little or no previous critical study. For that reason, the study is both an exploration of the cultural representation of environmental concerns and the oil encounter in the Niger Delta, and also a sort of propaedeutic remark on their writings about petrocultures in the Niger Delta to scholarly readership. I propose that their provincial and peripheral representation, nonetheless, unveils alternative insights and makes important contributions – which are of global relevance – to the manner in which the oil encounter and the socioenvironmental challenges it poses to local landscapes might be gainfully apprehended and critiqued. Perhaps this explains Ilan Stavans’s diagnostic pronouncement when he notes that “every writer sees the world from a provincial perspective” (30).<sup>26</sup> I want to suggest that although these texts articulate some local – and global – dimensions to the manner in which oil has come to define much of being in the Niger Delta, the texts engage with the social and environmental realities of the oil encounter in the Niger Delta on their own aesthetic and ethical terms: as narratives of discursive resistance which create, instantiate and perform an agentive dialogue of socioenvironmental justice for the landscape and people of the Niger Delta.

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<sup>26</sup> See Ilan Stavans “Is American Literature Parochial?” *World Literature Today*, July 2013. Web [www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2013/july/american-literature-parochial-ilan-stavans](http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2013/july/american-literature-parochial-ilan-stavans)

### **Outline of the study**

My thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter one describes the key theoretical interventions/concepts which structure my discussion in the chapters that follow. It proceeds in three parts. First, it discusses ecocriticism and the critical paradigms that inform it, especially in relation to African aesthetic responses to environmental concerns. It situates Niger Delta writing within the imaginative and critical frames of environmental thoughts to discuss the way that its inflections are shaped by an ‘oily’ topos. Second, it offers a critical background to the idea of the oil encounter, while engaging with Ghosh’s seminal essay on literary representation of oil and its fraught encounter: one that ostensibly resists satisfactory representation. And lastly, against the background of the first two categories, the third section of the chapter situates my thesis within the emerging critical frame of petrocultures, examining the ways in which the encounter of oil extraction and its politics of production in the Delta translates into a specific critical and imaginative Petroculture of the region, to project what I call a vision of “petro-environmentalism” in the Niger Delta, a kind of environmentalism that is occasioned by petroleum exploration and its impacts on the environment and social-scape.

Chapter two focuses on how three concepts of geography, temporality and environmental justice advocacy converge to project this petro-environmentalism in the literature that emanates from the region. The chapter proceeds in two main sections. Using the writings of earlier poets, Gabriel Okara and John Pepper Clark, to stage a literary historiography of the Niger Delta, the first part examines the way that nature-human relationship may have been conceived in what is framed as a landscape of pre-oil modernity Niger Delta. It uses this historiography to map/track a certain transition to the present writing, noting how the human-nature relationship which underscores the conception of nature and the environment in this earlier oeuvre is destabilised by the oil incursion. The chapter then discusses two contemporary poetry writings of Ebi Yeibo’s *A Song for Tomorrow and Other*

*Poems* (2003) and Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought it was Oil but it was Blood* (2002) as main texts to explicate the way that this oil incursion attenuates that nature-human relation.

Chapter three examines three texts, Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs* (1998), Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* (2005) and Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* (2000) as critiques of a fraught nationalism in Nigeria, a nationalism that is conceived and mobilised around the oil resource in the Niger Delta. The chapter suggests that the poets question the politics of this petro-nationalism through subversive acts of historiography, ones that narrate an insurrectional poetic of subnational ethic within which the existence of oil is inscribed. In exploring these texts I advance the notion that the poets' creative vision is endowed with some concrete moments in Nigeria's recent brush with socio-political contestations pertaining to issues of social and environmental justice. I investigate their representational strategy by means of which each of the individual poets imagines the oil's presence in a neoliberal atmosphere, where oil's commodification in the Delta has seemed to destabilise all that hold society in cultural and environmental cohesion. In their attempt to create an alternative history from the incongruous reality that confronts their creative vision, each of the poets deploys a literary motif of the biographical to instigate a critique of how certain elided lived experiences and ignored geopolitical issues bordering on minority discourse might constitute a legitimate space where a subnational, regional ethic is framed against a form of petro-inspired nationalism. I argue that these poets consider the Nigerian national process of being a defective one, for it is one that is conceived and performed around the production and exploitation of oil in the Niger Delta.

Chapter four revisits the notion of violence while seeking to understand the ways in which it operates in the Niger Delta as a quintessence of social and cultural affliction in this geopolitical region. Using Ikenna Aniekwe's film, *The Liquid Black Gold* (2010), as its analytical text, the chapter identifies and discusses an intricate climate of geopolitical

dissension which attends the forms of environmentalism that oil production in the Delta elicits. The chapter discusses two forms of violence: violence as a form of civil disobedience and violence as a parallel commodity, the latter being analogous to the oil commodity. I suggest that violence features as a currency which circulates in exchange for the oil resource in the region. The atmosphere of agitations and rebellious mass action which the socio-environmental conjunctures of oil extraction engenders, ensure that only those who can afford this commodity of violence, either as resistance militant groups, state repressive forces, or those who flout environmental standards to maximise profit, have access to the increasingly militarised oil resource in the region.

## Chapter One: Ecocriticism, the Oil Encounter, and Petrocultures: Inflections in the Niger Delta

*Alongside the ecology of nature, there exists what can be called a “human” ecology, which in turn demands a “social” ecology. All this means that humanity, if it truly desires peace, must be increasingly conscious of the links between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology. Experience shows that disregard for the environment always harms human coexistence, and vice versa.*<sup>27</sup>

### Introduction

In this chapter I provide a brief survey of some of the theorists who have focussed on ecocriticism in Africa and suggest that the critique they offer is not enough to account for the form of environmental consciousness, one I call “petro-environmentalism”, that the art forms (poetry and video film) which capture the oil encounter in the Niger Delta articulate. By petro-environmentalism I mean that the kind of environmental consciousness that is expressed in these texts is one in which the petro-exploration industrial complex is held up in critical reproach as the main culprit in the socioenvironmental challenges that confront the Niger Delta. I argue that the tropes of violence that the texts frame as part of the environmental concerns that are exacerbated by the production of oil in the Delta prompt a rethinking or an expansion of the critical paradigms that inform environmental writing and ecocritical reflections.

The chapter reads in three parts. First, it explores the fields of ecocriticism in relation to African writing and locates Niger Delta representations of oil within same. It discusses Niger Delta representation of the Delta environment as a kind of environmental consciousness that is occasioned by petroleum exploration and its impacts on the environment and social landscape of the Niger Delta. It suggests that the texts, in articulating a representational project that is sensitive to the environment under the threat of oil extraction, also signals a point of departure from mainstream ecocriticism and gravitates

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<sup>27</sup> Pope Benedict XVI. “Message for the Celebration of World Peace.” *The Human Person, the Heart of Peace*. The Vatican: 8 December 2006.



toward a radical but also contextually relevant way of giving expression to environmental concerns of an ‘oily’ topos in the Delta. In the second part, I give a background to the emergence of the concept of the “Oil Encounter”, both as a historical and a cultural phenomenon, and how this translates into a critical category, namely petrocultures. I lay out the theoretical frames that allow for an apprehension of what appears to be the invisibility of Niger Delta writings and other cultural productions from the global taxonomy of Petro-literatures. The third part of the chapter discusses existing critical literatures that have engaged with the ways in which crude oil production and its politics of extraction are represented in creative works of art, and also locates Niger Delta writings within the framework.

### **Ecocriticism, African environments and ‘oily’ inflections in Niger Delta writing**

In his book, *The Ecological Thought* (2010), Timothy Morton takes up the subject of nature, ecology and environment to discuss interesting ways of negotiating assumptions about what might count as ecological thought. He contends that “Ecological thinking might be quite different from our assumptions about it” (4), if one considers it to exist outside the purview of nature. *Ecological Thought* critiques the idea of nature as exotic, nostalgic, idyllic, the far removed, and the pastoral. Morton encourages the reader to think outside the abstractions of the sublime, the aesthetic, and the beautiful when we think ecology – when we imagine the human interconnectedness with the environment. He advocates for a conception of “Ecology without Nature, [precisely because] Ecology is profoundly about coexistence” (3), one that includes human and non-human species. I should add that this point, in a sense, pushes against *dominant* conceptions of nature and ecological consciousness, which tend to see nature as a significant marker of value.

Morton argues that ecology exists outside implicit definitions of nature; for nature, having being conceived as “a thing of some kind, over yonder [has] fail[ed] to serve ecology well” (3). He suggests that ecology might represent the interconnectedness of the human and

non-human, ineluctably bound together in a quotidian existence, if one resists thinking of nature as a reified thing of purity, authority, harmony, hierarchy, and mystery that is “over yonder” and removed from the pedestrian and the banal of everyday common experience. Morton contends that ecological thought is “a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings—animal, vegetable, or mineral” (7). If ecological thought is conceived as “a practice and a process”, I want to suggest that its principles of interpretation are not static but in constant flux, changing with the circumstance under which the “human and non-human coexistence” is imagined, performed, and understood.

Morton’s book is neither about ecocriticism per se, nor particularly about ecological and environmental writing in African literature. The book may in fact be described as an aphoristic reflection on ecology and the mutuality of being. But I have discussed his work as an introductory foray into this section as a way of drawing a connection between his book and the overriding concerns of ecocriticism in literary studies. Morton presents an argument that resonates in interesting ways with the debates that animate conversations about what counts as ecological thought in Africa. As I argue later in this section, his assertion marks a significant point of departure from the paradigms that inform much of mainstream (especially Anglo-American) ecocriticism, from which, for instance, William Slaymaker’s pronouncements on African writing of ecological thoughts, derives. I will look in detail at Slaymaker’s position shortly. I will also discuss how Morton’s formulation resonates compellingly with the manner in which the environment is conceived in the creative imagination of the Niger Delta. But first a background to the aesthetic and philosophical principles that inform much of ecocriticism is pertinent to discuss how they undergird a sort of polarity in the debates on eco-criticism in African writing.

Ecocriticism is a broad area of literary scholarship which has elicited combative debates on how nature and environment is—or ought to be—reflected in literature and literary criticism. Environmental writing, one that is constitutive of the sphere of creative imagination and critical enquiry about the environment, ecology and nature, has become a dramatic site of epistemic contestations. These contestations spring from debates about what constitutes the locus of environmental expression and what surfaces as the subject of eco-critical inquiry: should it be nature, wilderness, floras and faunas, the human inhabitants in the “exotic wild”, the environment, or a combination of all ecospecies—human and nonhuman forms alike?

Eco-critical debates are even more divided and perhaps polemical in the African context. Ecocriticism in its general sense is a most contested issue in postcolonial studies and particularly in African literary scholarship, both with regard to the creative imagination and in the sphere of critical commentary. In one sense, it stems from the seeming inability of mainstream ecocriticism to take note of the cultural peculiarity of the African context in addressing environmental justice and sustainable development—perceived as the two most significant issues in environmental discourse in Africa in general and the Niger Delta in particular. The failure to put the African context in perspective perhaps explains the American ecocritic William Slaymaker’s charge that African writers and critics fail to adequately respond to what he calls “The Call of the Global Green” (129).

Slaymaker’s essay, “Ecoing the Other(s): The Call of Global Green and Black African Responses”, remains to date the most comprehensive and possibly harshest criticism against African engagement with ecological thoughts. He claims that:

The African echo of global green approaches to literature and literary criticism has been faint. [...] there is no rush by Africa literary and cultural critics to adopt ecocriticism or the literature of the environment as they are promulgated from many of the world’s metropolitan centres. [...] Black African writers take nature seriously in their creative and academic writing, but may have resisted or neglected the paradigms that inform much of

global ecocriticism. The (siren?) call of the Green Wave resounding through much of the literary world has been answered weakly by black African writers and critics. (132-33)

Although written over a decade ago, in 2001, Slaymaker's pronouncements are to be taken seriously, precisely because of the persuasive nature of the reproach that is laid against African ecocritical thinking. His charge that black Africa has failed to answer "the call of global green" is not misplaced. But one can say that he hardly understands the contexts of African environmentalism or the conditions which inform the African eco-imagination and critical epistemology. In the first instance, by what indices do we measure the model of ecocriticism that is global? In fact, what constitutes environmental writing in Africa is indeed of global concern, for it is an ecological advocacy against the global industrial complex and corporate capitalism, it is one that laments environmental pollution and the destruction to agrarian life in local, indigenous landscapes. Much of these conditions are considered to be inflicted by foreign organisations and governmental agencies through practices that are geared towards profit-making ventures, such as capitalist resource exploitation, namely oil exploration in the case of Niger Delta,<sup>28</sup> and wildlife conservation of certain (*exotic*) corners

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<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*. Port Harcourt: Saros International, 1992. The book chronicles an account of environmental, and by implication cultural, damage done to Ogoniland and its socio-economic effect on the Ogoni people. Saro-Wiwa lays the blame squarely on successive Nigerian governments and also identifies Shell Company, the premier multinational oil conglomerate prospecting for oil in Nigeria, as the main culprit. In discussing the ways that environmental pollution has had negative effect on the extant cultures of Ogoniland, Saro-Wiwa also locates his abiding concerns within a discourse of minority rights that was gaining traction in the early 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. It may be argued, however, that the concerns Saro-Wiwa raised in the book over two decades ago have yet to be adequately addressed, not only in Ogoniland but also in the entire Niger Delta where oil, the hub of Nigeria's economy, is mined. Saro-Wiwa argues that "the genocide"—by this he means environmental devastation that is—taking place in Ogoniland is partly to be blamed on the international community, noting that:

Indeed, there is a sense in which the "Nigerian" oil which the Americans, Europeans and Japanese buy is stolen property: it has been seized from its owners by force of arms and has not been paid for. Therefore, these buyers are receiving stolen property. Also, it is Western investment and technology which keep the Nigerian oil industry and therefore the Nigerian nation alive, oil being 94 percent of Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product. (5)

Saro-Wiwa argues that since the industrialised nations have benefited in one way or another from what he calls "the purloining of Ogoni natural resources, the devastation to the environment..." (6), they are equally morally and perhaps, legally bound to intervene in ending what he argues to be the genocide against his Ogoni people and their environment. By which he means an international support for Ogoniland as an autonomous region that is free from political and economic subservience to the Nigerian state. This is what is otherwise known in

of the world for the pleasure of the rich in the global North. Africa is conceived as a vast landscape of wildlife and not a place with human presence and cultures that are closely linked and bound to the natural environment. Rather, it is conceived as an exotic location of wildlife to be preserved and conserved for the pastime of gaming and safari vacations for the metropolitan rich of the global North. I argue that it is this preservationist and conservationist ethos that accounts for the resistance, the hesitation and ambivalence of Black Africa to the green eco-politics that Slaymaker advocates.

In his essay, “The Authoritarian Biologist and the Arrogance of Anti-Humanism: Wildlife Conservation in the Third World”, Indian historian and social anthropologist Ramachandra Guha discusses the manner in which conservation practices and the rhetoric of propaganda in support of these practices tend to privilege wildlife and other protected species over the human population in local landscapes. He gives instances of how the practices and arguments by conservationists and management of parks have been seen to have “simply pitted the interests of the poor tribal people who have lived in the areas for generations against those of wilderness lovers and urban pleasure seekers who wish to keep parks free of human interference—that is, free of other humans” (17).

While pointing out the forms of prejudices against human population which define wildlife conservation in the so-called Third World, Guha argues that biologists, “who believe in wilderness and species preservation for the sake of ‘science’”, together with other interest groups of politicians and international conservation organisations, “tend to be united in their hostility to the human population who inhabit these landscapes of wild parks and sanctuaries” (14). Guha notes that these conservationists consistently embark on campaigns that cast local human communities in these locations “as having a destructive effect on the environment, their forms of livelihood aiding the disappearance of species and contributing to soil erosion,

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contemporary Nigerian political discourse as resource control, which I briefly discussed in the introductory chapter.

habitat simplification, and worse” (14). He cautions that the strong pejorative language with which conservationists and biologists express their feelings about the human practices in these demarcated wild reserves has informed “numerous projects across the world to constitute nature parks by throwing out the human inhabitants of these areas, with scant regard for their past or future in the name of the global heritage of biological diversity” (15). Guha insists that the scientific and aesthetic interests by biologists and conservationists “in other species, however, sometimes blind them to the legitimate interest of the less fortunate members of their own—that is, the local human inhabitants” (15).

Conservation is largely seen as a vestige of colonialism, as the present stage of the “Cs” project that make up the colonising mission of imperial expedition; the others being “Christianity, Commerce and Civilising” (Raymond Bonner, quoted in Guha 16). Termed “Green Missionaries”, Guha declares conservation biologists “possibly more dangerous and certainly more hypocritical than their economic and religious counterparts” (19). He argues that conservationists tend to be less tolerant of the less fortunate who do not accept their salvaging project of conservation, hence they want to, for instance, “protect the tiger or whale for posterity, yet expect other people [who must live with the direct consequences] to make the sacrifice” (19), of being disposed and dislocated, of having to relocate to other less arable, less inhabitable places. In comparing the consequence of colonial ‘green’ conservation and practice on local landscapes to other less dangerous colonial incursions, Guha has this to say:

[T]he processes unleashed by the green imperialism are well-nigh irreversible. The consumer, titillated into trying out Kentucky Fried Chicken, can always say, “once is enough”, while the Hindu, converted by baptism to Christianity, can decide later on to revert to his or her original faith. But tribal people, thrown out of their homes by the propaganda of the conservationist are condemned to the life of an ecological refugee, a fate for many forest people which is next only to death. (19)

In what he calls a distinctively North Atlantic brand of anti-human environmentalism, Guha concludes that scientists and conservationists who operate in “protected areas in the countries of the South must take full cognisance of the rights of the people who have lived in (and

oftentimes cared for) [the landscape] long before it became a national park or a world heritage site” (18).

In discussing the above, one must ask: what have literary representation and criticism got to do with this? I want to propose that it is this palpable anti-human tactlessness evident in the practices of conservationists and scientists that accounts for the hesitation to the level of eco-paranoia, identifiable in the resistance of African writers and critics to respond to the so-called “global green call” that is issuing from the metropolitan North. It is possible to suggest, then, that this is the type of “exploitative green” that is conjured up in the imagination of the African writer and critic when the green call is sounded from the global North. It invokes for them what Guha has described as the economic and political weight evident in “the prestige of science and the power of the dollar”, both serving as effective “green” tools within the reach of the Western conservation project in Africa (17); projects, I should add, that are often counter-productive to African interests.

I would argue that African ecocritical practice is an environmentalism that has come to regard the colour green with a suspicious gaze, for it holds for Africa a mark of eco-imperialism. Its tendency to valorise aestheticism and privilege the natural ecology over human ecology, divorces the natural world from the human. In its “green” bid to promote the conservation of nature, it tends to exclude the people who live in environments considered to hold particular natural value and tends to be oblivious of the socio-cultural ties of the people to the ecosystem.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the perceived resistance to the call of global green might be because of its tendency to pursue preservationist and conservationist interests, ones that enclaves local landscapes to the exclusion of the human population that has inhabited these places, thereby undermining not only the human presence in these sites but also destroying any form of

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<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, David Harvey’s *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. London: Blackwell, 1996; Graham Huggan. “Postcolonial ecocriticism and the limits of Green Romanticism.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 45.1 (2009): 3-14. These scholars have in many ways argued strongly for a locally-rooted aesthetic in the discourse of ecocriticism.

cultural significance and attachment they hold to the landscape. The image that African writers invoke to make sense of the environment and nature around the sites of their habitation is anything but green. Rather, they deploy concrete images with visceral connotations of apocalyptic import to bear witness to their local environment under siege by the “green” of “preservation strategy” that has been found to have “disastrous consequences in the Third World” (Curtin 5).

Slaymaker’s reading of African eco-imagination and criticism is rather cynical, just as his epistemology of what constitutes nature writing and ecological inflection is contentious. For instance, while echoing Jhan Hochman’s introductory essay in his book, *Green Cultural Studies*, Slaymaker seems to suggest—in agreement with Hochman—that nature is an entity outside the quotidian of human habitation which is pristine, unspoiled and preserved for the aggrandisement of metropolitan elite: the whites? Hence he conceives of answering the “green call” of nature along racial and class categories to the effect that:

Whites, more than blacks, also have greater access to some semblance of nature because blacks have been forced into urban areas for jobs [...] whites have more time, energy, and wealth for appreciating and aestheticizing nature and environment. Thus, it is only natural that whites should mount a global campaign to preserve what gives them pleasure. (133)

It seems (to Slaymaker and Hochman) that nature only exists in the precincts of the non-human, devoid of (less important) human and social provenance. This notion of “green” is ethically and fundamentally problematic. This limited understanding of nature might account for the resistance within African scholarship to any ecological call (of green) ecocriticism Western metropolises may purport to sound. For this form of ecocriticism ignores what is central to the concept of the environment in the African imagination, that the environment encompasses the ecological, the natural and other life forms of which the human is part. Slaymaker’s reading is heavily laden with privileged sensibility, one that is afforded the luxury of conceiving nature in purely aestheticizing and transcendental manner, to the effect that nature becomes a commodity which exists for the aggrandisement of the opulent white.



Transcendentalism in ecocritical discourse may be seen as a form of ecological consciousness which finds interest in the sublime affect that nature elicits, in the beauty of the natural world, which exists outside of the mundane of everyday experience. I should say that this is hardly the type of environmental consciousness that might engage the interest of either the African writer or the African critic, for the drudgery of existing in an environment under imminent and actual destruction requires more urgent and concrete eco-inflections.

In what he calls a combination of “disciplinary and superpower parochialism” (34) in American environmental humanities, literary critic and environmentalist Rob Nixon makes a similar argument. He argues that “transcendental approaches in American environmental literary studies have typically trumped transnational ones” (33). Nixon reasons that the aesthetic beauty which transcendental conception of nature elicits in the ‘full-stomach’ environmental critic largely elides other unpleasant concrete reality that might confront existence in such natural enclaves, namely expelled human populations and other forms of displacements. He goes on to suggest that such taxonomic oversight inherent in American ecocritical discourse is not accidental but derives not only from “disciplinary parochialism” but also “superpower parochialism”, which reinforces “a combination of American insularity and America’s power as the preeminent empire of the neoliberal age to rupture the lives and ecosystems of non-Americans, especially the poor...” (34). Nixon contends that the form of ecological thoughts—described by Lawrence Buell as “First-wave Ecocriticism” (8)—which issues from such position of American insularity, politically and aesthetically, are fundamentally elitist and exclusivist when applied to ecological challenges in postcolonial landscapes such as Africa and by extension, the Niger Delta.

In his essay, “Different Shades of Green: Ecocriticism and African Literature”, written as a direct response to Slaymaker’s essay,<sup>30</sup> American ecocritic Byron Caminero-Santangelo discusses interesting ways in which a reconciliatory hermeneutic of reading and epistemology might be realised in African eco-writing and criticism. Caminero-Santangelo asserts that Slaymaker’s reading of African writing about the environment stems from a typically Anglo-American attack on “anthropocentrism” which consistently argues for the divorce of the human and by implication the cultural from nature, so as to allow nature its own voice, its agency, its subjectivity (698-99). Caminero-Santangelo goes on to argue for a revision and opening up of what he calls “a primarily Anglo-American ecocritical framework”—which underpins Slaymaker’s ecocritical epistemology—because of the apparent limitations it displays in understanding the environmental writing in and about Africa. He calls for a more inclusive dialogue which considers the context of environmental history of place, particularly the (post) colonial history of Africa.

Caminero-Santangelo insists that (mainstream) ecocriticism and African environmental history, when placed together in productive conversation might unveil interesting transformational possibilities in the definition of environmental writing. The result, he maintains, might be realised in such a manner as to point to an inherent heterogeneity embedded in the field(s) of ecocriticism. Caminero-Santangelo concludes that when this is achieved, we might then realise that African literature can contribute more to ecocriticism and African environmental history than has previously been accounted for (704). The primacy of the literary imagination in unveiling culturally constitutive modes of environmentalism in Africa, identifiable in Caminero-Santangelo’s conclusion, resonates

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<sup>30</sup> The essay appears right after the republication of Slaymaker’s article in the Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson edited book collection entitled: *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2007. Caminero-Santangelo’s article in this collection is coded as a previously “unpublished paper” (698) in an anthology of previously published essays of African literary theorising. That it is preceded by Slaymaker’s essay to make for a continuous and coherent conversation of ecocritical discourse in African literature, in one sense, substantiates my claim.

with Lawrence Buell's evocative pronouncement. In his book, *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001), Buell argues that "the success of all environmentalist efforts finally, hinges not on some highly developed technology, or some arcane new science but on [an ecological sense of] minds, attitudes, feelings, images, narratives, all of which can be found in acts of environmental imaginations" (2).

In the introduction to their book, *Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa* (2011), Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers locate African ecological articulations in culture by connecting their modes of eco-poetics to environmental activism and questions of social justice. Caminero-Santangelo and Myers note that first-wave ecocriticism is increasingly chastised in contemporary environmental discourses. They decry its exclusivity as one that "favour[s] literary representations that focus on knowing, appreciating, identifying with, and protecting nature in a relatively pure state and/or on natural forms of belonging" (4). The book attempts to look beyond nature writing with regard to Africa, in order to address more concrete and urgent concerns about the environment, ecology and human relationship therein. Two key questions animate the book. The first is how African literatures and modes of analysis drawn from literary studies might contribute to ways of reading the environment in other disciplines. The second is concerned with how African literary studies might productively draw from studies of African environments (2).

Both concerns, the editors suggest, might privilege the need for a cross disciplinary approach that would stimulate better understanding of African environments and the people's relationship with them, which will, no doubt, produce "new kinds of environmental discourses" (2). Caminero-Santangelo and Myers identify Ken Saro-Wiwa and Wangari Maathai as figures that embody the vision and social consciousness of African environmentalism. They discuss "the manner in which the literary and the environmental

have been productively connected in Africa as well as the ways in which these two figures emphasise the link between environmental activism and social justice” (2). They argue that it is not accidental that Saro-Wiwa and Maathai were also distinguished writers who used their writings to promote their project of environmental rights and social justice advocacy.<sup>31</sup>

Caminero-Santangelo and Myers insist that African depictions of the ecology might be gainfully understood and appreciated if we take as theoretical points of departure, “African writers-as-environmentalists and African environmentalists-as-writers”, we might see that they offer, from a cultural and philosophical standpoints “powerful alternative ways of understanding nature, conservation, and development in contrast with dominant ideas of environment” (2). Nixon, to whom I shall later return, takes up this suggestion in his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), to discuss writer-activists in the global South as central to understanding forms of environmentalism in the South. The book explores possible ways of thinking through environmental pollution, human rights violation, social injustice, and the politics of representing these concerns. It brings together a wide range of environmental questions and reflects on the different forms of discourses – scientific, political, and social-activism – through which these are articulated.

Crucially, there is the need to understand and acknowledge that, in many senses, “African literary texts intersect with larger social texts regarding African environments and their material implication” (Caminero-Santangelo and Myers 2), such that the distinction between the socio-political and the purely aesthetic is often fluid. This, in a sense, resonates with what reviewer and South African ecocritic Dan Wylie terms “second wave ecocriticism” (500).<sup>32</sup> Reviewing Caminero-Santangelo and Myers’s *Environment at the Margins*, Wylie

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<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *A Month and A Day & Letters*. Oxfordshire, England: Ayebia Clarke Publishing Limited, 1995. See also Wangari Maathai’s *Unbowed: A memoir*. London: Heinemann, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> It is worth pointing out that this term is not exclusive to Dan Wylie alone; other scholars have also identified other “waves” of environmental expressions using terms like “first”, “second” and “third” to delineate their cultural, aesthetic and/or ethno-national particularities. See, for instance, Scott Slovic’s “The Third Wave of

argues that the conception of nature in Africa is inevitably embedded in “historical, social and economic fields of influence; [such that] any study of literature is hence also inevitably an interdisciplinary study of the work’s socio-ecological and political conditions of possibility” (500). Such notions are not so popular with mainstream ecocriticism hence the call for a culturally-coded and socio-historically rooted mode of ecocritical engagement which considers a cultural cohesion between the human and the non-human world since none exists outside of the other. Indeed Anthony Vital has insightfully argued that “ecocriticism, if it is to pose African questions and find African answers, will need to be rooted in local (regional, national) concerns for social life and its natural environment” (Vital 88). This suggests that eco-critical discourse in Africa ought to reflect environmental impulses that are invested in aspects of the quotidian as well as the sublime of existence. Hence there is need to account for what reviewer Ranka Primorac, in another context, has described as a “combination of text, context and cultural locations” (114) before a truly perceptive evaluation of Niger Delta poetry in the context of environmental writing can take root. This is because the poetry, as I shall presently show, deals with the environment in a way that gestures to nature as holding particular cultural value—a particular mode of being with nature and a general sense of human existence in the Niger Delta.

Considering the field of ecocriticism in relation to the Niger Delta is a messy affair, to say the least. This is because what seems to provoke much of the contemporary critique of environmental questions in Niger Delta writing is a condition so urgent, that it tends to compel the critic into losing sight of his/her primary object of analysis: literature. Attempts at

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Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline”. *Ecozon*, 1.1 (2010): 4-10. In deploying such ordering labels to mark off these culturally-determined broad spectrums of ecocriticism, Slovic also discusses interesting ways that each of these “waves” transcends provincial boundaries of race and/or nationality to articulate aspects of human and non-human experience from environmental perspectives. See also Loretta Johnson’s “Greening the Library: The Fundamentals and Future of Ecocriticism”. *ALECC: Association for Literature, the Environment and Culture in Canada*, (Dec. 2009): 7-13. Web: <http://www.alecc.ca>; and Serpil Oppermann, Ufuk Ozdag, Nevin Ozkan and Scott Slovic edited collection, *The Future of Ecocriticism: New Horizons*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.

untying the text of an environmentally inflected piece of writing often gravitates toward contextualising with the social. In a sense, the position of the critic, confronted with an environmental situation that is politically urgent, does not have the luxury of considering ecocriticism as a purely literary question. He or she is necessarily enmeshed in the socio-political conjunctures that animate the environmental concerns, both in the text and in the concrete contexts on which the literary text is based.

The form of nature writing that we encounter in the Delta, at the sites of oil extraction, is an ecological advocacy which bears witness to the damage done to the material culture and environment of the Niger Delta, one which is a direct result of the commodification of natural resources such as crude oil. It appears that much of the aesthetic principles which underwrite environmental writings in the Delta derive from a counter-current of geopolitical articulations, mobilised and deployed to resist forms of neoliberal and political power regimes at play, which enable the Nigerian state, in cahoots with multinational oil corporations, to exploit oil resources without accounting for the environmental repercussions to the ecosystem and the effect on the local population. This is the sense conveyed in reading the texts under study.

By the same token, while echoing Caminero-Santangelo to discuss what he calls ‘Eco-human engagement in recent Nigerian poetry’, Egya points to this material context of the political in discussing ecological engagements in Niger Delta writing. He argues that “the problems of the environment for contemporary Nigerian poets are entrenched in the larger crisis of leadership confronting Nigeria”, such that “[t]he character of the emerging eco-poetry in Nigeria is distinctively political: that is issues of ecology are tied up with the struggles of the people to survive in a heavily militarized environment” (69). Egya suggests that eco-writing for the Nigerian poets operates as both an aesthetic consciousness, and also, more importantly, as a political strategy of discursive resistance, evolving from a tradition

which perceives the environment as ineluctably tied to the fate of the local people, so that writing about the Niger Delta environment is not just about “the question of the environment suffering alone, but of a people being brutalized because of, and alongside, the environment” (69). I should add that such is the ethos that makes environmentalism in the Niger Delta unique, complicated, nuanced and interesting too. The way its environmental imagination seems to enact a running streak of counter-currents against the given of eco-imagination. In a sense, environmental writing in the Delta is deeply constitutive of the worldview (that is, the Niger Delta’s and perhaps much of Africa), *qua* Chinua Achebe, that besides every concept—every mode of being—there is always another being, be it human or non-human, existing side-by-side.<sup>33</sup> This suggests that, contrary to a dominant strand of ecocriticism,<sup>34</sup> ecological thought in the Niger Delta cannot be conceived outside the purview of culture. For to the Niger Delta critic and writer, nature, environment and ecology do not exist for their own sake; they are inevitably bound-up with the culture around which these categories come into being.

Again to cite Slaymaker one last time, indeed he has cautioned against this form of reading as being undergirded by a kind of environmental instrumentality in African nature writing, to the effect that the African writers and critics privilege a “humanistic survival philosophy [...] when they write about humanity in nature” (138). Slaymaker’s concern here is consistent with some recent eco-philosophical angst. In their book, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010), Australian postcolonial eco-critics Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, while echoing another Australian, ecofeminist Val Plumwood, have also cautioned that we must return to, and question, that philosophical basis

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<sup>33</sup> Although this notion may be found in much of African cosmology, it is credited here to the foremost African novelist Chinua Achebe in “What has literature got to do with it?” A text of his 1986 Nigeria National Merit Award Lecture reprinted in Godini Darah’s edited. *Radical Essays on Nigerian Literatures* Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited, 2008: 1-11.

<sup>34</sup> I am thinking here of the paradigm that informs Slaymaker’s and much of mainstream ecocriticism.

which acknowledges forms of instrumental reasoning that view nature and non-human others as being external [and subject] to human needs, and thus effectively disposable, or as being in permanent service to humanity, and thus as endlessly replenishable resource (4-5). Although Slaymaker's, Plumwood's, Huggan and Tiffin's cautionary intervention is well-informed and critical to rethinking ways of negotiating ecological thoughts and environmental concerns, it ought to come with a caveat, it seems to me, especially in the case of what one may call the outback of the global South, in places such as the Niger Delta which features as the cultural location—imaginatively and concretely—of the literary and filmic texts discussed in this study. For if as Okpaku notes, “critical standards derive from aesthetics. Aesthetics are culture dependent. Therefore critical standards must derive from culture” (quoted in Okunoye 748). It stands to reason, then, that a perceptive critique and creative conception of an environmental consciousness should proceed from the cultural repertoire of that literary space.

It may be stated here—drawing from the texts studied in this thesis—that in the relationship between the human subject and nature, there seems to be a necessary symbiosis that is invested with an important moral and ethical code. This is precisely because the kind of vision that Niger Delta eco-inflection offers, especially in the literature which captures the oil encounter, is one that co-articulates the fate of the environment with the social condition of the human population at the sites of oil extraction in the Delta. I would argue therefore that the texts inflect a poetic that is consistent with a concrete praxis of the environment's cultural relevance to the people who depend on nature for their genuine sustenance. By this I mean that the texts seem to conjure up a thematic of instrumental necessity in a positive sense, one that considers the environment as part of Niger Delta cosmology, comprising the human and non-human species, orchestrating what Susan Comfort in a related reading has termed a “reciprocal and non-exploitative relationship with the land” (237).



I would like to suggest that, in fact, by embedding culture and human contingency in environmental inflections of the Niger Delta, the texts gravitate towards an eco-poetics that is both an existential necessity and a potentially pragmatic endeavour. This instrumental logic of environmentalism in the literature therefore orchestrates a nuanced mode of inflecting eco/environmental aesthetics when placed against mainstream ecocritical enquiry. The texts consider the devastation done to the environment by oil production as a form of violence—“slow violence”, to use Nixon’s phrase.

Nixon’s *Slow Violence* (2011) is a fascinating book which brings together three seemingly unrelated yet inextricably interwoven concerns in African environmental discourse: “Slow Violence”, “Environmentalism of the Poor”, and the politics of articulating them within the larger frame of human rights and social justice, through the politics and poetics of third world activist-writers and scholars (2-5). Nixon’s discussion of environmental devastation and the question of social justice brings into productive dialogue conceptions of nature and the social contexts which give rise to particular forms of environmental consciousness. The concept of “structural violence”, he argues, does not adequately describe the insidious and often invisible effects of environmental degradation which takes place often over long periods of time. The book provides useful insights for understanding environmental pollution and the inequitable distribution of a country’s resources as another form of violence: a non-physical violence, inflicted incrementally, both directly and indirectly, over a long period of time. The phrase he uses to describe this is ‘slow violence’. This idea is significant for this study, because it is environmental pollution and the destruction of the people’s agrarian and fishing economy that exacerbates the agitations which result in physical violence in the Delta.

Nixon’s coinage of “slow violence” complicates conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act of confrontation. It enables a rethinking of notions of social

afflictions, namely ecological devastation, inequitable distribution of wealth from natural resources and geopolitical marginalisation as forms of violence. And these are the kinds of concerns that the texts I examine in this thesis frame as forms of unseen violence, which are inflicted by both the technologies of oil extraction and the neoliberal politics that enable the extraction of oil in the Delta. If these incongruities can be framed as a form of violence—slow violence, *qua* Nixon, it stands to reason, then, that attempts at resisting such conjunctures in the social world of the Delta might also feature within the purview of violence. Thus the tropes of violence, both the unseen and the resistant, continue to reverberate throughout the texts that capture the oil encounter in the Niger Delta. And this is where my study locates itself.

It is from Nixon, especially, that I have particularly drawn inspiration, theoretically and methodologically, in this study. Terms such as “environmentalism of the poor”, “petro-imperialism” and “socio-environmentalism” are borrowed from his book. Nixon provides insights for thinking and understanding the poetics and praxis of environmental aesthetics that inform the texts studied in this thesis. In the chapters that follow from this, I argue that poetry is a literary form which is able to register slow violence very effectively. The film, which tells the story of resource rebels, appears at first to represent a more spectacular form of violence but it too is concerned with making visible the slow violence which underlies the spectacular. *Slow Violence* enables us to explore alternative ways of conceiving environmental degradation as a form of violence inflicted on the landscape and its inhabitants. According to Nixon, this (slow) violence is insulated from public consciousness by the popular media’s veneration of the spectacular violence engendered by insurgency.

In considering Nixon’s ideas of slow violence for our understanding of the Niger Delta context, one is compelled to ask: how might we frame acts of violence as forms of environmentalism? What might it mean if violence is considered a contradictory mode of

environmentalism that is both radically instructive and insidious, one that at once bespeaks righteous indignation and operates in a climate of exploitative opportunism, both provoked and exacerbated by the damage done to the Delta ecosystem? What sets of meaning might this environmentalism of the poor (insurgent violence) elicit when conceived as one that is engendered by oil extraction activities after many years of negligence and monumental corruption? How do we extricate environmental discourse from its abstractions in scientific discourse and deep ecological musing—otherwise known as “full-stomach environmentalism” (Guha, Martinez-Alier, quoted in Nixon xii) – to make it speak anew in a Niger Delta reality of petro-induced environmental pollution, geopolitical upheaval and sociocultural disintegration?

I would argue that the present climate of oil extraction and the resultant pollution of the Niger Delta environment has galvanised a new form of environmental practice and a process of ecological thinking in literary and filmic texts of the Niger Delta. In so doing, I want to align myself with, and return to, Timothy Morton’s *Ecological Thought*, where he suggests that recent ecological thoughts on a global scale, might best be understood and negotiated when conceptualised as attempt at bridging the seeming divergence between mainstream (first wave) ecocriticism and (‘other’ waves) environmental justice criticism (Morton 14). This is not to suggest that the two categories are diametrically opposed: they are both concerned with the ecology, concerned with protecting the environment and making it habitable for human and non-human beings. But what I want to suggest here is that the “strand” of eco-critical practice in much of the global South of which the Delta is part, seems to gravitate toward environmental justice criticism, because their environmental concerns are inextricably entangled with socio-political factors.

At the same time as the eco-critical sequence I have been discussing so far, there has also been an alternative strand of ecocriticism developing within the mainstream Anglo-

American academy, and it connects interestingly with marginal, counter-cultural articulations in the global South. In their edited book collection, *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, & Pedagogy* (2002), American eco-critics Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans and Rachel Stein discuss the relevance of environmental justice for Third World and minority peoples around the globe. The book discusses the right of populations to “live unthreatened by the risks posed by environmental degradation and contamination, and to afford equal access to natural resources that sustain life and culture” (4). With its broad scope and extensive reach, the book details the way that minority peoples across the globe articulate environmental justice concerns through advocacy movements, concerned with addressing “the ways disparate distribution of wealth and power often lead to correlative social upheaval...” (5). Divided into three sections, namely “Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy”, the editors argue that “both teaching (pedagogy) and making (of) arts (poetics) are intrinsically political acts”, noting that both “require a skilful examination, negotiation, and transformation of the tensions that sometimes manifest in more overtly political responses” (7). I would add that, in fact, these “political acts” may also be framed as acts of dissidence which can be read as counter-narratives to the operations of oil multinationals and the Nigerian state in their appropriation of landscapes holding particular value for global consumption, against the wishes of local inhabitants.

I want to isolate the section on “Poetics” for discussion here, precisely because some of the essays therein take up the questions of environmental justice criticism, while also pushing against the boundaries of ecocriticism in a manner I find germane to my interest. In the first essay in this section, “Toward an Environmental Justice Ecocriticism”, American cultural and environmental critic T.V. Reed draws attention to some problematic features in ecocriticism. He discusses various strands of eco-critical practice and how they have failed to connect “environmental concerns with social justice issues in the context of ecocriticism” (145). Reed

discloses what he considers to be the limitations, weaknesses of mainstream ecocriticism in its seeming valorisation of nature's yonder over the quotidian of human-inhabited environments. He advocates for a revision of ecocritical practices so as to accommodate human social concerns that are intimately bound with larger environmental questions. In what he terms "environmental justice ecocriticism" (145), Reed provides insight into the possibility of a more inclusive approach to environmental discourse, one that deals with questions of race, class and minority people together with nature and ecology as the loci of its eco-consciousness. He argues that the exclusion of racial and class categories as important aspects in environmental discourse, has greatly undermined the field of ecocriticism's ability to grapple with ecological devastation in areas inhabited by people considered to be of minority race and the underclass (145). This, to him, has made the project of ecocriticism a largely incomplete endeavour.

Reed insists that the pretence of ecocritics to "isolate the environment from its necessary interrelation with society and culture has severely limited the appeal of environmental thought, to the detriment of both the natural and social world"; noting that the "privileged enjoyment of wilderness [has necessarily] blind(ed) the seer to the nature of injustices inflicted on the less privileged" in the site of such commoditized nature (146-55). He thus advocates for a "significant shift in the center of concerns for ecocriticism to truly represent the range of connections among cultures, criticism, and the environment" (146). Reed comes to the conclusion that "bringing environmental justice into ecocriticism entails a fundamental rethinking and reworking of the critical field as a whole" (157), where socio-cultural issues might be inescapably tied to ecological critique so as to make environmental consciousness a fundamentally pro-human and pro-nonhuman affair, irrespective of class, race and cultural affiliations.

Similarly in her essay, ‘From Environmental Justice Literature to the Literature of Environmental Justice’, Julie Sze notes that “environmental justice challenges the mainstream definitions of environment and nature based on a wilderness/preservationist frame” (163). She provides a possible way in which literature might help realise a form of environmental justice in its environmental representations. She writes that “literature offers a new way of looking at environmental justice, through visual images and metaphors [...] which allows for a more flexible representation of environmental justice, one with a global view and historical roots” (163). In the next chapter, I pick up on Sze’s point of how literature offers a new way of negotiating environmental justice. I discuss the ways in which poetry operates as a vehicle for advocating environmental justice in the Delta precisely because of its ability to represent and engage with the ‘slow violence’ of environmental damage.

By the same token in her essay, ‘Struggle in Ogoniland: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Cultural Politics of Environmental Justice’, Susan Comfort examines Saro-Wiwa’s work as a cultural intervention which brings environmental injustice in Ogoniland to the forefront of global public discourse. She argues that Saro-Wiwa’s engagement was to “resist the hegemony of state-sponsored maldevelopment and neocolonial capitalism by building an alternative consensus that transforms conventional political categories and expectations” (230). Comfort explains that Saro-Wiwa “constructs new narratives of social change that draw together environmental struggles with challenges to racial, ethnic, and class oppression” (230). She insists that Saro-Wiwa’s writing holds a “cultural vision” for a composite human and non-human society where environmental justice is reified, while revealing “an accompanying critique of global capitalism” as the harbinger of the socioenvironmental disintegration in indigenous landscapes.

Comfort identifies a major contradiction in Saro-Wiwa's writing which she notes to be a major kernel that runs through his entire oeuvre: "the conflict between his refusal to romanticise the folk and his commitment to a profoundly populist role as an advocate for Ogoni rights" (232). I should add that this contradiction contributed to the criticism levelled against Saro-Wiwa by those who vilify him as a member of the opportunistic elite, bent on utilising the Ogoni struggle to further his personal agenda.<sup>35</sup> By this I mean they suggest that his creative work over the years has always ridiculed African traditional belief-systems and cultures, to which he eventually returned to valorise in his political polemics to project Ogoni claims. It is instructive to note the connection that Comfort makes between Saro-Wiwa's articulations of minority/ethnic and environmental rights to questions of class and race in the United States. I want to argue that Comfort makes a compelling point here. She not only wrestles Saro-Wiwa's writings and politics from the seeming stasis of provincialism and ethnicity to which some of his critics have consigned him,<sup>36</sup> but also gives his eco-oeuvre a pride of place in global discourse of environmentalism, one that takes root in local concerns but also have global ramifications.

By way of concluding on this section, I want to suggest that the forms of eco-poetics articulated in Niger Delta art forms, seek to give voice to the region's experiences of geopolitical upheavals and environmental pollutions in the petro-modernity of the Delta. The literary and cultural corpuses "imaginatively convey the issues at stake in environmental justice struggles" (Adamson, Evans and Stein 9) at this present conjuncture in the Delta,

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<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, Azubike Ileoje's "On a Darkling Plain: The Darksome Lyric of an Outsider." *Before I Am Hanged: Ken Saro-Wiwa, Literature, Politics and Dissent*. Onookome Okome, ed. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 2000: 107-122. In this essay, Ileoje contends that Saro-Wiwa "was an outsider constantly in search of an alternative context that would convert him into an insider" (108), both in the cultural regime of power in Ogoniland and in the national calculus of political power. But in his doctoral monograph, cultural critic Austine Tam-Opubo George appears to dismiss Ileoje's claims as "dramatizing important conceptual weakness" (60). He argues that Ileoje "fails altogether to view the (Saro-Wiwa's) narrative from wider optic of discourse intent on inscribing its difference from dominant narratives through the production of counter-histories" (60).

<sup>36</sup> For other (harsh, perhaps snide) criticism of Saro-Wiwa and his writing, see Meja-Pierce's *Remembering Ken Saro-Wiwa and Other Essays* (The New Gong, 2005).

especially after the execution of Saro-Wiwa. Environmental justice ecocriticism is conceived in this study as one that is mindful of “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty 2). But more importantly, the particular concern for environmental justice in the Niger Delta is the oil extraction industry. Therefore it is also important to consider these texts as emerging from the particular experience of the ‘oil encounter’.

### **The “Oil Encounter” and literary imagination**

The term “Oil Encounter” can be credited to the Indian writer and critic Amitav Ghosh in his essay, “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel”.<sup>37</sup> Ghosh suggests that oil is surprisingly absent from fiction and that the oil “encounter [has] proved so imaginatively sterile” (75). He argues that “In fact, very few people anywhere write about the Oil Encounter [...] the silence extends much further than the Arabic or English-speaking worlds”. In his own words Ghosh declares:

Try and imagine a major American writer taking on the Oil Encounter. The idea is literally inconceivable. It isn't fair, of course, to point the finger at American writers. There isn't very much they could write about: neither they nor anyone else really knows anything at all about the human experiences that surround the production of oil. (76)

Crucially, Ghosh's interest is in the absence of “epic narratives” of the oil encounter in the novel form and in particular the epic historical novel, in American fiction writing, especially given the high-powered politics oil has generated in the United States and its effect on U.S. foreign policies in the Arab World.

I want to begin my initial comments by conceding that to some extent there has, indeed, been silence, reluctance, and “embarrassment verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic”, to the level of “petrofiction barrenness” among writers – in America and the

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<sup>37</sup> This essay was originally written in 1992 and published as “Petrofiction” in *New Republic*, 2 March (1992): 29-34. My quotations here are culled from a later version in his 2002 book of essays, entitled, *The Imam and the Indian*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2002:74-87. I believe that its reappearance in a book form—ten years after first publication—evinces the sustained instructiveness of his ideas about the representation of the oil encounter in creative imagination. Also, the fact the phrase, oil encounter, has gained currency in the way that other scholars have taken up his ideas to produce knowledge about petrocultures, makes this all the more cogent.



Arab world (75). But Ghosh singles out the Jordanian writer Abdelrahman Munif to instantiate the inherent difficulties in attempts at capturing the oil encounter in creative imagination. In his reading of Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1989) and *The Trench* (1991), Ghosh pronounces both novels weak, precisely because they gravitate toward what he calls "an escapist fantasy" and "a romantic hearkening back to a pristine, unspoiled past", respectively (83-87). That *Cities of Salt* ends on an optimistic note—with the autocratic emir fleeing and the sacked striking workers reinstated in the oil company—is cogent reason for Ghosh to name the narrative as "an escapist fantasy [founded] in pure wish-fulfilment" (84). But if as Derek Attridge notes, "The culture of a particular time or place determines what is offered as literature",<sup>38</sup> I would suggest that a writer ought to have the liberty to extrapolate from his imagination or lived-experience what the oil encounter has come to mean, and how that meaning defines not only his subjectivity but also his agency within the geographical space and socio-political context of that lived-environment. This is even more so when that position of subjectivity derives from a sense of vassalage in a neo-colonial framework. The literature that captures the oil encounter sometimes issues from a place-based consciousness, one that is vernacular and autochthonous to the writer. And this happens to be at odds with the sites of oil exploration that are essentially neoliberal spaces of deregulated (actually unregulated) global enterprises, where claims to autochthony, and by implication indigenous rights, are suspended for the oil commodity to flow without hindrance—as in the case of the Niger Delta, for instance.

Here is what Ghosh says of his (own) attempt to write about the oil encounter: "As one of the few who have tried to write about the floating world of oil, I can bear witness to its slipperiness, to the ways in which it tends to trip fiction into incoherence". Further down on

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<sup>38</sup> Attridge, Derek. "What Sort of Thing is 'Literature'?" English Department Research Seminar: Stellenbosch University. 28 March 2013. Lecture.

the same page he describes the literary form that might satisfactorily capture the oil encounter:

Equally, the novel is never more comfortable than when it is luxuriating in a ‘sense of place’, revelling in its unique power to evolve mood and atmosphere. But *experiences associated with oil are lived out within a space that is no place at all, a world that is intrinsically displaced, heterogeneous, and international [...] the truth is that we do not yet possess the form that can give the Oil encounter a literary expression.* (78; my italics)

Although this may be true for the actual encounter in the site of oil extraction, especially given that it is essentially an enclave space;<sup>39</sup> the oil encounter exceeds this narrow frame. It may be stated here that Ghosh seems to be interested in realist fiction, particularly the epic, historical novel. He is also interested in the international networks of power at play in the essentially globalised space that is the site of oil extraction. Though my interest, being poetry and video film, is markedly different from that of Ghosh, his pronouncement is to be taken seriously because of the implication it has for the literary and filmic texts that form the basis of my study.

The poetry collections and film studied in this thesis engage with the oil encounter in a different way: they imagine the oil encounter within a well-defined cultural sense of place, the Niger Delta. It is this concrete setting that forms the background against which the writers and film creators imagine the environment that has not only come under threat, but has also experienced actual visible, tangible pollution from oil exploration, a pollution that surfaces as something which intrudes on, and does violence to, a quotidian existence in very concrete ways. Crucially, the Niger Delta experience of the oil encounter is one that may be articulated through the environmental and social repercussion that oil production occasions at the sites of its extraction. Hence the texts address themselves to the oil encounter in a way that captures the trajectories oil has come to map on the local landscape of the Niger Delta and in the lives

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<sup>39</sup> See James Ferguson’s *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. The last chapter, “Governing Extraction” – to which I will later return – discusses the enclave nature of oil production in Angola, Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria’s Niger Delta.

of the *native* population around its site of exploitation. This, in a sense, suggests that the poetry collections and film may be considered flawed attempts at capturing the oil encounter when measured against the paradigms that inform Ghosh's reading. Thus my interest in Ghosh's pronouncements is less to contend with his path-breaking essay and seminal reading of the oil encounter than to draw attention to a prescriptive ethos which seems to inspire his dismissal of Munif's novel as failed attempts at capturing the grand narratives of the oil encounter.

Ghosh seems to suggest that the only possible way of capturing the oil encounter is through realism. I should say that realism does not seem to properly serve the writer when the reality that confronts his or her vision is overwhelming. A writer ought to be able to deploy his creative imagination in ways that might be therapeutic and optimistic in the face of oppressive realities, while pushing against the daunting concrete of the real to a realm of fictive possibilities – even if these are unrealistic. That being stated, a key question for realist fiction is inescapable: should a literature capturing the oil encounter be descriptive by way of passively representing the world as it is, or should it be prescriptive by way of opening up a space in the imagination for a changed world of possibilities? Might not a writer be able to refract reality by transforming experience into artistic, and insurrectionary, expression? In a sense, I am referring to a creative intervention that could, in a libertarian fervour, contaminate a daunting experience of the real with a counter-current of the might be – the “could be”. To refract the real in a way that de-familiarises the mundane with imaginative possibilities is to do violence to the materiality of the real, and to make it carry the burden of the writer's radical intentions.

Edward Said has insightfully argued that “No process of converting experience into expression can be free of contaminations” (*Humanism and Democratic Criticism* 49). What Said refers to is literature's involvement in matters of politics and the material world; this, he

describes as the shades of “Worldliness” in a literary work and its material existence in social contexts, created to carry the burden of its creator’s discursive agenda, insurrectionary and the like. I should add that the sometimes discursive agenda of literature, its counter-currents of creative resistance, questioning notions of power, injustice and other negative manifestations thereof, have implications for its mode of representation. Analysing the poetry collections and the video film in subsequent chapters, I show how literature’s prescriptive function identified in the second part of the question above is foregrounded. In fact, the artists seem to orchestrate what Emmanuel Obiechina has called “the poetics of personal involvement” (530), as a way of calling attention to instances of social disorder and violence in the Delta, while also pointing in the direction of affirmative possibilities beyond the daunting realities of the oil’s presence in the locality.

In his essay, “Oil in an American Imaginary”, Peter Hitchcock also picks up on Ghosh’s pronouncements and affirms Ghosh’s observation of a consciously muted imagination of the oil encounter – in American literature. Although he too fails to mention the existence of cultural production elsewhere – in Africa, for instance – which has captured, however non-epically, the oil encounter in their domain, Hitchcock makes a fascinating point which illuminates my argument in this chapter. He avers that:

If climate change has provoked utopian desires for a world beyond oil, a planet where oil does not and cannot centrally drive its economic activities, then that challenge must include an imaginative grasp of its otherwise abstruse narrative of modernity, not in the mere content of oil’s omnipresence, but in the very ways oil has fictively come to define so much of being in modernity. (81)

The oil encounter and the politics that attend the production and distribution of the oil commodity have brought with it a baggage of paradoxes of poverty and wealth existing at the same site, of neoliberal capitalism heralded by ideals of free market, which neither translate into wealth nor guarantee environmental and social justice for the indigenous population who live in spaces that bear natural resources such as the Niger Delta. The complexity in the

articulation of this oil encounter in the literature is aptly summarised by the British writer and journalist Michael Peel, who notes in his travelogue on the Niger Delta that, “It is often hard to convey to outsiders the degree to which the story of oil permeates the psychological warp and weft of Nigerian everyday life” (27).

Peel’s book, *A Swamp Full of Dollars* (2010), is a *real* life account of the complex mix of paradoxes and contradictions that define the oil encounter and the intriguing politics of power relations that it underwrites in the Niger Delta. Peel identifies a number of individuals he describes as key players who embody these contradictions. In his assessment of Al haji Mujahid Dokubo Asari, the leader of one of the militant groups in the Delta, the Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force, Peel describes him as a figure embodying the qualities of a renegade and a potentate: “In a system so riddled with corruption and contradictions, perhaps it was no surprise that someone like him [Asari] could appear to be both populist freedom fighter and profiteering warlord, feeding off the scraps of the very oil industry he was trying to undermine” (20). Peel further notes that “the fundamental problem with the region is not mass poverty [precisely, but] the marginal richness that the oil brings” (30). These are some of the concerns that this thesis aims to investigate and uncover in the literary and filmic texts examined in this study. It stands to reason, that it is this condition of paradoxes, this space of palpable radicalism, of revolutionary subversion and potentially brazen criminality that form the contextual basis to which the poetry and film explored in this study give excellent articulation.

The texts dramatize the complex, sometimes incoherent, ways in which cultural representations address the many different kinds of violence produced by the oil encounter. Of interest in the texts under study is the manner in which they seem to suggest that imaginings of the oil encounter in the Delta have come to be underscored by issues of environmental degradation and questions of social justice in the Niger Delta. It appears that

the representation of the oil encounter and the petrocultures it performs in the Delta has been hijacked by counter-currents around the twin issues of environmental and social justice, which attend the social reality of oil production. Perhaps this accounts for the region's literary invisibility in the classificatory paradigm of what Ghosh considers to be the literature that captures the oil encounter. The texts seem to unveil how oil features as mere referential foil around which issues related to justice, cultural history, and other libertarian human impulses are adumbrated in the Delta. Considering that there seems to be a representational crisis identifiable in the literatures that bear witness to the oil's presence (as Ghosh and Hitchcock have persuasively noted), the oil encounter does permeate much of being, not just in contemporary Niger Delta, but also in much of global modernity (Hitchcock 81, Szeman, "Petrofiction" 3). I would suggest that existing criticisms of attempts at representing the oil encounter, in a sense, evidence how efforts at understanding the oil ontology in the real world and in the imaginative sphere of representation result in incoherence and contradictions.

It is possible to state at this stage that in capturing the narratives of the oil encounter in its non-epic form, the poetry collections in this study also engage on a deeper level with the vexed question of the function of literature in society: a function that is at once mimetic and refractive thus enabling the form of poetry a more complex relationship with the real. By this I mean that poetry does not imitate the real but rather offers responses to the real, which are discontinuous, fragmentary memories and emotions – in fact, fleeting responses which, in a sense, enable the poets to capture and chart the subtle effects of slow violence. The poets studied in this thesis seem to suggest that poetry not only mediates the materiality of history, social reality, and the environment, but also, and more importantly, it refracts meaning through the creative resources of language. This study investigates the manner in which the texts provide a contextually nuanced insight into what the human relationship with the environment might mean in the face of the oil incursion in the Delta. Thus, while engaging

with the discourses of socioenvironmental justice in the Niger Delta to which the literature addresses itself, this study also locates itself as a critical engagement with Ghosh's essay as a way of addressing the invisibility of Niger Delta literature from his classificatory paradigm of what counts as cultural expressions that might adequately capture the oil encounter.

Given the foregoing, maybe it is not surprising that poetry as a genre and Niger Delta poetry in particular, has not registered as a relevant contribution to petro-literatures. Although there have been interesting studies of recent poetry writing both in the Delta and in Nigeria more broadly, it has never been considered in relation to the discourse of petrocultures *per se*;<sup>40</sup> my study seeks to address this lacuna. Could the oversight be because the representation of the oil encounter in the Niger Delta seems to be ideologically resistant to hegemonic power, and, in a sense, critical of the tenets of neoliberalism that make oil circulation possible? Or could it be because it reflects a temperament that is underwritten and hijacked by the twin agitations for environmental and social justice: an incongruity that oil exploration and its attendant politics create in the Delta? I would argue that poetry in the Delta has also captured the oil encounter, but not in the sense of Ghosh's formulation. I will show how the poetry collections require the reader to think about the project of representing the oil encounter in a different way. Throughout this study, I advance the notion that the figuration of the oil encounter in the Niger Delta cultural production does not, in any case, elicit grand narratives of epic quality that Ghosh calls for in literary objects that capture the oil encounter.

Reading the texts for this study, one seems to be continually reminded that literature (in this case, poetry) does not chase after reality by way of imitating the real. Analysis of the texts reveals that poetry, instead, negotiates understanding through the deployment of

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<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, Sule Egeya's "Eco-human Engagement in Recent Nigerian Poetry in English." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 49.1 (2012): 60-70; Ogaga Okuyade's "The Cumulative Neglect of Collective Responsibility Postcoloniality, Ecology, and the Niger Deltascape in the Poetry of Tanure Ojaide." *Matatu-Journal for African Culture and Society*, 39.1 (2011): 115-131; and Uzoechi Nwagbara's "Poetics of Resistance: Ecocritical Reading of Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs* and *Daydream of Ants & Other Poems*." *African Study Monographs*, 31.1 (April 2010): 17-30.

metaphors, signs and symbols to deepen metaphysical questions, not just about human existence but also about human relationships with nature, and with the Delta environment in particular. Analysis of the collections evinces how imaginative writing does not necessarily provide answers to societal problems. Instead, it pushes against the boundaries of social materiality by employing idioms and anecdotes in such a way as to broaden the moral imagination needed for addressing the issues that confront society, in particular the urgent need to reconsider the consequences of petro-modernity on the Niger Delta environment.

If poetry – otherwise considered pensive and withdrawn – is unable to project the wishes of the weak beyond the grim realities of the infinite present, beyond the drudgery of existing under precarious conditions; if literary creativity cannot overlook damning facts and figures of material reality to proffer palliative alternatives, where then might moral imagination and humanity's libertarian impulses for justice and freedom be articulated? How do we classify the kind of poetry emanating from the Niger Delta which captures the oil encounter? How does the oil encounter compel or prescribe the literary form that most creatively captures its experiences? The answers to these questions are part of the concerns of this study.

Claire Chambers in a reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Circle of Reason* (1986), corroborates Ghosh's uneasiness about the slipperiness, which interferes with attempts at capturing the oil encounter in the novel form. Chambers draws attention to Ghosh's experimentation with the picaresque to satirise what he imagines to be the inordinate and unwholesome presence of foreignness in a fictitious oil-bearing country, Al-Ghazira. Chambers critiques Ghosh's handling of generic form as "evidently flawed and failing to hang together as a whole [noting that *Circle of Reason* is] structured into three sections, each of which has a different setting, characters and concerns, [all of which] lack cohesion [as a result] of their having to deal with different concerns" (Chambers 34). If Ghosh too is unable to "capture the slippery world of



oil” (Ghosh) and effectively articulate the way in which its experience is amenable to incoherence when captured through a form of realist fiction—as he painfully acquiesces—how, then, might the representational correlation between literary form and the oil encounter be measured?

In the chapters that follow, I suggest that the examined texts, while mostly exploring local concerns about the ways that the global circulation of oil affects their *marginal* existence, also give radical insights on, and make important contribution to, what the ontology of this global commodity, oil, might mean when measured against the social and environmental repercussions it leaves at the sites of its extraction. Part of the work of this study then involves investigating and unveiling the contexts and conditions that give traction to the manner in which the oil encounter is imagined and represented in the cultural forms that capture it.

### **Petrocultures as critique of oil capitalism: signifying oil in cultural representation**

Since the publication of Ghosh’s 1992 essay, a number of writers, movie makers and scholars have taken up the question of the oil encounter and produced interesting works (films, documentaries, novels, poetries, etc.) invested in the portrayal of how oil has come to define our very being, not only in the preceding twentieth century, but even more so in the twenty-first. Petrocultures is a recent field of global studies which explores the representational and critical domain within which oil is framed and imagined in culture. The term is coined (or made popular) by a research collective based in the University of Alberta, Canada. Their website describes petrocultures as a research cluster that “supports, produces, and distributes research related to the socio-cultural aspects of oil and energy in Canada and in the world today”.<sup>41</sup> Petrocultures may be understood as a site of creative interventions and critical

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<sup>41</sup> <http://petrocultures.com> Imre Szeman and his colleague Sheena Wilson are the co-directors of Petrocultures Research Cluster at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. Together with other co-organisers, they convened the Petrocultures: Oil, Energy and Culture Conference where I presented a paper with the “The

conversations which engage with the political, social, cultural and environmental dimensions of the oil industrial complex on the planet.

The term oil capitalism may be credited to the Canadian cultural theorist Imre Szeman, whose body of critical work on petrocultures is perhaps the most substantial to the project of how oil has been imagined and creatively represented in cultural art forms.<sup>42</sup> In his essay, “System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster”, Szeman uses the term to discuss the importance of oil to contemporary global modernity: its economics, geopolitics, and socio-cultural modes of being. On the economic front, Szeman discusses the ways in which mainstream discourse of a possible end of oil is expressed, performed and realised at this present historical moment. Through what he calls: “strategic realism”, “techno-utopianism” and “apocalyptic environmentalism”, Szeman lays out three strands of narratives that focus on the “end of oil” and the possible (Leftist) alternatives to mitigate its effect in the immediate or long term. In his discussion of “strategic realism”, Szeman notes that this narrative of oil “derives from a strict realpolitik approach... [It is] a discourse that makes the nation-state the central actor in the drama of the looming disaster of oil, an actor that engages in often brutal geopolitical calculations in order to secure the stability of national economies and communities” (810).

Strategic realism articulates the importance of oil to nation-states’ economies and their national securities in a manner that disavows any dissenting voice to its master narrative. This makes campaigns against forms of “ecological devastation wrought by oil economies” (Szeman, “Non Public Spaces” 15) messy to articulate without incurring the wrath of powerful nation-states and governmental authorities whose unsustainable lifestyle, state

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Currency of Resistance: Violence as Rebellion and Commodity in *The Liquid Black Gold*.” The conference which held at the Campus Saint-Jean, University of Alberta, Canada, September 6-9, 2012, was the first global research collective to focus on the cultural and social impact of oil and energy on the planet.

<sup>42</sup> Aside the four essays discussed in this section, other works on petrocultures by Szeman include: “The Cultural Politics of Oil: On *Lesson of Darkness* and *Black Sea Files*.” *Polygraph*, 22 (2010): 3-15; “Literature and Energy Futures.” *PMLA*, 126.2 (March 2011): 323-25.

legitimacy and national economy are woven around inordinate dependence on oil. Petro-modern lifestyles and economic imperatives have driven oil exploration to the exclusion of human and environmental concerns at the sites of oil production. And this has exacerbated violent conflicts in parts of Africa among oil-bearing communities, nation-states and multinational corporations. It has even resulted in destabilising national sovereignty in some regions. According to Szeman, strategic realism equates hyper-dependence on oil by nation-states to national sovereignty and homeland security. In chapter four of this thesis, I will show how this point might enable us to make sense of the way in which the text, *The Liquid Black Gold*, appears to imagine the (Nigerian) state as brutal in its resolve to crush any dissenting voices raised, through activism or sabotage, against its continued control of the oil resource.

In his essay, “Crude Aesthetics: The Politics of Oil Documentaries”, Szeman turns to documentaries to examine the extent to which the films capture, frame and articulate “the problem of oil” within the broader categories of the end of oil narratives. Exploring some recent documentaries of oil, *A Crude Awakening: The Oil Crash* (dir. Gelpke and McCormack, 2006); *Crude: The Real Price of Oil* (dir. Joe Berlinger, 2009); and *H2Oil* (dir. Shannon Walsh, 2009), Szeman argues that the documentaries project the oil narrative as both reflecting and forming the source of the social narratives through which we describe oil to ourselves (424). He seems to suggest here that the narratives of oil are woven out of public conceptions and perspectives, which would include the socio-cultural misgivings and ideological apprehensions of the oil ontology, especially the way in which it operates to constitute social and ecological problem in the spaces of its extraction. Szeman examines the narrative and aesthetic choices employed by the film creators as the vehicle through which the “documentaries tell us about the social life of oil today” (424), both within the film and the social contexts that generate their narratives. It is important to note some core

characteristics of the documentary subgenre. The documentary is a category of nonfiction motion pictures which strategically captures (documents) some moments or events of reality for the purpose of public enlightenment and historical record. Szeman notes that the documentaries examined in this case operate to elicit responses and stimulate understanding about oil as a way of enabling “important forms of political pedagogy that not only shape audience understanding of the issues in question, but also [...] generate political and ecological responses that otherwise would not occur” (424).

Szeman takes as a starting point Frederic Jameson’s notion of cultural texts as “symbolic acts” in which social incongruities find “formal resolutions in the aesthetic realm” (Szeman 425). Szeman discusses the documentaries “as aesthetic acts that, in their own specific manner, have the function of inventing imaginary or [proffering] formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions” (426). Most of the documentaries are preoccupied with the inner contradictions of our utter dependence on oil—the dependence of global civilisation on petro-modernity—as the bedrock upon which contemporary civilisation is built. By contradictions, Szeman refers to the dilemma in the form of inescapable problems and elusive possible solutions that the documentaries unveil; the way that the films engage with oil in a specific, tangible manner and draw attention to our actual existential dependence on oil energy for the sustenance of the kind of human civilisation we have today.

But by the same token, the documentaries seem to avoid discussing realisable alternatives to our continued dependence on oil energy. *A Crude Awakening*, for instance, lays open the reality, problems and future consequences of a civilisation based on oil consumption and the inevitability of our continued utter dependence on oil energy. Szeman identifies as weakness in *A Crude Awakening*, its deliberate attempt “to avoid directly linking the narrative of peak oil [which the documentary deals with] to the impact of petrochemicals on the environment” (428). Further, he contends that the film tends to focus on the

importance of oil “to current ways of living and being, and to preclude the environmental challenges” that oil development pose to its sites of exploration. It is in the other two documentary films, *Crude* and *H2Oil*, Szeman observes that we encounter the political and environmental problems which oil drilling exacerbates in communities that host its installations. Szeman appraises *Crude* as a narrative which captures the landmark case, a class action by Ecuador’s Cofan Community against Texaco (now owned by Chevron), for the environmental devastation to their community between 1964 and 1993. The documentary engages with the role of corporations in the narrative of oil by focussing on the way that activities of oil development pollute the environment and affect communities around the sites of exploration. Szeman identifies the forms of legal and political machinations at play in efforts at seeking justice—environmentally, politically and socially from these corporate entities. In *H2Oil*, Szeman notes that the film highlights the close connections between the oil industry and government in Alberta – the particular location and context in which the documentary is set (431). It is important to add that the oil industry in Canada, precisely in the Alberta region is like the nirvana of oil development on the planet. I should say that it remains one of the few crisis-free oil locations in the world. This is because Canada, a first world country, has created a well-defined system of petroleum governance, which involves clear benefits to host communities, the state and the corporations. In concluding the essay, Szeman asserts that the documentaries are cautious in mobilising critical discourses of oil from their individual perspectives. Noting that they are neither dogmatic nor simplistic, he argues that they provide insights into how the problem of oil is framed and negotiated, both within the documentary subgenre and also beyond in the concrete of realpolitik. Szeman comes to the conclusion that all three documentaries refrain from proffering solutions explicitly, thereby suspending conclusions as a way of encouraging further conversations “in order to better map the nervous system of oil capitalism” (432).

The same line of argument about oil's ubiquity and its elusiveness in yielding itself to attempts at mitigating its unwholesome effect on present global modernity, either in relation to the reduction of greenhouse gas emission or the restoration of crude oil-induced polluted environments is uncovered in "Introduction to Focus: Petrofictions". In this introductory essay, Szeman intimates that "Oil is a substance whose impact has left its traces everywhere. [It] seems to have become a conscious part of our social imaginaries. [...] writers, artists and filmmakers have taken up the challenge of producing the petrofiction we need to fully make sense of oil societies" (3). Szeman's essay discusses reviews of contemporary works – including that of the Nigerian-born Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) – which capture the oil encounter, especially the manner in which oil's centrality to global modernity is highlighted in fiction.

Referring to reviews of recently published works, Szeman notes that Ghosh's unease about the absence of a truly great (epic) work of fiction appears to be unmistakably confirmed. He does, however, draw attention to the nuanced ways in which the books reviewed "move afoot to puzzle out the implications of our dependency [metaphysically and materially] on a slippery substance that connects technological future with prehistorical pasts in ways that cannot but be difficult to conceptualise" (3). This is where Szeman's point has particular relevance to my inquiry in this thesis. He comes to the conclusion that crude oil has an overwhelming presence and influence on contemporary life and yet proves artistically difficult in its mediation in the works that attempt to capture its (oil's) ontology. This, in a sense, suggests that the complexity (or I should say 'the problematic') of oil's presence and its association with all that define our being in twenty-first century modernity, compel creative practitioners in the sphere of cultural production around this substance "to avoid framing oil in the blunt language of solutions and problems" (Szeman 3). This development, necessitated by the urgency of the times, becomes a critical departure from what Ghosh had

earlier noted about oil in creative imagination. Ghosh has noted that, oil, because of its geopolitical (Arab) and moral burden of environmental pollution to its (foreign) sites of exploration, features as “a Problem that can be written about only in the language of Solutions” (76).

Similarly, Peter Hitchcock makes a persuasive argument when he writes that oil exists as a cultural logic that dares any writer to express its real, not as some character of passing reference, but as a very mode of referentiality, a texture in the way stories get told” (86). In the Niger Delta context and given the reality of neoliberal forces at play through the involvement of Big Oils<sup>43</sup> in this realpolitik that Szeman writes about, an attempt is made to wrest the contextual meaning of Szeman coinage, “oil capitalism”, and extend it to a similar term which I have adopted and deployed throughout this study: “Petro-imperialism”. This is precisely because oil capitalism takes a particular form in the Delta, one that evokes a political culture of imperialism as patrimony of the tenets of (neo) colonisation. In the texts discussed in this study, we encounter a literature that laments the region’s visibility to oil capitalism and state control on the one hand. But on the other hand, the literature seems to also project a people oriented ecological activism, while calling attention to forms of environmental pollution in the environment occasioned by oil exploration. I want to digress briefly to unpack this claim with a note on the Nigerian State, oil resource and the question of fiscal governance, before looking more directly at the literature.

In his keynote address entitled, “Nigeria’s Oil Sector and the Poor”, to a specially-convened think tank with the theme, “Nigeria: Drivers of Change Summit”, American

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<sup>43</sup> The term Big Oils is used to refer to the major oil conglomerates, namely Shell Petroleum Development Company (Anglo-Dutch), Exxon-Mobile (USA), Conoco-Philips (USA), Chevron-Texaco (USA), Total (France), and Agip (Italy). These oil conglomerates operate in partnership (known as joint venture) with the Nigerian state-owned company, Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). The NNPC is the state-owned corporation through which the Nigerian government monitors, regulates and controls the activities of the oil industry in Nigeria. The company also participates in the exploration, production, and distribution of petroleum resources in the industry. It issues licences to corporations (mostly multinationals) to operate in the oil fields in a joint venture arrangement, where it owns the majority share of 51% against the foreign partner’s 49%.

political scientist Michael L. Ross highlights a number of ways in which the oil resource undermines basic democratic values in Nigeria. He notes that there is an absence of policy stability which results in economic volatility, whereby government's policies ignore long term vision while chasing after the unstable income of the oil revenue. Ross measures poverty and the Nigerian oil sector against five indices: volatility, the stifling of other sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture, socioeconomic inequality, democracy, and ethnic violence. I shall not explore these in detail. But for the purpose of my enquiry I want to focus on just two points from Ross's presentation,<sup>44</sup> precisely because of their salience to the literary representations which capture the oil encounter in Nigeria. I will also discuss how these ideas have been taken up by other scholars in their study of petrocultures in Nigeria, both as part of the social texture of Nigerian life and within the literary texts that refract the material and political culture.

The first significant point I identify is what Ross names as the sole dependence on the oil revenue which makes the Nigerian government ignore other areas of revenue generation like taxation. Ross argues that when a government keeps taxes low, when there is little or no presence of strict tax regimes, such a government becomes morally unaccountable to the citizenry because it is able to elude scrutiny of its citizens, thereby abdicating the basic social contracts of rights and obligation between the governed and the government (Ross 6). Another point Ross raises is the manner in which oil production stifles industrialisation because of its enclave nature,<sup>45</sup> and the resultant effect of what has come to be called the

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<sup>44</sup> Since 2003 when he first presented the paper, Ross has developed his ideas into a book form with the title *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012. I have undertaken to engage with his conference presentation instead of the book, because his argument seems to be more concise and specific to the Nigerian contexts there. In chapter two of the book entitled "Troubles with Oil Revenues", especially pages 29-38 and 44-49, where he picks up on notions of the enclave nature of oil production and the Dutch Disease respectively, Ross expands his illustrations to include other (related) oil-bearing countries to substantiate his theoretical models.

<sup>45</sup> James Ferguson discusses this as "Governing Extraction" in the last chapter of his book, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.



Dutch Disease.<sup>46</sup> Considered in isolation, each of the above contexts seems immaterial to the subject under study. But when considered together against the background of Nigeria's socio-political trajectory of the oil encounter from where the literature draws its social vision, they give imaginative expression and moral legitimation to the insurrectionary temperament that undergirds Niger Delta writing. Thus my aim is to elaborate on these two categories by exploring their key dimensions, not only in the literatures that capture them, but also in the critical essays that discuss them.

Enclave refers to the protection of certain section of a national economy from the larger national contexts of socio-political instability or economic volatility. The oil industry is an example in Nigeria. James Ferguson, to whom I will presently turn, discusses this phenomenon in what he calls "Governing Extraction" to describe interesting ways in which the oil industry in Nigeria enjoys significant amount of political and economic insulation from the larger national strife.

The Dutch Disease on the other hand is a situation that occurs when the mineral sector, such as oil, causes inflation and increases the cost of manufacturing because of excess money in circulation. The sudden inflow of cash overwhelms the local industries as cheap foreign goods flood the domestic manufacturing economy. Nigeria has largely figured as a country infected with the Dutch disease. This, in part, stems from its inability to diversify its economy from oil. The continued inordinate dependence on oil wealth has stifled other sectors of the economy, which consist of the agricultural, manufacturing, and shipping industries. Official corruption in the form of misappropriation of the petrodollar has also been a major symptom of this disease. Sarah Lincoln picks up on this to discuss tropes of the phantasmagorical in Ben Okri's fiction—a metaphor that describes a culture of consumption in Nigeria that is

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<sup>46</sup> The Dutch Disease is a World Bank coinage, historically traceable to the devastating economic effect on the Dutch local manufacturing industry occasioned by the North Sea gas development and oil boom period. See also, note 6 in Sarah L. Lincoln's "'Petro-Magic Realism': Ben Okri's Inflationary Modernism." *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (2012): 249-266.

based not in the real world of abundance but in the fantasy of it. Lincoln unveils Okri's fiction as allegorising the way in which a sudden inflow of cash into the Nigerian economy in the oil boom decades of the 1970s and 80s led to hyper-inflation, which resulted in deluding the citizenry into living in a dreamlike world of abundance, one that is divorced from a reality of lack and abject poverty at the site of oil production, the Niger Delta.

The points I have discussed in Ross's paper find important traction in some creative works of fiction that capture the oil economy and political culture, especially the decades of Nigeria's oil boom-bust, which culminated in an economic hyper-inflation in the mid-1980s. The trajectory of the oil encounter can be traced back to the production of palm oil and other palm produce in the colonial era. Novels and short stories such as Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), Ben Okri's "What the Tapster Saw" in *Stars of the New Curfew* (1988), and Karen King-Aribisala's "Tale of the Palm-Wine Tapster" in *Kicking Tongues* (1998) capture this early connection.

American postcolonial scholar Jenifer Wenzel suggests that magic realism is a useful way of approaching these three texts in her essay, "Petro-Magic-Realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature". Wenzel discusses an interesting relationship among palm oil, petroleum and literary production in Nigeria (450), within the contexts of the Nigerian oil-boom-bust years. She identifies the three aforementioned texts for explication of what she notes to be an eloquent account of Nigeria's boom-bust years of oil capitalism, suggesting that palm oil can be read as the progenitor of crude oil. Wenzel reads into these texts an embedded form of narrative which suggests that oil is an object of hyper dependence, a rallying commodity that is central to a nexus of economic dependence, resource extraction and consumption without corresponding efforts of labour (499-52). She argues that these texts refract not just the oil phenomenon but also the ways that the Nigerian society—in the

late 1970s up to the mid-1980s—constituted itself and imagined its subjectivity around the oil resource, both materially and fictively.

What I find fascinating in Wenzel's reading of Amos Tutuola's *Palmwine Drinkard* (1952), is her drawing of a linkage between the egg—a gift given to the palm-wine addict by his tapster friend—and the oil resource as a signifier of a “material-plenty-amidst-scarcity” which the quotidian reality of the oil encounter seems to underwrite in Nigeria (451). In Tutuola's narrative, we encounter the main character, the “drinkard” (the palm-wine drunkard) return from his expedition to the land of the dead in search of his tapster friend. Since the friend (the tapster) will not return with him (the drinkard) to continue tapping wine in servitude to him and his merrymaking friends, he offers the drinkard a magical egg that would furnish him with all that he wanted. The egg turns out to be the life-saver as the drinkard returns home to find his village ravaged by famine: “Now as there was great famine before (sic) I arrived in my town, so I went to my room and put water into a bowl and put the egg in it, then I commanded the egg to produce food and drinks which my wife and my parents and myself would eat...” (Tutuola 120); and in a short while the entire village assemble at his home to be fed by this magical egg. “...but when these people ate the food and drank to their satisfaction, they began to play [...] until the egg was mistakenly smashed” (ibid. 122). The smashed egg—which was later unsuccessfully reassembled—soon begins to produce whips which destroy those who solely rely on it for their survival. Wenzel claims that it is possible to read the novel retrospectively from the final decade of the colonial era when the novel was published, to argue that:

[W]hat Tutuola's tapster sees [...] is the Nigerian neo-colonial petro-future—the moment of ‘spectacular and insatiable’ consumption that Achebe marked a quarter-century later—particularly if we read the egg's linkage of material-plenty-amidst-scarcity with the consequent violence of the whips as a prescient figure of the magic associated with the political ecology of oil. (451)

I would add that Wenzel's reading here suggests and points to a paradoxical quality in the oil's weft of Nigerian statehood in the egg's symbolic prognostication of oil's omnipotence in Nigerian national life. This trope becomes a foreboding of crude oil which was soon to be discovered in Nigeria at the time Tutuola was writing in 1952 (crude oil was commercialised in 1958).

Similarly, in her reading of Nigeria's oil boom-bust decade in Ben Okri's *Stars of the New Curfew*, Sarah Lincoln builds on Wenzel's idea of petro-magic realism to describe how the sudden inflow of cash from the oil boom decade led to hyper-inflation in the Nigerian economy, while also creating an illusion of wealth which verges on the magical in the psyche of the Nigerian populace. Lincoln pushes this notion of Petro-magic realism to discuss tropes of the phantasmagorical in Okri's fiction. She suggests that Okri deploys a dreamlike state of being to mediate "the economic and political realm in oil-boom Nigeria, the way in which petro-magic" instantiates a Baudrillardian concept of simulacrum logic of a superficial relationship among an appearance of oil wealth, the spectacle of power the wealth guarantees, and a reality of abject poverty among the citizenry (258).

Drawing on a reading of Fernando Coronil's *The Magical State* (1997), a study of Venezuela's oil economy, politics and culture, Lincoln claims that petro-magic denotes an irrational ultra-dependence on oil by nation-states such as Nigeria and Venezuela, as the basis upon which hegemonic legitimacy and political sovereignty are derived and performed. Hence "the states turn to modes of interpellation-by spectacle but also the investment of every aspect of life in such context with an unreal quality" (251). Lincoln argues that Okri's magical realist vision is a creative attempt to bear witness not only to the "oil economy's radical disruption of the bond holding signifier to the signified, representation to reality", but also to give expression to the simulacral logic of paradoxes of poverty and wealth, and the spectacle of power that the oil wealth brings to bear on Nigerian social sphere (250).

Wenzel and Lincoln are instructive in exploring the imaginative “vision of the oil economy’s petro-magical effect” on the social, economic and political sphere of Nigerian life. My study, while building on their foundational principles articulated here, examines the oil encounter and the manifestations of its social and environmental reality in the very site of oil exploration: the Niger Delta. I am interested in how we might make sense of a post-Saro-Wiwa literary and filmic imagination, one that captures the oil encounter in its socio-political disjuncture and environmental imperative. Wenzel and Lincoln’s views offer useful insight for my reading which seeks to understand the recurring tropes of inconsistencies, paradoxes, and mystifying narratives that the oil encounter inspires in the writers’ imagination.

However, what bothers me in the Tutuola, Okri and King-Aribisala’s texts and is echoed in Wenzel and Lincoln’s reading is that the petro-magic seems to conjure up a certain thesis of hopelessness for any form of dependence on the oil resource. This, in a sense, discourages any claim or attempt to lay claim to the wealth derived from oil by the local population at the sites of its extraction. To my mind, Wenzel and Lincoln’s reading seems to avow a contestable notion that the people’s dream and praxis of a better life, which access to the oil’s revenue might ensure, is a misplaced wishful thinking. Their readings seem to suggest that in the Delta, any hope for development, any potential reprieve from a quotidian existence of life’s drudgery in an environmentally devastated region will continue to be more intangible than concrete. And this seems to corroborate the notion that the oil is insulated from the reality of Nigerian national life. It stands to reason, then, that the oil economy, even while imposed as a ‘foreign’ commodity on a local agrarian economy where it disrupts all that is autochthonous and dismantles every semblance of sociocultural cohesion in native landscapes, will continue to be divorced and protected from local influence or any semblance of indigenous entitlement to the oil proceeds. And this substantiates my earlier claim that the form of oil capitalism that is encountered in the Delta is one of petro-imperialism.

Because of the seemingly excessive wealth oil generates, people around its extractive sites who do not benefit directly from this resource, usually feel short-changed by their government. This makes them resort to protests and armed struggles. Conflicts are even more likely when oil extraction has a direct negative impact on the social and environmental wellbeing of the local people around the oil site (Ross 7). Such infringement leads to clamours for justice, which when not appropriately addressed exacerbate disaffection among the people which then leads to violent confrontations with the State.

In his book, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*, American Anthropologist James Ferguson takes up the notion of oil's enclave nature to discuss the ways that politics of neoliberalism and economic exigencies of mineral extraction converge to insulate and occlude oil's political economy from the national economy and socio-political ecology of its local hosting sites. In what he calls "Extractive Neoliberalism", Ferguson argues that because of the peculiar nature of oil development—its exploration, production and distribution (circulation)—it is insulated from local crisis, internal politics and more importantly, from the local economy where it is produced. And this makes it an enclave commodity (195). Comparing the Zambian Copper Mining industry to that of oil in Angola and Nigeria, Ferguson names the one "socially thick" and the other "socially thin" (197-98). The reason, according to him, is that the presence of the copper mining industry in Zambia at independence was "thoroughly bound up with national-level social and political needs" (197). Ferguson notes that the industry had over the years assembled an array of highly skilled, unionised, and politically-vibrant local work force that wielded national influence which had political and social ramifications (199).

Discussing the extractive industry of oil in Angola and Nigeria, Ferguson observes that there is an increasing disconnection of the mineral extractive industry from national-level social, [environmental] and political entanglement, facilitated by new forms of spatial

flexibility made possible by neoliberal conventions of deregulated market and free movement of capital across “broken borders” (205). He argues that there is a significant degree of insulation of the oil from the wider society and its myriad of social, environmental and political upheavals. This insularity has constituted itself as a form of enclave around the oil industry. According to Ferguson, there are at least two types of enclave in the oil industry. The one by the fact of geological provenance, provided by way of the off-shore location of oil production as in the case of Angola. The only connection of this type of enclave is the mere fact of its installation in the territorial waters of the host nation and the close relationship between the industry and the government in power. The other which has most of its installations on-shore in inhabited environment, Ferguson describes as involving “the spatial enclaving of production sites with the use of foreign crews of skilled workers and private security forces” (203). This latter is identifiable as a political and strategic necessity of petro-imperialism that must protect foreign investment, and safeguard the essentially global commodity of oil from local interference. Ferguson identifies this type of oil enclave as a throwback to colonial-era extraction and indirect governance, where “private companies with their own private armies (from King Leopold’s Congo to the British South Africa Company) pioneered methods for securing economic extraction in the absence of modern state institutions” (207). He comes to the conclusion that this absence of State regulations has enabled “flexible and opportunistic forms of deregulated enterprises to flourish in Africa” (210).

I should add that this is particularly so in Nigeria’s Niger Delta. In chapter four where I discuss forms of oil-induced violence in the Niger Delta and how the oil corporations in the region seem to stoke or act with amoral insouciance to the civil strife, Ferguson’s point provides useful insights. In the film, *The Liquid Black Gold*, we encounter one of the expatriate characters, Mr Aswani, as embodying this opportunistic trait. He is seen to easily

transform from a legitimate oil executive to indulging in illegal oil smuggling (otherwise known as oil-bunkering in Nigerian parlance). When he is approached by one of the fighting youth faction to provide them with ammunition, he is only interested if there would be financial gains to be made. He (Aswani) declares: "I'm here in the interest of my company. I'm neither for your community nor for your country. I'm just a foreigner doing my own business to make my money." The oil companies seem to intervene only when their businesses and personal safety are brought under threat by the region's insurgency. Their interventions are usually both a business strategy and a gesture of self-preservation.

Although not examined in this study, there are some recent Nigerian novels which have captured the oil encounter in their own unique ways. Kaine Agary's novel, *Yellow-Yellow* (2006), articulates a narrative of an oil-induced exploitation in a fictive community through a metaphoric trope of rape. Agary pushes this metaphor of rape to its very taut boundaries by suggesting, it seems to me, that the oil encounter inscribes upon the Niger Delta two incongruous forms of rape: that of the land by way of oil pollution, and sexual exploitation of women in local sites of oil production in a manner too complex for explication here. The novelist discusses these two themes in a manner that each becomes epiphenomenal of the other.

Also Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) takes up the subject of militancy and kidnapping as a quintessential site around which the oil encounter might be understood. Again the question of (oil) resource control is privileged in this novel, but the interesting point from where the author discusses it is that it is the hostages taken that become the currency with which the oil wealth is accessed by the militants. The vexed question of authorship is brought to bear on this novel as a greenhorn journalist, Rufus, is charged with investigating and writing the story of the kidnapped wife of an oil company expatriate official. He finds himself entangled in the conflict. Rufus is compelled to experience and



witness first-hand, what it means, how it feels, to exist in the oil's scrublands of the Niger Delta, so as to be able to tell their story. Habila assumes a journalistic point-of-view to project a semblance of objectivity, but in doing so, he also sets out to authenticate that which is already known through the experience of participatory involvement. Hence, he places emphasis on experience and participation as the measure of and condition for negotiating meaning, one that can be realised only through witnessing and the immersing of oneself in the quotidian space of the Delta (see for instance, Zaq's account to Rufus his protégée on pg. 5). Habila seems to implore the reader to enter into this troubled space and experience it through an imaginative reliving of the Niger Delta existence.

As stated earlier in the introduction, my focus in this study is on how the oil encounter is imagined in the very different medium of poetry and film. I would argue that what these texts bring to the conversation about petrocultures is the performance of a cultural economy that is particular to the Niger Delta, one that seems to exist outside the logic of the global conception of the oil encounter. The texts also, in a sense, go against the grain of the literary 'canon' within petrocultures. That is, they engage with the oil encounter not as a grand phenomenon of epic quality which, for Ghosh, is mostly associated with the novel and set in an essentially globalised space, but as an intensely intimate situation that is entangled with their everyday experience of living in the oil extraction sites. Of the various texts studied in this thesis, I will show how the creative agency by means of which the texture of oil is surfaced operates in a unique way to illuminate our understanding of the oil encounter in the Niger Delta.

Each of the texts seems to project the significations of the oil encounter in certain ways that complicate meaning with incoherence, contradictions, unreliable witnessing, conjectural positions and fragmented narratives. These become the recurring tropes which serve as connecting kernels throughout the readings. I am going to begin this investigation by tracing

a shift that occurs between poets of an earlier generation (what I call a pre-oil exploration Niger Delta) and poets of the present that capture the social reality of the oil encounter. I suggest that this shift is one that can be traced along temporalities of the Delta at the moment of oil production, and the manifest violence of environmental pollution it leaves on the landscape and in the consciousness of the human subject in the milieu of oil production.

## Chapter Two: The Niger Delta, Temporality, and a Literature of Environmental Justice

*Poetry and visuals lend their voice to civil protests and other forms of civil disobedience which are launched to sensitise and elicit international sympathy and support for the demand for a clean and healthy environment for the citizens of the Niger Delta.*<sup>47</sup>

### Introduction

The Niger Delta is essentially a terrain of mangroves and swamps with networks of estuaries, labyrinthine creeks and tributaries that crisscross the wetlands which make up the Niger Delta. The Delta environment has always been a landscape that nourishes the creative vision of writers from the region. While this place-based vision may not be peculiar to the Delta alone, the landscape invokes in the writers a particular aesthetic that verges on existential yearnings engendered by what is figured to be, in earlier writing, a hostile geography. The landscape in all its luxuriance, beneficence, and magisterial force give colour to the poets' aesthetic choices. Writers such as John Pepper Clark and Gabriel Okara from the pioneering generation of Nigerian writing found inspiration from the Niger Delta region: they deployed images that were fashioned out of a material reality of the Delta environment. They conceived the environment as something beyond human control, something mystical with a superior force and agency in relation to which the human subject is constructed and whose existence is determined according to nature's beneficence or maleficence. I shall return to this point shortly in the discussion of the writings of Clark and Okara in order to think about the way a particular cultural knowledge of nature may have been produced (un)consciously in their imaginings. I will consider how this particular way of conceptualising nature translates into an enabling as well as undermining way of thinking about the Niger Delta in the present encounter with petro-modernity.

In the previous chapter I proposed an alternative interpretation of the particular mode of environmentalism that emanates from Niger Delta writing. I suggested that the form of

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<sup>47</sup> Basil S. Nnamdi, Obari Gomba & Frank Ugiomoh. "Environmental Challenges and Eco-Aesthetics in Nigeria's Niger Delta." *Third Text*, 27.1 (2013): 65-75.

eco-poetics that is articulated gives expression to environmental concerns which are marked off by an oily topos in the Delta. I maintained that in projecting an artistic vision that is sensitive to environmental and sociocultural questions, the writings that we encounter from this region also make critical commentary on the ontology of oil. Furthermore, I proposed that the writings seem to suggest that the Niger Delta provides the spatial and material template for envisioning the oil encounter and staging a critique of the essentially globalised space that is the site of oil production. I argued that the texts articulate a place-based, place-specific form of Petroculture. They emphasise the fact that the oil encounter in the Delta is not the official encounter at the point of extraction but rather the unofficial encounter with the side-effects of extraction. That is, it is not about oil companies and those who work for them but about a very different kind of oil encounter at the sites of spills and flares, the presence of pipelines and signboards and how all of these intrude on and interrupt notions of freedom and justice for human life and the environment. I concluded that the dual cultural spheres in which literary creativity operates in the Delta, that is the straddling of environmental consciousness and petro-imaginings, makes the art form necessarily a literature of petro-environmentalism. By petro-environmentalism I mean that the literature adumbrates a form of socioenvironmental justice for the landscape and human population at the sites of oil production.

In this chapter, I want to proceed in unpacking some of these assumptions by proposing that two ineluctable phenomena of geography and history (both as forms of knowledge and dimensions of lived-experience of the Delta) are galvanised in the creative oeuvre of the Niger Delta to project this petro-environmentalism. By geography is meant the physical landscape of the Delta, a site that stimulates creative imaginings as well as creates human subjects in relation to the environment. If as Sunny Awhefeada argues that “There is no discourse woven around the postcolonial that would negate the imperative of history” (172),

then by history in this chapter, I mean the temporal context of the Delta as an oil-bearing site which has produced the national wealth for the Nigerian state since 1958. Both categories conspire to produce a zeitgeist which mobilises a discourse of eco/environmental justice in the face of petro-imperialism. To these two categories I would add a third: environmental justice advocacy, which emerges as a response to the preceding two.

Using Ebi Yeibo's *A Song for Tomorrow and Other Poems* (2007) and Nnimmo Bassey's *We thought it was Oil but it was Blood* (2002) as main texts to unpack these conjectures, this chapter tracks what can be described as a transition from Niger Delta literature to a literature of environmental justice. The first, which I shall take up for discussion in the preliminary note, deals with experiences of living in a riverine area of agrarian and fishing subsistence. The other, while also discussing the same riverine themes, primarily takes up issues of environmental pollution and social injustice occasioned by the incursion of industrial-modernity into this space in the form of petroleum development. The dominant issues raised in the poetic texts can be negotiated around three broad treatments: the geographical landscape of the Delta, temporal context of oil exploration, and environmental justice advocacy.

The texts reflect on the disconnection between communal, collective, public, and private cultural spheres that exist in the Delta, as a result of its encounter with petro-imperialism. The chapter considers the kinds of aesthetics that emerge in the poetry collections as a response to the consequences of the oil encounter in the Delta. Thus the chapter begins the discussion by placing the selected texts against a backdrop of the locale which stimulates the writers' creativity as they draw their images from the site of their habitation. In the exploration of these geographical situatedness and a consciousness of time, the poets seem to implore the reader to return to what Nixon has termed the "temporalities of place" (18). Nixon notes that "Place is a temporal attainment that must be constantly

renegotiated in the face of changes that arrive from without and within, some benign, others potentially ruinous” (18). The temporality of the Delta as a place is negotiated in the context of the oil encounter and explored in the literature that refracts those socio-political and environmental upheavals that the current historical conjunctures of the oil encounter produces.

In an attempt to frame a discursive trajectory along the geographical and historical lines of the Niger Delta, two important premises animate my concerns in this chapter. The first premise is that environmental inflection in much of African literature and criticism leans on the idea that nature, and therefore, the environment does not exist for its own sake that the figurations of the environment in literature are aesthetically committed to utilitarian purposes,<sup>48</sup> and that nature, environment and culture are mutually coextensive and inclusive. If these assumptions have traction in the Niger Delta context, it seems to me, then, that even in the pre-oil exploration Niger Delta there exists an intricate existential bond between the human subject and the environment. Drawing on the writings of earlier (pioneer) poets to substantiate this claim, this is the impression one gets. Their creative preoccupation was with the existential and metaphysical issues that emerged from the precariousness of human existence in relation to the superior force of nature. Nature and environment are framed as embodying a special regime of power. These poets considered living in the Niger Delta as a form of drudgery, and conceived of the environment as a hostile terrain. By this I mean that their writings about human-nature relationship, while not particularly about the environment or nature but about the human condition, produced ideas about nature that inspired incoherent and conflicting hermeneutics. In their writings we encounter the human subject almost

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<sup>48</sup> I discussed this extensively in the preceding chapter. But see also, Graham Huggan’s “‘Greening’ Postcolonialism: Ecocritical Perspectives.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50.3 (2004): 701-33. In a critique on the productive convergence of postcolonial criticism and ecologically inflected criticism, Huggan highlights some productively useful lessons: one being that a critique of capitalist ideologies of ‘development’ which derives from certain utilitarian impulses of humanity’s conception of nature is aesthetically rooted in culture (719).

stripped of agency as humanity is brought under the vagaries of nature's providence and potential destructiveness.

The character of nature and the Delta environment are at once paradoxical and contradictory in the writers' imagination of the Niger Delta. This may be considered as a marker of the precarious existence of the human subject in this landscape, and can be productively read against a redemptive logic of petro-modernity's incursion into this Delta. I suggest that it is an incursion which was meant to recalibrate the human-nature dynamic. The literary corpus is therefore marked by a contradictory poetic reaction that is at best paradoxical, leading in two different directions.<sup>49</sup> The literature we encounter seems to stimulate narratives that result in what Mathias Nilges and Emilio Sauri have called "productive contradictions" (1). The one celebrates nature's abundance and lays claim to its alluvial wealth. The other laments the fast-fading landscape of the Niger Delta and calls for social protest and defiance against forms of ecological pollution and environmental devastation that oil extraction creates.

It seems that it is from the template of the former, a certain affective performance of Niger Deltanness in which the Delta is framed as a useable object solely for human need and betterment, that John Ejobowah writes when he summarises the social and environmental crises in the Niger Delta as "conflict arising from the federal government's control of oil resources and the distribution of their revenue among the constituent states of the federation, and oil communities' ownership claims to the resources" (quoted in Okuyade, "Rage, Anger and Indictment" 73). But Nnimmo Bassey takes a different position, in favour of the environment, of nature, when he makes a clarion call: "Arise people, Arise/ let's unite/ with our fists/ *let's bandage the earth/ because/ the oil only flows/ when the earth bleeds*" (*We*

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<sup>49</sup> Grateful regard is proffered here to Harry Garuba for sharing with me his unpublished conference paper, where his notion of dual visions of eschatological portrayal of the Niger Delta in Nigerian literature was quite instructive.

*Thought 17*; my italics). How has the literary corpus come to straddle these two unlikely spheres of poetic enquiry in the Delta? And how might we grapple with the contradictory epistemic vision in the present? Of interest is the lesson we can draw from reading the ‘pre-oil modernity’ poets of this region. Their figuration of the Delta landscape makes for a diachronic understanding of how the Delta’s geography continues to shape the creative imaginations of its writers. Coming to terms with the present is realisable, therefore, when put in historical perspective.

The second premise ensuing from the first is that the discovery of oil in commercial quantity in the Niger Delta was an opportunity to develop this region and help realise the useful potentials of the terrain that will mutually benefit both humanity and develop the environment. Capitalist modernity and its (bogus) promises of prosperity and development are implicated in this respect. Oil exploration with the big business it galvanises was meant to usher in a relief from the uncertain existence, where the human subjects would no longer depend on the natural environment, as it were, for their subsistence. Reading earlier writings one gets the impression that oil exploration at the time it began was a timely intervention because the relationship that existed between the human subject and the non-human, ‘natural’ world was no longer mutually beneficial; the relationship seemed hierarchical and humanity was figured to be at the lower end. It appeared that the thesis of humanity’s living in subsistent abundance from nature’s beneficence was increasingly becoming an unpredictable affair. It had seemed more and more apparent that this human-nature relationship needed reconfiguration, a rethinking in the face of changing realities. Little wonder, then, that oil exploration clothed in industrial modernity—and all its dubious promise of human and environmental development—came as a matter of utmost relief to contain nature’s unwholesome influence and recalibrate that uneven relationship for the benefit and in the name of progress.



How then did this arrangement become counterproductive and result in stimulating a literature that mobilises a discourse of environmental justice? Ebi Yeibo's aesthetic choices offer a creative insight into how time might be implicated in this incongruity. Beginning with the title of his collection, *A Song for Tomorrow*, Yeibo invests time with agency, a hopeful quality that hints at certain redemptive potential of temporality. For instance with a timed phrase of "since then" (18), the poet implicates time as the agency with which petro-imperialism has brought about change, a dystopian reality of human suffering that attends the consequences of oil exploration in the Delta. I hope to give some grounds for these assumptions. But my main purpose here will be to present a prelude to the concerns that animate my interests in this chapter.

Time is an apt metaphor with which to begin the discussion in the chapter. It offers useful insight into the works of the pioneer writers of what I describe here as the pre-oil modernity era of writing in the Niger Delta. I draw on their works to illuminate the main concerns that underwrite the chapter. On the trope of time in literature, the Ghanaian literary scholar and cultural theorist Ato Quayson writes that, "[time] is often a refraction of unfolding the relationships with others and with different moments of our own pasts [...] These crystallized moments of passage may fade away as quickly as they flash up to consciousness, or they may stay with us and become nodal points for fresh cognitions and perturbations" (125-126). In early Niger Delta writing, the metaphor of time features as nodal trope in the figurations of the relationship between the human subject and the natural world of the Delta.

By illustrating with the works of Okara and Clark, I do not pretend to say anything particularly new or original. These writers have enjoyed ample scholarly and quite exhaustive critical attention in their creative oeuvre, especially the way that they deploy local images to

engage with issues of human concerns in this cultural space.<sup>50</sup> Harriet Masembe's doctoral study examines Clark's dramaturgy and argues that while Clark borrows element of form from the Greco-European models (Aristotelian) in his plays, he also "reflect[s] an African religious concept of a universe [that is] governed by the gods and ancestral spirits, and in which man is an impotent creature in the face of a powerful force" (ii)—and I would add that this powerful force is often framed as nature's mystery which stupefies human comprehension. Masembe writes that in Clark's *The Raft*, "nature, character and the tragic theme are thus blended in one image [...] the fear of an imminent disaster that is foremost on the minds of the four men" (47). It is the fear of the unknown, of the danger inherent in the darkness around them that give expression to the wretchedness in which they exist in the riverine rural-scape.

A combination of twentieth century modernist spirit and the philosophy of existentialism inhabit the creative oeuvres of Gabriel Okara and JP Clark. Even the ways in which their works adumbrate the human condition in the face of nature's omnipotence have some "kind of melancholy poignancy" (Scruton 219). The poem "The Call of the River Nun", from Okara's *The Fisherman's Invocation* (1978), has time as the harbinger of change that the human life must undergo. It is on the imagery of time that the persona takes the reader to a cultural world of his childhood. He equates the watercourse of his childhood river to the life trajectory of the poet-persona:

I hear your call!  
I hear it far away;  
I hear it break the circle

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<sup>50</sup> Check further Emeka Okeke-Ezigbo's "J.M. Synge and Gabriel Okara: The Heideggerian Search for a Quintessential Language." *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 26, No.4 (1989): 324-340; Aderemi Bamikunle's "The Poet and His Art: The Evolution of JP Clark's Poetic Voice." *World Literature Today* Vol. 67, No. 2 (1993): 315-320; Dan Izevbaye's "J.P. Clark-Bekederemo and the Ijo Literary Tradition." *Research in African Literatures* Vol.25, Iss.1 (1994):1-22; and Dumbi Osani's "Time and Change in Okara's Poetry." *Uyo Journal of Humanities* Vol.11 (2006): 127-138; MJC Echeruo's "Gabriel Okara: A Poet and His Season." *World Literature Today* Vol.66, No.3 (1992): 454-456; Obi Maduako's "'Gabriel Okara' Poet of the Mystic Inside." *World Literature Today* Vol.61, No.1 (1987): 41-45, to mention but just these few.

of these crouching hills.

I want to view your face  
again and feel your cold  
embrace; or at your brim  
to set myself and  
inhale your breath; or  
like the trees, to watch  
my mirrored self unfold  
and span my days with  
song from the lips of dawn.

I hear your lapping call!  
I hear it coming through;  
invoking the ghost of a child  
listening, where river birds hail  
your silver-surfaced flow.

My river's calling too!  
Its ceaseless flow impels  
my found'ring canoe down  
its inevitable course.  
And each dying year  
brings near the sea-bird call,  
the final call that  
stills the crested waves  
and breaks in two the curtain  
of silence of my upturned canoe.

O incomprehensible God!  
Shall my pilot be  
my inborn stars to that  
final call to Thee  
O my river's complex course? (*Fisherman's Invocation* 16-17)

Although the poem appears to be a nostalgic evocation of his childhood relationship to a river in his homeland, the Nun River, as an embodiment of life's trajectory, the agency of time is not lost on the reader. It is through time past, the memory of a childhood long gone in the image of "invoking the ghost of a child" (16), that the poet persona transports his memory to this cultural landscape to reflect on the imminence of life's ending through death. Dumbi Osani writes that "[Okara] explores the reality of time as a historical process which is at once separate and synonymous with the changes both in the individual and in the events and developments that define and shape a society" (132). I want to add that this individual and

societal change through time in Okara's poem also reflects an unfolding history in the narrative: the history of nature and its relationship with the human. Both can be read as being exposed to the vagaries of time which becomes the material catalyst in the transitional process that attends nature and the human subject.

Clark equally invokes time's metaphor in the collection, *A Reed in the Tide* (1965), to reflect on certain philosophical ideas about human existence in general and the quotidian reality of living in the Niger Delta in particular. In the poem "Streamside Exchange", the poet dramatizes a conversation between a child and a weaverbird with nature as the register of the exchange. Through the synthesis of nature and culture in the images of "tide" and "market", the poem reflects on the transience of life and its subjection to the corrupting power of time:

Child: River bird, river bird  
Sitting all day long  
On the hook over grass  
River bird, river bird,  
Sing to me a song  
Of all that pass  
And say,  
Will mother come back today?

Bird: You cannot know  
And should not bother;  
Tide and market come and go  
And so shall your mother. (*A Reed in the Tide* 16)

Here the human subjects, child and mother, are stripped of agency and brought under the vagaries of nature's power and mystery, for the child "cannot know/ and should not bother" about the return of its mother; just as the mystery of time's movement and its influence on the human life, its mother's demise cannot be comprehended and should not be questioned. Even the knowledge of this life's mystery, that is, the truth of its drudgery, eludes the human child. Hence, the child is instructed on this knowledge by another one of nature's agent: the bird.

In the *Raft*, a play situated in one of the Delta creeks, four lumbermen, Ibobo, Olotu, Kengide, and Ogro, are set for their doom as they literally drift down a creek. While they are

unable to stir their log-bearing vessel to its destination, they are dramatized as ill-tempered and querulous among themselves as though they are incompatible and intolerant of each other:

IBOBO: I don't call that anything, Ogro simply croaks  
Croaks; that's all  
OLOTU: He can croak  
For all I care, and as for Kengide  
He just sits there like some foul-smelling  
He-goat at the fireside mauling away  
At the world between his teeth, while you Ibobo  
Babble about who's a canary and who's not.  
But in the meantime, what happens to the raft? Or  
Is it because none of you has a single log  
In it that your heart cuts very little? (100)  
OGRO: And we are water-logged here  
In Osikorobo—the confluence of all  
The creeks!  
OLOTU: The drain pit of all the earth,  
Or are you too caught by fear to say it?  
KENGIDE: With the swift ebb tide coming  
And some better lot, we ought to get out  
Before the sun goes down (*The Raft* 104)

The play is dystopian and an experimentation of a tragic reality that attends the ordinary human existence in the Delta environment, in which superstitious traditional beliefs of the four men, the swampy terrain of the waters upon which they drift, darkness, and their ill-tempered manners converge to destroy all four of them.

In the poem “Night Rain”, Clark captures the quotidian experience of living in the Delta in an ostensibly pre-oil modernity setting. Aderemi Bamikunle writes that Clark “recalls a typical stormy night of the riverine areas of Nigeria, bringing to mind the suffering, the poverty of the people and the terror of the storm” (316):

What time of night it is  
I do not know  
Except that like some fish  
Doped out of the deep  
I have bobbed up bellywise  
From stream of sleep  
And no cocks crow.

It is drumming hard here  
And I suppose everywhere  
Droning with insistent ardour upon  
Our roof thatch and shed  
And thro' sheaves slit open  
To lightning and rafters  
I cannot quite make out overhead  
Great water drops are dribbling  
Falling like orange or mango  
Fruits showered forth in the wind  
Or perhaps I should say so  
Much like beads I could in prayer tell  
Them on string as they break  
In wooden bowls and earthenware  
Mother is busy now deploying  
About our roomlet and floor.  
Although it is so dark  
I know her practiced step as  
She moves her bins, bags and vats  
Out of the run of water  
That like ants gain possession  
Of the floor. Do not tremble then  
But turn, brothers, turn upon your side  
Of the loosening mats  
To where others lie.  
We have drunk tonight of a spell  
Deeper than the owl's or bat's  
That wet of wings may not fly  
Bedraggled up on the iroko, they stand  
Emptied of hearts, and  
Therefore will not stir, no, not  
Even at dawn for then  
They must scurry in to hide.  
So let us roll over on our back  
And again roll to the beat  
Of drumming all over the land  
And under the soothing hand  
Joined to that of the sea  
We will settle to sleep of the innocent and free (*A Reed in the Tide* 25)

Through the childish eye of the poet persona the reader is confronted with what Louise Green has described as “the neglected and incomprehensible details of everyday life” (80). In the “The Aphorism and the Historical Image” Green explores how the German philosopher and writer Theodor Adorno deploys—through aphorism in *Minima Moralia*—“clichés, public

opinion [...] to produce nature as a complex concept, one which is at once universal and particular” (82). Investigating what she calls “natural installations” (81), Green uses Adorno’s aphoristic method to apprehend the modalities through which the transcendence of nature is given purchase and reified over the mundane of nature, where a metonymic instance of nature is mobilised, valorised and “produced as an affective marker, as a texture to supplement the concept of nature” (85). She argues that this reification in a sense privileges the discourse of environmental crisis, while it at the same time forecloses every other crisis that confronts humanity. Although Green’s interest in the question of form may not be exactly the same as the concerns here, her analysis of the ways in which knowledge about nature is produced—aesthetically, unconsciously, and for the purposes of commodification—is diagnostic and useful for my inquiry in this chapter.

Green’s interest in and analysis of, the way in which metonymic instances of nature are conjured up to produce ‘authentically’ natural installations in public spaces of our everyday life and experiences open up the possibility of exploring how Clark unconsciously produces some epistemic categories about nature. His narratives of ordinary provincial life produce folkloric archives about nature, as a mystifying force which dictates the fate of the human subject. These categories about nature, which are in a sense mystifying and mythological, are used to explain away some existential philosophies about life, its drudgery in a modern setting, longing for alleviation. The existential impulses of Clark’s work adumbrate certain unarticulated longings of humanity to reinvent its relationship with nature in the face of modernity’s imminent incursion into the Niger Delta. The poetry gives expression to history’s unfolding of the region’s encounter with oil exploration. Clark’s early writing laments with a most unintentional naiveté the precariousness of living off nature in the Niger Delta. Indeed, perhaps, this is why Bamikunle writes that “a note of pessimism is what pervades Clark’s *A Reed in the Tide*” (318), a collection that is most indebted to the

geography of the Delta. His poetry about everyday life in the creeks of the Delta produces ideas about nature that suggests a need for the reappraisal of humanity's relationship to nature.

In drawing on the works of these pioneer poets my intention has been to construct a brief literary history of the way in which the Delta, while offering a spatial context and cultural milieu to the writers' creative imagination, also gives expression to the material reality of a precariousness in which the human subject exists in a landscape considered to bear abundant wealth for the Nigerian state. I am interested in how we might use this preliminary note as entry-points to this cultural landscape—a landscape which seems to resonate with what David Goldberg has described as “the generalizability of precarity, the proliferation of the conditions of precarious possibility” (56). For it resists, it seems to me, any totalising interpretation of sociality between human subject and nature, and the consequent relationship with an incursive petro-modernity. It seems important, in concluding this section, to state that this tripartite relationship of nature-human-petro-modernity does not manifest in the creative oeuvres of Okara and Clark (a large part of their writing was done in the 1960s and 70s, when the extremely negative effects of oil extraction were not yet apparent). The tripartite relation I refer to here manifests through tropes of temporality in the poetry of younger, contemporary writers. The ‘contemporary’ poetry, as I will now discuss, might offer a more nuanced reading of this cultural environment, one with historical roots and global concerns situated in a context of the oil encounter.



### **Temporality and Ebi Yeibo's *A Song for Tomorrow & Other Poems***

Ebi Yeibo was born in the wetlands of the Niger Delta, and was educated at Abraka and Ibadan in Nigeria. He holds a Master of Arts degree in English and teaches at the Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State. With four poetry publications, *Maiden Lines* (1997), *A Song for Tomorrow* (2003), *The Forbidden Tongue* (2007) and *Shadows of the Setting Sun* (2012),<sup>51</sup> Yeibo has established himself as one of the most significant poets of the Niger Delta origin in third generation Nigerian writing. The second collection, which is the fulcrum of interest in this chapter, attests to this claim. It has won him major accolades in the form of poetry prizes by the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). Yeibo's poetry has relevance to my interest precisely because of its adumbration of history by means of the metaphoric of temporality. For the purpose of this discussion, I define temporality as a creative process of envisioning history in a linear continuum, one that has a clearly delineated or consciously imagined past, a concrete present and a prognostic future. This idea strikes me as particularly useful for understanding the manner in which Yeibo implicates history in grappling with the oil encounter in the Niger Delta.

Yeibo's creative vision in *A Song for Tomorrow* oscillates between aesthetic and philosophical registers of temporality. For him, temporality entails not only a recuperation of the past (an imaginary one as I will argue), but also an understanding of the incongruities of the present, so as to produce a future that is imbued with affirmative possibilities. The potential subject of time as the signifying kernel in this collection is announced in the title of the collection: *A Song for Tomorrow*. With such a caption, Yeibo appears to invest time with agency, one that galvanises a discourse of redemption, a hopeful quality that hints at the salvageable potentials of temporality. The collection is divided into four parts, namely "Night", "Song", "Undercurrents", and "Twilight". I want to isolate for discussion here two

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<sup>51</sup> Yeibo, Ebi. Correspondence by Email 28 October 2012.

sections out of this four-part collection: “Night” and “Twilight”. As their titles suggest, both deal with metaphoric of time, memory, and history. The poet uses these metaphors of counting time to reflect on existence in the Delta. In fact, he seems to suggest that life, hope, and human expectations are organised and negotiated around tropes of time in these two sections: ‘night’ and ‘twilight’. Thus time's metaphor can be accounted for in the manner they conjure up connotations of endings, retreats, and recollections – night is a time to retire from the day’s activity while twilight suggests sundown which heralds nightfall. Taken together, both parts can be read as the allegorising protocols of recuperating an imagined past, as a way of understanding the historical present, while prognosticating the possibilities for the future in the Niger Delta.

Yeibo’s poetic consciousness of time seems to indicate an aesthetic of moving forward and yet thinking backward, thereby causing a disruption in the representation of a problematic present. Through the techniques of mnemonics he places his disaffection on the material context of a lived past whose ghosts continue to manifest in the social realities of the present, while providing a template for projecting the future. Yeibo’s engagement with these categories of time seems to derive from a consciousness of history, even if imaginative. The history of the oil encounter in the cultural space of the Niger Delta stands central to the poetic vision of the poet in this collection. Ime Ikiddeh writes that:

In a general sense every writer and every artist is a historian of his time, the unconscious recorder of the events and the mood of his society...His view of the world however affected in the creative process represents at one level a confrontation with the reality of history, past or present. (quoted in Awhefeada 180)

In Yeibo’s creative attempt at confronting and recuperating the Delta’s history as a way of witnessing to the social realities that attend the oil encounter in the present, time is implicated. To him, time is history’s force and tale bearer of the oil encounter. Hence two out of the four sections in the collection deal with the poetics of time. The landscape of the Niger Delta is imagined to be trapped in a state of arrested development in its encounter with petro-

modernity and the misfortune it wrought on the environment and human life over time. Hence the poet seems to deploy what Quayson, in a different context, has termed “the Parables of Time” (125), as a way of grappling with this temporality. Quayson uses this phrase to discuss what he notes to be “two key dimensions of the representation of time in narrative”, both as a subjective experience “interpreted and felt by individuals” and as a “framework marked by [...] the cultural rituals of temporal imagining” (150). Thus Yeibo’s deployment of tropes of time in this collection is both personal and communal.

There is this aphorism among the Urhobo of the Niger Delta that goes something like this: “Memory is to the individual what history is to the people”. Let me hasten to point that this notion of an individual’s memory and its convergence with a people’s history is not peculiar to the Urhobo people alone. But it is useful to bear in mind when considering the role of the writer in the Delta: the writer as talebearer on behalf of his people. Perhaps this explains why Aderemi Raji-Oyelade notes elsewhere that “the writer is the bearer of both personal and collective histories of peoples and nations”.<sup>52</sup> Raji-Oyelade argues further that through literature the writer reinvents the past “in a fictional way that challenges the present state of things [...] and] queries the present in order to illuminate or envision the future.” This suggests that the writer is therefore concerned with articulating both individual memory and collective past. The writer is able to apply his individual memory to interrogate a collective past, in order to negotiate the present, so as to produce horizons of possibilities for the future. Richard Terdiman also picks up on the idea of memory’s process of historiography, where he submits that “[m]emory is the modality of our relation to the past” (7). In his compelling book, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*, Terdiman discusses how the past persists into the present, and asserts that memory is central to the artist’s representation of

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<sup>52</sup> Raji-Oyelade, Aderemi. “The Roles of Literature in National Development.” National Conference on Language, Literature, and National Development: Adekunle Ajasin University, Nigeria. February 10, 2010. Lecture.

[cultural] history. He argues that memory also constitutes a source of cultural and representational disquiet, an uneasiness with the way in which “the past endures, with how it continues to occupy and preoccupy [...] memory’s practice of [re]constructing] the present” (vii). I want to suggest that memory and history converge to underscore a metaphor of time in *Song for Tomorrow*. In Yeibo’s estimation time is the vehicle through which his creative memory and the imaginative history of the Niger Delta and its people might be brought into productive conversation in a cultural representation of the oil encounter.

In discussing the metaphor of time in this collection, I want to draw on Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope which provides a useful way of reading Yeibo’s engagement with tropes of the past, the present and the future in the Niger Delta. Bakhtin’s discussion of space and time in the work of the German writer and philosopher Goethe is diagnostic and germane to my interests in this study. Crucially and for the purpose of my reading, I invoke Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope here to describe the way time and space are aesthetically captured by language in a creative work of art. Bakhtin’s interpretation of time in Goethe’s work illuminates how Yeibo’s deployment of the metaphoric of time can be read as an engagement with history’s past, present, and future. For instance, in his reading of the ways in which Goethe connects the past with the present, Bakhtin writes that we have an “essential and living vestige of the past in the present [which has] essential connection [and] influence on [the present]. Goethe wanted to see necessary connections between this past and the living present, to understand the necessary place of this past in the unbroken line of historical development...” (*Speech Genre* 32-33).

Further, Bakhtin argues that for Goethe, “The creative [reinvention of the] past must be revealed as necessary and productive under conditions of a given locality, as a creative humanization of this locality, which transforms a portion of terrestrial space into a place of historical life for people, into a corner of the historical world” (34). Bakhtin talks about the

importance of the concrete concepts of place and locality in history making. He writes that Goethe's creative imagination is built up and populated by concrete locality. This, he describes as "chronotopic visualizing of locality and landscape in Goethe, [which] saturates landscape with time—creative, historically productive time" (36). Bakhtin also talks about "necessity" as the organising protocol in Goethe's sense of time. I think by necessity he means relevance, that is, the relevance of the past in the present. Bakhtin insists that for Goethe the ring of necessity was to bring together in one unified whole the past, the present and the future in a visible, concrete, and material, but also a materially creative, historical necessity (*Speech Genre* 39).

Time as vestige of history is also part of Bakhtin's interest in the discourse of the chronotope. He writes that historical time—past, present, and future—must have concrete necessity and human relevance in creative imagination, and must yield itself to a concrete vision for the betterment of the human condition. In the Goethean vision of time, Bakhtin writes that the recuperation of the past must be creatively effective in "determining the present, [which produces] a particular direction for the future, and, to a certain degree, predetermines the future" (34). My discussion of Bakhtin here is by no means exhaustive, but the points I have highlighted in his analysis of the chronotope in Goethe's work are: concrete visualisation of time in space/place, time as vestige of history, and the recuperation of the past as a way of understanding the present – all serve as entry-points to Yeibo's figurations of temporalities of the Delta and the oil encounter.

In this collection, as we shall see, Yeibo articulates time within the boundaries and significance of its temporal connotations. Time is virtual and imaginative, but it is also concrete and material too. If as John Mbiti notes that "in Africa Time is marked by phenomenon, that is, events and not by numerical calendar" (26), I want to suggest that the encounter of oil extraction has brought about a change in the nature of time in the Delta. It is

this change substantial in Yeibo's imagination that he creatively captures in the poem "Testament". He writes:

The rainbow in the sky  
Overwhelms the eye  
And humanity crumbles  
On a platter of nothing

Since then no candles  
Have ever lit out paths:  
We grope and gape ahead  
With treble timidity; summoning  
Conscious grit, like fishermen  
Paddling through water hyacinth  
Or a drained old man  
Contending with gruelling gristle (18)

In the first stanza of this poem there seems to be an intentional transposition of meaning, a conscious alteration of the allegorical signification of "the rainbow" – assumed to be a metaphor of hope and rebirth – to create a narrative that witnesses the dystopian reality wrought by time. Through the manipulation of this imagery the poet brings to the poem an imagined past which he juxtaposes with an inexplicable present. Although this dystopian vision is evident in the now, in the angst-ridden present, it nevertheless derives from some imagined past. Here the poet seems to gesture to a particular new historicist hermeneutic of judging the past in the light of the present and not the other way round. Therefore, with the recurring phrase of "since then" the poet implicates this imagined past as the traceable source of human suffering in the present:

Since then our senses  
Have ever played the plague:  
Either incoherent or numb or both  
Like skeletons, nibbled neat and dry,  
Pleading, unsure, betrayed, thrashed bare... (18)

But it is not time alone that has unleashed its fury, its superior and brutal force upon humanity. Time also mobilises other human and non-human forces, hence:

Our mothers too have ever starved us  
Of their nipples.

And the gods too  
Paddle in the same canoe  
Having shut their windows:  
And the once potent libations  
We once poured with tingling testament  
Now pay less than gutter-water  
In this ghoulish valley  
Like mere ashes  
When fire closes her eyes (18)

The gods, the ancestors who once traversed the Deltascape have abandoned their progenies by “shut[ting] their windows” and the heaving harvest, which the people’s libation to the magisterial forebears once assured, has since lost its purchase. But the poem is not only about lamentation; it also frames a narrative that projects hope, one that is celebrated in a song for tomorrow:

So we learn a new song  
Like children learning to walk-  
With unsteady, uncertain steps-  
For a new tomorrow (18)

But at the same time, the poet persona deploys the very powerful imagery of “the rainbow” to instantiate a redemptive logic of developmental vision for the oil encounter in the Niger Delta. The metaphor of rainbow also serves to reinforce tropes of time past and time present which connect to the subject of hope. This symbol runs through the entire poem. The image of rainbow as signifier of hope may be read as an analogy with the biblical rainbow in the Genesis story of Noah, which signifies hope and regeneration for the Israelites.<sup>53</sup> However, the rainbow is an antithesis of hope in the Niger Delta context, the poet seems to suggest, for it attends a reality of failed promises and misplaced hope in the thinking that the discovery of oil would translate into wealth for all. The biblical rainbow does not correspond with the Niger Delta situation: hence it “overwhelms the eye” and “crumbles” “humanity” “on a platter of nothing” (18).

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<sup>53</sup> CF Genesis Chapter 6: 5-22.

But the poet seems to suggest that the futuristic optimism laced with a song for an imagined future imbues time's future with a redemptive potential. It is anchored on how the crisis of the present might be fruitfully addressed so as to usher in a better future for the unborn. James Tsaaior in the foreword to this poetry collection notes that:

[...] this song for tomorrow suggests that symbolically...it is an endless, and, perhaps, ageless song, one that defines and redefines temporal boundaries and orchestrates the fluidity of history. Simultaneously, the song negotiates and interrogates history and the contemporary realities surrounding Nigerian nationhood. It invades the past, dredges and unmasks it as a strategy for distilling invaluable morals that can yield relevance for today and tomorrow. (11)

Much as these indicate certain eschatological vision of endings and possible beginnings in a futuristic Delta, the angst-inflected temperament that pervades the poem can be read as a creative expression of what Fatima Vieira has called "critical dystopia" (17). Vieira makes the interesting suggestion that a successful dystopia is one that is critical enough to proffer alternatives as well as offer a glimmer of hope and "a chance for humanity to escape" from a socio-historical condition such as that which is articulated in this collection. Vieira concludes that, in fact, critical dystopias derive from that same social dreaming that gives impetus to utopian literature [since utopia is a literary] strategy for the questioning of reality and of the present (17-23).

In the poem "Barren Rivers", the poet seems to hark back to this utopian imagining of a stable, orderly past as a way of questioning the discordant present. The tone with which he expresses his despondency is not lost even as he juxtaposes the past with the present social reality. His imagination in this poem can be said to bestride two epochal visions—of an imaginary *glorious* past and of a mystifying present—to create a narrative which instantiates what Niyi Osundare has described as a "comparing [of] the glories of yesteryears with the frustrations of today" (155). Both are juxtaposed in conversation to produce a critique of environmental destruction in the petro-modernity of the Niger Delta:

YESTERDAY



How can we forget  
The stirring songs of crickets  
That ushered us  
To the open hands of dawn?

How can we forget  
The warm dews that paved  
Untrodden paths to the shore?  
The hooks and nets we carried  
On padless heads;  
The bare feet on which we strutted;  
The bilge water we baled?

How can we forget  
The fresh breath of fishes  
That splashed in the morning sun;  
The turtles that brimmed our meals;  
The alligators that crammed our canoes,  
Exchanging for tapioca and starch  
From Urhobo traders, even  
Before noon shone on us?

But TODAY:

Fishermen sweat for nothing

They say:  
Oil has poisoned the river (33)

In this poem, it seems to me that the ideas articulated are contingent upon two lexical items: “we” and “they”. These first and third person plural pronouns inflect important meanings in the poem. The first-person plural pronouns, “we” and “us”, are at odds with the distancing tone that the third-person plural pronoun, “they”, conjures in the last stanza. The poet persona seems to identify with the past conceived as “Yesterday” in the way he inscribes himself within the narrative. Here his mnemonic, his memory aid, derives from a sense of habitual experience. The sense is of those activities being repeated, hence he identifies with the history he reconstructs, using “we” and “us” as markers of belonging. But when he gets to the last stanza signified as “TODAY”, he dissociates himself from the socioenvironmental reality into which the narrative translates. He deploys the third-person plural pronoun “they” to distance himself from the incongruous socioeconomic reality that confronts his imagination.

The phrase “they say” makes his narrative mode come across as conjectural and unreliable. Such postmodernist projection of facelessness and unreliability in narrating the oil encounter gives a diagnostic resonance to Robert Fulford’s metaphor of “cracked mirror of modernity” (95). Fulford writes that in a chaotic atmosphere of incoherencies and mystification to which modernity gravitates there emerges:

[T]he unreliable narrator [...], the storyteller for the age of relativism, the age of doubt and incredulity. The modern temperament quickens to stories that are splintered in this way: when we read the works of unreliable narrators, we stare into the cracked mirror of modernity. (97)

A sense of this literary ferment which Fulford aptly describes as cracked mirror can be recuperated for reflecting on the disarray to which the cultural geography is thrown in the Delta’s encounter with oil extraction. It can be used to understand the incursion of petro-modernity into the Delta, and how the writer’s attempt to grapple with the social reality of the present results in fragmentary visions that stupefy comprehension. The poet persona’s tone of self-denial of the present reality which confronts his imaginative possibilities conditions him in a way that “quickens” the narrative in the last stanza. It is important to add that even the structure of the last stanza corroborates this point. In fact it results in a fragmentary vision of the present. I want to suggest that this fragmentation becomes symptomatic of an unreliable narrator. In his attempt at bearing witness to the present conditions, the persona imagines a certain category of time: a psychological time. Bakhtin notes that psychological time “possesses subjective palpability and duration [for it engenders] depictions of danger, agonising suspense, insatiable passion, and so on” (15). I want to add that unlike Bakhtin notes in Goethe, Yeibo is unable to give concrete localisation to time’s present in this poem. This is because the distorted and “psychologically coloured” (Bakhtin 15) vision of the present that confronts his imagination, in a sense, overwhelms his creative signification. It is only through the mediation of language, in this case, the oscillation between two person

pronouns of “we” and “they” that the reader is able to derive meaning from the material reality of the present that is captured in the poem.

Much of the fragmentary vision and radical temperament that confront the poet’s attempt at capturing concrete reality in this collection can be gleaned as an indication of the mystifying reality wrought by the oil encounter in the Delta. The late capitalism that heralded oil exploration in the Niger Delta began to inspire narratives that were no longer straightforward and philosophical about life such as those discussed in the introductory section of this chapter in the writings of the pioneering writers. Instead, the oil encounter spawns in the present writers’ imagination narratives that favoured incoherence, self-reflexive ironies, despondencies, and scepticism. Their works refract a sense of postmodernist disorderliness, chaos, and paradoxically, prosperity as well as abject poverty at the same time. Take for instance “Dry season” where the poet juxtaposes images of barrenness with those of prodigious harvest at the instance of oil wealth in the region:

It is no time for celebration, friends  
When barrenness gnaws at naked souls  
Like desperate wild rats in a wizard’s tale  
And a nation crawls on an aching belly  
To the wilderness of nowhere.

Was it for nothing then  
That Christ cursed the fig tree  
On the thoroughfare to Jerusalem?

Or do we say with straight tongues then  
That when a clan’s infectious laughter  
Withers without a known cause  
The compatriots themselves curry the curse?

For we see dry leaves and dead trees  
And beautiful flowers drooping everywhere  
In stupefying postures  
Even in this heavy downpour,  
Like naked criminals after a heavy dose  
Of stone-hearted bullets.

And I suppose still  
The drought and harmattan

Are sure spellbound  
When false rains throw a hearty party  
Of live charcoals and flaming brimstones  
For laughing seedlings  
And unknown tendrils and their dreams (20)

Although the poem seems to include a significant amount of images from nature, one notices that things no longer converge at the centre where nature is valorised over human subjectivity. The atmosphere of incongruous human, material, and environmental suffering that the poem narrates is amenable to a resigned doubt directed at some imagined treacherous entity, one that holds access to the commonwealth for its personal aggrandisement. The poet persona seems to suggest that scepticism is a strategic weapon to keep the people's spirit alive in an atmosphere of economic exploitation. In fact, scepticism appears to be a way of staging protests against forms of social disaffection. The persona seems to suggest that credulity, which he frames to be the absence of scepticism at this historical moment, is dangerous for the citizenry, precisely because it has so far, qua Fanon, led to a blind alley, to no-where, and produced no result except nothingness, "drought" and "barrenness". Hence this scepticism, laced in a song for tomorrow, the poet suggests, will prompt the people to begin to ask searching questions that will lead to good governance. Yeibo draws on the metaphor of barrenness, where he mobilises a seasonal time in tropical Africa: "dry season" and the "harmattan" that it heralds to describe an atmosphere of dashed hope and failed promises:

So when heavy clouds gather again  
In the deep blue sky  
The innocent sky that sings  
Spirited songs of solace across the land  
Do we not cover our ears?  
Do we not choose to be blind?  
Do we not hang belief on a rafter? (20)

But the dampened spirits of the human subject is given a lift in “Tears in the Home”, where the poet invectively undermines oppressive regimes from the imaginative sphere of poetic rendition:

Dictatorship is a hungry guest  
That swallows its host  
Spreading darkest shadows  
Where no sun shines

See the storm and tempest  
Swaying us hither and thither  
Like changing tide floating corpses  
Dragging us with desperate chains  
To where tears soak the homestead (25)

Here, then, in a tenor of firm resilience that is reminiscent of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a Dream” speech, the poet declares in a cadence of futuristic hope:

May this budding shine  
That now twinkles in the timid tenor  
Right inside the black tunnel  
Console the crying creeks  
Then clear the harrowing haze  
That hangs in the hinterland (25)

Yeibo’s optimism in this poem is not unfounded. It seems to be rooted in a utopian vision of the future, which is built on the possibilities that he sees in the present: the unutilized potentials that are visible in the social reality of the now. His clear vision of the future refuses to be distorted in the despondency which the corrupt and oppressive leadership engenders: a cabal of “these patriots”, who have “played on us” a “horrendous hoax” and fleeced away the good of the land and left in their wake “O-F-F-E-N-S-I-V-E” remains “like [the Biblical] Cain’s offering” (25). In Yeibo’s attempt at constructing an alternative narrative of redemption that will untether the people from the existential bondage in which the present is ensnared, he does not allow his imagination to run wild in an escapist fantasy that literature sometimes allows. Hence his leap of faith in the art of poetic invocation is modest and incremental:

May this stirring sun  
That now strips naked  
Scrap-iron scoundrels swindling  
With starched khaki  
Mop up the maddening murk  
And stem the stream of tears

O let the chorus of light shower  
Let the showers of laughter  
Burst open bowels of disinherited barns  
That still litter the land  
Let the chorus of saints  
Bury the canister of lies,  
Daggers of memory, with ancient harvests  
Let cringing cocks crow again. (25-26)

Yeibo remains true to certain creative boundaries of realist literature which enables him to work with facts, material history and social reality, all of which he de-familiarises and turns into some poetic truth, as a way of producing alternative possibilities to move society forward. The poet does not seem to just recount the past in a nostalgic and utopian way. He makes a compelling temporal connection between the past and the present as a way of prognosticating the future. Thus his imagination and projections of the future are not unrealistic, wishful conjectures. They are informed by a deep sense of history and personal memory of the past in the light of the present.

In the four poems that make up the last section aptly entitled, “Twilight”, this material and realistic sense of imagination of the future is demonstrated by the note of modest optimism and possible rebirths which permeate the poems. In the eponymous poem “Twilight” he writes:

Tomorrow, fresh and fecund.  
Smiles from the world yonder  
Surveys the expansive earth  
With misted eyes  
For a place to perch (83)

Much as the poet beleaguers the future, “tomorrow”, with the responsibility of addressing the grim realities of the present, his hopeful temperament seems to be invested in a particular

progressive politics of transformative possibilities which revolutionary poetics might catalyse. This in a sense intersects with the transformative possibilities which Sara Mills speaks about in a Foucauldian notion of progressive politics. Mills notes that Foucault is more concerned to develop and describe a politics which takes account of the transformative possibilities within the present:

A progressive politics is a politics which recognises the historical and specified conditions of a practice, whereas other politics recognise only ideal necessities, univocal determinations and the free interplay of individual initiatives. A progressive politics is a politics which defines, within a practice, possibilities for transformation and the play of dependencies between those transformations, whereas other politics rely upon the uniform abstraction of change or the thaumaturgic presence of genius. (16)

In a vision that bears imaginative resemblance to the material reality of political discourse in the Delta, Yeibo's poetry gravitates towards this possibility for transformation. Yeibo's poetry can be said to contribute in no small measure to creating a narrative of discursive resistance, which engages with the deadening logic of oil in the Niger Delta. For instance in the poem, "For My Son Yet Unborn", the poet appears to create a narrative from the crucibles of minority politics in Nigeria, one that is grounded in the communal will to survive, to outlast the onslaught of petro-violence in the Delta. The poem articulates a socio-cultural and political-economic narrative which derives from the manner in which the people of the Niger Delta frame their geopolitical and economic contention with the Nigerian state and oil corporations as a genealogical struggle to liberate the minority peoples and the land in the region from the economic bondage of petro-imperialism. Yeibo writes:

From crimson creeks, I weave  
This song, for like floods  
In a season of showers  
Villains have taken over our shores  
And their acid breath chokes the land  
With mantra of fading dreams.

From a coven of Cains, I coin  
This poem; for our stars burn  
In the field, like brittle forests  
In the harmattan wind;

For scorpions and rogues  
Now chorus as seers, belabouring our sleep  
With prophesies of rocks and ashes.

.....  
That our children may find  
The tickling harmonies of old  
When they come. (84)

In this poem the reader is served with a deliberately moralistic poetic. Concerned with giving account of the present reality to the yet unborn, the poet connects a genealogical question of patrimony to the environmental responsibility of protecting the land as well. The poet's apprehensions are worsened by doubts concerning the present and a lack of faith in a future whose foundation seems to exist only in the realm of wishful conjectures. Here is a poem with a rigorous attempt at constructing the phenomenon of the oil encounter on the sociocultural history of the Delta. Here, then, lies the significance of the collection to the concerns of environmental justice.

The arena of Yeibo's Niger Delta becomes the chronotope of his imagination; its time and space form the subject of his narrative where the tripartite relationship of the human-natural environment-petro-modernity dynamic is dramatized. In deploying the metaphor of time, the locality of the Niger Delta landscape is by no means divorced from the subject of Petro-environmentalism to which the text addresses itself. It is this physical locality of the Delta, imaginatively conceived, which gives visible expression to time's cadences in Yeibo's work. Bakhtin notes that "The creative past must be revealed as necessary and productive under the conditions of a given locality, as a creative humanization of this locality, which transforms a portion of terrestrial space into a place of historical life for people [...]" (34). In a sense, the artistic engagement in abstract regurgitation of history that bears no resonance to the concrete temporality of place is of little relevance to a literature that deals with place-based consciousness such as the Niger Delta writing of petro-modernity. In the next section, I will show how this concreteness of place is privileged in Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought it*



*was Oil but it was Blood*. Bassey creates a narrative out of the urgent condition of the Delta in which he advocates for effective action against the obnoxious practices of the oil industrial complex, and suggests ways of achieving justice for the environment through collective action from among the people.

### **Environmental activism, rights movement and Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought it was Oil but it was Blood***

Nnimmo Bassey is probably one of the best known environmental rights advocate in Africa. He was born in 1958 in the Niger Delta, and trained as an architect. After a successful ten-year architectural practice in the public sector, he decided to devote his energies to activism on issues of human and environmental rights. He is the executive director of Environmental Rights Action, and the chair of Friends of the Earth International, a global grassroots collective on environmental rights action in the global South. In the last decade, Bassey has become the quintessential spokesman of minority and environmental rights around the world. This is attested to by the accolades he has received, namely the Times Magazine 2009 Hero of the Environment, the 2010 Rights Livelihood Award (also known as the Alternative Nobel), the 2011 recipient of the Ford Foundation Jubilee Transparency Award with his Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria organisation, and the 2012 Rafto Prize for Human Rights. The Norway-based Rafto Foundation described Bassey as an “untiring defender of victims of climate change”.<sup>54</sup>

In an interview with Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez, Bassey insists “that the United Nations must begin to pay more attention to what the people of the world are saying, what the people who are impacted by the multiple [climate] crises are experiencing, rather than listening so much to what corporations are saying” (*Democracy Now*).<sup>55</sup> He believes that a

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<sup>54</sup> CF. [www.saharareporters.com/news-page/nnimmo-bassey](http://www.saharareporters.com/news-page/nnimmo-bassey)

<sup>55</sup> [www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org) *Democracy Now*: A Daily Independent TV/radio global news hour program with Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez, Thursday, June 21, 2012: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

real solution must be sought and such a solution, he insists, is to be “found in the people’s summit, the people’s space, where people are not beating around the bush. [For] people are going straight, that we have to stop corporate capture; we have to stop false solutions in terms of selling off forests and cutting off communities from the resources that they need to live”. In my analysis I will show how this point forms an important position in the on-going debates on climate crises, and how his poetry draws from this pro-people ethic of environmentalism to initiate a critique of the forms of environmental imperialism that confront human society at this present moment.

Bassey’s activism focuses on socioenvironmental justice for oil explorations and the monumental damage done to local communities in Nigeria and parts of the so-called Third World such as Ecuador, Angola, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and South Sudan where oil is extracted. His campaign has brought him much respect, recognition, as well as made him an irksome personage to oil corporations. Bassey’s consistent message to the oil conglomerates has been: “leave the oil in the ground”,<sup>56</sup> since the cost of petroleum around the world has continued to be subsidised by the poor who inhabit in their bodies the pollution caused by oil exploration. The South African climate justice activist Patrick Bond writes that Bassey “jumped the scale [of climate justice politics] to demand that oil be left in the soil and under the gulf of Guinea...” (205). For Bassey, the poor are the people who live in the ‘oil fields’ close to where crude oil is mined. He argues that if the people must come together and force the discontinuation of oil production, the world would be forced to go the renewable way, that is, the use of other source of energy, such as solar, wind and bio-fuel, which to him, are the alternative to oil for the future of a cleaner environment. Bassey believes that through social movements the machinery of environmental pollution can be slowed down, halted, and

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<sup>56</sup> Check Further, [www.leaveitintheground.org.uk](http://www.leaveitintheground.org.uk)

possibly reversed. When asked about his decision to take to poetry writing in his environmental activism, he responds:

I found that in the struggle it's essential to take some aspects of performance. In the African context, a lot of social struggles are carried on the vehicle of poetry and song. And so I began writing poetry seriously in the early 1990s [...] I found poetry to be very useful in terms of mobilizing resistance, getting people to feel a part of the movement and so some of my poems are not just for people to read quietly, but for people to be part of the reading so that there are calls and responses; so, for example, when I say "we thought it was oil" the audience responds "but it was blood". (Baird 39-40)

In *We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood* Bassey walks a thin line between commitment to poetry and commitment to the struggle of environmental activism (performed in poetry) in bringing into the public sphere issues of social and environmental justice. The poetry collection carries the tone of subversion and defiance, and a mood of anger provoked by a collective deprivation of the people from access to the commonwealth that the oil brings, and the effect on environment too, which suffers pollution as a result of mindless drilling of pipes into what the poet calls the "mother earth". Bassey creates a text that is at best poetic activism and environmental rights manifesto. His call for environmental justice at this juncture of on-going conversations on climate change indicts the oil extractive industry. The anthology, which Vanessa Baird describes as "dedicated to campaigning for environmental justice" (39), is a creative effort to capitalise on Bassey's already established stature as an environmental rights activist. He poetically draws attention to corporate lawlessness and environmental crimes inflicted on local landscapes which bear fossil fuel for the oil extraction industry. His account of these spaces of environmental scrubland in the oil industry is concrete, for he has travelled throughout these parts to see first-hand how oil and other big businesses have destroyed local landscapes.

Patrick Bond in his polemical account of climate crises, a treatise he aptly entitled *Politics of Climate Justice*, identifies emerging grassroots movements committed to the cause of climate justice within the international gatherings on Climate Change. In what he subtitles

*Paralysis Above, Movement Below*, Bond brings to the fore a markedly ethical difference in two main approaches to combating the environmental challenges that confront the planet. The first, paralysis above, which he ascribes to governments, non-governmental agencies and big corporations, Bond discusses the way in which “the inability of global elite actors to solve major environmental, geopolitical, social and economic problems puts added emphasis on the need for climate justice philosophy and ideology, principles, strategy and tactics” (185) to be devised and mobilised from among the governed-masses, the very poor grassroots people. This, he names “Movement below, [that] best fuses a variety of progressive political-economic and political-ecological currents to combat the most serious threat humanity and most other species face in the twenty-first century” (185).

Bond provides a fascinating leftist interpretation of the climate crisis which confronts the planet. He argues that while the universe faces environmental and climate concerns that are genuine, concrete and specific to the way humanity lives and conducts its affairs, politics, one that is insidious and driven by narrow intentions to exploit and make gains, has taken over the most of the actions deployed to address this genuine crisis. This form of politics, Bond seems to suggest, is one that holds economic benefit to those who participate in the ameliorative process—a participation that does not necessarily translate into effective action. Bond maintains that the palliative measures taken to address the environmental peril posed to the planet have been hijacked by corporate entities and powerful government agencies, which seem to have identified the economic potential—real, imagined or assumed—that the process holds, namely the acquisition of carbon credit and a moral and economic licence to continue carbon emission. He argues that this so-called pragmatic approach, or moral currency if you will, diverts attention from the real issues that attend the crisis: humankind’s unsustainable lifestyle and the petro-modernity that drives it. Bond notes that this diversion has necessarily

engendered a bellicose politics of double speak and insincerity in the climate justice negotiations and debates.

In his discussion of movement below, Bond turns to the people-oriented street marches, demonstrations and campaigns to stop pollution of agrarian life in rural communities. There he lays out an illuminating account of grassroots successes and landmark victories over Big Oil, Big Coal, and other mining corporations in local spaces. While articulating efforts made so far by grassroots movement to stage resistance against these big corporations who engage in what he sees as a continued attack by capitalism on nature, as “environmentally voracious capitalism” (214), Bond insists that with little, steady strides, collective will and strategic civil disobedience and unwavering resolve of ‘native’ people around the world, we can arrest the polluting trend and save the planet from corporate greed (189-214).

What I draw from Bond’s book is his identification of pockets of local dissident groups as palpable examples of how global politics of climate justice can be effectively revitalised and re-appropriated to better serve the interest of indigenous peoples across the globe, people who are the actual victims of the changing climate. Crucially, while Bassey is primarily discussed here as a poet, I want to locate both his poetic and political practices of petro-environmentalism within this category of social and environmental justice crusaders. To my mind his poetics embodies the spirit (zeitgeist) of this movement from below that Bond discusses.

In *We Thought It Was Oil* Bassey confronts the reality of the oil encounter with a vision that is discerning and perceptive. His poetry brings into sharp focus “the value of imaginative writing as a site of discursive resistance” (Huggan, “Greening Postcolonialism” 703) for questioning environmentally exploitative attitudes of corporate institutions such as Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) in Nigeria and elsewhere. In the previous

chapter I intimated that Huggan and Tiffin, in echoing the Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood, caution that we must return to, and question, that philosophical basis which acknowledges forms of instrumental reasoning that view nature and other non-human others as being external [and subject] to human needs, and thus effectively disposable, or as being in permanent service to humanity, and thus as endlessly replenishable resource (Huggan and Tiffin 4-5).

Although their cautionary intervention is well-informed and critical to rethinking ways of arresting the climate crises that confront the planet, it ought to come with certain contextual stipulation, it seems to me, especially in the case of what one may call the outback of the global South, places like the Niger Delta and Venezuela's Orinoco Delta which feature in Bassey's poetry. I want to argue that Bassey stretches this philosophical basis of "ecological thought"<sup>57</sup> to its useful limits of representational possibilities. While his primary interest is with what he calls the "mother earth", the environment, he does not foreclose the utilitarian relevance of nature to local, indigenous people who must live off the environment. In reading this poetry collection I shall substantiate this point in a way that exemplifies how Bassey's poetics of environmental activism broadens the form of postcolonial ecocriticism. What I propose in Bassey's poetry, therefore, is a critical exploration of socio-cultural environmentalism, one that articulates a poetic which seems consistent with a concrete praxis of the environment's cultural relevance to the people who depend on nature for their genuine subsistence.

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<sup>57</sup> The term "ecological thought" can be credited to Timothy Morton in *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010.

In the eponymous poem, “We thought it was oil”, the poet’s petro-environmentalism can be read as deriving from a people-oriented consciousness, one that is ineluctably connected to nature, to the earth, in the unifying experience of petro-capitalist plunder, as the poet emphasises in the refrain:

The other day  
We danced in the street  
Joy in our hearts  
We thought we were free  
Three young folks fell to our right  
Countless more fell to our left  
Looking up,  
Far from the crowd  
We beheld  
Red-hot guns

We thought it was oil  
But it was blood

We thought it was oil  
But it was blood

Heart jumping  
Into our mouths  
Floating on  
Emotions’s dry wells  
We leapt in fury  
Knowing it wasn’t funny  
Then we beheld  
Bright red pools

We thought it was oil  
But it was blood...

First it was the Ogonis  
Today it is Ijaws  
Who will be slain this next day?

We see open mouths  
But hear no screams  
Tears don’t flow  
When you are scarred  
We stand in pools  
Up to our knees

We thought it was oil  
But it was blood...

Dried tear bags  
Polluted streams  
Things are real  
When found in dreams  
We see their Shells  
Behind military shields  
Evil, horrible, gallows called oilrigs  
Drilling our souls

We thought it was oil  
But it was blood...

They may kill all  
But the blood will speak  
They may gain all  
But the soil will RISE  
We may die  
And yet stay alive  
Placed on the slab  
Slaughtered by the day  
We are the living  
Long sacrificed

We thought it was oil  
But it was blood

We thought it was oil  
But it was blood (14-15)

The poem is modelled on a-call-and-response motif of folksongs associated with most indigenous communities in the Niger Delta. The persona witnesses to a history of oil-related crises in the Niger Delta and uncovers how Big Oils in cahoots with the Nigerian state continues to deploy military tactics to suppress any form of people's resistance. The poet associates oil with the image of blood to project a narrative of socioenvironmental destruction. He deploys concrete images of filth, violence, war and death, in the form of "blood", "gallows", "black holes", "slaughtered on the slab", "bright red pools", to give graphic expression to the ways in which the oil encounter in all its manifestations in the Niger Delta, has inflicted violence and destruction on the environment, and brought untold hardship to the local populace.



The poet seems to pun on the word “Shells” to suggest a metaphor for inflicting pain, destruction and death while hiding behind state oppressive apparatus of military force. He utilises poetic language in a way that both constricts and proliferates meaning at the same time. Although the lexical item “Shells” becomes an ambiguous term here, meaning is not arbitrarily assigned. It is in the realm of context—historical and cultural—together with its concrete referent, that its (Shell’s) full meaning is realised. As a lexical entry shell denotes military weaponry; it is synonymous with vestiges of heavy weaponry after fierce military combat at war fronts. Shells are found as remnants of cartridges shot in battle grounds after gun-fire exchanges. But more importantly, it seems to me that “Shells” as it is deployed in this poem is synonymous with the Anglo-Dutch petroleum giant, Shell Nigeria or Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) which operates the largest (50% of the) oil installations in Nigeria. Notice the way “Shells” is given a capital letter which suggests that it is a proper noun, but this is also contradicted by its pluralised usage. The poet is definitely playing around with the particular and the general and the different uses of the term. Nevertheless, the image of ‘Shells’ “behind military shields” conjures up a historical moment in Nigeria: the Ogoni episode – which the poet hints at in two preceding stanzas – and Shell’s involvement, its liaison with the Sani Abacha’s military junta, in the intrigues that led to the state-endorsed execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni Eight by hanging.<sup>58</sup> The concrete image of “gallows” in the next line provides added evidence of this historical resonance, as the Ogoni activists were hanged on gallows in November 1995.

But the poem is not all about recounting the atrocities of oil corporations and their government cohorts in the Niger Delta. It is also a narrative of affirmative resistance. The poet not only spurs the people to action but also mobilises natural elements, the soil, to

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<sup>58</sup> Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni saga are discussed in the introductory chapter of this study. The next chapter on versifying the Delta environment also partly discusses influence of Saro-Wiwa, especially in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide, who dedicated a part of the particular collection, *Delta Blues*, to the memory of the Ogoni Nine.

“RISE’ in defiance and confront the petro-induced onslaught on the environment. Egya writes that “the accent on RISE [in this] poem dramatizes the hope of an undefeated people. [...T]he image of blood...referring to both the oil pumping from the soil and the spilled blood of slain humans, it becomes an articulate symbol [...], conflating human and ecological suffering” (“Eco-human engagement” 64). And since both humanity and nature are unified in the same experience of human and ecological suffering, I argue that Bassey appears to suggest that the collaboration of both in defying the oil-induced onslaught becomes a formidable resistance, one that is poised to outlast petro-colonialism. Perhaps this explains why Okunoye writes that the poet as activist “consistently identifies with the helpless, the violated and the weak, affirming that they would outlive their oppressors” (“Writing Resistance” 71).

Using poetry as an alternative vehicle for enunciating claims of environmental justice, Bassey seems to reverse the trend of written testimony backed by activism. He considers poetry writing an alternative medium for the articulation of environmental justice and a call for redress. Some of the poems in the collection seem to jump out of the pages in a spirit of “Occupy”,<sup>59</sup> to add voice to the people’s ululations in the streets. I should hasten to add, however, that Bassey’s poetry, published in 2002, predates the Occupy Movements which gained political salience around the globe in 2011, and was most successful in the so-called Arab Spring of the Maghreb North Africa, which brought down hitherto powerful dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

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<sup>59</sup> Occupy has become a buzzword used to name recent counter-currents of solidarity demonstrations, marches and campaigns. It is the modern-day revolution that is powered by popular social media and championed by the youth around the world. The ethic of *Occupy*, a veritably nonconformist zeitgeist of collective indignation, is increasingly becoming the thread that connects suffering peoples around the world. It has demonstrated to the powerful people and the *underclass* alike, that power truly resides with the citizenry when harnessed through popular movement and collective anger, to draw attention to corporate lawlessness and other anti-people policies around the world. Recent economic and socio-political trends have shown that a generation of young people might be lost to unemployment and reckless government policies.

In “When the Earth Bleeds”, Bassey creates a narrative that ridicules the logic of petro-modernity. The poet provides the reader with a critique of modernity’s promise to bring succour to life’s drudgery, one which seems to define human existence in the Delta. The poem suggests that petro-capitalism has negatively impacted on nature, that its logic of progress through oil exploration and development inflicts violence and death on the earth:

I hear that oil  
    Makes things move  
In reality check  
    Oil makes life stop  
    Because

*The oil only flows  
When the earth bleeds*

A thousand explosions in the belly of the earth  
    Bleeding rigs, bursting pipes  
This oil flows  
    From the earth’s sickbed  
    Because

*The oil only flows  
When the earth bleeds*

They work in the dark  
    We must lift up the light  
Quench their gas flares  
    Expose their greed  
    Because

*The oil only flows  
When the earth bleeds*

In conference halls  
    We talk in gardens of stones  
The ocean waves bathe our eyes  
    But in Ogoniland we can’t even breathe  
    Because

*The oil only flows  
When the earth bleeds*

What shall we do?  
    What must we do?  
Do we just sit?  
    Wail and mope?  
Arise people, Arise

Let's unite  
With our fists  
Let's bandage the earth  
Because

*The oil only flows  
When the earth bleeds*

*The oil only flows  
When the earth bleeds (16-17)*

While attempting to lay-out and delineate his project of environmental activism in this poem, the poet's polemical narrative of environmental justice instantiates a "form of testimonial literature" (Eke, Kruger and Mortimer 67). Okuyade writes that "In 'When the earth bleeds' Bassey demonstrates that oil exploration only destroys the environment and reduces the opportunity for human survival" (75). I should add that Bassey does more than that in this poem. The poet provides us with a counter-narrative to the hegemonic narratives which political gatherings on account of climate change engender in the public domain. In fact, Bassey seems to testify to how collective responsibility on behalf of nature might be a most effective way to wrestle the planet from corporate greed.

What fascinates about the poem is the way in which the poet breaks with conventions of the written medium. He seems to write with an insurrectionary fervour as if he were addressing a gathering on a street live demonstration. The poet appears to be mindful that his poem is primarily a written text, but he "consistently employs *speakerly* strategies to point at the oral nature of his narrative" (Garuba, "Logic of Minority Discourse" 29; emphasis original). This in one sense points to the urgency of his concerns, the earnestness of his message, to give the reader-audience the same affective reaction that a live address in a public protest could have elicited. Here is a poet with an abiding commitment to the politics of non-silence. He seems to suggest that neither passive lamentation where "we just sit", "wail" and "mope" nor the repeated speech-making account of environmental devastations is enough to apprehend petro-imperialism. Hence he pokes at the ostentations of conference

talks where stakeholders are insulated in “halls” and “gardens of stones” where “ocean waves” add to the insulation from the grim reality of the planet in peril. So he deploys concrete, eye-catching metaphors of “bleeding rigs”, “bursting pipes” to conjure up spectacular images of apocalyptic import as a way of inciting effective action in “bandaging the bleeding earth”.

He contrasts the pretensions of conference rhetoric, the pomp of ostentatious gatherings in the ‘interest’ of the planet, with the grim reality of Ogoniland to produce a moral discourse on everything that is wrong with political debates on climate justice. And this in a sense resonates compellingly with Bond’s exposition which I discussed earlier in this section. Thus Ogoniland becomes the open wound which numbs the conscience of political discourses of climate justice.

The poet’s choice of language, especially in the last stanza, is suggestive of his insurrectionary disposition. The repetition of “Arise” with a capital letter A and the lexical item “fists” gesture to the urgency of active involvement, an involvement that is revolutionary. Bassey seems to reinvent and enable some ethos that motivates and empowers popular activism – that street marches and freedom square gatherings are increasingly becoming the legitimate site of critical engagement which works to achieve justice for the mass of people. But more importantly, it seems that the poem expresses certain disenchantment that has less to do with social injustice in the society than with the damage done to the environment, to the earth, by petro-imperialism. That explains why the poet makes a clarion call to the public not just to reclaim the stolen commonwealth, but, first, and most importantly, to “Arise”, “unite” and “bandage the earth” from the scourge and scorch of oil exploitation and hydro-carbon pollution.

The poem “Polluted Throats” presents the reader with a narrative that outlines some particularly disturbing instances, in which the socioenvironmental manifestations of the oil

encounter confront local communities in ways that strip them of agentive action. The community of Jacinto in the poem exemplifies this point:

At the yellow fields  
Of Jacinto the knuckles  
Of pregnant clouds  
Furious, howling like dogs  
Break into thunderous detonations

Match stick on sand paper  
Ducking beneath *quartros ductos*  
Plus two...as we beat  
A retreat into the belly  
Of the yellow cab  
On crude crusted paths

At the yellow fields  
Of Jacinto  
Zambrano drinks polluted streams  
Sees his rice field die  
Stands back and waits  
He wails: *it may kill us but what can we do?*

The question that won't run away  
*But what can we do?*  
Something  
That's what we can do  
And must (29)

The poet uses a farmer figure, Zambrano, as a metaphor for those whose means of existence, their autochthonous space and nature-dependent economy of fishing and farming are being systematically destroyed through petroleum development. The poet expresses how decisive action, devoid of procrastination, may operate to infuse activism with productive agency and inspire courage even in a despondent situation where oppressed people throw up their hands in a defeatist attitude. Hence in response to Zambrano's hopeless declaration: "*it may kill us but what can we do?*", the poet inspires hope in the following stanza: "Something /that's what we can do /And must". He appears to be suggesting that even when the odds are overwhelmingly against the oppressed, collective social action that is stretched beyond the ambivalence and doublespeak of politics can change things. Bassey's reticence in the last

stanza is too obvious to ignore. I think it holds up powerfully to involve his reader, to implicate the reader in the need to act. He seems to be conscious of a certain listening audience, not just a reader but a possibly active audience-listener-reader. In a sense, he seems to be saying, “Don’t just read this poem for its artistic/aesthetic satisfaction. When you’re done reading, put the book down and act”. But the modality of this action which he is suggesting is not communicated and this indicates that the solution and even the will to act resides squarely in the strength of the political as well as the pragmatic, collective. This, I think, connects interestingly to the Occupy movement to which I made analogy earlier.

In his essay, “Where is the Now?”, historian and postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty privileges the pragmatism of an agentive ‘now’ over the ostensible complacency of the political in addressing concerns that confront contemporary modernity. He argues that the manner of “How we periodize our present is thus connected to the question of how we imagine the political” (459). Arguing further, Chakrabarty insists that:

every imagination of the political entails a certain figure of the now. That is why, when we begin by defining the now in a very particular way as our first step of analysis, we have in a sense already committed ourselves to certain understanding of the political [...] For it is only by acknowledging the murkiness of the political today that we will configure a now so plural as not to be exhausted by any single definition. (459-62)

I want to use Chakrabarty’s pronouncements here to further unpack some possible meaning which Bassey’s metaphor of “something” might hold when valorised over the political rhetoric of climate crisis at this present historical moment.

To my mind, the lexical item “something” is a very fascinating metaphor through which insurrectional thought is articulated in this poem. It expresses powerfully the thrust of temporality which has been one of the loci of my concerns in this chapter. Bassey seems to use this term to indicate the primacy of a timely and decisive action, one that is geared towards achieving a condition of socioenvironmental justice in the Delta. Although Bassey expresses the word with some measure of reticence, there seems to be a particular inciting

contingency about this “something”, a necessarily political force in it. Perhaps this explains Jay Parini’s claim that “Often enough, poetry gives voice to what is not usually said, and in this sense it becomes ‘political’” (xii). I argue that indeed, the unsaid possibility of “something” in this poem is one that is infused with political expediency. Hence he concludes with a more compelling verb “must” to create an atmosphere of necessity and to put a note of urgency, an obligation to act on the concerns he articulates. He seems to suggest that a lot needs to be done. Crucially, the word “something” in my estimation points to the infinity, to an endless possibility of what we can do to curb the excesses of petro-capitalism. It seems that the poet invokes the word to operate as summons, as a mobilisation to push against the limits (that is, if there is one) of our moral imagination and purge the reader, the human community, of every taints of scepticism in attempts at (re)humanising our fossil fuel-crazed world of resource extraction.

By the same token, the potential of the collective will to act is drawn upon in the poem “Winamorena”, where Bassey connects the oil-induced pollution of an oil-bearing town in South America’s Orinoco Delta to that of Nigeria’s Niger Delta in a unified vision of mutual experience. He imagines the landscape of Winamorena as an extension of the Niger Delta:

Day breaks in a thousand rays  
Tickling my eardrums are tom-toms  
Of distant homes screaming the call  
Of two Deltas pulled apart

The birds sing good morning  
Might well have roused me  
In Oloibiri, Ikot Nseyen, Yenegoa  
Ogoni, Benin City or Sangana

A call to parade attune with Delta beats:  
Today let the Deltas unite  
Let kinship defy the seas let  
Love, pains, laughter power the paddles  
As two daybreaks that make a day

Rolling in my hammock I smell  
Taylor Creek, Stub Creek



Manamo, Nun, Qua Iboe  
Winamorena beckons Okoroba  
Orinoco calls the Niger  
Swinging from my h'mock  
I see a dance of two Deltas (28)

Bassey's vision of socioenvironmental consciousness in this poem transcends geographical borders. It is consistent with what Nixon has described as "site-specific struggles [...] across national boundaries in an effort to build translocal alliances" (4). In a sense, the environmentalism of the poor which Nixon suggests, and which achieves salience throughout this study, is an expression of ethical solidarity for the victims of extractive capitalism, one that leaves in its trail a two-prong form of violence at the sites of resource extraction. I would suggest that Bassey's aesthetic of environmental activism is one of cosmopolitanism, which straddles spatial and temporal distances to bring the human condition under one frame of mutual poetic experience. The poem seems to suggest that although both Deltas—the Orinoco in South America and the Niger in southern Nigeria—may be geographically separated from each other, they are intimately connected in a common vestige of Third World lived-experience, a heritage of poverty, filth and environmental pollution occasioned by their similar encounter with oil extraction.

Bassey sees environmental pollution as a global scourge that is aided by the obnoxious tenets of neoliberalism which must be addressed in a unified struggle of collective defiance and subversion. He seems to be saying that global exploration—and exploitation—of oil leaves in its wake the same vestiges of ruinous social and environmental repercussions in local, vernacular landscapes; a disturbing familiarity that makes "Winamorena [in Ecuador] beckons Okoroba [in the Niger Delta, just as] Orinoco [in Venezuela] calls [on] the Niger" (28). Even as the poet persona reclines in a makeshift sleeping bed in the creeks of South American Delta, he "smell"[s] the familiar filth of the Nun and Qua Iboe Creeks of the Niger. Thus he calls for "a dance of [the] two Deltas" (28) to mobilise and oppose this exploitative

trend of externally inflicted abjection. He believes that globalised peoples' movement must be connected in a unified struggle of the human spirit, thus he invokes a subversive "parade [where] the Deltas [must] unite and let their kinship defy the seas" to allow their mutual concerns of "pain" and common experience of "love and laughter", which living in the Deltas engenders, [en]power them to liberation (28).

In an insurrectional address on Fracking and Shell's involvement to a town-hall gathering in Dublin, Ireland, Bassey declares that the "struggles in the backwater of the Niger Delta echoes back in Ireland".<sup>60</sup> His petro-environmentalism can be said to be invested in a twin vision that is at "once profoundly local and profoundly transnational" (Nixon 235), deriving from an activist ethos that the struggles of the common people, especially in the global South, have become the kernel that connects climes and peoples around the world at this moment in history.

I would like to suggest that Bassey's project of environmental rights activism through poetry can be read as a strategic political and cultural critique of petrocultures in the Delta. It is also an art of eco-protest, one in which he seems to build on existing modes of postcolonial ecocriticism to produce a subgenre of environmental justice literature. Huggan and Tiffin make a case for postcolonial ecocriticism while engaging with the work of the American ecocritic and philosopher, Lawrence Buell. Drawing on Buell's notion of "environmental imagination", where he suggests that "environmental imagination engages a set of aesthetic preferences for ecocriticism which is not necessarily restricted to environmental realism or nature writing" (Huggan and Tiffin 13), Huggan and Tiffin insist that eco/environmental criticism needs to be understood as a "particular *way of reading* rather than a specific corpus of literary and other texts". They observe that ecology in literary criticism:

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<sup>60</sup> Nnimmo Bassey. "A Movement is not a Bicycle Wheel." Speech delivered at a town hall meeting on Fracking and Shell: Liberty Hall Theatre, Dublin, Ireland. 20 August 2012. Web. September 28, 2012.

[T]ends to function more as *aesthetics* than as *methodology* in eco/environmental criticism, providing the literary-minded critic with a storehouse of individual and collective metaphors through which the socially transformative workings of the environmental imaginations can be mobilised and performed. (13)

My point is less to contend with Buell's magisterial treatise than pushing Huggan and Tiffin's a little further. Huggan and Tiffin go on to suggest that while postcolonial ecocriticism performs an advocacy function it also "preserves the aesthetic function of the literary text while drawing attention to its social and political usefulness, [that is] its capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world" (14). This is where their point becomes pertinent to Bassey's poetry of environmental and social justice advocacy. Bassey's poetry does offer a way of reading nature and a glimpse into how nature might be conceived in the Niger Delta. His poetics of "mother earth" in the oil encounter is as much a literature that valorises nature above the murk of oil-smeared greed as it also puts humanity's cultural ties to the environment at the core of its imagination.

The poem, "The United Niger Delta Co.", the longest poem in this collection, is the final piece I want to take up for discussion in this section. Bassey begins the poem with a Biblical analogy of the Genesis story of Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit which led to the fall of humankind,<sup>61</sup> to create an allegorical tale of the oil encounter in the Niger Delta. The first stanza offers a key to Bassey's poetic diagnosis:

When the flares had come  
 And dis-united the day from the night  
 The surface of the earth was united in a dance  
 As Jehovah set the boundaries of the nations  
 And snakes bedevilled the apples  
 And Eve, poor Eve was told... if  
 If you take and if you eat of these fruits  
 You will see only day and no nights! (22)

The poet appears to suggest that the grand plot which engenders the oil encounter in the Delta is one that may be likened to the Genesis story of the forbidden fruit, the "bedevilled apples",

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<sup>61</sup> Genesis 3: 1-20.

as he calls it. Here he seems to convey certain philosophical meaning of how we might conceive oil exploration as a venture which, just like the story of the forbidden fruit and the resultant fall of Adam and Eve from Eden, has brought about more damage than its promise of potential benefits. Bassey's analogy with the biblical tale operates to produce a narrative that is morally tethered to a poetics of teleological provenance of cause and consequent effect. The stanza that follows narrates how yielding to the promises of petro-modernity gave entrance to Big Oils' incursions into the Delta in a manner of colonial expedition into 'Other Worlds':

And so it was that Shell, Exxon-Mobil, Texaco, NNPC  
Elf, Chevron, Agip, Statoil and similar entities agreed  
That the most desired entity of all  
The United Niger Delta Oil Company incorporated  
Opened its claws and rigs and climbed broad platforms  
Shared and divided the land and the sea  
Took the entire coasts of our country  
Loving best the heart beating in her waist: the Delta  
They christened their property  
The savaged land of the uncontacted  
The savaged land of the blind  
The savaged land of the powerless saboteurs

In holding out for a critical reappraisal of oil exploration and its resultant decimation of the Niger Delta environment, Bassey urges the reader to return to Imperial discourse of colonial incursion. The title of the poem, United Niger Delta Oil Company invokes a historical reverberation with colonial Britain's United Africa Company, later renamed Royal Niger Company, which enjoyed an imperially-sanctioned monopoly of trade in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta during colonialism. Bassey uses this resonating slogan to project some anti-imperialist sentiments. He seems to reiterate that the lessons of colonialism should not be lost on the reader, in that the forces which gave impetus for colonialism to thrive are equally at play in the conditions that now allow the Niger Delta environment to be plundered in a frenzied drive for fossil fuel. Hence he seems to warn against two vices that appear to work

together in the Niger Delta oil landscape: internal greed and external arrogance. He continues on this cautionary note in the following lines:

Now our loving United Niger Delta Oil Company incorporated  
Has established an *opera of buffoonery*  
Stabbing the land with laurels like her imperial majesty  
Playing tunes with *skullerships* and roofless sheds  
To cover the covetous and tyrannical reign of the rigs  
To seal the croaks from our parched throats

Yesterday we saw a mountain of butterflies dead  
Drunk with the blood from our feet  
Today we hear their drones like lunatic bees  
We see ferric derricks screw deep into our veins and  
The United Niger Delta Company incorporated  
Keeps sailing off with its booty of dollars, greed and crude  
Rejoicing with the junta with the spoils of war  
From last days of their drowning dominions  
And as always somewhere on the oilrigs, in the creeks and mangroves  
Of the hell of this national enterprise  
Bellies burst as pipes burst  
Hellish flares melt gasping throats  
And thousands of the living dead fall  
Into a thousand gaping holes in the centres of their yards  
Nobodies and *somebodies* swing from the pendulums of the rigs  
Falling ... falling ... falling ... falling into anonymous graves  
And silent mourning in desolate mornings (24)

With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to say that Bassey is suggesting here that (anti)colonial discourses of Western imperialism might still be a legitimate domain for productive conversations in a way that may well produce a critical idiom for unpacking the complexities of the oil encounter and the grim conditions it has left in its trail. The poem narrates Big Oil activities in the Delta in a fashion that re-inscribes colonial expedition so as to locate petroleum exploration and development in the Niger Delta as a project of neo-imperialism or what one may call petro-imperialism.

Bassey's poetry may be read as deriving from a consciousness that African literary imagination continues to be hunted by vestiges of colonialism. He seems to suggest that the occupation of the Niger Delta ecosphere for oil production and commodification by Big Oil is

a re-enactment of an exploitation-driven expedition that underwrote colonialism. I take up this point in the fourth chapter where I draw parallels between colonialism (economic exploitation being one of its motivations) on the one hand, and oil exploitation and the politics of violence it galvanises on the other hand. Placing Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* in conversation with Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, I argue that both encounters may be conceived as a form of violence, which in a sense provokes reprisal violence as modes of counteractive defiance against social and environmental incongruities that the oil encounter produces in the Niger Delta.

## Conclusion

I want to suggest that in exploring literary conceptions of the Niger Delta within three broad contexts of “cultural geography” (Darah, *Radical Essays* xxi), temporality and oil modernity, and how these congeal to project a literature of environmental justice, there seems to be a contest of power relations at play among nature, humanity and petro-capitalism in the “oil landscape” of the Delta. In the writings of and about the Niger Delta we encounter the way in which the earlier poets conceive nature as an entity that is constitutive of power around which the human subject is defined and brought into being. We also notice how certain power, ascribed to nature, is held up to define human subjectivity and made to measure the limits of his/her agency in the cultural world of the Delta.<sup>62</sup> I argue that this epistemological impression about nature features as a marker of contradictory and paradoxical relationship between human subject and nature. It also, in a sense, provided an opportune text for petro-incursion, which tends to substantiate the logic of petro-modernity as advancement towards development and modern civilisation. Although it may be reasonable to state that the belief in modernity’s promise of progress and development was not an unfounded one, but its failure to provide the necessary, (elusive) goodlife for those who inhabit this space stems from that continuous contest in which power struggles get caught up in in much of contemporary modernity.

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<sup>62</sup> While it may be observed that my point here makes certain resonances with Michel Foucault’s conception of power relations, I do not directly stage an engagement with his work. Foucault’s notion of power, one that he develops around the question of subject and power is framed as the basis upon which societal structures are built. He did not concern himself with questions of nature and environment in his work but with power formations within social structures and institutions—of Europe. So this would make my attempt to make his work speak to questions of environment in cultural representation—in Africa and particularly in the Niger Delta— amount to intellectual deviancy. But the point that might be particularly useful for my inquiry is Sara Mills’s pronouncement on Foucault, where she notes that Foucault’s notion of power relations is “a set of relations and strategies dispersed throughout a society and enacted at every moment of interaction” (30). Drawing on this point, it is useful to suggest a consistency with the way certain power relations are projected among the human subject, nature and oil prospection in the poetry collections studied in this chapter. It explains the intangibility of progress that attends the presence of petro-modernity in the Niger Delta. For if tensions of power relation are enacted at every moment of interaction, it stands to reason, then, that the hope of a respite for the human subject through the incursion of petro-modernity into the Niger Delta is a chimera.

In the depiction of temporality and environmental concerns that attend the incursion of oil modernity in the Delta, I argue that petro-capitalism manifests itself as a third category in the nature-human relation to constitute a tripartite relationship. This incursion threatens the force and influence of nature in the affairs of humanity. But it also does not favour humanity (the autochthonous people) either. Petro-modernity seems to make an inroad into the landscape with its own set of rules and practices which do not derive from human's innate quest for progress, modernisation and development but from capitalist singular motive: to exploit and make profit. In the next chapter, I investigate the ways that this contest of power features in the form of neoliberalism and the logics of technological development within which petro-modernity operates in the Niger Delta. In my reading of the poetry collections, I suggest that the poets reveal certain ways in which petro-modernity intrudes on the quotidian, on the very mode of being in the Delta, to evolve its own cultural and social regime of operation, one that is different from that which exists between nature and human subjects.



## Chapter Three: Versifying<sup>63</sup> the Delta Environment and the Oil Encounter as Critique of Nationalism

*Nationalism is not a political doctrine, nor a program. If you really wish your country to avoid regression, or at best halts and uncertainties, a rapid step must be taken from national consciousness to political and social consciousness.*<sup>64</sup>

### Introduction

The previous chapter discusses the way that geography and temporality converge to bear upon poetic imagination in the Delta, and how the incursive epiphenomenon of petro-modernity instigates a poetic temperament that verges on petro-environmentalism. This chapter aims at teasing out some of the concrete ways in which the incursive relationship of oil modernity, a form of petro-sociality with nature and human subjectivity, operates in a neoliberal framework in the Niger Delta. Exploring Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs* (1998), Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* (2005) and Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* (2000), I discuss the way that these poets stage a critique of this petro-modern sociality using biographical techniques as modes of signification to produce critical idioms for articulating socio-cultural instances of the oil encounter in the Niger Delta. I suggest that each of the poets deploys tropes of the (auto)biographical to construct a subversive "poetics of personal involvement" (Obiechina 530), to draw attention to instances of social disorder and violence inflicted upon the Niger Delta by Big Oil and the Nigerian state.

They deploy this narrative strategy to bear witness to, and poetically interrogate, what they deem to be forms of petro-imperialism which the oil exploration occasions. While using their piece of earth, their local community, to imagine what the oil incursion might signify for the human subjects and the environment of the Delta, the three poets: Tanure Ojaide, Ogaga

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<sup>63</sup> The term versify as deployed here does not suggest poetry in its strict sense of verse form. I use the term to simply mean the way that the environment and its social world of oil modernity are captured and represented in the poetry collections. I acknowledge that some of the poems treated in this chapter, characteristic of most contemporary Nigerian poetry, are written in elegant prose narratives.

<sup>64</sup> Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin, 1961: 203.

Ifowodo and Ibiwari Ikiriko recreate a subversive, alternative history of the oil encounter in the Delta. Their vision seems to be endowed with certain concrete moments in Nigeria's recent history, one that is marked with geopolitical contestations pertaining to questions of social and environmental justice in the Niger Delta.<sup>65</sup> I investigate the representational strategies by means of which each of the individual poets imagines the oil's presence within this atmosphere of disruptions, where oil commodification has seemed to destabilise all that holds society in cultural and ecological cohesion.

In their attempts to create an alternative history from the incongruous reality which confronts their poetic vision, each of the poets deploys a literary motif of the biographical to draw attention to certain elided lived experiences and ignored geopolitical issues bordering on Nigeria's fraught nationalism and fiscal federalism. In the three selected collections which deal primarily with some concrete moments in Nigeria's recent history, the following question seems pertinent: how do we measure the moral truth of fiction against the facts and figures of material reality and of documented history? The sections that follow throw these concerns in broader contextual relief to open up possibilities for a more inclusive and nuanced public dialogue on how the encounter of oil might be gainfully negotiated.

In his hilariously seditious book, *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World* (2004), British writer Francis Wheen names history as an ambiguous term used to "mean no more than what occurs in the world, or the techniques for finding this out, but also the discipline that orders events and experiences into an evolutionary narrative" (68). It is within the process of this creative ordering of events that I want to locate the texts examined in this chapter. To say this is to argue that the slice of history that is apprehended in the poetry

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<sup>65</sup> Here I have in mind the state-influenced judicial execution of Saro-Wiwa in 1995 – to which some of the poems in Ojaide's collection are addressed. The 1998 Jesse fire disaster from petro spillage and the forms of media reportage that elide the human dimension to the oil narratives in the Delta: this is what Ifowodo engages in the text under study. Finally, the resource-control debates since the return to democratic governance in 1999, and the geopolitics that are mobilised and performed around the oil proceeds which enable or disavow inequitable wealth-sharing dynamics – it is within this context Ikiriko's poetry is located.

collections seems to surface as counter-narratives created to thwart the concrete materiality of the real and of history which confront the poets' imaginative vision. The process of creative ordering of events seems sacred to the writer burdened with the social duty to witness to and narrate certain elided experiences of his/her community. It seems to me that such cultural responsibility sometimes compels a creative nuance in engaging with the subject of historiography, especially when approached from the imaginative realm of literature.

In a compelling analysis of history as the hero of the African narratives, South African writer and scholar Lewis Nkosi examines how writers "have sometimes dramatized moments in history when events have seemed to loom larger than any individuals" (31). He writes that these African writers have sketched out "a whole cycle of a people's history; [where blank spaces are] filled in, [and unclear aspects are] re-examined, paraphrased and mythologised" (31). Although Nkosi's discussion of history in African writing is about the novel, his pronouncements have important relevance to the concerns in the poetry collections that I discuss here. His reading is daring and scholarly in the way he places history at the very core of African literature.

Nkosi illustrates with Chinua Achebe's "two novels of Ibo village life"—*Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*—which he describes as fine examples of the good uses to which the African imagined past can be reconstructed through artistic process of turning fact and social history into moral and cultural truth (32). The success of Achebe's use of fact and fiction is aptly summarized in Margaret Lawrence's submission that, "Achebe in *Arrow of God* follows the course of history with accuracy, and at the same time manages to confirm that *fiction is a great deal, more true than fact*" (quoted in Nkosi 39; my italics). Nkosi's discussion can provide useful insights when considering poetry in the present context of the oil encounter in the Niger Delta. His discussion of history illuminates the ways in which the poets under study deploy local myths, history and facts to create narratives which capture certain elided recent

historical events that attend the oil encounter in the Delta. Nkosi submits that in dealing with fact in fictional works, writers often attempt to show verisimilitude through the social reconstruction of the past which deals with recognisable people in recognisable human situation, through the creation of believable characters who embody these values and tradition of the given era in history. The success of every writer resides in the depth of his/her artistry through which meaning is expressed without necessarily undermining the referent to which the text is addressed. The three poets signal the telling of the Delta through different stylistic approaches and artistic techniques.

With tropes of lived and imagined memory of the Delta, Ojaide in *Delta Blues & Home Songs* deploys an autobiographical mode in versifying the Delta. He (re-)constructs a self-sufficient, paradisiac landscape of the pre-oil exploration Niger Delta to question the logic of human development and petro-modernity. Ojaide does this with a lived sense of cultural history and a socio-political commitment to his people. He appears to suggest that since he has been a witness, by virtue of his nativity, to the idyllic past, both imagined and lived, he can through his art help to reconstruct a moral vision which will illuminate societal imaginations and broaden perspectives in proffering solutions and remediation to the social and environmental challenges that plague the Niger Delta. Ode Ogede in his 1996 reading of Ojaide's poetry makes a contentious claim, it seems to me, when he dismisses Ojaide's poetry on technical grounds as "occasionally managing to rise above the level of prosaic banality" (69). Ojaide appears to be haunted by the vexing question of the effectiveness of literary intervention in a society in the throes of socio-political upheavals. He feels a poet should take it upon him/herself to partake of proffering solutions to society's problems. With this in mind he seems obliged to tell the Delta's story through a narrative of participatory witnessing, while rendering his poetry in elegant prose of autobiographical inclinations. Thus the impulse to tell a story seems to privilege the preponderance of enjambment and

shambling lines over poetic density in the collection under study. Perhaps this accounts for the free-flowing, story-telling prosaic verse in the poems.

Ifowodo takes his inspirational force from a slice of the contemporary history of oil extraction and its social and environmental conjunctures in the Niger Delta. The poet invests his imagination with realistic resources and convincingly fictionalises instances of real-life events to question their official accuracy as they have been framed in the sphere of mainstream discourse. He inflicts certain poetic truths upon these hegemonic facts as a means of destabilising the idiom of the power-bearing episteme that inheres in the narratives of the oil encounter which circulate in the public sphere. Ifowodo renders the ostensibly factual tales which circulate in the public arena nonsensical by setting against them ‘other knowable truths’, to create conflicting, conjectural voices in the public arena of the Niger Delta. Through the power of creative imagination inscribed on the lived memories and felt experiences, and the eclectic use of language, the poet effectively blurs the line between the speculative and the factual of the oil encounter. This he does by weaving those speculative tales which equally circulate alongside dominant narratives to create a plethora of truths about some instances of petro-related violence which the oil phenomenon in the Delta enables. With a vast pool of ironies and contradictions Ifowodo allows each of the stories he weaves out of the oil encounter to be defined by the agency through which such encounter is inscribed so that the reader’s attention is permanently arrested, and objectivity is constantly re-negotiated.

While Ifowodo uses speculative tales to create conflicting voices in the public arena, Ikiriko deploys circulated images, signs and symbols to challenge hegemonic power. Ikiriko’s artistry is located within what I shall discuss as the geography of socio-economic politics and the geo-politics of ethnicity in the Nigerian federation. He seems to be interested in the concrete vestiges of power-bearing symbols, images which circulate in the spaces of oil

extraction in the Delta. He uses language in a very Bakhtinian way to create multiple voices that are at once competing for attention and self-reflexively deconstructing the meaning they embody. Ikiriko's poetry can be read as a collection which "emphasise a dialogic relationship extending outside the text, between [his cultural reading audience], as well as operating within the text" (Steiner 3), to create a subversive narrative of geopolitical/regional liberation. The geographical map of Nigeria gives expression to his poetic vision. It is this geographic metaphor of the large country literally sitting on the Delta at the base of the Nigerian map that Ikiriko draws on to launch his invectives within the majority-minority dialectic, which seems to define issues of social justice—infrastructural development and inequitable wealth distribution—in the Delta.

**(Auto)biographical narrative of the Delta environment: localism contra nationalism in Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs***

Born in the oil-rich but economically impoverished area of the Niger Delta in 1948, Tanure Ojaide<sup>66</sup> was raised by his maternal grandmother in a riverine, rural environment. In an autobiographical essay, Ojaide romanticizes about this period of his birth as "an age of innocence in a rural home in the Delta region of Nigeria [when] the old ways were still very vibrant" (15). He writes that "Every first-born male child in [his] Urhobo [ethnic extraction] is traditionally [deemed] a priest" (15). He tells of how he is made to serve as acolyte, as a traditional priest in his native shrine, as Urhobo custom demands in spite of his received Christian beliefs of Catholicism. This is indeed a demonstration of an inherently syncretic ethos that affords him the advantage of straddling two civilisations—African and Western

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<sup>66</sup> Ojaide is not the type of poet one remembers by only one good work: he is prolific. His poetry publications include *Children of Iroko & Other Poems* (1973), *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986), *The Eagle's Vision* (1987), *The Endless Song* (1989), *The Fate of Vultures* (1990), *The Blood of Peace* (1991), *Daydreams of Ants* (1997), *Delta Blues & Home Songs* (1998), *Invoking the Warrior Spirit: New & Selected Poems* (1999), *In the Kingdom of Songs: A Trilogy* (2002), *I Want to Dance & Other Poems* (2003); *In the House of Words* (2006), *The Tales of the Harmattan* (2007), *Waiting for the Hatching of a Cockerel* (2008), and *The Beauty I Have Seen* (2010). His writings are consistently rich and deeply rooted in the Delta region.

values—which bear upon his creative oeuvre. Ojaide has necessarily become a socio-cultural priest, an environmental and minority priest of awareness.

Ojaide studied under the tutelage of some Urhobo traditional artists. Okitiakpe of Ekakpamre is largely instrumental to his studying Udje dance and songs – a traditional poetry – which he later translated into English and continuously deploys in his poetic writings (“I Want To Be an Oracle” 20).<sup>67</sup> The legendary premier Urhobo musician Omokomoko is one of the main artists who exposed Ojaide to the breadth and depth of Urhobo poetry, philosophy of life and traditional aesthetics. He uses his Urhobo heritage to poetic advantage by exploring the *Ivwri* philosophy and using Urhobo folklore as a foreground. The *Ivwri* philosophy is a rich cultural heritage which draws upon the legends of past heroes who become models in the society for others to emulate. Thus we see Ojaide’s continual reference to mythical and legendary figures such as Mukoro Mowoe, Essi, Ogodogbo and Aghwana, regarded as foremost Urhobo thought leaders.

It is important to state that there seems to be a sense of inter-textual connection between Ojaide’s personal story and his creative vision, his poetry on the one hand, and that of the cultural history of the Delta which he creates in this collection on the other. Ojaide hints at this inter-textual cultural resonance in his autobiographical essay, “I want To Be an Oracle: My Poetry and My Generation” (1994). There, he lays out the project of his poesy by discussing how his cultural roots continue to be his most potent creative muse. Now I concede that this may not be peculiar to Ojaide alone as writers often ascribe their creativity to natal inspiration. But what I want to highlight is the way in which Ojaide narrates his personal story as embedded in the history of the oil encounter in the Delta. I suggest that this personal/natal history is held up to critique the notion of nationhood, one that is imagined,

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<sup>67</sup> See also Philip Aghoghovwia’s study of Ojaide’s *The Fate of Vultures & Other Poems* in “Urhobo Myth and Oral Rhetoric as Constitutive Sites in Tanure Ojaide’s Poetry.” *Politics of the Postcolonial Text: Africa and its Diasporas*. James Tsaaior, ed. Munich: Lincom Textual Analyses, 3 (2010): 89-104.

brought into being, and sustained by the logic of oil extraction in the Delta. He seems to suggest that his autobiography might serve as a mirror through which the history of the Delta, in relation to oil modernity, can be framed as an instance of national becoming constituted to undermine indigenous cultural economy and local subjectivity.

By the same token, Uzoechi Nwagbara reads Ojaide's poetry as an "ideo-aesthetic" creation, one that is deployed "as a kind of public duty" owed "to the Nigerian people, to expose, reconstruct, and negate the actualities of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria" (17). In the poetry analyses that follow, I will show how this point is consistent with the manner in which Ojaide creates an imaginative reconstruction of his childhood as a near utopian past to serve as model for the remediation of oil polluted Niger Delta. I argue that his narrative becomes an environmental as well as humanistic critique of oil extraction in his natal Delta. By this I mean that while his primary interest seems to be with the Delta environment under the threat of pollution from hydro-carbon extraction, the poet also inscribes some human dimension to the environmental concerns that he expresses. And this he does by locating a primordial human relationship with the environment through the valorisation of his own biography within the narrative. He seems to suggest that what is being done to the environment has corollary effects on the human population that inhabits the environment.

Ojaide's poetry can be situated within what the Nigerian critic Funso Aiyejina calls the "Alter/native tradition" in Nigerian poetry. Describing Ojaide as a "new traditionalist" (124), Aiyejina argues that the writings of Ojaide's generation, categorised as second generation writers in modern African literature, marked a paradigm shift from the previous generation (see also Adesanmi and Dunton 7). Enmeshed in cultural leftist orientation and radical political agenda, these writers moved away from the use of far-fetched, high-sounding Anglo-Western images and resorted to native and traditional metaphors that were aimed at 'altering'



the (sub)human conditions of the oppressed in the postcolony. In a study of the poetry of Niyi Osundare and Kofi Anyidoho—two of Ojaide’s contemporaries—British postcolonial scholar Stephanie Newell discusses this AlterNative aesthetics of poetry writing among this generation of writers as a creative trope which “captures the political energy and tensions in contemporary West African literatures better than the term postcolonial” (131). Newell further notes that writers within this alternative tradition “encapsulate the tensions of writing against the postcolonial regime in the context of colonial history; they represent the effort to be a native without otherness [...] they represent the difficulty of asserting a political position that is resistant and radical without being reactionary or assimilated by the dominant power” (132). Free of idiosyncratic language and arcane imagery, Ojaide’s poetry relies on parables and references to traditional rituals adjusted to contemporary purposes, such as his crusade for the restoration of the ecosystem in the Niger Delta and the improvement of the living condition of the people in this region.

Ojaide positions metaphors, images and legends from folklore and history to speak about the Niger Delta conditions – the environmental and social injustices. In a book of essays written in his honour, entitled: *Writing the homeland: the poetry and politics of Tanure Ojaide*, Onookome Okome argues that Ojaide is well aware of the social burden a poet in a distressed society must bear, and he takes this role with fortitude. Okome maintains that social responsibility is for Ojaide, “the very soul of writing” (158). Hence, Ojaide’s poetry is essentially about the Niger Delta environment in which he first experienced life; a region that continues to capture his imagination as he attempts to question the absence of environmental and social justice for the autochthonous people and the environment. The fast fading world of the pre-oil exploration Niger Delta remains the site where Ojaide locates his poetic vision in *Delta Blues*.

*Delta Blues & Home Songs* is divided into two sections. The first, “Delta Blues”, dedicated to the memory of Ken Saro-Wiwa, is concerned with the degradation of the Deltascape. In this section, Ojaide privileges a certain imagined childhood memory of his natal Delta. It is precisely this romantic memory he valorises to function as the touchstone for measuring and questioning the environmental protocol, such as they are, within which successive governments and multinational oil corporations operate in the Niger Delta. The second section, *Home Songs*, has some folkloric poems concerned with themes that are at once personal and communal, dedicated to well-meaning individuals who have impacted on the poet’s life during his formative years. Through the memory of lived-childhood experiences, Ojaide takes us on a voyage to this environment, where he describes the beauty of a self-sustaining agrarian culture and the subsistent abundance that was the Delta economy before oil was discovered.

In “When green was the lingua franca” the poet stages a captivating affirmation of ecological imagination. He seems to be saying that green, the colour of ecology and natural vegetation, was the language of communication in the pre-oil modernity Niger Delta: that it signified harmony, cohesive sociality and orderliness. With a childlike naiveté he describes the pastoral abundance of the Delta, through rustic memories of childhood:

My childhood stretched  
 one unbroken park,  
 teeming with life.  
 In the forest green was  
 the lingua franca  
 with many dialects.  
 Everybody’s favourite,  
 water sparkled...  
 I remember *erhuvwudjayorho*,  
 such glamorous fish  
 but denied growing big.  
 Earthworm, communal name  
 for the kind of women seeking  
 to flourish in the soft spots.  
*Uwara*, beauty that defies

tyranny of *Akpobrisi*,  
forest manic and recluse—  
what flesh or fiber fails  
to capitulate before charm?

*Urhurhu* grapes coloured  
my tongue scarlet,  
the *owe* apple fell to me  
as cherries and breadfruit  
on wind-blessed days.  
The cotton tree made me  
fly for tossed-out fluffs;  
the gum tree took fingerprints  
before invisible policemen.  
*Ikere* froglets fell from skies  
that covered the land  
with tropical sheets;  
the skipper-fish overflew  
culverts into fisher's ambush.

Undergrowth kept as much  
alive as overgrowth, the Delta  
alliance of big and small,  
market of needs, arena  
of compensation for all... (12-13)

Here, he deploys metaphors to convey the centrality of the greenery to his childhood's bucolic existence. The Niger Delta, just like the larger Nigerian federation, is a linguistically heterogeneous society with about forty languages and over two hundred dialects. Pidgin is the lingua franca of this region. Pidgin was a contact language around the coastal areas with the earliest European merchants from Portugal, France and later, colonial Britain. Over time and as a result of British colonialism the Pidgin language now has English as its major substrate. It is this linguistic image that the poet draws on to demonstrate the aura of cultural and ecological equilibrium. The greenery, as the lingua franca, signifies the evident agrarian abundance, vegetative richness and stable biodiversity for which the Delta was once celebrated. We notice a sense of nostalgic retrospection in the idyllic ambience with which he portrays the 'forest' as evenly spread in their 'green' foliage and the 'water sparkling', a description of scenic beauty and pristine orderliness.

With this near utopian memory and geographic description of the Deltascape, Ojaide draws our attention to the subtlety of his lived-environmentalism. This subtle environmentalism makes a no less damning commentary on the degradation of the ecosystem wrought by oil exploration and neoliberal capitalism. The poem reimagines the past, while imbuing it with a subversive reality, one that contrasts with and questions the present reality. The following lines juxtapose the Edenic picture created above with the brutal reality of oil exploration as the poet denounces Shell, one of the major multinational oil corporations mining oil in Nigeria's Niger Delta for the ecological invasion and commodification of the region. Still on the same poem:

Then Shell broke the bond  
with quakes and a hell  
of flares. Stoking a hearth  
under God's very behind!  
Stop perjuring women for  
Their industry, none of them  
Drove God to the sky's height;  
It wasn't the pestle's thrust,  
That mock love game,  
That caused the eternal rift.

I see victims of arson  
wherever my restless soles  
take me to bear witness.  
The Ethiope waterfront  
wiped out by prospectors—  
so many trees beheaded  
and streams mortally poisoned  
in the name of jobs and wealth! (13)

In Ojaide's biographical narrative of environmentalism in the Delta, Shell Oil Corporation – as well as other multinational oil corporations mining oil in the region – is responsible for the despoliation of the environment and the incessant violence that threatens the continued existence of nature and human life in the oil sites. According to the poet, with the intrusion of oil in the Delta, Shell has broken the bond between the people and the environment and committed a sacrilegious act against God by heating up the firmament with its flares. This

abomination has led to frenzy in the race to exploit the alluvial wealth the region bears. The poet deploys idioms of violence: “victims of arson”, “restless soles”, “wiped out”, “beheaded”, “mortally poisoned” in juxtaposition with glamorous images of neoliberal capitalism: “jobs”, “wealth” to suggest that the oil wealth becomes a bane in its paradoxical existence; with it comes death and destruction, instead of development and the good life it promises. This is precisely because the race for oil in Nigeria does not bear the mark of moral and social justice. This point is consistent with Robert Young’s contestation that poverty and starvation suffered by the marginalised are often not the mark of an absolute lack of resources, but are “from failure to distribute them equitably” (quoted in Okuyade, “Cumulative Neglect” 127). The once healthy landscape has become degraded, polluted and endangered by oil spillages, gas flaring among other environmental hazards. This has, in turn, taken its devastating toll on the flora, fauna and people of the Niger Delta.

My argument does not suggest that Ojaide disavows oil production (such as we see Bassey advocating, in a radical feat of righteous indignation, that oil be left in the soil), but that he privileges moral sensitivity and distributive social justice in the face of such petro-induced capitalism. This position becomes even more pertinent when placed against a given instance such as the news report by Agence France Presse (AFP) on the case between Shell and the Bodo community in Nigeria. The case was heard in a London Court (notice that is was not heard in Nigeria) and judgement was passed in favour of the Bodo community:

A spokesman for Shell’s Nigerian operations, the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), said it would pay compensation but said the process could take *several months*. But lawyer Martin Day, representing the Bodo community, said he would be pressing for “adequate compensation *immediately*”. “This is one of the most devastating oil spills the world has ever seen and yet it had gone almost unnoticed until we received instructions to bring about a claim against Shell in this country,” he said.<sup>68</sup> (My italics)

In this report two things stand out for me. First, it seems that justice is unavailable to the

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<sup>68</sup> “Shell admits ‘devastating’ Nigeria oil spills.” *AFP News Agency*, August 3, 2011.

poor, namely Bodo Community, within the Nigerian justice system; hence the case was taken to a London court. Second, from the quotation which I italicised above, it is noticeable that Shell seems to lack the moral urgency to address the environmental hazards its operations continue to cause in Nigeria.

Take for instance the dismissive response devoid of remorse and moral obligation to a community that hosts its exploration. It invariably demonstrates that in the protocol of oil production in the Delta, from which Shell's modes of operation proceeds, environmental and social justice that would secure human and ecological safety in these oil sites are not rights but rare privileges. These privileges are at best granted by courts of law – apparently the only hope of the subaltern – and dispensed with reluctant levity by the big brothers – multinational oil corporations and the Nigerian state – or at worst, they are exacted by violence as the aggrieved take to the Delta creeks and become insurgents. This becomes the means by which they bring attention to the plight that confronts their community. In the chapter that follows from this, the video film which I examine coalesces around this notion. The movie conveys eloquent testimony to the way that justice seems to elude local communities who must bear the consequences of oil mining in the area. The youth of the community resort to violence, kidnapping and insurgency as a way of exacting privileges to their community. In a society where the rule of law is allowed to take its full course, rights, not privileges, for the citizenry, are the conditions for true justice.

If “When green was the lingua franca” is a subtle call for environmental justice, the poem “Delta Blues” is a dirge to the poet's natal heritage. Beginning with the title, this eponymous poem is a song of lamentation and protest; it is poignantly rendered in a mood that is reminiscent of the Negro Spirituals of anti-slavery in the African-American literary tradition. The poet laments the violence, death, greed, apathy, vested interests and what Ramachandra Guha in a very different context calls “green imperialism” (19). Here I borrow

Guha's phrase to suggest the ways in which the Niger Delta landscape, which Ojaide so bucolically portrays in the first poem, is starkly projected here as a commoditised entity, precisely because of the oil resource it bears. And this is now privileged over the human inhabitation in the oil sites; thus he questions the amorality of energy consumption:

This share of paradise, the Delta of my birth,  
reels from an immeasurable wound.  
Barrels of alchemical draughts flow  
from this hurt to the unquestioning world  
that lights up its life in a blind trust.  
The inheritance I sat on for centuries  
Now crushes my body and soul.

The rivers are dark-veined,  
a course of perennial draughts.  
This home of salt and fish  
stilted in mangroves, market of barter,  
always welcomes others—  
hosts and guests flourished  
on palm oil, yams and garri.  
This home of plants and birds  
least expected a stampede;  
there's no refuge east or west,  
north or south of this paradise (21).

Ojaide stages a narrative of intimate environmentalism using first person pronouns such as “my”, “I”, and “me” and other lexical items, namely “my birth”, “home”, “my nativity”, as markers of belonging to give authenticity to the testimony he bears. With a mournful cadence, the poet decries the violence of environmental despoliation that is visited on the landscape by the so-called industrial development of the oil resource:

My nativity gives immortal pain  
masked in barrels of oil—  
I stew in the womb of fortune.  
I live in the deathbed  
prepared by a cabal of brokers  
breaking the peace of centuries  
& tainting not only a thousand rivers,  
my lifeblood from the beginning,  
but scorching the air and soil.  
How many aborigines have been killed  
as their sacred soil was debauched

by prospectors, money mongers? (21-22).

As he recounts the plight of the marginalised people of the Niger Delta, he also conjures a picture of the vanishing abundant natural riches of the Delta landscape. The rain forest is being stripped of trees, which used to serve as protection and security for the people of the Delta, one of which is the “Iroko” (African teak). “The forest is levelled” for mindless profiteering, animals and other avian species migrate to areas where they can survive since they have been dislodged from the Delta forest.

Ojaide’s testimony against petro-modernity in the Delta crystallises from a personal narrative of autobiographical environmentalism to that of a local/communal eco-articulation. He embeds cultural history in the narrative of nature to stage a critique of the Niger Delta environment in the throes of petro-industrial onslaught. Perhaps this explains why in the last three stanzas he connects the devastation of the Delta environment to the physical violence that was inflicted by the hangman who performed the execution of the Ogoni Nine. And this line of thought is further realised in the poem, “Wails”, which I take up for discussion next. Ojaide mourns this treachery against the people and the symbol of their struggle in the person of Ken Saro-Wiwa in a eulogy for a friend and fellow artist which is modelled on his native Urhobo *Udje* dirge songs:

Another ANA meeting will be called  
and singers will gather.  
I will look all over  
and see a space  
that can take more than a hundred—  
the elephant never hides.  
I ask the god of songs  
whether all the singers will come,  
but that silent space  
that can take more than a hundred  
stares at me with nostalgia  
and gives me feverish cold.  
I won’t find one singer  
when another ANA meeting will be called.

*Aridon*, give me the voice



to raise this wail  
beyond high walls.  
In one year I have seen  
my forest of friends cut down,  
now dust taunts my memory (17).

With the benefit of hindsight Saro-Wiwa's execution was without doubt a cathartic moment in Nigeria's history under the brutal regime of General Sani Abacha's dictatorship. Certainly it was so for Nigerian writers on whom it had a devastating impact—politically and culturally—and for the international community, whose support Saro-Wiwa had enjoyed. Ojaide in this poem confronts the tragedy of contemporary Nigeria, in which Saro-Wiwa and the struggle he was passionately involved in are the tragic heroes. He metaphorically refers to Saro-Wiwa as “the elephant” whose absence would be visible when “Another ANA meeting will be called” referring to the Association of Nigerian Authors which Saro-Wiwa once presided over as its national president. Charles Bodunde argues that “Ojaide interprets Saro-Wiwa's death within the wider contexts of political struggle and national tragedy”, so that “Saro-Wiwa's case symbolises the aspirations and will of a community and the complexity of a political struggle” (201). In a melancholic, disconsolate mood, the poet announces with tearful poignancy:

I must raise the loud wail  
so that each will reflect his fate.  
Take care of your people,  
they are your proud assets.  
The boa thoughtlessly devours  
its own offsprings, Nigeria's  
a boa-constrictor in the world map (17-18)

Ojaide discovers in the courageous and irrepressible minority rights' leader useful folkloric armour against totalitarian regimes just like the elephant shields its young ones from the predator's rampage. Perhaps this explains his image of the elephant to describe Saro-Wiwa as a hero who looms large in the minds of the people. It also calls to mind the fate of the elephant, once Africa's priceless possession. The elephant was once a symbol of Africa's

pride, strength and abundance but its tusk served as the basis for the illicit ivory trade by colonial imperialists and their African collaborators. This trade saw the death of many elephants as Africa's fauna and flora were plundered to serve as raw materials to develop Europe. Today, the elephant, once a symbol of Africa's economic stability, is an endangered species on the African continent. It is this concrete image of the endangered elephant Ojaide draws on to describe the death of Saro-Wiwa, a moral voice of truth and justice, symbolising the people's struggle against forms of oppression and exploitation. The poet concludes climatically:

Streets echo with wails.  
A terrible thing has struck the land,  
everyone is covered with shame or sorrow--  
this death exceeds other deaths.  
They have murdered a favourite son,  
this news cannot be a hoax;  
for the love of terror,  
they have hanged a favourite son  
and eight other bearers of truth  
Nobody fools others about these deaths (18)

Tayo Olafioye remarks that "Ojaide is able to transform the image of pain through satire into artistic form because he is not only an artist but the voice of his people, more accurately, the Oracle of the Delta" (quoted in Okuyade, "Cumulative Neglect" 124). In the traditional setting of the Niger Delta and perhaps elsewhere, an oracle—the knower and seer of hidden things—was not only concerned with lamentations and condemnation of ills in the society. It also prescribed ways of addressing these ills by providing workable alternatives to mitigate the consequences of those challenges that plague society. Ojaide believes, and he states this quite emphatically, that "commemoration of all that is good in the past...is still viable...in the present [and] should inspire hope" ("I Want To Be an Oracle" 21).

It is possible to suggest then that Ojaide is not an oracle of doom but of hope. His poetic vision expresses a call for the restoration of a liveable environment in his homeland, one that is ineluctably connected to the social wellbeing of his people. He believes that since

he has been a witness of the good past as he succinctly ‘versifies’ in this collection, he knows what is lost in that past which can serve as a model for rebuilding the crumbling structures of the present. Hence the poem is not all about grief and despondency. He seems to hint at a glimmer of hope in the images of renewal and continuity of the struggle signified by the transfer of the mantle of leadership, of heroism, from one activist to another:

After the warrior-chief’s fall,  
somebody else will carry the standard—  
Boro left for Saro-Wiwa to take over,  
the stump will grow into another *iroko*.  
The hardwood shield is broken,  
the people are exposed to a storm of abuse;  
the diviner’s spell is broken  
& everybody’s left in the open.  
But the diviner’s words are never halted  
by death—*Ominigbo* is my witness (19)

The African belief in “life after death” (Ojaide, *Poetic Imagination* 11) reverberates in most of the poems dedicated to Saro-Wiwa and the other eight, and this becomes a source of consolation and creates a new horizon of hope and sustenance for the continued agitations and demand for social justice in the Niger Delta. This, in a sense, reinforces my earlier point of the poet as an oracle of good tidings and not one of doom; an unapologetic optimist.

In “Elegy for nine warriors”, for instance, the poet engages with this trope of life-after-life, that is, the continued existence of life even in the great beyond to portray the “Ogoni Nine” as heroes, “the nine warriors”, who have become immortalised in the lore of sub-regional and ethnic cosmology, one that is etched by their bold attempt at confronting the might of the Nigerian state on behalf of the Niger Delta:

Those I remember in my song  
will outlive this ghoulish season,  
dawn will outlive the long night.  
I hear voices stifled by the hangman,  
an old cockroach in the groins of Aso Rock.  
Those I remember with these notes  
walk back erect from the stake.

The hangman has made his case,

delivered nine heads through the sunpost  
and sore'd his eyes from sleepless nights.  
The nine start their life after death  
as the street takes over their standard (25).

Ojaide's passion for exploring traditional African folklore is undeniable. Writing in a tradition of abuse poetry modelled on the Urhobo *Udje* dance song of cursing and lampoon, Ojaide chides and derides the notorious hangman responsible for the death of these folk-heroes whose blood will continue to whet the appetite for progressive dissension in the troubled region of the Niger Delta and Nigeria at large. In this poem Ojaide employs repetitive words for effectiveness and the advancement of the intensity of the message. The repeated use of "those I remember" reinforces the persona's homage to the Ogoni Nine and his unflinching support in the cause for which they died. The poem reads like a chant to herald 'the nine' into the bliss of afterlife, so that their demise does not leave the people in a state of despair but charges them into action to actualize the demands for which the leaders made the supreme sacrifice.

In the poem "Abuja" Ojaide frowns at the socio-economic imbalance which has generated political altercation and caused the Delta populace to live in abject poverty, a veritable paradox of living in lack amidst plenty. The poet constructs a seditious narrative of geopolitics in Nigeria, demonstrating how the political foundation upon which the nation-state exists (that is if one truly exists) stands revealed in its starkest weakness:

Here where all cardinal points meet in a capital  
here where rocks raise homes to the sky  
here where the savannah rolls over the soil  
the coven where witches plot the demise of others  
this is where chiefs celebrate on the sweat of slaves  
this is where range chickens consume and scatter leftovers  
this is where the hyena's den is guarded by rings of packs  
this is where the hyena cornered the hare  
and swallowed it, leaving no scent for a trace  
this is where the boa-constrictor strangles its catch  
this is where robbers boast of their callous acts  
& laugh at the plight of a hundred million cowards  
this is where the national flag covers a cesspool

this is where a god led his worshippers to die  
this is where I weep for my entire land (41)

This is probably the most representative poem where Ojaide's politics and poetics of locality as scathing critique of nationalism are most powerfully performed and realised. The poem is a fast-paced narrative, a riveting rendition which dramatizes the inherent material contradictions that the national wealth from the oil resource performs in the political process of national engendering in Nigeria. In fact, the poem seems to give metaphoric resonance to what Ilan Stavans has called "an illness of abundance",<sup>69</sup> and I should add that the poem orchestrates a dichotomy of excess and opportunism, ones that are devoid of moral responsibility among the national leadership which insulate, alienate and lead to parochialism. The narrative exposes the weakness in the will to nationhood, one that is broken by the parochial needs of the ruling elites. The poet articulates the manner in which the national leadership seems to be geographically insulated by their hold on to political power, one which assures unmitigated access to the oil wealth at the expense of fairness and social justice.

The poem also discusses the power-play which alienates the populace from the gains of the natural resource which providence, by virtue of their location, offers. The masses live in squalor while the resources from their land build mansions elsewhere. The poem becomes a cry for what could have been for his homeland and what should not be the scheme of things in the seat of power that is Abuja.<sup>70</sup> This signals a feeling of alienation and betrayal among the people of the Niger Delta. In fact, it is an alienation that is at once socioeconomic, cultural and political. The political calculus of the nation-state around the question of wealth-

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<sup>69</sup> Ilan Stavans "Is American Literature Parochial?" *World Literature Today*, July 2013.

<sup>70</sup> Abuja, the capital city of Nigeria, is a post-Civil War creation of the federal military government of Murtala Mohammed in 1976. It was built from the immense wealth that the 1970s Oil Boom had brought to Nigeria. The money which should have been deployed to other vital sectors of the country's economy, and to cushion the effect of pollution the oil exploration had brought on the Niger Delta environment, was used to build a brand new city for the vain glory of Nigeria's political elites. Abuja exemplifies the postcolonial extravagance and self-serving interests which seem to define politics and leadership in Nigeria.

sharing seems to leave the local populace stripped of the very means on which their life depends, resulting in what Nixon describes as “displacement without moving” (19). Nixon talks about the people’s loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in “a place stripped of the very characteristic that made it inhabitable” (19). As has been discussed in the introductory chapter, the Delta is essentially a wetland of tributaries and labyrinthine creeks which crisscross the southern fringes of Nigeria. Its peculiar geography compels a nature-dependent economy of fishing and farming. The exploration of oil and the resultant pollution of the wetlands and rivers have greatly affected this agrarian economy. Since the people are denied equitable access to the oil wealth, it stands to reason then, that they are doubly short-changed, resulting in the displacement without moving that Nixon talks about.

The repetition of “here” and “where” in the poem suggest locality but that this locality is undermined in each case by the rest of the phrase which refers to a particular elsewhere that is Abuja. Abuja is signified as the stage where the paradoxical existence of oil in the national political process is dramatized as one that encourages extravagance and poverty of vision. Abuja becomes a place that stands to reveal the nastiness of Nigeria’s oil-driven nationalism. Tijan Sallah notes that “place conveys a deep sense of history” (21). Abuja conveys a historical weakness of Nigeria’s fiscal federalism, one that is constituted to disproportionately favour the central government at the expense of other federating units. Every wealth generated in the regions, such as oil revenue in the Delta, is carted away, in a colonial-style of resource plunder of annexed enclaves, to develop Abuja. Thus Abuja becomes everything that the Niger Delta is not.

The questions of inequality and lopsided geopolitical arrangement in the Nigerian polity consistently hunt the lines of this deeply lyrical poem. The beauty of the lyricism is at odds with the narrative it projects: the disconnection between the government and the

governed, between the origination of the wealth and where it is amassed. The image of exploitation and depravity of the people which Abuja represents is discernible in the poet's continuous repetition of "this is where". Thus the poem becomes a narrative of social and political exclusion, questioning the continued denial of the people from their socio-economic patrimony to the wealth which their homeland and physical landscape bears.

Ojaide's ability to measure the Deltascape within the gamut of his poesy is born out of his deep-rooted and sustained relation with the region. The unhappy shift as represented in the metaphor of a falling landscape into the now visible ruins can be traced to the absence of vision in governance. This according to the poet is manifest in the ways in which unthinking and parochial rulers (not leaders) have shattered the people's hopes and usurped their means of livelihood. This sad situation is captured eloquently in couplets in the poem, "Army of microbes":

To the usurper-chieftain who has set his rabid guard dogs  
against streets of impoverished ones

To the uniformed caste of half-literate soldiery  
who close people's mouth with trigger-ready hands

To robbers who beat loud the drums they stole  
from those they feel are blind and deaf to their loss

To the army of insatiable microbes  
that have brought plague to the land

To the ruling council fat in the neck and thigh  
but whose plans make wraith of workers

To those who have creased faces of farmers and fishers  
with lines of hunger and pain

To the hyena and his cavalry of hangmen  
that litter the landscape with mounds

To the cabal of loyalty and fealty  
that sold the rest for coded Swiss accounts

To the executioner and his legion of praise-singers  
who maimed the land's totem pet

To the petty head in his lair of Aso Rock

who spread sorrow into every home

I say, Shame on you and your kind (43)

The poem depicts the state of affairs in Nigeria during Abacha's Junta and the stifling situation that confronted the Nigerian nation at the time. The rulers in uniform dictated the affairs of state not with the authority that issues from the sovereignty of a national constitution but with the might of the gun. Each couplet reflects on the reality of human existence in Nigeria at the time. Ojaide employs invectives to expose the brutal reality of the living condition of the populace. The military government and their cronies are portrayed as economic saboteurs in their bid to enrich themselves by stashing away the national earnings in Swiss coded accounts. What is noticeable in the lines above is an aesthetics in which images are deployed to emphasise the fact that all is not well with the Nigerian polity; governance is lopsided, and that human right's struggle is imperative in re-inscribing a democratic culture of accountability, equity and justice.

Ojaide's poetic oeuvre demonstrates a lived and imaginative relationship with his homeland. It is this cultural relationship he has with the Delta that he inscribes within the context of the oil encounter. Ojaide's poetic aesthetics and practice are not grand but lyrical. He refracts through imaginative reconstructions of his birthplace and its delicate ecology, the precariousness of the people's lives in the face of neoliberal capitalism and the global race for oil. By writing about his childhood, Ojaide does not seem to escape from the oil's post-industrial, urban presence by creating an idyllic world of his childhood Delta. This childhood past is only invoked and placed in relation to the present as a way of drawing attention to the social unease and environmental violence inflicted on the landscape on account of the big business that the oil commodity galvanises. This disorder not only has ramified bearing on the delicate environment, but also intrudes on the writer's poetic memory of his imagined past, of his natal relationship with the environment, and this seems to hold the historical present in critical contrast and vilification. In the next section I will discuss how the burden



of poetic memory and the imperative of moral truth bear upon Ogaga Ifowodo's creative imagination to produce a poetry of insurrectionary testimony which operates to thwart certain hegemonic, grand narrative of the oil encounter and offers alternative perspectives on how we might begin to productively engage with the social and environmental repercussions of oil extraction in the Niger Delta.

### **Contesting hegemonic facts with moral truth: speculation as subversive agency in**

#### **Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp***

If Tanure Ojaide's poetry begins on a nostalgic, autobiographical note, Ifowodo's *Oil Lamp* is a rustic evocation of the Deltascape. The first poem, "A waterscape" which features as a prologue to the collection, serves as a window into a lost, maybe never-existing, harmonious ecosystem of the pre-oil exploration geography of the Delta:

Hung above water, hands in the air,  
whited tongues and breathing fibrous hair:  
roots, white mangrove roots.

Blacker than pear, deeper than soot,  
massive ink-well, silent and mute:  
water, black water.

Floating hats of lily, yellow plume,  
plankton and shrimp, egg-and-fish in bloom:  
lakes, ancestral lakes.

Rich mud of eels, water-holes of crab,  
sink-place for fisher of dig-and-grab:  
bog, mudskippers' bog.

And in the mangrove waters, where tides  
free the creeks of weeds, fishermen glide  
home to the first meal (xi).

In the poet's nostalgic imagination, the alluvial wealth and vegetative abundance of the Deltascape, described in idyllic cadences, are in symbiotic and non-exploitative cultural relationship with the autochthonous people who rely on the environment for their agrarian subsistence and fishing economy. While this is similar to the opening stanza in Ojaide's poem which captures his childhood memories of his Delta, the poem also stands in sharp

contrast to the other poems in this five-part poetry collection which I shall presently discuss.

Ogaga Ifowodo<sup>71</sup> was born in the oil-bearing town of Oleh, in 1966. He holds a bachelor of law degree from the University of Benin, Nigeria, MFA and PhD degrees from Cornell University, USA. He worked for eight years with the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), Nigeria's premier human rights group, from where he carved his niche as a civil rights crusader – a knack he had shown as a student activist and dissident leader against military dictatorship in his student days in the 1980s at the University of Benin. On his return from the United Kingdom where he had attended the Commonwealth Summit in Edinburgh, he was arrested and held in solitary confinement between 1997 and 1998 by General Sani Abacha's military junta on account of his human rights activism and dissidence. A memoir of his prison experience – an excerpt from which was included in the Jack Mapanje edited anthology, *Gathering Seaweeds: African Prison Writing* (Heinemann, 2002) – is in the writing process. In an interview with Sola Balogun, a veteran arts reporter and newspaper editor, Ifowodo tells of how, in high school at the Federal Government College, Warri, he once "literalised" an adage: 'It's an ill wind that blows no one any good' and turned it into a poem. He titled the poem, "Ill Wind" which won a joint first prize for his boarding house.<sup>72</sup>

It is precisely on this particular point that I want to begin the discussion of his artistic strategy of creating his own slice of history, a subversive history of the oil encounter in

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<sup>71</sup> Ifowodo has published *Homeland & Other Poems* (1998), which in manuscript won the 1993 Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) poetry prize; *Madiba*, winner of the 2003 ANA/Cadbury poetry prize; *The Oil Lamp* (2005), and *Homeland* (1999), a German-English selection of his poems. He is included in the anthologies, *Step into a World: A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature* (John Wiley, 2000) and *25 Nigerian Poets* (Ishmael Reed Publishing Co., 2000). His work has been featured in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Poetry International*, *Mantis* (forthcoming). In 1998, he was named recipient of the PEN USA Barbara Goldsmith Freedom-to-Write Award and of the Poets of All Nations (Netherlands) "Free Word" Award. He is an honorary member of the PEN centres of the USA, Canada and Germany and a fellow of the Iowa Writing Program.

<sup>72</sup> CF: <http://www.mywritingworld.org.uk>

Nigeria.<sup>73</sup> I want to examine the ways in which Ifowodo mobilises speculative tales, street stories, and mundane news-stories, to create a poetics of moral truth which bears witness to repressed experiences of the people of the Niger Delta; experiences, I should add, which seem to be denied articulation and visibility in the fields of mainstream discussions. In a public lecture entitled, “The Rich and the Rest of Us” (presented at the Michael Jurist Memorial Lecture, Georgetown University, Washington, DC on 25 April 2012), American Leftist intellectual Cornel West notes that, “The condition of truth is to allow suffering speak” (West). My reading of *Oil Lamp* therefore proceeds to show how Ifowodo brings to the centre stage elided tales of the suffering poor in the Delta as a way of thwarting the visible, dominant accounts which underscore official oil narratives in the Delta. He retrieves some ‘speculative’ tales circulating in the public domain and places these in insurrectionary conversation with other ‘hegemonic’ narratives in the public sphere to produce a condition of truth in which socioenvironmental justice is valorised above the murk of petro-imperialism in the Niger Delta.

In his monograph, *Fact of Fiction, Fiction of Fact* (2005), Nigerian scholar James Tsaaior writes about the indeterminacy of truth in imaginative writing, especially when considered against the background of the intricate relationship that exists among facts, accuracy and convictions—all of which constitute the material textures of history. He suggests that it is left for the reader to sift through these categories and work to produce moral truth, one that is located in concrete contexts “rather than something which appears in a transcendental way” (3). Tsaaior situates his argument in what he calls the “post theories” to discuss the way that “the mutant called text” dredges through the absurdities of accounts

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<sup>73</sup> Although Ifowodo’s poetry does contain some elements of the epic in the way that he treats history and myth, his subject matter is that of the quotidian. He weaves his narrative around issues of the everyday, ones that affect the poor, the underclass at the sites of oil extraction in the Delta. This collection attempts to bring to light certain instances of the oil encounter in the Delta that are otherwise elided in the larger narrative of oil-induced national engendering. In terms of narrative style and trope, Ifowodo’s *The Oil Lamp* is in many ways, similar to Derek Walcott’s classic collection *Omeros* (1990), a postcolonial epic which echoes Homer’s *The Iliad*.

which proliferate the paths of history, to produce meaning in the social world. Echoing Karin Barber, Tsaaior insists that the “text itself says more than it knows, [precisely because] it generates surplus meanings that go beyond and may subvert the purported intentions” (9) of its creator. He argues that in attempts at giving substance to truth in a text, historical facts and interpretive convictions are often implicated in a contestable terrain of shifting hermeneutical and epistemological perspectives, a field of carnival voices, which constitute the domain of mainstream critical discourse. Tsaaior comes to the conclusion that the concept of truth in a text lies in the signifying possibilities that discursive and counter-discursive operations catalyse in the concrete world of contexts.

Tsaaior’s idea has critical salience in my reading of Ifowodo’s *Oil Lamp*. It enables an interpretation of how the poet deploys local myths, history, moral convictions, and facts to create seditious, insurrectional narratives which bear witness to the operations of petroleum extraction in the Niger Delta. In the proceeding pages I suggest that his counter-articulation infuses moral truth and cultural lore into the concrete fact of the oil trajectory and the socio-political discourse which underscore oil exploration in Nigeria. I propose that in fact, Ifowodo provides the reader with narratives of cultural truths in which the complex operations of oil politics in the Delta stand revealed in its moral weakness and bankruptcy. The poetic strategy of blurring the line between the real and the imaginative, the truth and the untrue is important in this collection. It provides a new register – an alternative idiom – of hermeneutic possibilities in understanding the phenomenon of the oil encounter.

Three strands of ideas may be isolated for discussion in this poetry collection. Ifowodo’s creative agency can be deciphered within three artistic styles and poetic strategies by means of which he thwarts received knowledge in order to generate alternative discursive idioms for engaging with issues of social and environmental justice in the Delta. The first identifiable technique is that he takes up certain moments in Nigeria’s contemporary history,

circulated facts and concrete instances of oil exploration, out of which he weaves speculative tales to produce moral, emotional truths. In the first part of the collection titled, “Jese” Ifowodo fictionalises moments in Nigeria’s history that attend the oil encounter. The poem “Jese” captures a real life incident: the October 1998 fire disaster that occurred in the Niger Delta town of Jesse. The inferno was caused by a petroleum pipeline explosion that claimed the lives of over one thousand people in a rural community along the Ethiope River.

Prior to the spillage there had been a fourteen months nation-wide fuel scarcity in Nigeria, which was increasingly taking its toll on the already impoverished people of the Delta under a despotic military rule at the time. In the mainstream media reportage, the inferno was said to have been caused by saboteurs in the local community who scavenged for petroleum to sell in the “black market”. Ifowodo infracts this dominant narrative by utilising unverified and unverifiable evidences given by the victims of the fire disaster. It is these speculative tales that circulated alongside the dominant stereotypical grand narratives that Ifowodo weaves around the pitiable conditions of the local community. The poem “Jese” is an imaginative retelling of the incident. A full quotation of the third movement is apposite:

This was how the damage was done,  
with old pipes corroded and cracked  
by the heat of their burden –

petrol and paraffin piped away  
from rotting dugouts and thatched huts  
to float ships and fly planes,

to feed factories and the chain of ease  
to heat stoves and save the trees  
to light house and street at break of night,

to make fortunes for faceless traders  
in markets without stalls or hand-made goods.  
A sickened earth rusted the pipes

and threw up the lie encased in hollow metal.  
Four boys chasing rodents for the day’s meal –  
while their mates in cities where the pipes end  
learnt their letters in song and rhyme – were first

to find the fountain. The mist of gushing oil  
blinded them long before the blaze. Their screams

summoned the village for the hot shower,  
the ritual bath before sacrifice (5).

The first stanza establishes what might account for the spillage in the first instance. Ifowodo artistically avers that while the crude oil is siphoned to develop and enrich other worlds, neither the facility which transports the product nor the region which bears the oil, benefits from the venture. The poet suggests that the old oil pipes are “corroded and cracked/by the heat of their burden” and even the earth revolts against this mindless exploitation as the “sickened earth rusted the pipes /and threw up the lie encased in hollow metal”. This position unequivocally repudiates the reportage in the mainstream media especially the international media, namely the BBC. A report by BBC’s correspondent Hilary Anderson in Warri reads:

Hundreds of people have been burned to death in southern Nigeria after a ruptured fuel pipeline caught fire. Local newspaper said many of the victims were trying to collect leaking petrol when the explosion occurred near the oil-producing town of Warri. Several of the corpses were found still clutching plastic cups, funnels and cans they had been using to try to scoop up the fuel. The military state administrator, Walter Feghabo, has ordered a mass burial. There is no official word on what caused the fire, but correspondents say it is thought to have been caused by a spark from either a cigarette or a motorbike engine. The state-owned Pipeline and Product Marketing Company (PPMC) operating the pipeline has said the fuel leak was caused by sabotage. (Anderson)

I find the comments of Tony Jupiter, the country director of the environmental group, Friends of the Earth, an evocative critique of the discursive strategy of the above report—the hypocrisy that underwrites the perspective from which the news is relayed, one that is at best insensitive and at worst inhumane. According to Jupiter:

This tragedy underlines how the oil companies and Nigeria’s corrupt government have put screwing as much money as possible out of the oil industry before public safety [...] The fact that people are scrabbling in the streets to collect fuel from a burst pipeline shows how Nigeria’s awesome oil riches are still being controlled by a few, rather than benefiting the many. (Jupiter)

In the reported incident it seems glaring that no mention is made of the devastation done to the environment in the spillage: the farmlands that were destroyed and the freshwater ways of

the Ethiope River into which the petrol flowed, which was polluted and rendered uninhabitable for the aquatic fauna. The story of the spillage and eventual fire outbreak is made complex to undermine the monolithic fact of the so-called ‘sabotage’ and stretched thin when considered against a subsequent press statement by one of the leaders of Jesse Community, a retired Nigerian Army General, David Ejoor. His testimony is published in one of the national dailies, *The Nigerian Punch*:

[T]he rush by the local people to collect spilled petrol from the oil pipeline resulted in the death of over 1,000 Urhobo people in Jesse. Evidence abounds that the fire was caused by the oil companies and the Government. When the spillage became a general knowledge, the oil companies moved in to cover the cartel that was siphoning petrol from a joint valve near Idjerhe in tankers. Towards daybreak, the saboteurs failed to put the pipes back properly and hence the spillage of petrol. The spilled petrol flowed in the farm and in Ethiope River. People going to their farms discovered that they were wading in petrol and not in water. There was a rush to fetch the petrol from the farm and the floating petrol in the river. News got to the police and the oil companies. Attempts were made to persuade the crowd to disperse. The oil companies feared that it was going to be impossible to explain the cause of the spillage to any satisfaction. The Oil Company then sold the idea that the local people had sabotaged the oil pipe. The company and the government then sent a helicopter to the area. The officials in the helicopter warned the people in English to disperse or something would happen to them. Most of the crowd did not understand what was being said and the sight of the helicopter added more fun to the fetching of the liquid gold manna. The officials followed up their threat with firing nerve gas at the crowd, which made it impossible for them to run. Those who attempted to run could not move their limbs with agility. Then the horror came; the place was set on fire with the intention of killing everybody present and to prevent anybody from giving evidence. (Ejoor 2)

With the myriads of conspiracy theories and conflicting accounts of the incident in the public arena, authenticity and accuracy are exposed in their inherent weakness in the face of critical scrutiny. Ifowodo’s imaginative projection of the inscribed truth seems to seek not ‘the factual’ evidence, but to conjure up what can be termed a moral truth. He seems to pose fundamental metaphysical questions about human life, state governance, and patrimony from the commonwealth of the oil resource. The poet employs polyphonic accounts to denounce the lack of moral imagination evident in the blame game making the rounds under which the federal government and the multinationals together with the mainstream media hide to detract and deflect the main issues at stake. In fact, Ifowodo seems to mobilise these conflicting

accounts to operate as multiple voices—in a Bakhtinian sense—to do violence to the concept of official truth, so as to project alternative interpretations of what might have been the cause of the inferno. Hence he pushes against the boundaries of concrete facts as presented by the official reportage and perhaps documented history. He appears to suggest that the social encounters with the materiality of oil modernity in the Delta may be signified as a complex, mystifying experience, a conundrum which does not easily yield to the apparently simplistic and stereotypical interpretations, as in the mainstream media reportage. With the poet's unique devices and idiomatically related tropes, the discourse of the oil encounter is apprehended and the circumstances that attend its trajectories are made complex.

Egya in a reading of Ifowodo's poetry offers an interesting resonance to this notion when he notes that "the poet projects the dialectic voices of both the oppressed voice (man and earth) and the oppressor. Indeed, the poems utilize novelistic techniques in their polyphony and many-languagedness" ("Eco-human Engagement" 66). But Martin Amis, in an interview with John Haffenden, seems to put this point better when he declares that: "style is not neutral, it gives moral directions" (23). Thus Ifowodo's artistic technique of weaving the factual with the speculative of carnival voices around the pitiable condition has a collective hold on the reader's imagination. His reification of the conjectural which the multiple witnesses conjure up seems to give us a moral direction that, it is not the broken pipe or the defiance of the people in risking their lives by helping themselves to the spilled petrol that is at issue. It is the unwillingness of the government to transform the mineral resource into common and accessible wealth for the people and the living conditions that has reduced them to a spectacle of survivalist scavengers.

That the earth revolts and rusts the pipes is a validation of the people's defiance in helping themselves to the plundered spoils of their land. By investing the earth with agency in its activist solidarity with the poor community, Ifowodo appears to give credence to my



earlier point made in chapter one, that there exists a symbiotic relationship between the human subjects and the environment, one that is deeply rooted in culture. Hence we notice the active involvement of the “sickened earth” in the way that it rusts the pipes and exposes the official lies “encased in the hollow metal” (5). In a sense, the agentive earth gives cultural rationale to the righteous indignation which provokes the alleged sabotage. Only starvation and a threat of an imminent annihilation can put such people in a survival mode where they defy death to scavenge for crumbs (spilled petrol) to stay alive.

And this brings us to the second identifiable technique by means of which Ifowodo imagines the oil encounter in the Niger Delta. In his refraction of the social disorder and environment devastation that confront the Delta, Ifowodo deploys idioms which gravitate toward paradoxical and humorous ironies to operate in such a way as to make the grim realities which he expresses to seem uncanny but nonetheless hilarious. Still on the same poem, the disturbing images of squalor are conjured by the instances of scavenging associated with the poor and the insane, and these are made dreadfully laughable and vibrant in the poem. The poet depicts Jesse villagers as a:

...crowd, crazed by cracked  
casks of wine on a cobbled street,  
a siphoning circus danced to the wild  
music of deprivation in the low growth,  
  
and they fought for elbow room  
to fill their bowls and kegs  
with the spilled oil of their land  
  
near a drilled-dry well, its drilling tree  
the lurking brown ghost of electiriki (6).

Notice the spectacle of survivalist eagerness, which verges on the ludicrous, the compelling image of jest, in which the poor, the very wretched, scramble to help themselves to the leaking fuel from the burst petro-pipes. These lines, in a sense, resonate with the proverbial story of Lazarus in the Bible who waits at the table of the Richman for crumbs that would fall

from the latter's table of plenty. The Jesse people are described in searing images of paradox and irony, as the crumbs are from the plenty, the abundance of their environment which providence has bestowed. Hence they helped themselves to the "spilled oil of their land" (6).

They are left with few choices in the given situation, precisely because it had been:

...the fourteenth month of the fuel crunch  
and stoves cooked cobwebs in cold corners.  
Dreading the spirits that live in trees,

they would not break green twigs to make a meal,  
till the fuel crunch compelled choice between  
tree and human, today and tomorrow.

The forest quivered as trunk after trunk snapped,  
and a nameless rage wagged green-fingered  
branches in the air as they fell to the hungry axe (3).

It is also ironical that the people would rather subscribe to animistic beliefs than engage in the soulless endeavour of plundering the already decimated environment as they "would not break green twigs to make a meal" because they fear "the spirits that live in trees". They would rather risk their already precarious lives by scooping from the broken pipes than violate their cultural relationship with the environment. Thus, with a vast pool of ironies and paradoxes Ifowodo presents a more convincing account of the incident by weaving the fictional with ostensible facts. And this invokes in the reader a semblance of laughter which endures the searing images of squalor and deprivation deployed to describe the living conditions of the populace who live in habitats of "rotting dugouts and thatched huts/ [while the oil from underneath their feet], feed factories and the chain of ease/ [...] to make fortunes for faceless traders" (5).

Ifowodo's training as a lawyer and human rights crusader is brought to bear in the poem "Odi". He makes the concept of justice in Nigeria his subject of poetic ridicule. The poem fictively captures the event that unfolded in the Niger Delta town of Odi, also an oil-bearing community in Southern Nigeria. The people of Odi had in 1999 staged a civil protest

to draw the attention of the newly democratically elected government to the continued absence of meaningful development in their area, even as their land generates much wealth for the national treasury. An altercation ensued between the youth of the community and the Nigerian Police which the Federal Government had sent to quash a growing uprising and “restore order” in the community. The confrontation resulted in the death of five policemen – so the story went – and also in the death of countless civilians. The federal government, in retaliation, sent in the Army “to teach the villagers a little lesson”...this resulted in the death of five hundred people—mostly women and children. In the retelling of this narrative, Ifowodo neither valorises the rebellion by the youth nor disavows the government’s reprisal, it seems to me; instead, in movement “XVI”, he questions the government’s brutal sense of justice in a so-called democracy, where the Nigerian state literally unleashes on its citizens:

A battalion of justice scorched its path  
to Odi, came to solve by war  
a case of homicide: five cops and four  
  
soldiers sent to break a youth revolt  
lay dead in the dark labyrinth of the Delta,  
engorging sharks or crocodiles, or growing rank  
  
with slick-spiked creek water. And the president,  
ex-commando, false-star-general,  
summoned the governor of the province  
  
for his orders: “By noon tomorrow, find  
the murderers or prepare the grounds for my men” (21)

Ifowodo imbues his imagination with a dose of sarcasm and irony to euphemistically describe the garrison-like nature of justice in Nigeria. The diametrically opposing collocation of “battalion” and “justice” is meant to poke at the reader’s sense of justice so that objectivity may be renegotiated as one reencounters the Odi episode in narrative. Six movements later in the poem the poet returns to the question of brutal justice as the patrimony of a culture of violence deriving from the long years of military dictatorship in Nigeria. He jibes at the cruelty of justice with ironical collocations of incompatible concepts, namely: destruction and

justice. He writes in movement “XXII”:

Noontide breeze, mordant with the smell  
of justice, blew into deserted homes  
through blown-out windows, broken walls, fallen

roofs, sent the echo of their warning  
where the enemy might hear it and surrender.  
Still, they heard only their boots on doors,

the crashing walls and rafters  
which, shaken loose, collapsed at their feet.  
But the breeze cooled the sweat of battle

on their skin, dried their starched fatigues  
to knife-edge sharpness, invigoured  
the toughness of the bombing phase (27).

The poet’s use of military images such as “battalion”, “ex-commando”, and “false-star general”, “surrender”, “enemy”, “boots”, suggests that the country, in its young democracy at the time, had not fully purged itself of those vestiges of military brutality, a culture of public display of violence and abuse of power. The images evoke in the reader disturbing memories of the horrors of past military dictatorships in Nigeria and its brutality, of which Sani Abacha’s junta was the most notorious. Irony is deployed in this poignant poem, not just as “a tone but as a clash of perspectives” (Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem* 6). Although the poet evidently does not take sides with either of the feuding parties: the people of Odi on the one hand, and the Nigerian Government on the other. He allows his choice of imagery to point in the direction of true justice, where his interest lies.

In the third strand of poetic artistry that I take up for discussion here, Ifowodo appears to find inspirational insights in the Italian poet and philosopher Dante. In the epigraph to this collection, Ifowodo quotes an excerpt from Dante’s *Inferno* (canto xiv) to draw on tropes of the infernal and aesthetics of eschatological rhetoric as a way of signalling the looming annihilation of the Niger Delta, one that is imminent if questions of social and environmental injustices in the region are not properly addressed:

I saw so many flocks of naked souls,

all weeping miserably, and it seemed  
that they were ruled by different decrees...  
Above that plain of sand, distended flakes  
of fire showered down...  
The dance of wretched hands was never done;  
now here, now there, they tried to beat aside  
the fresh flames as they fell (quoted in Ifowodo iii).

Ifowodo draws on the above lines to signal his aesthetic engagement with tropes of the infernal and the eschatological. This, again, is a case of literalisation, that is, the metaphoric flames of hell in Dante's *Inferno* become actual flames in the Delta. The images are made manifest in two broad strands. The first is of fire as a signature of oil blowouts and material agency of destruction on the one hand, and on the other hand, as a human agency of repression and pacification brought about by that incongruous operation of violence which I discussed in the introduction of this thesis. The second is one that features in different forms of official corruption and lack of accountability in the form of socio-economic injustice, political tyranny and moral irresponsibility. The lines of movement eleven illustrate the first point:

The fire uncoiled like infinite  
cobra, stretched to the farthest edges  
of a land marked by oil for double torment.

And the fields of crop, snatched from water  
by the hands of simple farmers, screamed:  
*It's midseason! We are not ripe!*  
*Do not reap us! Do not cook us!*

The creeks and ponds, soon to boil dry,  
joined the fields, thinking the case  
of water even clearer and cried:

*take your cooking oil away*  
*we are no pots or cauldrons!*  
*Can't you see here's no kitchen*  
*And you burn your meal to ashes?*

The rivers, now on fire, rushed  
to the sea for a dip, floating  
along the land's burning question,  
  
unanswerable as every spot soaked the flow

and wind and water showed the fire where to go (13).

Here the fire seems to be in connivance with the already palpable environmental degradation brought about by oil exploration to obliterate every form of existence, fauna and flora, in the landscape. The poet laments:

IX

The smoke bore food to a severe god,  
but to a village sent to sleep by hunger,  
a sign of the end of time. They wakened

from their nightmares to the greetings of fire  
shrieked across dismal doorways by a child  
demented by the deafening whoosh! blinded

by the dazzle of her mother's hair glowing  
for a maddening moment like filaments of gold.  
Led by the venomous scent of charring bone,

the dripping and drying fat of breasts and buttocks  
spiced by the aromatic thyme of the shrivelling  
shrubbery, they rushed to the edges of the blaze

but checked by the furious fence twirled by the smoke  
round its infernal altar, the men's eyes  
reddened, then moistened, as they ran for water;

the women broke out of their breast-beating fear  
quickly enough to clutch at sand and stones  
to throw in handfuls at the furnace.

But all was fuel to the consuming fire,  
bones and flesh as stones and sand and the thrown water (11).

In this poem, the agentive metaphor of the infernal, of fire, as the harbinger of destruction and death is brought about by a material resource, namely petrol. The people's act of coveting the oil is precipitated by the need to stay alive, but alas, it is expressed through survival modes of scavenging. Notice that although Ifowodo decries the imminent annihilation of the people brought about by the oil encounter, in all its imperialistic formations, he imbues his tales with ironies, paradoxes and humour, which rouses some restrained hilarity in the reader. His cinematographic description of the way in which the fire consumes the bodies in the inferno has a euphemistic bent to the horrendous situation he

portrays. But the full vent of his ire and despondency is unequivocal in his engagement with the other figurations of infernal metaphoric as a human agency of repression and political tyranny:

The first grenade, lobbed by a hand  
too eager for live cremations, landed  
on the roof of the village school.

The fire and alarm started there  
with the wiping out of the house of learning.  
They had come to perfect what rain and wind

began weeks before by stripping the mud-  
walled classroom blocks of their thatch roofs.  
In the thick of season's night-and-day

downpours, the walls washed down to hardwood  
posts and bamboo grids were at home with defeat.  
Hearing no shrieks, the sort his well-trained soldier's

ears knew as the terror of a shell-shattered  
night just before dawn, he steadied his hand  
for the second lob, this time in line with the rest

of the troops (22).

Ifowodo, consummate poet that he truly is, has a way of saying a lot with few images, webbed in a plethora of meaning. In this poem, two disturbing issues are decipherable. The first is that the Nigerian state is at war with the citizenry over oil rights and resource control. In the fashion of military rule, the poet seems to suggest that the State is determined to go to any length to preserve its unimpeded and unquestionable access to and control of, the oil deposits, even if that means exterminating the entire local population around the site of the crude wealth who dare to resist its motives. The second is that education, which is arguably the sure route through which the people of the region might untether themselves from a life of drudgery, is not spared the fascist justice meted out to the Niger Delta community. Hence even the dilapidated schools, of "the mud-/walled classroom blocks of their thatch roofs" (22), are demolished in the government's reprisal attack on the community.

Ifowodo works with facts and emotional truths to produce a moral reality which destabilises what Judith Butler terms “the hegemonic field of representation itself” (“Precarious Life” 155). Also, Terry Eagleton has noted that in a postmodernist temperament, “[t]ruth is the product of interpretation” (*Literary Theory* 201). This is an interesting point to take seriously, because it seems to me that the forms of poetic truth which Ifowodo subversively produces in this text signal an important but also alternative dimension to a productive engagement with the socio-political manifestations of the oil encounter in Nigeria. It may be said also that Ifowodo’s poetic vision and artistry in this respect take root in certain arbitrary, eclectic, hybrid and decentred form that inheres in the postmodernist work of art about which Eagleton speaks here. This is because the visible trajectories and social realities that the oil encounter instantiates and exacerbates in the Niger Delta inspire literary imaginations that resonate with what Harry Garuba has described as “the complicated terrain of the unresolved, [while] acknowledging incoherencies, contradictions and multiplicities without seeking the resolution and coherence that grand narrative provides” (“Unbearable Lightness” 65). The oil encounter and the politics that attend the production and distribution of oil resources seem to have brought with it a baggage of paradoxes—of poverty and wealth existing at the same site, of neoliberal capitalism heralded by the ideals of democracy and free market which do not translate into wealth, nor guarantee environmental and social justice for the local populace that exists in spaces that bear natural resources such as the Niger Delta. The literary expression of the Delta does give eloquent articulation to this atmosphere of anomie, of limited choices and of the unresolvable. In Ifowodo’s attempt at bearing witness to the oil encounter to create a possibility for justice and for moral compassion to prevail, his text powerfully reverberates with Anthonia Juhasz’s similar observation in her book, *The Tyranny of Oil* (2009). She writes that:

Communities that live where oil is found – from Ecuador to Nigeria to Iraq – experience the tyranny of daily human rights abuses, violence, and war. The tyranny of environmental



pollution, public health risks, and climate destruction is created at every stage of oil use, from exploration to production, from transportation to refining, from consumption to disposal. And the political tyranny exercised by the masters of the oil industry corrupts democracy and destroys our ability to choose how much we will sacrifice in oil's name. (2)

And paradoxically too, these are the incongruities that also give expression to Ifowodo's poetry and compel his creative verve to subversively inscribe other tales upon the ostensibly overwhelming facts of the material reality of oil extraction in Nigeria. It is this material reality, which (hegemonic) history orchestrates that Ikiriko's poetry recuperates and interrogates in the next section.

**Dialogic engagement with images of hegemonic power: geopolitics and distributive justice in Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta***

Ibiwari Ikiriko<sup>74</sup> was born in 1954 in the Northern Nigerian city of Kano but grew up in Okrika, an inner city suburb of Port Harcourt – the largest Niger Delta city and commercial capital of the petroleum industry in Nigeria. Ikiriko took a Master of Arts degree in English and a PhD in Arts and Commitment in Poetic Creation at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. He unfortunately died soon after his first and only poetry collection was published in 2000. His singular output is nonetheless fundamental to the evolving petrocultures captured in this Niger Delta poetry. Oyeniyi Okunoye notes that, “In spite of his very short career as a poet, Ibiwari Ikiriko's work is probably the most representative of contemporary Niger Delta poetry in the sense that it primarily articulates a regional consciousness” (“Alterity, Marginality” 416). Ikiriko seems knowledgeable about Nigeria's chequered geo-political history, and this perhaps explains his continued deployment of a metaphoric of geopolitical Nigeria, with a bid to engage that history in what Sule Egya has called “discursive textualization” (“Imagining Beast” 350), as a way of establishing a particular aesthetic of

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<sup>74</sup> Owing to the sudden death of this poet immediately after his poetry collection was published, very scanty biographical note exists on him.

regional specificity that emphasises the distinction between the Niger Delta and the rest of the Nigerian nation. I will presently return to this point in the analysis of the poems.

I want to begin my sets of comment by stating that the text in a sense encourages us to think about geography and geopolitics as possible sites of political conflicts, sites of understanding power at play, and the kinds of agency that they enable at the sites of oil extraction in the Delta. The poet has several ways of keeping the reader engaged in this text. His continuous allusion to contexts of Nigeria's historical process of being, its geopolitical contestations over fiscal federalism, and the geographical makeup of the country, leaves the reader longing for meaning outside of the text: in contexts. In fact, the concreteness of these geopolitical and geographic tropes in the text make the images read not as metaphors but as '(con)texts' for what they truly are. By (con)texts I mean that the poetry blurs the demarcation between text and context. While it draws attention to itself as a literary work, a text, it also defers attention to a referent of context, and this makes the collection straddle the two realms of text and context. The poetry orchestrates a concatenation of voices—geopolitical, socio-historical, and cultural—to operate as carnivalesque countercurrents, competing to be heard and calling attention to themselves in insurrectionary enactments of geopolitical articulations and the performance of ethnic identity. *Oily Tears of the Delta* may then be conceived as a text which operates from a vantage point of political and historical contexts through which the oil encounter in Nigeria is imagined and brought into productive dialogue with the social world of the Niger Delta. What are the specific dialogics that Ikiriko brings to the fore of petrocultures, and what insights might these offer in understanding the oil encounter in the Niger Delta?

In considering the geo-poetics of subnational, regional consciousness that Ikiriko articulates in this collection, my reading of the text may therefore proceed based on the following two assumptions. The first is the expressive impulse of dialogism in the text; it is

one that expresses certain “dialogised interaction” (*The Bakhtin Reader* 113) with meaning-bearing signs and power-enforcing symbols that circulate in the local sites of oil installations in the Niger Delta. As we shall encounter in the text, the poet sets out to recuperate and re-appropriate some meaning-bearing signposts which populate the public spaces of the Delta as a way of deconstructing the forms of power that they embody. The second is his poetic engagement with a metaphoric of geographical and geopolitical Nigeria, one in which he seems to stage a textualisation of the chequered history of the national becoming. He questions and rejects the logic of majority-minority dialectic which, in a sense, underscores the national political process of being.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of dialogism and heteroglossia help me to make sense of and to unpack, the expressive impulses of Ikiriko in this poetry, especially the way that he uses language as instrument of mediation between the text and contexts to project a form of dialogised interactions. Although Bakhtin is well-known as a major theorist in novelistic discourse, his ideas of dialogism and heteroglossia are well suited to understanding Ikiriko’s poetry. In his essay, “Literary Stylistics: the Construction of the Utterance”, Bakhtin explains how language is constitutive of the social space in which it functions, as a continually evolving category:

Language is most certainly not a dead, frozen product of social life: it is in constant flux, its development following that of *social life*. This forward movement in language is realised in the process of human communication not only in connection with production, but also in the course of speech communication [...] speech communication [...] is no more than one among the many forms in the development (coming-to-be) of the social group in which speech interaction takes place between people participating in social life. Hence it would be a futile waste of effort to try to understand the construction of utterances, which make up the element of discourse, without any reference to the actual social environment (situation) which has evoked them. [...] the true essence of language is the social event of speech interaction, manifest by one or several utterances. (114-15)

The idea of the dialogic for Bakhtin takes its root in the exchange of utterances between the speaker or interlocutor and the listener/audience, and this involves some element of response between the two (117). Bakhtin argues that all forms of utterances, be it dialogue or

monologue or psychological interaction with the inner self, are “completely dialogic”, precisely because utterances are constitutive and derivative of an inherently “sociological character of the human consciousness [of] experiences and their expressions” (118-119).

The term heteroglossia, on the other hand, may be understood as deriving from the word heterogeneous, which means, socially diverse and linguistically constituted multiplicity of being, in this case, the presence of voices. The sociality of these voices is underwritten by their ability to deploy language as an interactive tool of exchange through dialogue. Heteroglossia in my reading of Bakhtin may be seen as the social textures which give concrete expression to discourse, the multiple voices which call attention to ideological standpoints, and give meaning to social consciousness, through the perceptive use of language. In his own words, Bakhtin intimates:

Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The process of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance; the utterance not only answers the requirements of its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act, but it answers the requirements of heteroglossia as well; it is in fact an active participant in such speech diversity. And this active participation of every utterance in living heteroglossia determines the linguistic profile and style of the utterance to no less degree than its inclusion in any normative-centralizing system of a unitary language. Every utterance participates in the ‘unitary language’ (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces). (*Dialogic Imagination* 75)

What I draw from Bakhtin’s conception of the dialogic and social heteroglossia and will bring to bear in reading Ikiriko’s poetry is the primacy of language as the concrete connection between text and context, language as the mediating agent by which the dialogic interaction is organised and performed in the text. Ikiriko’s poetry can be read as a dialogic artefact which finds expression in Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia, in the sense that it tends to feed from and engage with, the public domain of quotidian sociality in the Delta, a sociality that is conceived in its real, concrete textures.

Ikiriko seems to interrogate those meaning-bearing images which communicate some ideology-embedded and power-enforcing messages bearing governmental and authorising instructions in the spaces of oil installations. He considers them as holding some form of repressive powers, believing that these images are invested with repressive principles which legitimise government's actions and inactions in the Delta region. The poet undertakes to re-appropriate these signs and images which (to him) seem to hold powerful influence on the psyche of the local populace. The site of oil extraction, the Niger Delta, is made a heteroglot space in this collection. Beginning with the first poem in the collection, "Evening Already", there appears to be an enactment of a certain dialogic protocol taking place in the mind of the poet persona:

I had listened  
To the voices within me  
To the voices around me  
That I am a time-bomb.

Now I realise  
That I am only a landmine.

I had listened  
To the voices within me  
To the voices around me  
That I am an oil bean seed

Now I realise  
That I am only a coconut!

I cannot detonate  
Without external pressure  
I cannot disperse  
Without external agency (11)

We notice that the persona seems to be engaged in a soliloquy, dialoguing with the self over what later emerges as "cares", a recurring image that runs throughout the poem in which he explores a number of concerns that seem to irritate his poetic sensibilities. The persona breaks into a dramatic monologue as if he had been contemplating these concerns for a while. We do not quite get what he is getting impatient about, but he has apparently lost his calm

and becomes restless with the “cares” around him. The persona is pressed for time as we glean in the urgency of his tone:

And before me  
I see day’s light  
Changing from gold  
Past silver,  
With shadows lengthening.

Yet I am resolved  
Not to be wasted by time  
And I know why I live  
To say these things are still to do.

Cares.  
Clamping weight of cares.

Cares before me  
Cares behind me  
Cares within me  
Cares around me (11-12)

The persona seems to scorn at his indulgence in the luxury of waiting patiently at a cost he as a geographical entity could no longer afford. We are only introduced to what his complaints are about in the second canto of the poem. He seems to imagine himself as embodying a personified subject of a geographical landscape, and as such he is no longer willing to bear the burden of external agency, one that seems to exploit the persona’s hospitality, a sacrifice that amounts to nothing:

Cares crowd around me  
Like wretched huts around  
An only Queen House  
On a land-starved island  
Fed upon by the encroaching sea  
That offers difficult terrain excuses  
For majority policies to keep it so  
Enshrouded Beauty failing to exude.

I am immersed in cares  
Like a cock in crude oil,  
Jugular glutted, glottis jaded.  
Time crier belated (13)

The poem is rendered in the form of a chant. The reader hears the webbed words echoing in the mind's ear, of one possessed with the muse to excoriate, yet burdened with concerns he speaks about. Here, his engagement with the politics of Nigeria's geography and map is first surfaced. He calls the Delta a "land-starved island" fed upon by externalities he describes as an "encroaching sea" who gives unconvincing reasons of "difficult terrain" for not developing the hosting entity, the Delta – an area that bears the wealth for the nation.

Ikiriko's poetry appears to have the reader believe that official narratives and certain power-bearing images in the form of signposts – found throughout the Niger Delta – are constitutive sites where repressive ideologies – which legitimise the activities of Big Oils, the actions and inactions of government – are invested in the Delta region. Thus the poet undertakes to invoke these local signpost and meaning-bearing images to function as "dialogizing backgrounds" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* xvii), which foreground a connection between his text and the context of the material history of geopolitical and social contestations in Nigeria. In the poem "Under Pressure" Ikiriko conjures up signs, symbols and images which occupy the sites of oil installations in the Niger Delta. He uses this poem to challenge and question the mechanisms of power at work at the sites and spaces of oil extraction, especially the oil transporting pipelines, which populate the spaces of human habitation. The poet seems to question the manner in which these signs and images operate to control, threaten and alienate the local inhabitants in the region:

DANGER!

High pressure oil pipe line – keep off!

Don't anchor!

DEATH!

High tension gas pipe line – keep clear!

No fishing!

WARNING!

High pressure pipes – keep away!

No berthing!

*Tresspassers* will be compressed.  
Roasted. Melted.

O what a full tide of pressure  
Brim they over our land and persons (51).

In this poem the poet elegantly speaks about a particular process of systematic intrusion which the signposts perform in the Niger Delta. I want to highlight at least three levels on which this intrusion operates and which culminates in alienating the human population from the ‘oil ecology’ of the Delta. The first I identify is the physical, spatial intrusion. This one impedes and destabilises the very physical space of human existence. It immobilises and restricts human presence and freedom. It inscribes and constitutes for itself, within itself, a spatial demarcation, a form of physical segregation between the oil resource and the local human population. This distinction is clearly delineated by the fact of the announcement of the physical presence of the pipelines. Even when the pipelines are underground, the inscriptions announce their malicious presence through the signpost by instructing the public to “keep off!” and steer clear. This form of intrusion operates to govern the quotidian physical movement and mobility of the local populace. It dictates to the human subjects that inhabit this landscape where to venture, where and how to move and loiter, and where not to.

The second form of intrusion is the economic and cultural interruption that the signpost orchestrates. This is the form that meddles into, disrupts and controls the territorial economy. It decrees where, how and what daily vocations should be conducted. It forbids the local people from their practice of maritime economy in the form of fishing, sailing, berthing and wharfing. In fact, all essential preoccupations of the people, given the nature of the terrain, are suspended so that the oil can be transported without hitch or hindrance to its point of consumption. The pipelines that crisscross the Delta, piping away the oil to other climes are captured here as a societal menace, a classical Grecian sphinx, bent on wrecking the land and the people. While they fleece away the wealth from under their feet, they also pose danger



and frighten the local populace from going about their domestic businesses. The people are excluded from the means of livelihood and their alternative means of survival is denied them as well. Thus it warns them from berthing their sea-going vessels, while also threatening them with “DEATH” if they venture to fish in the waters.

The third and final form of intrusion is the one that operates at a psychic level. The poet seems to suggest that while performing these forms of intrusive exclusions, occluding the locals from all that relates to oil production in the Delta, the very revenue hub of the Nigerian state, these signs embody a semblance of legitimacy over the spaces they occupy, but they also do something powerful to the people. The signposts that announce the presence of high-pressure pipelines psychologically disarm and mentally alienate the local inhabitants from their very human sphere of existence. Having restricted human movements and denied the locals from their alternative means of livelihood, this third level of intrusion operates to banish them from the landscape by declaring them “trespassers”: a category of outsiders, invaders, that can be crushed at will. This, in a sense, enforces a form of intrusion with a legal instrument that has a superior force to psychologically disarm, threaten and strip them of any claim to autochthony that would have served as the basis for resisting such psychological violence.

But in the poem, there seems a particular eeriness and incisiveness about the words in block letters, “DANGER!”, “DEATH!”, “WARNING!”, and the wrong spelling of the word ‘trespassers’; all pointing to an intentional provocation to (re)act against perceived threats of annihilation in the region. Every word in the opening stanzas is made to account for itself and to point in the direction of an imminent uprising that the poem and its analogous context of the signposts are meant to stoke. The poet appears to be reticent about this imminent outcome but his choice of punctuations is suggestive of that possible reaction. In a sense, I would agree with Eagleton here, that “Poetry is something which is done to us, not just said to us;

the meaning of its words is closely bound up with the experience of them” (*How to Read a Poem* 21). John Brannigan makes a similar point while noting that poetry is “not a passive vehicle of ideological meaning. It generates and multiplies meaning, and therefore must be accounted for as an active participant in the process of fashioning and interpreting society, culture and history” (quoted in Egeya 350). I want to suggest that the choice of words and punctuations, in a sense, also feeds into, and draws from a certain concrete social world of the Delta, one that is proliferated by violence in its varied shades and manifestations. The one I refer to here features both as violence of environmental destruction and as violence of resource rebellion, a kind of environmentalism of the poor, as we shall see in the next chapter, that is deployed to make visible the unseen violence in the forms of intrusion that I have been discussing.

In the poem “Devalued”, the same streak of this incitation is conveyed in a narrative that throws the conditions of violence, with all its historical and systematic valences, into clarifying relief:

Our yesterdays  
Have been diluted  
With debased deeds

Our todays, devalued  
Are no more weighty  
Than a dollar bill

And our tomorrows  
Are mortgaged by  
Home brokers to foreign clubs

So, finish we are  
Unless we gather in concert  
To break these brokers (56).

The poem gives expression to some geopolitical and ethno-regional tensions that seem to define Nigerian history, especially pertaining to resource control – which continues to be a knotty issue in the discourse of fiscal federalism and national wealth sharing. Hence the Delta is figured to be the goose that lays the golden egg, but left to starve and denied a share in the

wealth it produces just because it lacks the wherewithal to sway state policies which would guarantee its political relevance in national political process. The poem reveals a rallying summons for a revaluation of the national fiscal policy. The citizenry lacks hope just as the country's leadership lacks vision and a national dream for the nation and people. Governance seems to be groping in the dark with no sense of direction and the country is described as lacking history since it leaves no rallying narrative around which national pride and identity might be mobilised. Chinua Achebe puts this even more glaringly in his controversial classic, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983). He writes:

The countless billions that a generous Providence poured into our national coffers in the last ten years (1972-1982) would have been enough to launch this nation into the middle-rank of developed nations and transformed the lives of our poor and needy. But what have we done with it? Stolen and salted away by people in power and their accomplices [...] Embezzled through inflated contract to an increasing army of party loyalists who have neither the desire nor the competence to execute their contracts. Consumed in escalating salaries of a grossly overstaffed and unproductive public service [...]. (24)

Fully enmeshed in the squandering philosophy around the oil wealth is a culture of consumption, tagged the so-called “national cake”, one that is guaranteed by narrow opportunism and not by dint of merit through hard-work – as in the case of the French or Germans. Toyin Falola in his book, *The History of Nigeria* (1999), explains this absence of a unifying national value as an “outcome of the interaction of three interrelated factors, namely, the nature of politics, the character of the state, that is, a weak state which inherited many problems created by colonialism, and the country's role in the international economic system which contributed to its underdevelopment”. Falola highlights the manner in which politics takes the form of a “winner takes all game”, noting that in Nigeria, “politics involved primarily the ability to gain control of public resources, or the process of doing this, not for public ends, but for private ends” (108). This philosophy has entrenched in the very core of the Nigerian body-polity, a deep-seated culture of corruption and, in the citizenry, unpatriotic disposition. The ruling class, lacking vision and foresight, has mortgaged the country's

economy to lending agencies such as the Paris Club, where the government continues to service unaccounted-for and unutilised loans. In the poem quoted above, Ikiriko takes issue with a form of regional deprivation: he paints the region's future as bleak and unsure unless some drastic measure is taken to address and secure the regional patrimony. The poet seems to be saying that for us to address the Niger Delta situation, one that is marked by limited political agency and the disavowal of local identities, we must go back to the geopolitical arrangement where the conditions for and will to, Nigerian nationhood would be renegotiated.

Ikiriko's poetic vision of regional consciousness, as Okunoye has pointed out, is starkly projected in its unflattering manner in the poem "The Minority Man", written to lament the socio-economic and political status of the Delta in the national political process:

Goose-flesh turns my body  
Into that of a plucked hen  
Each time your condition confronts me,  
Minority Man.

Robin on a tree infested by crows,  
Tilapia in a river colonized by sardines,  
A hen among ducks, an ass among cattle.

Minor Minority Man  
Impotent in bedrooms  
Bound to fewness  
Manacled by the tyranny of numbers  
Out-numbered and outmanoeuvred.

Mini Minor Minority Man  
Impotent in boardrooms  
Having neither say nor way  
Marginal in things.

Easily moved like a decimal point  
Insignificant in equations  
Without factor, without connection, weightless.

Badnamed unresourceful and unindustrious  
And besieged by resourceful deluges  
You snuggle up to the Harmattan

The Harmattan that leaves you

Shrivelled, snivelling and suze-rained

But let the gods make a plea for you:  
If these and those resourceful ills  
Be industry  
Let's have no more of it (43).

This poem represents for the poet a deep sense of repression, of burden, of being crushed under the weight of limited agency which is determined by number in Nigeria's political discourse. Ikiriko questions the discrepancy between wealth generation and power-sharing dynamics in the national political process. He considers the perceived socio-economic imbalance and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta as the visible manifestation of a disproportionate geopolitical arrangement of the Nigerian state. He seems to suggest that the geopolitical history of Nigeria (which I highlighted in the introduction of this thesis) is underscored by numerical politics, and this is diametrically opposite to the logic of wealth generation for the Nigerian nation: for the Niger Delta, considered the minority, produces more wealth while lacking political influence which only numbers guarantee. The poet seems to be saying that in addressing the contentious issues that confront the Niger Delta, a rethinking of the geopolitical arrangement of the Nigerian nation is imperative for it constitutes the basis upon which the national political process is imagined and performed at every stage of national life. Hence he undertakes to reject that history by questioning its foundational politics of exclusion, where majority takes all at the expense of the so-called minority, conceived as vassals, defeated, as if the national political process were a contest of war – one of attrition and bellicosity.

The poem reveals how political agency and the rights to equal citizenship within the larger Nigerian state, is denied the Delta, framed as “mini, minor, minority man”. Notice the way that the poet conceives Delta subjectivity in the register of the “Other”, the outsider, one that is lacking in political agency in comparison to his Northern counterpart. Okunoye argues that: “By inserting the idiom of the North/South dichotomy into the context of Nigerian

political discourse as a tool for clarifying power relations, Ikiriko finds a binary mode of cognition relevant” (“Alterity, Marginality”418). Okunoye further insists that “At the heart of this discourse of otherness [in Ikiriko’s poetry] is an insinuation of internal colonialism” (418). I want to add that, in a sense, this perception emerges from a shared sense of marginality which the Delta’s so-called minority status historically bequeaths on its (human) subjects, and this offers a fascinating frame for reading this poem. It perhaps explains why the poet tends to personalise the Delta as though it is an extended ‘self’ of the persona. Here, we encounter Ikiriko’s preoccupation with minority rights articulation with an aesthetic of geopolitics, one in which the notion of relational complementarity and sense of belonging in the larger Nigerian project are disavowed and regional otherness is inscribed as the veritable identity marker for the Niger Delta subject. This becomes the subversive strategy by means of which the poet stakes claim to the oil resource which the Delta bears.

In “To the Niger Delta” the poet continues on this history-interrogatory note where the Delta is figured to be the foundation which bears the burden of the nation, but is denied the wealth it produces and consigned to the status of vassalage:

This jungle giant because you  
bear it  
like its roots the Iroko tree,  
has stood several season’s storms

This china pot because you  
cushion it  
like its raffia pad a pitcher,  
has its babel contents contained.

The raffia pad serves well  
because the pitcherwoman cares  
and renews it time to time.  
The Iroko roots serve well  
because the boughs after receiving  
give to them their fair share.

But you, base Delta, stay sentenced  
to serve only as source and support.

Brave Delta, hail! But tell all,  
how long will this sentence last? (19)

Ikiriko takes poetic liberty that is garnished with political rhetoric of ethnic, regional consciousness. He creates a narrative of “mythologised victims” in which he stages a “personal moral crusade against the tyrannies of the modern” (Huggan, “Greening Postcolonialism” 704) Nigerian state in the sharing of the oil wealth. In “Oily Rivers” he intimates: “I come from/the bottom of / the Amalgam, / the base Delta, /where things are made base, / and beings become base, / leased by / powered policies / crude as petroleum. /I am of /the Oil Rivers, / where rivers are/oily/ and can/ neither, / quench my thirst/ nor / anoint my head” (20).

Ikiriko draws on geographic metaphors about the Nigerian map to enact a poetic engagement with this subnational, regional consciousness. He conceives the larger Nigerian geographic entity as literally sitting on the Delta at the “base” on the Nigerian map. This lexical item, “base”, is imbued with subversive aesthetic which seems to prevail throughout the collection. This is first indicated in the preface to this book, decidedly entitled “Foreline”, in which Ikiriko probes: “Take a look, dear reader, at the map of Nigeria and behold how the giant country sits, supressing the Delta which serves it the functions of support and sustenance. As it is on the geographical expression, so it is in the political, social and economic expressions” (6). The poet takes inspiration not just from the geography of the country but also the map that traces that geography and the trajectories that play themselves out in the politics of numbers evident in the majority-minority dialectic. The poet’s increasing focus on and obsession with the particularly “debased” state of the Niger Delta, can be gleaned further in the poem “Top Upon Bottom”:

Up top high upon  
Down bottom low below

Natural, yes, and global.  
Like the sky upon the ground

And north on top of south ...

On the globe a broad northern hemisphere  
Sits on a tapering southern hemisphere

And on many maps as well as ours  
A feeble bottom supports a ruddy top.

So like a giant on feeble feet,  
We wobble in decisions  
And in associations

In this natural and global  
Up top high upon  
Down below low below (44)

The poet frames the geographical constitution of the south, perhaps of the Delta, as weak by fact of its natural terrain and by virtue of geopolitical status, that is, its inability to influence policies, even ones that directly affect its social and political fortune. This weakness is described with images of both “tapering” and “feeble” and further reinforced by the poet’s claim that ‘we’, in the south, have the tendency to be ontologically timid in the sense that “we wobble.../ in associations”. Implicit in this poem is the way that the natural location of the Delta impacts on its will to sociality, its will to act politically, hence “we wobble in decisions / and in associations”. If the fact of the Delta’s geographical location, its natural terrain is a factor responsible for its underdevelopment and provinciality, the poet seems to suggest that the region’s relationship to its northerly counterparts is disproportionately uneven. He likens that relationship to that of a giant with unsteady, “feeble feet”. The poem reveals the way that two intricate categories of natural and geopolitical concepts in the form of the natural and the global combine to define the geopolitical constitution of the southern, of the Delta, laying low in the map, and constituting itself as subservient, antipodal to the global North, and, therefore, diametrically opposite in all things, especially in human development and progress.

In his geo-poetic attempt at expressing the way that this geopolitics operates to limit human subjectivity and political agency in the Delta, there seems to be a necessary disintegration of language. The poet deploys a consistent streak of word playfulness in this



collection, and, this, in a sense, makes nonsense of the concerns which confront his creative possibilities. Ikiriko's poetry draws attention to itself as a playful piece of highly creative but interrogative writing, deployed to deconstruct a historiography of economic exploitation and geopolitical repression that were inspired by the oil encounter. Taken together, *Oil Tears of the Delta* may then be conceived as a poetic of dialogic version and subversion which springs from, responds to, and operates to question the chequered geopolitical and economic history of Nigeria. The collection may, in fact, be assembled as an aberration, a cultural artefact, that is primarily produced to subvert the effects of those power-bearing signs that circulate both in the mainstream idiom of political discourse, and in the local spaces where the oil installations are situated.

### **Conclusion**

So far I have discussed the forms of unseen violence that attend the creative possibilities of the poets in their attempts to engage with the realities of their natal Delta. I highlighted the ways in which their imagination of the Delta is disrupted by the overwhelming reality of oil extraction. This overwhelming reality is framed as a form of unseen violence which underlies the conjunctures of historical, socio-political and environmental incongruities that are enabled and stoked by the presence of oil and the politics that governs its process of extraction in the Delta. The disruption it brings about in the poetry collections discussed is observed as one that intrudes on the poets' attempts at laying claim to or establishing a relationship with the Delta. Hence, we notice the way in which in Ojaide's poetry of childhood memory, his relationship with the Delta is intruded upon by the reality of oil, and this makes his poem read like a nostalgic evocation. The form of intrusion that occurs in Ifowodo's poetry is marked by oil spillages, State tyranny, petro-fire and the infernal destruction of all that exists in its path. The poet seems to suggest that the trauma of witnessing these forms of petro-violence and processes of injustice is one that valorises felt

experience over objectivity in giving account of the oil phenomenon. In Ikiriko's poetry we encounter this intrusion in the very concrete texture of signposts which bear powerful messages that operate as power-enforcing codes to govern and control human subjectivity around the oil sites. The signs are put up by the government in conjunction with the oil multinationals to indicate the right of way for the oil pipelines underground, but these signposts actually inscribe images that suggest a possession of the land on which they stand. Ikiriko's poetry questions the mechanism of power and control at work within these inscriptions. His narrative stages a dissident act in which ethnic identity is performed to undermine nationalism, and projected to emphasise regional specificity and geopolitical claims to the oil spaces. But in staging this act of what I call geo-poetics as a way of wresting power from the circulated images, there is a disintegration of language in the way Ikiriko deploys word playfulness to make nonsense of the reality that confronts his creative vision.

What all these entail therefore is that the form of intrusion that operates in attempts to capture the oil phenomenon in the Delta is one that coerces the poets into incoherence, psychologically alienates and dislocates the poets' memory aid, their mnemonics, from their sense of place – a sense of place that is invested with local identity and bequeaths indigenous subjectivity. And this becomes a reflection of the actual processes of 'oily' intrusion that operate in the concrete world of the Delta to displace and dispossess the local populace of every sense of belonging, of cultural authenticity and of authority to reaffirm their regional specificity – or disavow their geopolitical marginality – to which their geopolitical status of "minority", deriving from oil-nationalism, is consigned, perpetrated and engendered. This form of dispossession becomes even more compelling when considered as a form of what Nixon describes in *Slow Violence* as "displacement without moving" (19). Thus the notion of displacement continues to be a recurring trope in all the poetry collections that capture the oil encounter in the Delta. The theme of displacement is an important kernel that connects all the

poetry discussed in this chapter. All of the texts I have discussed so far draw attention to what Nixon would call “slow violence”. I now turn to a text which deals with more spectacular violence as a manifest form of oil intrusion in the Niger Delta.

## Chapter Four: The Currency of Resistance: Violence as Rebellion and Commodity in the Oil Encounter

*These are revolutionary times. All over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression and out of the wombs of a frail world new systems of justice and equality are being born. The shirtless and barefoot people of the land are rising up as never before. "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light."...We must move past indecision to action...If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.<sup>75</sup>*

### Introduction

In this chapter, I revisit the notion of violence while seeking to understand the ways that it operates in the Niger Delta. In exploring the ways in which this notion of violence is culturally conceived and represented in the Nollywood video film, *The Liquid Black Gold* (2010), the chapter focuses on the impacts of petro-violence on the social and environmental structures in the Delta. It situates the film within an intricate climate of dissension – a dichotomy of revolutionary and reprisal violence – which seems to attend the forms of environmentalism that oil production in the Delta elicits. The chapter reflects on the tropes of violence which underwrites agitations for environmental remediation and local control of the oil resources in this region. It suggests two roles which violence plays in instances of socio-political upheavals that the politics of oil production orchestrates in the oil sites.

These two forms of violence are discussed in this chapter based on the following assumptions. The first is that violence operates as a form of civil disobedience, one that is deployed by local communities, especially the youth otherwise known as “militants” or “resource rebels” – depending on one’s ideological leaning – as a desperate move to transgress constituted authority and draw attention to their social and environmental plights, as consequences of oil production in the region. The second form which I propose and will advance critically is an exegesis of violence in the Niger Delta, a form of violence that is

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<sup>75</sup> King, Martin Luther Jnr. “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence.” Speech delivered at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned at Riverside Church in New York City. 4 April 1967.

produced as a parallel commodity circulating alongside, and analogous to, the oil commodity. I suggest that it features as an epiphenomenal stricture of the oil encounter. This form of violence operates and is surfaced in the insurrectionary politics that is performed in the Delta: the way that government officials, some oil industry operatives, local representatives, and certain members within the ranks of the rebels, exploit this so-called revolutionary violence to distract the people from the more insidious violence of environmental pollution and socioeconomic exploitation taking place in the land. I will show how this second category of violence seems to have become a currency that circulates in exchange for the oil resource in the region. I advance the notion that the atmosphere of agitations and rebellious mass action which the socioenvironmental conjunctures of the oil encounter engenders, has congealed in a way that seems to ensure that only those who can afford this commodity of violence, either as resistance militant groups, state repressive forces, or those who flout environmental standards to maximise profit, can have access to the increasingly militarised oil resource in the region.

By way of a synopsis, *The Liquid Black Gold* (dir. Ikenna Aniekwe, 2010) is about an oil-producing community, Zeide, a fictional representation of the Niger Delta region. Zeide community is confronted with questions of environmental justice and sustainable development in the wake of oil extraction in their locality. This community is embittered about the negative effect of oil mining activities on their agrarian economy and socio-cultural life: its pollution of their land and water, without restitution from the oil corporations. The vibrant members of this community, mostly made up of the youth, march to the King's palace to demand redress for the situation, and to have their representation in the affairs of local governance in the community. While the king together with his council of elders, listen to the community's entreaties, Ebipade (Sam Dede), the protagonist and the youth's de facto leader quickly seizes on this opportunity to request for an emissary from among the youth to

represent their demands to the oil company as they could no longer trust the community chiefs who hitherto had represented the community but only for their own narrow interests. The film deals with the corruption and greed of the chiefs, initially elected to represent the community's interests in their dealings with the oil companies, but now intent on maintaining their nouveau riche status. The corruption is evident at various levels of leadership and power, including the State army, and some of the youth insurgents who also get co-opted into these structures. This is where the conflict in the film is set. More than half of the film is narrated as a series of flashbacks and documentary-style rendition by the leader of the rebel movement, Ebipade, to his wife Ihuoma. This provides the audience with the rationale and justification for the insurgency by the youth, which includes the destruction of the fishing life, disenchantment among the youth because they are denied employment with the oil company, and the sexual abuse of women in the community.

This chapter deals mainly with a social phenomenon of violence and so I will turn briefly to what Mineke Schipper-de Leeuw has termed "socio-critical reflections" (10). Throughout the chapter I repeatedly look to two socio-cultural theorists for inspirational guidance and theoretical insights on the discursive tropes of violence: Frantz Fanon and Rob Nixon. Writing exactly half a century apart, Fanon in 1961 and Nixon in 2011, both scholars' interests in notions of violence intersect with the argument that animates this chapter. Fanon's comments on violence have to do with the libertarian impulses of defiance and dissidence that were deployed against forms of oppression, especially colonialism and its patrimonies of neo-liberal imperialism in anti-colonial Algeria. Fanon's preference for violence was consistent with the desires of the Algerian people on the one hand, and that desire was, on the other hand, compelled by the given circumstances that confronted them at the time: the zeal to take colonialism by the jugular. Now I understand that a number of scholars have attempted to antiquate Fanon's idea of violence as a libertarian mode of apprehending forms

of oppression, especially given the rhetoric of terrorism and counterterrorism that animates contemporary global political discourses.<sup>76</sup> But in a public lecture entitled, “Reading Fanon in the Twenty-first Century” (presented at Colgate University, New York on 10 November 2010), postcolonial theorist and anthropologist Achille Mbembe comments: “It has never been more difficult to read Fanon than it is today; when history seems to be superseded by an infinite present, we need to extricate his work from the ahistorical time frame within which it has been locked in order to make it speak anew”.<sup>77</sup> Mbembe suggests that Fanon, being a rather difficult writer, might only be read in context, one that may be divorced, necessarily, from the (colonial) times in which he wrote and properly situated in the temporal setting to which we want to engage his work. Therefore, my reading of Fanon is situated in the context of the contemporary historical moment in the Niger Delta – in the context of petro-induced violence, one that bespeaks revolutionary and reactionary violence at the same site of petro-politics, the one becoming epiphenomenal of the other.

In a sense, Fanon’s pronouncements on resistance violence can be read in the present context of the Niger Delta to enable an understanding of the debates inaugurated by the twin issues of environmental and social injustice which are occasioned by oil production and the geopolitics that enable its operations. These issues are framed as a new form of colonialism and the intervention deployed to resist it evokes an anticolonial temperament. It appears that the echoes of resistance struggles emanating from the Niger Delta against what they perceive as petro-exploitation seem to find resonance in a vocabulary of anti-colonialism. Thus the

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<sup>76</sup> See for instance, Hannah Arendt’s *On Violence*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1969. I do not address her views here in relation to Fanon because that has been adequately dealt with in Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings’s “On Politics and Violence: Arendt Contra Fanon.” *Contemporary Political Theory*, 7 (2008): 90-108. Arguing in defence of Fanon, Frazer and Hutchings write that “violence for freedom, then, goes beyond the straightforward means to an independently conceived ends. Rather, [...] it is thought as the expression of human freedom” (91); one which Jean-Paul Sartre in the preface to Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* calls a process of self-recreation from a condition of enslavement (22).

<sup>77</sup> Mbembe, Achille. “Reading Fanon in the Twenty-first Century.” W.E.B. DuBois Memorial Lecture. New York: Colgate University, 15 November 2010. Lecture.

present agitations for environmental and social justice becomes “a liberation struggle of a special type: liberation from internal colonialism, poverty, wretchedness and an empty future” (Sagay). Furthermore, Nixon’s notion of “slow violence”, on the other hand, suggests a manifestation (though not visible) of forms of structural and systemic violence which are embedded in the practices of capitalism without morality, one that is evident in the oil extraction industry, and has been seen to horrendously devastate local environments and impoverish local population at the sites of such industrial operations. Both forms of violence have come to clash in the ‘oil landscape’ of the Niger Delta. Attempts to make the slow violence visible through the instrumentality of collective action have resulted in a spiral of violence which in a sense constitutes for itself an existential threat to both the natural and human ecology of the Niger Delta.

In *Wretched of the Earth* Fanon advocates a kind of violence which serves as revolutionary instrument for rebellion against oppressive systems. Although Fanon’s interest is in a resistance movement that is national in spirit (that is anti-colonial nationalism), his avowal looms in the sub-national/ethnic ethos that drives the resource-control agitations and geo-regional politics which oil production provokes in the Delta. The regional discontents of the Delta, just like the anti-colonial movement, seek to challenge the environmental and political economic hegemon rooted in a historical, political, and eventually, economic trajectory that sprang from a colonial legacy to the Nigerian state. The trajectory of what appears to be the oppression of the “minority” peoples, and the exploitation of the oil resource in the region by the Nigerian state, is framed as a kind of geopolitical colonialism. Decolonization, Fanon argues, is “a murderous and decisive struggle between two protagonists” (37), so that the agency and modality through which that process is undertaken becomes the villain: violence.



For Fanon, violence is the structural manifestation of forms of oppression and domination of peoples, cultures and nations by colonialism (see also Frazer and Hutchings 95). Fanon notes that these negativities, once conceived as violence cannot be defeated outside the purview of revolutionary violence—one with a well-defined purpose, a progressive vehicle by means of which freedom is attained and the humanity of the oppressed is re-instated. Humanity, the human life, is necessarily defined by its propensity for freedom. Where freedom is denied, people begin to feel constricted, a limitation that diminishes their being. In an attempt to re-humanise the self, they resort to that which bespeaks their state of subjection: violence. This kind of violence, Fanon argues, becomes the means by which they repossess their humanity. Fanon does not see this violence as a means to an end in itself. He insists that this violence only secures the possibility for structural and practical transformation, one that operates outside a politics of negation, of oppression and exploitation.

In the Niger Delta's oil encounter, violence manifests as a two-faced agency; at once an insurrectionary tool in the hands of the youth groups, and an analogous commodity to the oil, serving as incongruous modes of distraction both to the resistance groups and their perceived villains. The insurgency which members of local community deploy to disavow this politics of negation and make visible the deeper, structural violence is one that in the process gets consumed by the spectacle of that visibility. It insulates the main issues of social and environmental injustice from public scrutiny, and usurps the rebellion it was deployed to bring about. The brutal fact of this insurgency as we shall encounter in the film is one that, qua Fanon, "evokes for us the searing bullets and blood-stained knives which emanate from it" (37), as reminders of the victims, mostly collateral damages that it casts in the drama of insurrection. In *The Liquid Black Gold*, the youth's eventual resort to violence re-echoes Jean-Paul Sartre's dictum, in the preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, that "no

gentleness can efface the marks of violence [slow violence]; only violence [sabotage] itself can destroy them (marks of violence)” (21). Sartre notes that for Fanon, irrepressible violence is not man’s degeneracy to savagery, nor a misguided resentment of constituted authority; it is his resolve to re-create himself in the face of oppression (21). In discussing the film under study, I suggest that *Liquid Black Gold* frames the operations of violence not as an instrument of decolonisation in a strict Fanonian sense of anti-colonialism, but as a form of resisting vestiges of (neo-)colonial patrimony evident in the petro-industrial complex in Nigeria.

If in the Fanonian paradigm social protest and subversion are the uses to which violence is put in this film, violence also features as an analogous phenomenon to the oil commodity: both circulating in the Niger Delta. This form of violence is one that is conceived within and woven around the visible damage done to the Niger Delta environment and socio-cultural upheavals brought to the human inhabitants around the sites of oil exploration. It is one which Nixon has framed as “slow violence” in the Third World which has consequently elicited an “Environmentalism of Poor” in the spaces where it is perceived and made manifest.

In chapter one of this thesis, I discussed the form of environmental consciousness that is projected in literary and cultural expressions of the Niger Delta. I suggested that it is one which grapples with the social and environmental actualities of the oil encounter. I argued that these actualities coalesce to project in the creativity of this region a vision of petro-environmentalism, a kind of environmentalism that is occasioned by petroleum exploration and its impacts on the environmental and social scape of the Niger Delta. In situating Nixon’s *Slow Violence* within this discussion, I showed how his book provides an eloquent articulation of environmental devastation and the question of social justice in the Third World setting of the Niger Delta. I argued that his analysis brings into productive dialogue conceptions of nature and the social contexts within which the environment is imagined. In

this chapter I will reiterate some of the points highlighted in the book to negotiate the analysis of the film under study.

Nixon's *Slow Violence* provides useful insight for understanding environmental pollution and the inequitable distribution of a country's resources as another form of violence, a non-physical violence, inflicted incrementally, both directly and indirectly, over a long period of time. This idea has important significance in the analysis of *Liquid Black Gold*, for it is environmental pollution and the destruction of the people's agrarian and fishing economy that exacerbates the agitations which result in physical violence as the film progresses. Nixon's coinage of "slow violence" complicates conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act of confrontation. The book offers alternative insight in theorising environmental pollution as a form of violence, and this enables us to locate the modes of counter-discursive narratives that operate in the film's allegorising protocol of violence. It enables us to rethink other notions of social afflictions, namely: ecological devastation, inequitable distribution of wealth from natural resources and geopolitical marginalisation as forms of violence, which are slow, non-physical and deficient in visibility, but nonetheless atrocious in the way that they permeate every aspect of being in the spaces in which they occur (3-6). If these incongruities can be framed as a form of violence, slow violence, qua Nixon, it stands to reason, then, that attempts at resisting such conjunctures might also feature within the purview of violence. And it is within this operation of violence that the film locates itself.

*The Liquid Black* frames violence as something that is inflicted by a number of factors issuing from the operations and politics of oil production in the Niger Delta. The video film reveals how the primary grievances of Zeide community revolve around issues of environmental pollution and social disruption that are occasioned by oil extraction. These problems are deemed to operate in this oil site as a complex structurally orchestrated malaise

which Nixon engages and frames as “slow violence”, an “environmentally embedded violence that is often difficult to source, oppose [...] and reverse” (7). The film highlights the way in which the attempt at making these disaffections visible through the instrumentality of popular revolt and dissidence is met with physical violence, with both actions having a cataclysmic effect on human life and the local environment of Zeide community. I would like to discuss this film as a modest response to Nixon’s call for representational intervention in instances of this slow violence. He is of the view that artists—literary and visual—should be actively creative in drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long term effects.

But I would like to suggest that *Liquid Black Gold* is unable to adequately draw public attention to this non-physical violence of environmental pollution from oil extraction. I will show that the action is quickly overtaken by physical violence and insurgency among the youth factions. I argue that violence is encouraged and stoked by the internal dynamics of local politics which have little or nothing to do with actual oil extraction in the Delta, but which benefit from the condition of social disintegration within which justice is sought by means of the so-called revolutionary violence. Nevertheless, the film succeeds in drawing attention to the increasing uselessness of cultural structures meant to uphold order in the face of changing dynamics motivated by self-interest on the parts of local chiefs and military leaders. The community king is portrayed as useless and ignorant, and easily swayed by the crooked chiefs’ opinions. He is isolated in his compound (palace) and relies on the lies the chiefs feed him. In a sense this signals the ascendancy of political and economic power over cultural power in African modernity. Traditional monarchy, supposedly the custodians of cultural values and societal cohesion, are rendered powerless, even useless, in the socio-political economy of modern power structures, such as that which the politics of oil production galvanises in postcolonial Nigeria.

Interesting parallels can be drawn between colonialism (economic exploitation being one of its motivations) on the one hand, and oil exploitation and the politics of violence it galvanizes on the other. Both can be apprehended within the context of a certain colonial patrimony in the Niger Delta. During colonialism natural resources, such as palm oil, cocoa, cotton, and groundnut were expropriated to feed industrial Europe and to fund the continent's colonial project of imperialist expansionism. So too is crude oil, a resource siphoned off from the Delta to feed international demands for fossil-fuel, and the wealth that is accrued misappropriated by the Nigerian state without ploughing some back to the oil-bearing locality as a way of mitigating the effects of the pollution done to the environment and the local agro-economy. Both encounters seem to employ the force of violence in achieving their goals. Little wonder then that violence seems to be the most formidable tool in the hands of the 'natives' for challenging the oppressive order.

Dissidence in the Niger Delta tends to be invested with a grammar of colonial resistance violence. The marginalised youth and local peasantry attempt to locate their agitations in the contexts of Nigeria's political and economic history which was bequeathed to the state by its British colonial masters. According to Fanon, in oppressive systems the peasantry are the actual revolutionaries. They embrace violence without the luxury of an option. Once they have access to weapons and the use of force, there is no going back for them until their goals are achieved. They believe that either way the pendulum swings "they have nothing to lose and everything to gain" (Fanon 61). They believe that only violence pays, because for the first time they are able to express their grievances and call attention to themselves. That the authority is paying attention to their demands – either by pacification, by reprisal attacks or by negotiation – makes them sometimes overstretch the struggle, even if that means degenerating to brazen criminality, until their long-repressed anger is sated.

If the poets discussed in the previous chapter conceived environmental pollution in the Delta as a vestige of neoliberal imperialism, then the filmic text I engage in this chapter depicts the visible trajectory of the oil encounter as a form of neo-colonial violence. *The Liquid Black Gold* seems to suggest that environmental pollution and inequitable distribution of the oil wealth in the Delta are a form of structurally operative violence, a slow violence, which can only be resisted with a well-calculated violence that is articulated in a grammar of organised resistance and sabotage. Whereas the poetry collections studied in chapter three imaginatively bore witness to the (elided) lived experiences of the Delta people within the context of the oil encounter and issued a poetic call to action in addressing issues of injustice, the present chapter is an exploration of the consequences of the decisive actions the people may have taken to address such injustice. Thus, drawing on Fanon's observation when he avers that violence "frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction" (74), I argue that violence as evidenced in the film is a projection of a form of wake-up call from that slumber of inaction to an active engagement with insurgency. But it is my contention that in the film, the noble ideals of defiance and redemptive resistance are consumed in brazen criminality and unnecessary violence.

### **Nollywood and the politics of mediation**

My concern in this section is less to do with the evolution of Nollywood as a site for cultural knowledge production and medium of representation than an aspect of its production which draws on the aesthetics of spectacular violence, one that seems to attend instances of protests for environmental and social justice in Nigeria.<sup>78</sup> My interest resides in the modalities by

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<sup>78</sup> For a comprehensive study of the evolution and practices of the Nigerian film industry known as Nollywood, see Hyginus Ekwuazi's *Film in Nigeria*. Jos: Nigerian Film Corporation, 1991. And also his essay, "Nollywood: Historical as Economic Determinism or as an Accident in Evolutionary Trends/Creative Process." *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Scholarship*, 3.5 (2008): 135-142; also cf. Agatha Ukata's "Images of Women in Nigerian (Nollywood) Videos." Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of the Witwatersrand, 2010; and, Akin Adesokan's "Anticipating Nollywood: Lagos circa 1996." *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies*, 37.1 (2011): 96-110.

which violence as a counter-cultural revolutionary strategy is mediated in *The Liquid Black Gold*, and the sets of meaning that might be derived when the film is considered as a representation of oppositional discursive geopolitics and petro-violence in the Niger Delta. The film prognosticates how the agitations for environmental and social justice might be dangerously (if not already) diverted into an all-consuming violence, one that undermines a noble quest for justice.

If there is any local integrity and indigenous power that might be associated with Nollywood filmic production, then *The Liquid Black Gold* may be deemed to have been strategically produced as a means of isolating the social malaise of violence exacerbated by the oil encounter for a targeted audience's scrutiny. To be sure, there is a particular geopolitical interest in the Niger Delta struggles and if successfully realised, it is one that seems biased in favour of the local populace and Nollywood seems to be a powerful vehicle through which this regional politics might be effectively negotiated. In a sense, *Liquid Black Gold* appears to project an influential, if nuanced dimension, in representing instances of violence that attend the oil encounter in Nigeria. It is therefore not by mere coincidence that most of the films which deal with themes of petro-violence and debates around resource control are written, produced and directed by the same individuals with virtually the same cast.<sup>79</sup>

In fact, there seems to be a necessary organisation of productive forces in Nollywood which reflects the imbalances within the Nigerian national polity, as actors, directors, scriptwriters and producers who are from 'minority groups' are subsumed under a national cinema culture and are unable to project their cultural specificities. This is a powerful

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<sup>79</sup> See for instance films such as *The Liquid Black Gold* (dir. Ikenna Aniekwe, 2010), *Crude War* (written by Ikenna Aniekwe and dir. Ugezu J. Ugezu, 2010), and *The Amnesty* (Screenplay/dir. Ikenna Aniekwe, 2011). There is a veritable sense of strategic astuteness about these artists in their representation of violence and the geopolitics that stoke it in the Delta. In the film under analysis, we encounter the way they surface certain elided instances of the oil encounter, where cultures seemed displaced, cultural links severed, kinship ties are fractioned, basic human weaknesses are exploited, and nonsense is made of local heroes and heroines.

sentiment among Nollywood practitioners who are from minority groups, and I want to suggest that the film under study represents a response to that phenomenon. It seems that Nollywood productions are sponsored by indigenous [private] producers, “who practically dictate the type of plot they want to see in the production” (Eghagha 74). Thus, an influential ‘resource rebel’ may well be the producer and financier of *The Liquid Black Gold*, a video film which brings to the fore an insider knowledge of how violence is (re)appropriated from its original resistant insurgency to a currency of exploitation and distraction in the Delta.

A number of critics have explored the ways in which cultures and various social narratives are mediated in Nollywood.<sup>80</sup> Ogaga Okuyade draws attention to the powerful role of Nollywood as a quintessential popular medium in the representation of contemporary situations in Nigeria when he notes insightfully that Nigerians are increasingly becoming a viewing society rather than a reading one (“Nigerian Filmic Enterprise” 1). Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome point to how Nollywood “video production has been absorbed into the realm of popular culture” in Nigeria (106). The film scholars maintain that Nollywood representations “give something like an image of the Nigerian nation [...] in the sense of reflecting the productive forces of the nation, economic and cultural” (106). Because of its wide range of subject matters and formulaic motifs drawn from contemporary national discourses, Nollywood is centrally placed at the heart of Nigerian public social life. Adesokan put this point more tellingly by arguing that “Nollywood films circulate as part of a

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<sup>80</sup> I take as my starting point the assumption that Nollywood has a scavenger-like characteristic. By this I mean that with its ears close to the ground, Nollywood quickly picks its raw materials from contemporary situations in Nigeria with the speed of immediacy as they occur in society. Nigerian scholar and dramatist Hope Eghagha opines that “the regularity with which movies are churned out yearly implies that the market is booming, [for] Nollywood enjoys great patronage among Nigerians” (71). I should add that, in fact, the video film is increasingly becoming popular among English speaking Black Africans in other parts of Africa and in the diaspora. Because of its low budget production, Nollywood churns out movies with the rapidity of weekly releases. Hyginus Ekwuazi observes that “Three release points of the video have since evolved. These are Lagos (Idumota Street), Onitsha (Iweka Road) and Kano” (“The Hausa Video Film” 64). He goes on to declare that “the targeted audience and, therefore, the thematic orientation of the video film determine the release points” (64). This suggests that the films are strategically circulated among targeted audience as a means of responding to, and provoking public debates around contemporary issues that confront society.



welter of images in a stream of global flows, aided by the intense relationships between media and cultural imaginaries” (99). This suggests that Nollywood has necessarily become the quintessential window through which the quotidian social life in Nigeria might be encountered. Its subject matter becomes the fodder for accessing the prevailing social and cultural imagination of the nation.

In an auteurist critique on Kenneth Nnebue’s creative and entrepreneurial boldness as catalyst to the phenomenon that is Nollywood, Haynes writes that Nnebue’s creativity:

suffers from the faults and limitations of Nollywood as a whole [...] his great strength, which is also Nollywood’s, stems from his proximity to the popular imagination. He works from what he reads in the newspapers, hears on the radio and picks up from the conversations around him [...] he converts his materials into an urban mythology of enormous reach and power. (31)

The mechanical flaws and imaginative triteness identified as limitations in Nollywood movies (Haynes 31), in a rather obstinate, survivalist sense, gives currency and uniqueness to Nollywood as a popular art form which has come to stay. I would like to suggest that Nollywood’s technological limitations are, in a sense, over-determined, and as such have not stunted the medium’s creative ingenuity in giving narrative images, within the filmic genre, to those burning human concerns that confront the Nigerian nation. Beyond economic categories of low budget and lesser technical qualities that are characteristic features of the Nollywood video films, Nollywood may also be marked-off by its alternative vision and cultural aesthetics.

Nollywood films depict the lives of ordinary people in the postcolony in their daily struggles with postcolonial realities of poverty, ethnic clashes, cultures in transition, bad governance, just to name a few. Evaluation of a Nollywood movie as a filmic text is guided by the context, milieu and social code that underwrite its production. As the French cultural scholar and virtuoso of African film Pierre Barrot notes: “When Nigerian feature films are discussed, the word ‘drama’ comes up repeatedly. It is clear that it is not the fictional nature

of the stories that is important, [...] but the dramatic intensity and the amount of tension generated” (25). In the same breath, Agatha Ukata declares that Nollywood films “adhere to Nigerian standards by continually recreating the everyday lives of Nigerians within the context of their space and time” (5). This makes the medium the most popular mode of cultural expression in Nigeria and also makes the Nollywood phenomenon a significant referent in the global filmic industry (Okoye 20).

But in *Liquid Black Gold*, it seems to me that Nollywood mobilises its global circulation to benefit the local. It functions as a bridge builder. According to Okome, Nollywood generates:

knowledge at the local about the global that has eluded the watchful eyes of the state and corporate capital. Nollywood surely produces its own brand of knowledge in the competitive environment of the production of visual knowledge. It generates its own sense of the logic of the human condition in a postcolonial situation. (“Nollywood” 4)

I share this sentiment. For the video film under study, in a rather subversive manner, refracts notions of violence in ways that destabilise the discursive idiom of youth insurgency in the Delta. The meta-narrative of violence around which the politics of oil production is inscribed in the Delta, is, in a sense, wrestled from its public discursive domain and appropriated to a locally embedded province of internally orchestrated violence. Within this internal social disorder, violence is invested with a new grammar, one that not only negotiates the heroic struggle for the remediation of the polluted Niger Delta environment and local control of the oil resource, it also unknots the puzzling tale of militarisation and brigandage to which the agitations and social protests in the Niger Delta have degenerated.

The idea of violence both epistemologically and materially, can be analysed in this film as a pervasive capitalist entity, one that is consistent with the sense in which Eagleton defines capitalism as a leveller of status which does not care who it enriches or deprives. According to Eagleton, “capitalism is an impeccably inclusive creed: it really doesn’t care who it

exploits. It is admirably egalitarian in its readiness to do down just about anyone; it is prepared to rub shoulders with any old victim, however unappetizing” (*After Theory* 19). Violence is depicted in *The Liquid Black Gold* in this same sense: as an enabler both for the perceived villains and for the ostensibly genuine militant insurgents. In a similar vein, Wole Soyinka also offers critical insights into how violence constitutes itself as a bohemian entity, a veritably nonconformist agent by which all that it comes in contact with is brought to ruination. Soyinka’s conjecture on violence is in a different context, the University of Ibadan student uprising in 1980. His interest in this essay is primarily with “the language of alienation”, as he calls it, with which a social phenomenon (of violence) is articulated in the public sphere by a “class of the bourgeois intelligentsia [...who engage in] the act of appropriating a harsh reality to a *langue* of scholarship” (135). Soyinka writes that “nothing can be more proletariat than violence [...violence is] one of the few universal commodities [which] cannot be placed under licence” (134).

I want to suggest that *Liquid Black Gold* holds up the signification of violence in this same sense. The film dramatizes violence as an intractable creed, one that is made available to the contending formations which have emerged in the Delta over the years, especially after the travestied execution of Saro-Wiwa and his compatriots by the Nigerian state in 1995. *Liquid Black Gold* refracts questions of violence as a subversive tool which transcends the discursive. The film gives “an imaginative definition to the occluded relationships that result from slow violence and from the geographies of concealment in a neoliberal age” (Nixon 47). The film seems to suggest that there are certain elided relationships, divested from mainstream public consciousness, which can be given moral agency, mobilised through a discourse of liberatory resistance, and articulated in a grammar of physical violence as the environmentalism of the poor in the Niger Delta. Let me give some grounds for this claim.

While echoing Edward Said and Michael Watts, Nixon insists that resistance to slow violence – that is, environmental violence, if not structural violence as well – “needs to be seen – and deeply considered – as a contest not only over space, or bodies, or resources, but also over time” (8). He argues that the seemingly delayed effects of slow violence should be addressed with the urgency of the now. To him, “the past of slow violence is never past”, its pollutants “live on in the environmental elements we inhabit in our bodies, which epidemiologically and ecologically are never our simple contemporaries” (Nixon 8). It is my contention, then, that attempts at resisting such violence, becomes an exercise in re-inscribing a people’s native history from the existing official history imposed on them as the meta-text from where sovereign power and rights over the natural resources derive. This is precisely because, in the Niger Delta for instance, the consequences of slow violence are inherent in the socio-political and historical trajectory of post-colonial Nigeria. If that is the case, Said’s injunction as quoted in Nixon, becomes one to be renegotiated and rethought in the Niger Delta situation, using the film as the narrative context.

Said has noted that “struggles over geography are never reducible to armed struggle but have profound symbolic and narrative component [...]” (Nixon 7). I shall ground this point by digressing a little with a brief reference to the Saro-Wiwa story as an entry point for my analysis. In his attempt to bring the unspectacular slow violence to the fore through systematic framing of subversive narration, *Saro-Wiwa*, no doubt, was consumed by a superior violence which derived largely from the sovereign power and authority over oil governance. After the trial and execution of Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni 8, apparently the last symbols of non-violence, the people of the Niger Delta seem to have come to the realisation that a non-violent, intellectual approach to their environmental and geopolitical concerns was, after all, ineffective. They seem to have concluded that non-violent dissidence did not move the conscience of the hegemonic order. The people felt that the Nigerian state in all its might

was ready to crush any dissenting voice raised to challenge its constitutionally-contrived rights to the oil resources in the Delta. Perhaps Saro-Wiwa's non-violent, intellectual approach has lost ground to angst-ridden defiance and brazen violence. What confronts the Delta now seems to give full realisation to what Michael Watts describes as "the masked militant armed with the ubiquitous Kalashnikov, the typewriter of the illiterate" ("Blood Oil" 62; see also Nixon 122). In the last decade, the youth in this region have responded to the continued exploitation of oil resources and environmental pollution in the Delta with an activism that signals new modes of environmentalism that are articulated in the grammar of violence, though rooted in, and routed through, the call for the twin justice for the environment and social life in the Delta.

Whether in the non-violent intellectual approach of Saro-Wiwa or in the guerrilla tactics of the recent militant organisations in the region, such as the ubiquitous Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND),<sup>81</sup> one characteristic is apparent: strategic insubordination. Hence we tend to encounter in the Delta, a deployment both of "armed struggle" and geo-poetics as strategic means of transgressing the Nigerian state. This defiance continues to unsettle the Nigerian government and destabilise its national polity. It draws the world's attention to the fact that all is not well with the oil industry in Nigeria. The environmentalism of the poor as is now visible in the Delta is manifested in acts of sabotage which results in violence. According to Nixon, the poor or those who live in vernacular landscapes "are usually the casualties of slow violence" (4), their environmentalism or agitations for environmental justice in such instances are usually made footnotes in mainstream media reportage. This is because the poor lack the means or voice to call

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<sup>81</sup> The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) is one of the resource rebel groups fighting for what they describe as the "economic and political decolonisation of the Niger Delta from the larger Nigerian project. This group is the most revered, for they are ubiquitous, more political and well-organised. With access to the media and the use of medium to large assault weapons and bombs, they have continued to cause problems for the Nigerian state (especially the army) and have brought the oil industry in Nigeria under serious threat.

attention to their plight. It also stems from the media's bias for mainstream, popular discourse of "the spectacular" as Nixon calls it, which has the potential for causing a row that could embarrass and unseat any constituted authority identified as the culprit. But the environmentalism of the poor lacks the ululation of the public sphere, for they belong in the backyard of mainstream society. It arguably accounts for why they tend to resort to that which attracts society's attention: physical violence. In a sense, violence in this context may be perceived justified only when it opens up a space for political possibilities that would entrench justice and freedom, and restore humanity to the oppressed (Fanon, Arendt 79, Frazer and Hutchings 102). In the wisdom of the local populace, the youth especially, revolutionary violence, "one that is conferred with all its subversive/marginal/anti-establishment connotations" (ZiZek 17), has come to give active voice to their concerns.

The trope of violence which frames the film draws heavily on this emancipatory impulse of violence to inaugurate its discursive intentions. *Liquid Black Gold* begins with the protagonist and dissident youth leader, Ebipade, returning from what turns out to be an insurgent mission. He is carrying a gun, with a mask covering his face. He gets into the house and meets his wife, Ihuoma, and son, Timipreye, still awake as a result of the gun shots they hear around the neighbourhood. Ebipade's wife reprimands him for coming to their home with his "battle gear" on, thereby exposing their twelve-year old son to such violent images:

*Ihuoma:*

Must you come back to us wearing that mask, carrying the gun and amulet? You send the wrong message of yourself to our son here

*Ebipade:*

No, I'm sending the right message about myself and my people to him. And that is what I want him to understand, and you too, my wife.

It seems to me that the intention in the this video film is to mobilise a discourse of resistance that is deployed through the domestic space of the family unit to give moral urgency and domestic pertinence to the Delta agitations, which are not only of local concerns but also of

global relevance. Haynes argues that the domestic space, one that is “narrativized through the marital and family melodrama”, has become “the generic bedrock of Nollywood film production” (32). Although clothed in insurgency, the domestic space of the family unit becomes a site for inaugurating an embedded narrative of the use of violence as a means of ensuring a future for the young and the unborn, and to untether the region from the economic bondage of petro-colonialism. The agitation becomes a genealogical struggle to ensure a political possibility of a local community, and this speaks to an earlier point of re-inscribing a native history through acts of sabotage and insurgency. In a dialogue with his family, Ebipade speaks to his son, Timipreye in unequivocal terms about the wisdom in their acts of insurgency:

*Ebipade:*

Hey, come to me my boy. Come here, [*gestures him to sit by his side*] sit down.  
You haven't said welcome to me.

*Timipreye:*

Daddy, welcome

*Ebipade:*

Good. I didn't think you'd still be awake up to this time of the night.

*Timipreye:*

I couldn't sleep...the gunshots.

*Ebipade:*

The gunshots? But that's the least thing you should worry about, because that is our way of life. It is the only way we can guarantee a better future for our sons. Like you! And for your own sons and the next generation.

Ebipade and his family embody the precariousness of existing in the oil sites of the Niger Delta. The young family provides an example of how civil resistance against petro-exploitation destabilises a people's cultural cohesion and unsettles the sanctity of the family unit. The insurgency sometimes produces hardened militants and brazen criminals in this region. For instance, one can only imagine what the young lad, Timipreye, would grow up to become if the issues for which his father fought to address were not resolved by the time he grows up. Ebipade declares:

[...] In some circumstances, yes! Violence can be the only way [...] We fight to stay alive. We fight to defend ourselves. If anyone dies in the process it only just completes that definition of history: that a few must die for many others to stay alive...In a situation where men are deprived of their land, where women and children are made to drink from polluted swamps just because of oil mining...Yes! A life can definitely exchange for another life.

No doubt oppressive regimes in most of Africa – of which Nigeria is a case in point – are a matter of politics and of economics. Exploitation of the Delta and its local populace may be seen as, first, one of an economic, and then, of a political nature in order to maintain the status quo of the former. In *Liquid Black Gold*, Ebipade understands the importance of political power in having a say in local governance. He knows that change and development can only come when someone with the peoples' interest at heart sits at the discussion table where deliberations with the oil corporations are made. With this in mind, he demands youth representation when the dialogue between the community and the oil corporation takes place. In the presence of the entire community and council of chiefs he demands of the king:

*Ebipade:*

One more thing your majesty, the youth of this community have decided that we want to sit and discuss with the Whiteman [referring to the oil corporation]. Face to face [*this rouses applause from his followers*]. We do not want any more representatives. And we want to be part of the sharing and distribution process. No more representations.

This pitches him against the crooked chiefs who represent the community. The chiefs understand that if the youth are allowed to deliberate with the oil companies, their greed and betrayal of the community will be exposed. They connive among themselves to destabilise the brewing resistance and turn the social protest against itself:

*Chief Zeide:*

I know that boy will rubbish our effort. That boy has always struck me as a devil. I knew that boy alone would mess-up our game.

*Chief Paul (cuts in):*

But I won't let him; I cannot allow that, that...oh I must do something.



*Chief Ebi:*

Indeed we must do something. We just have to do something...

These chiefs quickly identify a few youths in the community who have benefited from their corrupt practices to become their stooges and opposition to the genuine youth leadership. These youths are paid and supplied with guns to cause disunity among the youth group. From here violence is let loose between factions. Frustrated by this distracting opposition, Ebipade, and his youth followership take to violence to make their voices heard. The youth continue to believe the path of dialogue is the best option to seek to be heard, but the chiefs are bent on destabilising that pursuit for their own benefits. The youth's decision to employ violence is only vindicated when they are attacked even while still deliberating on the available peaceful means to address the situation. The fighting that ensues in turn distracts them from the real problem they had set out to address in the first instance.

The youth's frenetic display of energy and indignant exuberance are identified and turned into a commodity as a strategy of distraction by the chiefs. Other interest groups who benefit from the restiveness in the community swoop in to exploit the resistance movement for their parochial benefit. Two national leaders, Ogbuefi and Alhaji who call themselves "elders, representing federal military interests" invite Ebipade to their house and offer to support him only if he decides to take to violence:

*Ogbuefi:*

So my dear young men, you need to fight, not just to fight but to fight hard. That your so-called chiefs and representatives are ripping you and your entire community off...

*Alhaji:*

You need to fight with all seriousness. We have promised to supply you with guns and ammunition [...] you need to fight them down and make them respond to the cries of your people.

*Ogbuefi:*

All we need is our commission; [*chuckles mischievously*] just our commission and we'll give you plenty of ammunition to fight.

As the insurgency degenerates into hostage-taking between the youth factions, the quest to find solutions to the environmental and the social problems is jettisoned. When Mr Aswani, an expatriate oil company official, is reluctant to sponsor the insurgency (having been approached by Ebipade to help them get arms and ammunition), an emissary from his oil-bunkering partners is sent to convince him to let the rebels fight while their 'black-market' business goes on. The emissary assures Aswani that while the government tries to douse the tensions occasioned by the youth insurgency their oil-bunkering business will go on undetected. It is possible to suggest that, in mediating the spectacle of violence that the youth orchestrate, the film also stages a critique of the latent violence, one of corruption and exploitation which thrive in this atmosphere of physical violence. The film seems to suggest that within the affective operations of spectacular violence in the Delta, there is embedded a powerful politics of bellicosity that is stoking and exploiting the conditions within which justice is sought.

### **Natural resources and resource rebellion**

A lot has been written about the relationship among natural resources, geopolitical tension, ethnic conflicts and resource rebellion in Nigeria, especially in the fields of social anthropology and political science.<sup>82</sup> For the purpose of my discussion here I want to recuperate an important category for analysis in this section, namely the involvement of a

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<sup>82</sup> For a detailed (but by no means exhaustive) bibliography on these subjects, please refer to the introductory essay on "The Niger Delta" in the main introduction of the thesis. Also, for instance, in his essay, "Resource Curse? Governmentality, Oil and Power in the Niger Deltas, Nigeria" (2004), Michael Watts explores the relationship between oil and violence within which all forms of ungovernable practices come into play in the Niger Delta. Watts traces the various kinds of violence "engendered by oil", to elaborate the ways in which "resources, territoriality and identity" constitute forms of rule "within the ungovernable spaces" they operate (53). Drawing on Michael Ross (whom I discussed in chapter one), Watts notes that the spaces these collisions among oil, violence and governmentality come into being, are "sort of enclaves in which [...] oil capital is an active presence" (54).

global cartel of oil bunkering, which fuel and finance militancy, thereby making illicit trade in crude oil possible as a result of the porous security occasioned by such agitations.<sup>83</sup> With detailed analyses of facts, figures, and concrete examples, Abiodun Alao discusses the relationship between natural resources and conflicts in Africa, of which Nigeria, with its vast oil reserve, is a case in point. He identifies three weaknesses in governance concerning natural resources which fuel violent confrontations in Nigeria: the inadequacy of laws and regulations governing the sharing of the endowment, the intricacies of elite politics, and the changing role of civil society (x). Beyond identifying these problems, Alao concedes that the ones he has identified are first part of the problems within the complex and variegated categories of conflicts among the citizenry—in Nigeria. He goes on to proffer possible solutions to ending these categories of conflicts, namely the establishment of “credible structures” that can assist in ensuring equal distribution of the resources.

Alao’s analysis offers pertinent insights in reading the socio-political history of Nigeria within the context of the oil encounter. However, he seems to be evasive in proposing a concrete approach to addressing the crisis of insurgency (by the militants) and counter-insurgency (by the Nigerian government), which confront the region. For instance, establishing credible structures to address the Niger Delta problems and appropriating accrued oil revenues have not yielded lasting solutions. Indeed there have been several interventionist commissions established to address questions of social development and revenue (re)distribution in the oil producing regions of the Delta in the last fifty-five years.<sup>84</sup> But these commissions have been mere political propaganda, as their efforts were thwarted

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<sup>83</sup> See Cyril Obi and Siri Aas Rustad, eds. *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta: Managing the Complex Politics of Petro-Violence*. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute/Zed Books, 2011.

<sup>84</sup> See, for instance, the Willink Commission of 1958 set up to address the fears of minorities and the means of allaying them; the Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC) of 1992; the Niger Delta Development Commission of 2000; and more recently, the Amnesty Disarmament Commission, which later mutated into the Federal Ministry of the Niger Delta in 2009.

by lack of moral responsibility and a lack of cultural understanding of the region's challenges.

Obi and Rustad note that the Niger Delta conflict is a web of historical, socio-economic, and politically fluid dynamic “in which global forces are implicated in, and benefit from, oil extracted under conditions of structural violence and iniquity” (2). Oil bunkering, an illicit trade in crude oil is made possible as a result of security lapse occasioned by native resistance and insurgency in the region. It has become a major financier of militancy in this region. The smuggling cartel is believed to include officials of the Nigerian state, and some big players in the transnational oil corporations both within the country and in far-flung Oil Futures markets in London, Detroit, Rotterdam, and Brazil. These business-oriented individuals benefit from the restiveness and lax security situation in the Niger Delta. Even when the Nigerian state is sincere about addressing the myriads of problems which oil extraction brings to the locality, the government is soon distracted from the illicit trade by its showdown with the resource rebels and insurgent groups in the region.

In the Delta, groups of criminal elements within the ranks of the resource rebels who are mostly ex-political thugs, have had an enormously negative impact on the geopolitical contention (see Ikelegbe; Ukiwo in Obi & Rustad 2011). They have capitalised on the militant stratagem of insurgency to employ criminal tactics, whereby they sometimes kidnap innocent well-meaning individuals, both expatriates and locals. This has brought disrepute to the rebels and greatly compromised their supposedly noble struggles. In his role as executive director of Environmental Rights Action, Bassey in an interview with Alabi Williams of *The Nigerian Guardian* has said that: “The current violent confrontations in the Niger Delta appear to have taken on a life that the instigators could not have predicted and the smoke of battle is so thick and the tricky creeks so murky that pinpointing combatants on either side is a difficult business” (74). The messy business of monumentalising the combatants as

untainted heroes in the resistance struggles can be illustrated in *Liquid Black Gold*. We notice how Biokpor and his fellow combatants, fighting on the side of Ebipade, easily relapse into killing and kidnapping of their opponents as soon as their leader Ebipade is arrested and kept in military custody. Little room is left for justice, which is what they seek in the first instance, to ultimately prevail.

Mahmood Mamdani, writing about the Rwandan genocide of 1994, names two categories of violence. One he calls revolutionary/counter-revolutionary violence which makes sense, and is targeted at apprehending oppressive regimes. The other he instructively terms non-revolutionary, which is devoid of meaning, and its perpetrators are always “the subalterns”, the “wretched of the earth” (1). Similarly, Frazer and Hutchings identify two types of violence operating under the same condition of negation. The one they term “Revolutionary violence, the violence that must be used in resistance to and defeat of, oppression” (91). The other they note to be repressive or reactionary violence for domination (101; see also Sartre 21-25). But in the context of the Niger Delta and with particular reference to the film under study, I would like to suggest a different (third) category of violence. This violence stands in-between a revolutionary and a non-revolutionary one. It is one that begins as a revolution and down the road it becomes anything but revolutionary. While this category of violence is neither completely hijacked by criminal elements nor entirely overtaken by parochial interests, it is dragged into the debris of all that it seeks to challenge in the first instance. And that is where such violence becomes a commodity, as it exploits the rebellion it is deployed to bring about.

In *Liquid Black Gold*, Ebipade and his youth movement resort to violence when their quest for deliberative justice for their community is scuttled by the chiefs who represent them. Yet without their knowing it, their choice of resistance violence is exploited by those who benefit from the lopsided socio-political economy. The chiefs, having taken advantage to

enrich themselves at the expense of the community, raise a ‘counter-force’ from among the agitating youth group to cause disunity in their midst and distract them from their quest for social and environmental justice. While the chiefs and the youth have an audience with the king, the chiefs plant a seed of doubt about who should lead the youth delegation. The film depicts the subtlety of the chiefs’ plans, because no one in the youth group realises that they are being pitted against each other. Again, the need for and access to power (economic and political) is depicted as a strong motivation. Ogbuefi and Alhaji “who represent interests from above” offer to equip the youths with arms to continue the mortal combat, thereby buying into this commodity of violence as a means of distracting from the main issues of slow violence, which the uprising was meant to address. Thus, the youth are completely distracted from addressing the subtle violence which produced the condition for social disorder in their community.

### **Dialogue, story-telling, and the mediation of violence in *Liquid Black Gold***

In what appears to be a technological deficiency in giving filmic realisation to “slow violence”, the film deploys narrative characteristics of dialogue, story-telling, and narrative-embedding to stage the discourse of violence. What the film seems to lack in cinematic techniques, such as giving visual images to the oil pollutions of the Delta Rivers, the gas flaring into the atmosphere, and even the violent confrontations between insurgent factions, it makes up for in dialogue. By this I mean that the film imbues Ebipade with the art of telling – of narrating – as if he were a griot in an oral performance. Ebipade is made the speaking subject through whom the film’s discursive intentions are projected in a way that suggests the immediacy of a direct, if live, dialogue with the audience, although this takes place in a conversation with Ihuoma his wife. Ebipade has just returned from an insurgent expedition and his wife is uncomfortable with the spiral of violence to which their so-called rebellion against the community chiefs has resulted. She reprimands him for turning against his own

people whom he [Ebipade] deems as traitors who have colluded with the government and the oil companies to exploit the community. Ihuoma charges Ebipade:

Ihuoma:

You so stoutly justify and defend the actions of you and your boys, Ebipade? Even when you fight and kill your own brothers and sisters? People who you should be with in this so-called struggle?

Ebipade:

Yes, because those brothers and sisters who should be with us in this noble struggle have turned around to kick our backs [...]

In the film, Ihuoma demonstrates a voice of alternative advocacy and the one who offers Ebipade the medium to rationalise their choice of armed insurgency. She is the listening subject who stimulates Ebipade to enter into an extended argument for the necessity of violence. Ebipade is positioned here, qua Bakhtin, as the “speaking subject whose utterance” becomes “the embodiment” of the violence (*Dialogic Discourse* 75), to which the film is unable to give filmic realisation. Thus he becomes the medium through whom the deficiency in the film’s ability to visually represent (slow) violence is mitigated. Ebipade’s dialogue in the film is interspersed with the camera movement, which pans out in a montage sequence to give motion descriptions to his verbal accounts. The motion images used in segues from Ebipade’s verbal accounts to his wife about the instances of the violence which he describes, are at best amateurish. The film takes seem like real life events which are captured without rehearsals or multiple shots. Although the mutual intersection between Ebipade’s telling and the camera intervention in refracting tropes of violence in the film may seem technically weak, the film is able to realise its artistic intentions. In a sense, it indicates that the break in Ebipade’s verbal accounts by the camera montage does not suggest that he lacks the discursive idiom to articulate the ideology of their resistance, but that Nollywood production, while taking cognisance of its technological limitation in giving artistic realisation to instances of violence, deploys modes of oral rendition to complement its visual representation. Thus the film’s medium of portraying violence is what I have chosen to

describe as ‘oraltronics’, a representational protocol that concatenates oral rendition with electronic mediation of video film deployed “both to perform the work the film needs to do and to reflect on” the mutual intersection between Nollywood production and a certain ancestry of African oral forms (Levine 151). It may be stated that this griotic function is not visibly apparent in the film necessarily: it seems only implied in a subtle way.

But there is a narrative structure that is embedded in the film and most of the action is woven around this narrative structure. And this narrative structure is, in turn, organised around Ebipade’s account to his wife. Although Ebipade is the one who speaks, he is always responding to what has been said before, both by his wife and by all the critiques made of insurgent violence, in that sense, his rendition is highly dialogic. At this stage the film does not seem to be concerned much with what it projects, what it is saying, but with how it is said. Ebipade faces the camera and addresses his assumed audience as if he were on a live stage. Here, the film seems to break with filmic conventions of the fictive, the make-belief; in fact, it seems to pass a message in a manner that conveys the political urgency of the real. Where the film is unable to show spectacles of violence or give filmic realisation to slow violence, Ebipade’s commentary interjects to give creative expression to that which the film attempts to refract.

Story-telling is a veritable art in representing lived-experiences and may be used to understand how the tropes of violence – which elude graphic mediation – are captured in the film. In discussing story-telling as a mode of representing violence in *Liquid Black Gold*, I identify with Walter Benjamin’s postulations on the art of story-telling. In his reflection on the fictional works of the nineteenth century Russian novelist Nicolai Leskov, Benjamin discusses the art of capturing the essence of “Experience” through uncommon craftsmanship in telling stories (81). Benjamin notes that, “The story-teller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he, in turn, makes it the experience of



those who are listening to his talk” (83). Benjamin captures this interventionist characteristic of story-telling when he draws a distinction between the story-teller and the one who merely informs. He declares:

it is half the art of story-telling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it [...] The most extraordinary things, marvellous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks [...] The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. (85-86)

Benjamin notes that “story-telling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to” (87). Confronted with the technological challenge of making a graphic statement in the film about the environmental and the social injustice in Zeide, the Nollywood film imbues Ebipade with uncommon craftsmanship in chronicling the Oil Encounter in Zeide Community. The inability of Nollywood to graphically capture the forms of slow violence in the Delta is compensated by Ebipade’s craftsmanship in relating the narrative. He makes his role in the struggle marginal while maintaining the sanctity of the agitation which is cardinal to the realisation of the twin justice of the environmental and the social in the Delta. Thus the meaning of his life and his experience with the oil encounter (that is, the agitations and the brazen violence) is revealed only in the struggle to which he dedicates himself. According to Benjamin, a story-teller does not tell the audience what they do not already know but does it with such craftsmanship that:

The story-telling that thrives for a long time in the circle of work—the rural, the maritime, and the urban—is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the story-teller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus the traces of the story-teller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. Story-tellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience. (87)

The above lines illuminate how Ebipade narrates the story of Zeide community within the context of the social upheavals that the oil encounter exacerbates. The struggle becomes a struggle for his life. Ebipade weaves and spins the story through his own involvement in the resistance, so that the Niger Delta struggle becomes a fresh tale of the Oil Encounter. Through Ebipade's story-telling one is able to establish how violence is paradoxically deployed to become a commodity as well as a rebellious instrument available to agitating youth and to the manipulating agents, the chiefs, whom the youth had set out to challenge in the first instance. Through this technique of narration the oil encounter is re-enacted experientially in the actions that unfold in the film to lay bare the banality of violence that operates at the site of oil production. Benjamin contends that "[a]ll great story-tellers have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder" (95). He argues further that a great story-teller embodies "the image for a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier" (95), in producing sets of cognitive meaning for understanding complex encounters such as that which the oil trajectory in the Delta galvanises.

Transgression as a subversive strategy against authoritarian regimes of power has never been a static phenomenon; it is in constant flux. And so the dissidents involved in the process tend to have multiple subjectivities which are sometimes conflicting. The characters embody the paradoxes that attend the ontology of oil in the Delta: as one of heroism and villainy, integrity and compromise, wealth and poverty, morality and amorality, responsible husbands and insurgents, all at the same time. Hence, Tejumola Olaniyan argues in another context that, "Even so, whether ankle-or neck-deep in complicity (there is always a complicity, for the ground of resistance is veritably impure), [...]" (51); this ground of complicity as far as can be extrapolated in the above observation, is cogent in understanding the seemingly contradictory roles Ebipade plays in the film. He embodies the contradictions

and inconsistencies that inhere in the social and environmental instances of the oil encounter. Much as Ebipade is the leader of the dissident youth and the “supreme commander” of the foot soldiers in the Delta creeks, his humanity and moral standing are in no way brought under question.

That his wife reprimands him at the home front suggests that he considers her as an equal partner in the domestic sphere, precisely because it seems important to him that she understands the driving force behind their insurgency. So, he does not impose himself and his beliefs on her, but makes it a point of duty to explain the complexity of violence in the community. And this in a sense illustrates that dichotomy of husband and insurgent in the character of Ebipade. Although Ebipade is ideologically motivated and morally upright, he is by no means perfect. He is not a flat character. We see how he develops as the plot unravels, so that the ‘moral’ hero that emerges at the end of the film is one that has been shaped by the unfolding action: local political tension, violent confrontations between factions and eventual resolution. He is portrayed as perceptive, one who understands the enormity of the task he is face with. As such, he is able to hold his strong moral points of demanding youth representation and seeking social justice throughout the insurgency. For instance, Ebipade’s decision to avenge the betrayal and murder of his friend and “sergeant-at-arms”, Layefah, pushes him to re-strategize. He compromises as a means of sustaining the resistance only when such a move ensures his continuous formidability against his assailants; so he is able to hold a firm stance to its conclusive end.

When the “elders who represent powerful interest from above” decide to stop financing their struggle, he plays a hand from his numerous aces that will only ensure the continuous flow of arms and ammunition for their cause. Firstly, he seeks a youth representation among the community delegation to the oil company to deliberate and negotiate without violence as a peaceful means of remediating the effects of oil exploration

on the community. When that is scuttled by the chiefs, he agrees to be supplied with ammunition by the two elders, Alhaji and Ogbuefi, as a desperate move to make their voices heard and bring attention to the youth's concerns. He strikes a deal with an official of the oil multinational, Mr Aswani, a "white man", seen as one of those in connivance with some local elites to bunker oil in the region. Ebipade agrees to turn a blind eye to their nefarious activities in return for arms and ammunition to sustain the rebellion. At this stage the film creates a context for the insurgency in the region and serves as a subtext to the dubious role violence plays in perpetuating an atmosphere of restiveness which makes meaningful development in the region impossible. But even as the youth resistance turns inward in a counter-current of brigandage, Ebipade does not degenerate into acts of greed or parochial interests; his actions become acts of strategic sabotage as a means of pushing forth his community's demands. Even while he is detained without trial — after being deceived out of the creeks by the cunning chiefs — his followers remain loyal to him.

Ebipade's boys frame his unlawful detention as a strategic game of war. They too deploy their own tactics of kidnapping and hostage-taking, but this time, they kidnap the expatriate officials of the oil multinationals, who had, hitherto, been left out of the insurgency. The youths see the violent confrontations between factions and the dubious chiefs as a sort of witty game; thus, they deploy metaphors of sport contests to articulate their resistance. When the second-in-command, Biokpor, is approached to cease hostility by Chief Teride, the new government-appointed negotiator, he [Biokpor] tells of his readiness to "play the game [of war] when the whistle is blown" that there is "no game [of peace] unless Ebipade is released". This seems to suggest that since Ebipade is the initiator of the insurgency in their demand for environmental and social justice, he is also seen as pivotal to the resolution of the conflicts and a key figure in the entrenchment of justice and meaningful development in his community. Thus his involvement in the story – and his account of it –

becomes a mirror through which the complex tale of the operations of petro-violence in the Delta might be understood.

### **Embedded-narrative of internal violence as critique of nationalist ideologies**

As stated earlier in this chapter, there is certain local integrity and indigenous power associated with Nollywood filmic productions. In *Liquid Black Gold*, the logic of local integrity and indigenous power are reinforced in the way the film utilises eminent individuals in society as members of its cast. There seems to be a predetermined credibility to the oppositional discursive tropes of violence which the film refracts. The personalities behind the characters in the film have some cameo-like characteristic; although they play major roles in the film, and command some amount of respect if not reverence—in real life—in the Niger Delta and even in the mainstream Nigerian society. Let me give examples with just two. Ebipade, for instance, is Sam Dede in real life, one of the foremost actors in Nigeria and a renowned drama professor at the University of Port Harcourt, a prestigious tertiary institution located in the city of Port Harcourt, Nigeria's oil capital. Chief Ebi is Justus Esiri, who was a veteran theatre practitioner and one of the pioneering actors in Nollywood. He died in 2012. These personalities have some force of authority—and they give weight to the characters they embody in the film. Provided with a medium to express the disaffection of the Delta to Ihuoma, Ebipade constructs an argument that is framed in the politics of minority resistance:

Ebipade:

Let me tell you something my dear wife, our real enemies are the government and those that we have sent to represent us before the oil companies. Our perceived enemies are the oil companies, who out of naivety or ignorance, or, maybe, sheer greed, have connived with these two enemies to rip us off. There was a clause in the 1963 Constitution and that clause gave us the power to control the resources in our region. That power was also vested in other regions. You see, when agriculture was the mainstay of our country's economy, nobody, nobody amended or abrogated that section of the constitution. But at the advent of oil in the Zeide Region...let's not even go into that... Let me tell you something, resource control is the remote and immediate solution to all this crises.

Ebipade's address to his wife finds exteriority in the vexed discourse of Resource Control, but he is unable to follow it through. The film seems to wrestle his account from the concrete materiality of the region's geopolitical history of tensions with the Nigerian state over revenue sharing. But it soon morphs into some mystifying discourse of resistance that is contradictory in its articulation.<sup>85</sup> The context of the film's material production and the discursive conditions it summons gesture to an atmosphere of the paradoxical and of the unresolvable exacerbated by the oil encounter in Nigeria. For instance, within the context of resistance violence that the film refracts, there lies an embedded narrative of internally-stoked violence within the meta-narrative of violence. Throughout this movie, there seems to be a departure from the familiar script of blaming the oil multinationals as the identifiable culprit in the environmental pollution and destruction of the social fabric in the Delta. *Liquid Black Gold* seems to construct an oppositional discourse of violence instigated by internal tensions between the youth and their elders in the community.

*The Liquid Black Gold* gives an imaginative realisation to an important (but often ignored) aspect of the Niger Delta struggle [crisis]: a generational ideological rivalry between the young and the old in the Delta, which stems from a culture of gerontocracy in (pre)modern African societies, but is increasingly displaced in a post-traditional African modernity. That rivalry has fuelled much of the internal tensions which result in brigandage among youth groups in the Delta. Here, again, it is Ihuoma who provides the podium for Ebipade to articulate this ironic twist in the insurgency. She plays as important a role as he. Without Ihuoma's prompting, Ebipade's eventual actions would not have made sense to the audience:

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<sup>85</sup> The trajectory and currency of oil in the Delta can be followed to arrive at an understanding of the spectacle of violence as is now evident in the region and an apparently discordant feature of politics, history and sociocultural economics that built up to the present in Nigeria. This video film draws heavily from the debates that emanate from the discourses of Resource Control and Principles of Derivation which underscore Nigeria's geopolitical economic history since independence. I have highlighted this history in the introductory chapter of this study.

Ihuoma:

Tell me about your brothers and sisters who you kill and kidnap

Ebipade:

They are just a lucky few who the community appoint to bring before the oil company the several hardships oil exploration has brought on our people: Chief Ebi, Chief Zeide and Paul, a retired school teacher. They have become so rich; they are even richer than the king. And they saw this assignment as an opportunity to enrich themselves while shutting their ears to the plights of our people.

This passes a damning commentary on the avarice of local community representatives and the government officials sent in to intervene in intra-communal crises in parts of Nigeria. In the same vein, Ebipade's submission here complicates the endless story of greed, corruption and betrayal that attend the oil encounter in Nigeria. The film crystallises into a critique of nationalism within the context of the oil encounter. It brings to the fore the weakness in the argument of local claims against national interest. It carries the notion that the argument of local claims to the oil wealth set up against national interest is a problematic one. The embedded narrative of internally-stoked violence portrays a socio-political crisis which has continued to insulate the twin issues of environmental and social justice from critical scrutiny. Since the local community cannot produce responsible representative leadership who can genuinely champion the cause of environmental and social justice, *Liquid Black Gold* seems to suggest that the utopian event of a total control of the oil wealth by the locals would be counter-productive. Some of the local leaders would expropriate the wealth for their selfish benefits. And this would, no doubt, result in a more disturbing spectacle of fratricide and patricide.

Furthermore, the traditional structure of hierarchy in African modernity is questioned in the film: the tension between gerontocratic rule and the increasingly disillusioned youth in the Delta and perhaps, elsewhere in Africa. The youth feel that traditional societies have continued to deploy cultural politics and contrived traditional beliefs to disenfranchise them in local governance. The ascendancy of community elders over youth with vitality, and

sometimes, better skills and education, has been the source of major conflicts in the Delta.<sup>86</sup> Due to the long years of neglect and the mistrust it has engendered, the problems of the Niger Delta have transcended those of structural development. It has come to the level where the so-called resource rebels have begun to see their insurgency as a career, as a means of livelihood. This becomes a problematic situation when a structural solution is proffered without putting into consideration the socioeconomic and moral burden such long-drawn agitation has brought to this troubled society.

By resorting to violence in *Liquid Black Gold*, I argue that the rebelling factions succeed in enacting an insidious form of violence that Fanon may not have envisaged. Fanon frames the use of violence as a strategy which leads to freedom and an entrenchment of national politics, based on equal participation of all revolutionaries, that is, all citizens. But violence in the film has become a politics in itself. It is one that appears to enable the feuding parties to partake of the revenue-sharing (or grabbing) of the oil proceeds. I argue that this twist in the use of violence is one that seems to make nonsense of the ideals around which Fanon's notions of decolonisation are framed. For instance, Eriye and Akpobome, leaders of the hirelings fighting on the side of the chiefs, see their newly-acquired power as a form of economic success. They consider violence as a source of income, because they might not be able to get a job in the oil companies in the event of a favourable consideration of their demands – they lack the requisite qualification to get into a paid employment in the oil companies. And so Eriye and Akpobome consider Ebipade as an economic rival who is bent on sabotaging their means of survival. The rivalry between factions, which begins as a

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<sup>86</sup> In the introductory section of this thesis I briefly discussed the historical contexts around which Ken Saro-Wiwa championed and was involvement in the Niger Delta struggle. What I left out is a bitter generational and ideological rivalry between him (Saro-Wiwa) and his one-time mentor and subsequently political rival Chief Edward Kobani in the Ogoni Saga. This rivalry, it is argued, brought about mistrust and bad-blood that resulted in the mobbing of four Ogoni Elders in 1994 by some irate Ogoni youths. It was for this reason—unsubstantiated though—that Saro-Wiwa was tried and hanged in 1995 by the Abacha junta. Adewale Meja-Pearce has a more detailed discussion of this angle to the Ogoni struggle in his book of essays, *Remembering Ken Saro-Wiwa and Other Essays*, especially pages 9-48.



rebellion against what the youth have termed social and environmental injustice, becomes a personal fight for unhindered access to and control of the perks of the oil wealth. Thus, the issues that confront the region also pose a moral question about the Nigerian social structure. And this in a sense calls for a socio-cultural reengineering, one that transcends structural measures which mere geopolitical and socio-economic solutions might catalyse. A former Secretary of the fiery Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) Abiye Kuromiema, in an interview with *The Guardian's* Alabi Williams, makes a fundamental point while discussing the Federal government's promised construction of a major road in the Niger Delta:

Let them [government] finish the East-West [road], how many people in the Niger Delta will have money to open factories there? They have been able to build a road from Emuoha to Kalabari land. The moment they did that the boys, who were driving boats from Abonema wharf, Port Harcourt to Buguma and Abonema, and back lost their jobs. Those boys are now driving for militants [in the creeks]. (23)

This aptly demonstrates that structural development, if not well thought out and linked to the bigger developmental project of socio-political reengineering, can become counter-productive. Evidently, as articulated by the youth leader, some of the Niger Delta Youth become insurgent, not because they are criminals bent on unleashing mayhem in the society, but because government is insensitive to if not ignorant of their social reality. The long years of disaffection stemming from socio-cultural repression and political discountenance on account of their "minority" status has made the crises in the Niger Delta quite a messy business to which linear solutions may no longer apply.

### **Local resistance, politics of neoliberalism and global circulation of oil**

The paradoxical function of violence, both as physical and socioenvironmental means of resistance is cleverly articulated in the film. Violence gives motivation to the structures of economic and socio-cultural forces, and the political processes that inhere in the meta-narrative of the oil encounter in Nigeria, and perhaps in the global petroleum industry. Obi and Rustad discuss this notion when they observe that there are local and global forces

“enmeshed and implicated in the [oil-related] violent conflict either as supporters of the state-backed transnational extractors of oil or as allies of local resistance movements and rights advocacy groups” (3), who exploit the fragile security situation in the region to their selfish ends. In what he calls “extractive neoliberalism”, James Ferguson argues that the untidy atmosphere produced by oil related conflicts enables “flexible and opportunistic forms of deregulated enterprises to flourish in Africa” (210). Ferguson writes about the peculiar nature of oil—its exploration, production, and circulation—and the manner in which it is insulated from local crises, internal politics and economics in parts of Africa where it is produced (195). He observes that there is an increasing disconnection of mineral extractive industry from national-level social, [environmental] and political entanglement, one that is facilitated by new forms of spatial flexibility made possible by neoliberal conventions of deregulated market and free movement of capital across “broken borders” (205).

It is quite surprising to note that even when local crises are fuelled by oil explorations and the politics that ensure its unhindered flow, the oil industry is intractably insulated from the crises. This point finds resonance in a real life-incident cited in Timothy Hunt’s *Politics of Bones*, a biography of Owens Wiwa, the younger brother to Ken Saro-Wiwa. The book is an agitational account of the role played by the younger Wiwa in the Ogoni Saga with the Nigerian state in the 1990s. Hunt narrates an altercation between a group of Ogoni farmers, and a group of Wilbros Construction expatriate-workers with their ever-present military guard, in which Owens intervenes after some protesting locals were shot at by the company’s security detail:

As they spoke, Owens noticed a group of women crying over another woman who was lying on the ground. Trying not to show his anger, Owens asked the army captain if it would be all right if he spoke with the man in charge of the Wilbros workers. “That’s the manager there,” said the captain, pointing to one of the white men in a shirt and tie. Owens introduced himself. “Tell me what’s happening. I had some people who came to my clinic who said they were shot. Now I come here and I’m seeing this. What is it? The man, whose name was J.K. Tillery, shrugged and said, “Hey, this is none of my business.” How do you mean?” These are Nigerian soldiers and these are Nigerian people. It’s none of my

business.” Sir, I passed this road yesterday and your trucks were not here,” said Owens. “These soldiers were not here and these people were not here. Nobody was shot. You brought the soldiers to this area. So now this is your business. (Hunt 96-97)

Drawing a parallel in *Liquid Black Gold*, it becomes noticeable that the oil multinationals – addressed with the metaphor of “The Whiteman” – are hardly mentioned. The film focuses on the internal tension of violence and the cultural crises in oil-bearing communities that make it impossible for the oil wealth to percolate down to the common people. It is interesting to note that it is only when “The Whiteman” is taken hostage by the agitating youth, as a desperate move to force the government to address their concerns, that the conflict is resolved and the film comes to an end. The kidnapped official is instrumental in bringing the conflict to a resolute end. He is the one who finally manages to get a peace-brokering deal underway which leads to the release of Ebipade and the award of contracts for road construction in Zeide.

*Liquid Black Gold* appears to avoid an overt critique of neoliberal capitalism and the regime of oil governance that enable its operations in the Delta. Nevertheless, the film subtly negotiates certain tenets that enable the continued flow of oil from the local Delta to the global market. *Liquid Black Gold* gives an interesting perspective on oil multinationals’ amoral, insensate approach to the conduct of big business in “vernacular landscapes” (Nixon 86) such as in the Niger Delta. Fanon notes that the colonisers in all their imperialistic formations always succeed in safeguarding “their legitimate interests [in their former colonies] with the help of [global] economic conventions” (51), albeit western-invented conventions. Hence there appears to be reluctance verging on apathetic ambivalence on the part of the multinationals in intervening in the confrontations between the Nigerian state and the local communities. The oil corporations seem to always pride themselves on being anything but meddlesome. They argue that they are there to do business and make profit, and

not to meddle into issues of social development and justice; for these (to them) are the exclusive preserve of the Nigerian state, the Federal Government.

In the film, one of the expatriate characters, Mr Aswani, representing the oil corporations makes this claim when he is approached by Ebipade to provide their youth group with ammunition. Aswani declares: “I’m here in the interest of my company. I’m neither for your community nor for your country. I’m just a foreigner doing my own business to make my money.” Indeed, as Slavoj Zizek notes: “The fate of whole strata of the population and sometimes of whole countries can be decided by ‘solipsistic’ speculative dance of capital, which pursues its goal of profitability in *blessed indifference* to how its movement will affect social reality” (12; my emphasis). Zizek discusses the way that capitalism flourishes within what he notes to be the operations of “systemic violence” in society. I would suggest (in a similar vein) that Aswani personifies this solipsistic performance of (petro)-capitalism in the way he demonstrates indifference in the crisis brewing around the operations of his business. He is portrayed as one who only intervenes when his business and personal safety are brought under threat by local insurgency. This exemplifies the operational strategy of the oil-prospecting industry in the Delta. Their interventions in the Niger Delta faceoff with the State are usually both a business strategy and a gesture of self-preservation. Since “they pay their taxes promptly and whichever way they are told” (Ekeh 98), that is, into secret accounts of government agents or private accounts of local representatives, these companies are not morally obliged to see to it that their business is beneficial to the host communities. The subtlety of this engagement in the film is remarkably different from the poetry studied in the previous chapters, especially in Bassey’s which adequately capture and vilify the ways in which the Niger Delta is exposed to unregulated, borderless, yet enclave petro-capitalism that is insulated by neoliberalism, which

cannot be held responsible for the wreckage inflicted on any local, defenceless outback like the Delta.

Placing *Liquid Black Gold* against a broader context of other representations of petrocultures, it becomes apparent that the film tends to restrict itself to its immediate concerns of local realities which give instances to socioenvironmental manifestations of the oil encounter in the Niger Delta. In contrast to this representative schema, we see a different sociocultural narrative at play in the Hollywood movie, *Syriana* (2006). The movie gives a creative definition to the ways in which oil circulates to affect other aspects of global modernity, how it percolates to other modes of modern consumption and undergirds the challenges and crises that confront our planet today (Mitchell 409).<sup>87</sup> Two characters stand out in the film: the ingénue Wasim and his friend, Farouk. We do not lose sight of their innocence, even as they are indoctrinated into becoming terrorists through Islamic fundamentalism. But their action seems to be wrestled from the discourse of religious fundamentalism when before they are to execute the suicide attack on the oil installation, Wasim grows cold feet, thinking that he is not faithfully convinced he is the chosen one to do the task. His friend, Farouk tells him, with a most convincing naiveté, that their actions will bring economic succour to their impoverished families. He reminds Wasim of his father's dream of bringing his (Wasim's) mother from Pakistan to the 'greener pastures' of the fictive oil location (possibly the Persian Gulf). Thus, other than dying for an Islamic fundamentalist

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<sup>87</sup> *Syriana* engages with the ways in which the global circulation of oil and the politics that makes for unhindered flow of oil possible, affect lives in far-flung places across the globe. From the high walls of the CIA in Washington DC, the boardroom of oil bigwigs in Texas, through the indentured immigrant oilrig workers' barracks in The Middle East, to the religious and cultural politics that underwrite the Emirates' control of oil resources in the Arab World. Seemingly unrelated, and perhaps, unimaginable lives and stories are ineluctably connected to the metanarrative of the oil encounter in an episodic manner. It seems easy to see what the film portrays: the strong-armed politics and capitalist impulses that the oil encounter stimulates. But what fascinates about *Syriana* is how it deploys the discourse of oil politics without demonising the evils of capitalism which operates without morality and its rhetoric of universal prosperity. The film also does not monumentalise the oppression of the poor, those whose lives take a plunge as a result of the contradictions and paradoxes that inhere in the free-flow of trade and labour that oil circulation galvanises. Instead, it engages on a deeper level the way in which the global flow of oil affects other aspect of local and global modernity.

belief, their death becomes a humanist-driven sacrifice for the economic liberation of their respective families. This, to me, is what makes the duo the true (tragic) heroes in *Syriana*.

While Ebipade's actions in *Liquid Black Gold* can be said to be similar to Wasim and Farouk's: a humanist-driven attempt to liberate his Zeide Community from petro-colonialism, his role as an insurgent rebel is not an innocent, selfless one. He is unequivocal in stating his resolve to wrestle to the ground anyone found complicit in the exploitation of his (Zeide) people, even if that person is a relative. He does not see the casualties in the struggle as economic sacrifice that will bring succour to the people, but as collateral damage in a greater cause, that is, the quest for geo-regional sovereignty and total control of the oil resource, a quest that is framed as a kind of reprisal violence against the slow violence of environmental pollution and resource exploitation. *Liquid Black Gold* is not as subtle in the mediation of oil at the global level as *Syriana*. It goes to the very heart of the provocation, the interstitial formations created to stoke violence as visible manifestations of all that is condemnable in the manner in which the extractive industry and local government conduct business in the Niger Delta.

### **Conclusion**

*The Liquid Black Gold* can be read as an allegory of the contemporary socio-political situation in the Niger Delta. But the film, just like most video films typical of Nollywood productions, heads for narrative closure, where every conflict is resolved and the people live happily ever after. I think that a narrative such as the oil encounter which resides in the discursive atmosphere of the unresolvable, incoherencies, contradictions, and paradoxes should eschew closures in order to prompt varied and alternative means of apprehending the crises occasioned by the oil encounter in the Niger Delta. And this is also a technical problem in Nollywood; it reflects an inability in its production to establish narratives that are non-teleological, and this makes their films excruciatingly predictable with amateurish endings. If

as Szeman notes, “conclusions are suspended in order to better map the nervous system of oil capitalism” (“Crude Aesthetics” 432), it stands to reason then, that narratives of the oil encounter in the Nigerian context are on-going historical processes with chains of events—contradictory and paradoxical mostly—which co-occur not in a linear process but in a cyclical discursive process. Noel Carroll writes that:

Closure [...] transpires when all of the questions that have been saliently posed by the narrative get answered [...]. The impression of completeness that makes for closure derives from our estimation, albeit usually tacit, that all our pressing questions regarding the storyworld have been answered. (4-5)

This point has traction only to the extent that the said narrative is meant to entertain and destabilise the foundations of our received wisdom. But when a narrative is also meant to serve an agenda, as a narrative of discursive resistance, it ought to arrive at an open-ended conclusion. In the beginning, *Liquid Black Gold* sets out to apprehend the issues of social and environmental justice, seen as slow violence, but is intercepted by physical violence. This physical violence was meant to be deployed as agency of resistance and bring to the fore the unspectacular, slow violence in the region; but it too gets hijacked by the perceived villains and turned against the agitating youth, whereby all get drowned in an abyss of endless violence. Nevertheless, it seems that *The Liquid Black Gold* is giving a moral articulation to the subject of violence in the region: that beyond the display of frenetic energy by the youth resource-rebels, there lies a desperate longing for an amicable and permanent solution to the Niger Delta crises. More than anything else it seems to suggest that the people are increasingly becoming weary of the restiveness and the long-drawn confrontations with the Nigerian state and the oil majors. Thus *Liquid Black Gold* appears to suggest that the people of the Niger Delta long for a day when all will sit at the reconciliatory table and draw up a master-plan for a logical solution to the problems exacerbated by the oil encounter.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion – in quest of meaning through experience**

So far I have explored the ways in which literary and filmic texts collectively draw from the same experience of the oil encounter to engage with tropes of violence, which are considered as being inscribed and orchestrated by the technologies and politics of oil extraction in Nigeria's Niger Delta. I have attempted to establish the different kinds of violence and the ways they are represented in contemporary poetry and video film which capture the oil encounter. I have shown how the texts bring to the dominant paradigms that inform environmental writing and ecocritical practice, a baggage of geopolitical and sociocultural ideologies of disaffection from the Nigerian national political process to bear upon their environmental consciousness. I have argued that the texts consider the devastation done to the Delta environment by oil extraction as a form of violence. This violence is framed as a kind of intrusion which eludes visibility because of the subtlety of its existence and operation. I focussed on how the texts consider this violence as analogous to the oil commodity, both circulating and permeating every aspect of being in the Niger Delta. I attempted to understand the specificity of this violence in the texts, especially the manner in which violence is engaged and surfaced in its unseen valences to make them visible as instances of the oil encounter in the Delta.

In chapter one I explored the field of ecocriticism in relation to African writing, and suggested that the critical paradigms that underlie its critiques are inadequate to account for the environmental consciousness that the texts which capture the oil encounter adumbrate. I suggested that the particular environmental concern and its entreaties for justice in Niger Delta writing are mobilised within and around the representations of the oil encounter. I have argued that in the projection of these two concatenating forms of environmental concerns and the oil ontology in the Delta, narratives are spawned, through lived and imaginative experiences, to advance what I call a literature of petro-environmentalism.



Ghosh argues that representing something of such magnitude as oil modernity can only be done adequately through narratives of epic quality such as realist fiction or the historical novel (75). He further notes that this has made the oil encounter suffer a representational crisis, not just in American literary circuit but also, and even more perturbingly, in the Arab world, which is the very stage (or theatre) of oil extraction and the nastiness that attends its production and circulation, one that is underwritten by the politics of neoliberalism. In situating Niger Delta representations of the oil encounter within this ferment of petrocultures, I moved away from the above assumptions to suggest that the texts, poetry and video film, have adequately captured the oil encounter, but not on a grand scale or through realist fiction. And this suggests that the texts I analyse might not fit into Ghosh's taxonomy, precisely because the writers' imagination of the oil phenomenon does not elicit the kind of narratives that Ghosh would have anticipated. In my reading I showed how poetry intervenes in the daunting reality of the oil's presence to point society in the direction of transformational possibilities, even if immediately unrealistic. This process of looking beyond the real to create a world of radical possibility is what accounts for the taxonomic invisibility of Niger Delta poetry in the discussion of the literatures that write about the oil encounter.

In their signification of the oil ontology in the Delta, lived-experience, in its actual, quotidian specificity, takes precedence in the writers' imagination. It is from this vantage point of being in the particular milieu of the oil sites that the writer negotiates possible meaning(s) of the oil's presence in the Niger Delta. Against this background, I suggested that realism does not seem to serve the purpose of the poets' intentions, because what confronts the writer's fictive possibility is an intimidating reality which stupefies their creativity into fragmentation, their narrative into incoherence and their point of view into contradictions. To forestall these incongruities the poets begin to deploy narrative techniques that they deem appropriate for their poetic intentions. Thus in chapter two we encounter Yeibo, in *A Song for*

*Tomorrow*, approaching the oil imagination by focussing on its temporalities in the Niger Delta. In the poem, “Barren Rivers”, as I have already discussed, the poet creates a narrative in which his persona identifies with a pre-oil modernity Niger Delta, an imagined past, to speculate about a world of harmony, abundance and peace in which oil production had not destroyed all that held society in cultural and environmental cohesion. But when the persona attempts to engage with the present setting of the Delta, one that is permeated by the presence of oil with all its incongruities, his narrative slips into fragments and conjectures, and this makes his poetic witnessing become unreliable. In a similar vein, Bassey’s *We Thought it Was Oil but it Was Blood* provides us with a poetic of environmental justice advocacy, but what we encounter is a measure of reticence in the way that the poet offers open-ended concepts of resistance to petro-capitalism. In the poem, “Polluted Throats”, he deploys the word ‘something’ to constitute for the reader the transformational possibility that collective action might catalyse.

In the third chapter, Ojaide, Ifowodo and Ikiriko, unable to narrate the suffering of the human populace in the oil sites with no identifiable oppressor, conjure up a fraught history of national becoming in which they conceive the Nigerian political process as the context within which their oppressive conditions take root. The poets create a world in which ethnic identity and regional autonomy are valorised and privileged over nationalism, precisely because that seems to serve their geopolitics of social and environmental justice, a sub-regional concern to which their texts are addressed. The poets tend to assert their ethnic identity by performing a form of regional distinctiveness, a creative act of dissidence in which they deploy concrete historical and geopolitical verities to assert this regional specificity. And this becomes the basis upon which they stage protests against forms of environmental injustices and geopolitical marginalisation that are enabled by what is considered a fraught nationalism.

This form of nationalism is disavowed because it is perceived as merely political and superficial, one that is conjured up, mobilised and rallied around the oil proceeds.

In chapter four, the engagement with notions of violence in *Liquid Black Gold* may be understood as a means of achieving a state of national being, a reinvention that is at once a closure and a window of possibilities for a new regime of oil governance in Nigeria. It is closure because it enables a quintessential Hegelian principle of political as well as practical “negation of the negative” (Mbembe,<sup>88</sup> Zizek 27) valences of the unseen and spectacular violence that are embedded in the technologies and politics of oil extraction that the film dramatizes. It provides a window of possibilities because, it attempts at making visible the unseen violence that underlies the structural violence, through the instrumentality of organised transgression. Violence, also, in a sense proceeds to enable a new regimes of operation, an atmosphere of free ordering that produces affirmative possibilities for attaining justice and a rethinking of a truly democratic Nigeria. Violence, as evidenced in the concluding part of *Liquid Black Gold* (where a resolution is reached), may then be conceived as the vehicle by means of which the human society is re-inscribed in freedom and brought into being.

Having so far examined the poetry collections and film, I want to briefly return to the photographs that I discussed in the introduction of this thesis in order to show how the insights from these texts might enhance our understanding of those visual images. To be sure, what the poetry and film provide is an insight that suggests at least two ways in which the notion of violence is a complicated one in the representation of the oil encounter in the Niger Delta. The first insight is that the portrayal of the oil phenomenon in the Delta is one that includes the human experience of the unseen textures of violence of the oil encounter, in its quotidian verities, at the sites of oil extraction. And, these verities of human provenance are

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<sup>88</sup> Achille Mbembe at the W.E.B. DuBois Memorial Lecture, New York, Colgate University, 15 November 2010.

at odds with the first photograph which captures the signpost of the first oil-well in an environment that is fallow and uninhabited.

The second insight that the texts provide, which may enhance our understanding of the visual images, is that the notion of violence is staged as a form of performance in the sense that, to a certain extent, it proceeds to govern attempts at making the felt experience of violence visible through the instrumentality of representation. In effect, violence is signified as the visible expression and extension of the unseen experience of violence that is felt, but at the same time eludes visibility because of the nature of its operation in the Delta. In any case, what noticeable in the second photograph is that the unseen violence embedded in the injustices of environmental pollution and socioeconomic marginalisation of the Niger Delta is elided by the spectacle that characterises the protocol by which these disaffections are protested and made visible. And this spectacle tends to become the violence in itself. Indeed, it has come to constitute itself as the violence in the public mind, especially given the preponderance of militarised insurgency in Nigeria's petro-modernity. The spectacle of violence which the photographs portray has made the images circulate much faster than the poetry collections. Notice the excessive form of violence that is performed in the photograph by the rebels, the rocket propelled gun (RPG) and Kalashnikovs (AK-47) pointed at their hostage. Looking at the photographs after reading the poetry collections, it becomes possible to see the extent to which they stage and limit the way in which the oil encounter gets represented to the world. The poetry collections I have explored demand a more complex, nuanced reading of the oil encounter in Nigeria's Niger Delta, and this is what I have attempted to do in this study.

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