CHAPTER 1

Precarious Riches
Oil, Insurgency, and Violence in Nigerian Literature

The Violent Precariat

In Tony Nwaka's political thriller *Lords of the Creek* (2015), the monarch of the Ijaw tribe recounts the struggles of his community by invoking a local legend, which involves a wrestling competition between three neighboring communities. Of the three communities, two had won previous competitions as they were privy to some large sums of powers known as "special endowments," and each used them judiciously to their advantage and had won the title. The third community, it was believed, was at the receiving end of violence from the other two communities, with no access to special endowment powers. Years later, taking pity on the third community, the two communities decide to relinquish their right to use the endowment powers, to create a level playing field. The third community wins the title for the first time. But a feud erupts between various quarters of the community as to who would keep the trophy. Eventually, it was agreed by the community that a mini-tournament between various quarters would determine the ultimate owner of the trophy. To the utter dismay of the organizers, however, during one of the fights, a contending party suddenly flashes the same special endowment weapon banished by the two neighboring communities against its opponent team, killing the whole lot. Powerless to stop this incredible occurrence, the other quarters watch the entire ordeal in disbelief, and "wonder why a weapon they had collectively objected to as a people would be used against them by their own brothers. They were disillusioned. They folded their hands and wept bitterly, praying for divine intervention."[1] Given that this legend stems from a so-called oil community,[2] one is tempted to indulge in a thought experiment and replace the "special endowment" powers in the story with that of oil, but tragically, there would be no divine intervention in this ill-fated community because, as the nafthologists hold, "After His death, God turned into oil, and oil became a surrogate God with very straightforward

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utility: everything that smacks of being sacred is burned in the black motor of economic growth."[3]

The inverted, internalized, and even acculturated violence of a community that is always on the margins of a society with abundant resources speaks much to the theme of this chapter: How are violence and resources interlinked? In the spirit of the Ijaw story at the opening of this chapter, I will move forward with the premise that violence, particularly internalized or inverted violence, becomes not only an immediate response to but also a way of challenging precarity. Here, I use the term "internalized violence" as a form of systemic and socially administered violence, "which not only harm[s] us" but compensates for "internalizing negative self-images and a profound sense of alienation and despair."[4] Much the same way, my use of the term "inverted violence" is inspired by an epigram that is frequently attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: "Poverty is the worst form of violence." One could even replace "poverty" here with "precarity" and still do justice to the concept of precarity, but perhaps Gandhi was the first pacifist figure to think nonviolence *through* violence, as he warned of a bloody uprising, "unless there is a voluntary abdication of riches and the power . . . for the common good."[5] If we put aside the pipe dream of the pacifist abdication of riches for the common good, we will be revisited with the same unresolved Gandhian paradox in Achille Mbembe's caveat that the violence carried out by the postcolonial subject is no more, and no less, than a sum of the violence inflicted upon the very history of that subject under colonial rule.

As if invoking the very language of precarity, Mbembe writes of the colonized subject:

> The figure par excellence of vulnerability and stripped dignity, captured from time to time in snatched phrases describing a disparate and derisory humanity, he now only answers to abjection and to the same forms of misery to which he has been reduced.. . . In this balance between caring and wounding there appears, in all its violence, the paradox of the "commandment," a grotesque and brutal power which aims to draw together the attributes of logic (*reason*), fantasy (*arbitrary*), and cruelty.[6]

It is this very convergent logic of violation and violence of the colonized subject that enables a fantasy of exacting justice (reason). The gist of both Gandhi's and Mbembe's theses that the precarious subject is both violated *and* violent is also a dominant current in Niger Delta literature, which responds to the insurgent spearhead by an array of splintered armed groups challenging the state. Incensed by Sani Abacha's billions of dollars of loot

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from oil revenue in the late 1990s, the Ijaw Youth Council, Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), and the Niger Delta Liberation Front (NDLF) waged an uncoordinated war against the oil conglomerate. Most of these splinter groups sprang from a political vacuum created by inter-ethnic, resource-based grievances – between Hausas and Igbos, on the one hand, and between Igbos and Delta minorities, on the other – since the days of the Nigerian civil war. In 2004, an umbrella organization called Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) rose to prominence through a bewildering array of insurgencies. At the opposite end of the spectrum are the state, the military, and the rival group Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), founded by Ijaw youths led by Ateke Tom. This group rose to prominence after the fallout of Mujahid Dokubo Asari, the founder of NDPVF, with the governor of the River States in 2003, who had actively funded the group since its inception. Since March 2016, however, another group called Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) has joined the fray, with crude theft, kidnapping, and attacks on foreign oil workers as their major activities.

Ironically, crude oil dependency – be it through theft or by trade – is probably the greatest cause of precarity in Nigeria, much to the neglect of civic infrastructure, including education and health. Despite its primacy to the economy and society, oil theft is endemic to Nigeria and is the source of major conflicts among rebel groups competing for oil territory. The state, for its part, casts a blinkered eye on oil piracy even though it costs about $3 billion annually in revenue for the exchequer. The Delta states' collusion with the armed groups is a well-documented fact, but what is little known is the Nigerian state's lackluster attitude toward oil piracy, which is often justified by the lopsided argument that oil theft provides temporary employment, never mind the unsafe and unprotected work conditions as well as the precarious subjects who are exposed to the dangers and violence involved in stealing, transporting, and selling it in the streets.

It thus comes as no surprise that the "tangible aspects" of the precarious subjects and their conditions of injury are often "packed inside an overarching sense of fear of disruptions, potential harms and risks as engendered through 'terror,' 'others,' war and climate change."[7] This is perhaps the implicit yet somewhat underhanded connotation behind Guy Standing's framing of the precariat as the "new dangerous class," a class that is subject to myriad visible and invisible forms of violence, one that resorts to equally violent forms of resistance.[8]

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Challenging Standing's neat categorization of precariat against "decent labour" in the North, however, Franco Barchiesi argues that such a distinction is not applicable to the Global South due to histories of "indecent labour" – slavery and bonded and indebted labor regimes.[9] Coupled with colonial extractivism and biopolitical occupation, sections of populations not only in the Global South but also in the settler colonies are repeatedly subjected to forms of injury and intensified suffering. Although, for some critics, this situation does not necessarily lead the precariat to rebel or take recourse to violence but to find a solution within the economies of violence, there is much historical and sociological evidence that suggests otherwise.[10] The violent mutiny of West African captives and the subsequent suicides of the Igbo rebels in 1803 off the Savannah coast is a case in point: the captives chose to kill their captors, or die trying to do so, rather than finding a solution or accepting their fate. Ronaldo Munck, too, endorses this view by injecting political agency into Standing's conception of such a violated, therefore potentially "dangerous" class of denizens in the North. The greatest "dangers" presented by such violated precariat, as it were, are the organized labor movements in the sectors of mining of minerals and chemicals in the South, from Colombia to India.[11]

In the contexts where there is already a precedent for violence, stemming from the resource extractivism of the colonial era – for example, the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya (1952–1960); the Second Chimurenga of Zimbabwe (1964–1979) against colonial land grabbing; the Morant Bay Rebellion (1865) in Jamaica against the adverse conditions of taxes, poverty, and disease; or the Akassa tribes' rebellion against the monopoly of the palm oil trade by the Royal Niger Company in 1895 – insurgent violence tends to be a periodic response to precarious working conditions. In this sense, the Southern precariat can be defined as a doubly marginalized figure through colonial subjugation and the continued repression by the postcolonial state, which is subject to new forms of capitalist hegemonies as exemplified in the North/South divide. Under such circumstances, unlike the Northern precariat that resorts to violent protests only when decoupled from *decent* labor regimes, the Southern precariat takes the *indecent* route to violence when all other conciliatory means are foreclosed, and when there is a historical precedent for insurgency as a means of liberation struggle.

Paradoxically, violence and precarity seem to converge in regions where natural resources are abundant, and where the precariat is denied access to resources that are sitting on their inherited lands. This is certainly the case with Michael Watts's reading of youth unrest and precarity in the Niger

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Delta (2017), West Papuans' protests and riots against Freeport-McMoRan's mining (2020), and the Tuareg insurgency in northern Mali (2007–2009) against the French uranium firm Areva, to name a few.[12] In conjunction with the theses on peripheral realism and its aesthetics (Majumder), these examples point toward the disjunctive experiences of the commodity frontiers (Niblett) – oil, coal, sugar, cotton, and other agrarian and natural resources that are essentially tied to the "common reference" provided by the "core" – the demands set in motion by colonial enterprises as well as the global capitalist extractivism.[13] The examples featured in this chapter perform a similar task as the world literatures from the periphery, by taking "stock of literary implications born of the displacement of a universalized subject of labor by the gendered, casualized, and far-flung forms of post-Fordist production that challenge classical realism's signature allegorizing of individual subject and nation form."[14] Unlike the totalizing tendencies of postcolonial realism (representational politics at the level of identity) or modernism (stylized treatment of struggles, laden with mimicry of the form and modulation), and unlike the early waves of Nigerian literature in the footsteps of decolonial nationalism, nativism, Marxism, or post-militarist culture,[15] the texts featured in the chapter reveal disjunctive, differentiated, and even splintered experiences internal to their form: journalistic fiction, fictional journalism, antihero plots, rogue protagonists, rogue environments, youth gangs, and slum lords, layered and palimpsestic narration of routinized, concealed, and absent violence from the narrative proper.

In what follows, I provide four examples that illustrate that the violence inflicted by precarious subjects and communities mirrors the violence inflicted upon them: Michael Peel's *A Swamp Full of Dollars* (2009), Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), Tony Nwaka's *Lords of the Creek* (2015), and Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* (2011). As each of these readings reveal, the violence that did not have a chance to be counted, tended to, attended, or witnessed *returns* as the violence carried out by the precarious subject.

Absent Presences in Michael Peel's *A Swamp Full of Dollars*

In Andrew Berendes's documentary *Delta Boys* (2012), the video journalist captures a peculiar scene with the militants in the so-called Camp Angola 2 – somewhere in the thicket of the creeks – with a handheld camera. The camera moves slowly – from the boat that docks at the island, then upward – to register the menace to come, against the hissing of the weary

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reptiles and the chirping of restless crickets, occasionally giving way to the sprawling mangroves behind which stand men in bare torsos holding Kalashnikovs. As the journalist approaches what appears to be the den of the militants, one hears bustling activity, befitting of last-minute housekeeping before an important guest arrives. The host shouts out his orders: "Take up yourselves," "Keep everywhere easy," "Take up your weapon," "Every soldier according to his wing." The host himself stands still, with his rifle lodged on the left shoulder and a finger resting on the pistol grip, as the camera moves, inch by inch, toward him, "Halt!" he screeches:

> "Who goes you, in this Niger Delta region? A white man?"
> "Yes sir."
> "You come with our Chief of Staff?"
> "Yes sir."
> "You, white man, friend of our Chief of Staff?"
> "Yes sir."
> "You, white man a friend of black man?"
> "Yes sir."
> "You white man, a friend of Niger Delta?"
> "Yes sir."
> "Feel free, Say what you see, don't *add* or *subtract*."[16]

The opening credits cut into the dialogue, accompanied by a flush of African drums, rolling in with a sharply fonted text "A Storyteller Productions Presents . . ." For an owner of a company that *produces* storytelling, as it were, the militant leader's directive to "Say what you see, don't add or subtract" must have given quite a jolt. If only humanities and social sciences had such uncluttered access to the imagination to "Say what you see, don't add or subtract," we wouldn't be needing this book. But the irony of this uncluttered wisdom is that the very scene I have described above is staged; at least there is enough evidence in the camerawork to reach that conclusion. The journalist must have been accompanied by a dedicated cameraman, for instance, to film his arrival in a boat (unless – even more scandalously – a militant was doing it for him); the militants holding the guns behind the mangrove stay still, looking least surprised at the intruder from outside; the commander in chief visibly poses, allowing the camera to lurk behind the shoulders of his chief of staff and slowly panning toward him for a dramatic effect. It goes without saying that the staged scene fails to honor its representational pact between camera and its subject not only because of the intentions of its creators, but equally because of the exuding fictionality of the very real subject in front of the camera. This view is corroborated in Michael Peel's work *A Swamp Full of Dollars*, one of the

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texts under examination here, whose narrative journalist's quest for a "truthful depiction" is cast into doubt by the very *performative* nature of the subjects that the text purports to represent. "The men were gluttons for the camera,"[17] writes Peel, and moreover:

> Many villagers and militants, sensing the growing if still modest international interest in the region, operate with a sense of theatre.... I am reminded of this as we pull away from the Ikebiri jetty, when Commander Freeman gestures to a house on stilts at the river's edge. "See where we toilet, see," he says, urgently. "See the houses that we are living in. Can you believe we are in an oil producing community?" A moment later, having paused for thought, he turns to us to say that next time we come we should "bring video coverage."[18]

Peel's views, though accentuated to invite a stern judgment on part of the reader, are very much in tune with what Enrique Galvan-Alvarez has called "performing sovereignty,"[19] wherein the subalterns – be they rebels, rogues, protestors, revolutionaries – *perform* their sovereign desires and achievements *for* the camera. The fictionality that enters such performance is critical to the understating of the Niger Delta's plight through literary narratives. The two texts selected for analysis here pose a peculiar challenge to the foregone conclusion in literary theory that all text is susceptible to fictionality, as both works feature journalists who embark on a truth-seeking voyage of Conradian proportions, no less than a fact-finding mission in the heart of Niger Delta's "darkness." The only difference between the two protagonists, however, is that Peel's *A Swamp Full of Dollars* features a real-life journalist with a penchant for literary devices, whereas Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* features a fictional journalist with social realist and picaresque proclivities. Despite their generic distinction or classification, by employing what I call here "militant metaphors,"[20] both texts – as this chapter aims to show – reveal that precarity breeds insurgent violence.

Given the ethical bind to facts or verifiability of factual claims in narrative journalism, Peel's *A Swamp Full of Dollars* is best positioned to uncover the "absent presence" of violence. In other words, the real life journalist's lack of direct access to the sites of sources of insurgency violence in the Delta swamps leads him to trace the trajectories of its militant metaphors *elsewhere*, in the normalization of violence in every other aspect of Nigerian life: the urban gangs of Lagos, the informal economy fed by the laundering of oil money, the menace of oil theft, the infrastructural vacuum occupied by a vigilant and organized mafia, and, more importantly, the global hegemonic forces driven by an insatiable

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appetite for Delta oil. In tune with what Derek Gregory calls the "connective dissonance"[21] of dissimilar narratives in which "moments clip together like magnets" or "imaginative geographies [as] doubled spaces of articulation,"[22] Habila's *Oil on Water*, on the other hand, unravels what I would call the "present absence" of the Niger Delta conflict. While complementing the absent presence captured by a narrative journalist, the imaginary freedoms unleashed by fiction enable the journalist narrator to go beyond what is given and present: the violence inscribed upon, if not etched into, the Niger Delta's very cultural landscape and ecosystem. In doing so, both texts treat, as this chapter argues, the Delta militancy as a metaphor, as a symptom of the larger yet absent inequalities crystallized into insurgency, and set out to trace the other absent metaphors that are laden with militancy: area boys, bookshops, urban gangs, ecology, and landscapes.

Like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Habila's *Oil on Water*, Peel's narrative begins with the autodiegetic narrator *waiting* on a boat for the night to clear, so that the expedition could resume. Peel is looking for oil, and what is more, for not just those who might extract it, but also those who steal for it and kill for it. He is after the much-coveted prize: a peek into the heart of the Delta creeks. As luck would have it, his repeated attempts to "get the scoop" are thwarted by the threats of abduction that Peel himself documents. Nonetheless, as if announcing his ambition, Peel's narrative opens with an action-packed encounter in the militant den of Asari, only to be cut short by the erratic and dangerous behavior of the group. Ruing the missed opportunity with the militants, Peel wastes no time to source new objects of his inquiry elsewhere: in London, on the American warships patrolling the Delta waters, and in the suburban and satellite towns of Lagos, as evident in the titles of his chapters, "The Boys from the Bookshop," "Fuel the Bike, Fuel the Rider," "Fishing without Fish," and "More Popular than Churchill." This approach enables Peel to situate his narrative in both the complex web of global consumption of Delta oil and the failures of local governance.

Typical of its generic conventions, Peel's reportage vacillates between the authorial "I" and "camera eye" narration, laden with common journalistic protocols of interviewing, balanced sourcing, and on-site reporting while employing storytelling techniques of troping – diegesis, focalizers, free indirect speech, irony, and allegory, among others – that enable the journalist to "represent social reality through the filters of personal experience and moral judgment."[23] For instance, it is Peel's repeated distrust in the altruism of the insurgency – the insurgent's cause or at least the way

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insurgency activity is conducted – that turns him away from the Delta creeks and to seek answers in Nigerian mainstream society. To his credit, however, Peel does cite on-site evidence to justify this implausibility of the insurgents claims: when he questions Asari about how it is that only seventeen of his fighters had been killed whereas his force had assassinated thousands of enemies, Asari responds: "'We don't know.. . . We are on the right course, so we are protected.'"[24]

It is almost as if Peel's narrator embarks on a quest for the elusive "truth" of militancy among the "sheer variety of untruths,"[25] by tracing this so-called right course of those who mimic, moralize, and reap the benefits of an informal oil-theft economy fueled by the militancy outside the Delta region. He finds the absent presence of militancy in the most unlikely places: in a bookshop run by the youth on Lagos Island. Led by a protean fellow named Adekunle Talabi, the bookshop is a shell organization featuring a curious blend of area boys, vigilante groups, civic activists, and urban gangs – a conglomerate of "young male scavengers" whose "roots lie as much in the limited riches brought by oil as in grinding deprivation."[26] The area boys have a two-fold function: to provide "security" to the liquidation of oil money and to take a cut from it. In the *absence* of infrastructures for a formal economy, they become the watchdogs of what they do have in their *presence* – the informal sector: "The area boys are part of a grab-it-now free-for-all that helps explain Nigeria's paradox of poverty," who are fully aware of the fact that "they have to give the real economy space to flourish if they are to take their share."[27] In the context of such infrastructural neglect, the void filled in by the citizens is tantamount to "civic insurgency," or what Sarah Nuttall calls, via Hanna Baumann, the "resistance as repair" which "involve[s] ways of restoring or reusing infrastructures to resist being cut off and to assert access to the city; and of the turning of the planned into the resources of the unplanned."[28] Such civic insurgency, as Peel rightly observes, often resembles organized crime, much like the romance of the picaresque anti-hero who emerges from the shacks and slums subsidized by neoliberal capital, and takes a violent path in a just fight to change his fate, often resorting to "the undignified and subversive – at times roguish – individualist options left within these disenabling global relations."[29]

Unlike the flamboyant, gun-hungry Delta insurgents, the violence of Talabi's gang is rather implicit and silent. Talabi himself represents a militant metaphor, resembling a potent blend of a warlord, mercenary, and self-appointed city councillor: "His commercial interests include DVD retail, a barber's salon, a building contractor, and a security

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company. Most crucially, he is the 'chief' of all boys." "'I am the chairman,' he says. 'I am the manager.'"[30] As Peel testifies to the area boys' performative sovereignty, their major source of income "is spurious 'taxes' that they apply to the trucks passing through their domains, bearing consumer goods bought with the proceeds of crude."[31] This resistance of repair is a sharp antidote to the self-admitted infrastructural neglect signaled by the leading Nigerian news headlines: "'Lawlessness, armed robbery, gridlock, overpopulation, stench: welcome to Lagos.'"[32] Despite their tenuous and "incredible" operations of events, Peel's narrator is more willing to listen to the justification of their existence than that of Asari's men:

> The Lagos gang fight in the no-man's-land between the breakdown of traditional power structures and the rise of global capitalism. The group has no elders, Talabi says, and no wider sense of patriotic loyalty. They see themselves – or so, at least, they tell me – as a symptom of lawlessness rather than a cause of it. "I am providing security for my area, not for my country," Talabi says. "For my area, for my people – in order not to let us fall into bad temptation."[33]

Temptations are rife in a world of extreme polarities "of ostentatious plenty amid mammoth poverty,"[34] especially in Kuramo Beach of Lagos where Peel locates a reckless display of oil wealth, just enough to keep social unrest contained and social hierarchies intact. Fittingly yet somewhat discordantly, Peel goes on to invoke Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* to describe the near-anarchic conditions fostered by oil wealth: "in the absence of central autocratic control, societies were doomed to exist in a state of perpetual conflict pitting all against all."[35] Peel, however, does not hold Nigerians solely responsible for such a state of perpetual conflict, but the insatiable appetite for Nigerian crude in the West, which subsidizes Lagosian dystopia.[36]

If Talabi's men could be seen as civic insurgents responding to the precarious conditions in their presence and, more importantly, as those filling the void of the infrastructural neglect precipitated by the gross mishandling of the absent oil wealth, then the *okada* (motorbike taxi) drivers of Lagos are the exemplars, if not the emplotters of the resistance of repair in a broken city. Peel finds another absent presence figure, like Talabi, in Olufemi Orimogunje – an *okada* entrepreneur – who has no qualms about disclosing the riches of his enterprise: "'A tailor who doesn't have any cloth to sew with will become okada rider. A mechanic who doesn't have any tools will become okada rider. Unemployed graduates will become okada riders.'"[37] A trained biochemist himself, Orimogunje

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impresses upon the journalist that his *okada* club is a sanctuary for the qualified unemployed professionals, "illiterate youths and natural-born chancers."[38] As Peel further gleans from Orimogunje, the absence of *okada* drivers in the streets of Lagos would amount to law-and-order problems:

> apart from the logistical problems it would cause . . . sacked riders would turn to robbery. "The crime rate would increase," he says, "because okada riders save many souls in employment." "It's a system you enter by force – force of the economy," he says. "That's what always brings our solidarity – people united by frustration. It's like particles attracted by a magnet."[39]

Besides the precarious income – from which a string of local authorities demand a cut – it is also a dangerous profession, not least because of accidents and deaths due to the reckless driving and the fury of the precariat "united by frustration."[40] Violence remains an integral part of this pyrrhic but indispensable unity. Peel's frequent use of narrative devices provides a rare insight into this violence, especially when he takes the cue from a union leader of the *okadas* about their civic resistance of repair and probes him in such a manner that the violent nature of their operations unravels itself:

> If people don't pay their union fees, their okadas are taken from them. If they still don't pay, the riders are taken to the nearest police station to face the "wrath of law.". . . I asked what happens to members who don't pay up. Agumba's sidekick, Innocent Adio, answers, trying to be helpful – and earning his name. "They will force him and beat him and humiliate him," he says. The chairman anxiously corrects him, "Not beat him. They will seize his machine."[41]

As Amartya Sen writes, "[p]overty can certainly make a person outraged and desperate, and a sense of injustice, related particularly to gross inequality, can be a good ground for rebellion – even bloody rebellion."[42] Although *okada* drivers do not stage an armed rebellion per se, their canniness to break rules to survive reconstructs the civic infrastructure in such a way that it transforms them into militant metaphors revving through the Lagosian streets. As the journalist himself concedes, despite the fact that *okada* drivers' "horn-blowing and gadfly dodging across lanes" may be annoying, "you will silently cheer your okada driver as he rides roughshod over traffic laws to get you to your appointment in time."[43] As Hanna Baumann agues, such canniness in the context of Palestine has the effect of civic insurgency: "Crossing the boundaries that might be reinforced, claiming public space through presence and opposing state violence by exposing oneself to it are ways of mobilising vulnerability as

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a means of resistance. To take up space and claim it through one's body is a way of insisting on a 'right to the city' through daily practice."[44] The *okada* rider's place in the oil-rich country is all but precarious: plenty of oil to fuel the bike, not enough to fuel the rider. Although the *okada* riders may not be directly linked to the management of the oil money, their very existence owes to the violence generated by the infrastructural neglect – of transport, unemployment, lack of safety, and traffic gridlocks – which they take upon themselves, turning the resources of the unplanned violence into planned civic insurrection.

Peel's quest to trace the trails of Delta oil gradually moves from inward to outward: from the Creeks to the urban centers of Lagos, and to the tainted world of global oil conglomerates. Owing largely to its investigative aspect, Peel's journalism uncovers the most conspicuous of the militant metaphors and, along with them, their very absent presences that shape the Delta violence: the militarization of the Gulf of Guinea by the Americans, and the complicity of the Western states and global oil, banking, and other contracting companies such as Shell, TotalEnergies, Eni, Halliburton, and Siemens, who have formed a consortium of sorts to bribe the then President Abacha with billions of dollars to win contracts, launder money, and remain complicit with the state's violation of human and environmental rights. As part of the post-9/11 "war on terror" campaign, the patrolling of the warship *Dallas* – perhaps the most imposing of the militant metaphors – to protect the offshore drilling facilities of the multinationals and to curb the oil theft militancy in the region has the opposing effect: it provokes the militants to prove their strength and protect their territory. Peel, for instance, recounts an attack by the militants on a Shell Bonga oilfield seventy-five miles off the coast just before his arrival in São Tomé, which sent a "tremor of fear" through the regional oil industry whose output was reduced by ten percent as a result, reminding them of the intentions of the other visiting vessels to get involved in the oil conflict.[45]

Dallas's absent presence in the Delta conflict is not an isolated enterprise but one "too closely connected to the executive and to national security forces that have a popular reputation for brutality and impunity," having killed scores of "armed-robbery suspects" around oil facilities.[46] Shell itself is the major catalyst of the conflict, with its perpetual absent presence in the security operations and, more crucially, the displacement of the Delta subjects from their own lands. Peel uncovers this interplay of precarity and violence with the use of fictional devices in conjunction with a series of backstage stories that brings forth the absent present forces of the conflict.

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For instance, in a face-to-face encounter with the Shell managing director – Basil Omiyi – Peel narrates:

> Omiyi denies Shell has responsibility for the greatest crime widely laid at its door: the execution of the "Saro-Wiwa nine." As he talks, he raises his finger in the air as if scolding a child who simply won't get the right idea. The Ogoni struggle was not about Shell but about autonomy, he says, pointing to a bill of rights signed in 1990 by Ogoni leaders including Ken Saro-Wiwa.[47]

While emphasizing the pedantic and knee-jerk reaction of Omiyi and his physiognomy, which is befitting of a person in denial, Peel backs up his narrative ploy with his own sources, "but Omiyi does not mention [that] [t]he bill of rights describes the area as an 'ecological disaster,' and one where people have no water, no electricity and no jobs. 'The Ogoni people have received NOTHING,' it says."[48] Armed with this evidence, Peel goes on to drive the conversation with Omiyi to concede that the oil industry *does* provide logistics and support for the military because if the military were to be pulled out of the Delta, there would be ethnic wars and bloodshed: "'I would say the Ijaws have armed themselves to the teeth today. They would have the upper hand.'"[49] Peel immediately punctures this claim for military support by exposing the sheer platitudes in Omiyi's narrative: "'If we ever know any time today that the government wants to use this for an offensive type of thing, we will not do it. That's the truth. And we keep this message all the time.'"[50]

Against the innocuous metaphors of the unsubstantiated claims such as *offensive type of thing* or *that's the truth* or *keep this message all the time*, Peel goes on to source stories and narratives with militant metaphors that unravel the workings of the oil industry, especially Shell, in a sharply contrasting manner to Omiyi's claim that its role is that of a neutral enterprise. In the process, Peel turns to the other side, the local elite and the villagers at the receiving end of the spectrum, to find out that the oil industry is at the heart of the Niger Delta's "conflict system" as the chief benefactor of the conflict, not its manager. Peel's narrator presents, for instance, the case of the Odioma community, which was torn apart after Shell had purchased lands from a village, and another village came forward claiming to be the owner. The conflict ended in the military razing the entire village of the new claimants. Peel immediately connects this journalistic evidence to the narrative diegesis to debunk Omiyi's ethically questionable response: "'What happened on the ground we don't know,' . . . 'I can't speak for the military.'"[51]

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His reporting of the River State infrastructure, particularly the disparities between the public and the private domain due to oil wealth put the role of the oil industry in the spotlight: £20 million spent on "two helicopters and [to] build a new airport runway and hangar" for the state officials' trips, and derelict public schools with no desks and children defecating on waste grounds due to lack of sanitation.[52] If that is not enough, the Delta youths are refused employment in the oil industry, other than those in designated "host communities," resulting in animosity between groups who were "not necessarily antipathetic previously."[53] Perhaps the most illustrious insights of the Delta's conflict system come from a local elder named Francis Ododo, who corrects Peel and the general assumption that the insurgency is simply the product of poverty, and of relative precarity: the Delta youths, in an age of technology and travel, could see how the other regions benefit from oil at their own expense. Having repeatedly been turned away by men in uniform at the local oil facilities when seeking employment, having to live under acid rains produced by gas flares, having to pay double the price for fuel locally, the Delta youths grew "restive" and have been "pushed to the wall." As one of the militants candidly puts it: "'We will carry the gun to claim our rights. Since we have nothing – nobody cares for us.'"[54] Despite the occasional throwaway comment about Nigerian anarchy, Peel's uncovering of absent presences that underpin the Niger Delta conflict are made possible by the generic conventions unique to narrative journalism: factual claims that represent reality and narrative ploys that represent emotional and psychological truths that can't be captured by facts or evidence alone.[55] If the narrative journalist sees himself as the "potential messenger for people's frustration and at the same time a symbol of the very privileges they say they resent,"[56] then the task of the fictional journalist, as it were, is to "make people see what they cannot see"[57] precisely because of the factual and topical overdetermination of what can be seen, or what is presented to be seen.

Present Absences in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

Habila's novel is set against such overdetermination of factual knowledge of the conflict – often made possible by the thrill- and sublime-seeking film makers from the West. In fact, Habila himself was approached by a film company who wanted to make a feature about kidnappings in the Niger Delta, which had "forced"[58] him to write the novel. But, as if refusing to abdicate his aesthetic and imaginative rights, the "force" in

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Habila's novel, as it were, turns on its head: he takes the cinematic kidnapping plot and goes beyond its every imaginable limit. In effect, he treats the kidnapping culture as a mere symptom, an entry point into a world of present absences, namely, the grave socioeconomic precarity of the subjects whose violence is inscribed not only into the daily grind of their living but, more importantly, into the very nature and landscape – be it water, oil, or fish – they cohabit with. As Habila states in an interview, he prefers his fiction to tackle "topical" issues, but "then you go beyond and in-depth, to look at the characters and the sociopolitical and literary implications of these topical subject matters," and in the process "make people see what they cannot see because of the topicality."[59] This "inability" of the reader to see beyond the glare of the screen or the taper of textuality is what Daniel O'Gorman reads as the presence of absence in the context of Iraqi war literature. For O'Gorman the conspicuous absence of the victims in the narrative proper leaves the traces of their *presence*,[60] in tune with Derek Gregory's notion of "connective dissonance in which connections are elaborated in some registers even as they are disavowed in others."[61]

Habila's fictional journalist is best positioned to decipher the absence(s) of the silenced or subjugated voices. He does so by tapering off each layer of hierarchy, in a descending order beginning with the global, down toward the local, the ecological, the aquatic, the subterranean – through metaphors and materials that are at the author's disposal. This imaginary thirst to capture beyond what is given, present or familiar, is shaped by Habila's desire to defamiliarize the familiar or, in the author's own words, to "stand outside Nigeria and see myself" and "to see things from a vantage point" of an investigative fictional journalist who is bound by neither facts nor the verifiability of real-life events.[62]

Recalling the Conradian echoes of Peel's journey, accompanied by the veteran journalist Zaq, the young reporter Rufus in Habila's novel sets out on a hunt for a kidnapped British woman, the wife of a British oil engineer at a multinational refinery, into the troubled waters of the Delta creeks. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that their voyage is less about the missing woman than the two men "bearing witness to"[63] – to borrow Wendy Griswold's term – the paradox of the precarious and the plenty in the Delta region. From the global crisis of oil engineering and the international media frenzy and fascination associated with the kidnapping phenomenon in the Delta, Zaq and Rufus gradually move inward: to the local subjects, fish, water, ecology, and the militarization of their entire biosphere.

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The very structure of the novel – its anachronistic movement, alternating timelines, and the chapters constantly switching the narrative perspective between Rufus's own pernicious past and the picaresque present – allows for a rather convoluted and connectively dissonant portrayal of violence at both ends of the spectrum: the precarious and the privileged, the military and the militants, the violators and the violated. The recurrent references to the urban riches serve as a trope of presence, through which the pursuit of the absent precarity in the Delta creeks becomes a relentless, at times restless affair for the protagonists. This chasm between the urban and rural creeks is allegorically represented in the superimposition of oil *on* water, or in the recurring metaphor of the burned side of Boma's face – Rufus's sister who barely survives an accident resulting from her father's pirated oil enterprise. If oil here represents the presence of urban dreams and desires, then water is its absent other – the precarious, precious, and contaminated substance of the creeks. The charred remains of oil on Boma's face, as it were, serve as a militant metaphor for the two incompatible substances that cannot coexist but cohabit – under the condition that oil is always superimposed on water.

In contrast to the professional hazards faced by Peel's journalistic narrator who offers a proxy narration of the Delta conflict in the civic, urban, and global power circuits, Habila's fictive journalist – uninhibited by his creator's cultural proximity to the Delta conflict as well as the imaginary liberties entrusted to his genre – grapples with the convergence of precarity and violence from a social realist perspective. As Habila himself admits, "it's in the news all the time," and to gain a neutral perspective, he had done research for a commissioned movie script that fell through. Habila had decided to use that research material and turn it into a novel because he had felt "fiercely" about the Delta people's strife and the subject matter.[64] Social realism is generally understood as a divergent, if not deviant form of realism, or at times crudely defined as "contemporary life from a left-wing point of view"[65] with a penchant for the struggles of the marginalized and subaltern groups, like Habila's self-avowed commitment for social justice that inspired the novel in the first place. Sure enough, in a heated exchange with James Floode, Rufus goes on to reason about the oil theft, the criminal elements as well as the insurgent activity, as just violence:

> But I don't blame them for wanting to get some benefit out of the pipelines that have brought nothing but suffering to their lives, leaking into the rivers and wells, killing the fish and poisoning farmlands. And all they are told by the oil companies and the government is that the pipelines are there for

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> their own good, that they hold great potential for their country, their future. These people endure the worst conditions of any oil-producing community on earth.. . . And you think the people are corrupt? They are just hungry, and tired.[66]

The fictional journalist takes the hackneyed and oft-cited justification of hunger as militant metaphor – a cause or justification for militancy – and traces its present absences among the precarious subjects of the Delta community. Ironically, this toxic blend of poisoned ecosystem, hunger, dead fish, and dead insurgents grows into a full-blown disease across the Delta that could only be treated by oil. As the Doctor, whom Rufus meets in the Creeks, recounts:

> I soon discovered that the village chief's discontent was not over their health; they were remarkably healthy people, actually. One day an elder looked me in the face and said, I am not ill. I am just poor. Can you give me a medicine for that? We want that fire that burns day and night. He told me that, plainly, pugnaciously.[67]

In a bizarre clash of fates, the villager does get his bitter medicine – the orange fire that burns all day and night – only to find out that it burned way too bright for him to see. A year later, livestock and fish began to die, but the villagers didn't care. People began to die due to exposure to toxins, and, as the Doctor recounts: "Almost overnight I watched the whole village disappear, just like that."[68] In an almost identical case of an oil curse, a group of villagers lose their entire ancestral lands to some aggressive oilmen from the city. Instead of accepting the money offered as compensation, they curse the greedy men and abandon the village.[69] These two vignettes provide a compelling testimony to the structural chasm between precarious and plenty, nature and culture, reminding us that "it is not *simply* shortage, but the abundance and processes of environmental rehabilitation or amelioration that are most often associated with violence."[70]

Yet, by not always naming its progenitors, the narrator is quick to seize on moments of insurgent solidarity whenever the occasion arises. For instance, in his hunt for an abducted nurse, the militant Professor whom Rufus encounters along the way remarks:

> Do you think we'd keep her against her wish, rape her, maybe? We are not the barbarians the government propagandists say we are. We are for the people. Everything we do is for the people, what will we gain if we terrorize them?. . . I'm letting you go, so you can write the truth. And be careful, whatever you write, be careful. I am watching you. I have people everywhere.[71]

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Such innate sense of menace and moral rectitude, threat and goodwill that characterize insurgent violence is also representative of the paradox of precarity: aggressive agency and passive victimhood. Rufus's brother-in-law John – an impoverished, unemployed youth, facing eviction from his landlord – is yet another embodiment of this paradox. Describing the violent life endured by his sister Boma, Rufus grows weary of her husband: "He had been full of anger before he left, the kind of anger that often pushed one to blaspheme, or to rob a bank, or to join the militants."[72] A similar predicament is visited upon Rufus when a chief from a fishing village asks him and Zaq to take a boy away with them to Port Harcourt, because with no fish left in the river, the only choice left for the unemployed youth in the village is to join the militants.[73]

Zooming in from the global to the urban, and to the creeks and its oil, *Oil on Water* eventually turns the lens to the terrestrial and the aquatic spheres. The metaphor of fish – which has been a major source of sustenance for the Delta inhabitants – one that moves inside the water, *upon* which the Delta oil floats, serves as a narrative bridge between the precarious lives of the Delta subjects and Rufus's formative childhood years in the rural Delta. For instance, in a series of alternating narrative blocks – between Zaq's formative days as a journalist and Rufus's life in the countryside and then in the city – that make up the opening of two chapters, Habila abruptly switches the narrative perspective from Zaq's and Rufus's misadventures in the Creeks to a nameless place from Rufus's past in which his sister is swept into a river in an attempt to save a bucket of crabs that Rufus overturns and scatters at the river bed. This event from Rufus's past is immediately transitioned into a similar event in a nameless Delta village in which a local old man and a young boy go fishing and crabbing.[74] Accordingly, the "floating carcasses of fish and crabs"[75] – which reveal their present absence, and their connective dissonance throughout the novel[76] – become objects of anger, as well as guiding metaphorical cues to the responsive violence of the ordinary Nigerians, including one Chief Ibrahim of a nameless Delta village,[77] the inhabitants of the Junction, and the Irikefe Islanders, among others.

Regardless of these complex narrative cues that serve as what Gregory calls the "doubled spaces of articulations" in which events in one place and time can be understood through their connective trajectories elsewhere – such as the connective dissonance of the techniques used in the treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and the Chinese Uighur rehabilitation camps – the existing readings of *Oil on Water* tend to advance a rather hackneyed perspective on the novel as political pamphlet for ecological justice or a

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manifesto for averting apocalypse.[78] Sule Egya's reading, which hails *Oil on Water* as a template for literary militancy, is perhaps the only exception to this.[79] Such militancy in the novel operates as a responsive field of force set in motion by the triple helix of the oil complex: the multinational refineries at the top, followed by the federal military, and the local militants.[80] Egya further notes:

> Literary militancy, as I conceive it, is the desire of writers, Nigerian writers, especially of the South-South or Niger Delta region extraction, to deploy the instrumentation of literature, of literary and cultural imagination, in not only projecting the colossal environmental degradation and human suffering going on in the region, but also instituting a confrontational discourse in defense, and toward the liberation, of the anguished local peoples and environment of the region. I prefer the use of the word "militancy" over "activism" . . . because it better captures the sense of potential force and aggression in what I see as the metaphorical belligerence deployed by the writers.[81]

Taking my cue from this notion of literary "belligerence" as a trope of narrative discomfort and even disturbance – metaphorical or otherwise – I wish to draw attention to the picaresque and rogue elements in *Oil on Water*. The social realist depiction of these picaresque figures, with an "emphasis on dirt and grime and recreating authentic working and living conditions,"[82] become the signature theme of its plot, setting, and characters, which haunt the novel as the metaphors of present absence:

> The village looked as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it. A square concrete platform dominated the village center like some sacrificial altar. Abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia were strewn around the platform; some appeared to be sprouting out of widening cracks in the concrete, alongside thick clumps of grass. The atmosphere grew heavily with suspended stench of dead matter.. . . Something organic, perhaps, human lay dead and decomposing down there, its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil. The patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker's hands.[83]

Not only the traces of the dead and the decomposed, but also the vivid metaphors of decay or deadly diseases evoke an organic imagery of violence sunk into the very soil of the Delta. Here, the metaphors of violence and militancy are superimposed palimpsestically upon nature, as though nature itself has turned rogue, staging its own kind of insurgency against those who inhabit it. This is not a violence that is inherent to the Delta ecology, as Habila's metaphorical militancy reveals, but a *response* to the violence inflicted upon the environment.

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If the term picaresque is typically associated with the attributes of delinquency, abjection, crookedness, conceit, and roguery, and even an innate sense of menace displayed by the unconventional hero who hails from a troubled social class that is exposed to violence, then the picaresque hero himself becomes the source of violence.[84] Arguably, the very plotting of the novel is infused with the rogue elements of the sorry lives of all the major protagonists occupying the bulk of the narrative: Rufus's itinerant childhood in the countryside, Boma's failed marriage, and Zaq's marriage to whiskey. Like Zaq's uncanny fascination with risk, the fringe lives of the sex workers (one of whom he marries) and drugs, Rufus is drawn to and even volunteers for the job, knowing the dangers very well: "I see it as a great opportunity to show what I can do, sir" is his response when his editor candidly asks, "Aren't you afraid of danger? You could get killed."[85] As if that is not enough, Rufus steps into the dead man's shoes: he gets the opportunity to cover the kidnapping by the sheer chance that his predecessor gets killed by the militants on a similar assignment. Even after he willingly accepts the job, Rufus strongly entertains the thought of running away with the finder's fee offered by Mr. Floode, the husband of the kidnapped British woman.[86] While these rogue elements remain integral to the characters themselves and adhere to the generic features of social realism in which the descriptions of "low life" and a desire for upward social mobility are pressed into the service of "anti-idealizing" issues of "hunger and social justice,"[87] other aspects of Habila's narrative, such as the vocations, occupations, or preoccupations of the characters, too, are rendered in the most picaresque terms. A journalist, whom Rufus meets along the way, remarks: "I bet you went to journalism school, didn't you?... Well, nothing like journalism school for us. You begin as a cub reporter, and if you survive, you become the king of the jungle, or at least something high up on the food chain."[88]

For Rufus and Zaq, the sense of naturalized roguery that underpins their vocation is made prominent through ecological metaphors. The very opening of the novel is ominously explosive as the narrator recounts the accident at a "barn with the oil drums," in which people are either dead, have their faces charred, or, more importantly, are saved from a certain impending danger. Inversely, the physical environments are replete with the traces of the humans, human refuse, and, above all else, *refused* humans: "consumerist goods," a "lone arm floating away" with "its middle finger extended derisively, before disappearing into the dark mist,"[89] "dead birds draped over tree branches," "dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots,"[90] "dead bats that could not survive the gas flares."[91]

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In essence, the recurring instances of roguery and their prefiguration as the present absence of nature and culture in the novel lend insights into Nancy Peluso and Michael Watts's critique of violent environments, which falsely recast precarious and disposed subjects into nature as savage and violent objects.[92] In the latter, Habila's narrator exposes the fraught relationship between violence, nature, and precarity by means of what Rob Nixon describes as the "environmental picaresque" in which the "the toxic repercussions" innate to neoliberal practices "will return to haunt it."[93] Citing Indra Sinha's *Animal People* as the prime example, Nixon writes: "His picaresque Animal [is] a potent compression of disturbing, porous ambiguity, a figure whose leakiness confounds the borders between the human and the nonhuman as well as the borders between the national and the foreign."[94]

Besides confounding the borders between human and animal representations, I might add, a salient feature of the environmental picaresque is its ability to anthropomorphize or even subjectivize the otherwise objective nature, thereby infusing a sense of active agency into the physical environment – a dominant current of *Oil on Water.* To that end, the frequent comparisons of oil pollution with the human liver-spotted or nicotine-stained hands invoke the militant imagery of the Delta region as a toxic organic soup of oil and dead human flesh. As the fictional journalist reflects:

> The ever-present pipelines crisscrossing the landscape, sometimes like tree roots surfacing far away from the parent tree, sometimes like diseased veins on the back of an old, shriveled hand, and sometimes in squiggles like ominous writing on the wall. Maybe fate wanted to show her first-hand the carcasses of the fish and crabs and water birds that floated on the deserted beaches of these tiny towns and villages and islands every morning, killed by the oil her husband was helping to produce.[95]

The above words, attributed to the kidnapped woman Isabel Floode, on account of the narrator, bear testimony to the agency of the violated nature, whose violence is made legible through militant metaphors.

Boma's surprise visit to Rufus on Irikefe Island provides the ultimate metaphorical cue to the commensurability of precarity and violence, but also the incommensurability of the two facets of Nigeria – oil and water, Lagos and Port Harcourt, precarious and plenty. "She looked pretty," remarks Rufus, "I was looking at the good side of her face, and suddenly I was back many years the last time I'd seen her like this, without the scar."[96] It is entirely possible to read the scar as an allegory of the burned side of Nigeria – the Delta creeks, Irikefe Island where Rufus stands and sees the good side of Boma's face – whose combusted fumes drift waywardly, casting a smokescreen over its "pretty" side. The fact that Boma

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refuses to return to Port Harcourt and decides to stay on Irikefe Island as part of a group of worshippers who are forced into submission by the insurgents gestures toward the narrator's own submission to the violent agency of the precarious denizens of the Niger Delta.

If the two journalists featured in this chapter – one fictional and one narrative – were to heed the wisdom of one of the Delta boys cited at the opening of the chapter – "say what you see, don't add or subtract," they would, in all likelihood, have presented us with a staged set of the facts on the realities of the Niger Delta. As Peel's authorial narrator concedes: "I am a potential messenger for people's frustration.. . . For them, the priority is to tell their story to a world that they optimistically hope is listening."[97] And almost immediately Peel undermines this laissez-faire notion of journalism by drawing attention to the challenges posed by the performance of stories, like the "camera-glutton" insurgents he frequently encounters.[98] Thus, Peel's attempt at, or rather journalistic imperative for, factual verification leads him to shift his gears as well as the focus of his subjects of his inquiry from the Delta creeks to the militant metaphors of the urban gangs, civic insurgency, and the global actors at work. Complementing Peel's absent presence, Habila's fictional journalist performs an equally enabling role in teasing out the traces of absence in what is present or given. As he states in an interview, he wanted to expose the suffering of the Delta subjects not by documenting the suffering itself but by carrying "the reader into this landscape . . . The big people – the oil companies and the government – they are in the background. You have a sense that they are there, always pulling the strings."[99]

It is these global undercurrents at work that resurface as presences or absences in the local and vernacular struggles that position the two texts under discussion as world literatures from the Global South. By dint of their entanglement between form and politics, between the picaresque and neoliberal ideologies, the peripheral realism in these texts operates not necessarily as "a deviation from the main plot's realism but rather as a constitutive part of it,"[100] for instance, by turning nature (Habila) and the civic sphere (Peel) into active agents with a "resisting impulse."[101]

Subterranean Violence: Present Absences of Oil Unrest in Tony Nwaka's *Lords of the Creek*

Although both *Oil on Water* and *A Swamp Full of Dollars* set out to expose economic precarity, unequal access to resources, and asymmetrical power relations, perhaps the only thing that is fairly egalitarian and accessible to

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the Niger Delta subjects are the abductions. They spare no one, not even albinos, who are often mistaken for white oil workers. Tony Nwaka's political thriller *Lords of the Creek*, my third example, features another kidnapping plot to untangle the ethnic rivalries in the Delta region over resources, and related issues of youth unrest, mass unemployment, and insurgency. A twenty-six-year-old princess of the Itsekiri tribe, Aleroy Mayuku, is abducted in the Delta State, but the blame falls on the Ijaw insurgents in the River States. The other marginalized oil community, the Urhobos, within the Delta State is not spared from the trouble. The anchor of this entire interethnic conflict is Adilax, a Texan-based oil company, which comes under threat by the agitated youths from the Itsekiri tribe over their abducted princess, and the unemployed Ijaw youths who feel that their king does not receive the royalties from the oil wells that he thinks he deserves. The Urhobo youths, on the other hand, have their own grievances, having been marginalized by the Itsekiris' dominance in the Warri region: "the youths therefore insisted that the community should be accommodated in the dispensing of patronages like contract awards, youth employment, and scholarship schemes."[102]

At the heart of this triangular youth agitation is a young Nigerian regional manager of Adilax, Robert Akinyemi Edward, who shuttles back and forth between kings, tribal chiefs, monarchs, governors, rebels, rogues, ruffians, gunrunners, and priests to save his oil facility from the angry youths. As a political thriller, however, *Lords of the Creeks* is committed to exposing the machinations of the rich and the powerful and "their otherwise single-minded efforts" to win and triumph.[103] Inversely, it also paints a bleak picture of the jarring worlds of the Niger Delta's elite and the precariat by devoting excessive narrative space to sovereign violence involving AR-15 rifles, Peugeot 604s, Volkswagen Beetles, Mercedes E class and BMW 5 Series cars, divisional police officers (DPOs), police commissioners (CAMPOLs), A. Lange & Söhne watches, and so forth, whose senseless details are often pushed to absurd and meaningless proportions. Incidentally, such technique in a political thriller opens up space for the present absence of the narrative anchor, representing the subjects and citizens of a given political structure or system – the troubled, unemployed, and agitated youths of the Niger Delta in the case of *Lords of the Creek.* This technique, rather than undermining or negating the violence inflicted upon the Delta population, ameliorates its concerns precisely by unraveling the latter's ability to shape the crises as well as machinations of sovereign power structures. This allows for a subterranean narrative presence of the marginalized and violated subjects, particularly

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the youths, who both underlie and undercut the crises within the sovereign power structure that shapes the diegetic mantle of the novel. The visible absence of such violated subjects in the narrative proper is what I would like to call "subterranean violence." A case in point is the very plotting of the novel, which grows obsessive with the looming crisis among the elites, kings, and the sovereigns among three tribes – Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Urhobo – following the disappearance of the princess, while barely acknowledging the existence of their subjects. Just as in Clarice Lispector's concession that "subterranean violence . . . surfaces in the act of writing,"[104] it is a violence that is not only barred from visibility, but also deemed irrelevant and insufficient in relation to the impending crises of the narrative at hand. In a sense, subterranean violence bears the traces of both slow violence,[105] whose effects are neither temporally immediate nor spatially imminent, and a "symbolic violence" wherein dominance exercised upon the weak and the disadvantaged does not necessarily violate the law by virtue of cultural and social capital privy to the dominated.[106]

For instance, upon learning of the Itsekiri princess's abduction, the regional manager of Adilax, Robert, embarks on a series of royal visits and diplomatic missions to alleviate the tensions among the regional elites. Without much ado, Robert rushes to the ruler of the Warri Kingdom; the Itsekiri King Lou Atorongboye Mayuku II; the governor of the Delta State; Professor Joshua Areyenka; and the monarch of the Urhobo tribe to persuade the youths of the respective tribes not to attack the Omadino oil flow station. While these efforts are underway, the Itsekiri tribal chiefs congregate among themselves under the pretext that their princess was abducted by the Ijaw insurgents, who have historically disputed Itsekiri claims over the ownership of oil-rich lands in Omadino. The governor of the Delta State summons an emergency security meeting to "contain" the threat.[107] For the governor, this perceived threat is the damage that the closure of the Omadino oil flow station would cause his impending reelection; for the president of Nigeria, it is the reduced output of oil production and the price of crude oil in the international market.[108] The entire furor among the ruling elite of Niger Delta over the potential closure of the oil facility evolves into a state of sovereign emergency of its own, in which the ultimate emergency unfolding among its subjects, particularly the unemployed youths, remains concealed. As Santiago Zabala observes, the greatest emergency of our times is

> the absence of a sense of emergency, denying the most obvious emergencies (climate change, civil rights, human rights) . . . The artists who seek to

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> expose these meanings today are the ones whose works demand our intervention in masked and hidden global emergencies, emergencies that are concealed in the idea of their absence.[109]

In *Lords of the Creek*, Nwaka's excessive focus on the machinations of sovereign power, and fraternal and elite networks, alludes precisely to the subterranean emergency in the idea of its very absence from the narrative frame. To that end, Nwaka's narrative leaves a series of cues that form a diegesis of second order in which a whole narrated world within its own spatiotemporality takes place. Such traces and narrative cues, as my previous readings of *A Swamp Full of Dollars* and *Oil on Water* have demonstrated, gesture toward a "connective dissonance" as present absence between what is presented and what is glossed over in a fictional narrative.

Drawing upon James Lasdun's proclamation that the novel is "as interesting for what it omits as what it includes,"[110] O'Gorman reads the "apparent absence of humanity" in select American novels set in the wilderness as "in itself an expression of humanity."[111] Such mirroring of narrative selves, like the mirroring of violence between the oppressor and the oppressed, is a concession of presence of absence, suggesting "a cultural pathology" in which affective structures of loss and nostalgia positively signify their lack of presence.[112] Likewise, "[t]he absence of recognisably" grievable lives, particularly in contexts of war, leaves its traces of the lost, disappeared, silenced, or the dead "*as* a haunting presence."[113] Apropos Zabala, in *Lords of the Creek*, the impending crisis has nothing to do with the actual presence of an emergency, but instead with a manufactured, perceived emergency arising from the potential closure of the oil facility, in the *absence* of grievances emanating from the ethnic feuds over the ownership of the oil wells, wages, unemployment, precarity, and poverty. This very absence of grievability, of precarious and marginalized lives, leaves the traces of a fractured narrative in which two jarring worlds collide: the sovereign power that strives to manufacture a crisis by attempting to contain the threat, and the wandering agitated youths, insurgents, and criminal gangs who occupy the innocuous spaces of the narrative margins. Here, if the manufactured emergency within the world of sovereign affairs forms the first order of diegesis, then the world of insurgents, dissidents, or subversives becomes the second order of diegesis in which the former's crisis not only is foregrounded but is formally bound to the latter's narrative movement.

During his visit to the Presidential Palace to discuss the crisis caused by the abduction of the princess, the narrator describes Adilax's chief

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Mr. Breukelen: "[d]ressed in a pristine sky blue Hugo Boss suit [he . . .] alighted from his chauffeur-driven Lincoln limousine, and [was . . .] ushered into the hotel by the doorman,"[114] while appreciating "a rare 5711 series" (referring to the Patek Philippe watch model) presented as a gift by the president of Nigeria himself.[115] This lavish world of the elite circles, against the backdrop of the impending threat posed by the precarious and agitated youths, inimically exposes the present absence of the latter in the narrative frame. This absence, in turn, is reconfigured in the accidental foray of the evidently affluent protagonist Robert into the precarious world of the urban Warri, who is dumbfounded by what he sees:

> Robert found the heaps of refuse all over the dusty slums unbearably suffocating. A teenage girl suddenly turned the corner of a house. She emptied the contents of her bucket in a filled waste bin, adding to the mounting refuse around the bin. Flies buzzed over the spot. Robert raised his left hand to cover his nose. He wondered if city council officials ever got near this part of Warri. *But that will be a story for another day*.[116]

While the piling of garbage upon garbage may symbolically mirror the gathering stream of precarious youths resorting to violence one after the other, or one against the other, Robert's shocking discovery of the state of affairs in his own city serves as a narrative anchor between the present as well as the absent, or what I have called the second order of diegesis. In the latter, *Lords of the Creek* weaves a latent narrative thread connecting every dissident with the ruling elite and the insurgent groups who invoke violence, or rather counter-violence, as the immediate solution to the violence unleashed upon them.

An Itsekiri chief, for one, claims that they have "*no* option but to fight for survival" and that acting otherwise might be "taken as weakness."[117] Another irritated chief rebukes Robert's appeal for restraint and asks: "How long are we going to continue putting up with their [Ijaws'] endless attempts to take over our lands?" Instead, he advocates retaliation by attacking Ijaw and Adilax targets.[118] But when another group of Itsekiri tribal chiefs propose the opposite, the security chief of the Itsekiri royal family, a twenty-three-year-old political science graduate, grows increasingly violent:

> He wondered where Chief Jolomi and his group were when he braced the bullets with his boys to fight back rampaging Ijaw youths who almost overrun the place just a few years ago. He recalled the fierce battle that erupted from the disputed party primaries at Warri stadium in 2003, where he lost some of his boys.[119]

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At the other end of the spectrum, the notorious Ijaw insurgent leader Tonye Briggs laments the deterioration of fishing activity due to polluted waters, and the migration of Delta youths to the cities in search of opportunity, who would eventually be lured by oil money. Echoing the insurgent leader's concerns about the violence thrust upon the Delta youths, the secretary to the Delta State, Simeon Osharode, shares his concerns with the governor in the most apprehensive manner:

> My greater worry is the criminality that had resulted from the series of conflicts in the city. I was at the seaport yesterday. The Ports Authority has practically shut down the place. Ships are not coming anymore. As businesses are closing shop, people are losing their sources of livelihood. Such a pool of unemployed people would naturally become scriptable to all kinds of social vices.[120]

The pervasiveness of dissidence and disenchantment within some ranks of the sovereign power in *Lords of the Creek* ultimately grafts moral bonds across the ethnic divide by forging horizontal connections among precarious communities – as well as those from the ruling elite who express their proxy solidarity for the latter – wherein the use of insurgent violence becomes a legitimate, if not an imminent response to sovereign violence. By the same token, this situation also forges vertical bonds across the agents of sovereign power – the president of Nigeria, governors, tribal chiefs, DPOs, CAMPOLs, oil executives – in order of their respective hierarchical positions and status. Tonye Briggs's encounter with the monarch of his own Ijaw tribe best illustrates this antinomy of vertical and horizontal bonds:

> "Your majesty, you think decency still has meaning?"
>
> "It still does my son. Let us continue to stand on the moral high ground. The abduction of the princess and the white man cannot bring lasting solution to our problems."
>
> "Your Majesty, sometimes we need such brutal actions to bring those people to their senses. That's the kind of language they understand."[121]

Though the insurgent leader is quick to declare that he is "not a terrorist," he nonetheless toys with the idea of mob justice in matters of blood and of survival.

> *Moral authority my foot*. "Your majesty, where was the moral authority when that army colonel they call John Dunga tried to take our local government headquarters away from Ogbe-Ijoh to Ogidigben, at the creation of Warri South West Council – just to stamp Itsekiri identity in the council, knowing that Ogidigben is an Itsekiri Community.... If we

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> had not resisted the way we did, we won't be here today. I hate injustice."[122]

Ultimately, the Ijaw monarch himself becomes convinced of his dissidents' inordinate faith in the *agency* of violence, and goes on to advocate violence as the panacea to their precarious existence in the midst of Niger Delta's riches: "I honestly do not know *what else* we are supposed to do. We have begged, we have cried, we have threatened. My son, remember that he who has been rejected cannot reject himself."[123]

The manufactured nature of the emergency within the sovereign structure implodes toward the end of the novel, when the protagonist Robert Edward eventually discovers that the kidnapping of the Itsekiri princess was orchestrated by a local billionaire, Otunba Adedoyin – and not the Ijaw insurgents as widely suspected – in order to discredit the Delta State governor Joshua Areyenka and to negatively influence his reelection bid. Because "the institutions that sustain these practices (emergencies) are also the ones that frame them," it is only in the imaginary realm of the arts that the "emergencies . . . concealed in the idea of their absence" can be brought to the fore.[124] In *Lords of the Creek*, the frailty of the manufactured emergency would eventually be undone by the internal emergencies between the Delta elites that remain hidden, repressed, or glossed over. In other words, it is precisely this crisis within the sovereign emergency that unravels itself as the concealed emergency that foregrounds, shapes, and steers the former's: the world of the precariat, the insurgents, dissidents, and the vertical bonds forged through violence.

In an utterly anticlimactic encounter with the protagonist, the Ijaw insurgent leader Tonye Briggs makes his case for retributive violence abundantly clear:

> "It is believed she [the princess] is with you, sir."
>
> "No. We are not kidnappers, we are freedom fighters. It is not our character to harm our fellow black people.... We fight foreign interests to extract reparation for the years of slavery, exploitation, colonialism, and neocolonialism.... Tell me, are the other ethnic groups not involved in militancy and piracy?"[125]

The rhetorical moral high ground of the insurgent leader is immediately undercut by his allusion to other victims of the Delta, for whom the conditions of grave precarity become a sufficient motive to use violence as leverage, a negotiating tool to meet their immediate needs. When slow violence is "driven inward, somatised into cellular dramas of mutation that – particularly in the bodies of the poor – remain largely unobserved,

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undiagnosed, and untreated,"[126] it is met with equally unresolved effects of retributive violence that brook no compromise. In the case of the Niger Delta, this paradox is inflected in the gift of wealth that is utterly chained to the poison of poverty, the curse of precarity, and the menace of perpetual violence that nurture one another like a colony of parasites. In that sense, the subterranean violence in the *Lords of Creeks* is analogous to what Artwell Nhemachena calls "violence of absence presence,"[127] which refers not only to the violence produced through sovereign structures but also to the violence produced by the very *absence* of sovereign structures. Such notion of subterranean violence, as evident in *Lords of the Creek*, "stresses the need to notice violence emanating from the comings and goings of things and entities; the vulnerabilities emanating from the absence that is not quite absent and the presence that is not quite present."[128] The unraveling of absences and presences of violence and counter-violence in the three texts is made possible by the disruptive and disjunctive plots, splintered and fractured narrative modes, and devices featuring runaway protagonists who adhere neither to the politically charged heroes of "ideal-type" realism nor to the stylized and aestheticized heroes under the influence of modernism in the earlier genres or generations of Nigerian literature: the two companion journalists in the rogue environments of *Oil on Water*, the absence of a protagonist in *A Swap Full of Dollars*, and the disempowered, go-between hero, crownless monarchs, and invisible oil lords in *Lords of the Creek.*

Oil, Oil Everywhere, Nor Any Drop to Fry: Routine Violence in Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*

My last example, Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*, deals with a similar predicament through domestic pathos, familial disputes, and disrupted private lives that mirror the fissures and fractures within the Niger Delta's social fabric. In that sense, the play of violence in Watson's novel remains a zero-sum game, insofar as the violence that *enters* the private lives of the characters *exits* and reenters the societal realm as insurgency. Although *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* is hardly about birds that can fly, it is a story that is perpetually in flight, from Lagos to Warri, from Warri to rural Nigeria, and from the Delta creeks to London. Told from the perspective of the young female protagonist named Blessing, the story revolves around the struggles for her family's survival, including her mother and her brother, who suffers from various allergies and chronic congenital health

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problems, presumably aggravated by oil spills and exposure to the toxic environment.

The story opens with Blessing, her brother Ezekiel, and their Mama saying goodbye to their sheltered lives in Lagos, and preparing to move to Warri, the birthplace of Mama, as the latter finds her Yoruba Christian husband with another woman in a compromising position. It is not until their arrival at the family compound – where several unrelated families reside – that Blessing finds out that her maternal grandfather Alhaji was an Ijaw Muslim. Desperate and destitute, but proud, the patriarch does not shy away from the challenge of feeding more mouths. In addition to the orphaned Boneboy, whom his wife adopts, Alhaji goes on to bring an young Efik woman, Celestine, into the household as his second wife.[129] Soon after their arrival, both Ezekiel and Blessing register in a poorly equipped local school with barely any instructors, while Mama takes a job as a waitress at the Highlife Bar, which, as the name suggests, the elite employees of the Western Oil Company frequent. At the bar, Mama meets Dan, a British expat worker, whom she decides to introduce to her parents – a move that would have fatal consequences for the entire family, especially for Ezekiel, who does not approve of his mother's relationship with a white man.

Like Habila on the deceptively familiar movement of oil alongside water, Alhaji's family is equally skeptical of the vexed affair between an Izon woman and a white oil worker. In a heated family debate that takes place *in medias res*, Grandma challenges her daughter: "Oil and water do not mix! You are made of water, you are part of Delta, and the river runs through you. That man," Grandma pointed to Dan, "is made of oil."[130]

Grandma's allusion to the incommensurability of oil and water is more than symbolic; it is almost epistemic, if not endemic, to the Manichean encounter between the precarious Delta subjects and the Western Oil Company that fuels what Gyanendra Pandey would call "routine violence" in the region.[131] If routine violence is defined by what it is not – episodic, criminal, or heuristic – its defining feature is its continuity and invisibility "so much a part of our everyday lives that we often no longer recognize it as violence."[132] This normalization of violence, or rather its embodiment into everyday practices and routines – from work, commutes, and daily life choices – seeks an external outlet to be discharged, while transforming itself into a site or instrument of agency for the novel's central characters. Such agency in the novel, however, is enabled by a series of narrative cues that reveal the extent of routine violence thrust upon the entire family. At a protest by women led by Grandma against the Western Oil company,

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when the crowd begins to sing the Ijaw song *Wo Ekilemo* a proud Blessing muses that "I sang loudly until the part that said 'I have overcome death, poverty and sickness.' I could not sing that part."[133]

Blessing's altruism provides intuitive clues to the precarity and routine violence in the novel on account of both her narrative perspective and her focalizers. Forced to abandon school for the lack of a better choice, Blessing becomes an assistant to Grandma, a midwife, making frequent visits to villages where she rarely fails to register the desperation and destitution of her surroundings, almost as if mimicking Boma's picaresque account of death in the Creeks in *Oil on Water*:

> A large pile of animals lay dead and rotting next to the road.... The air smelled of condensed milk that had been left in the sun. A pipeline fire blazed in the distance, causing tiny particles of a black ash to blanket the ground. Some of the ash found its way into my sandals, and melted against my sad feet. I covered my mouth with my hand. I had never seen a village that looked so burnt and dead.[134]

Blessing's description of the Delta villages as a nest of assorted human and animal flesh is reflective not only of the embodied violence of the entire Nigerian nation, but particularly of Warri, which is often described as an afflicted organ of parasitical proportions. When Mama announces the family's move to Warri, Ezekiel immediately consults the *Encyclopaedia of Tropical Medicine*, uttering the foreboding claim: "And if we don't get shot, the bacteria and parasites will surely kill us.... The river-dwelling parasites burrow through foot skin, enter the lymphatic system and can ultimately cause organ failure!... That place is so bush; I doubt they even have medical facilities."[135]

Although Ezekiel's description of Warri as a parasite of Nigeria, which would eventually take over the entire body, organ by organ, is both striking and suggestive, it remains epiphenomenal to the stark inequalities between Warri and the rest of Nigeria, particularly Lagos. Upon the family's arrival in Warri, Blessing's sensory focalizer goes on to register that "Warri even smelled different to Lagos. I closed my eyes and sniffed. The air smelled like a book unopened in a very long time, and smoky, as though the ground had been on fire."[136]

If the city itself is presented as such an anomaly to Lagos, then the grandparents' house is depicted as the absolute other *within* (Nigeria): "I did not want to believe it. *No electricity!* Cold things raced through my mind: fridges, drinks, fans, air-conditioning."[137] Blessing's unsettling discoveries end not quite with the unfamiliarity with the place, or the gross inequalities between Lagos and Warri, Warri and the Creeks, but also with

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the presence of foreign elements that gradually seep into, if not altogether invade, the private sphere of the familial lives:

> A large oil barrel was full of water. It had a picture of Shell printed on the side. A cup floated at the top. I hoped that the oil barrel water was not used for washing the dusty bowls, or worse still, cooking with. A thought suddenly entered my head. Water. Why would there be water in a bucket? Why not just pour it from a tap? *No running water.* Surely, that was not possible?[138]

Surrounded by an abundant source of energy, but with none for electricity or running water, the inhabitants of Warri become the least of its beneficiaries. This quandary is further compounded by the paradoxical promise of infinite riches, made possible by the presence of wealthy multinational companies such as Shell, and the pervasive precarity that creeps into all aspects of the protagonist's family, routinely affecting their needs of eating, drinking, and procuring proper shelter and employment. It is precisely in these terms that Pandey observes that "the prehistory of the most gnarling and visible acts of political violence can be traced . . . in the exercise of particular kinds of violence – upon the poor, upon the marginal groups, upon trade unions and women and other subordinated sections of society – as a routine, everyday and unremarkable practice."[139]

The unremarkability of such violence achieves its effect largely by virtue of naturalizing as well as pathologizing it as a routine part of the social discourse, or in the case of our novel, of the familial lives. Both the naturalizing and pathologizing of violence is evident in its anthropomorphic projections wherein, for instance, Ezekiel is described as "sickly . . . there was never a week when Ezekiel did not have an asthma attack, an allergy, a throat infection or chest infection."[140] The multiple assaults on Ezekiel, and the family's inability to afford medical treatment for the same, are allegorically reinforced at the narrative level by the frequent descriptions of the Niger Delta as a hostile and inhospitable region, with the looming threat of an insurgency. When, for instance, Blessing follows the stench near their compound, leading her to the water, Grandma exclaims, "The water of the Delta is the Blood of I. . . . But we must not drink this. Only in emergencies. The tap water is cleaner. But now, the water is full of oil spills, and salt, so only for washing clothes and bodies."[141] In the same breath, when Grandma warns of the dangers lurking deep in the water, an alarmed Blessing reacts: "I stared at the water. Crocodiles? The water was still in some parts and rushing in others. An area in the middle was jumping like the space between my cornrows. The water was dark, dark, dark. It looked like thick mud. Swirly patterns coloured the top."[142] This almost predatory description of the oil lump in

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the water as the danger looming from the innards of the earth, moving surreptitiously through the underwater currents, finally arriving at the family compound in the guise of poverty, disease, abductions, and eventually death is more than suggestive of the routine violence that plagues the pages of *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away*.

Surrounded by crude oil, an ironic obsession over cooking oil – which is presented as a source of both sickness and ailment for Ezekiel's health problems – takes precedence in the narrative. By extension, crude oil itself becomes the source of sickness and ailment for the Niger Delta's socio-economic pathos. Upon the family's reception in Warri, Grandma is discrete enough to take note of Ezekiel's special oil needs, and assure him that his food would be fried in palm oil, not in groundnut oil to which he is allergic. The patriarch of the house, Alhaji, is anything but discrete about Ezekiel's special needs: "Nigerians do not have nut allergy. All our food is fried in groundnut oil."[143] But Mama would rather have Ezekiel's food fried in sunflower oil than groundnut oil. Things grow so desperate that Blessing entertains the idea of Mama stealing vegetable oil from the Highlife Bar. But Grandma is hell-bent on frying meat in *some* kind of oil. When Mama insists that Ezekiel should eat boiled meat rather than having it fried in groundnut oil, Grandma exclaims: "He will get sick if he eats meat that has not been fried."[144]

Surrounded by oil knee-deep under the surface of the earth, Blessing's family becomes obsessed with the kind of oil they cannot afford. Suspecting that the groundnut oil, which is widely used in the Delta region, is actually the cause of Ezekiel's sickness, Mama assures the family that "at least when I am working I'll be able to buy some vegetable oil . . . even if it is expensive."[145] Warri, the land of oil, the sort that cannot fry your favorite cut of meat. Oil, oil everywhere, nor any a drop to fry!

If the lack of oil in an oil-rich world becomes a life-threatening force, then the salience of death by virtue of its allegorical presence throughout the narrative serves as a harbinger of the violence to come. Two characters in particular merit our attention in this relation: Celestine, Alhaji's second wife, and Boneboy. The reader gets the first inklings of the routine violence in the novel through the survival of Boneboy, who is represented as an emaciated, voiceless, and passive boy whose parents were murdered by the so-called Kill and Go police for the mere fact that they lived by the creeks that were frequented by "no good boys."[146] As his name itself implies, Boneboy is depicted as something short of a human, almost as if lacking in flesh.

If the figure of Boneboy serves as a narrative conduit between the world of routine violence, the "Kill and Go police," and the necropolis of Warri,

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then Celestine's entry into the family turns death into a means of the family's subsistence and sustenance: the more death and violence there is, as it were, the better the family could eat. After Celestine's arrival, with one more mouth to feed, Alhaji insists on her finding some kind of a job as a town mourner: "funerals are a very big business these days. All the warring and diseases. All these positions from the oil companies."[147]

In addition to the two outsiders to the family – Boneboy and Celestine – who bring death or the remnants of death into the family compound in their own unique ways, violence creeps into the household in the most unforeseen ways, beginning with the crocodile-shaped "swirly patterns [of] thick mud"[148] from the underwaters of Warri lakes, into the waterways, through to the streets, and, finally, right into the family compound itself. Following the daytime gun parades and escorts for white oil workers zipping through the neighborhood, Blessing spots young boys no older than Ezekiel guarding gunboats full of barrels: "The boys looked the same as the boys we had seen in the gunboat, but I knew they must have been different.. . . I could smell oil. What were these boys doing with guns? Why did they wear berets?"[149]

For Alhaji, despite their Ijaw ethnic tag, these Sibeye Boys, as they are known, "are not the only group making trouble for the rest. Copy cats! They are damaging the reputation of the real FFIN [Freedom Fighters of the Izon Nation]. Us, the real freedom fighters!"[150] The feuds between the FFIN and the Sibeye Boys, on the one hand, and the armed groups of the Urhobos, Itsekiris, and Ogonis, on the other, being the major source of oil-related violence in the novel, the Kill and Go police are another rare breed of militants who are funded by the oil companies. Designated as police by the Nigerian state, the Kill and Go militia are often unleashed against all other insurgency groups.[151] Alhaji struggles to make sense of this entangled web of violence:

> But why would our own government kill our own people? Surely not for money? And if it was for money then who caused the deaths? The oil companies who give money to kill, or the government who take the money and give the guns, or the boys who join the army because they have to? Or Sibeye Boys who fight the wrong ways, for the wrong reasons?[152]

Although Alhaji does concede here that there are legitimate reasons why some boys turn to arms, he is fully aware of the dangers involved in such social infiltration of organized violence. Like a prophecy come true, the lingering violence underneath the waters, on the waters, or across the street now enters the private sphere of the family: a huge bullet hole is bored into Ezekiel's right shoulder when he goes to the nearby creeks to forage

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snails.[153] Following this tragic event, Alhaji pens down a letter to the local state official, requesting him to curb the number of armed outfits in the city. Ironically, his own formula promulgates the use of *right* violence of the FFIN against the *wrong* violence of the "copy cats."[154]

Not only a modest plea to the state authorities, Alhaji's letter uncovers a nexus of judicial executions, extra-judicial murders, and the residual violence of the state that spills over into an entire social field, holding the private sphere of familial lives as its hostage. For some such "copy cat" area boys, violence itself becomes a source of livelihood, a skill that they hone in the streets. As they are deprived of an entire social imaginary as well as the civic space of their community, the very conditions of making the "copy cats" become a "routinized punishment" in which the production of minorities and majorities becomes no longer an episodic event, but an ongoing process.[155] Having survived the shooting episode, Ezekiel throws away his asthma medication into the river creeks, claiming that he has become immune to pain, and that "even bullets cannot kill" him,[156] almost as if reinstating Achille Mbembe's saying: What more violence can one do to a thing that is no-thing?[157] In other words, not only does Ezekiel's gaping wound tear up his body, but in doing so, the violence of the act implants itself into his body, making him immune to (any) more violence to come, thereby instilling in him a sense of impunity to the responsive violence he must exact.

It is this very immunity routinized into Ezekiel's own precarious living that subsequently becomes externalized, as he is seeking an external object that would harness his anger and resentment. This object is the play of forces that put him there in the first place: the oil conglomerate. Slowly but steadily, Ezekiel begins to mimic the Sibeye Boys, who categorically denounce the tag of terrorism and claim that the real criminals and terrorists "are the politicians, with their billons of dollar bank accounts. The government task forces and the oil company security forces have wiped out whole Delta villages. The Sibeye Boys stand for the Ijaw people. We will fight for the people and take back what is rightfully ours."[158]

When Mama brings her new lover, a white man, to the house, Ezekiel borrows the Sibeye Boys' rhetorical tongue: "You people come here," he confronts Dan, "and take our women . . . and our money. And our jobs.. . . You pay people to kills us, and you rape our land and then our women! And you give me a chocolate bar?"[159] Alhaji offers an apology to Dan, as if distancing the family's views of the "white men" from those of the Sibeye Boys.

When Blessing goes on to question the purpose of Ezekiel's actions, the routine violence inflicted upon his precarious community is rendered in an

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even more derisive tone: "Some groups are kidnapping the white oil workers. They call the oil black gold, so the groups call the oil workers White Gold!"[160] Ezekiel spares no time when it dawns upon him that there is white gold sitting in his own house, and tips the Sibeye Boys to abduct Dan, inviting mob justice into his own front yard. As a tragic set of events leads to Ezekiel's death, when attempting to blow up a pipeline, Grandma brings it upon herself to respond to the violence – albeit through peaceful public protest – that entered her private compound to its rightful owners: the state, the oil workers and the insurgents.

Despite Grandma's stated disapproval of insurgent violence, her own views on the oil companies and the routine violence unleashed upon her family and the families of Warri do not necessarily contradict the insurgent thinking of the Sibeye Boys. In this relation, Grandma's concession that "we are being murdered and our sons are turning into murderers" and that the Sibeye Boys "feel they have no choice! No future! And that is the fault of the Western Oil Company"[161] sums up her insurgent solidarity vis-à-vis the central tenet of the novel. The violence that enters the private lives of the characters through the front doors exits as insurgency through the back door of Alhaji's compound. The formal disruptions evinced in the layered narration of such scattered violence – on the land, underneath the water, on the surface of the water, in Alhaji's compound – is also mirrored by the disruptive and disjunctive social realities of the Niger Delta across classes, race, ethnicity, religion, regionalism, and resource nationalism. A conceptual exposition of these realities that inform the disruptive realisms of the four texts analyzed in this chapter is made possible by both the "distant reading" of the global capitalist forces at work (absences) and a "better close reading" of the vernacular particularities (presences) of the Niger Delta's conflict system. The violence that both enters and exits the private lives of the characters featured in this chapter finds a renewed significance in the chapters to follow: as intimate violence of the precarious subjects in the Burmese context, as (dis)enchantment expressed by the revolutionary ideologues and militants in India, and, finally, as insurgent bonds forged through the politics of death and the living-dead in Middle Eastern literature.

Notes

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